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VOICING PAIN

PAIN AND SUFFERING IN THE MYSTICAL CULTURE OF LIÈGE

SANDER VLOEBERGS



PEETERS

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Illustration:

Black pages with red drops of blood, signifying the wounds of Christ, from a psalter and rosary of the Virgin (ca. 1500).

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INTRODUCTION

Love has put in chains our heart and powers
And all our mind and will;
And the man in us must undergo
As many suffering as this life holds:
With the miserable, he must suffer need;
With the slain, death;
With beggars, he suffers bodily torment;
And with lovers, pain of soul¹.

The Brabantian poet and mystic Hadewijch composed these evocative verses in the thirteenth century, voicing her concern about the human soul's relationship with the divine, whom she names Love. In her poetry, Love is a demanding figure who binds the soul in chains and accepts only pain as payment for the debts owed to her. In another poem, she urges her reader to: "Wait in the chains of veritable Love and strive to understand the voice with which Love herself speaks"². This voice, she insists, calls the readers to embrace the full spectrum of human suffering. Only then will humanity truly know Love. She writes: "If we loved with love all that Love loves, and if her glory were known to us, she would communicate herself in it in one fruition and in one knowledge"³. In this mystical theology, Hadewijch suggests that the voice of pain is, in fact, the voice of Love.

While Hadewijch and her contemporaries embraced suffering as a spiritual necessity, modern readers have grown increasingly reluctant to do so. This shift reflects a broader cultural transformation in how pain is perceived and managed. Admittedly, much has changed since Hadewijch and her contemporaries composed and contemplated these remarkable medieval love poems. One could say that modern readers are less inclined to embrace suffering with open arms, with patience and devotion. Today pain is primarily addressed through medical intervention rather than spiritual reflection. The poet has ceded her place to the scientist, who battles not sin or evil, but the existential realities of human suffering.

* Primary sources are cited in translation, in abbreviated form, with page numbers included. Full references are provided in the second section of the bibliography.

1. HADEWIJCH, *Poem in Couplets* 10, p. 336.

2. HADEWIJCH, *Poem in Couplets* 12, p. 342.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 343.

Anesthetized and medicalized, modern people long for a blissful and painless existence. Anesthesia becomes the new ambrosia – the elixir of the gods, that replaced Eucharistic wine, the blood of the Son of Man. Through this evocative juxtaposition of images, I reflect on the profound historical shifts in our relationship to pain and ask: What has become of the voice of Love? Can we still hear her, now that our senses are numbed?

This question leads me to a central concern of this study: the urgent need to voice pain, in order to hear Love. The phenomenon of pain demands a kaleidoscopic approach, highlighting its varied manifestations across time and space. This approach stands in sharp contrast to the scarcity of sophisticated pain language in contemporary cultures. The lack of pain metaphors and narratives creates a precarious situation in which suffering becomes unintelligible. Propelled by medical discourse and the reduction of pain to problematic physical stimuli, it is often perceived as violent, irrational and hostile to modern rationalistic individuals and their cultures. Articulating pain through language and artistic expression is a compelling and creative endeavor, often the work of artists and poets. Yet, it is the medical field, rather than the arts and literature, that continues to dominate the modern understanding of pain and its associated imagery. Therefore, it is the responsibility of artists, poets, and scholars to speak out and offer alternative perspectives, demonstrating that pain can be intellectually engaging and can illuminate the human condition⁴.

Despite significant advancement in pain relief and management, suffering remains an integral part of contemporary life. This multifaceted experience continues to captivate and challenge scholars across disciplines. In recent decades, a diverse field of pain research has emerged, driven largely by developments in the medical sciences – particularly in neuroscience. They portray pain as a definable entity: something that possesses an essence and can be examined. Aided by technologies such as fMRI scans, neuroscientists investigate pain by reducing it to an activity of the brain and nervous system⁵. The International Association

4. See A. VETLESEN, *A Philosophy of Pain*, trans. J. Irons, London, Reaktion Books, 2009, pp. 8-11.

5. Cultural historian Joanna Bourke argues that the conceptualization and interpretation of pain as a negative stimulus goes back to René Descartes' influential thought experiment in his *Meditations*. Descartes' conceptualization of pain built on the mechanistic idea of pain: Pain is communicated through the machinery of the human body, from the nervous system to the brain and back. The body is, then, reduced to a machine and pain is seen as a signal passing from the nerves to the brain. The stronger the signal, the sharper the pain experienced and the greater the adverse effects for the human body and the physical damage done. Thus, from Descartes onward, pain was understood as the agent of physical injury, generally lending it a negative connotation in folk wisdom and scientific discourse

of the Study of Pain, for instance, has defined pain as: “an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage, or described in terms of such damage”⁶. While this definition acknowledges emotional suffering – long excluded from clinical frameworks – it nonetheless upholds the dichotomy between mental and physical pain. Scientific inquiry continues to prioritize physical pain which is more easily described, located and treated, often at the expense of emotional pain, which is validated only when it can be linked to tissue damage⁷.

This conceptualization of pain as a definable entity also made its way to the popular imagination. Scholars in the humanities have likewise approached pain from this essentialist perspective. Elaine Scarry has offered a highly influential philosophy of pain’s destructive nature, one that continues to resonate in contemporary culture. In her study of torture, she describes pain as fundamentally corrosive – an adversary of language and the human imagination. She writes: “Its resistance to language is not simply one of its incidental or accidental attributes but is essential to what it is”⁸. She describes pain as an inner, indivisible experience that can only later be expressed through metaphors and linguistic constructions, which fail to truly convey the experience itself⁹. Pain monopolizes language, becoming its only subject. The victim, overwhelmed by physical torment, is reduced to inarticulate sounds, while the torturer dismantles the victim’s linguistic system and imagination. Unsurprisingly, Scarry concludes that pain is a negative, destructive force, an assault on language. Her definition of pain is that it is essentially alinguistic¹⁰.

However, in recent years, these essentialist views have been challenged by cultural historians. Joanna Bourke, for example, has offered compelling alternatives. She observes that the notion that pain is beyond words has remained popular to the present day. Although pain is hard to describe and articulating it is painful, this does not necessarily mean that pain is beyond language, as Scarry insists. Pain is not a fixed or universal

alike. See J. BOURKE, *The Story of Pain: From Prayer to Painkiller*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 13.

6. The International Association of the Study of Pain (IASP) formulated this definition in 1976. According to Bourke, it has become the most dominant clinical definition of pain used today. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 10-12.

8. E. SCARRY, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 5.

9. According to Scarry, the most obvious and most used metaphors are those related to the weapon and the wound. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

10. See BOURKE, *The Story of Pain*, pp. 5-6; 16; 54.

experience, but one that is shaped by cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts. She emphasizes that pain is always mediated – through language, metaphor, and social interactions – and that its meaning and expression vary across time and place. Pain has a history too. Bourke's approach highlights the importance of narrative and interpretation in the experience of pain, suggesting that pain is not merely a biological event but a deeply human and communicative phenomenon. This perspective opens new possibilities for understanding pain as a site of meaning-making, rather than solely as a source of suffering¹¹.

This recent cultural-historical approach to pain is propelled by a broader affective turn in the humanities, which seeks to incorporate human emotions into historical narratives and to challenge classical historiography that assumed objectivity and rationality. Traditional historiographic mechanics have long excluded the study of pain and its diverse cultural expressions. According to Javier Moscoso, pain intersects with multiple dimensions of human history and cannot be confined to the history of emotion and sensations, nor can it be adequately captured through rigid categorical frameworks. Instead, the historical study of pain unravels rhetorical strategies and evolving modes of cultural interpretation that shape the understanding of suffering¹². Pain is an intrinsic part of human history, and examining pain cultures historically offers insight into significant shifts in pain language that often parallel broader cultural transformations – shifts that remain obscured in conventional historiography. These changes in pain language reveal historical knowledge because they reflect conceptions of the physiological body, environmental developments, and ideological transitions. Pain language encodes information about embodied experiences within specific contexts, shaped by patterns of movements, orientation, and interaction with the material world¹³.

These recent cultural-historical approaches have revealed that Western pain cultures today are shaped by a pivotal transformation in pain language that emerged in the nineteenth century. This shift underpins the contemporary understanding of pain, which is now embedded in a scientific worldview and a mechanistic conception of the human body. Breakthroughs in pain control and relief during this period profoundly influenced how pain is perceived today. These medical advances coincide

11. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

12. J. MOSCOSO, *Pain: A Cultural History*, trans. S. Thomas – P. House, Basingstoke, Palgrave – Macmillan, 2012, p. 2.

13. BOURKE, *The Story of Pain*, pp. 4-5; 66-67.

with changes in the social and material cultures that generate pain metaphors – particularly found in the language of war and combat. Pain ceased to be a force to endure passively and instead became an adversary to be fought with the proper arsenal. The pharmaceutical industry provided these weapons, rendering the patient endurance of pain meaningless. Consequently, militaristic metaphors dominate the discourse surrounding pain¹⁴.

Moreover, the emergence of the new metaphorical language surrounding pain coincided with a decline of religious imagery that had previously upheld pain's positive connotation. Prior to the nineteenth century, pain occupied a more complex role in human existence, shaped largely by religious authorities who framed it within a cosmic narrative. Religion gave meaning to pain. It is no coincidence that Western pain language underwent drastic changes precisely as the authority of religious institutions began to erode. Pain was embedded in a theological system populated with figures such as Christ, Job, Lucifer, martyrs and saints. For religious communities, pain was primarily viewed as a redemptive experience – one that could restore humanity's relationship with God after the fall from a painless earthly paradise. The waning influence of the Church in the nineteenth century was only partly responsible for these drastic changes. Internal reform in the Church's theological discourse on pain also contributed to this transformation. Pain, hitherto interpreted and theologically valorized as restorative and beneficial, was gradually redefined. Religious authorities increasingly adopted secular interpretation of pain, shaped by an emerging scientific discourse¹⁵. As Bourke notes, the valorization of pain truly collapsed when even religious communities and authorities could no longer describe it as constructive. Pain had to be eradicated, not glorified¹⁶.

14. Other analogies also emerged, drawing on innovative train technology and the imagery of industry. *Ibid.*, pp. 73-80.

15. Along with medically schooled contemporaries, many Church leaders and theologians were skeptical of the miraculous phenomena in medieval and modern Christianity. Glucklich illustrates these changes with the nineteenth-century phenomenon of hysteria, a popular diagnosis in the Victorian Age, which was also applied in ecclesiastical and theological circles. The characteristics of this affliction were repeatedly compared with religious phenomena such as stigmatization. Through Freudian theory, hysteria was also connected to masochism and erotic impulses. Ecclesiastical authorities were not opposed to this surge of medical and clinical discourse, and engaged with the new concepts and theories. See A. GLUCKLICH, *Sacred Pain: Hurting the Body for the Sake of the Soul*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 199-200. In my article *Wounding Love*, I discuss the nineteenth-century reflections on the phenomenon of stigmatization and offer a mystical-theological perspective that broadens the medicalized view on stigmatization. See S. VLOEBERGS, *Wounding Love: A Mystical-Theological Exploration of Stigmatization*, in *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 77 (2016) 1-29.

16. See BOURKE, *The Story of Pain*, pp. 81-83.

These recent discussions on the significant changes of both secular and religious pain languages shed light on the ambiguous position pain currently occupies within theological and religious scholarship. Ariel Glucklich argues that the psychologizing and medicalizing of the Christian tradition lives on today – the yawning gap between premodern and modern language growing ever wider. He writes:

We have lost our capacity to understand why and how pain would be valuable for mystics, members of religious communities, and perhaps humanity as a whole. The role of pain, before it was displaced, was rich and nuanced, and ultimately situated persons within broader social and religious contexts. Our failure to remember – to recognize – this fact is a direct legacy of the nineteenth century's medicalization of pain and elevation of nervous disorders (followed by psychoanalytical pathology) to the understanding of human religious behavior¹⁷.

To remedy the numbed capacity to understand and empathize with other pain cultures, I propose an in-depth investigation of the conceptualization, interpretation, and valorization of pain during a period often misrepresented in modernity: the religious pain cultures of the Late Middle Ages. Premodern cultures have nonetheless attracted the attention of contemporary researchers, who seek to move beyond modern dichotomies such as mind/body and object/subject, aiming instead to approach human suffering beings as a holistic person¹⁸. Esther Cohen argues that the Late Middle Ages stand out as a time when pain was omnipresent and highly complex – an era marked by both inconceivable cruelty and exceptional compassion¹⁹. People of diverse socio-religious backgrounds contributed to the negotiations and construction of a social and metaphysical system, carefully documenting their perspectives. Cohen argues that:

Pain appears and disappears from historical sources like a landscape momentarily floodlit by a revolving light, only to vanish again in darkness. The later Middle Ages are a time when the sources starkly outline the landscape of pain. All modes of cultural expression were harnessed to the effort of articulation, explanation, and display of pain in the most extravagant possible manner. Not only sufferers but professionals – doctors, theologians, and lawyers – wrote their own versions of pain. Thus, an intrinsically individual feeling became a social, religious, and cultural phenomenon²⁰.

17. See GLUCKLICH, *Sacred Pain*, p. 201.

18. See R. MILLS, *Suspended Animation: Pain, Pleasure and Punishment in Medieval Culture*, London, Reaktion Books, 2005, pp. 8-12.

19. See E. COHEN, *The Modulated Scream: Pain in Late Medieval Culture*, Chicago, IL – London, University of Chicago Press, 2010, p. 3.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

I highlight the creative, artistic, and intellectual contributions of religious writers, particularly the mystical theologians whose works flourished in the period of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Given the central role of religious motifs in shaping perceptions of pain, examining pain cultures through the lens of mystical theology proves especially fruitful. The language of theology enables contemporary readers to grasp the diversity and richness of pain experiences, expressions, and cultural artefacts. Theological inquiry engages with religious experiences and rituals that are often intimately connected to the suffering body, and these rituals frequently commemorate and reenact pain²¹. As such, the experience of pain is deeply influenced by attitudes, motivations, awareness, and systems of belief. Religious discourse often determines whether pain is judged beneficial within a given culture. Religious communities can serve as paradigmatic pain communities, where pain does not isolate or exclude, but is instead shared through a common language and transformed from a potential destructive into a meaningful experience²². Moscoso argues that: "Faith does not eliminate the feeling of harm, but it does relocate experiences of hurt in accordance with past suffering, with the received example, with the magnitude of the Passion, and, above all, with the promise of future redemption"²³.

Although the conceptualization and interpretation of religious pain can restore a sense of control over the experience and impose order within society²⁴, some individuals in pain draw on their creative abilities to challenge dominant frameworks of meaning. These marginal voices may even subvert existing hierarchies that determine how pain is valorized²⁵. Scholars today depend on the documented discourse of these negotiations that persist through metaphors and figures or speech that have emerged,

21. Talal Asad, an anthropologist of religion, develops this idea in his *Genealogies of Religion*. He starts with defining a religious ritual as a kind of routine behavior that symbolizes or expresses something. The idea that a ritual is a script, a performance of what is prescribed in order to acquire abilities, is premodern. He develops this idea based on a study of medieval monasticism and the Rule of Benedict. He is interested in the idea that rituals can teach the body to develop virtues, including emotional states. This idea got lost in modern anthropology that divided emotions and social form. Asad states that embodied practices are a precondition for varieties of religious experiences. He connects this to the perception of pain which is determined by both traditions of body training (like monastic practices) and the pain history of individual bodies. See T. ASAD, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, Baltimore, MD – London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993, pp. 55-59.

22. See GLUCKLICH, *Sacred Pain*, p. 121.

23. MOSCOSO, *Pain*, p. 28.

24. See GLUCKLICH, *Sacred Pain*, pp. 142-143.

25. See BOURKE, *The Story of Pain*, p. 8.

vanished, and reemerged over time²⁶. This discussion also applies to religious experiences of pain, which can contest established positions of power in a specific religious pain culture. Such experiences demand new interpretations that question inherent meanings – meanings embedded in religious pain language and theological discourse governed by religious authorities. The experience of pain interrogates the language of pain, just as pain language serves to interpret the experience. New expressions of pain influence the language used to speak about God, while theology attempts to rewrite pain in light of the story of salvation.

Building on these insights, I turn to mystical theology as a lens through which to examine medieval pain cultures more deeply. Specifically, I propose to study how mystical theology shaped internal negotiations surrounding the conceptualization, interpretation, and valorization of pain. The vein of mystical-theological writing is intricately woven into the intellectual and spiritual history of the Christian West and has contributed to the development of a rich and nuanced pain language. The study of mystical theology has evolved into a dynamic research field, offering profound insights into religious experience and theological reflection. Scholars in this field explore the hidden presence of God in the here and now, emphasizing the believer's participation in the intimate relationship with Christ, and his Father and Holy Spirit. McIntosh and Howells write: "[...] mystical theology explores and interprets every doctrine to help believers find there a doorway into a living, transformative encounter with the divine reality to which, Christians believe, their theological language is meant to point – allowing Christians [...] to live into their theology"²⁷.

I believe these mystical discourses hold the key to understanding and empathizing with cultures of distant pain. They explore the experiential and sensory dimensions of language, placing the embodied human person at the center – one who fully participates in human culture, nature, and even the divine. These authors grapple with both the potential and the limitations of language to express the often painful experiences of God within a given cultural frame of reference. Throughout history, mystical theologians have described the mystical experience as both apophatic and cataphatic. Much like pain, the mystical experience resists naming or categorization; it is apophatic at its core²⁸. It is nevertheless the role of

26. See MOSCOSO, *Pain*, p. 67.

27. M.A. MCINTOSH – E. HOWELLS, *Introduction*, in *Id.* (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2020, 1-5, p. 1.

28. I argue that a strong affinity between the contemporary theory of deconstruction and negative theology, and various apophatic traditions, including Christian mysticism has

mystical theology to provide a language, imagery, and understanding to support individuals in their transformative journey²⁹. It is up to the mystical theologian, McIntosh states, to guide readers towards the meaning behind the text and to shape their encounters with the hidden presence of God. To that end, the theologians: “employ powerful literary strategies such as a superabundance of dialectical imagery, or heightened, poetic, or visionary language – sometimes drawing upon a metaphorical range of intense emotional states, profound intimacy, or personal narrative”³⁰. These expressions and teachings can be regarded as cultural artefacts: the cataphatic counterparts of the apophatic mystical tradition, offering contemporary readers tools for expression and understanding.

Pain and suffering were crucial components in the vocabulary of the mystical theologians. Writing for diverse audiences – from uneducated lay believers to mystically initiated elites – these authors were compelled to conceptualize, interpret, and valorize pain in different ways. Despite the diversity of readership, the authors themselves belonged to a shared mystical-theological network, particularly in the Late Middle Ages. Their texts exhibit a high level of intertextual consistency and should therefore not be studied in isolation but as a mystical culture – a concept I will elaborate in the following chapters (esp. I.3 and II). This concept allows me to study a variety of mystical writings that transgress the traditional canon of mystical authors and explore the interactions between mystical texts and the religious communities that inspired them. I include hagiographers, storytellers, and preachers who conveyed the experiences of others as mystical theologians, even when their own claim of mystical knowledge remains rather implicit. All these authors, who documented and interpreted experiences for the benefit of their readers, constructed mystical spaces and stages where God’s hidden presence was encountered – whether through the life of a saint or the visions of a mystic. They required profound and comprehensive insights into the depths of human existence, as they were entrusted with guiding their Christian communities. I emphasize their capacity to articulate and interpret mystical experiences and stress that all writers are shaped by lived religion and their own lived experiences³¹. The

led to an overemphasis on apophatic theology. See, for example, D. TURNER, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

29. See E. HOWELLS, *Mystical Theology and Human Experience*, in MCINTOSH – HOWELLS (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology*, 45-64, pp. 63-64.

30. M.A. MCINTOSH, *Mystical Theology at the Heart of Theology*, in ID. – HOWELLS (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology*, 25-44, p. 30.

31. Mystics were thus no more gifted or blessed than their colleagues who wrote *vitae* and *exempla*. They were all believers, and they all tried to be better Christians. The depths of their pursuit of mystical knowledge, however, varied, but this does not necessarily extend to

mystical experience as such cannot be studied. What can be examined, however, is the author's ability to tailor and transfer mystical knowledge to a specific audience. To do so effectively, they relied on a rich repertoire and imaginary of human experiences, traditions, images, and gestures.

I argue that these negotiations within the mystical culture overlap with the mystics' pain culture, which can be analyzed as a case study. Therefore, I will discuss the conceptualization, interpretation, and valorization of pain in late medieval religious literature of the mystical culture of Liège. I approach religious pain as a multifaceted phenomenon – experienced physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. For this purpose, I selected thirteenth-century mystical-theological sources that reveal crucial insights into the meaning of religious pain in late medieval society. Historically, this study of religious pain has often been subordinated to research on gender and socio-religious roles. Rarely have in-depth studies focused on pain from a theological perspective, as I will demonstrate in the first chapter. Nevertheless, this theological approach, grounded in mystical-theological sources, contributes to the historical study of medieval pain cultures. It also challenges and enriches current debates about the meaning of pain as a complex human experience³².

I begin this exploration with acknowledging my position as a contemporary reader, an interdisciplinary scholar, and a Catholic theologian. My interpretation is shaped by my academic background and interests in theology, literature studies, art, dance, and cultural history. I have chosen a text-immanent approach to the study of pain within the mystical culture – an approach that benefits from the often didactical and empathic style of its authors who gently guide their readers towards mystical insight. To support my text-immanent approach, I open the study with three introductory chapters that outline the contours of medieval pain culture and engage with the extensive body of secondary literature on related themes, thereby clarifying my specific approach to the selected case study. First, I employ the concept of mystical culture to frame this investigation, narrowing the scope to a distinctive network of religious individuals and institutions who contributed to the richness of

genres. For the position of the mystical theologian within the Christian community, see R. WILLIAMS, *Mystical Theology and Christian Self-Understanding*, in MCINTOSH – HOWELLS (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology*, 9-24; P. MOMMAERS, *Wat is Mystiek?* (Spiritualiteit, 12), Nijmegen, Gottmer, 1977.

32. My focus remains on the historical study of pain. While a dialogue between pre-modern medieval pain culture and contemporary perspectives lies beyond the scope of this study, such a comparison promises to yield valuable insights into religious experiences of pain.

pain imagery and who documented these expressions. These agents and their literary networks within the mystical culture of Liège will be examined in detail in the second chapter. The third chapter traces on the genealogy of the mystical pain experience, offering a concise introduction to several key ideas that will be developed throughout this study.

The main body of this book is structured into four acts, each comprising multiple interrelated chapters. A detailed overview of these acts will be given in section 5 of the first chapter. Here, I wish to emphasize the internal logic that mirrors the mystical process: from outward action to inner experience, and back to external expression. I approach the authors as theologians and artists, with the intention of truly hearing their voices. I will be guided by figures such as Hadewijch, Thomas of Cantimpré, and Ruusbroec, whose presence through their writings is almost tangible. These mystical theologians speak to contemporary readers, guiding them on an inward journey to the depths of human existence, where the full spectrum of human experience – especially pain – is explored.

I

MEDIEVAL PAIN CULTURE

The Late Middle Ages have received significant scholarly attention over the last decades. The study of pain has been part of an elaborate and interdisciplinary research field. Yet despite this broad academic interest, pain itself is rarely treated as a central subject. Scholars have often focused on its embodied experience, its iconography, or its entanglement with gender and power. The interwoven histories of pain, gender, and identity have indeed produced a substantial body of literature, with particular attention given to the suffering of female bodies within medieval religious culture. Yet, in much of this scholarship, the study of pain remains a secondary concern, subordinated to broader discussions of female identity and agency within patriarchal frameworks.

Still, between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, pain occupied a unique and pervasive place in medieval thought. It was not merely endured or overcome, but actively cultivated and interpreted as meaningful. Cohen highlights the distinctiveness of pain culture between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, emphasizing “the multifarious ways in which pain was treated – even in fields of thought that we might consider irrelevant – and the tremendous *positive* significance identified in pain. Suffering was not to be dismissed, vanquished, or transcended: suffering was to be felt with an ever-deepening intensity”¹. This period thus offers a particularly rich context for examining how individuals made sense of pain, and for exploring the diverse ways in which it was conceptualized, articulated, and communicated across a wide range of documented sources².

Pain occupied a central role in religious expression and theological discourse throughout the Middle Ages, yet, as Donald Mowbray argues, it remains underexplored in scholarly literature. He particularly emphasizes the need to study the theological language surrounding pain, noting that such inquiry reveals significant shifts in doctrinal thought and emotional sensibility within the Church. Given the centrality of suffering in Christian soteriology, he contends that understanding the theology of pain

1. COHEN, *The Modulated Scream*, p. 4.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

is essential to grasping medieval conceptions of Christology, penance, death, and the afterlife. He acknowledges the extensive scholarship on female expressions of pain within medieval devotional culture, but he notes that these sources often present conflicting and heterogeneous theological positions. Precisely because of this complexity, he chooses to focus on a male group of thirteenth-century Parisian theology masters, whose professional engagement with theological debate and systematic argumentation offers a more coherent framework for analyzing pain. He advocates for more focused case studies that examine communities with strong internal cohesion and a shared engagement with the theme of pain – communities that cultivated rich vocabularies of expression, interpretation, and valorization. In his view, these academic texts provide a valuable counterpoint to the more frequently studied female devotional writings, and allow for a clearer exploration of the theological spectrum surrounding pain³.

Both Cohen and Mowbray refrain from undertaking a detailed analysis of the diverse interpretations of pain found in medieval mystical sources. Cohen suggests that these interpretations are shaped by a religiosity centered on the *imitatio Christi*, arguing that while pain was a constant in the construction of religious identity, its meaning varied significantly across communities and individuals. The behavior of saints – the central figures in these texts – could be modeled in a wide range of ways, with their expressions and understandings of pain shaped by their specific social contexts⁴. This variability, however, does not preclude the possibility of constructing a theological framework that accounts for the multiplicity of pain languages. In fact, recent developments in cultural history, particularly the affective turn, offer new methodological tools for engaging with the rich diversity of historical sources, enabling a more nuanced study of medieval pain cultures.

In order to foreground the study of pain within this particularly rich religious culture, scholarly attention must be redirected toward its theological conceptualization, interpretation, and valorization. A text-immanent and theological reading of the sources allows for engagement with contemporary scholarly concerns – such as gender, female agency, authorship, and tradition – while also preserving the texts' intrinsic themes of faith, humility, mystery, and divine immanence. Elizabeth Dreyer warns that

3. See D. MOWBRAY, *Pain and Suffering in Medieval Theology: Academic Debates at the University of Paris in the Thirteenth Century*, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2009, pp. 1-2.

4. See COHEN, *The Modulated Scream*, p. 143.

an overemphasis on feminist frameworks and contemporary academic paradigms has led to a neglect of the central role of faith in God in the construction of these texts – a belief that, she argues, should neither be dismissed nor ridiculed by agnostic or atheistic scholars. A theological approach, informed by cultural-historical scholarship, can thus enrich and complement existing perspectives⁵. Mowbray has already demonstrated the diversity and complexity of pain discourse in academic theological sources. This complexity, however, may be more effectively addressed through a case study that applies a text-immanent and mystical-theological lens – an approach that Mowbray himself may have overlooked due to the dominance of feminist scholarship and the relative scarcity of theological studies in the field. I contend that a clearly delineated network exists within these religious pain cultures, one that reveals meaningful connections between diverse theological perspectives grounded in a shared commitment to imitate the suffering Christ.

I propose to examine late medieval religious pain culture through the case study of the mystical culture of Liège – a concept I will elaborate throughout the second chapter. My approach is informed by cultural-historical methodologies, such as those developed by Bourke, which emphasize the diversity and evolution of pain cultures rather than reducing them to generalized or homogenized narratives. Unlike diachronic analyses that trace developments over time, my study adopts a synchronic perspective, focusing on a specific pain culture within a defined temporal framework. This allows for an exploration of the social topography that shapes how pain is conceptualized, interpreted, and valorized. The concept of the mystical culture of Liège serves as a lens through which to investigate the relationships between texts and readers, bodies and religious communities. A mystical-theological approach enables a precise mapping of expressive variation within a concrete network of texts, embodied practices, and centers of theological knowledge – yielding a systematic and comprehensive analysis of this pain culture.

To establish the concept of mystical culture and demonstrate its relevance for the study of pain culture – as well as for the intertwined histories of gender, female religiosity, sainthood, and female agency explored in previous scholarship – I will first outline several major shifts in academic discourse that have enabled the formulation of this concept. Subsequently, I will examine the notion of mystical culture in greater detail and articulate the structure of this book through the lens of text-immanent theological analysis.

5. See E. DREYER, *Whose Story Is It? The Appropriation of Medieval Mysticism*, in *Spiritus* 4 (2004) 151-172, p. 162.

1. *From Female Body to Mystical Community*

The study of pain in late medieval culture has been significantly shaped by feminist scholarship, which has foregrounded the female body as a central site of female experience within a patriarchal society. Carolyn Walker Bynum's groundbreaking work placed the theme of physicality firmly on the scholarly map⁶. Her research engages with texts authored by mystical women as well as hagiographic accounts of their lives. Bynum's aim is to delineate a distinct form of female spirituality rooted in embodiment, which she explores by identifying shared female experiences in contrast to those typically associated with male theological and spiritual frameworks. She writes:

Thus, as many recent scholars have argued, the spiritualities of male and female mystics were different, and this difference has something to do with body. Women were more apt to somatize religious experience and to write in intense bodily metaphors; women mystics were more likely than men to receive graphically physical visions of God, both men and women were inclined to attribute to women and encourage in them intense asceticism and ecstasies⁷.

Following Bynum's work, scholarship has largely concentrated on physical suffering, engaging with the same sources to further develop the notion of a distinct female spirituality. A central point of contention has been the uncritical use of hagiography as a historical source. Feminist literary scholars such as Amy Hollywood have emphasized the value of hagiography for understanding lived religion and popular spiritual practices, yet she simultaneously urges methodological caution. Hollywood argues that it is scientifically untenable to treat hagiographic texts as authentic expressions of female spiritual self-understanding. These texts, she contends, were shaped by male hagiographers who often disregarded the women's own theological insights, instead aligning female sanctity with Christ's humanity through depictions of bodily asceticism, self-mutilation, miraculous acts, and – most prominently – his physical suffering. In contrast, Hollywood focuses on female-authored texts that offer genuine accounts of personal

6. See, for example, C.W. BYNUM, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, Berkeley, CA – Los Angeles, CA – London, University of California Press, 1988. She argues that her work has often been perceived under the rubric new historicism by feminist scholars, because of her engagement with themes such as sexuality, gender, and death. However, she confesses she never aligned herself with these trends in historiography. Instead, she always focused on the primary texts. See C.W. BYNUM, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, New York, Zone Books, 1992, p. 22.

7. BYNUM, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, p. 194.

experience, noting that these women typically framed their suffering as a spiritual process and distanced themselves from the bodily asceticism emphasized by their male interpreters⁸.

Building on this feminist textual criticism, Dyan Elliott and Elizabeth Petroff have further illuminated the interpretative dynamics at play in medieval hagiography. Petroff argues that female saints are often not the true subjects of their own narratives, as they are inscribed within a patriarchal rhetorical framework that prioritizes external signs of holiness over inner spiritual agency⁹. Elliott, however, offers a more tempered reading, suggesting that the emphasis on bodily suffering in hagiographic texts does not necessarily stem from misogynistic intent. Instead, she interprets it as a pragmatic strategy: male hagiographers, aiming to make sanctity legible to a largely uneducated audience, translated complex mystical theologies into visible, corporeal signs. In this view, the suffering body functioned as a communicative medium – a tangible expression of divine presence within a culture that privileged external markers of sanctity¹⁰. Together, these scholars shift the focus from authorial bias to the theological and cultural mechanisms through which pain was rendered meaningful, highlighting the performative and mediating role of hagiography in constructing religious identity.

Within scholarly discourse, the study of pain has become closely entangled with textual interpretation, particularly regarding the role of male hagiographers and their portrayals of female sanctity¹¹. This focus has often highlighted the limitations of hagiographic representation in capturing

8. See A. HOLLYWOOD, *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Meister Eckart and the Beguine Mystics Mechtilde of Magdeburg and Marguerite Porete* (PhD Dissertation), University of Notre Dame, IN, 1991, p. 324. Later she nuances this critique, stating that people today cannot imagine what it meant to be a man or a woman, masculine or feminine in the Middle Ages. It is thus problematic to comment on male and female spirituality as such. She advises future researchers to focus on the differences between authors, between individual male theologians and between diverging ideas of women on female spirituality. See A. HOLLYWOOD, *Feminist Studies in Christian Spirituality*, in EAD., *Acute Melancholia and Other Essays* (Gender, Theory & Religion), New York, Columbia University Press, 2016, 93-116.

9. See E.A. PETROFF, *Body & Soul: Essays on Medieval Women*, New York – Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 177.

10. See D. ELLIOTT, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell: Metaphor and Embodiment in the Lives of Pious Women: 200-1500*, Philadelphia, PA, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012, p. 181.

11. For an overview of the secondary literature on hagiography and the cults of saints, with an emphasis on gender issues (typical for scholarship of the last two decades of the twentieth century), see K. LEWIS, *Gender and Sanctity in the Middle Ages*, in P. STAFFORD – A.B. MULDER-BAKKER (eds.), *Gendering the Middle Ages*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2001, 205-214.

authentic female spiritual experience¹². However, more recent approaches have introduced greater nuance, shifting attention toward the diversity of theological perspectives and interpretative strategies across a range of sources. These developments have encouraged comparative analyses that foreground differences not only between male and female authors, but also among male theologians themselves, and between varying conceptions of female spirituality. Such scholarship has expanded the field beyond binary gender frameworks, revealing pain as a complex theological and cultural construct negotiated within diverse textual and communal contexts¹³.

These theological ideas and representations of pain were not developed in isolation but emerged from a dynamic dialogue between men and women – both saints and mystics – within their religious communities. The resulting texts are often best understood as collaborative products, shaped by shared devotional practices, theological reflection, and communal negotiation. Gender identity and religious pain, in this context, are not static categories but are constructed and performed within specific social and spiritual networks¹⁴. Religious women, regardless of whether they authored texts themselves, actively participated in shaping their own spiritual authority. This authority was grounded in their embodied charisma and their immediate, often mystical, relationship with God. The female body thus became the *prima materia* through which sanctity was expressed and negotiated. These collaborative efforts between clerics and religious women resulted in a corpus of literature that carefully balanced

12. Anneke Mulder-Bakker writes about this: “The message seems to be that ‘true’ medievalists do not concern themselves with hagiographic sources, or if they do, it is only because they wish to study the earliest texts in the vernacular or are interested in folk beliefs and popular mentality. Little or no thought is given to the place of hagiography within medieval studies”. A.B. MULDER-BAKKER, *The Invention of Saintliness: Texts and Contexts*, in EAD. (ed.), *The Invention of Saintliness*, London – New York, Routledge, 2002, 3-23, p. 10.

13. See for example B.P. MCGUIRE, *Holy Women and Monks in the Thirteenth Century: Friendship or Exploitation*, in *Vox Benedictina* 6 (1989) 343-373, p. 343; B. MCGINN, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism: 1200-1350* (The Presence of God: A History of Western Christianity, 3), New York, Crossroad, 1998, pp. xii-xiii; J.W. COAKLEY, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and Their Male Collaborators*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2006.

14. Catherine M. Mooney questions whether female voices can be distinguished from male ones when it comes to hagiographic writings and to what extent the construction of sanctity is influenced by gender and by genre. See C.M. MOONEY, *Voice, Gender, and the Portrayal of Sanctity*, in EAD. (ed.), *Gendering Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, Philadelphia, PA, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999, 1-15, pp. 1-4. Later authors have increasingly stressed the influence of genre over gender.

divine revelation with ecclesiastical orthodoxy, particularly within select thirteenth-century communities¹⁵.

Within this framework, sainthood emerges as a fragile and negotiated identity, continuously shaped by communal expectations and subject to scrutiny. The saint's performance had to navigate a delicate balance between distinction and humility – between inspiring reverence and avoiding accusations of pride. Aviah Kleinberg studies this social construct of sainthood within a community with special attention to the phenomenon of the living saint, that is, saints recognized as such in their lifetime, in the late medieval era. He urges scholars to pay closer attention to the specific social transactions that enabled a particular saint to emerge in a community (the audience of their saintly performance)¹⁶. This social dynamic also impacts the scholarly study of pain. Richard Kieckhefer emphasizes that voluntary suffering served as a theological marker of sanctity, distinguishing the saint from the broader community. Importantly, the suffering female body was not a mere literary construct; it was a lived, performative reality embedded in a religious pain culture that collectively sought meaning in visible acts of affliction and spiritual endurance¹⁷.

Recent research has established that this performance of the suffering body was not exclusively linked to female saints as previous scholarship assumed. By examining the *vitae* of both male and female saints, scholars like Martha Newman and Katrien Heene note that the suffering body was not an exclusively female preoccupation, but that several lay brothers

15. See J.A. McNAMARA, *The Rhetoric of Orthodoxy: Clerical Authority and Female Innovation in the Struggle with Heresy*, in U. WIETHAUS (ed.), *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics*, New York, Syracuse University Press, 1993, 9-27.

16. See A.M. KLEINBERG, *Prophets in Their Own Country: Living Saints and the Making of Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, Chicago, IL – London, University of Chicago Press, 1992, pp. 1-7; 40-50.

17. See R. KIECKHEFER, *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu*, Chicago, IL – London, University of Chicago Press, 1985, p. 121. These social dynamics relate to the manuscripts as well, as Sarah Ritchey notes. The constant performance of the saint in front of their audience urges the texts to take on a similar role. The texts perform acts of grace as well. Ritchey focuses on the written documentation of these performances and how they functioned within the communities after the saint passed away. She studies the effects of reading the stories as part of a manuscript within a specific context, paying attention to the intertextuality in the manuscript rather than focusing on the authenticity of the saints. She observes that most of these manuscripts functioned within a context in which healing was offered. The manuscripts, like the saints, are performative. Like the saints, they can be healing and therapeutic. See S. RITCHEY, *Saints' Lives as Efficacious Texts: Cistercian Monks, Religious Women, and Curative Reading c. 1250-1330*, in *Speculum* 29 (2017) 1101-1143, pp. 1102-1106.

also sought Christ's intimacy through bodily suffering. They challenge the division between man and woman and propose to focus on literacy and social status rather than gender. Hagiographers usually attributed the symbol of the suffering body to unlettered lay brothers (characterized as Christ's warriors). Performing bodily mortification was a way for lay brothers to acquire religious authority, which religious women and monks could acquire through their education and clerical positions (*ex officio*)¹⁸.

As Alicia Spencer-Hall argues, hagiography serves as a rich medium for exploring these negotiations. It mediates between texts and bodies, between female performance – both active and passive – and male interpretation, revealing the complex interplay of gender, embodiment, and theological meaning within medieval religious culture. Importantly, this approach underscores that gender alone does not determine religious identity; social positioning within a networked community is equally significant¹⁹. She calls on scholars to embrace the genre's inherent mediation, rather than attempting to bypass or neutralize it. Hagiography, she argues, should be studied as a medium, an artefact, and a form of cultural and religious communication that bridges earthly and celestial communities. In this view, hagiography creates a virtual space where different media – oral, visual, textual – interact and converge. Although the genre often aimed to entertain and instruct a broad audience, it also pursued deeper forms of socio-cultural education²⁰. Spencer-Hall strives to incorporate popular literature and forms of lay culture in her research – thus going against the academic, elitist predilection for artistically recognized literature and art belonging to an official canon²¹. She corrects the academic focus, advocating a broadening of the canon and a firmer awareness of

18. See M. NEWMAN, *Crucified by the Virtues: Monks, Lay Brothers, and Women in Thirteenth-Century Cistercian Saints' Lives*, in S. FARMER – C.B. PASTERNAK (eds.), *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages* (Medieval Cultures, 32), Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 2003, 182-209; K. HEENE, *Ad sanguinis effusionem: Automutilatie en gender in middeleeuwse heiligenlevens*, in *Queeste* (1999) 1-22.

19. Spencer-Hall considers hagiography a cinematic medium, in light of the relationship between cinema and mysticism. See A. SPENCER-HALL, *Medieval Saints and Modern Screens: Divine Visions as Cinematic Experience*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2018, pp. 55; 242-251.

20. As Brigitte Cazelles notes, the didactic nature of hagiographic texts varies according to the political, spiritual, and social realities that shaped them. Thus, hagiography is not only a vehicle for commemorating saints but also a lens through which the intellectual and devotional currents of medieval communities can be studied. See B. CAZELLES, *Introduction*, in R. BLUMENFELD-KOSINSKI – T. SZELL (eds.), *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, Ithaca, NY – London, Cornell University Press, 1991, 1-17, p. 1.

21. See SPENCER-HALL, *Medieval Saints*, p. 50.

the mystical context – although she leaves out mystical authors, which is regrettable.

The distinction between hagiographic and mystical genres, often emphasized in contemporary scholarship, was far less rigid in the medieval context. Themes such as sainthood, ecstasy, divine love, and mystical union were explored across both literary forms, suggesting a shared theological and experiential framework. This fluidity invites comparative studies that transcend genre boundaries and examine the interplay between socio-religious roles and gendered expressions of spirituality. Scholars increasingly advocate for such cross-genre analyses – not only to deepen our understanding of the lives and writings of religious women, but also to include non-hagiographic texts and the *vitae* of male saints, thereby broadening the scope of inquiry into medieval religious identity and pain culture²².

Comparative analyses of hagiographic and mystical texts have opened new perspectives on the roles of both hagiographers and mystics as theological agents. Rachel Smith introduces the concept of “mystical hagiographies” to foreground the hagiographer not merely as a chronicler, but as an apophatic theologian – one who remains present within the text and actively shapes its theological contours. By highlighting the voices within the narrative, including his own, the hagiographer constructs a network of relationships that commemorate the saint while also expressing profound theological tensions such as doubt, fear, and suffering²³. Smith’s contribution underscores that suffering in these texts is not confined to female bodies alone; rather, it encompasses a wide spectrum of physical, emotional, and spiritual pain experienced by diverse figures. This broader view challenges reductive readings and affirms the complexity of pain as a shared theological and literary concern.

Drawing on this overview of secondary literature, I argue that hagiographers did not intentionally overemphasize saints’ performative pain or misrepresent their theological insights. Rather, they acted as mediators between the lived mystical experience and the broader mystical culture. This process – what I term hagiographic mediation – involved crafting

22. See W. WILLIAMS-KRAPP, *Literary Genre and Degrees of Saintliness: The Perception of Holiness by and about Female Mystics*, in MULDER-BAKKER (ed.), *The Invention of Saintliness*, 206-218, pp. 207-210. For a concrete example of scholarship investigating both hagiographic and mystical writings related to the mystic Beatrice of Nazareth, see R. DE GANCK, *Towards Unification with God: Beatrice of Nazareth in Her Context: Part Three* (Cistercian Studies Series, 122), Kalamazoo, MI, Cistercian Publications, 1991.

23. See R.J. SMITH, *Excessive Saints: Gender, Narrative, and Theological Invention in Thomas of Cantimpré’s Mystical Hagiographies* (Gender, Theory & Religion), New York, Columbia University Press, 2019, pp. 2-3.

texts that featured characters resembling living saints and selecting narrative moments that best expressed their sanctity. While mystical theology was often implicit in the contemplative lives of these figures, hagiographers had to account for the theological literacy of their readers. Their task was not only to document but to interpret, translating mystical experience into accessible theological language. In doing so, they helped shape the reception and transmission of mystical knowledge across diverse audiences.

2. *Mystical Performance*

A renewed attention for pain and performance within mystical treatises suggests that these themes cross genres. A performative perspective, developed by Joanna Ziegler and Mary Suydam, proposes to see pain not only as a literary device or hagiographic invention but instead look at the performance of pain as multisided, belonging to the historical bodies of both men and women, as well as the literary corpus where it is carefully constructed by the author and mystical theologian. It reveals that the performance of pain is not just physical but spiritual; it serves as a way to communicate different theologies²⁴. Suydam emphasizes that mystical treatises too were literary products, created on the basis of the sacred performances, reinterpreted with every copy or revision of the manuscript. She observes a similar performativity between female saints and female mystics in mystical treatises. Women, in particular, broke through the paradigm of the solitary, contemplative mystic, and consciously chose to be part of the community in which their spirituality grew. Some of these women, including Hadewijch, addressed a select community of readers in which their mystical texts were performed²⁵.

Hadewijch's oeuvre offers a particularly compelling case study for examining the performative dimensions of mystical writing. Literary scholars such as Louis Peter Grijp, Frank Willaert, Veerle Fraeters, and Aniko Daroczi have explored the performativity embedded in her texts, especially her *Poems*²⁶. Grijp's seminal study revealed that these *Poems*

24. See J. ZIEGLER, *Introduction*, in M.A. SUYDAM – J. ZIEGLER (eds.), *Performance and Transformation: New Approaches to Late Medieval Spirituality*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1999, xiii-xxi, pp. xv-xx.

25. See M.A. SUYDAM, *Beguine Textuality: Sacred Performance*, in EAD. – ZIEGLER (eds.), *Performance and Transformation*, 169-210, pp. 169-170; 196.

26. See V. FRAETERS – F. WILLAERT, *Hadewijch: Liederen*, Groningen, Historische Uitgeverij, 2009. Daroczi argues that these performative textual communities did not only include Hadewijch's *Poems*, but also her *Letters*, which were recited in paraliturgical

were in fact songs, likely performed with music²⁷. Their melodic structure and rhythmic intensification were designed to affect both listeners and performers, creating a dynamic interplay between textual content and embodied reception. Through the creation of distinct lyrical *personae*, Hadewijch invited her audience to identify with the spiritual journey enacted in the songs. This participatory mode of reception was rooted in a cultivated oral culture, where memorization and improvisation were sensory practices. The community's engagement with the texts was thus not only intellectual but bodily, forming a network of performance, memory, and mystical instruction guided by the author herself²⁸.

This recognition of community and performativity of pain in hagiographic and mystical texts calls for a renewed perspective on the synthesis of body and text. The suffering body is not only central to hagiographic representation; it is also deeply embedded in mystical treatises, where embodiment and textuality are inextricably intertwined. Patricia Dailey, in her analysis of Hadewijch's work, argues that the mystical text is inscribed upon the body of the mystic – particularly through liturgical practices, hymns, and sermons. Embodiment, she contends, involves multiple literacies, and the body itself becomes a linguistic medium that seeks to articulate and interpret its own experience. This approach moves beyond the tendency to extract theology from mysticism, instead returning mystical literature to its Christian textual tradition, where exegesis and embodiment are co-constitutive. In this view, the body is not merely a vessel of suffering but a site of theological production – an active participant in the articulation of divine presence²⁹.

Hadewijch, along with other holy women, their hagiographers, and male saints, formed part of a broader mystical network whose texts exhibit striking thematic and stylistic resonances. As Simone Roisin has shown, these figures operated within the context of the mystical culture

contexts. In Hadewijch's work, Daroczi finds an oral rhetoric and therefore concludes that a global musicality underwrites her oeuvre. See A. DAROCZI, *Groet gheruchte van dien wondere: Spreken, zwijgen en zingen bij Hadewijch* (Antwerpse Studies over Nederlandse Literatuurgeschiedenis, 14), Leuven, Peeters, 2007.

27. See L.P. GRIJP, *De zingende Hadewijch*, in F. WILLAERT (ed.), *Een zoet akkoord: Middeleeuwse lyriek in de Lage Landen*, Amsterdam, Prometheus, 1992, 72-93.

28. See A. DAROCZI, *Hadewijch: Mystiek tussen oraliteit en schriftelijkheid: Over de verbinding van inhoud en vorm*, in L.P. GRIJP – F. WILLAERT (eds.), *De fiere nachtegaal: Het Nederlandse lied in de Middeleeuwen*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2008, 33-54, pp. 26; 41.

29. See P. DAILEY, *Promised Bodies: Time, Language & Corporeality in Medieval Women's Mystical Texts* (Gender, Theory & Religion), New York, Columbia University Press, 2013, pp. 50; 60.

of Liège – a concept I will elaborate in the following section³⁰. Their writings reflect a shared mystical vocabulary and imagery, shaped through dialogue among mystics, saints, and their interpreters. While saints and mystics performed their sanctity within their immediate communities, hagiographers had to anticipate how these performances would be received by a wider audience. The resulting texts – and the “characters” within them – are products of a dynamic interplay between lived experience, textual tradition, and communal interpretation. In both hagiographic and mystical literature, performativity is not limited to the body or the text alone, but emerges through the interaction between authors, readers, and the spiritual communities they inhabit.

3. *Mystical Culture*

To examine the differences and similarities in the conceptualization, interpretation, and valorization of pain within a specific religious context, the mystical cultures of the Late Middle Ages offer a particularly fruitful case. This study focuses on a single case characterized by close interpersonal relationships and clearly identifiable textual networks within a defined temporal and geographic framework. Rather than adopting the more common diachronic approach, which traces the historical development of mysticism over time, I opt for a synchronic analysis³¹. This method allows for the investigation of mystical theology as it was practiced and articulated at a specific moment, revealing the diversity of interpretations among contemporaneous mystical theologians. While socio-political realities undoubtedly shaped this culture, previous scholarship has often overlooked the personal theological and mystagogical approaches of individual authors and their relationships with their readers. I argue that variations in pain language are closely tied to the positioning of both authors and readers within the mystical culture, and to their respective access to and understanding of mystical knowledge.

The topography of mystical culture serves as a crucial analytical tool for examining variations in pain language. This concept not only delineates the geographical and temporal boundaries of the study but also identifies a distinct cultural unit: a network of historical figures and texts

30. Roisin discusses for example, the textual resemblances between the *Life of Abundus*, the *Life of Arnulfus*, and the *Life of Ida of Nivelles*. See S. ROISIN, *L'hagiographie cistercienne dans le diocèse de Liège au XII^e siècle*, Leuven, Bibliothèque de l'Université, 1947, pp. 56-59.

31. See B. MCGINN, *The Genealogy of Mystical Traditions*, in MCINTOSH – HOWELLS (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology*, 65-85.

rooted in the long tradition of mysticism. For this purpose, I have selected the thirteenth-century culture of the diocese of Liège. This network extended across sermons, hagiographies, and mystical treatises, and permeated folk traditions and secular literature. The thirteenth century witnessed a dynamic convergence of monastic and secular literary traditions, generating a rich array of theological interpretations in which the meaning of pain was continuously negotiated. Within this network, pain languages intersected and evolved, forming a cultural nervous system responsive to intellectual stimuli from diverse figures and centers of thought.

The socio-religious environment of the thirteenth century supports the use of the concept of concentric circles to describe the dissemination of mystical knowledge. This model envisions mystical insight radiating outward from an epicenter – a mystic and their immediate circle – toward broader devotional communities. Barbara Newman refers to this process as a watering down of mysticism. She identifies the most radical and refined expressions of thirteenth-century mysticism in the aristocratic souls of female authors such as Mechtild of Magdeburg and Hadewijch. These women developed what Newman calls the *mystique courtoise*, a form of mysticism nourished by both secular courtly love lyricism and monastic love theology³². Their innovative practices and ideas spread through a network of texts, charismatic figures, and cultural centers, and were gradually adapted to new audiences and changing socio-cultural contexts. Newman's notion of dilution can be interpreted either as a loss of intensity or as a productive integration of mysticism into everyday religious life³³.

A similar shift from mystical to popular devotion is reflected in Thom Mertens' concept of mystical culture, which I adopt and refine in this study. Mertens critiques the rigid division in scholarship between so-called mystical and non-mystical texts, and instead proposes a more integrated framework. His concept bridges multiple literary genres, bringing together texts that have traditionally been studied in isolation. Within a mystical culture, mystics serve as models of the ideal life, and their teachings shape the values, worldview, and practices of the broader community. However, this culture is not monolithic. Mertens emphasizes that mystical ideals were not only celebrated but also challenged and moderated. His approach, which combines literary-historical and cultural-historical perspectives, reveals a diachronic evolution in mystical

32. See B. NEWMAN, *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages*, Philadelphia, PA, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003, p. 169.

33. *Ibid.*

theology – from radical expressions in the thirteenth century to more domesticated forms of devotion in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This “watering down” of mystical ideas reflects both adaptation to new audiences and the institutional pressures of orthodoxy³⁴.

While I adopt Mertens’ concept of mystical culture, I expand his literary-historical and cultural-historical framework by integrating a theological analysis of evolving ideas. These ideas not only shifted diachronically across centuries but also fluctuated synchronically between cultural centers, historical figures, and religious lay communities. To fully grasp the dynamics of mystical culture, we must examine not only the top-down influence of mystical masters on lay audiences, but also the bottom-up flow of beliefs, stories, and practices into mystical texts. This reverse movement reflects the mystics’ attentiveness to the cultural background of their readers, many of whom belonged to popular devotional circles. If mysticism is fundamentally didactic and mystagogical, then it must be understood as a dialogical process – an exchange of images, ideas, and experiences between teacher and student, author and reader, within a tightly woven network of spiritual communication.

The conceptualization and interpretation of pain were among the most contested theological issues within mystical culture. Pain functioned as a crossroads of meaning, shaped by the socio-cultural backgrounds of those who experienced and expressed it. Mysticism, in this context, operated as a form of theologizing – a creative synthesis of traditions negotiated through dialogue. While some participants in mystical culture, such as monks and trained theologians, were deeply embedded in the Christian intellectual tradition, others – particularly within religious lay communities – engaged with mystical ideas through devotional practices and vernacular theology. The concept of mystical culture provides a framework for tracing how theological ideas about pain circulated, transformed, and were embodied across these diverse contexts, mediated by shared textual and performative networks. The concrete network will be described in chapter two. Now it is important to outline a methodology for studying pain within a concrete mystical culture and its dialectical relationship between performative texts and textualized bodies.

34. See T. MERTENS, *Mystieke cultuur en literatuur in de late Middeleeuwen*, in F. VAN OOSTROM *et al.* (eds.), *Grote lijnen: Synthesen over Middelnederlandse letterkunde*, Amsterdam, Prometheus, 1995, 117-136, pp. 118-127.

4. *A Close-Reading Approach to the Mystical Culture*

To analyze pain within a specific mystical culture, I adopt a close reading methodology focused on selected textual material. This approach emphasizes both the literary and historical positioning of the texts within the broader mystical network. Drawing on Cohen's method, I identify instances of pain not through explicit terminology alone, but by examining how pain is conceptualized, interpreted, and valorized within its narrative and theological context³⁵. My selection privileges texts that are imaginative, dramatic, and performative – qualities intrinsic to mystical literature. Following the insights of Bynum and Joris Reynaert, I treat these texts as networks of images and metaphors, carefully staged by their authors to facilitate the transmission of mystical knowledge about pain³⁶.

I consider mystical theology to be an imaginative theology, a term introduced by B. Newman to highlight the shared reliance on imagery across various theological traditions – monastic, scholastic, vernacular, mystical, and pastoral. According to Newman, all medieval theologies are deeply visual and metaphorical in nature³⁷. Engaging with mystical texts, therefore, requires entering into their symbolic logic and participating in their imaginative play. Rather than extracting abstract doctrines, one must read these texts as aesthetic and theological compositions, where images serve as vehicles for divine insight. This approach allows for a more faithful and nuanced interpretation of mystical pain language, one that respects the genre's expressive complexity and theological depth.

Following Sarah Coakley, I approach the study of mystical theology as a hermeneutical exercise – one that seeks to do justice to the original texts and their cultural contexts. Coakley acknowledges the challenges posed by differing cultural frameworks, but argues that these can be bridged through sympathetic imagination and rigorous, text-immanent analysis³⁸. In this spirit, I contend that engaging with mystical theology requires more than historical distance or doctrinal clarity; it demands a creative sensitivity to the ways in which medieval authors expressed the hidden presence of God across various media. To read like a mystical theologian is to enter into their imaginative world, to trace the contours

35. See COHEN, *The Modulated Scream*, p. 3.

36. See C.W. BYNUM, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity: 200-1336*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1995, p. 7; J. REYNAERT, *De beeldspraak van Hadewijch* (Studiën en tekstuutgaven van Ons geestelijk erf, 21), Tielt, Lannoo, 1981, pp. 23-30.

37. See NEWMAN, *God and the Goddesses*, pp. 294-296.

38. See S. COAKLEY, *Theology and Cultural Relativism: What Is the Problem?*, in *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 21 (1979) 223-243, p. 239.

of divine mystery as it unfolds in image, metaphor, and embodied experience.

An imaginative, text-immanent approach – combined with a theological reading of the selected mystical culture – produces a rich polyphony of voices that conceptualize, interpret, and valorize pain. To organize this diversity, I propose the analytical categories of “outer” and “inner”, derived from close textual readings. These categories do not represent fixed binaries but rather a continuum along which expressions of pain fluctuate and transform. They are applicable to mystical discourse, and serve as a heuristic framework for mapping the varied manifestations of pain within the mystical culture of Liège.

The categories of “outer” and “inner” also serve a purpose within the internal logic of mystical theology and the structure of mystical culture, which I conceptualize as concentric circles. These categories help articulate the mystical process itself. John of Ruusbroec, for instance, repeatedly describes a movement from the outward to the inward and back again throughout his oeuvre. This spiral dynamic functions as a mystagogical tool, guiding readers toward deeper theological insight. Many mystics employed this structure to shape their writings. My text-immanent approach follows this same trajectory: the chapters move from external experiences of pain to their interiorization, and finally return to outward expression. This cyclical movement reflects the inseparability of inner and outer dimensions of pain, which are always present to varying degrees in mystical experience.

This continuum between outer and inner pain also reflects the pedagogical and mystagogical structure typical of mystical texts³⁹. Physical pain, often more visible and accessible, dominates the outer ring of mystical culture, where most believers understood bodily suffering as a site of salvation – a notion deeply embedded in medieval theology and devotion. In contrast, the inner circle, composed of close-knit communities around mystical theologians and teachers, focused on mental and spiritual pain, often linked to the *apex mentis*, the innermost core of the human person in medieval anthropology. Understanding this inner pain requires not only proximity to the teacher but also a refined grasp of mystical

39. “Being-in-pain is a multifaceted sensory, cognitive, affective, motivational, and temporal phenomenon”, Bourke observes. One seldom suffers exclusively from physical or mental pain. Pain is a total experience that touches and addresses one’s entire being. That is why it is difficult to separate pain (a bodily experience) from suffering (the affective experience of pain). Bourke argues that both terms should be used interchangeably. She does not distinguish between emotional and physical pain because they go together. See BOURKE, *The Story of Pain*, p. 21.

theology and its symbolic language. The categories of outer and inner thus serve to map the didactic progression of mystical texts and the spiritual development of their readers.

This structure – moving between outer and inner, between text and body, between performance and writing – mirrors recent scholarly developments and informs the architecture of this book.

5. *The Journey In and Out in Four Acts*

Borrowing the language of theater, which suggests a relationship between performance and text, between bodies and audiences, and again between outer and inner, I describe the analysis in four acts which consist of chapters that deal with a particular facet of the described act and the journey in and out. The first three acts depict the journey inwards: the journey towards the mystical center and the journey from physical and outer depictions of pain, to more inward experiences that are harder to pinpoint and depend on a more advanced mystical literacy. This increased mystical knowledge substantially transforms the conceptualization and interpretation of pain and moves it from its association with “fear” to a mystical union with “love”. To understand these mystical transformations, we will proceed with the mystical acolyte, from periphery to inner circle. The last act will detail how this mystical knowledge is captured and expressed. It deals with a meta-reflection on mystical language which is drenched with painful experiences associated with the process of writing.

In the introductory chapters I develop the analysis of the mystical pain culture of Liège using the proposed imaginative text-immanent approach and the categories of outer and inner. I first highlight the concrete textual networks of the mystical culture of Liège, the selected case study, before continuing the in-depth analysis. After the second chapter on the textual networks and the selection of source materials, I will develop a short diachronic overview of the mystical tradition and its significant pain languages in the third chapter. I will focus on the tradition’s transmission and interpretation of pain language leading up to the selected case study – the thirteenth-century diocese of Liège – with the fourteenth-century mystical John of Ruusbroec as a point of reference. This overview will develop some key theological insights that are crucial for the formation of the mystical knowledge in the epicenters of the mystical culture.

In chapters four through fourteen, I move from the periphery of the mystical culture (the devotional culture of lay believers and their religious leaders and teachers) towards the mystical circle of insiders. I start

with discussing external expressions of pain that are captured within a variety of texts and genres. Then, I explore the ways in which imaginative and devotional practices interiorize experiences and expressions of pain, increasing the agency and responsibility of the reader/practitioner. When I move towards the center of the mystical culture, I develop with the mystical authors some crucial understandings of the relationship between pain, love and fear which deconstruct presupposed assumptions of the general medieval theological worldview. These insights cannot remain a private inner experience. Contrary to popular understandings of mysticism, the mystical journey does not end with contemplation and mystical union. Instead, the mystic becomes a teacher, a writer. Via a painful process of externalization, the mystic captures the teachings in writing – a final step in the dialectical relationship between bodies and texts.

The first act considers outer forms of pain and bodily harm, using the idea that pain can contribute to heavenly glory and can even be exchanged for salvation. This paradigm and these expressions dominate medieval popular religious literature, such as *exempla* (folk stories, mainly meant for preaching) and the *vitae* of saints. The general population of believers – the target audience of the sermons and sermon literature – did not want to be confronted with pain, not even for their own personal salvation. They prayed to saints and followed the strict moral regulations of the Church to avoid pain, which they perceived as a punishment for their sins. Pain was seen as an act of demons who torture people in the here and now. After their death, the believers were threatened with a punishment far greater than earthly pain. They could be banned from heaven and sent to hell or purgatory, a doctrine and imagination that peaked in the Late Middle Ages. The authors used the imagination of physical harm, and purgatory in particular, to encourage readers and listeners to live a virtuous life and to repent. They created vivid scenes and theatrical dramas to reach their goal, entertaining the audience while informing and persuading them of the importance of a morally good life and the need for penitence. Pain experiences and dramatic plots went hand in hand, Moscoso argues, as the experiences had their own actors, plots, stages, costumes, props, scenography and audience⁴⁰. The structure of pain expressions aimed to convince. Pain makes for a good story.

The same performative approach to the sources will be applied to the hagiographic literature, which was inspired by the study of Ziegler and

40. Moscoso, *Pain*, pp. 6-7.

Suydam, and Moscoso's insight in the dramatic nature of pain events⁴¹. The main characters – the saints – were the actors who intervened in their community and fought harm and pain caused by demons and sin, which would have resulted in the condemnation of lost souls. The performance of pain was staged by the hagiographer to inspire adoration in the listener or reader and to narrate the story of salvation and Christ's deeds, through the saints' behavior. Their bodies became canvases on which their sainthood was printed. Excessive physical pain was staged and shared, so that the believer might recognize Christ in the suffering of the saint, allowing the saint to become an *alter Christus*. The hagiographer had to assist his reader interpret the pain performances of the saints correctly. The literal interpretation of the *imitatio Christi* and his excessive suffering had to be moderated. These transgressive acts were mainly employed by lay saints and were described and interpreted by their hagiographers to match the average mystical literacy of a broad audience. I call this interference of the hagiographer, who carefully restaged the pain performances, "hagiographic mediation". The saint could then be adored and begged to take away the suffering of the ordinary believer, and their virtuous behavior imitated (in lesser degree than the saints). On a literary level, the figure of the saint mediated between folk and mystical traditions, which also explains the abundant presence of paramystical events in hagiographies (paramysticism is, after all, also a form of external communication). To study this type of bodily pain performance, I highlight the case of Elisabeth of Spalbeek and Christina Mirabilis.

Finally, the first act also discusses another type of *imitatio Christi* unrelated to Christ's suffering body but nonetheless externally visible: exclusion and persecution by the community. This performance of the new martyr allowed the spectator to observe outer events that caused mental pain. This form of *imitatio Christi* is often overlooked but was a dominant theme in all the *vitae* and much of Hadewijch's work. She described "aliens" responsible for the harmful environment she lived in, which made her feel betrayed and abandoned, like Christ. Hadewijch's theological construction of the "aliens" played a prominent role in her thinking and helps make sense of the imitation of Christ's suffering. To illustrate this experience of pain, the life of Juliana of Mont Cornillon is discussed.

Act two considers the internalization of pain experiences and employs the concept of compassion. Pain does not just serve to deter or to instill adulation but also to establish an inner affective relationship in which pain

41. SUYDAM – ZIEGLER (eds.), *Performance and Transformation*; MOSCOSO, *Pain*.

is passed on. Within the devotional circles of mystical culture, this affective bond with suffering was strongly encouraged. As the fourteenth century progressed, passion devotion became ever more dominant in the spiritual landscape, particularly with the ascendance of Modern Devotion. Pain language of and meditation on Christ's suffering led to an increasing number of literate participants in mystical culture looking inward, daring to partake in Christ's suffering through empathy. The great example of this compassion was the Mother of Christ, who watched her Son die on the cross, her heart shattered by sorrow. This inner form of suffering in the shape of mercy is powerfully present in the lives of various female saints. Hagiographers used this imagery to shape the imagination of their readers, creating an inner space where the readers could meditate on the images and participate in the dramatic scenes presented by the author. Readers were even invited to create their own scenes, resulting in a flurry of visionary activity at the end of the Late Middle Ages.

The saints set the great examples of affective compassion in their meditation on the pain imagery. Their reflections on pain imagery figured in a general inward turn in thirteenth-century hagiographic literature, as described by Roisin. Yet the saints did not lose their societal value and continued to contribute actively to the deliverance of the community; they were both Martha and Mary. Their contribution was rooted in their loving relationship with God, which empowered them to act as mediators⁴². The mystical wisdom that the saint obtained and communicated to a broader audience through the *vitae*, was knowledge of the experience of love. The emphasis on compassion, co-suffering and redeeming urged mystical theologians to rethink the relationship between pain and love.

In mystical culture, compassion as a form of suffering was often connected to the dynamic of exchanging pain. The saints showed a transgressive superabundance of compassion for both the suffering of Christ and the suffering of humanity. They became bridge figures, co-redeemers in their own right, and mediated between God and their communities. The fear of purgatorial punishment was so great that believers longed for assistance in their personal paths to salvation. The saints could intervene through their own personal suffering, which was rewarded with heavenly glory. They exchanged their pain for salvation and could even distribute this salvation within their communities. The saints were so compassionate that they wished to suffer for the salvation of others. Their deeds and their visionary activity, in which they creatively and affectively interacted with pain imagery induced by God, demanded adoration and a kind of

42. ROISIN, *L'hagiographie cistercienne*, pp. 171; 245-247.

watered-down imitation. The readers or listeners could also meditate on the images offered by the saints and their hagiographers, and they could follow the same path of compassion to become better community members and more devoted believers. This path called for a commitment beyond simple external observation. A mystagogical process emerged that strongly revolved around experience, in which the disciple attempted to live similar experiences, thus gaining the knowledge revealed to the saint/mystic.

The dynamics between pain, compassion, and divine justice will be examined through a theme that fascinated adherents of the thirteenth-century cult of saints: the practice of saving souls from purgatory. This case is a good illustration of the multifarious theological positions present in the *vitae*, even in *vitae* written by the same author. Hadewijch's explicit condemnation of this practice, in her fifth vision, helps to place the hagiographic theologies in a continuum. At one extreme of the spectrum, I place Lutgard of Aywières, the purgatory saint par excellence. At the other extreme we find Hadewijch, who vilified this practice and called its participants Lucifers. These two theological positions are compared and contrasted, examining the dynamic of pain and love. This illustrates the transition from a classical promise dynamic to a dynamic of longing in which pain is no longer merely a stage on the road to God, but an intrinsic component of this bond.

The differences in mystical theologies at the basis of these distinct positions on saving souls are further examined in act three. I argue that these differences result from two distinct paradigms, one based on pain exchange, the other on desire. Act three elaborates on the shift in paradigms through three mystical authors: Beatrice of Nazareth, Hadewijch, and John of Ruusbroec. The transition between literary genres (hagiography to mystical treatise) is illustrated through the unique example of the life and works of Beatrice of Nazareth. Her life was documented by an anonymous hagiographer and in her own texts, of which only the tractate *Seven Manners* has survived. Beatrice introduced a new tension that is shared by all three authors and relates to mental pain, namely the tension between love and fear. Bourke argues that fear and pain go hand in hand. Fear is a basic emotion that shapes a range of different emotions and can cause a variety of, sometimes opposing, bodily responses. Fear can be linked to anxiety, a kind of fear without direct object and can cause great mental pain and unease⁴³. Fear of pain can even aggravate the experience,

43. Cf. J. BOURKE, *Fear and Anxiety: Writing about Emotion in Modern History*, in *History Workshop Journal* 55 (2003) 111-133.

Cohen argues, while acceptance reduces the sensation⁴⁴. In medieval culture, fear reigned supreme. It was cultivated by popular literature and helped to keep the Christian flock on the right moral path through fear of punishment. But Beatrice and other mystical authors sought ways to harmonize a healthy dose of fear for God with the basic experience of being loved by God. Building on the thesis that God is Love, the authors explored ways of guiding their readers through pain and fear toward a firm grasp of the abysmal nature of Love. The most prominent spokesperson of this transgressive love for God was Hadewijch.

Hadewijch mentioned and conceptualized pain on an inner level and placed this experience within her dynamic, yearning relationship with God who is Love. In her mystical works, Hadewijch focused less on outer pain in favor of an elaborate exploration of the mystic's inner world. Physical pain and the affective relationship with Christ's suffering body were subordinated to her descriptions of a mental pain that challenges the mystic's loyalty to the service of Love. In describing the themes of sorrow and pain caused by the fear of the beloved's absence, she was inspired by love lyricism and biblical themes gleaned from the Book of Job, the Song of Songs and, of course, the life and passion of Christ. Hadewijch's imitation of Christ revolves around Christ's mental pain, his anxiety and his feeling of having been forsaken by his Father. Hadewijch thought through the consequences of a completely voluntary surrender to Love. The only possible response to the radical otherness of God, who will never be what the naive young lover expects, is an eternal desire for God that grows exponentially and eternally. Hadewijch's mystical theology was very advanced and radical, only suitable for a close circle of highly trained mystical insiders, which I call the epicenter of mystical culture.

One century on, Ruusbroec still wrote about Love, but in a much altered environment. The emphases within the literary network shifted with increased democratization of mystical ideals. This devotional culture greatly valued the meditation on Christ's passion and the affective relationship with the suffering body of the crucified Son. But the radical nature of the mystical centers and mystical theology was increasingly seen as suspect. After the condemnations of the works of Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart, Ruusbroec had to be extremely circumspect. Hence the mystic's arguments are very refined and didactic. In his oeuvre, Ruusbroec elaborated on the mystical concept of the pain of love, and incorporated

44. Cf. E. COHEN, *Towards a History of European Physical Sensibility: Pain in the Later Middle Ages*, in *Science in Context* 8 (1995) 47-74, p. 50.

this idea into a system accessible to a broader audience, in contrast with Hadewijch's textual community and intimate circle. Act three ends by discussing Ruusbroec's adaptation of the conceptualization, interpretation, and theological valorization of pain borrowed from thirteenth-century mystical culture.

Act four gives some final reflections on the genre of mystical literature. I study the pain that authors and saints were confronted with when they attempted to articulate their mystical experiences and ideas. This final act analyzes the relation between speech, contemplative silence and pain, which was interpreted as the price that had to be paid to express mystical insight and gain religious authority, especially for women who were not allowed to preach publicly. I then reflect on the role of the hagiographer as mystical theologian and the pain he needs to go through to express his ideas and write down his *Lives*. Through his writing, the hagiographer is following a unique path, parallel to that of the saints and mystics. Hagiographers propose their own way of *imitatio Christi* through the suffering of their literary body, their corpus.

Finally, I will consider autobiographical passages in the works by Hadewijch and Ruusbroec, which offer insights into the authors' writing processes and the relationship with their readers. The process of expressing pain is studied through a theological analysis of the concept "enlightened reason", which was used by both Hadewijch and Ruusbroec. Enlightened reason, as part of the faculties of the human soul, mediated between contemplation in God and active and loving service to their community. The mystical authors felt the need to break the silence of contemplation and felt compelled to share their teachings. They conceptualized and interpreted this urge to speak, culminating in Ruusbroec's understanding of the "common man", who simultaneously rests in God and works in society. These mystical authors, too, are "common" and fulfill their service to Love (for Christ and their community) by writing mystical works.

II

THE MYSTICAL CULTURE OF LIÈGE

This book explores how pain was conceptualized, interpreted, and theologically valorized within the thirteenth-century diocese of Liège, using the fourteenth-century mystic John of Ruusbroec as a key interlocutor. I selected this case study because Liégeois texts are part of a shared textual network and mystical culture in which mystical ideas were debated, appropriated, modified, or rejected. This culture encompasses a plurality of voices that contributed to a rich and nuanced mystical language of pain. It is rooted in monastic traditions, shaped by textual and bodily practices, and enriched by secular and folkloric rituals. In the thirteenth century, this culture bridged monastic ideals with the lived experiences of laypeople embracing a renewed apostolic lifestyle, bringing their own cultural backgrounds into the mix. This convergence produced a variety of literary genres – sermons, hagiographies, and mystical treatises – that permeated folk traditions and secular literature. The creative endeavor of connecting monastic, secular, and lay literary traditions was entrusted to mystical theologians. Some operated exclusively within the epicenters of mystical culture, like Hadewijch, while others positioned themselves at its periphery to reach all believers, including those unfamiliar with mystical discourse. The hagiographers and sermon writers belong to this latter group of mystical theologians.

Through the concept of mystical culture, I advocate for the inclusion of various types of mystical theologians and writers, rather than focusing solely on canonized mystics. In particular, I argue for the inclusion of hagiographers, given their significant contributions to the shared language of pain and their active engagement in the discourse surrounding mystical pain experiences. Drawing on the methodological challenges encountered in academic research on female sanctity, I critically assess the skills of mystical theologians in relation to their position within this culture. Their depictions of pain were not driven by a personal fascination with female suffering, but emerged from a creative and attentive dialogue with their audiences and sources – including the embodied mystical theologies of both men and women. This mediating skill, which bridges mystical ideas and folkloric traditions, is often overlooked in secondary literature, which tends to privilege studies of canonized mystics or the broader female

saintly culture. Yet, the production of mystical texts – especially those authored by women – coincided with the flourishing of hagiographies and *exempla*, peaking between 1230 and 1250. During this period, Beguine communities became institutionalized and Cistercian monasteries expanded, fostering literacy and mystical education among laypeople, particularly through exposure to mystical tropes and imagery¹. The concept of mystical theology enables a comparative analysis of the diverse strategies employed by mystical theologians to transmit mystical knowledge to readers from varied cultural backgrounds.

In this section, I begin by outlining the historical context of Liège's mystical culture, with particular attention to female religious communities such as the Beguines and the Cistercian nuns. I then examine the textual networks that fostered mystical literacy within these communities. These networks were often anchored in Cistercian centers, which linked holy women and men to mystical authors and hagiographers. I explore the role of these authors as mediators between Cistercian mystical traditions and a lay readership. The Cistercian Abbey of Villers played a key intermediary role, connecting monastic traditions, mystical authors, and devotional cultures within the diocese of Liège. Cistercian spirituality was instrumental in shaping and transmitting mystical knowledge in the region. Its influence extended beyond contemporary hagiographic literature and continued to shape the mystical genre more broadly. Hadewijch and John of Ruusbroec – the central mystical authors examined in this book – were clearly inspired by foundational figures of Cistercian mysticism, such as Bernard of Clairvaux and William of Saint-Thierry, who were deeply embedded in the Western monastic literary tradition. I conclude by identifying the mystical sources these authors drew upon and situating their contributions to Middle Dutch mysticism within their historical and textual networks.

1. *The Saints of Liège*

a) *Mulieres Religiosae*

You know, I repeat, that when you came to our country, it seemed to you that you were in the promised land, for I heard you say how you left Egypt in your own regions and, travelling through the desert, how you found the promised land in the diocese of Liège. When you were in your own regions, you were acquainted with many people from our country who had been

1. See J. VAN ENGEN, *The Religious Women of Liège at the Turn of the Thirteenth Century*, in S. VANDERPUTTEN – T. SNIJDERS – J. DIEHL (eds.), *Medieval Liège at the Crossroads of Europe: Monastic Society and Culture. 1000-1300* (Medieval Church Studies, 37), Turnhout, Brepols, 2018, 339-370, p. 341.

marked with the cross, who were fervent against heretics to the faith, wondrously patient in tribulation and overflowing with the works of mercy. Indeed, as you yourself said to me, you were filled with wonder by certain women who wept more for a single venial sin than did the men of your land over a thousand mortal sins. When you came to our regions, you saw that it was exactly as you had heard. Indeed, you heard so much that you would hardly have believed it had you not known it by experience and with the clear-sighted eyes of faith².

In these lines from the introduction to the *vita* of Mary of Oignies, James of Vitry addresses Bishop Fulk of Toulouse, offering a vivid testimony to the exceptional religious climate of the diocese of Liège, which he likens to the promised land³. As a passionate advocate of the early Beguine movement and its spirituality, James sought to persuade influential Church officials of the unique contributions made by female saints to the region's religious vitality. His introduction highlights several exemplary themes that came to define perceptions of female sanctity: poverty, humility, Eucharistic devotion, and bridal mysticism marked by chastity and virginity. James not only praised these women but also used his ecclesiastical authority to shield them from the frequent prejudices and persecutions they faced. He set a precedent for other hagiographers, who entered Liège as skeptical observers and departed as fervent defenders of a revitalized spirituality reminiscent of both martyrs and monks. Moreover, James claimed that these women challenged conventional notions of saintly power and expanded the boundaries of religious imagination. He described witnessing women in prolonged states of ecstasy, seemingly suspended from material reality by a vertical force, and others who danced in rapture like David before the Ark. Whereas such episodes had previously been brief, these women embraced mystical rapture as a way of life – moving fluidly between active and passive states in their service to God and society. Their lives were framed as a loving devotion to Christ, their heavenly Bridegroom⁴.

2. *Mary of Oignies*, pp. 39-40.

3. Fulk of Toulouse (1155-1231) became a Cistercian in the Provence, where he became an abbot. He was a great enemy of the Albigensians, who were considered heretics. Fulk traveled around and proclaimed the crusade against them. He also passed through the diocese of Liège where he came into contact with the *Mulieres Religiosae*. James of Vitry addresses Fulk in his prologue. See B. BOLTON, *Fulk of Toulouse: The Escape That Failed*, in *Studies in Church History* 12 (1979) 89-93.

4. McGinn calls Mary of Oignies' *Life* a "manifesto for the new form of beguine life and its mystical piety", and its prologue and announcement of the antiheretical theme as a praise for the women of Liège. McGinn discusses what he calls the "new mysticism" with illustrations from the prologue. See MCGINN, *Flowering*, pp. 36-41.

In recent decades, scholars have devoted considerable attention to the flourishing religious communities of women in the thirteenth century – a phenomenon often referred to as the “Frauenfrage”⁵. Despite extensive research, no definitive explanation has emerged for the remarkable number of women who chose a religious life in this period, in various forms. James of Vitry did not clearly distinguish between these communities, referring to them broadly as *Mulieres Religiosae* or *Mulieres Sanctae*. Academic literature frequently identifies these women as Beguines, with Mary of Oignies often portrayed as a proto-Beguine – a model of female sanctity that coexisted with the ideal of the (Cistercian) nun. However, recent scholarship has challenged the clarity and usefulness of the term “Beguine”, questioning whether it adequately captures the diversity of the women described in sources like James’ introduction⁶. These communities were not neatly defined or separated. Moreover, while female religiosity has rightly received much attention, it is important to recognize that men also played significant roles within these networks and deserve consideration.

Walter Simons examined the emergence of the thirteenth-century Beguine movement in the Low Countries, placing it in relation to other influential religious communities such as the Cistercians. He notes that this period was marked by regional prosperity, with autonomous towns gaining prominence⁷. The urban centers of the Liège region were among the most densely urbanized in medieval Europe. This vibrant and flourishing

5. The term “Frauenfrage” was introduced by H. GRUNDMANN, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages: The Historical Links between Heresy, the Mendicant Order, and the Women’s Religious Movement in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century with the Historical Foundations of German Mysticism*, trans. S. Rowan, Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 1995.

6. The origin of the term “Beguine” is still unclear. Simons argues that the term does not show up in historical sources, and only started to emerge between 1219 and 1224. After this period, the term was used more frequently. See W. SIMONS, *City of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries: 1200-1565*, Philadelphia, PA, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003, pp. 34-37. Jennifer N. Brown asserts that the term is often used as an umbrella term in modern scholarship. See J.N. BROWN, *Three Women of Liège: A Critical Edition of and Commentary on the Middle English Lives of Elisabeth of Spalbeek, Christina Mirabilis and Mary of Oignies* (Texts and Contexts, 23), Turnhout, Brepols, 2008, p. 2.

7. Smith gives a historical overview of the borders of this specific geographic region. She states that it was divided by political, religious and linguistic borders. This created a patchwork of competing alliances. There was the Count of Flanders – the vassal of the French King – and then there were the Duke of Brabant and Prince-Bishop of Liège – who both swore allegiance to the German King. The area mostly coincides with the ecclesiastical borders of the diocese of Liège. The diocese contained both the region of the Prince-Bishopric and a large part of the Duchy of Brabant. See SMITH, *Excessive Saints*, p. 37. I will use the term “diocese of Liège” to discuss the selected geographic region.

city life fostered increased literacy and a growing population of multilingual inhabitants. As cultural life expanded, new ideas and values circulated widely, even reaching rural areas. Simons emphasizes that these developments also benefited women, who – more than men – migrated to cities in search of work and opportunity. Girls in this period received more education than had previously been assumed. This suggests a societal demand for literate women – many of whom likely had knowledge of Latin and spoke multiple languages – skills that were valued both socially and economically. These intellectual and literary pursuits often predated the more formalized educational structures later offered by the Cistercians⁸.

According to John Van Engen, women in Liège's mystical culture frequently learned from one another within informal settings – through networks, clusters of teachers, and peer instruction. He argues that these networks and the broader mystical culture of the thirteenth century had already begun to take shape before the establishment of the Cistercian convents. He also notes that the first generation of *Mulieres Religiosae* had already established networks and communities before entering convents. These women were typically affluent and well-educated, with knowledge of Latin. Their attraction to the Cistercian lifestyle stemmed in part from the protection it offered. This perspective challenges the strict separation often made between the intellectual contributions of Beguines and Cistercians. Both groups played a role in the dissemination of mystical knowledge within Liège's spiritual culture⁹.

Katrien Heene notes that young girls were frequently educated by Beguines – not only in etiquette but also in reading literary texts, including hagiographies¹⁰. She counters the enduring stereotype that Beguines were largely illiterate, a bias Anke Passenier identified as deeply embedded in historical narratives. Heene demonstrates that this stereotype was perpetuated by the *humilitas topos* in hagiographic writing, even though

8. See SIMONS, *City of Ladies*, pp. 3-12.

9. See VAN ENGEL, *The Religious Women*, pp. 347-349; 366.

10. Heene refers to the sermon of James of Vitry (*Ad virgines et puellas, Sermo 3*), who addressed young girls in one of his *ad status* sermons. He mentioned that Beguines continuously read the Psalter. James considered reading a pious act and he considers the Beguines well placed to instruct girls on devout behavior as well as literary works. Heene also states that Caesarius of Heisterbach mentioned stories on diligent female students in his *Dialogus miraculorum*. Heene argues that Caesarius indicated in his work that he knew his works would be read by women. See K. HEENE, *De litterali et morali earum instructione: Women's Literacy in the Thirteenth-Century Latin Agogic Texts*, in T. DE HEMPTINNE – M.E. GÓNGORA (eds.), *The Voice of Silence: Women's Literacy in a Men's Church* (Medieval Church Studies, 9), Turnhout, Brepols, 2004, 145-166, pp. 153-154.

many hagiographers explicitly acknowledged the high level of education among these women¹¹.

A good example of this interplay between intellectual centers and learned women can be found in the *Life of Ida of Gorsleeuw*. Ida started searching for knowledge at an early age. This thirst for wisdom guided her entire life. She was educated in Borgloon or Loon, in a Latin school. Beatrice of Nazareth, a renowned mystic and holy woman, went to the same school when she lived with the Beguines. Next to her formal education, Ida sought spiritual knowledge in the Beguine community and from the hermit Jutta, with whom Christina Mirabilis spent nine years of her life. Ida then entered the Cistercian convent of La Ramée, which Ida of Nivelles also joined and where Beatrice of Nazareth learned to copy and illuminate manuscripts. In this cultural center, the women became familiar with the textual network and made their own contributions. Ida practiced the art of writing some 40 years in this convent. She also produced the texts that inspired her Latin *vita*. Ida of Gorsleeuw is traditionally thought to be the one who taught Beatrice to copy manuscripts, although there has been some discussion about whether Ida of Nivelles might have been the one who taught Beatrice as they were close spiritual friends¹².

A physical network connected various communities of religious women: roads linked villages in the Samber and Meuse valleys – such as Oignies, Namur, Huy, and Liège – to Northern cities like Nivelles, Louvain, Zoutleeuw, Sint-Truiden, Borgloon, and Tongeren. Several *Mulieres Religiosae* frequently traveled these routes. Mary of Oignies, for instance, moved between Willambroux and Oignies, while Christina Mirabilis journeyed between Sint-Truiden, Borgloon, and Liège. This mobility facilitated shared contacts, including with the hermit Jutta of Borgloon, who was known to Christina Mirabilis, Lutgard of Aywières, Mary of Oignies, and Ida of Gorsleeuw. Ida, in turn, was connected to Ida of Nivelles and Beatrice of Nazareth. Unlike the others, this final cluster was not linked by roads but by the shared center of the convent of La Ramée¹³.

These women were also connected on an intertextual level, appearing in each other's *vitae* and visionary experiences. According to Spencer-Hall,

11. See A.E. PASSENIER, *Women on the Loose: Stereotypes of Women in the Story of the Medieval Beguines*, in R. KLOPPENBORG – W.J. HANEGRAFF (eds.), *Female Stereotypes in Religious Traditions* (Numen Book Series, 66), Leiden – New York – Köln, Brill, 1995, 61-88.

12. See A. STEENWEGEN, *De gelukz. Ida de Lewis of Ida van Gorsleeuw*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 57 (1983) 107-133; 211-247; 307-322, pp. 120-129; 223-239.

13. See SIMONS, *City of Ladies*, pp. 61-65.

these encounters often took place in what she calls a “virtual sacred space” – a mystical realm that bridged earth, heaven, and purgatory. This space was freely accessible to these women, and occasionally to men as well. Within it, they encountered souls in purgatory, saints, angels, and even Christ¹⁴.

Based on the historical and textual networks, researchers have proposed canons of holy women. The term *Mulieres Religiosae* can refer to the broad phenomenon of female spirituality that originated in Italy and spread throughout Western Europe or to describe the close-knit network of Liégeoises¹⁵. The women counted among the latter group of *Mulieres Religiosae* are: Alice of Schaarbeek (the Leper) (ca. 1220-1250), Beatrice of Nazareth (1200-1268), Christina Mirabilis (1150-1224), Elisabeth of Spalbeek (ca. 1246-1304), Ida of Gorsleeuw (ca. 1200-1266), Ida of Louvain (ca. 1212-1261), Ida of Nivelles (1199-1231), Juliana of Mont-Cornillon (ca. 1192-1258), Lutgard of Aywières (1182-1246), Margaret of Ypres (1216-1237), Mary of Oignies (ca. 1177-1213) and Yvette of Huy (1158-1228). However, according to Spencer-Hall, the specific demarcation of the corpus of the *Mulieres Religiosae* is controversial. She excludes Odilia of Liège, because her *vita* is mainly about Church politics, and Catherine of Louvain, because her *vita* only records her conversion¹⁶.

Yet the challenge of defining a canon of *Mulieres Religiosae* extends beyond the inclusion or exclusion of figures like Catherine and Odilia based on thematic content. Anneke Mulder-Bakker has repeatedly criticized the criteria by which saintly literature has been canonized or dismissed. She argues that hagiography should be approached as a source of insight into local saintly ideals, rather than as a record of candidates for official canonization. According to her, the saints of the thirteenth century were primarily revered as local icons – figures embedded in a textual community that preserved the memory of saints recognized during their lifetimes¹⁷. Mulder-Bakker refers to these figures as “living

14. See SPENCER-HALL, *Medieval Saints*, pp. 204-206.

15. Spencer-Hall sums up the criteria to be included in the canon of *Mulieres Religiosae*: “holy women resident in Brabant-Liège in the thirteenth century; sharing narrative tropes and spiritual practices; evidence of contact between the women, interconnection of biographers; and medieval manuscript holdings grouping the collection”. *Ibid.*, p. 37. Van Engen states that all these women lived in the diocese of Liège except for Margaret of Ypres and Margaret the Lame of Magdeburg. Margaret of Ypres’ *Life* was written by Thomas of Cantimpré who was based in Louvain. See VAN ENGEN, *The Religious Women*, p. 341.

16. See SPENCER-HALL, *Medieval Saints*, pp. 36-37.

17. See MULDER-BAKKER, *The Invention of Saintliness: Texts and Contexts*, pp. 5-17.

exempla”¹⁸. She notes that these local cults entered into dialogue with the more widely known *vitae* from the *Legenda Aurea*, which was introduced into Liège’s mystical culture in 1285 through a Middle Dutch translation. This interaction allowed universal saints of the Catholic Church to engage with local traditions centered on the *Mulieres Religiosae*, creating a rich and layered network of spirituality and devotion¹⁹.

There are compelling reasons to retain the established canon of *Mulieres Religiosae*, despite the valid critiques raised by Mulder-Bakker. While more scholarly attention should indeed be directed toward figures who fall outside this canon, I will adopt the narrower, widely accepted definition, as these sources are well documented and warrant deeper mystical-theological analysis. What makes this group particularly fascinating, as Van Engen notes, is not the individual uniqueness of each woman, but the dynamic formed by their interconnections²⁰. This cluster deserves more focused research. In this study, I examine the internal dynamics of the group to trace how pain was conceptualized, interpreted, and valorized. To do so, I connect these women to the intellectual centers of monastic culture that guided or inspired them, and to the mystical-theological contributions of their hagiographers.

b) The Monastic Culture

The *Mulieres Religiosae* drew heavily on monastic sources for guidance in both their virtuous lives and their literary education. Unlike the universities, which prioritized the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, monastic centers sought a harmony between theological reflection and a life of virtue. These women turned especially to the monastic tradition of

18. The concept “sante vive” (living saints) was first used by Gabriella Zarri, who emphasized the importance of the community recognizing a saint as holy while they were still alive, thanks to their prophetic, thaumaturgic, and political influence. See G. ZARRI, *Le sante vive: Cultura e religiosità femminile nella prima età moderna*, Torino, Rosenberg & Seller, 1990.

19. See A.B. MULDER-BAKKER, *Lives of the Anchoresses: The Rise of the Urban Recluse in Medieval Europe*, Philadelphia, PA, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005, p. 198. Besides the canonized saints and local saints, Mulder-Bakker also adds the category “sarcophagus saints”, to describe the blending of Germanic mythology with holy legends. Often the stories of martyrdom were distorted and then attributed to a new, artificial saint, such as Dymphna of Geel, who likely has no historical base, but emerged from a holy place (in folk culture). See A.B. MULDER-BAKKER, *Saints without a Past: Sacred Places and Intercessory Power in Sains’ Lives from the Low Countries*, in EAD. (ed.), *The Invention of Saintliness*, 38-57, pp. 39-52.

20. See VAN ENGEN, *The Religious Women*, pp. 347-349; 366.

love mysticism, rather than the scholastic theology of the universities. Their active lives were grounded in a textual network to which they themselves contributed²¹.

This section outlines the key texts of the Western monastic tradition that shaped the mystical culture of Liège in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries²². Jean Leclercq emphasizes that the literary heartbeat of monasticism pulsed through the Bible, the Church Fathers, and classical literature. Through the liturgy, the Bible and its commentaries were not only read but experienced. Monastic authors practiced *lectio divina*, a method inherited from Jerome and Benedict, which aimed at *meditatio* and *oratio*, fostering a longing for God. These commentaries were not academic exercises but spiritual guides – texts written to meet the personal and communal needs of their readers. As Leclercq writes, biblical commentaries “were not the outcome of academic training but were written to fill the personal, spiritual needs of the author himself or his public – that is to say, a reader or a community”²³.

Among the biblical texts that shaped monastic theology in the thirteenth century, the Book of Job and the Song of Songs held particular significance. Pope Gregory the Great’s *Moralia in Job* and Rupert of Deutz’s *On the Works of the Holy Spirit* interpreted Job typologically, placing his words in Christ’s mouth and reading his suffering as a prefiguration of Christ’s salvific passion. Job thus became a literary figure through whom medieval theologians explored the intimate dialogue between God and the suffering soul²⁴. Yet the Song of Songs often surpassed Job in popularity, especially within Cistercian circles. Under Peter the Venerable, the abbey library of Cluny held twelve commentaries on the Song of Songs, including

21. Stephanus Axters observes for example that the Cistercian love mysticism, Bernard of Clairvaux’ in particular, heavily influenced the Middle Dutch literature in the diocese of Liège. Bernard’s works were translated to Middle Dutch and the translations also circulated in popular culture. See S. AXTERS, *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid. 1: De vroomheid tot het jaar 1300*, Antwerpen, De sikkel, 1950, pp. 193-194.

22. Alcantara Mens stresses the importance of Eastern influences more than Axters. He argues that traces of this influence can be found predominantly in iconography and artistic themes. Mens lists a few important works in the literary tradition, including the *Golden Legend* and the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*. These texts would play a major role in the development of Christian theater and art and in Late Medieval devotional culture. Cf. A. MENS, *Oorsprong en betekenis van de Nederlandse begijnen- en begardenbeweging: Vergelijkende studie: XII^{de}-XIII^{de} eeuw* (Klasse der Letteren. Verhandelingen van de Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België, 7), Antwerpen, Standaard, 1947, pp. 1-12.

23. J. LECLERCQ, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. C. Misrahi, New York, Fordham University Press, 1961, p. 79.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

multiple copies of commentaries by Origen and Gregory²⁵. Bernard of Clairvaux elevated the tradition, interpreting the Song as a treatise on divine love. The bride and Bridegroom's interplay – marked by presence and absence, intimacy and separation – resonated deeply with mystical experiences of longing and divine withdrawal²⁶. Gregory had already noted this dynamic in his *Moralia in Job*, linking both texts through their shared concern with the tension between divine nearness and absence²⁷. Together, the Book of Job and the Song of Songs provided a theological and literary framework for articulating the experience of suffering, desire, and divine intimacy – core themes in the mystical culture of Liège.

Among the Latin Church Fathers, Augustine was the most widely read. His pastoral writings, sermons, biblical commentaries, and letters were preserved in abbey libraries and frequently cited to address monastic concerns. His *Confessions* left a lasting impression on mystically inclined monastic writers and secured his influence over the mystical tradition in the Low Countries²⁸. This Augustinian legacy was carried forward by figures such as Gregory the Great and John of Fécamp²⁹.

The Cistercian abbeys and their networks strongly shaped the spirituality of Liège during the thirteenth and fourteenth century. We can thank the Cistercians for the efflorescence of monastic culture and two of the spiritual tradition's greatest masters: Bernard of Clairvaux and William of Saint-Thierry. Themes from their work had no trouble breaking through the monastic walls and entering thirteenth-century popular devotion. Cistercian spirituality and its mystical theologians often created a bridge between monastic culture and lay communities. One Cistercian center in particular created an epicenter within the mystical culture of Liège, closely connecting mystics, hagiographers and preachers, namely the Abbey of Villers³⁰.

25. See AXTERS, *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid*, 1, pp. 152-153.

26. In medieval monastic circles, Origen of Alexandria was the best known of the Greek Church Fathers, Leclercq states (either firsthand or through Evagrius). His influence increased through the works of Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercians who studied his commentary on the Song of Songs. Leclercq also notes that, curiously, the works of Pseudo-Dionysius were rarely read, despite the translation made by John Scotus Eriugena. It took Pseudo-Dionysius until the twelfth century to regain influence on Western spirituality because his ideas, based on Greek philosophy, were not well understood in the earlier medieval period. See LECLERCQ, *The Love of Learning*, pp. 93-96.

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 84-86.

28. For example, Augustine appears as one of the characters in HADEWIJCH, *Vision 11* (pp. 290-291).

29. See LECLERCQ, *The Love of Learning*, pp. 97-98.

30. Spencer-Hall shows that the *vitae* of the *Mulieres Religiosae* appear in different libraries and different codices. These libraries and manuscripts are also connected. The

The Abbey of Villers functioned as both a literal and symbolic crossroads of diverse communities and cultures. Situated on the frontier between the Holy Roman Empire and the Kingdom of France, it was steeped in a rich and multifaceted spiritual environment. Sara Moens has demonstrated that Villers played a mediating role between the visionary traditions of figures like Hildegard of Bingen and the *Mulieres Religiosae* of Liège. The abbey was institutionally and literarily connected to many of the women whose *vitae* are central to this study. Through its *cura mulierum*, Villers exercised spiritual oversight over several convents, preached to female communities, conducted visitations, and supported hermits and other religious women. At the institutional level, Villers had contacts, via the *cura mulierum*, with Aywières (Lutgard), La Cambre (Alice of Schaarbeek) and La Ramée (Ida of Nivelles and Ida of Gorsleeuw). A lay brother of Villers, Arnulf, founded Val-des-Roses, where Ida of Louvain would live. The monks were also responsible for the incorporation of the Salzinnes Abbey (Juliana of Mont Cornillon) and the Abbey of Nazareth (Beatrice of Nazareth). These connections were not only institutional but also familial and literary. Villers thus emerged as a vital node in the transmission of mystical theology, bridging monastic, female, and lay spiritualities in the broader mystical culture of Liège.

Beyond its institutional and spiritual influence, the Abbey of Villers also played a central role in the literary preservation and production of mystical texts. The abbey's library housed key documents such as the liturgical office for Mary of Oignies, alongside sermon collections by James of Vitry and the *Bonum universale de apibus* by Thomas of Cantimpré³¹. Villers also acquired significant relics, including Mary of Oignies' finger in 1226 and relics of Juliana of Mont Cornillon, underscoring its devotional ties to the *Mulieres Religiosae*³². These connections extended into familial networks as well – Yvette of Huy, for instance, encouraged her father to join the abbey³³.

codices were edited by women and no distinctions were made between lay and religious women when it came to their *vitae*. Some of these codices were produced in Villers, such as the ones preserved at the Royal Library of Belgium (MSS 8609-20 and 4459-70) See SPENCER-HALL, *Medieval Saints*, p. 39.

31. See SIMONS, *City of Ladies*, p. 178.

32. See RITCHEY, *Saints' Lives*, p. 1108. On the relics of Mary of Oignies, see B. BOLTON, *Spiegels van vroomheid: Relieken van Marie van Oignies*, in M. MONTEIRO – G. ROOIJAKKERS – J. ROSENDAAL (eds.), *Dynamiek van religie en cultuur: Geschiedenis van het Nederlands katholicisme*, Kampen, Kok, 1993, 124-137.

33. See S. MOENS, *The Mulieres Religiosae: Daughters of Hildegard of Bingen?*, in VANDERPUTTEN – SNIJDERS – DIEHL (eds.), *Medieval Liège at the Crossroads of Europe*, 339-370, pp. 322-323.

Villers was not merely a repository of texts but an active literary hub. Its monks composed letters, poetry, and hagiographies, including two letters sent to Hildegard of Bingen. Thomas the Cantor wrote letters to his sister in the Cistercian convent of Parcum-Dominarum³⁴. Abbot Nicolas (1236) and Arnulf of Louvain (1250) wrote poetry, the second penning the *Carmen de sancta cruce*. Goswin of Bossut wrote the *Life of Arnulf, Lay Brother of Villers*, the *Life of Abundus* and the *Life of Ida the Compassionate of Nivelles*, again pointing to the connection between Villers and the *Mulieres Religiosae*. It is also known that Thomas the Cantor wrote the *Life of Godfrey Pachomius*. Other authors have remained anonymous, but Roisin argues that they must have been contemporaries, even friends. Other Cistercian monasteries also produced a few *vitae* about the holy men of Villers. In Aulne, for instance, the *Life of Prior Werric* and the *Life of Simon the Lay Brother* were written³⁵. Van Engen counts twelve male *vitae*, including two of knights who became hermits, three of lay brothers of Villers and Aulne, and seven of monks. These *vitae* were not as widely circulated as the lives of female saints³⁶. Villers thus emerges as a key site where monastic and lay, female and male spiritualities converged in both lived practice and textual tradition.

c) Storytellers and Hagiographers

Hagiographers and storytellers played a vital role as mystical theologians in their own right, interpreting saintly behavior and translating embodied mystical knowledge for both specialist and lay audiences. Their task was not merely to record lives but to construct interpretive frameworks that could guide readers – especially those unfamiliar with monastic conventions – through the transgressive and often enigmatic actions of the saints. Rather than distorting the saints' theology, these writers mediated between mystical traditions and broader cultural contexts. This process of “hagiographic mediation” involved crafting narratives that resembled

34. Thomas the Cantor wrote two letters to his sister that contain the words “Ave Maria”, which was rare for this period, Axters observes. He also recounts that Thomas sent the texts of the *Life of Godfrey Pachomius* to his sister with the advice to patiently and carefully suffer her headaches. See AXTERS, *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid*, 1, p. 196.

35. For a short overview of and introduction to these *vitae*, see ROISIN, *L'hagiographie cistercienne*, pp. 28-72; AXTERS, *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid*, 1, pp. 197-200. Based on an explorative study of the *vitae* of Cistercian male saints, I selected two *vitae*, those of Petrus Conversus and Arnulf of Villers, because of their explicit conceptualization and interpretation of (physical) pain. These *vitae* will be discussed in the fifth chapter.

36. See VAN ENGEN, *The Religious Women*, p. 341.

living saints and selecting episodes that best expressed their sanctity. Hagiographers had to consider their readers' theological literacy and cultural background. Operating within the flux of mystical ideas circulating in religious communities, these authors focused on the lived experience of pain and spiritual transformation, expressed through a plurality of genres – including hagiography, sermons, and *exempla*.

The genre of the *exemplum* offers a unique lens through which to study lived religion in the thirteenth century. Juliane Matuszak aptly calls *exempla* the “Bible of medieval everyday life”³⁷. *Exempla* play a pivotal role in shaping the moral and doctrinal imagination of ordinary believers. They allowed theologians to communicate ethical principles and eschatological teachings – especially concerning purgatory and *postmortem* suffering – through vivid, accessible stories. Saints often appeared as mediators in these tales, with the Virgin Mary as the most prominent intercessor. They could be invoked as protection against the devil or to comfort the suffering human in need of God's mercy. This compassion could be earned, if one followed the sacrament of penance and strove to live a good life – themes that were also present in Thomas' hagiographic works. Drawing inspiration from hagiographic literature, *exempla* were crafted to entertain and instruct, using rhetorical and narrative techniques to make complex theological ideas palatable to a broad audience. Le Goff describes this process as “refolklorisation”, whereby hagiographic tropes and saintly figures were democratized and integrated into popular culture. As such, *exempla* bridged ecclesiastical tradition and folk imagination, enriching the study of mysticism by revealing how mystical ideas permeated everyday life³⁸.

The *exemplum* brought saints even closer to the people and their folk devotions. I will mainly consider the collection of *exempla* and sermons of Thomas of Cantimpré and, to a lesser extent, the collection written by James of Vitry³⁹. Both were famous hagiographers and can therefore be

37. J. MATUSZAK, *Das Speculum exemplorum als Quelle volkstümlicher Glaubensvorstellungen des Spätmittelalters* (Quellen und Studien zur Volkskunde, 8), Siegburg, Schmitt, 1967. Referenced in C. BREMOND – J. LE GOFF – J.-C. SCHMITT, *L'Exemplum* (Typologie des sources du Moyen Âge occidental, 40), Turnhout, Brepols, 1982, pp. 85-86.

38. BREMOND – LE GOFF – SCHMITT, *L'Exemplum*, pp. 92-107.

39. The Cistercians created their own *exempla* collection, called the *Exordium magnum ordinis cisterciensis* to promote sanctity in the Order. They started working on this collection in 1170, Cornelus De Vooy writes, and it could be considered one of the most important *exempla* collections made in the Middle Ages. See C. DE VOOYS, *Middel-nederlandse legenden en exemplen: Bijdrage tot de kennis van de prozaliteratuur en het volksgeloof der Middeleeuwen*, Groningen, Wolters, 1926, pp. 21-26. By way of the Cistercians, the *exempla* genre once again grew closer to the hagiography known in Villers. Newman argues that, compared to the collections of the Dominicans, the

connected to the main actors in the mystical network of Liège⁴⁰. Their works exemplify how mystical theology was translated into accessible narratives for lay audiences. Thomas, educated in Cambrai and later affiliated with the Dominicans, was deeply influenced by James' preaching and spiritual vision. His *vitae* of Lutgard of Aywières and Christina Mirabilis, as well as his *Bonum universale de apibus*, reflect a sophisticated understanding of mystical phenomena and social structures. James, trained in Paris and later bishop of Acre, wrote the influential *vita* of Mary of Oignies, whose prologue offers a vivid portrait of Liège's mystical culture. Through their *exempla* and hagiographies, both authors shaped the mystical imagination of their time, bridging elite theological discourse and popular religious experience.

Thomas was born in 1200 and received his education in Cambrai⁴¹. At the age of fifteen, he likely heard James of Vitry preach in Brussels about the crusades, an encounter that left a lasting impression. Like James, Thomas began his religious life with the canons regular and entered the monastery of Cantimpré in 1217. There, he wrote the *vita* of the abbey's founder, John of Cantimpré, completing it in 1228. Between 1223 and 1225, he began his encyclopedic work *De Natura Rerum*, which took him fifteen years to finish. From 1228 onward, at the request of Bishop Godfrey of Fontaines, Thomas took up pastoral duties and began preaching. In 1230, he met Lutgard of Aywières, whose mystical experiences inspired him to delve deeper into the phenomenon. A year later, he traveled to Borgloon and Sint-Truiden to investigate the enigmatic Christina Mirabilis. Around this time, he was asked by the brothers of Oignies to write a supplement to the *vita* of Mary, originally composed by James. During his Dominican novitiate in 1232, Thomas completed the *Life of Christina*. He later studied in Paris (1237-1240), met Siger of Lille in Ypres, and recorded the *Life of Margaret of Ypres* while residing in Louvain. After Lutgard's death in 1246, he began her *vita*, considered

Cistercian stories remained rather local and specific. Cf. M.G. NEWMAN, *Making Cistercian Exempla, or, the Problem of the Monk Who Wouldn't Talk*, in *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 46 (2011) 45-96, p. 47.

40. Smith has studied Thomas' *exempla* collection within the context of his entire oeuvre, consisting mainly of hagiographies. She argues that Thomas experimented with the genres, and he did not edify his saints through exemplarity (making the saint a universal representation of Christ) but instead tested the ideas of edification and imitation. His corpus contrasts often different and even incompatible forms of exemplary life. See SMITH, *Excessive Saints*, pp. 5-6.

41. See A. DEBOUTE, *Thomas van Cantimpré: Zijn opleiding te Kamerijk*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 56 (1982) 283-299, pp. 283-284.

his hagiographic masterpiece⁴². In 1252, Thomas studied under Albertus Magnus in Cologne⁴³. In 1256, he was commissioned by Humbert of Romans to document the Dominican Order's history, which led to the *Bonum universale de apibus*, a collection of *exempla* structured around the metaphor of bees. He worked on this text until 1263, and it was later translated into Middle Dutch as the *Biënboec*⁴⁴.

As a hagiographer and author of *exempla*, Thomas of Cantimpré followed in the footsteps of his mentor, James of Vitry. Born between 1160 and 1170, James received his theological education at the University of Paris. After completing his studies, he traveled to Oignies to join the priory of the canons regular, motivated by his admiration for Mary of Oignies, whom he had recently met. Although he wished to remain in the diocese of Liège – home to many holy women – his appointment as bishop of Acre in the Holy Land prevented him from doing so. He briefly returned as an auxiliary bishop but was soon called to serve at the Roman Curia. James gained renown as a gifted preacher, using his rhetorical skills to denounce the Albigenians as heretics and to promote the fifth crusade. While he authored several historical works, his reputation rested primarily on his sermons, which he compiled in collections such as *Sermones dominicales*, *Sermones de sanctis*, *Sermones vulgares* (which included *exempla*), and *Sermones communes vel quotidiani*. Among his historical writings, Henri Platelle highlights the *Life of Mary of Oignies*, which includes a significant prologue on the mystical culture of Liège. Through

42. Lutgard's *vita* was translated into Middle Dutch. The text is contributed to different authors over the century of research since the discovery of the manuscript by J.H. Bormans. For a detailed overview of this research, cf. G. HENDRIX, *Omtrent het Kopenhaagse Leven van Lutgart, de oudste vertaling van Thomas van Cantimpré's Vita Lutgardis* (Ontmoetingen met Lutgart van Tongeren, Benedictines en Cisterciënzerin, 4), Leuven, Bibliotheek van de Faculteit Godgeleerdheid, 1997. The Copenhagen manuscript reduces the prominence of mysticism and asceticism in the *vita*, because it was written by and for laypersons, meant to be heard collectively, rather than read individually, Stracke argues. D.A. STRACKE, *Over den berijmer der Kopenhaagsche Lutgart*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 20 (1946) 50-101, pp. 81-86.

43. Cf. A. DEBOUTE, *Thomas van Cantimpré als auditor van Albertus Magnus*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 58 (1984) 192-209.

44. A. DEBOUTE, *Thomas de Cantimpré*, in M. VILLER – F. CAVELLERA – J. DE GUIBERT (eds.), *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique: Doctrine et histoire*, 15, Paris, Beauchesne, 1991, 784-792. Van der Vet lists thirty Latin manuscripts of the *Bonum universale*, six Middle Dutch translations (*Biënboec*) and four translations in other languages. Cf. *Het Biënboec van Thomas van Cantimpré en zijn exemplen*, ed. W.A. VAN DER VET, 's Gravenhage, Nijhoff, 1902, p. 49. De Vooys states that there is no explicit connection to Caesarius' *Dialogues* despite the similarities in content. Thomas was inspired by James' *exempla*, Gregory's *Dialogues* and the *Exordium*. See DE VOOYS, *Middel nederlandse legenden*, p. 31.

this *vita*, written in 1216 – three years after Mary’s death – James contributed to her widespread veneration⁴⁵. He also authored the *Historia orientalis et occidentalis*, of which only two of the three intended parts survive, and composed extensive letters chronicling the crusades. According to Platelle, James’ spirituality is most clearly expressed in the *Life of Mary*. Susan Folkerts notes that this *vita* was the most widely disseminated of its kind, surviving in thirty-nine Latin manuscripts⁴⁶. Between 1228 and his death in 1240, James also compiled a collection of *exempla*, including the *Sermones vulgares* and *Sermones communes*⁴⁷.

Thomas of Cantimpré’s *Life of Lutgard* is widely regarded as his mystical masterpiece, shaped in part by the stylistic influence of Goswin of Bossut, a fellow hagiographer from the diocese of Liège⁴⁸. Goswin, though less prominent than Thomas or James of Vitry, was a skilled writer and cantor at the Abbey of Villers, where he fully employed his rhetorical and musical talents. At the request of Abbot William, he authored the *Life of Ida of Nivelles*, despite never having met the saint personally. For a long time, this *vita* remained anonymous, but scholars now agree that Goswin also wrote the *Life of Arnulf*, the *Life of Abundus*, and likely the *Life of Ida*, based on internal evidence and stylistic parallels. Goswin had known Abundus of Huy personally, and the most mystical passages in that *vita* are deeply infused with Bernardine spirituality. Unlike Thomas and James, Goswin did not compile a collection of *exempla*. Yet his *vitae* read like vivid testimonials, and their short, anecdotal passages attest to his considerable narrative skill. These passages resemble the style of Caesarius of Heisterbach’s sermons, which were popular at Villers. Abbot William encouraged Goswin to emulate Caesarius’ simplicity, in contrast to the more elaborate style of some hagiographies.

45. See H. PLATELLE, *James of Vitry*, in A. RAYEZ et al. (eds.), *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique: Doctrine et histoire*, 8, Paris, Beauchesne, 1974, 60-62. Contrary to the *sensus communis*, Spencer-Hall states that it was Mary of Oignies who was famous among her contemporaries and that it was James of Vitry who gained popularity through his affiliation with this saint. Together, they transcended the level of most local saints, and the *vita* reached an audience outside of the circles that were used to reading hagiographies. See SPENCER-HALL, *Medieval Saints*, pp. 149-155.

46. See S. FOLKERTS, *The Manuscript Transmission of the Vita Mariae Oigniacensis in the Later Middle Ages*, in A.B. MULDER-BAKKER (ed.), *Mary of Oignies: Mother of Salvation* (Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts, 7), Turnhout, Brepols, 2006, 235-241.

47. See BREMOND – LE GOFF – SCHMITT, *L’Exemplum*, p. 59.

48. See S. ROISIN, *La méthode hagiographique de Thomas de Cantimpré*, in *Miscellanea historica in honorem Alberti de Meyer*, Leuven – Bruxelles, Le Pannon, 1946, 546-557, pp. 546-547.

Goswin's *vitae* thus function as collections of concise moral stories, bridging the genres of hagiography and sermon⁴⁹.

Finally, the Premonstratensian canon Hugh of Floreffe also deserves mention. He authored the *vita* of Yvette of Huy between 1221 and 1239 and may also have written the *vita* of Ida of Gorsleeuw⁵⁰. All four hagiographers – Thomas of Cantimpré, James of Vitry, Goswin of Bossut, and Hugh of Floreffe – maintained close ties with Beguine communities and several of the key *Mulieres Religiosae*. Their *vitae* and *exempla* offer valuable insight into the readership at the periphery of mystical culture. Through their writings, we can trace how mystical ideas were translated for broader audiences, and how the lived experiences of sanctity were shaped, interpreted, and circulated. With these mediators in place, we now turn inward – to the very heart of the mystical culture – with the mystics Hadewijch and Ruusbroec.

2. Hadewijch

a) The Historical Hadewijch

Hadewijch remains a mysterious figure in the history of mysticism. Although she authored one of the earliest known oeuvres in Middle Dutch – including 45 *Poems*, 14 *Visions*, 31 *Letters*, and 16 *Poems in Couplets* – she left behind no verifiable biographical traces, and no hagiography was ever written about her. In the fourteenth century, she was still venerated in Groenendaal as the Blessed Hadewijch, but her legacy faded until its rediscovery in 1838, largely thanks to Jesuit scholar Jozef van Mierlo. Faced with limited historical evidence, van Mierlo proposed that Hadewijch was part of the *Mulieres Religiosae* and closely linked to the Beguine movement. He based this on her *Visions* and the *List of the Perfect*, which names several Beguines⁵¹. Paul Mommaers expanded on this hypothesis, suggesting that Hadewijch lived in Antwerp and served

49. See B. NEWMAN, *Preface: Goswin of Villers and the Visionary Network*, in *Send Me God: The Lives of Ida the Compassionate of Nivelles, Nun of La Ramée; Arnulf, Lay Brother of Villers; and Abundus, Monk of Villers by Goswin of Bossut*, trans. M. Cawley; preface B. Newman (Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts, 6), Turnhout, Brepols, 2003, xxix-xlix, pp. xxxi-xlv.

50. Cf. G. DE BAERE, *Pays-Bas*, in M. VILLER – A. RAYEZ (eds.), *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique: Doctrine et histoire*, 12, Paris, Beauchesne, 1994, 718-719.

51. See J. VAN MIERLO, *Lijst der volmaakten*, in ID., *De Visioenen van Hadewych I* (Leuvense studiën en tekstuutgaven, 10), Leuven – Gent – Mechelen, De Vlaamsche Boekenhal, 1924, 186-193. Van Mierlo is referenced in R. FAESEN, *Was Hadewijch a Beguine or a Cistercian? An Annotated Hypothesis*, in *Cîteaux* 55 (2004) 47-64, p. 49.

as a spiritual leader within a Beguine community. He emphasized her noble background and multilingual education, which enabled her to master mystical theology and guide others in their pursuit of divine union. Yet Hadewijch's *Letters* also reveal internal tensions – jealousy, rivalry, and theological disagreement⁵².

Although Hadewijch is often portrayed as a radical Beguine with a bold theology of divine love, several scholars have challenged van Mierlo's hypothesis. Alcantara Mens argued that the early Beguine movement lacked the literary sophistication to produce a writer of Hadewijch's caliber⁵³. Norbert de Paepe suggested that Hadewijch's frequent references to travel make it unlikely she was confined to a convent or beguinage⁵⁴. The most substantial critique came from Rob Faesen, who questioned the authenticity of the *List of the Perfect*, a key source in van Mierlo's argument. Faesen, along with Axters, doubted Hadewijch's authorship of the list and found its theological tone inconsistent with her other writings. He also rejected the claim that Hadewijch lived in Antwerp, attributing the confusion to a scribal error. Instead, Faesen revived an alternative hypothesis: Hadewijch may have been a noblewoman at the court of the Dukes of Brabant, possibly the first abbess of the Cistercian convent of Valduc⁵⁵.

This study does not aim to reconstruct the historical Hadewijch, but rather to explore the literary *persona* "Hadewijch" as she emerges from layered mystical-theological texts. Like the *Mulieres Religiosae* in their hagiographies, Hadewijch is shaped through narrative and theological construction. Her writings – especially the *Visions* and *Letters* – do not offer direct autobiographical testimony, but instead function as theological and pedagogical instruments. Whether she was a Beguine or a Cistercian nun is ultimately secondary to the mystical theology expressed in her work. Following Reynaert's approach, biographical references are treated as literary and theological devices that contribute to her authorial identity⁵⁶. Her depictions of suffering belong to a carefully crafted framework that fuses profane literary traditions with religious mysticism.

52. See P. MOMMAERS, *Hadewijch: Writer – Beguine – Love Mystic*, trans. E. Dutton, Leuven, Peeters, 2004, pp. 39-40.

53. See MENS, *Oorsprong en betekenis*, p. 111.

54. See N. DE PAEPE, *Hadewijch: Een bloemlezing uit haar werken* (Bibliotheek der Nederlandse Letteren), Amsterdam, Elsevier, 1979, pp. ix-xxvii, esp. x.

55. See FAESEN, *Was Hadewijch a Beguine or a Cistercian?*, pp. 58-63.

56. See REYNAERT, *Beeldspraak van Hadewijch*, pp. 13; 28-30.

b) Profane and Religious Literary Sources

Hadewijch's poetry was deeply shaped by the courtly love tradition, both in form and in musicality. She adopts the figure of Lady Love, a noble and idealized beloved, central to the *fin'amor* lyric. Like the chivalric lover, Hadewijch's poetic voice experiences joy in the initial encounter with Love, followed by a painful period of absence and longing. Loyalty to Love, even in the face of rejection, becomes a spiritual trial – one that promises greater reward through suffering. This dynamic of presence and absence generates a paradoxical emotional landscape of hope and despair, sweetness and bitterness. Hadewijch integrates this framework into her mystical theology and enriches it with the motif of the spiritual quest, borrowed from chivalric romance⁵⁷.

According to Willaert, the interplay between joy and suffering – borrowed from profane literature – forms a central axis in Hadewijch's poetic world. These two emotional poles, or “isotopes”, recur throughout her work, offering a flexible yet consistent framework. While the motifs themselves are limited in number, Hadewijch continuously reimagines them, creating new poetic variations on the same spiritual message. Her *Poems*, more than her *Visions*, provide space to explore the pain of love as a transformative force. This suffering, drawn from the courtly tradition, becomes a theological tool: it allows the lover to demonstrate fidelity to Love, which for Hadewijch is ultimately God⁵⁸.

In Hadewijch's mystical theology, the noble Lady of courtly love is none other than God – Love personified. Yet this divine Love is not merely elusive in the romantic sense; it is ontologically beyond human grasp. Hadewijch equates chivalric loyalty with Christian virtue, portraying the spiritual life as a noble quest of surrender and alignment with Love's will. This path is marked by pain, which she expresses through the language of profane love poetry⁵⁹. Such pain cannot be understood solely within a mystical framework; it is shaped by literary tradition. Hadewijch fused courtly lyricism with mystical theology so thoroughly that poetry itself became a sacramental medium – especially in articulating the suffering of Christ as the ultimate expression of divine Love⁶⁰.

57. See FRAETERS – WILLAERT, *Liederen*, pp. 44-45.

58. See F. WILLAERT, *De poëtica van Hadewijch in de Strofische Gedichten*, Utrecht, HES, 1984, pp. 135-140.

59. See DE PAEPE, *Bloemlezing*, pp. xxxvi-xxxviii.

60. See AXTERS, *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid*, 1, pp. 358-361.

Hadewijch's mystical imagination blends courtly love with biblical narrative⁶¹. She stages encounters between her poetic characters and scriptural figures, drawing heavily on the Bible as her primary source of theological insight. Her writings reference numerous Old Testament figures – Moses, Tobit, Isaiah, Daniel, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and especially Job, who was widely seen as a prefiguration of Christ. Most central, however, is King Solomon, revered as the author of the Song of Songs and the embodiment of hidden wisdom about divine love. In the New Testament, she finds a parallel in John, the beloved disciple who rested on Christ's breast and received intimate revelations. Paul also plays a significant role in her theological framework, contributing to her vision of spiritual transformation through love⁶².

Hadewijch's writings reflect a deep engagement with patristic and monastic sources. She cites Origen directly and integrates Augustine into her visionary narratives, indicating familiarity with key theological texts. Her tenth letter draws on Richard of Saint Victor's commentary on the Song of Songs, while Bernard of Clairvaux' *De Diligendo Deo* also informs her thought. The influence of William of Saint-Thierry's *De natura et dignitate amoris* is evident in her theology of love⁶³. Additionally, the *Jesu dulcis memoria*, a paraliturgical treatise often attributed to Bernard but written by an English Cistercian, shaped several of her *Poems* and *Letters* – though Hadewijch mistakenly credited Bernard as its author⁶⁴.

Additional influences on Hadewijch's oeuvre may include scholastic theology, classical literature, and visual culture. Parallels between Hadewijch and Henry of Ghent – particularly in their use of light imagery and theological reflections on exemplarity – warrant closer examination⁶⁵. This opens the possibility of fruitful dialogue between scholastic and mystical traditions. Intertextual links between Hadewijch's ninth vision, the writings of Boethius, and the legend of Saint Sophia further enrich her literary landscape⁶⁶. Beyond textual sources, Hadewijch was

61. For Hadewijch's use of biblical imagery, see J. REYNAERT, *Mystische Bibelinterpretation bei Hadewijch*, in D.R. BAUER – M. SCHMIDT (eds.), *Grundfragen christlicher Mystik* (Wissenschaftliche Studientagung Theologia Mystica in Weingarten, 7-10), Stuttgart, Frommann-Holzboog, 1987, 123-137.

62. See AXTERS, *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid*, 1, pp. 372-373.

63. See R. FAESEN, *Begeerte in het werk van Hadewijch* (Antwerpse Studies over Nederlandse Literatuurgeschiedenis, 4), Leuven, Peeters, 2000, pp. 66-89; J. VAN MIERLO, *Hadewijch en Wilhelm van St. Thierry*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 3 (1929) 45-59.

64. See AXTERS, *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid*, 1, pp. 373-375.

65. See J. REYNAERT, *Het mystieke 'licht' en Hadewijchs eerste Brief*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 65 (1991) 3-11, p. 11.

66. See V. FRAETERS, *Wijsheid verbeeld: Genese en werking van de beeldspraak in Visioen 9 van Hadewijch*, in *Queeste* 14 (2007) 101-125, pp. 106-115.

likely shaped by visual and artistic traditions of her time, though these influences are harder to identify⁶⁷.

c) Hadewijch's Corpus

Hadewijch's oeuvre has been rightly interpreted as both mystagogical and didactic⁶⁸. Her writings were not merely intended to inspire or move her readers, but to educate them in the *schola caritatis* – a school of love in which she trained spiritual lovers in the *ars amandi*. This pedagogical aim lends a strong sense of literary unity to her corpus. Scholars have often attempted to arrange her works chronologically, tracing a supposed mystical development. Suydam, however, argues that the coherence of Hadewijch's language and reasoning across genres – visions, letters, and poems – reflects not a personal evolution, but a mature theological voice from the outset. She challenges the genre hierarchy that privileges letters over visions, insisting that the visions are not naive outpourings of a young mystic, but carefully crafted expressions of complex spiritual experience⁶⁹.

Building on this, I propose that the figure of "Hadewijch the mystic" is itself a literary construction – one designed to guide readers through a transformative journey, rather than to document the author's own. This view aligns with Hadewijch's dual identity as mystic and artist. Her poetic mastery has sparked debate, particularly following Willaert's *Poetica*, which suggests her work adheres closely to the conventions of courtly love literature. Critics such as Reynaert and Mommaers have challenged this reading, emphasizing Hadewijch's divine inspiration and creative autonomy. For Mommaers, Hadewijch's writing is not merely literary craft, but the fruit of a profound spiritual relationship with God.

67. See J. REYNAERT, *Hadewijchs hemelvisioenen en de contemporaine iconografie*, in M. VAN VAECK – H. BREMS – G.H.M. CLAASSENS (eds.), *De steen van Alciato: Literatuur en visuele cultuur in de Nederlanden: Opstellen voor prof. dr. Karel Porteman bij zijn emeritaat*, Leuven, Peeters, 2003, 351-372.

68. See V. FRAETERS, *Visioenen als literaire mystagogie: Stand van zaken en nieuwe inzichten over intentie en functie van Hadewijchs visioenen*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 73 (1999) 111-130.

69. Cf. M.A. SUYDAM, *A Touch of Satisfaction: Visions and the Religious Experience according to Hadewijch of Antwerp*, in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 12 (1996) 5-27, pp. 7-11; Bernard Spaapen and Frans Van Bladel claim that Hadewijch wrote her *Letters* when she was a mature mystic, later on in life. Hadewijch apparently addressed these to a noble woman. Spaapen argues that, in her youth, Hadewijch struggled with her vocation, a struggle she expressed in her other works. See F. VAN BLADEL – B. SPAAPEN, *Hadewijch: Brieven. Oorspronkelijke tekst en nieuwe Nederlandse overzetting* (Bloemen van Ons geestelijk erf, 6), Tiel, Lannoo, 1954, pp. 7-8.

Her innovations – both theological and aesthetic – cannot be reduced to technique alone. They reflect a visionary author who shaped her own symbolic world, blending mystical theology with poetic artistry⁷⁰.

3. *Ruusbroec*

To better understand the distinctiveness of thirteenth-century mystical culture in Liège, this study introduces a comparative perspective through the figure of John of Ruusbroec. Writing in the fourteenth century, Ruusbroec inherited the textual and theological legacy of the previous century, yet operated in a climate increasingly suspicious of mystical and paramystical expressions. His theology of pain will serve as a counterpoint to Hadewijch's, allowing for a nuanced exploration of continuity and transformation within the mystical tradition. This section will briefly trace the evolution of the textual network that connects both authors.

a) Hadewijch and Ruusbroec

Although Hadewijch's works survived in only four manuscripts and were not widely disseminated in her time, they nonetheless reached John of Ruusbroec, likely through the Carthusians of Herne or his own community at Groenendaal. Ruusbroec's familiarity with Hadewijch's writings is evident in his adoption of her theological concepts, terminology, and imagery. Phrases such as "unity without difference" and "being God with God" echo Hadewijch's mystical vocabulary, while motifs like the upside-down tree, the vortex, and the eagle recur in his own texts⁷¹.

70. See P. MOMMAERS, *Hadewijch onder een nieuwe loep*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 60 (1986) 3-22; and the response of Willaert: F. WILLAERT, *Het geheugen van Hadewijch*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 80 (2009) 3-20. In an insightful article, Vekeman, for his part, describes how Hadewijch received her imagery from divine messengers in the shape of angels, an eagle and John the Evangelist. The mystic became an artist and was inspired by the intercession of messengers reminiscent of the Ancient Greek muses. Hadewijch interpreted these images without explaining or neutralizing them. She preserved their unruly visual language, which she incorporated in her *Visions* (and in the rest of her work, I would argue). She was no exegete, analyzing the origin of the images. Instead, she created a new visual world that aimed to mediate the history of salvation. Hadewijch got to know these images through divine intervention before she became a messenger herself and passed along a visual language, transformed and permeated by her own embodied lived experiences, to her readers. Cf. H. VEKEMAN, *Angelus sane nuntius: Een interpretatie van het visioenenboek van Hadewijch*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 50 (1976) 225-259, pp. 249-252.

71. See S. AXTERS, *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid. 2: De eeuw van Ruusbroec*, Antwerpen, De Sikkel, 1953, pp. 270-272. Geert Warnar points out that Ruusbroec and

Scholars such as Jessica Boon have traced a development in Ruusbroec's theology through his engagement with Hadewijch's expressive and intuitive mysticism. While Ruusbroec often reformulated her ideas with greater nuance, his debt to her is unmistakable⁷². Still, Hadewijch's influence must be situated within the broader thirteenth-century mystical culture, especially the contributions of the *Mulieres Religiosae* and Beatrice of Nazareth⁷³.

b) Literary Sources

Ruusbroec successfully recontextualized Hadewijch's radical mystical ideas within the framework of thirteenth-century mystical culture, adapting them to the theological and social climate of the fourteenth century. To do so, he drew on a wide range of literary sources, foremost among them the Bible. He was deeply embedded in the monastic literary tradition. He was familiar with Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Job*, the writings of Augustine, and the works of Bernard of Clairvaux, Rupert of Deutz, and William of Saint-Thierry. He also referenced Petrus Comestor and echoed the language of Pseudo-Dionysius and Maximus the Confessor. These sources helped Ruusbroec to articulate a mystical theology that was both rooted in tradition and responsive to the challenges of his time. His use of Bernard's nuptial imagery, for instance, reveals a continuity with Cistercian love mysticism, while his engagement with

Hadewijch also diverged. He attributes the bulk of Ruusbroec's terminology to the shared Middle Dutch vocabulary of mystic circles, further minimizing Hadewijch's impact. Hadewijch, along with Ruusbroec himself, was not as influential in the late medieval context as she is often presented, Warnar cautions. He states that possible similarities can be explained by the use of theological works on the Eucharist, such as those of Albertus Magnus, very influential in this period. Ruusbroec's theology differs markedly from Hadewijch's ecstatic surrender in which suffering was inherent. See G. WARNAR, *Ex levitate mulierum: Masculine Mysticism and John of Ruusbroec's Perception of Religious Women*, in DE HEMPTINNE – GÓNGORA (eds.), *The Voice of Silence*, 193-206. Warnar finds himself alone in this radical position. Most researchers recognize Hadewijch's direct influence on Ruusbroec.

72. See J.A. BOON, *Trinitarian Love Mysticism: Ruusbroec, Hadewijch, and the Gendered Experience of the Divine*, in *Church History* 72 (2003) 483-503, pp. 486-502.

73. John Arblaster and Rob Faesen argue that Ruusbroec was influenced by the *Mulieres Religiosae* who were the heirs of William of Saint-Thierry's thought. The authors focus on direct information available about these women. They selected the female-authored texts of Beatrice of Nazareth and Hadewijch. They then discuss some indirect information in the *vitae* of Mary of Oignies and Ida of Nivelles. J. ARBLASTER – R. FAESEN, *Mysticism in the Low Countries before Ruusbroec*, in *Iid.* (eds.), *A Companion to John of Ruusbroec* (Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition, 51), Leiden – Boston, MA, Brill, 2014, 5-46, pp. 17-32.

more speculative texts like John Scotus Eriugena's *De divisione naturae* shows his openness to metaphysical reflection⁷⁴.

The influence of Pseudo-Hadewijch⁷⁵ is also evident in Ruusbroec's work, particularly through the poems in couplets 17 to 29. These poems, found in Manuscripts B and C, show striking affinities with Ruusbroec's mystical vocabulary and theological concerns. Terms such as *bloot* (bare), *drivoldecheit* (threefoldness), *eenvuldecheit* (simplicity), *ghenster* (spark), *ledich* (emptiness), and *zonder middel* (without mediation) recur in both corpora and form part of their shared mystical lexicon. While these ideas were not entirely new – many were already present in Hadewijch's earlier work – Pseudo-Hadewijch emphasized the ontological nature of Love more strongly. This metaphysical focus resonates deeply with Ruusbroec's own theology, making these poems some of the finest examples of metaphysically oriented mystical poetry in the Middle Dutch tradition⁷⁶.

Ruusbroec's mystical theology was also shaped by vernacular preaching traditions, particularly the *Limburg Sermons*, compiled in Sint-Truiden after 1300. These sermons, some of which are actually treatises, reflect the devotional and theological concerns of the region. Notably, *Sermon XLII* contains Beatrice of Nazareth's *Seven Manners*, while *Sermon XLI* reproduces Hadewijch's tenth letter, suggesting a deliberate effort to preserve and disseminate key mystical texts. Several sermons focus on the suffering of Christ – a theme central to Cistercian spirituality and echoed throughout Ruusbroec's writings⁷⁷. These sermons demonstrate how mystical theology was transmitted to lay audiences through vernacular preaching, reinforcing the pain language that permeates Ruusbroec's work.

Ruusbroec's mystical theology of divine union was further shaped by his engagement with speculative treatises such as the anonymous *Gaesdonckse tractaten*. These fourteenth-century texts, inspired by Johannine Logos mysticism, explore the thinning boundary between the

74. See AXTERS, *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid*, 2, pp. 261-272.

75. "Pseudo-Hadewijch" is a later, anonymous author (or possibly several authors) who wrote in Hadewijch's name or style, probably in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century. I will not discuss the authorship here. For more information, I refer to S.M. MURK-JANSEN, *The Measure of Mystic Thought: A Study of Hadewijch's Mengeldichten* (Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik, 536), Göppingen, Kümmerle Verlag, 1991.

76. *Ibid.*, pp. 200; 273-275.

77. For a detailed study of the *Limburg Sermons*, see W. SCHEEPSMA, *The Limburg Sermons: Preaching in the Medieval Low Countries at the Turn of the Fourteenth Century*, trans. D.F. Johnson (Brill's Series in Church History, 34), Leiden, Brill, 2008.

soul and God, suggesting that the soul itself becomes the virtue of Love. These passages are among the boldest in speculative mysticism⁷⁸. Ruusbroec also drew on Gerard Appelmans' *Glose op den Pater noster*, which elaborates on divine emanation, mystical experience, and virtue. Appelmans portrayed mystics as co-saviors who bear the cross with innocent love – a notion that extends Hadewijch's theology but with a more didactic tone⁷⁹. Ruusbroec's engagement with these sources reflects his effort to defend and refine the tradition of deification in a time increasingly wary of mystical excess, especially in the wake of condemnations of figures like Marguerite Porete⁸⁰.

c) Network and Education

To understand the intellectual and spiritual environment in which Ruusbroec developed as a mystic, it is essential to consider his early education and exposure to liturgical culture. He was trained at a Latin school in Brussels, where he encountered classical authors such as Ovid and Virgil – already Christianized in medieval curricula – and developed a deep love for liturgical hymns. Although he did not pursue higher education, Ruusbroec attained remarkable theological proficiency. His spirituality of suffering was shaped by the interplay between his priestly office, his liturgical devotion, and his early schooling. Through his position as curate of Saint Gudula, he had access to the chapter library, a repository of mystical texts, and came into contact with the broader literary network of Liège. He also maintained connections with Paris, the intellectual center of Europe at the time, and frequently visited the abbeys of the Carmelites and Franciscans. These mendicant orders played a crucial role in transmitting mystical metaphysics through vernacular

78. See AXTERS, *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid*, 2, pp. 133-138. Alcantara Mens states that Appelmans borrowed the theme of love mysticism and terminology of *orewoet* from Hadewijch, Beatrice, and the Middle Dutch translation of the *Life of Lutgard*. He then passed on these themes from the thirteenth to the fourteenth century (and to Ruusbroec). Ruusbroec would have to defend this tradition of love mysticism from heretical movements who might have misinterpreted it (for example, the Brethren of the Free Spirit). See MENS, *Oorsprong en betekenis*, pp. 146-149.

79. AXTERS, *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid*, 2, pp. 133-138; 273.

80. Satoshi Kikuchi portrays Ruusbroec as a critical heir of mystical doctrines, especially the teachings of Meister Eckhart and his condemned doctrines. Kikuchi shows that Ruusbroec reinterpreted Eckhart's doctrines and translated them to his context with theological precision and a critical eye. See S. KIKUCHI, *From Eckhart to Ruusbroec: A Critical Inheritance of Mystical Themes in the Fourteenth Century* (Mediaevalia Lovaniensia, 64), Leuven, Leuven University Press, 2014.

sermons and treatises, making such ideas accessible even to those without formal theological training⁸¹.

Ruusbroec's theological development was further shaped by the broader mystical culture of his time, including the mendicant orders and their vernacular teachings. Although figures like the Dominican Henry of Louvain were active in his environment, it was the vernacular writings of priests without formal theological training that proved more influential. Ruusbroec's access to the chapter library of Saint Gudula allowed him to engage deeply with mystical texts, and his connections to Paris – the intellectual theological center of Europe – linked him to the wider scholastic and mystical discourse. He frequently visited the abbeys of the Carmelites and Franciscans, whose sermons and treatises helped disseminate mystical metaphysics to lay audiences⁸². The Middle Dutch translations of Meister Eckhart's sermons likely reached Ruusbroec during his Brussels period⁸³. The condemnation of Eckhart's ideas and the burning of Marguerite Porete still influenced Ruusbroec's world. A good grasp of this environment is crucial to better understand Ruusbroec's work. Just as with Hadewijch, Ruusbroec did not write in a socio-cultural vacuum, although his reclusive life in the Sonian Woods suggests this. Both Brabantian mystics were closely involved in the mystical culture they tried to instruct.

Ruusbroec wrote in a time of socio-economic decline. While the thirteenth century had been marked by urban prosperity and cultural flourishing, the fourteenth century was overshadowed by war, disease, and political unrest. The mendicant orders, once vital for theological education and spiritual renewal, had entered a period of moral and institutional decay. The authority of the papacy weakened dramatically during the papal crisis, and heretical movements such as the Flagellants and the Brethren of the Free Spirit gained traction. Even the Beguines and Beghards, once protected by clerical authorities, faced increasing suspicion and persecution⁸⁴.

81. See G. WARNAR, *Ruusbroec: Literature and Mysticism in the Fourteenth Century*, trans. D. Webb (Brill's Studies in Intellectual History, 150), Leiden – Boston, MA, Brill, 2007, pp. 24-35. Warner bases most of his depiction of Ruusbroec's life on the hagiographic writing about Ruusbroec. These texts are not part of the scope of this book because these sources were published after Ruusbroec's death. Nevertheless, a comparison between Ruusbroec's *vita* and the *Mulieres Religiosae* might be very fruitful in order to study differences in gender, literacy and mystical-theological context – elements that have an impact on the conceptualization and interpretation of pain as I demonstrate in this book.

82. See R. VAN NIEUWENHOVE, *The Franciscan Inspiration of Ruusbroec's Mystical Theology: Ruusbroec in Dialogue with Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 75 (2001) 102-115.

83. See WARNAR, *Ruusbroec*, pp. 35-50.

84. See R.E. LERNER, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages*, Berkeley, CA – Los Angeles, CA – London, University of California Press, 1972, pp. 44-45.

At the Council of Vienne (1311-1312), the Beguine movement was officially condemned, although Ruusbroec continued to support them. The Council also reaffirmed its rejection of doctrines previously censured in Marguerite Porete's *Mirror*. Paul Verdeyen argues that these condemned ideas continued to circulate in fourteenth-century Beguine communities, and Ruusbroec encountered them firsthand in the Brussels beguinage. His polemical writings against the so-called Brethren of the Free Spirit reflect his effort to defend mystical theology while distancing himself from its radical misinterpretations⁸⁵.

Ruusbroec's mystical theology was not universally accepted during his lifetime and even faced condemnation after his death. According to his biographer Pomerius, Ruusbroec left Brussels partly due to tensions with fellow clergy, including a curious anecdote about his irritation with the poor singing of canon Godfrey Kerreken. This episode, though seemingly trivial, gains symbolic weight in light of Ruusbroec's spiritual interpretation of liturgy in *Seven Rungs in the Ladder of Spiritual Love*. Kerreken's failure to harmonize with the heavenly Cantor – Christ – represented a deeper spiritual discord. Ruusbroec, in contrast, sought mystical unity through liturgical song and contemplation. His departure from Brussels marked a withdrawal from mainstream ecclesiastical life and a turn toward the wilderness, where he could write in harmony with the mystical tradition and reach a broad audience through his texts⁸⁶.

d) Ruusbroec's Corpus

Ruusbroec's extensive oeuvre must be understood within this tense and shifting context. His role as a mediator stands out – bridging communities, textual traditions, and theological paradigms. He did not merely contribute to mystical theology; he translated and reinterpreted centuries of mystical knowledge for diverse audiences. This mediating function has often been underappreciated in secondary literature, which tends to emphasize his theological originality. Hilde Noë argues convincingly that Ruusbroec was not a mediocre writer, but a master of imaginative engagement. His rich visual language weaves together biblical motifs and metaphors from various traditions. His masterpiece, *The Spiritual Tabernacle*, exemplifies this artistry, structured around a baroque mnemonic system that guides readers through complex contemplative paths.

85. See P. VERDEYEN, *Ruusbroec en zijn mystiek*, Leuven, Davidsfonds, 1981, pp. 23-24.

86. See J. ARBLASTER – R. FAESEN, *John of Ruusbroec's Life and Works*, in ID. (eds.), *A Companion to John of Ruusbroec*, 47-80.

Ruusbroec was also a pastoral writer, deeply attuned to the spiritual needs of his audience. He combined theological insight with a compassionate understanding of human imperfection, drawing strength from a long mystical tradition and offering guidance to his readers in all circumstances⁸⁷.

Ruusbroec considered his first work, *The Realm of Lovers*, a youthful undertaking, according to the *vita* by Brother Gerard, and it was disseminated by copyists against the wishes of the author⁸⁸. The work that followed, *The Spiritual Espousals*, revealed a greater mystic and literary maturity and was very popular with fourteenth-century readers. This success can perhaps be attributed to Ruusbroec's structured presentation of the meeting with God. His third work, *The Sparkling Stone*, resulted from a discussion with Brother Gerard. Two subsequent, shorter treatises, *The Four Temptations* and *The Christian Faith*, are of a more polemic nature, according to Axters. The colossal work *The Spiritual Tabernacle* is Ruusbroec's masterpiece and was also the most widely circulated of his works. In the following theses, Ruusbroec took up the pastoral duty he had already displayed in *The Sparkling Stone*. *The Seven Enclosures*, *A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness* and *Seven Rungs in the Ladder of Spiritual Love* were written for Poor Clare Margriet of Meerbeke (to whom he also addressed his first out of eight *Letters*)⁸⁹. For Gerard, Ruusbroec wrote *Little Book of Explanation* after a meeting with the Carthusians of Herne, as a correction and clarification of his early work, *The Realm of Lovers*. The last work that should be mentioned is *The Twelve Beguines*⁹⁰.

Ruusbroec increasingly addressed a particular and attentive audience after he took up his role as a monk, an audience that is historically easier to identify. The Poor Clare Margriet, for instance, was a regular correspondent of Ruusbroec, through whom he could reach a large female audience. Ruusbroec was aware of the impact of his treatises on Margriet's network and consciously addressed a diverse audience, adjusting his tone and standard. In *A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness*, for instance, he did not just address Margriet, but also a junior nun of a younger generation

87. See H. NOË, *Ruusbroec the Author*, in ARBLASTER – FAESSEN (eds.), *A Companion to John of Ruusbroec*, 100-129, p. 111; EAD., *Jan van Ruusbroec als prozaschrijver: Staat van het onderzoek*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 58 (1984) 210-226.

88. J.M. Willeumier-Schalij describes how Ruusbroec's work evolved as the more experienced writer increasingly kept in mind the taste and intellectual level of his readers. His first works are highly intellectual. See J.M. WILLEUMIER-SCHALIJ, *Ruusbroec's werk in het middeleeuwse tijdsbeeld: Een receptie-onderzoek*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 55 (1981) 298-390, pp. 332-389.

89. See T. MERTENS, *Epistolaire aspecten van Ruusbroec's Brieven*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 64 (1990) 53-69.

90. See AXTERS, *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid*, 2, pp. 230-234.

who would have been more familiar with the practices of imitating Christ, which were so very popular in Modern Devotion. In Ruusbroec's evolving works, the *imitatio Christi* and the passion mysticism played an increasingly prominent role. Ruusbroec adjusted himself to the different standards of his readers, without leaving behind his love for the perfection of the contemplative life. On the contrary, Ruusbroec incorporated a description of the contemplative life in every tractate and continuously attempted to elaborate and reinterpret his own ideas, in order to help his readers reach this ideal⁹¹.

In this study, I approach Ruusbroec's oeuvre through the lens of his audience and the pedagogical strategies he employed to communicate mystical doctrine to a broad lay readership. His writings reflect a careful balance between theological profundity and accessibility, adapting complex mystical ideas to the spiritual capacities of his readers. Central to this analysis is Ruusbroec's use of pain language – its conceptualization, interpretation, and experiential dimensions – which evolved throughout his corpus. Ruusbroec reappears in each chapter of this book, serving as a comparative reference point for the thirteenth-century mystical culture of Liège and its enduring legacy.

4. *Mystical Theologians of Liège*

To conclude this section on the mystical culture of Liège, I include a list of the most important figures whose theologies will be discussed in the following chapters⁹².

- Mary of Oignies, *mulier religiosa* and recluse (ca. 1167-1213)
- Christina the Astonishing of Sint-Truiden, *mulier religiosa* and recluse (1232)
- John of Cantimpré, Augustinian abbot (d. ca. 1210)
- Yvette, anchoress of Huy, vowess and anchoress (1158-1228)
- Lutgard of Aywières, Benedictine prioress of Sint-Truiden and Cistercian nun of Aywières (1182-1246)
- Juliana of Mont Cornillon, *mulier religiosa*, prioress, and recluse (1193-1258)

91. See WARNAR, *Ruusbroec en zijn mystiek*, pp. 255-270.

92. This list is based on B. NEWMAN – A.B. MULDER-BAKKER, *Canon of Thirteenth-Century Southern Netherlandish Saints' Lives*, in A.B. MULDER-BAKKER (ed.), *Living Saints of the Thirteenth Century: The Lives of Yvette, Anchoress of Huy; Juliana of Mont Cornillon, Author of the Corpus Christi Feast; and Margaret the Lane, Anchoress of Magdeburg* (Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts, 20), Turnhout, Brepols, 2011, 1-45, pp. 43-45.

- Ida of Nivelles, Cistercian nun of La Ramée (1199-1231)
- Beatrice of Nazareth, Cistercian nun of Nazareth and mystical author (1200-1268)
- Margaret of Ypres, *mulier religiosa* (1216-1237)
- Arnulf of Villers, Cistercian lay brother of Villers (d. 1228)
- Petrus Conversus, lay brother of Villers
- Ida of Louvain, *mulier religiosa* and Cistercian nun of Roosendaal (fl. 1240)
- Elisabeth of Spalbeek, *mulier religiosa* and recluse (1248-1316)
- James of Vitry, Augustinian canon and papal legate (ca. 1167-1213)
- Goswin of Bossut, Cistercian monk and cantor of Villers (1240s)
- Hugh of Floreffe, Premonstratensian canon (ca. 1230)
- Hadewijch, *mulier religiosa*, Cistercian nun (?), and mystical author
- Thomas of Cantimpré, Dominican scholar (1200-1272)
- John of Ruusbroec, priest in Brussels, Augustinian canon of Groenendaal and mystical author (1283-1381)

III

THE MARTYR AND THE MONK

This chapter describes the knowledge traditions and mystical-theological pain histories that culminated and came to full expression during the thirteenth century. The monastic tradition metamorphosed and flourished during this period which Bernard McGinn calls the “new mysticism” (1200-1350)¹.

My concept of mystical culture is supported by McGinn’s analysis of the “vernacular theology” that flourishes during this period. The use of the vernacular propelled multiple new literary genres while still repeating traditional elements and tropes of the monastic mystical tradition that preceded the thirteenth century. The borders of this theology are hard to delineate and McGinn includes the saints’ *vitae* as well as vision literature and poetry in the vernacular that enabled lay people to gain *auctoritas* and to teach *ex beneficio*². Moreover, the mystical culture cultivated an audience of believers eager to learn about mystical teachings which were previously inaccessible for “illiterate” people. The mystical language, and by extension the religious pain language, was a mixture of neologisms and traditional concepts and images.

The thirteenth-century mystical theologians dealt with tropes and archetypes that date back to early Christianity and inspired their own new interpretation of tradition and, in particular, their own pain language, as Cynthia Hahn states. This century, more than others, revived these old tropes and stereotypes and reenacted them in a new context. Moreover, their reenactment reached a different kind of audience and was performed by religious and lay people alike. They invigorated and reinterpreted archaic tropes and archetypes to explore the range of experiences that the *imitatio Christi* allowed – most of them related to pain and suffering³. Especially those stemming from the early Christian period were extremely popular in the Late Middle Ages. For centuries, most tropes and archetypes lingered in the collective memory and resided in the stories of

1. See MCGINN, *Flowering*, pp. 1-2; 6-7.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 19-24.

3. C. HAHN, *Portayed on the Heart: Narrative Effect in Pictorial Lives of Saints from the Tenth through the Thirteenth Century*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 2001, pp. 39-45.

legendary martyrs and saints; during this time they came to life anew in actual living bodies. These *topoi* are very relevant for the study of pain and will be addressed in the next act. In this chapter, I will select two related archetypes that will illustrate some key mystical-theological insights into pain: the martyr and the ascetic monk.

1. *The New Martyr*

Lutgard thought a great deal about the One who had “suffered such tribulation from sinners” and wondrously burned to repay Christ and suffer martyrdom for him. But since the time of the martyrdom had “passed like the winter and the rains had come and gone”, Christ prepared for her another kind of bodily martyrdom⁴.

This passage from the *vita* of Lutgard of Aywières exemplifies the thirteenth-century saint’s yearning to suffer like the early Christian martyrs who died for their faith⁵. Lutgard was particularly inspired by Saint Agnes. Her desire to emulate Agnes – specifically her suffering and death – was so intense that her heart burst, soaking her tunic in blood. Through this traumatic event, Lutgard physically joined the lineage of suffering martyrs, tracing back to Christ himself. She became what is known as a red martyr. Although she did not meet the traditional criteria of martyrdom – namely, dying as a result of persecution – she embodied what might be called a “martyr of desire”. This longing was so profound that it triggered a severe psychosomatic reaction. Lutgard wished to endure the same torments as Agnes, despite living nearly a millennium later. Her internal suffering was so overwhelming that it manifested physically; her body became the vessel through which her painful desire was expressed.

Lutgard’s unusual longing drew the attention of her hagiographer, Thomas of Cantimpré, who also chronicled the *Life of Margaret of Ypres* – another virgin saint from the same region – using Saint Agnes as a model. While Lutgard’s martyrdom centered on her intense desire and its psychosomatic effects, Margaret’s *vita* developed the notion of martyrdom through virginity. According to Thomas, Margaret’s death, brought on by extreme abstinence, rendered her a martyr of sorts⁶. Elliott

4. *Lutgard of Aywières*, p. 255.

5. Margot King compares the *Mulieres Religiosae* to the *Desert Mothers* who had to flee rape and persecution in the first centuries of Christianity. See M.H. KING, *The Desert Mothers: From Judith to Julian of Norwich*, in *14th Century English Mystics Newsletter* 9 (1983) 12-25.

6. Elliott argues that the causes of Margaret’s death are not discussed in her *vita* but can be found in one of Thomas’ other work, *Liber de natura rerum* (*On the Nature of*

argues that Margaret quite literally sacrificed her life for her virginity, which was celebrated as a sign of unwavering devotion to her heavenly Bridegroom, Christ. Inspired by the example of the virgin martyr Agnes, Thomas portrayed Margaret's virginity as the key to her sanctity. Her early death was followed by a triumphant entry into heaven, where she was united with Christ. On her deathbed, Margaret declared that she had received all she had longed for – a statement that, as Elliott notes, directly echoes the *passio* of Saint Agnes: “Behold, what I have desired, I now see: what I hoped for, I now possess. I am united in heaven with him whom I loved with total devotion on earth”. In this way, Margaret is presented as a second Agnes, reimagining martyrdom through the lens of virginity and spiritual union⁷.

The longing to emulate Saint Agnes was not unique to Lutgard or Margaret of Ypres; it was a recurring theme among thirteenth-century women in the diocese of Liège. This spiritual aspiration extended to contemporaries such as Juliana of Mont Cornillon and Odilia of Liège, who also referenced Agnes in their mystical experiences. The popularity of Agnes surged during this period, especially as mystical tropes were introduced into the vernacular. Simons notes that Lambert Le Bègue, a cleric active in Liège in the latter half of the twelfth century, played a crucial role in this development. He translated religious texts, including the *Life of Saint Agnes*, with the intention of making them accessible to lay audiences. His efforts notably influenced the Beguines, who revered Agnes as a model of virgin martyrdom⁸. Le Bègue was not alone in this endeavor. Eamon Duffy observes that many martyr narratives from the early Christian period, compiled in Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*, were translated into the vernacular around the same time. De Voragine emphasized Agnes' chastity and the miraculous tortures she endured – elements that contributed to her widespread appeal, especially as her *vita* took on the captivating qualities of folk and fairy tales⁹.

Scholars such as Elliott have pointed out the misogynistic tendencies in the writings of authors like Thomas of Cantimpré, particularly his insistence on imposing Agnes' ideals of chastity onto the virgin saints he

Things). There, he argued that her symptoms indicated humoral imbalance caused by excessive abstinence and illness. He attributed the condition to the suffocation of the uterus pressing against the heart. Margaret's hemorrhaging, he wrote, was consistent with the digestion of poisonous seeds, Elliott states. See ELLIOTT, *Bride of Christ*, p. 199.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 199-200.

8. See SIMONS, *City of Ladies*, pp. 24-31.

9. See E. DUFFY, *Introduction*, in Jacobus DE VORAGINE, *The Golden Legend*, trans. W.G. Ryan, Princeton, NJ – Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2012, xi-xx, pp. xv-xvii.

encountered¹⁰. Rather than dwelling on this alleged misogyny, I wish to emphasize the theological implications of the interaction between ancient and contemporary models of martyrdom. Central to this dynamic is the saints' longing for union with their promised heavenly Bridegroom, Christ, and the suffering that accompanies this desire. The exemplary lives of Lutgard and Margaret share a common thread: through their suffering, they believed they would ascend to the highest thrones in heaven and be eternally united with Christ. Their narratives reinterpret and reenact early martyr theologies, even though their suffering stemmed more from overwhelming spiritual desire than from physical violence. In this way, old and new martyrdom converge in a shared yearning for divine union, though the modes of pain and suffering that mark the path toward that goal differ significantly.

The early Church proposed a connection between the suffering of the martyr, the passion of Christ, and the heavenly rewards promised to those who endured such pain. Candida Moss explains that the Church Fathers conceptualized this relationship through the framework of *imitatio Christi*, the imitation of Christ. They explored the theological implications of this idea, allowing interpretations of Christ's suffering to shape the lived experiences of martyrs and saints. These interpretations, in turn, influenced and challenged theological discourse. Over time, the Church Fathers developed a sophisticated framework in which martyrs were portrayed as *alteri Christi* – other Christs – endowed with religious authority. By emulating Christ's suffering to its fullest extent, surpassing the pain endured by ordinary believers, martyrs became central figures in discussions of soteriology and eschatology. Their suffering was not only a reflection of Christ's own but also a pathway to salvation. Ultimately, theologians concluded that the imitation of Christ's passion granted martyrs a privileged place in heaven immediately after death. As Moss notes, martyrdom forged a hierarchical lineage that linked earthly suffering to heavenly reward and divine praise¹¹.

Thirteenth-century saints deliberately presented themselves, or were presented by their hagiographers, as the fruit of this lineage, a development in the history of ideas and a new interpretation of Christ's suffering rooted in

10. Carolyn Muessig notes that Agnes was an ideal example of the virgin martyr type, also apparent in Cecilia and Catherine, and that Agnes was included in the sermons on chastity of James of Vitry. See C. MUESSIG, *Paradigms of Sanctity for the Thirteenth-Century Women*, in B.M. KIENZLE (ed.), *Models of Holiness in Medieval Sermons*, Louvain-la-Neuve, Fédération Internationale des Instituts d'Études Médiévales, 1996, 85-101, p. 89.

11. See C.R. MOSS, *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 3-7.

the mimetic theories of early Christendom. Thirteenth-century mystical theologians reimagined Christ's suffering from the perspective of his humanity. This attention to the human Christ was not new but emerged in the eleventh century in learned circles, culminating in Anselm of Canterbury's *Cur deus homo*.

In his short treatise, Anselm attempted to explain why God had to be made human to save humanity from sin. Anselm argued logically. God became human to rectify the world with his death. Anselm spoke of a "ransom", the sum to be paid to free humanity from its prison of sin and the "devil's blows"¹². The suffering and death of the God-man was the heavy toll paid. The Incarnation and the inevitable death on the cross were the only means by which this debt could be repaid, while also doing justice to human free will and to the devil's prerogative to persecute and punish sinners. According to Anselm, sin is the condition in which the human person finds himself or herself when failing to render to God what is due to Him. Adam's debt could not be settled by humanity. Only God, in an act of love, was capable of breaking the impasse, through Christ's dual nature. God had to become human because Adam, the first sinner, was human and his original righteousness and dignity had to be restored. Only after Christ redeemed this debt, could humanity desire what is good and fulfill his commitments to God. Thus God could justly show mercy and reward humanity with eternal life. Yet it was not suffering and death that should inspire the believer and induce his love, but Christ's will power. For Anselm, this act was not about omnipotence but about love¹³.

According to Rachel Fulton Brown, the repayment to God should not be perceived as a punishment. She argues that early medieval authors, such as Gregory the Great, interpreted Christ's sacrifice as a ransom owed to the devil. But this was not the case for Anselm. Fulton Brown writes: "It is important to note here that Anselm explicitly distinguished satisfaction from punishment. Satisfaction is that which releases the sinner from debt – it is a 'voluntary recompense for wrongdoing'. Punishment, by contrast, is the just consequence of having fallen into debt by doing someone (here, God) some injury"¹⁴. God becoming human was, in the

12. ANSELM OF CANTERBURY, *The Major Works*, ed. and trans. B. DAVIES – G.R. EVANS (Oxford World's Classics), New York, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 270-274.

13. See R. FULTON, *From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary: 800-1200*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2002, pp. 60-91.

14. Fulton argues that the affective devotion of the human Christ and his suffering may have been familiar to the illiterate long before being committed to writing in the eleventh century. *Ibid.*, p. 177. Stephanus Axters makes a similar discovery in his study of the history of devotions in the Low Countries. The devotion of Christ's humanity and suffering has a long pedigree in the Low Countries, Axters contends, visible in the liturgy as

first place, an act of love and compassion, not retribution. Yet Anselm's satisfaction theory has often been cited since for its exchange of pain for salvation, similar to the dynamics of martyr theologies. This emphasizes Christ's suffering as the price for our sins, obscuring the actual deed of love. But God's judgment does not involve revenge. It involves love. Satisfaction theory is not just about the price humanity paid to return to its original, innocent state, but also about the fundamental relationship between justice and love.

Inspired by a theology of loving imitation, thirteenth-century mystics and saints sought to emulate Christ's suffering not only as a personal devotion but as a communal act of redemption. Through their imitation of Christ, they assumed the role of co-redeemers, extending the salvific potential of pain beyond the individual. This reinterpretation of martyr legends and the theme of redeeming pain introduced a new dynamic: suffering could now be shared, redistributed, and offered on behalf of others. Medieval theologians who emphasized the sacrament of penance believed that Christ's original sacrifice, while foundational, was insufficient to absolve the sins committed during one's lifetime. Without conversion, remorse, or intercession, many souls faced punishment in hell or purgatory. Saints, as new *alteri Christi*, offered an alternative. By enduring suffering, they proposed a spiritual exchange – applying their pain to the debts of others, in line with Anselm's satisfaction theory. In doing so, they transformed personal agony into communal salvation. Through their own suffering, some saints proposed a bargain, based on the exchange of the martyr's salvific pain and on Anselm's satisfaction theory. They imitated Christ's sacrifice for humanity's salvation, turning themselves into "co-redeemers"¹⁵.

Both ancient and thirteenth-century martyrs were portrayed as warriors in a cosmic battle against death and evil, fighting not only for their own salvation but also for that of their communities. Their suffering – whether

well as the culture of relics. Axters notes that relics of Jesus, and of objects associated with his life and death, were the most important of those revered in the ninth century. The devotion of Christ emerged from the liturgical prayer, via the relics worshipped by monks in the ninth and tenth centuries. Axters also observes that a similar devotion of Mary gained ground, noting the growing number of Mary feasts and the adoration and circulation of her relics. See AXTERS, *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid*, 1, pp. 70-72.

15. Newman writes: "The ransom had been paid by Christ but every new sin made new debt. The Christ of purgatorial piety did not care who paid each sinner's debt: it might be God's mother or his saints, his special friends or the friends of the deceased – or he himself might pay by applying his own sacrifice to their account". See B. NEWMAN, *From Virile Woman to Woman Christ: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature*, Philadelphia, PA, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995, p. 119.

through persecution or the imitation of Christ's passion – was the means by which they overcame death. Aligned with the figure of *Christus Victor*, martyrs reenacted the triumph of Christ over evil, extending its salvific power. Thirteenth-century saints consciously adopted this mediating role, positioning themselves as participants in the same spiritual warfare¹⁶. While Christ's victory over death secured humanity's redemption, the martyrs offered supplementary salvation by reliving and embodying that struggle. In the diocese of Liège, this theme of combat with demonic forces was especially prominent in hagiographic texts, underscoring the saint's role as defender of the faithful and vanquisher of evil¹⁷.

Despite their shared foundations, early Christian martyr theology and its thirteenth-century reinterpretations diverged in two key respects. First, the theme of persecution – central to the early Church – had to be artificially reintroduced in the medieval West. Thirteenth-century mystical theology revived this motif by portraying saints as excluded, persecuted, and suffering servants of God. This aspect, often overlooked, became increasingly prominent in hagiographies and mystical texts from the thirteenth century. Saints and mystics sought to emulate the emotional and spiritual isolation of the early martyrs by constructing narratives of rejection – sometimes imagined, sometimes literal, and occasionally grounded in historical tensions. Through these literary and theological reconstructions, they positioned themselves within the martyr's lineage, hoping to share in the promised heavenly glory.

The second major divergence between early and thirteenth-century martyr theology concerns the notion of impassibility – the idea that saints might not feel pain at all. Within the tradition of *apatheia*, or freedom from passions, some theological thinkers proposed that the holy body, particularly that of the martyr, could transcend suffering. The impassibility of the resurrected body was interpreted not as a victory over pain itself, but as a triumph over fragmentation and loss of identity. The martyr's body, preserved in its integrity, became a symbol of spiritual wholeness and continuity¹⁸. This notion, however, raised complex questions in the thirteenth century, especially as impassibility began to be associated

16. See Moss, *The Other Christs*, pp. 28; 87-88; 100.

17. It has long been apparent to researchers such as Weinstein and Bell how dominant the theme of battles with demonic forces was in the *vitae* in the Low Countries, especially when compared to their Southern counterparts. See D. WEINSTEIN – R.M. BELL, *Saints & Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom: 1000-1700*, Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 187.

18. Studying relics and their cults, Bynum further examines Church history to show how impassibility and the unchanging nature of the body could already be attained on earth. See BYNUM, *Resurrection*, pp. 43-46; 81-85.

with morally ambiguous figures such as criminals and devil worshippers. These groups were often viewed with contempt precisely because they seemed incapable of suffering, and thus incapable of redemption. In contrast, Christian doctrine maintained that humanity owed God its suffering. The ability to suffer became a theological necessity. Yet both martyrs and criminals, by enduring torture without visible agony, destabilized this framework. Saints had to suffer authentically, but also demonstrate mastery over their pain. They were called to suffer like Christ: fully, yet with spiritual control¹⁹.

Scholastic theologians of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries approached the concept of impassibility with caution and rational inquiry. While they accepted that the afterlife was a state of *stasis* – a realm of bliss beyond growth, desire, and pain – they remained skeptical of the miraculous claims found in martyr legends. The suffering endured by martyrs, they argued, could never equal that of Christ, whose passion remained the theological benchmark. To explain how martyrs could endure extreme torment, scholastics proposed a moral framework rooted in virtue. They suggested that martyrs achieved impassibility through the cultivation of *fortitudo*, the strength to withstand suffering, and *caritas*, the perfect love of God. These virtues enabled the saint to transcend pain without denying its reality. Ordinary believers, though unable to fully attain such perfection, were encouraged to pursue these virtues as part of their spiritual journey²⁰.

The idea of the immutable, impassible body entered thirteenth-century hagiography through accounts of bodily miracles. The corpses of new martyrs, despite their wounds, showed no signs of decay. These phenomena were interpreted as visible signs of sanctity, suggesting that perfect *caritas* could elevate the body beyond corruption. Yet mystical theologians complicated this notion. Drawing on monastic mysticism, folk theology, and devotional legend, they argued that perfect love did not lead to serenity or *stasis*, but to an intensification of pain and yearning. The desire for

19. The culture of martyrs indeed emphasized impassibility when drawing on the tradition of the Desert Fathers, Cohen writes. Thus, Evagrius Ponticus proposed the concept *apatheia*, which encouraged monks to combat their own passions and senses. This *apatheia* is not the same as impassibility, but a fighting of the passions that lead the soul astray. This is common in monastic ascetic traditions but is not considered impassibility. The Western tradition (including opponents of Evagrius) considered impassibility the absence of passions and pain, and completely rejected the notion. Pain was made welcome and encouraged, and had to be suffered patiently, just as the martyrs – the champions of stoic suffering for the faith – had endured. The Western monastic tradition also strove to tame the passions, but did not interpret this as a battle for impassibility, but as a pain that had to be borne inevitably. See COHEN, *The Modulated Scream*, p. 6.

20. BYNUM, *Resurrection*, pp. 43-46.

God was not a calming force – it disrupted equilibrium, agitated the body, and propelled the soul into a state of perpetual longing. In this mystical framework, impassibility was not the absence of suffering, but its transformation into divine desire. The saint's body became a dynamic site where pain and holiness intertwined, not in stillness, but in movement²¹. Bynum writes:

Medieval debates over bodily resurrection involved more than theology and philosophy. Mystics, poets, hagiographers, sculptors, and tellers of folktales ruminated about what body could do, wherein lay its significance, how it might be redeemed. And theologians, like storytellers, expressed their concerns and concepts in images, analogies, and examples as much as in logic. Such images came not only from a fund of images inherited from the past; they came as well from daily experience. Storytellers and theologians alike feared death, buried the dead, and died themselves²².

Mystical theologians and their contemporaries bridged scholarly and vernacular understandings of impassibility. Their reflections emerged not only from theological treatises but also from mystical texts, hagiographies, *exempla*, and folk stories. In this tradition, *apatheia* was not interpreted as the absence of pain or insensitivity. Such a reading would have suggested a heterodox form of quietism – an idea strongly opposed by authors like Ruusbroec²³. Instead, thirteenth-century mystical thinkers redefined impassibility in relation to the deified body and the overwhelming desire for God. Saints were not immune to suffering; they were transformed by it. Their pain was not silenced but intensified by divine longing. Through this reinterpretation, mystical theology reopened debates on Christology, eschatology, and soteriology, proposing pain as a privileged path to imitate Christ – not through detachment, but through ecstatic desire and imitation of Christ, like the martyrs of old.

2. *Unlocked Monastic Life*

The monk is the other archetypal figure who played a pivotal role in the imagination of Liège's thirteenth-century mystical culture. As mentioned earlier, this culture grew out of a long tradition of monastic mysticism, which reached a broad lay audience and became a "watered-down" version of mysticism. Monastic mysticism created its own interpretation of the imitation of Christ. The monastic tradition preserved the imitation of the suffering Christ by recording it and reliving it in an altered context.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 220-225.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 342.

23. See MENS, *Oorsprong en betekenis*, pp. 135-136.

Monks mimicked Christ by rejecting an earthly existence, thus dying a first death – dead to the world – and entering the monastic world and the heavenly Jerusalem. The monastic life was a kind of *imitatio Christi* in which one died with Christ in order to rise in the new life within the walls of the monastery. Through an imitation of this type of suffering, monks could reach redemption and deification alongside Christ. Western monks preserved the ideas of suffering and deification, while their Eastern counterparts predominantly focused on deification itself. Western monks went on to develop a long ascetic tradition in the wake of the martyrs, disciplining the body and readying it for heavenly glory²⁴.

Monks also suffered a kind of mental pain, an existential anxiety that could be related to the idea of waiting for the final fulfillment of their promised existence (often called *visio Dei*, the contemplative seeing of God after death) and for deification. Monastic culture developed an eschatology that went back to the martyrs. We already noted that martyrs, through their temporary suffering, cinched a place in heaven's hierarchy. When their heroic deeds were redeemed with a place in paradise, their suffering ended. Like Lutgard, a Cistercian nun after all, they longed for God.

The monastic tradition elaborated on this simple version of exchange between pain and salvation. Two eschatological lines are – to a greater or lesser degree – consistently present in the monastic tradition, sometimes crisscrossing or even opposing one another. Martyr theology and the theological conceptualization of the resurrected body are examples of the first eschatology line, in which heaven is a place of *stasis*, a reward for earthly pain. Heaven is the end-of-times consummation. The other line disrupts this proposed eschatology and originates from the Eastern monastic tradition. It is hard to reconcile with martyr eschatology. It revolves around *epektasis*, or continual eternal progress, as developed by Gregory of Nyssa, which left clear traces in the Western Church too.

24. The Western monastic world encouraged the imitation of certain elements from the human life of Christ, which were only later united in the doctrine of Christ's humanity. Eastern monasticism was predominantly focused on the doctrine of deification at an ontological and eschatological level, not at the level of morality and psychology, as was the case in the West. See G. CONSTABLE, *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought: The Interpretation of Mary and Martha; The Ideal of the Imitation of Christ; The Orders of Society*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 149-150; 177. Luke Dysinger highlights the importance of martyrdom for the development of Christian asceticism. He says: "Later, 'professional ascetics', monks and nuns, would gain popularity and see themselves as successors of the martyrs – as spiritual athletes whose ascetic practices in life substituted for the 'red martyrdom' of death that characterized the eras of Christian persecution". See L. DYSINGER, *The Ascetic Life*, in MCINTOSH – HOWELLS (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology*, 165-185, p. 167.

In this eschatology, heaven is a desired place, always on the horizon, never reached. As McGinn writes:

Without explicitly saying so, many late medieval mystics seem to have abandoned the notion of the *ordo caritatis*, the restoration of the proper harmony between love for God and all other lovers in favor of what might be described as a new form of *epektasis*, that is, an infinite and “insane” pursuit of God, one based on an overpowering love that is subject to no law but itself and able to find no term but its own annihilation²⁵.

This eschatology of longing and expectation is characteristic of both Eastern and Western monastic traditions. The monastery was a waiting place, where man prepared for the city of God. In this monastic ante-chamber, monks could already get a taste of the heavenly salvation they so craved. Leclercq identifies the same tradition of *epektasis* in the lives of the monks and argues that they were aware of the impossibility of experiencing total unity with God on earth (the heavenly reward), but that, in their longing for God, they could already feel him. Their eternal desire was a doorway to the experience of the eternal God. Their longing souls so heavily influenced this encounter, that it had to have an eternal quality. Eschatology contended that infinite longing must naturally continue in heaven. The desire of the soul pierced the division between heaven and earth, and made it possible to experience heaven prematurely in the monastic in-between space, even though this experience was often painful due to the frantic desire the monks had to bear²⁶. Reynaert writes that Cistercian monasteries of the twelfth century, in particular, experimented with this eschatology of desire. Bernard of Clairvaux and William of Saint-Thierry developed a mystical theology in which God could already be encountered in the here and now, through love and longing. The human person could partake in divine love by endlessly desiring God, who is endless desire and movement²⁷.

In the thirteenth century, via Cistercian monastic mysticism and its democratization, complex eschatologies permeated mystical theology and folk devotions. Mystics and saints attempted to uncover the secrets of the hereafter in the present, and even explored places such as heaven, hell and, above all, purgatory. The *exempla* literature, too, was permeated with this eschatological theme, facilitating a cross-fertilization of the *exempla*, hagiography and mysticism²⁸. These experiments in eschatology

25. MCGINN, *Flowering*, pp. 256-257.

26. See LECLERCQ, *The Love of Learning*, pp. 55-68.

27. See REYNAERT, *Beeldspraak van Hadewijch*, pp. 220-223.

28. See ROISIN, *L'hagiographie cistercienne*, pp. 112; 193-203.

would later be criticized and questioned. According to Axters, the Council of Vienne, which denounced the Beguines, also rejected the eschatology in which heavenly reality could be tangibly experienced on earth²⁹. Thirteenth-century mystical theologians had to consider the implications of these eschatological possibilities on earth, which increasingly escaped the safety of the enclosed monasteries. Through the ascetic practices of the body, and through the mystical growth achieved through visions and mystical teachings, everyone could experience a direct encounter with God – even lay people. Mystical theologians had to manage the traditions of the martyrs and monks in a new dynamic polyphony of mystical culture, negotiating the meaning of *imitatio Christi* and of pain within the restrictions of the Catholic Church and her teachings.

The monastic theme of *epektasis* – the endless striving toward God – profoundly shaped the pain language of thirteenth-century mystical culture. Mystical authors such as Beatrice of Nazareth, Hadewijch, and later John of Ruusbroec translated this eschatology of longing into the vernacular, giving rise to new expressions of spiritual desire³⁰. One striking example is the Middle Dutch neologism *orewoet*, a term that captures the restless, burning yearning for divine union. Through such language, the mystics reenacted the monastic archetype of the ever-seeking soul and wove it into the fabric of mystical theology. They linked this longing directly to the painful imitation of Christ, as embodied in the martyr tradition, thereby fusing ascetic heritage with affective devotion in the vernacular.

The mystical authors and their contemporaries recognized that desire itself was a source of pain – an ache that could not be resolved, only deepened. They projected this longing into infinity, crafting a mystical theology that was both captivating and disruptive. Rather than viewing pain as a currency to be exchanged for heavenly reward, they proposed a model in which pain was the very medium of divine encounter. This theology challenged established frameworks of merit and satisfaction, suggesting that the path to God lay not in transactional suffering, but in an unending, ecstatic yearning that defied closure.

The interplay between eternal and temporary pain – and their entanglement with desire and reward – will reappear throughout the following chapters. These tensions culminate in the third act, where I examine how

29. See AXTERS, *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid*, 2, p. 181.

30. René Roques states that John of Ruusbroec refers to Anselm of Canterbury and his ideas on Christ's redeeming pain and debt. See R. ROQUES, *Anselmus Cantuariensis: 'Pourquoi Dieu s'est fait homme'*, Paris, Cerf, 1963, p. 190. For the influence of Anselm on Hadewijch, see MOMMAERS, *Hadewijch*, p. 60.

mystical theology reconfigures the history of pain. The innovations explored there are not peripheral; they emerge from the very heart of mystical culture. This specific pain language is situated on the inside: within the elect circles of mystical acolytes and teachers, and within the human interior, where pain, fear, and love converge and permeate one another. It is in this intimate space that mystical theology dares to rethink suffering – not as punishment or transaction, but as transformation.

I begin the journey through the landscape of pain culture at its outermost edge – at the periphery of mystical experience. In the first act, I examine pain as it is externalized: made visible on the body and performed before an audience. This form of pain most clearly reflects the traditional theological economy of exchange, where suffering is offered in return for salvation. It is temporal, measurable, and transactional – redeemable for heavenly gifts both in this life and the next. In contrast, eternal pain belongs to the realm of the damned, to forces of evil condemned to suffer beyond human comprehension. These infernal powers are opposed by the champions of temporary pain: the saints, who, following in the footsteps of the martyrs, enact the triumph of heaven through their suffering.

ACT I

STAGING PAIN

In the Late Middle Ages, pain was an omnipresent force – impossible to ignore in the streets of cities ravaged by illness and death. The suffering body was a daily reality, visible in both private and public spheres, and vividly portrayed in the fine arts and literature through images of Christ’s passion and crucifixion, as well as the torments of the martyrs. This period was saturated with bloody depictions of the Son of Man and his followers. Gruesome tales of Christ’s agony and the tortured bodies of saints and martyrs spread like wildfire, becoming central themes in *exempla*, hagiographic literature, and mystical treatises. These stories transcended the written word, entering everyday life through ritualistic and folkloric reenactments, and through the actions of living saints¹.

In this act, I turn my attention to the broader mystical culture, and more specifically to its periphery – home to the majority of Christian society: the mystically *illiterati*. I use this term, paired with the adjective “mystical”, to indicate their limited or absent access to theological sources and formal training in mysticism. Instead, these individuals drew upon bodily wisdom and oral traditions. My focus lies at the intersection of folkloric devotional practices and the performative dimensions of mystical literature. Both realms share a deep fascination with bodies in pain. Accordingly, the suffering body and its dramatic manifestations will take center stage in this act.

Thirteenth-century mystical theologians engaged in a profound debate on the meaning of the body – a body that, in this period, was expected to suffer visibly. They facilitated a dialogue between bodies of the past, present, and future: physical bodies alongside those represented in literature, art, and folk legend. In these theological frameworks, the suffering body was rarely neutral; it was both a source of immense good and of profound evil. The salvation of the human body was commemorated and

1. I agree with Glucklich that an analysis of religious pain needs to encompass both religious data (rituals, artifacts, narratives) and intellectual theory. He posits that physical suffering as an emulation of God can be seen as a form of “performed folk theory”. Academic theories are simply more complex and detailed variations of the same conceptualization. To study the performance of pain, I take into account these folkloristic elements that contributed to creation of mystical literature. See GLUCKLICH, *Sacred Pain*, p. 9.

ritually reenacted in Christian liturgy, as well as in oral and written accounts of the miraculous suffering of Christ, the martyrs, and the saints. In stark contrast stood the damned bodies of demons and devils, ever present in the collective memory of late medieval Christian society. Within the popular imagination, pain and illness often assumed demonic form. The explicit and visible agony of Christ's crucified body revealed to the faithful how he had suffered for humanity's sins, paying the ransom for salvation with his blood. Meanwhile, the grotesque bodies of demons and sinners served as vivid warnings of the fate awaiting those who failed to follow Christ. The human body and its representations became the medium par excellence to show the *illiterati* that suffering could be redemptive – if endured in imitation of Christ. The ambiguity surrounding the meaning of the suffering body gave mystical theologians room for creative interpretation. By casting different types of suffering bodies as opposing figures, they could transmit mystical-theological insights – even to an audience lacking formal mystical education. The body became a canvas on which the drama of salvation and damnation could be read by all.

In this act, I examine the suffering body from the perspective of the viewer, the reader, and the audience. I explore how the authors of *exempla*, *vitae*, and mystical treatises directed their characters, reconstructed the *mise-en-scène* and the audience surrounding the saint or mystic, and how these holy figures integrated the audience's gaze into their performance of mystical theology. Hahn notes that these strategies of representation and restaging remain largely underexplored in scholarly research. She argues that the role of the audience – especially in the *vitae* – has received little attention. Yet it was precisely the construction of an audience that enabled the writer to convey the intended emotional and theological effects to the reader. As Hahn puts it: "Readers and viewers are always implicitly present in the narrative structure of hagiography even if they are rarely explicitly mentioned in the text themselves. In some sense, hagiography is simply a series of effects directed at an audience"².

Stories about demons and saints were never intended as mere entertainment; they were meant to inspire virtuous behavior and foster devotional or mystical growth in the reader³. Hans Robert Jauss argues that these Christian narratives sought to transcend the realm of pleasurable

2. See HAHN, *Portrayed on the Heart*, pp. 4-5; 30.

3. See SPENCER-HALL, *Medieval Saints and Modern Screens*, pp. 43-47; ROISIN, *L'hagiographie cistercienne*, p. 184.

contemplation. Readers were not permitted to indulge in self-satisfied sentimentality or passive admiration. Mere identification with the heroes was insufficient. Instead, readers were expected to follow the *sensus moralis* of the protagonists and undergo a personal conversion. To achieve this, writers aimed to evoke associative identification with the saints, encouraging readers to emulate their behavior in real life⁴. Yet hagiographers and mystics explicitly warned against imitating the saints and mystics too literally. Saints were to be admired, and mystics were to await the gifts of God – the true protagonist. This did not mean that readers were left without a role. As Hahn and Jauss suggest, readers were invited to observe the saints' virtuous conduct, imitate it, and learn about the active life that pleases God. However, their transgressive and excessive suffering was to be admired, feared, and interpreted – not replicated⁵. Through the dramatization and staging of suffering bodies, mystical theologians could communicate the virtuous life, the promise of salvation, and even the hidden presence of God to the mystically illiterate.

The suffering body is, first and foremost, an external reality – clearly visible and immediately observable to all who encounter it. Its directness demands a visceral, instinctive reaction from the spectator. The natural human response to pain is resistance; pain is unwelcome, and people instinctively seek to keep it at a distance. Pain must remain external. Theological literature infused this primal reaction with meaning and purpose, treating it as the foundational layer upon which mystical theologians could build. Pain, in this sense, becomes a tool to forge affective bonds between bodies, without requiring prior mystical knowledge. It signals danger – the threat of damnation for one's sins and the prospect of becoming an eternally suffering body. The tormented bodies of devils and sinners inflict pain and serve as warnings of what awaits those who fail to convert and lead a virtuous Christian life. These demons also function as external embodiments of pain. Folklore and visual culture often depict illness and suffering as demonic forces that manipulate the human body from the outside. By expelling these pain-demons, the community could be spared from affliction and adversity.

4. H.R. JAUSS – B. BENNETT – H. BENNETT, *Levels of Identification of Hero and Audience*, in *New Literary History* 5 (1974) 283-317, pp. 289-301.

5. The theme of *admiratio* dates back to Gregory the Great's description in his *Dialogues*, Hahn argues. Gregory argues that saints had to induce a sense of astonishment. Their miracles had to seduce ordinary people to recognize the eternal presence of God in the world. However, the miracles should not distract from the saints' virtuous lifestyles, which, Gregory argues, are the real signs of their sanctity (and not the miracles). See HAHN, *Portrayed on the Heart*, pp. 14-15.

The living saints of the thirteenth century acted as mediators in a cosmic struggle against the forces of evil. By imitating Christ's suffering, they assumed redemptive powers. The specific form this suffering had to take – the kind of pain that qualified someone for sainthood – was subject to theological speculation and shaped by both traditional iconography and the sensitivities of the surrounding community. This community included not only the immediate circle of the living saint, but also the broader readership and textual networks through which their stories circulated. The holy body thus emerged as a product of both physical enactment and textual performance. Saints, as living icons, embodied symbolic bodies marked by ambiguity in meaning and representation. Their exuberant suffering could signal divine intervention – walking in Christ's footsteps – or, conversely, demonic possession, with pain-demons embedded in the saint's body⁶.

Theologians took care to ensure that the holy body was unequivocally associated with virtue, shaping its interpretation and reception in the aftermath of its performance. They acted as mediators between various traditions – ascetic monasticism, bridal mysticism, folk theory, and choreographic practice. In doing so, they introduced interpretive parameters that considered both the context of the saintly act and the gaze of the spectator. Their aim was to shield the saints from accusations of complacency and to affirm that their suffering was a genuine imitation of Christ, bringing them closer to him. Ultimately, however, it remained the responsibility of the spectator and reader to interpret the scene. The theologian could only offer signs, embedded in the saint's physical actions and sacred performance, framed within a theological and literary context⁷. These signs were meant to persuade the audience to invoke the saint's powers, emulate their virtuous conduct, and attain mystical-theological insight.

At the margins of mystical culture, the suffering body was a ubiquitous presence – accessible to all, requiring little theological or conceptual effort to interpret. Its primary function was to instill fear and prompt

6. Robert Mills describes the saint's body as a "body of contradictory discourses". He argues that: "Rather, saints functioned in the Middle Ages as heterogeneous figures, incorporating a body of contradictory discourses in which the lines between object-hood and subject-hood were often blurred". They were also challenging commonly held stereotypes. See MILLS, *Suspended Animation*, pp. 122-123.

7. The holy body that suffers is a canvas that needs to "prove" its holy status through miraculous suffering, Elliott argues. Concrete evidence of sanctity was necessary; the body had to carry signs of God's presence. She writes: "[...] apprehension of divine presence of the spiritual senses was often registered in their corporeal counterparts". These bodies were also represented in art, but, here too, no unity or fixed interpretation of divinity can be found. See ELLIOTT, *Bride of Christ*, pp. 122-123; 181.

virtuous behavior among onlookers. The body of the saint, however, was far more complex. It was the hagiographer's task to interpret and present this body in such a way that it would be recognized as holy. This required careful mediation between various parameters – doctrinal, cultural, and performative – to ensure that the saint's suffering was perceived as sacred rather than pathological or theatrical. I refer to this process as hagiographic mediation. The following section will explore the different aspects that hagiographers had to consider in order to frame the painful performance as authentically saintly.

This act turns to the mystical culture of the diocese of Liège, with particular attention to *exempla* and hagiographies. Two guiding concepts structure the analysis: admiration and mediation. The focus shifts to the perspective of the spectator and the reader – those who seek to avoid suffering and therefore venerate the saint through the interpretive mediation of the confessor and the hagiographer. The external reality of pain was deeply embedded in popular culture and rested on simple theological assumptions accessible to the broader population. These beliefs were cultivated through sermons, the performances of living saints, and the retelling of their lives. Pain was often understood as a price one could pay to avoid evil and attain salvation. Temporal suffering, when properly framed, promised eternal beatitude under the guidance of Christ, his living saints, and their hagiographers. Both the traditional view of pain as a transactional offering and its conceptualization as an external force – manifested in demons or sanctified bodies – corresponded with the mystical literacy of the audience. These narrative structures helped ensure that even the simplest insights could be remembered and internalized.

While this act focuses on the periphery of mystical culture, popular conceptions of pain also resonate in the writings of Hadewijch and Ruusbroec. Here, their works will serve primarily as reference points; their mystical teachings will be examined in more detail later. The emphasis lies on external and observable phenomena that helped distinguish the suffering body of the saint as a symbol of virtue. These include experiences of social exile and public derision, through which the saint's body reenacts Christ's persecution and sentencing by humanity. Such sacred and sensational events surrounding the saints' exuberant suffering were meant to elicit communal veneration and, in doing so, protect the community from pain.

IV

THE FIGHT AGAINST PAIN

1. *Demonic Bodies and Hellish Pain*

This chapter opens at the margins of Liège's mystical tradition, within the realm of popular devotional culture shaped by the mystically illiterate. Folk theologies and storytelling traditions played a formative role in this environment, with roots that reach back to Germanic mythologies and legends. These traditions are essential for understanding the imagery found in *exempla* and hagiographies. Echoes of these motifs also appear in Thomas of Cantimpré's *Biënboec*, a text that skillfully merges Christian doctrine with popular imagery and narrative forms. His project contributed to the ongoing Christianization of pagan cults, rites, and tales – elements that endured and resurfaced throughout the Christian High Middle Ages. In his *exempla*, Thomas drew upon heathen and folkloric foundations, crafting characters that reflect pagan gods, reimagined through Christian iconography. Their sinful and destructive traits were embodied by demons, destined to be vanquished by the true Christian God, while their virtues were reattributed to Christ and his saints, who came to represent goodness and righteousness¹.

The cosmic battle between good and evil – present in both pagan and Christian narratives – revolves around the human body, which finds itself on the front lines. It is wounded and tormented by the devil's forces, and healed by the virtuous powers of Christ and his saints. Although divine figures such as Mary, Christ, and the saints play prominent roles in these *exempla*, it is the fear of evil, embodied by the devil, that drives the genre and remains its dominant motif. In the medieval imagination, fear of the devil and his consorts far outweighed love for Mary and Christ. This fear – directed at threats to both body and soul – formed the fertile ground from which more complex narrative theologies could grow. At the heart of these stories lies a visceral fear, nourished by a deep aversion to pain.

These narrative theologies were shaped by preachers and writers such as Thomas, who cultivated fear and aversion to pain, and offered Christian

1. See *Het Biënboec*, ed. VAN DER VET, pp. 67-68.

theology and moral instruction as remedies. Pain – and especially the fear of pain – was personified in the figure of the devil and his demons, who thus became the mouthpiece for theology. Drawing on established narrative structures and motifs, the devil emerged as a symbol of evil and suffering, yet remained subject to divine authority. In these accounts, he operated under God's will, fulfilling a divinely assigned purpose². He was not entirely evil, echoing the ambivalent nature of the pagan gods who inspired him. These gods behaved like humans, neither wholly virtuous nor entirely corrupt. Similarly, the devil was sometimes portrayed as outraged by human wrongdoing, acting as an agent of divine justice by punishing sin. His role varied across stories: he tested faith, inflicted punishment, and provoked ethical reflection. Pain, in this framework, could be understood as either a trial or a consequence of sin. In both cases, the believer was called to respond with moral clarity – choosing virtue and embracing penance³.

If the decision to live a virtuous life and perform penance came too late, the believer faced the prospect of temporary or eternal suffering. While the devil and his consorts could inflict only minimal pain on earth, they were believed to possess full authority to torment souls in their own domains: purgatory and hell. These realms were imagined as spaces of unbounded pain, where every conceivable form of torture could be enacted. The concept of purgatory and hell as zones of intensified suffering was developed by various literary circles that gained prominence in the thirteenth century, including those associated with the University of Paris and the preaching tradition. The imagery of these places was fed with familiar, everyday experiences of pain, which were then disproportionately magnified and projected onto the afterlife. In doing so, theologians and preachers sought to make the punishments of purgatory and hell vividly tangible for the faithful – encouraging them to make morally sound choices in the present⁴.

2. According to Axters, the devil played the leading role in folk devotion well into the fourteenth century. He points to sermons and courtly love literature, as well as the *exempla*, in which the character of the devil is unexpectedly complex. The devil's importance changes with each story and genre. See AXTERS, *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid*, 1, pp. 421-423.

3. See *Het Biënboec*, ed. VAN DER VET, pp. 159; 167-168.

4. Theologians agreed that the pains of purgatory were equal to those of hell, but assumed that the torments of hell were eternal, while those of purgatory temporary. For an in-depth account of this debate, see MOWBRAY, *Pain and Suffering*, pp. 159-163. Anneke Mulder-Bakker has stressed that women played an important part in the transmission and creation of the eschatological imagination thanks to their social role as storytellers. See A.B. MULDER-BAKKER, *The Metamorphosis of Women: Transmission of Knowledge and the Problem of Gender*, in STAFFORD – MULDER-BAKKER (eds.), *Gendering the Middle Ages*, 112-134.

The saints of the diocese of Liège played a pivotal role in shaping the theological and imaginative discourse surrounding purgatory and its associated cruelties – an essential dimension of medieval pain language. The evolving imagery of purgatorial suffering emerged from a dynamic exchange between saints, confessors, and hagiographers, each contributing layers of meaning drawn from their own socio-cultural contexts. A compelling example of this process can be found in the *The Supplement to James of Vitry's Life of Mary of Oignies* by Thomas of Cantimpré, particularly in a passage where the saint engages in conversation with a merchant⁵:

A conversation arose between them about the fire of purgatory. She undertook to explain what one should think on the subject: "It is certainly fitting and right that the Lord has prepared a fire for the cleansing of souls which have not been purified in the world by penance, so that, because no evil deed passes without being punished, the souls of penitents may be temporally cleansed according to their deeds by this admittedly most severe punishment so that, without spot or wrinkle (Ephesians 5. 27), they may pass to those eternal abodes with the saints. Then the man said to her, "Is that fire as severe as it is said to be?" She replied, "it is incomparably more severe. I tell you that purgatorial fire is as much more severe than our material fire as our material fire is more severe than imaginary fire painted on a wall"⁶.

In this vivid exchange, Mary draws on theological tradition and her own rhetorical and spiritual insight to instill a fear of pain that motivates moral reform⁷. Her words are not merely descriptive; they are performative, designed to move both her interlocutor and the reader toward a virtuous life. The vision that follows confirms her success: the merchant is assured that his upright conduct and earthly suffering have earned him a place in heaven, bypassing purgatory altogether. The conversation underscores a central theme in mystical-theological storytelling: earthly pain, when endured patiently and virtuously, is trivial compared to the torments of purgatory and hell – and can ultimately be redemptive.

5. John Coakley dedicated an entire chapter of his book to the interactions between James of Vitry and Mary of Oignies. Mary's *vita* is a memoir of their relationship and offers the possibility to study James as Mary's partner in conversation. Coakley seeks to explore the possible balance and interaction between informal and institutional powers and accordingly treats Mary's gift as occupying a sphere of its own, clearly separate from the authority of clerics. See COAKLEY, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power*, pp. 68-71.

6. *Supplement*, p. 143.

7. This imagery goes back to a fragment of Pseudo-Augustine, which states that hell-fire is to earthly fire as physical flames are to those painted in a fresco. The fresco pales in the face of real fire and so the fires of hell are much more intense than those on earth, Cohen argues. See COHEN, *The Modulated Scream*, p. 194 (see also the remark in note 117, p. 310 with reference to *De vera et falsa penitentia*, PL 40, 1127).

This theological-narrative strategy – designed to promote ethical behavior through affective engagement, aversion to pain, and a straightforward notion of pain exchange – is not limited to *exempla* and hagiography. It also appears in mystical texts, including those of John of Ruusbroec. These folkloric elements, often overlooked by scholars focused on Ruusbroec's theological innovations and sophisticated mystical teachings, reveal his attentiveness to a broader audience. The concept of mystical culture makes it possible to interpret these passages alongside his more intellectually demanding mystical-theological reflections. A clear example is found in *The Christian Faith*, where Ruusbroec explicitly refers to an *exemplum* that echoes the same moral logic as the conversation between Mary of Oignies and the merchant discussed earlier:

There were three gluttonous monks over there by the Rhine and they always ate outside the monastery because they wanted special food. Two of them died suddenly and unexpectedly. One suffocated, the other drowned while bathing. The one of the dead came back and showed himself to the third companion, who was still alive, and told him that he was damned. And the monk who was still alive asked him if he was in great pain. And he lifted his hand and let a drop of sweat fall on a tin or metal candlestick that stood there. And it melted in one moment like tallow or wax in a glowing oven. And the stench became so great that the monks had to abandon the monastery for three days. And the monk who had seen this left the monastery and became a Franciscan. And the man who told me the story had been a monk there too, and he had become a Dominican⁸.

Like Thomas, Ruusbroec adopted the dialogical form, presenting a conversation between a living monk and a deceased companion. The *exemplum* he employed plays with the instinctive human aversion to pain, evoked through the imagery of scorching heat and the repulsive stench of hell. This foul odor stands in stark contrast to the sweetness associated with heaven, intensifying the visceral reaction that the preacher – or author – aims to elicit from his audience.

Ruusbroec was aware of the often sensational and vulgar characteristics of the *exempla*. Thus he refused to include in his own text another *exemplum* he had read elsewhere. The untold *exemplum* (which Ruusbroec commented on without recounting in full) repeats the same argument as the first, with the same message – convert before you die – although Ruusbroec expanded the theological reflection by introducing a punishment tailored to the specific sin. Pain is linked to the part of the body involved in the transgression, implicitly the genitals, as the story concerns a violation of the vow of chastity. In this framework, the devil acts

8. RUUSBROEC, *Faith*, p. 277.

as the executor of divine justice. Ruusbroec wrote: "For the powerful hand of divine justice takes revenge in the fire of hell"⁹. The devil and hellish pain are the price paid for a sinful life, according to Ruusbroec, which is why he counseled his readers to do the following:

And therefore I say to all of you who are still in the time of grace that you should choose the company you prefer and want to live in and die with. And if the glory of God cannot attract you, at least let the pains for hell scare you so that you leave your sins behind and seize on virtue¹⁰.

In *The Seven Enclosures*, Ruusbroec sought to convey his insights on didactic and mystagogical knowledge transfer to sister Margriet, a close acquaintance and frequent correspondent. One illustrative passage centers on the parlor grill, the physical barrier through which mystically endowed nuns communicated with lay visitors. This setting serves as a potent metaphor for the interaction between two distinct mystical communities: the broader devotional culture and the more cloistered world of the Cistercian monastery. The mystical teachers at the heart of this culture recognized their responsibility to translate foundational teachings into language accessible to outsiders. The parlor grill thus became a site of interpretive mediation – an exercise in translation shaped by the same pain language and eschatological imagery found in Thomas' *exempla* and hagiographies.

Ruusbroec encouraged Margriet to console the sick by invoking the suffering of Christ and the martyrs, who endured their afflictions with patience and fortitude. If the sick could emulate this virtuous disposition, they would be rewarded with eternal life in heaven. Should Margriet herself fall ill, Ruusbroec advised her to thank God and refrain from lamenting her pain or the perceived betrayal of loved ones. In this passage, he reaffirms the traditional theological link between patient suffering and divine reward. Through Margriet's voice at the parlor grill, Ruusbroec reached out to the ordinary believer¹¹.

Ruusbroec emphasized that promising heavenly reward for virtuous conduct should be complemented by amplifying the fear of hell to deter sinful behavior. This dual approach formed the basis of his advice to sister Margriet. The sisters were instructed to offer guidance only under strict conditions: the conversation had to concern spiritual matters, and the listeners had to be receptive, without being offended or overwhelmed by overly simplistic formulas. In this context, Ruusbroec provided Margriet

9. *Ibid.*, p. 278.

10. *Ibid.*

11. RUUSBROEC, *Enclosures*, pp. 521-522.

with a set of rhetorical strategies tailored to these spiritual consultations. Ruusbroec wrote the following to Margriet:

If they also desire to hear some good (word) from you for their profit, then criticize sin for them as best you can and praise virtue and justice for them. Threaten with hell and console with God's mercy. Point out the harshness and horror of devils and of hellish pains, the glory and joy of the angels and saints with God in eternal beatitude. Thus should you address them, and with good examples fitting to these words; thus they are chided, instructed, frightened and consoled in all things necessary for them¹².

These instructions were designed to guide believers toward a virtuous life, without overwhelming them with excessive demands or complex theological reasoning. For Ruusbroec, such moral conduct is an essential part of the mystical journey – one that readers of mystical texts must not overlook. Yet he also emphasized that the mystical path extends beyond the promise of heavenly reward. God's presence, according to Ruusbroec, can be experienced in this life as well. Fear of punishment and avoidance of sin are not sufficient; true spiritual growth requires a deeper transformation.

In *The Realm of Lovers*, Ruusbroec refers to fearful individuals as slavish servants – “un-free servants” – who serve God not out of love, but in expectation of reward. Their virtue is motivated solely by fear of eternal pain. Ruusbroec calls them mercenaries, not yet liberated in their love for God, driven more by dread than devotion¹³. In *Seven Rungs in the Ladder of Spiritual Love*, Ruusbroec observes that these individuals fear what threatens their own well-being: illness, death, divine judgment, purgatory, and hell. Their love for God is uncertain, overshadowed by self-concern. Positioned on the lowest rung of the mystical ladder, they remain at the margins of mystical culture, worshipping themselves rather than God. They fear the devil more than they love Christ. Although the terror of pain may prompt conversion, it is not enough for genuine spiritual growth. The self-protective believer ultimately obstructs mystical transformation¹⁴. The vast majority of the public feels no need for transformation and is at peace with following the rules that keep pain external.

2. *Warrior Saints*

In popular culture, the cosmic struggle between good and evil – and the battle for human souls – was embodied by figures whose intercessory

12. *Ibid.*, p. 525.

13. RUUSBROEC, *Realm*, pp. 90-91.

14. RUUSBROEC, *Rungs*, pp. 612-614.

presence was believed to have tangible influence and to be spiritually effective. Christ and his saints were venerated as safeguards against the forces of evil, which sought to seduce, harm, and condemn humans to eternal suffering in hell. Through their imitation of Christ's redemptive ordeals, the saints were empowered to confront and repel these forces. Yet earthly pain remained inescapable. Devils could torment even the most virtuous souls, attempting to lead them astray. According to the *vitae* and *exempla*, saints bore the pain of their communities and actively fought the demons of suffering. Virtues formed their symbolic armor, as richly described in the *vita* of Ida of Nivelles. The saint and "warrior-maiden", whose life was recorded by Goswin of Bossut, fought a devil who tormented her in many terrifying and beastly forms:

Note that the demon appeared often to this warrior-maid of ours, now in the form of a monkey, now of a dog, and in many other shapes besides; but he never managed to inflict any hurt. And little wonder, for the Lord had set Ida atop the citadel of the virtues and had equipped her with a spiritual armour, enabling her to *tread on serpents and scorpions and all the power of that* (Luke 10.19) perdition-bound apostate and murderer (John 8.44)! In fact, Ida always had the demon as fully subject and obedient to herself as any disciple to a master¹⁵.

Ida's spiritual armor was inseparable from her role as a leader in the pursuit of righteousness. Clad in the virtues, she was able to withstand every assault from the demons of pain and expel them from her community. Her faithful imitation of Christ rendered her impervious to their attacks; she stripped the devils of their power and brought them under her command. The *vita* portrays Ida as a potent mediator whose veneration could shield the community from misfortune. Yet this protection depended on collective moral effort: only through shared resistance to sin could the community keep pain at bay. The devil, whose task was to test and punish, did everything in his power to sabotage the saints and lure people into evil. A clear example can be found in the *vita* of Juliana of Mont Cornillon:

Because Juliana was continually rescuing souls from the power of the evil spirit and restoring them to Christ, she provoked the devil's bitter wrath and envy against her. How the evil one raged, ground his teeth, and languished when he saw how many souls, whom he thought he had swallowed up in the storms of temptation or irremediably cast down by the weight of sins, were recalled as if from the mouth of hell by the efficacy of her prayers! [...] He raged with utmost malice against her, no sleep, appears to her in terrible forms, striking her to make her suffer as much punishment as he

15. *Ida of Nivelles*, p. 50.

could, but the more he attacked her the more gladly she strove to deliver souls from his meshes¹⁶.

Ida and Juliana endured the devil's assaults with unwavering patience. By steadfastly imitating Christ and his suffering, they outmaneuvered the devil and rendered his attacks powerless. Even clothed in the armor of virtue, the saints were not exempt from pain – on the contrary, their trials formed a vital link between Christlike endurance, the rejection of evil, and the long-standing tradition of martyrdom. For some saints, the quest for Christ unfolded entirely within a world saturated by torment. These afflictions were not always inflicted by demons alone; at times, they came from within the saints' own communities or from those closest to them – a theme that will be explored further below.

In the *vita* of Christina Mirabilis, the saint's suffering was not limited to demonic attacks or cruelty from others. Her body also reacted to the lingering traces of sin left behind by wrongdoers. She learned to avoid food offered by those who lived immorally, as consuming it caused her intense torment. This "unjust plunder" provoked visceral cries: "O Christ! What are you doing with me? Why do you torment me in this way?" And striking her own body, she exclaimed: "O Miserable soul! What do you want? Why do you desire these foul things? Why do you eat this filth?"¹⁷ Christina's sanctity was marked by an extreme sensitivity to sin and its effects. Her pain was not a reflection of Christlike imitation, but a reaction to the presence of sin that demanded purification.

Not every virtuous woman succeeded in resisting evil. Pain and demonic affliction could strike anyone – even the most esteemed members of the community. Thomas recounts a story in Lutgard's *vita* involving two Cistercian nuns who were tormented by demons that incited them to commit serious sins. Lutgard, however, managed to overcome these forces and expel them from the afflicted women. The hagiographer uses this episode to distinguish Lutgard from other virtuous figures and to emphasize her hidden divinity. He also raises a theological question: why is the devil granted such power¹⁸? He writes:

Certainly it is by a wondrous, a most wondrous, permission of the Saviour and Redeemer that Satan should receive power over a pure body, even a virginal body – power that it not only exercised for the pollution of the flesh, but can even proceed to the corruption of the mind and the detriment of the soul¹⁹.

16. *Juliana of Mont Cornillon*, p. 67.

17. *Christina the Astonishing*, p. 141.

18. *Lutgard of Aywières*, p. 248.

19. *Ibid.*

The devil and his demons operate under divine permission. Thomas adheres to the Augustinian view that evil is a perversion of the good, not a substance in itself. Why God permits evil to exist remains an unresolved mystery for the hagiographer. Yet Lutgard appears uniquely equipped to navigate this theological paradox and confront evil directly. Friar Bernard recounts that Lutgard did not fear the demons – in fact, it was they who feared her. As Thomas writes: “But according to the Lord’s promise, she would powerfully crush his head – that is, the first stage of his temptations – with the foot of the virtues”²⁰. Ordinary believers lived in fear of the devil and his demons, lacking the spiritual armor that protected the saints. Still, they were urged to emulate the virtues of their spiritual heroes – especially their patience in suffering – and to fortify their resistance against evil. When demonic assaults proved too overwhelming, they could turn to the saints they revered for protection and intercession.

Within this theological framework, every experience of pain can be theologically valorized – because Christ permits it. Pain must not serve any purpose other than to forge a connection between Christ and the believer, whether through direct imitation of his suffering or by enduring the indirect torments inflicted by pain demons. Saints, too, are bound by this logic: they may only intervene by aligning themselves with Christ, never by acting on their own authority. According to Ruusbroec, this is precisely where the greatest danger lies. Saints must not presume themselves superior to Christ, nor pursue pain and divinity for personal glorification.

The veneration of saints cannot be allowed to get out of hand, according to Ruusbroec. The saint walks a fine line between charity and self-love. In *The Spiritual Espousals*, Ruusbroec writes: “And some lead a hard life in great works of penance in order to be known and reputed to be of great holiness and also to merit a great reward”²¹. These “saints”, Ruusbroec warns, resemble merchants – trading their penance for personal gain rather than offering it for the greater glory of God. Through bodily asceticism, they seek heavenly reward and public recognition. But

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 251-252.

21. RUUSBROEC, *Espousals*, p. 224. Ruusbroec made a similar point in his *Tabernacle*, p. 445: “But when suffering and affliction come upon us from without or within, in whatever way, we are to be meek and patient and submissive to God in all things. And thus we offer to God the female of our patience, which sometimes merits more and is worth more to God than the drive to action. But practicing each in its time is a life of justice. Nevertheless you shall know that activity and passivity, and all that we can do, can make us neither holy nor saved, unless we are united to the Holy Church and offer to God, at common expense, a lamb which is from us all”.

in pursuing divine status, they risk losing sight of their true purpose. The devil exploits this vulnerability, not only by inflicting harm but by seducing the saint along the perilous edge between holiness and vanity. As Ruusbroec writes: “For sometimes the things which they desire happen to them by means of the fiend; and then they attribute it to their holiness, and it seems to them that they are worthy of it all”²². When the saint absorbs this pain for his or her personal gain (honor, fame, or glorification in heaven), then he or she counteracts the actual *caritas* and divine works that would benefit the souls of the saints and their communities. Only through genuine humility can the saint maintain this demanding balancing act. Through arrogance, the saint can still lose the battle against evil and expose his or her own soul to the eternal pain of hell²³.

Ordinary believers, too, could lose the battle if fear overtook them – especially when they placed more trust in the miraculous powers of saints, sacred objects, and rituals than in the salvation offered by Christ and his Church. Above all, they sought protection from the pain inflicted by demons and devils. Over time, the theological construction of the devil began to take on a life of its own within popular culture, slipping beyond the control of theologians. The widespread fear of pain and catastrophe, fueled by the image of the devil, could not be fully contained by the strictly Christian practices promoted by mystical theologians. In response, people turned to incantations and fervent prayers to ward off the evil and doom that haunted them. As Axters observes, these folk devotional practices existed outside the Catholic mainstream and were regarded as unhealthy outgrowths. Theologians’ reluctance to endorse them stemmed from a loss of authority over the figure of the devil – who, though still subject to divine will, was no longer mediated through saints and theologians. Laypeople, acting independently, sought to repel the devil through rites of evil-foreswearing rooted in pagan traditions and through incantations, attempting to protect themselves without undergoing the moral conversion and virtuous lifestyle required for salvation²⁴.

The feeling of fear that was cultivated in *exempla, vitae* and in some mystical treatises, originating in the natural aversion to suffering, was the driving force behind the popular conceptualization, interpretation, and valorization of pain. This fear of pain was used to encourage virtuous behavior, the endurance of suffering and trials, and – if this proved insufficient – the adoration of saints who could combat the pain demons. This

22. RUUSBROEC, *Espousals*, p. 224.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 224-225.

24. See AXTERS, *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid*, 2, pp. 421-423.

is how these personifications of pain were kept outside the community, banned to their own kingdom: purgatory and hell.

The intricate narrative structures found in the *vitae* reveal a complex and often ambiguous understanding of pain – its meaning, its source, and its spiritual value. Pain may be inflicted directly by the devil or arise indirectly from the consequences of sin. In either case, it must be endured with patience, guided by the example of Christ and a commitment to righteous living. Pain becomes a trial for the soul, a test of faith. Yet saints often go beyond passive endurance and appear to actively seek pain, as the following section will demonstrate. Crucially, pain must always remain tethered to the figure of Christ; it cannot become an end in itself. Instead, pain functions as a narrative device to expose the presence of evil that must be resisted. It marks the places where the Body of Christ – the Christian community – is vulnerable to illness and corruption. These stories call for conversion and virtuous action, which alone can heal this spiritual sickness. In this symbolic framework, saints are portrayed as healers, and heaven – defined by the eternal absence of pain – stands as the ultimate promise of a healthy Christian life.

SAINTLY BODIES AND TRANSGRESSIVE PAIN

While all Christians were expected to suffer patiently, not all did so equally or by choice. Many believers turned to saints – often portrayed and venerated as “warrior-maidens” – to defend them against pain and the forces of evil. Yet this is only the beginning of the story of pain. More often, saintly bodies were perceived as living Veronicas, bearing visible signs of Christ’s redemptive suffering. These bodies did not merely recount the battle against evil; they embodied the struggle for salvation.

In what follows, I examine how hagiographers transformed these saintly bodies into icons of Christ, constructing a theology of pain through the depiction of bodily harm as sacred performance. These writers both protected and unveiled the vulnerable bodies of their saints, guiding the reader in interpreting their signs by casting them as part of the audience. The hagiographer restages the saint’s suffering for the reader to witness and comprehend. I read the *vita* as a carefully directed *mise-en-scène*, inspired by an original saintly performance that the author seeks to remember and reanimate – while playing with the fleeting nature of the suffering body, which appears and disappears before the reader’s eyes.

The saint’s body functioned as a canvas upon which ordinary people could read the story of salvation. In the Late Middle Ages, theology was not only taught through texts and sermons – it was also interpreted and inscribed upon holy bodies. These bodies stood at the crossroads of multiple discourses: those of learned theologians, mystical communities, and lay devotional movements. All were preoccupied with the imitation of the human Christ, the practice of penitence, the fear of divine judgment, and the hope for future reward. In the thirteenth-century diocese of Liège, mystical theologians – both writers and performers – shaped and refined this theological discourse. The saint’s body occupied a privileged position in this process, serving as a communicative medium through which mystical theology could be transmitted to a broad audience, including those who were mystically illiterate.

The saint’s body was an open book in which theology was enacted. It conveyed redemptive pain through physical injury, yet the meaning of that pain was never fixed. Wounds could be interpreted in multiple ways,

depending on various parameters – most notably the setting in which the saint's suffering was staged and the audience witnessing it. To ensure that the wounded body was understood as a reflection of Christ's suffering, a carefully constructed interpretive framework had to be developed. This framework emerged from the interplay between the visible holy body and the hagiographer's narrative. Body and word existed in constant dialectical tension. The meaning of the wounded body was shaped by discourse, environment, and spectatorship, while the body itself demanded ever-new interpretations. The hagiographer served as a mediator – between the saint and the reader, between the medium of performance and the medium of text. The reader relied on the hagiographer's documentation and interpretation, trusting him to weave together tradition and creativity. With the reader in mind, the hagiographer had to craft a nuanced portrait, balancing layers of meaning while remaining acutely aware of the performative dimension of the saint's suffering body.

The wounded body at the center of this section can, in my view, be interpreted through two key focal points: asceticism and penitence, and transformation and receptivity to the divine. These two dimensions reinforce a deepening, circular movement through which both the saint and the spectator may grow toward a mystical union with God and Christ. They also reflect an eschatological tension: ascetic bodily practices prepare the soul for future unity with God, while bodily transformation allows for moments of divine encounter in the present.

Christ remains the central figure in this dynamic. The saint's body becomes Christoform – first through purgation, then through intimate contact with the divine. This section will concentrate primarily on penance, asceticism, and the literal reading of the body as Christoform, since these aspects are visibly inscribed on the body and do not require extensive mystical or theological exposition. There is a visceral immediacy to the suffering body explored here. The hagiographer's mediation appears minimal, and the interpretive demands placed on the reader are less rigorous than those found in more discursive mystical texts.

This chapter centers on the role of hagiographic mediation and the guidance offered by confessors and theologians. They were responsible for ensuring that the saints' transgressive actions – particularly their displays of pain – moved and captivated audiences without straying beyond the bounds of orthodoxy. I will examine both the portrayal and interpretation of excessive and moderate pain, while also challenging rigid distinctions between male and female performers, and between learned and illiterate ones. Rather than focusing solely on the saints themselves, I shift attention to the writers, their audiences, and the degree

of mystical literacy required to interpret saintly pain as meaningful and sacred performance.

1. *Lay Bodies and Blood Stains*

While ordinary laypeople were encouraged to live virtuously and endure pain with patience, saints took these ideals to their extremes. As Kieckhefer has argued, it was precisely through extreme behavior and voluntary suffering that saints distinguished themselves from regular believers, marking their unique role as mediators between heaven and earth. Saints did not merely endure pain – they actively sought it. Physical suffering and acts of self-mutilation were often employed as effective means to achieve spiritual goals. Unlike ordinary people, who avoided pain and only endured it when necessary, saints embraced suffering as a way to imitate Christ¹. This radical pursuit of pain as a spiritual discipline was not without risk. It had to be carefully moderated by mystical centers, theologians, and hagiographers, who ensured that such practices remained within the bounds of orthodoxy.

The tension between destabilizing bodily practices and theological authority is explicitly thematized in the lives of lay saints. Their hagiographers staged scenes in which excessive suffering and wounded bodies were put on display. In doing so, they risked portraying behavior that could be interpreted as immodest or prideful – *superbia* – and thus potentially condemnable². First, the lay saints were seen and their pain (mis)-interpreted by spectators. Then, the hagiographer reconstructed the *mise-en-scène*, advocating for the sanctity of the pain performance and guiding the reader – now a second-order onlooker – toward a proper theological interpretation. Yet the wounded body “on stage” remained ambiguous. Its meaning was not self-evident and required careful framing. The transfer of meaning across mediums – body and text – demanded strict regulation and mediation. This was not ordinary suffering; it was theatrical, excessive, and theologically charged.

One of the hagiographic strategies for framing excessive displays of pain was to offer only a restricted glimpse into the saint’s bodily performance. Hagiographers carefully navigated the dialectical tension between

1. See KIECKHEFER, *Unquiet Souls*, pp. 106; 121;151.

2. See KLEINBERG, *Prophets*, pp. 41-42. Simons discusses the transgressive behavior and uncontrolled and immodest movement of the saintly body. See W. SIMONS, *Reading a Saint’s Body: Rapture and Bodily Movement in the vitae of Thirteenth-century Beguines*, in S. KAY – M. RUBIN (eds.), *Framing Medieval Bodies*, Manchester – New York, Manchester University Press, 1994, 10-23, pp. 15-17.

inner and outer, private and public, in order to safeguard the saint's authenticity and orthodoxy.

James of Vitry, for instance, described Mary of Oignies as an *exemplum* – a model of authentic religiosity. Like all *exempla*, she entered the collective imagination as a legendary figure. Her fame was tied to her public performances and her visibility as a public *persona*. Mary led a public life, but this did not mean that her suffering body became public property, exposed to the masses. James was careful to emphasize that Mary's most intimate and mystical experiences of the divine – especially those related to her *imitatio Christi* – remained hidden from public view. He gave the following example:

From the fervour of her spirit and as if inebriated, she began to loathe her flesh when she compared it with the sweetness of the paschal Lamb and she needlessly cut out a large piece of her flesh with a knife which she then buried in the earth from a sense of reticence. She had been so inflamed by an overwhelming fire of love that she had risen above the pain of her wound and, in this ecstasy of mind, she had seen one of the seraphim standing close by her. After she had died, the women who were washing her corpse were amazed when they found the places of the wounds, but those who had known of this event through confession understood what the scars were. Why do those who show amazement of the worms which swarmed from the wounds of Simeon and at the fire with which Antony burnt his feet not astonished at such fortitude in the frail sex of a woman who, wounded by charity and invigorated by the wounds of Christ, neglected the wounds of her own body³?

According to James of Vitry, Mary's act of self-mutilation stemmed from deep reflection on the sinfulness of the body and its corrupt tendencies. At first glance, her cutting of flesh appears to be a radical extension of ascetic tradition, already evident in her frequent and rigorous fasting. Her asceticism evolved from a rejection of worldly goods and comforts to direct bodily harm. These practices were intended to discipline the body in pursuit of Christian virtues such as patience and humility, culminating in transformative pain that lifted her into ecstatic states and removed her from everyday reality. By cutting into her own flesh, Mary rendered her body sacred. Her extreme asceticism placed her body at the service of the spirit, allowing it to become enraptured in divine encounter – symbolized by the appearance of a seraph. Mary's practices went beyond the conventional bodily chastisements known in monastic circles. Although her mystical experiences and asceticism were eventually made visible through her mutilated body, her wounds were only

3. *Mary of Oignies*, p. 60.

discovered after death, when her naked body was exposed to onlookers (and, through James' narrative, to the reader) and were interpreted as stigmata⁴.

Mary's inner reality was hidden from her community and could only be revealed through her confessor and hagiographer, who acted as an extension of her voice. Her clothes, moreover, shrouded the miraculous signs which could cause disbelief, as happened in other cases analyzed below. Mary's disfigured body and its complexity were hidden from the outside world under layers of mediation. The external world got a glimpse of her inner feelings through the hagiographer and her body's unveiling after death. Her spirituality was first made flesh through her self-mutilation and, subsequently, through the hagiographer's words. This allowed outsiders to become familiar with the body's ascetic and mystical abilities that heretofore had only been visible to a select group of insiders behind convent walls.

A comparable interpretation of the wounded body – as a site of performance and revelation of divine presence – can be found in the *vitae* of male saints, particularly those described as “giants of asceticism”⁵. Both lay brothers, Petrus Conversus and Arnulf of Villers, began their ascetic practices early in life, much like many holy women. However, the *vitae* of these male lay brothers place greater emphasis on the theme of conversion than do the lives of their female counterparts. Conversion, along with the penitence it entails, becomes a central motif. A life marked by extreme mortification of the flesh is portrayed not only as a path to atonement, but also as a way to meditate on Christ's suffering and to imitate his torments and those of his martyr⁶. Petrus' *vita* devotes several

4. Arguably these wounds were not truly stigmata, because they were self-inflicted. Carolyn Muessig distinguishes between spontaneous stigmata and self-inflicted wounds (as ascetic practice and imitation of Christ), in light of the paradigm shift following in the wake of Francis of Assisi (in the context of prayer and meditation on the passion) at the end of the thirteenth century. See C.A. MUESSIG, *The Stigmata in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020, p. 59.

5. Axters uses this term to single out certain saints who distinguished themselves through their extreme asceticism, such as Arnulf of Villers (1228) and Godefridus (1201). See AXTERS, *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid*, 1, pp. 184-186. In this section, I place Petrus Conversus alongside Arnulf. *The Holy Life of Petrus* was handed down in a summary in the *Gesta Sanctorum Villariensium* and in a French translation by Jean d'Assignies. Finally, I could also mention Simon of Aulne, although only small fragments of his life have survived. The full text has never been recovered. See ROISIN, *L'hagiographie cistercienne*, pp. 96-98.

6. Petrus expressed his inner feelings of culpability and shame for his sins by resolutely denying himself any gratifying physical experiences and by seeking excessive experiences of pain. Inspired by the stories of martyrs and the Desert Fathers, and remorseful for the sinful behavior with which he had insulted and harmed God, Petrus relentlessly sought

pages to detailed descriptions of all the ascetic practices undertaken by the lay brother. He, too, used conventional methods supplemented with a few creative innovations to force his body into submission. These practices ranged from strict fasting to self-flagellation, rolling himself in brambles and nettles, and chastising himself with sticks and thorns⁷.

Petrus' ascetic practices were anchored in a private, interior space where he meditated on the sins of his youth and brought Christ's passion into the present. He externalized this pain in solitude, deliberately concealing it from his fellow brothers. His suffering was not meant to be seen – it was a secret expression of intimacy with God, one that at times felt deeply mystical. The hagiographer plays on Petrus' name by describing his soul as hidden in the porous stone that is Christ. This pun evokes the theological image of Christ as the foundation and refuge. Petrus hid himself in Christ's wounds while his own body was torn apart, his festering injuries emitting a sickening stench. His brothers, unaware of his inner torment and unable to see his wounded body (which he kept hidden beneath his clothing), eventually confronted him. One brother exclaimed:

What are you doing, my dear brother, when you are alone by yourself? What passion do you experience in secret? Living with you has become painful to us, your company is unbearable, you infect us all with the stench of your body and we are weakened by your horrible contagion; now we cannot tolerate you any longer⁸.

Petrus' hidden ascetic practices had unintended consequences: his fellow brothers also suffered, not through witnessing his pain, but through the unbearable stench it produced. The physical suffering was transferred into olfactory discomfort, prompting the community to consider expelling him. Faced with this rejection, Petrus had no choice but to reveal his secret and expose his mutilated body. He explained to one of the brothers that his actions were acts of penance for past sins. Upon hearing and seeing this – complemented by the overwhelming smell – the brother recognized the miraculous nature of Petrus' suffering. He interpreted the stench and wounds as signs of profound and excessive penance, confirming Petrus' divine status. Through this brother's intercession, the meaning of Petrus' suffering was unveiled – a secret previously known only to the

methods to right his wrong and to express his guilt and shame through his body. *Petrus Conversus*, pp. 329-333.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 329.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 333.

hagiographer and the reader, who had been granted privileged access to Petrus' inner world⁹.

Petrus' bodily practice was driven by guilt and shame over youthful sins, but also by a profound longing for the human Christ. Some of the wounds on his body reflect not only a desire to purge sin, but to reshape his body into a Christoform vessel – one that physically resembled the crucified Christ. This shared suffering forged an intimate bond between Petrus and Christ. His meditation on the passion narrowed his veins and tautened his body, but these psychosomatic effects were insufficient. Petrus went further: he inflicted Christ's signature wounds upon himself. He recreated the side wound using a hot iron, then stretched and fastened a rope through the open gash to keep it permanently exposed – just as Christ's had remained open. This act of self-mutilation was not intended for public display or admiration. It was a private gesture of devotion, performed for his own spiritual relationship with Christ. The wound remained hidden beneath his clothing and could only be accessed through textual mediation. The hagiographer creates a window onto Petrus' wound, which in turn reveals his mystical bond with Christ. The body is theatrically exposed, but only within the private realm, *in secreto*. It is the hagiographer who unveils this hidden scene for the reader, carefully framing Petrus' wounds as signs of ascetic rigor and mystical encounter¹⁰.

A similar tension between revelation and concealment emerges in the account of Petrus inflicting not the side wound, but the stigmata on his hands and feet. In medieval sources, stigmatization could be interpreted both as divine intervention and as an act of self-mutilation. In Petrus' case, the origin of the wounds cannot be directly attributed to Christ. This ambiguity does not exclude divine presence, nor does it negate the miraculous nature of the event. Despite initial hesitation – fearing that such mortification might prove fatal – Petrus pierced his hands and feet with iron nails to fulfill his interpretation of the biblical verse: “Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me” (Matt 10,38). His longing for Christ and fear of spiritual failure outweighed his fear of bodily harm. For this act, the hagiographer tells us, “the soldier” was rewarded by Christ, who accelerated the healing process so that the scars became barely visible¹¹. Once again, it is the hagiographer who grants the reader privileged access to the holy body. He reveals Christ's presence

9. *Ibid.*, p. 333.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 331.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 361-363.

in the faded scars on Petrus' skin. The wounds were self-inflicted, but their healing – and concealment – was the work of Christ.

The *vita* of Ida of Louvain, written at a later date, incorporates elements from several earlier hagiographies¹². Her hagiographer explicitly describes her stigmata as acts of divine intervention: Christ's wounds were imprinted on her hands, feet, and side, and were visible to all. The gash in her side was so deep and painful that the cloth covering it had to be removed, regardless of the agony this caused her. Ida could hardly bear to have her other wounds touched, making treatment nearly impossible. The hagiographer notes that these wounds were observed by hostile individuals, including her own father, who responded with outrage and spoke ill of saints. Each insult intensified her suffering. Because her wounds could not be concealed, Ida endured both physical pain and public scorn without reprieve¹³.

Ida's reaction to the public exposure of her wounds is central to the argument. Fearing that her growing fame might compromise her humility, she prayed for the stigmata to be erased. Christ granted her request and removed the visible scars, but the physical pain persisted and returned whenever she was mocked by the wicked. According to both Christ and the hagiographer, this pain was redemptive, and Ida was called to continue bearing it. The miracle was not the removal of suffering, but its concealment. The pain was rendered invisible and placed under the control of her confessor and hagiographer, who could now mediate its meaning and communicate it under appropriate theological and social conditions. The physical performance thus became textual documentation: the stigmata survived only as words. The hagiographer, aware of the community's skepticism, worked diligently to explain and valorize the injury. This allowed Ida to continue her redemptive suffering without disrupting social norms or compromising her humility¹⁴. Ida's hagiographer writes:

Maybe it surprises them that the stigmata of Christ's ancient wounds should rekindle, after such a long interim, on the limbs of a virgin. Not the lance of the persecutor but only the mildness of God's loyalty, not the sharp cruelty of the crucifier but only the perfection of love caused them to appear. I myself believe that these things do not elicit surprise, but instead deserve the exquisite power of humility and loyalty that I witness in this soul, elevated to the height of perfection¹⁵.

12. Cf. ROISIN, *L'hagiographie cistercienne*, p. 70.

13. *Ida of Louvain*, p. 109.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 109-113.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 111-113.

The *vitae* of these saints reveal a deep-rooted concern with excessive physical suffering as a form of imitation of Christ – whether through stigmata or side wounds – and with the humility that must accompany such suffering to avoid self-complacency. The ascetic practices that support humility are potentially contradicted by the saint's claim to susceptibility and divine intercession in the human body of the saint. Asceticism leads to the transformation of the body, making it Christoform and the vessel to experience the love for God. However, the saint's mystical ambitions cannot be inordinate. As previously discussed in relation to Ruusbroec's critique of vainglory, the confessor and hagiographer play a crucial role in safeguarding the saint's humility. They do so by regulating access to the divine spectacle and by carefully interpreting and explaining mystical passages. Ultimately, the saint's performance is mediated through the *vita* – no other visible traces remain.

In some cases, miraculous wounds are explicitly attributed to divine intervention, often triggered by an excessive longing for God and redemptive suffering. This is exemplified in the *vita* of Lutgard of Aywières. Her desire to suffer for Christ, like the martyr Agnes, led to what Thomas of Cantimpré calls a “martyrdom of desire”. Lutgard's intense yearning had a psychosomatic effect, culminating in a physical transformation that rendered her Christoform. She received a type of side wound:

As she burned with such great longing that she expected to die from desire alone, one of the outer veins opposite her heart burst, and so much blood flowed from it that her tunics and cowl were copiously drenched. She was so weakened by this that she sat down for a little while, and at once Christ appeared to her with a joyful countenance and said, “For the most fervent yearning for martyrdom that you experienced in shedding this blood, you will receive in heaven the same reward for martyrdom that St Agnes earned when she was beheaded for her faith. By your desire you have equaled her martyrdom in blood”¹⁶.

This rupture drenched her tunic in blood – as much blood as spilled from her great example, the Holy Agnes. This blood sacrifice guaranteed her place on par with Agnes' in heaven's hierarchy. In contrast to Petrus, Lutgard's wound did not remain open. The scar did remain with her for the rest of her life, although it was, of course, covered, unlike hand and feet injuries. Her robe was washed by the two nuns who witnessed the scene. The cloth, soaked with her blood, did not become a relic. The nuns

16. *Lutgard of Aywières*, pp. 255-256. The aortic rupture is highly symbolic in this *vita*. Lutgard would, after all, go on to exchange her heart with that of Christ. The location of this rupture is also close to the side wound – the side wound and the heart are connected in this *vita*. Thus, I describe the scar of the rupture as a side wound.

internalized the event, they were witnesses, and had no external markings. Divine intervention was limited with but two nuns as witnesses and, later, the hagiographer. This is how control is established over an excessive and transgressive phenomenon, through hagiographic mediation, constraining the bold scene.

The lay brother Arnulf also sought ways to imitate Christ. As in the cases of Petrus and Lutgard, his suffering is connected to the martyr tradition. In a telling passage, it becomes apparent that Arnulf's suffering body, too, is mediated by textile. An intermedial exchange takes place between physical performance and textile. This passage relates the visit of a monk to Arnulf. The stable keeper, Nicolas, told the man that the lay brother was in his purgatory. This purgatory coincides with the private space of Arnulf's cell, where he subjected his body to "purgatorial beatings". The visiting monk did not enter the space, but only encountered Arnulf when the lay brother had ceased his blows¹⁷. The hagiographer writes:

Arnulf rapidly gathered his tunic around him, put his hooded cloak back on, and came straight out. The monk, noticing how muddied his tunic was with blood, and how the blood still trickled and ran from the freshly flogged body, was so pained at heart that he burst into tears, prompting Arnulf to ask why. The monk replied: "I am pained and touched to the quick to behold such martyrdom! But why, dearest friend, why put yourself to such a death?" To which he offered only the joking reply that it was not himself he was putting to death, but his sins! Yet small wonder, given that the such frequent, sharp afflicting of the flesh so often exempts God's servants from a whole range of occasions for sin¹⁸.

Only Arnulf's blood-soaked tunic was seen by the monk who did not personally witness Arnulf's suffering body. The beating happened in Arnulf's monastic cell. The important difference with Lutgard's aortic rupture is that Arnulf's wounds, while covered by his robes, were self-inflicted on his back through flagellation. His bloody tunic reminded the monk of a martyr's death and terrified him. Through the reenactment of the martyrs' bodily mortification, the lay brother walked a fine line between disciplining the body to eradicate sin, and the actual destruction of the body. The blood-stained robe was ambiguous: a possible transgression might have taken place. The transgression of the boundary between discipline and mortification, and humility and transgression, is problematized, creating an interesting dynamic between the suffering body of the

17. *Arnulf of Villers*, p. 134.

18. *Ibid.*

saint and the witness or reader who is simultaneously fascinated and shocked. The suffering body is both scandalizing and inspiring.

The hagiographer's mediation and the tension between boundaries and transgressions become especially clear in another passage, where Arnulf's self-flagellation is discovered. The scene unfolds in the private space of Arnulf's monastic cell, where he routinely whipped himself. This intimate act was witnessed by a monk standing outside the cell – an observer whose gaze is mirrored by the reader's own. The hagiographer writes: "Another time he was in his cell for his customary whipping, unaware of a man standing at the wall outside and taking stock of his manner and measure of beating himself. This man tallied the number of strokes Arnulf gave himself: nineteen hundred of them, before ever he stopped"¹⁹! Arnulf's inner bond with Christ is made tangible through this act of self-mortification, and the monk's witnessing of it reinforces its spiritual significance. The monk, counting the number of consecutive blows Arnulf inflicted on his own body, was bewildered and moved.

He observed that most people seek comfort and that only soldiers are this antagonistic to the body – the body of the enemy. The performance he had just witnessed testified to a hatred of the flesh beyond his comprehension. He admonished Arnulf to take pity on his poor body, as no one can live without one, and to act with more moderation and discretion in the future. "Not at all", Arnulf answered the monk (and the reader), "no such persuasion shall take effect! The foe for me is this flesh of mine, a foe the more formidable for being closer at hand! Beast of burden, indeed it is, needing to be jabbed with spikes and shoved, or it will laze in its lewdness and dreary me to the whirlpool of death. And do I intend to keep stirring up against it wars ever new, wars ever fresh!"²⁰.

The hagiographer gives Arnulf the sobriquet "soldier of God". Arnulf battled the sinful flesh with inventive torture instruments that disconcerted and horrified many. Witnesses to his martyrdom attested that Arnulf's practice of suffering outstripped that of the "martyrs of old". The hagiographer states that the martyrs of antiquity were slain at the hands of the enemy. The lay brother, in contrast, mercilessly dispensed the blows himself. The saint *wanted* to suffer. Arnulf's pain experiences exceeded the known pain tradition without being a direct imitation of Christ's suffering, as in the cases of Petrus, Lutgard and Ida. The transgression takes place at the level of the ascetic tradition, less at the level of the divine presence in the body. This transgression

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, p. 135.

of traditional frames of reference is meant to intrigue and disconcert the reader.

The *vita* continuously plays with confirming and overstepping of the boundary between traditional asceticism and unbound mortification of the flesh. The lay brother performed the classic ideals of asceticism but transgressed their limits and became immoderate. The educated monks in the *vitae* give voice to the classic theology that seeks to limit excessive pain and demands moderation. Arnulf is presented as both a humble, obedient brother and as a provocative saint. His excessive suffering serves as a confirmation of his social role as a saint and new martyr, set apart from society. By problematizing the breaking of social conventions, the hagiographer clearly highlights Arnulf's status as one of the elect. Yet this emphasis needs to be balanced by portraying the saint as obedient at the same time. He must show remorse for his excessive and transgressive actions, which are mentioned numerous times in the *vita*, despite the criticism these deeds elicit from learned monks²¹. The next fragment clarifies this thought:

Then one day some bodily weakness made him swoon and he collapsed and slumped to the ground unconscious. A brother who saw it happen, feared that he must have imposed some unusual affliction on his body; and so, shortly after Arnulf's return to his senses he privately told him: "Brother Arnulf, beware of overstepping the common practices of the Order and taking upon yourself without permission to singularity of a more rugged, more austere life. It could do great damage to your body!" The remark left him inwardly ashamed of himself and so he approached the monk who was his confessor and confessed to him having worn those cords without permission. The confessor upbraided him and enjoined a penance, forbidding him ever again to dare attempt the likes of it without permission²².

Arnulf's regret and shame deepened his commitment to penitence. His transgressions were met with both punishment and encouragement. The hagiographer frequently refers to these acts, revealing a fascination with their extremity. The monks serve as a theological counterbalance, reminding the reader that Arnulf's behavior should evoke horror and awe – not imitation. Fearing that Arnulf might collapse under the weight of his self-imposed tortures, they forbade him from continuing. This led Arnulf to devise creative alternatives to reexperience physical chastisement. His excessive suffering is granted a place in the *vita* because it conveys a theological truth: the suffering earthly body will be transformed. The offering of one's own flesh – "skin for skin" (Job 2,4) – through mortification

21. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 132.

and perforation (such as wearing hedgehog skins), becomes a pathway to the promised body: “the skin of this wretched flesh in exchange for the glorious skin of the Resurrection”²³.

The perforated skin is a vivid image that amplifies the dynamic between the internal and the external – the skin works as a membrane and a veil. The spectator and reader get a glimpse of Arnulf’s inner world through the externally wounded body, even though it’s often concealed. The hagiographer writes that God “dwells within the flowery cell of his heart” (Song 1,15), but limits the access to the mystical experiences that take place there. The hagiographer not only describes the external experience, but offers insights into the motivation of the ascetic practice. This practice should primarily be linked with penance, as discussed earlier, and touches upon other themes mentioned above, such as the fear of the Last Judgment and the pains of hell, and the visualization of Christ’s suffering. These elements encouraged the lay brother to practice and expand his ascetic practices. They represent both his terror of God (Ps 18,10) and his passionate love for Christ, a love that feels very mystical and is mentioned only sporadically in the *vita*. Yet this mystical love is powerfully articulated: “Surely it was love: a love fervent to the point of presuming even the likes of this, a love welling up from the depths of your heart, a love frothing through the wounds of your flesh”²⁴.

The *vitae* of male and female saints are not solely accounts of enduring pain or literal imitation of Christ’s suffering. Like skin, they function as a membrane between the external and the internal²⁵. These lives reveal, alongside exuberant pain performances, a mystical reality made visible through wounds. *Vitae* do not document physical suffering unequivocally, I argue they represent a nuanced and complex dialogue between literate clerics and lay performers. Hagiographers appropriated the motif of excessive pain not only to highlight the saints’ transgressive divinity but also to captivate their audiences. These excessive tableaux fascinated not just ordinary people but also literate monks. Such fascination was only possible through the hagiographer’s strict control over the orthodoxy of mystical theology. They carefully protected and unveiled the saints’

23. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

25. Mills states that: “Skin is the limit of the body’s spatial location, a visual surface cloaking the internal organs and protecting them from danger”. He observes that, in medieval devotion, skin was sometimes constructed through metaphors of clothing. Late medieval poems, he says, liken the crucified Christ to a piece of *vellum*. The skin was a medium on which (religious) memories could be inscribed. See MILLS, *Suspended Animation*, pp. 66-67.

bodies, safeguarding their intimacy – their bodily relation to the divine – within the public sphere of the *vitae*. The hagiographer restages saintly suffering for the reader to witness and comprehend.

2. *Pain, Moderation, and Mediation*

Martha Newman has argued that educated monks and nuns sought alternative ways to emulate Christ's suffering, often avoiding excessive bodily self-mutilation²⁶. Building on this observation, I propose that the suffering body in hagiography should be understood as part of a *mise-en-scène* of saintliness, staged for an audience. While I acknowledge the presence of extreme pain performances among both male and female lay saints – frequently mimicking Christ's suffering in literal and graphic ways – I aim to nuance the distinction between lay saints and literary monastics. Rather than drawing a strict line between the two, I suggest that the hagiographer's mediation and the audience's mystical literacy play a decisive role in shaping how pain is presented and interpreted. The hagiographer does not merely document suffering but actively restages it, balancing theological orthodoxy with dramatic effect. This performative dimension complicates any straightforward reading of pain as either excessive or moderate, and invites a more layered understanding of how asceticism, mysticism, and narrative intertwine.

In particular, I turn to the hagiographer Thomas of Cantimpré, who has been criticized for certain misogynistic remarks in his writings. However, based on my reading of the suffering body as a canvas on display, I argue that the excessive suffering of his female saints is often more implicit than explicit. A reductive claim that hagiography equates female sainthood with the excessive female body – especially in Thomas' *vitae* – fails to account for the complex processes of mediation through which bodily performances are transformed into text. For example, in the *Life of Lutgard*, the saint's bleeding body is immediately covered and restored, shielding it from public view. The reader receives only a brief glimpse into a narrative that is otherwise focused on bodily moderation. Lutgard herself is said to have rejected extreme asceticism, preferring to keep her body strong for spiritual labor: “for she considered it more useful to keep it strong for many other labours useful for souls than to weary it in vain to the point of destruction”²⁷. Lutgard balanced between limited corporeal chastisement and divine interventions which drastically wounded her

26. See NEWMAN, *Crucified by the Virtues*, pp. 182-209.

27. *Lutgard of Aywières*, p. 254.

body. On the controlled discipline of the body, Thomas added his own thoughts:

I tell this story against those who, having tasted a sweetness of the spirit once or twice, become enemies to themselves and reject their bodies cruelly. Although they direct themselves to God in this way with a stronger spirit, they destroy the body which was given to help the spirit. Thus they have a way of vexing the spirit too, weakened by the destruction of the body, with incredible miseries. "For the corrupted body weighs down the soul" (Wisdom 9. 15)²⁸.

Similarly, in the *Life of Margaret of Ypres*, Thomas portrays a female lay saint whose bodily suffering is notably restrained. Although Margaret lived and performed her sainthood within a male-dominated environment, her life contains few instances of severe wounds or graphic pain. She spent her short life in her parental home, under the supervision of her father and later her clerical uncle, before committing to a life of virginity under the guidance of her Dominican confessor, Zegher. Thomas emphasizes that Margaret did not reside in a convent but in the "convent of her heart", a symbolic space accessible only to her confessor and, later, the hagiographer²⁹. This spatial and symbolic delimitation is crucial for understanding the performative dynamics of her sainthood. Margaret's life is presented as controlled and straightforward, devoid of radical gestures or transgressive motifs.

Her suffering, particularly her internal hemorrhaging and headaches, is interpreted as a divine reward. When her bleeding intensified, Zegher advised her not to inflict further injuries, and the event was carefully regulated, since she was already tormented by a high fever brought on by internal hemorrhaging. Her bleeding was experienced by outsiders as a sweet, fragrant scent, a scent which signaled divine grace in the literature. Through a sensory transfer, the visual experience of the suffering body shifted to the olfactory sense, which was associated with a pleasant stimulus. The possible shock that the suffering body carried with it was neutralized. The confessor's presence influenced the ebb and flow of Margaret's bleeding. The whole event was regulated. The scene was completely barren, transgressive elements were excluded³⁰.

Margaret's *vita* is striking in its simplicity and restraint. The reader is rarely confronted with radical theological claims or dramatic mystical experiences. Instead, the narrative unfolds within a tightly controlled

28. *Ibid.*

29. M.H. KING, *The Life of Margaret of Ypres by Thomas de Cantimpré*, in *Vox Benedictina* 7 (1990) 159-185, p. 161.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

framework, emphasizing obedience, moderation, and doctrinal clarity. Margaret's sanctity is not marked by transgressive acts or spectacular suffering, but by quiet endurance and spiritual discipline. Her life is portrayed as a model of humility and submission, shaped by the guidance of her confessor and the theological agenda of her hagiographer. Thomas projects his own theological convictions onto Margaret's suffering body, which remains passive and receptive rather than active or provocative. The absence of daring motifs or controversial episodes reinforces the impression that Margaret's sainthood is "under control" – a carefully curated example of virtuous suffering that aligns with ecclesiastical expectations and avoids the risks associated with excessive or ecstatic displays.

Her sterile room, only accessible to her family, is related to the heavenly space Margaret would soon enter. As she bled, the saint stood at the gate of paradise. In this space, suspended between heaven and earth, Thomas' theological position once more becomes clear. The hagiographer uses this passage to reaffirm the classic connection between pain and salvation. In exchange for the suffering the saint endured, she was promised a place in heaven:

Indeed in her mortal sickness she always had the divine presence and the pleasantness of paradise before the eyes of her mind. As a bird shut up in a cage always thinks about its release, so the handmaid of Christ, the mouth of her mind open and gasping, sought in prayer the hour of death so that she might fly back to the free air of heaven³¹.

The pain that grants access to the heavenly gates is strictly regulated by the confessor and the hagiographer. The pain experience cannot be separated from the Christian life and does not serve a purpose in and of itself. Thomas subordinates Margaret's suffering to the transubstantiation of the Eucharist. The thirteenth-century emphasis on the literal presence of Christ in the host, mediated by the priest, is placed above the personal experience of the imitation of Christ's suffering:

Almost daily she felt some new torments in her limbs. After she received the Body of Christ on Sundays, however, she felt absolutely no pain at all, and this fits in with what the blessed doctor Augustine said: "Strengthen yourself with the Body on Sunday: it is a medicine to counteract apathy and a food to heal those who are weakened". When on the next day, sickness attacked her again and she was once again racked with her accustomed pains, this fact most certainly confirmed to her that she had completed her purgation in this life and, free like a bird, she was flying to heaven³².

31. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 180.

Pain is of a temporary nature and serves primarily to hasten penitence. The Church's redeeming role takes precedence. Pain must be suffered patiently and virtuously. The emphasis on passive submission in this simple *vita* already points to a problematizing of the shift in mystical culture and in the laypersons, who emulate mystical (pain) experiences.

The display of excessive pain is almost entirely absent in the lives of Lutgard and Margaret, especially when contrasted with the *vita* of Christina Mirabilis. In his account of the male saint John of Cantimpré, Thomas does not shy away from describing acts of self-harm, despite John's status as an erudite monk and abbot of the monastery of Cantimpré. Thomas writes:

Because this most devout servant of God burned inwardly with amazing ardor, he tormented his body outwardly with savage, uninterrupted labor. He could by no means have survived very long without harming himself unless he had sometimes done what his spirit found burdensome, yielding to his flesh through the corruption of nature itself. He ordered his life and work in such a way that he was always praying, reading, preaching, or hearing confessions, and he took no more time for himself than he needed to indulge in sleep or food. His fasts were frequent, his nourishment sparing, his bed hard, his vigils long. Afflicted by these crosses, his limbs were strained by continuous toil. This was his outer life. But inwardly his ardent spirit was tormented the more keenly the more he longed to be dissolved and be with Christ³³.

Thomas links John's ascetic practices and bodily suffering to a form of spiritual martyrdom. He contrasts the literal imitation of Christ's physical torments and those of the martyrs with a more interiorized suffering, driven by an unrelenting desire for God. John's extreme asceticism is not staged for the reader; its details remain implicit. Like the hagiographers of Petrus and Arnulf, Thomas had to avoid placing the saint too prominently in the spotlight, which could suggest self-glorification. External pain, if too visible, risked attracting negative attention and provoking scandal. In such cases, it was crucial to frame and interpret the scandal through biblical and Christological motifs – a theme that will be explored further in the section on persecuted saints and has already been briefly addressed in the discussion of Ida's stigmata. Thomas and John deliberately avoided this path. As Thomas writes: "He was urgently constrained on the one hand by concern for his neighbors, among whom scandals were increasing and on the other by the desire to see Christ, whom he bore constantly in mind"³⁴. The excessive pain stays in John's private life and is not exposed

33. *John of Cantimpré*, p. 107.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

by the hagiographer's voyeuristic gaze. An explicit choice was made to preserve social order.

Thomas writes that John inflicted his body outwardly and his spirit inwardly. The reader is not offered a rich exposition of those bodily afflictions because the age of physical martyrdom is over, Thomas states. Instead, the reader learns more about Thomas' spiritual martyrdom and what inflicted pain in his soul. The emphasis is on the inner pain, although the outer pain is not absent. The hagiographer describes how the Lord was actually relieved by quiet contemplation which comforted his spirit, something the body could not do on its own. His bodily suffering was subordinate to his private and mystical experiences of God. Thomas argued that John employed his body in his inner quest for Christ. That was why the body should not be destroyed completely and pain should be moderated³⁵.

These moderate displays of pain offer a counterpoint to the extravagant depictions found in both primary and secondary literature on excessive suffering and self-harm. Rather than emphasizing spectacle, these *vitae* provide an initial insight into the relationship between external performance and internal focus, particularly in how bodily pain is experienced in connection with the theme of desire³⁶. However, this approach presupposes a foundational understanding of mystical theology on the part of the reader. In contrast, the excessive display of pain tends to both captivate and disturb its audience, and can easily be misinterpreted as self-mutilation or even demonic possession. Therefore, whether dealing with mystical insight or ascetic extremity, it was essential for the hagiographer – who had to restage these performances through narrative and reenact the forces at play in the saints' dramatic pain episodes – to guide the reader in interpreting the sacred nature of both moderate and excessive suffering.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Simone Roisin thinks the *vita* of Lutgard is an excellent example of the increasing focus on the inner lives of saints in thirteenth-century Cistercian hagiographies. She even considers it the most mature and mystical *vita*. See ROISIN, *La méthode hagiographique*, pp. 546-547.

VI

HAGIOGRAPHY AS CHOREOGRAPHY

While pain has often been foregrounded in hagiographic literature as a sign of sanctity, it rarely appears in isolation. The suffering body, as explored in the previous chapter, is not only a site of ascetic discipline and theological meaning – it is also a medium through which joy, ecstasy, and divine presence are expressed. In certain cases, the *mise-en-scène* crafted by saints and their hagiographers took on markedly dynamic dimensions. The saint was not merely portrayed as a living canvas, embodying the salvific suffering of Christ through bodily transformation, but also as a performer – a sacred dancer navigating the liminal space between pleasure and pain, heaven and earth. Movement played a central role in these saintly pain performances. Ecstatic raptures were interwoven with the language of suffering, evoking a sense of divine presence coursing through the saint's body as they performed fervently before their community. Like choreographed dance, these performances unfolded before an audience, engaging both mystically literate and illiterate spectators. Hagiographers, tasked with recording these sacred dances, had to craft refined literary strategies to frame these transgressive, moving bodies in ways that preserved the saints' doctrinal soundness.

In contrast to the examples discussed in the previous chapter, the *vitae* of Elisabeth of Spalbeek and Christina Mirabilis reveal forms of pain display that blur the boundaries between public and private, interior and exterior, bodily mortification and divine rapture. These women, together with their hagiographers, transformed the language of pain into a physical spectacle marked by duration and repetition, thereby challenging established norms of saintly conduct within their mystical milieu. One could argue that, even under the careful mediation of their hagiographers, these saints stretched the limits of orthodoxy to the furthest extent. Their pain was not merely endured – it was integrated into a mystical transformation that unfolded before the eyes of the public, becoming a model for veneration and, potentially, imitation. Although hagiographers generally discouraged imitation of such extreme behavior, I suggest that these sacred performances and ecstatic raptures nonetheless crossed into the margins of mystical culture, where they provoked tension with religious authorities. To illustrate this process of democratization in mystical performance,

I will explore how ecstatic joy – not only pain, though the distinction is often elusive – was enacted by Elisabeth and Christina, as well as by mystical enthusiasts who lacked the endorsement of the ecclesiastical elite.

1. *Elisabeth's Stigmatic Dances*

The *vita* of Elisabeth of Spalbeek, written by Philip of Clairvaux, stands out for its emphasis on the hagiographer's personal experience rather than a conventional catalogue of miracles. Philip did not merely document Elisabeth's sanctity – he became part of the performance itself and its literary restaging. Having met Elisabeth in person, he witnessed her divine enactments firsthand. He describes how the saint revealed her wounded body, which bled on Fridays, in a ritual structured around the liturgy of the hours and the reenactment of Christ's passion. Although he frames the *vita* as a single day in the life of the saint, guided by the Breviary, Philip had in fact observed her over several weeks. Elisabeth rehearsed her ritual intensively, and Philip condensed these observations into one sacred tableau, at times rendered in graphic detail. What the spectator and reader encounter is not a linear account of virtuous living, but a choreographed performance of salvation¹.

Philip assumed a triple role: that of spectator, hagiographer, and choreographer. In the *vita*, he carefully observed and documented Elisabeth's bodily expressions and movement language, transforming her performances into a living narrative of salvation – most notably, the passion. The reader, guided by Philip's gaze, is positioned as a spectator witnessing the drama of redemption unfold through Elisabeth's body. Yet the reader is not invited to imitate, but to admire. Elisabeth is not portrayed as a paradigmatic saint marked by exceptional asceticism or mystical insight. Rather, the person behind the performance remains largely obscured. What emerges is a body opened to divine presence, requiring no elaborate theological exposition – only direct, embodied representation. Through her performance, the passion is not merely recalled but reactivated, allowing the sacred event to reenter the present and offer the possibility of redemptive encounter.

According to Simons, Elisabeth's performance fulfilled a similar role to other forms of art in the church. This role was bestowed upon the arts by Gregory the Great who saw art as a form of belief communication for the *illiterati*. Art represented biblical tableaux and encouraged the viewer

1. See SIMONS, *Reading a Saint's Body*, pp. 10-11.

to react emotionally to the story of salvation. Elisabeth's ecstatic raptures transformed her into a lifeless statue, that reminded Philip of the statues of saints. Her performance summoned both theatrical and choreographic elements – analogous to the passion plays that also flourished in this period. She would have been familiar with these elements, according to Simons, through folk dances as well as prayer books, which favored physical movement during liturgies².

Next to her moving body as a dancer, and her lifeless body as a statue, Philip also recalled the iconographic tradition of Veronica. Through the evocation of Veronica, it becomes evident that Elisabeth did not merely represent a saintly figure from the past – she reanimated her presence in the here and now. Veronica, traditionally understood as a relic bearer whose veil bore the true image of Christ, was believed to transmit miraculous power through each reproduction. Elisabeth's body similarly became a living relic, a conduit through which Christ was made present. In doing so, she assumed a role typically reserved for the priest in the Eucharistic rite. Her female body became a *simulacrum* of the divine, a site of revelation that challenged the boundaries of orthodoxy and orthopraxis. Elisabeth was not simply like Veronica – she embodied her. She was the blood-soaked shroud.

The bloody display of Elisabeth's wounds – linked to the true face and presence of Christ – surpasses the symbolic function of blood-stained textiles found in the *Life of Lutgard*. Elisabeth's bleeding occurred weekly, carefully rehearsed and ritually enacted as part of a vivid performance. Like Lutgard, she bled miraculously. Yet in Elisabeth's case, the wounds more closely and literally mirrored the passion of Christ. Her body bore the stigmata.

The hagiographer expressed his desire to verify the circulating reports about Elisabeth's stigmata and to assess her orthodoxy and *orthopraxis* – speaking from his position as a “literary man”. Philip needed to ensure that her ecstatic dance and theatrical embodiment of the passion were genuine manifestations of divine grace. Given the theological and ecclesiastical implications of her practice, a phase of *probatio* – critical examination – was deemed necessary³. Recall that her performance did not take place in a private space, but in a semi-public space of a Church, during the Catholic hours of prayer. It revealed the body of Christ through the saint, unveiled and direct. He visited her in 1266 in Herkenrode,

2. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

3. See J. Nijus, *The Politics of Mysticism: Elisabeth of Spalbeek in Context*, in *History* 77 (2008) 285-317, p. 299.

where she, a sickly girl, lived in a cell annexed to the chapel that had been built for her. He wrote:

In the male sex, namely in the person of St. Francis, God has revealed himself already. Now both sexes may perceive on Christ's cross what should be honored, venerated, adored, imitated, and loved, not only by the testimony of Scriptures but also by living examples of the human condition, so that no human, whom that Child of the Immaculate Virgin redeemed, can prevaricate, being illiterate and simple, and say: "I cannot understand such profound mysteries, because I am not lettered", or "because this is a closed book for me". Now this illiterate man or woman can read in the members and the body of this girl, as a vivid and unmistakable Veronica, a living image and an animated history of redemption, as though he or she were reading parchments or documents [...]. Truly every human must gain strength of faith, a desire for charity, and eagerness in devotion, when convinced by arguments that have come alive and stand bodily before our eyes⁴.

Elisabeth's stigmata play a central role in her *vita*. Philip presented her as the first woman to receive the stigmata since the days of Saint Francis. He placed Elisabeth within a tradition and a religious context, although he ensured that her unique story and behavior was not equated with the claims to veneration of other female bodies. The hagiographer used some hagiographic *topoi* to place Elisabeth in a network of *Mulieres Religiosae*, even though his *vita* is of a radically different order than the other *vitae*. Although Elisabeth disciplined her body and practiced self-mortification, from early childhood to her last days, she did this less to purify her body, as other saints, than to compensate for her inadequate worship of God.

Philip distinguished Elisabeth from other female stigmatics whose wounds were often self-inflicted and interpreted as extreme ascetic practices, such as in the case of Mary of Oignies. In contrast, Elisabeth's stigmata signified divine intervention, transforming her body into a Christoform vessel. God acted through her flesh. Her exposed wounds did not convey a theology of penance, but rather embodied a mystical teaching on the real presence of Christ. The wound to her side, just as Christ's, secreted both water and blood. Here she differed from other stigmatized who only bled from the wound. Elisabeth's body imitated Christ's body more explicitly and literally. This literal interpretation of Christ's suffering was translated in an unprecedented theatrical and dramatic manner, not only in her body, but in her entire performance.

4. Translation: SIMONS, *City of Ladies*, p. 130.

Elisabeth's performance shifted the emphasis between the two focal points of asceticism and penance to the susceptibility of divine presence through representation and reenactment of sacred events. Her performance was soteriologically and eschatologically charged, and brought salvation into the present. The performance was a mystical expression. It was up to the hagiographer-choreographer to interpret and regulate this mystical teaching. Elisabeth's *vita* stands as a successful example of hagiographic mediation, allowing her to be represented as a Christian saint. Her orthodoxy was safeguarded precisely because she did not articulate her mystical experience verbally; instead, her body served as the medium of expression. It was the hagiographer – not the saint herself – who interpreted this bodily language and framed it within a theological discourse, thereby regulating her orthopraxis through the written text.

Although Elisabeth's performance unfolded in a semi-public setting, it did not constitute a transgression. The chapel in which she performed functioned as an extension of her own body – a sacred architectural space through which theological meanings were embodied and negotiated. Access to this space was restricted to a select group of witnesses, primarily clerics. For readers, the performance was accessible only through the hagiographic text, which carefully framed Elisabeth's body within a controlled interpretive environment. This environment included not only the witnesses but also the surrounding architecture, religious art, and relics⁵. The chapel thus served as an external framework for the ecstatic body, a liturgical space where clerical authority shaped the reception of her performance. The meanings generated by the clergy and Christian artists were projected onto Elisabeth's moving body, guiding both reader and spectator to interpret her actions as a reenactment of Christ's salvific suffering. Christ remained the central figure of this embodied narrative, while the Church and its ministers retained their mediating role. In this context, Elisabeth became a living, moving relic – inseparably linked to the sacred geography of Herkenrode.

5. Jesse Njus argues: "The chapel became a site of pilgrimage. However, Elisabeth also used her visitors to enable her own active participation in the constant flow of religious patronage created by the circulation of religious people and sacred objects". NJUS, *The Politics of Mysticism*, p. 292. Susan Rodger and Joanna Ziegler argue that the explicit reference to the chapel as an intrinsic part of the performance is unique. Elisabeth became part of the architecture and sacred space. See S. RODGER – J.E. ZIEGLER, *Elisabeth of Spalbeek's Trance Dance of Faith*, in SUYDAM – ZIEGLER (eds.), *Performance and Transformation*, 299-356, pp. 308-309.

2. *The Astonishing Performance of Christina Mirabilis*

Of all the *vitae* of the *Mulieres Religiosae* and holy men, the *vita* of Christina Mirabilis is the most unusual. Her *vita* is a collection of stories that appear to outdo each other in sheer marvel. The audience and the readers, both medieval and contemporary, are amazed by this exceptional figure. James of Vitry, for example, writes in his prologue to the *Life of Mary of Oignies* about how he heard stories about this Christina:

I saw another in whom God worked so wondrously that after she had lain dead for a long time – but before her body was buried in the ground – her soul returned to her body and she lived again. She obtained from the Lord that she would endure purgatory, living in this world in her body. It was for this reason that she was afflicted for a long time by the Lord, so that sometimes she rolled herself in the fire, and sometimes in the winter she remained for lengthy periods in icy water and at other times she was driven to enter the tombs of the dead. But after she had performed penance in so many ways, she lived in peace and merited grace from the Lord and many times, rapt in spirit, she led the souls of the dead as far as purgatory, or through purgatory as far as the kingdom of heaven, without any harm to herself⁶.

This brief account already reveals key elements of Christina's pain performance. Her life is framed as a horror narrative in which she returns from the heavenly realm to suffer for the souls in purgatory. Her enactments of purgatorial torment were bizarre and theatrical, often accompanied by ecstatic rapture.

Christina's *vita* has recently gained renewed scholarly attention due to its rediscovery of mystical-theological passages⁷, her resemblance to the anthropological figure of the shaman⁸ and her role as a "living example"⁹. Bynum focused on her indestructible body in the context of resurrection theology¹⁰, while B. Newman examined her purgatorial devotion and its gendered dimensions¹¹.

Christina's pain performances diverge significantly from the normative *imitatio Christi* and the narrative strategies typically used to frame such

6. *Mary of Oignies*, pp. 48-49.

7. See M.H. KING (ed.), *The Life of Christina Mirabilis*, Toronto, Peregrina, 1989, pp. 5-9.

8. According to Paul Vandenbroeck, she was the product of a rural culture and its archaic ecstatic traditions. See P. VANDENBROECK, *Hooglied: De beeldwereld van religieuze vrouwen in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden: Vanaf de 13de eeuw*, Gent, Snoeck-Ducaju, 1994, p. 25.

9. See R. SWEETMAN, *Christine of Saint-Trond's Preaching Apostolate: Thomas of Cantimpré's Hagiographic Method Revisited*, in *Vox Benedictina* 10 (1992) 67-97, p. 68.

10. See BYNUM, *Resurrection*, pp. 221; 333.

11. See NEWMAN, *From Virile Woman*, pp. 108-136.

acts. As Folkerts notes, bridal mysticism – prevalent in Cistercian circles and common in most *vitae* – is absent from Christina's hagiography. This absence alters the *imitatio Christi* motif, which usually casts the saint as Christ's bride through excessive suffering. Christina, by contrast, is portrayed as a prophet and mediator, imitating Christ not in his passion but in his salvific mission for the damned. She embodies divine knowledge revealed through mystical intervention and acts as a maternal figure, not a bride¹².

Although her name evokes Christ-like imitation, the most literal parallels to Christ's life appear only in the early pages of her *vita*, before her first death. During this period, she is described as a shepherd – a humble domestic role – and frequently visited by Christ, who imparted heavenly secrets and inner sweetness. These experiences, referred to as *jubilatio*, overwhelmed her body and led to her death. In her journey to heaven, Christina was shown purgatory, though her hagiographer refrains from describing what she saw. Instead, the torments are enacted throughout the rest of the *vita*. Thomas does not offer a topography of the afterlife but emphasizes the ineffability of purgatorial suffering, which must be performed to be understood¹³. Christina's mission was divinely ordained. The Lord gave her a choice:

Certainly, my dearest, you will be with me here, but I now offer you two choices, either to remain with me now or to return to the body and undergo there the punishment of an immortal soul in a mortal body without damage to it, and by these your sufferings to deliver all those souls on whom you had compassion in that place of purgatory, and by the example of your suffering and your way of life to convert living men to me and make them turn aside from their sins, and after you have done all these things to return to me, having accumulated for yourself a reward of such great profit¹⁴.

Christina accepted this mission and endured unspeakable pain through extreme mortification and public suffering. Smith compares her to the

12. All other women did experience their relationship with Christ as a bride. Elisabeth of Spalbeek was an exception, yet she too is sometimes called a bride, although she saw no visions of her Bridegroom. See S. FOLKERTS, *Een vrome vrouw als rolmodel voor geestelijken: Christina de wonderbare van Sint-Truiden*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 78 (2004) 5-24, pp. 5-18.

13. Christina's *vita* confirms the established theological distinction between hell and purgatory, when Christina says: "I asked them what place this was. I thought it was hell, but my guides said to me, 'This place is purgatory and it is here that repentant sinners atone for the sins they committed while they were alive'". *Christina the Astonishing*, p. 131.

14. *Ibid.*

Desert Mothers and virgin martyrs, but unlike them, Christina felt every torment and performed it publicly¹⁵. Her goal was to provoke emotional responses from her audience, leading them to repentance and compassion. In exchange for their pity – often expressed through alms – she offered indulgences to souls otherwise condemned.

A recurring motif in Christina's *vita* is the notion of pain exchange, wherein she compassionately assumes the suffering of souls in purgatory by allowing those torments to be enacted upon her own body. This concept, common in hagiographic literature, is exemplified in her relationship with Count Louis¹⁶. Christina took on his purgatorial punishments – enduring extreme cold and heat – and expressed deep remorse for his sins by weeping at the locations where they had been committed. Through this act, she not only performed tangible purgatorial suffering but also demonstrated that, despite her exuberant and often misunderstood behavior, she remained capable of participating in communal life. While many of her performances were perceived negatively by broader audiences, Christina succeeded in reframing her pain as an expression of compassion, supported by her prophetic insight and profound charity.

One striking example of her pain performance involved sitting in burning ovens to mimic purgatorial fire. When no oven was available, she immersed herself in boiling water or placed her limbs in flames¹⁷. Her body was pierced with nails, echoing the stigmata of Peter, and her hands were burned by purgatorial fire. Yet, like other holy bodies, her flesh remained unmarked. Witnesses had to rely on their own eyes or oral testimony to grasp the miraculous nature of her suffering. Once her screams ceased, her body bore no trace of pain, rendering the performance ephemeral and dependent on narrative transmission.

Christina's relationship with her audience was undeniably charismatic. Thomas describes how spectators hung on her every word as she spoke of hell, purgatory, and Christ's compassion. She was impassioned and spoke as though divinely inspired. Despite her eccentricity, she commanded authority and admiration, which endured beyond her death. Her suffering invited compassion and offered her audience a path toward

15. See SMITH, *Excessive Saints*, pp. 62-63.

16. Christina appeared to Louis in Thomas' *Concerning Bees*. She took over his purgatorial pain and fell ill. Cf. *Het Biënboec*, ed. VAN DER VET, pp. 248-249.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 133-134. Christina's other pain experiences can be linked to the ascetic practices that other saints also endured. Christina was, for instance, chased by mad dogs, forcing her to run through brambles until her entire body was wounded. *Ibid.*, p. 135.

Christian virtue¹⁸. Another example of her affective technique is found in the following passage:

When one of the townspeople died whom she knew in spirit to be damned for his sins, she wept and twisted herself and bent herself backwards and bent and re-bent her arms and fingers as if they were pliable and had no bones. All who saw her found her sorrow so intolerable that even the hardest-hearted could not endure it without the greatest contrition and compassion¹⁹.

The issue of witnesses and audience has not been sufficiently explored in the secondary literature – even though this tension between body and onlookers is particularly acute in a passage at the end of the *vita*, when the reader is invited to share the voyeuristic gaze of the witness and the hagiographer. Abbot Thomas was a reliable witness to an intimate scene which unfolded in an empty church or chapel after matins, much like Elisabeth's performance, where Christina staged a dialogue between her body and spirit²⁰. Thomas and a companion watched her from behind a pillar and we too, as readers, witness how Christina first beat herself out of bodily hatred. She cried:

O miserable and wretched body! How long will you torment me, miserable as I am? What are you doing with me? Why do you keep my wretched soul in you for so long? Why do you delay me from seeing the face of Christ? When will you abandon me so that my soul can return freely to its Creator? Woe to you, most miserable one! And woe to me who am united to you!²¹.

Then Christina articulated her body's reply. This physical reaction is an interesting qualification of an overly simplistic approach to the ascetic tradition. Her body wondered why the soul did not let go of the body and even returned to the earth, rather than leaving the body until it would rise at the Last Judgment. It was the choice of the soul to remain connected to the body. The soul then expressed its remorse through tears and kisses. Christina kissed her feet and hands and said:

O most beloved body! Why have I beaten you? Why have I reviled you? Did you not obey me in every good deed I undertook to do with God's help? You have most generously and patiently endured the torments and hardships the spirit imposed on you [...] Now, O best and sweetest body, endure patiently. The end of your labor is at hand. Now you will rest in the lust and sleep for a little and then, at last, when the trumpet blows, you will rise

18. *Christina the Astonishing*, p. 138.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

20. This incident unfolded in a sacred space but not during a sacred hour (as with Elisabeth).

21. *Christina the Astonishing*, p. 151.

again, purified of all corruptibility, and be joined in eternal happiness with the soul you have had as a companion in the present sadness”²².

This performance brought her inner joy and *jubilatio*, and no meeting with the witnesses took place.

This passage in particular nuances an oversimplified view of Thomas’ potential misogynistic handling of the life of Christina and his potential exaggeration of bodily harm and suffering. Laurie A. Finke, for instance, reads Christina’s *vita* as an amplification of the assumed obsession of the male hagiographer with creating a grotesque female body, which must suffer wounds yet remains miraculously intact. The femininity of her body and the erotic subtext were exaggerated and had to be combatted by the Church with “disciplinary technologies”, such as mortification of the flesh. According to Finke, Christina’s *vita*, and those of other female saints, revolved around a power relationship that forced the woman to wound her body²³. However, I would argue that the hagiographer used narrative technologies to frame Christina’s extravagant performances, to move the reader to a compassionate response to the suffering body, and to make an ethical decision to do good and avoid purgatorial punishment. The inclusion of the audience and onlooker is crucial to understand how pain is framed within the story. It is not an easy feat to transform the aversion caused by these transgressive performances (within the narrative but also as a reaction to the text) into an empathetic response and a mystical-theological understanding of the suffering body.

Rachel Smith notes that writing Christina’s *vita* forced Thomas to confront the limits and possibilities of hagiography. The genre demands the depiction of incredible, often unbelievable events. Smith argues that Thomas was acutely aware of this challenge and used Christina’s life to test the boundaries of hagiographic representation. He portrayed her not as an *alter Christus* but as a demoniac figure reflecting human sinfulness and eschatological dread. Smith concludes: “Christina’s image is one that cannot be recuperated by the reader’s categories, rendering this Life a work of apophatic theology”²⁴.

Thomas succeeded in capturing Christina’s life in a way that resonated widely. Her *vita* became the most popular among the *Mulieres Religiosae*, recorded in Latin and translated into Middle Dutch and Middle English.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 151-152.

23. See L.A. FINKE, *Mystical Bodies and the Dialogics of Vision*, in U. WIETHAUS (ed.), *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics*, New York, Syracuse University Press, 1993, 28-44, pp. 38-44.

24. See. SMITH, *Excessive Saints*, p. 52.

Folkerts attributes this success to Christina's lack of institutional affiliation, which allowed her story to be appropriated by various communities. Unlike Lutgard, whose *vita* was intended for convent audiences, Christina's was directed at the broader public²⁵. She became a "living sermon", a humble woman made exemplary by divine grace²⁶.

Christina's *vita* does not delve into specialized mystical theology but is direct, rich in imagery, and performative. Thomas appeals to the fear culture cultivated by preachers and hagiographers to prompt conversion. Christina's body becomes a canvas for the theology of sin and redemption. The hagiographer's goal is not to teach mystical insight but to encourage moral reform. He concludes: "Woe to those who want to buy the oil of mercy after the time of trading has passed! With empty lamps they will beat on the door and will not be allowed to enter. Rather, the Bridegroom will say to them, 'Amen, I say to you, I know you not. Watch therefore, because you know not the day nor the hour' (Matt 25,12-13)"²⁷. Christina's pain performances incited fear and repentance, fulfilling the function of the *exemplum*. Her life reached a diverse and popular audience at the margins of mystical culture, explaining the widespread success of her *vita*.

Both Christina and Elisabeth radically expanded the boundaries of how pain could be staged and interpreted within mystical culture. Elisabeth's excessive suffering was carefully mediated through a hagiographic framework that emphasized *imitatio Christi* and situated her ecstatic body within a clerically regulated space. Her performances were choreographed within the architectural and liturgical confines of the chapel, ensuring theological coherence and safeguarding orthodoxy. Christina's performances, by contrast, often unfolded in public and sometimes even defied clerical instruction. Her pain was not framed through the passion of Christ but through the torments of purgatory, which she enacted with visceral intensity. Thomas relied on the fleeting nature of her performances to neutralize their transgressive potential. Unlike Elisabeth, Christina bore no visible stigmata or bodily markers of divine election. Her sanctity was not inscribed on her flesh but performed through acts of suffering that provoked fear and compassion in her audience.

Where Elisabeth's body was interpreted as a Christoform vessel within a controlled theological *mise-en-scène*, Christina's body became a

25. See FOLKERTS, *Een vrome vrouw*, pp. 6-14.

26. See J. VAN MECHELEN *et al.*, *Christina en Lutgardis: Het verhaal van twee mystieke vrouwen in Sint-Truiden*, Sint-Truiden, Erfgoedcel Sint-Truiden, 2012, pp. 153-154.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 152 (my translation).

volatile medium for purgatorial horror and communal conversion. Her performances were disruptive, eccentric, and emotionally charged, yet they succeeded in moving her audience toward penitence and ethical reflection. In both cases, pain was not merely endured but transformed into a communicative act – a mystical language that required careful mediation by the hagiographer.

These women challenged the limits of orthodoxy by embodying divine presence in ways that blurred the boundaries between public and private, ritual and spectacle, suffering and salvation. Their performances demanded not only theological interpretation but also narrative containment. Through the literary strategies of their hagiographers, their bodies were framed, regulated, and ultimately sanctified.

3. *Excessive Joy*

The striking and eccentric nature of the pain performances enacted by both Christina and Elisabeth risks overshadowing another crucial dimension of their mystical lives – namely, jubilation. As Amy Hollywood points out, the mystical experiences of saintly women were not always centered on suffering. While pain was often theologically framed and valorized, it did not exclude moments of profound joy. These redemptive episodes, frequently neglected in scholarly discourse, reveal a different facet of mystical embodiment. Hollywood provocatively asks: “Are we no longer capable of telling stories in which the unspeakable is the site of jubilation rather than lamentation, of beautiful voiceless song rather than inarticulate screams, of a body spinning with delight rather than one twisted in agony”²⁸? Her question invites a reorientation of the interpretive lens – from suffering as the dominant mode of mystical expression to an openness toward ecstatic joy as equally revelatory and theologically significant.

These moments were described as *jubilatio*²⁹, an expression of an overpowering sacred presence which makes the body move and does not

28. A. HOLLYWOOD, *The Unspeakability of Trauma, the Unspeakability of Joy*, in EAD., *Acute Melancholia and Other Essays*, 44-64, p. 62.

29. *Jubilatio* has a long history rooted in monasticism, where it first received its meaning. According to Faesen, the term *jubilatio* was already used by Pope Gregory the Great in his *Moralia*, who spoke of the inexpressible joy originating in the soul, which cannot contain this elation. The spiritual interpretation of *jubilatio* goes back, Faesen argues, to Augustine, who described *jubilatio* as a vocal sound that expresses what the soul cannot describe. See FAESEN, *Begeerte*, p. 277. Richard of Saint Victor, Paul Mommaers writes, sought the biblical basis of this phenomenon in the psalms, particularly Ps 150,5 and Ps 47,6. See MOMMAERS, *Hadewijch*, p. 29.

happen of one's own volition. Another possible expression, called *raptus*, is the state in which the body stays behind lifeless during moments of ecstasy. Jubilation, in particular, is characterized by spectators and readers as joyous and excessive. *Jubilatio* and *raptus* are usually experienced in a community, not in private, but in public. They are a form of performance in which ecstasy and divine presence are central and predominant. The body is the medium that connects the outer world with the saints' spiritual journey, often described with terms borrowed from bridal mysticism. James of Vitry, for example, describes how these women, overcome by the honey-sweet taste of the lover, left their lifeless bodies behind while their souls melted. Some returned to their bodies with such joy that they moved and jumped, just as David leapt in front of the Ark: "My heart and my body exult in the true God" (Ps 83,3)³⁰.

The hidden presence of God could lead to excessive joy expressed in jubilation or an even more diligent bodily mortification. In the *vitae* both moments are conceptualized and interpreted by the hagiographer, the audience, and the readers. For example, Christina's performances of *jubilatio* usually reached multiple onlookers. *Jubilatio* was expressed in Christina through celestial song and wondrous movements, which could be called dance. A good example of her song and dance performance unfolded at Saint Catherine convent, where Christina, in an ecstatic episode, performed a dance for the sisters, and then burst out into song:

Sometimes while she was sitting with them [nuns of Saint Catherine], she would speak of Christ and suddenly and unexpectedly she would be ravished in the spirit and her body would whirl around like a hoop in a children's game. She whirled around with such extreme violence that the individual limbs of her body could not be distinguished. When she had whirled around for a long time in this manner, it seemed as if she became weakened by the violence of the rolling and all her limbs grew quiet. Then there sounded between her throat and her breast a wondrous harmony that no mortal man could understand³¹.

After hearing Christina's angelic sound, the nuns sang with her the *Te Deum*. The scene was given a liturgical framework. Thus, the transgression of the ecstatic *jubilatio* is subsumed in a liturgical-theological frame, a good example of hagiographic mediation. The divine intervention in Christina's body became part of the overarching Christian story of salvation. The reader could now interpret the performance as an exceptional moment of divine grace.

30. *Mary of Oignies*, pp. 45-48.

31. *Christina the Astonishing*, p. 145.

In the mystical treatises, such as the work of Hadewijch, the focus is on the proper response to those moments of intense joy and intense pain, and not on the interpretation by the audience. Hadewijch explains how the hidden knowledge can easily be ignored and forgotten when one indulges in the mystical experience and forgets about the virtuous life in the service of God. She writes in her fourteenth poem:

It is a great pity that we thus stray,
 And that high wisdom remains hidden from us
 Which Love entrusted to the masters
 Who give lessons to true Love;
 In the school of Love the highest lesson
 Is how one can content Love.
 But they who early leave off,
 And then nevertheless jubilate
 And feast their Beloved
 For a brief while with salutations –
 Provided they live in concord with the virtues –
 Can still master the course of study.
 But they who wish to enjoy the Beloved here on earth,
 And dance with feelings of delight,
 And dwell in this with pleasure,
 I say to them in advance:
 They must truly adorn themselves with virtues,
 Or the course of study is a loss to them³².

Hadewijch added the following thought: The sweet experience expressed in *jubilatio* can also be spawned by an evil spirit. After all, the evil spirit aims to distract good people from their righteous path. Hadewijch wrote: “For sometimes when a man experiences sweetness, he feels so much pleasure of the senses in it and yields so far to this pleasure that he falls into bodily illness and thus lets slip more profitable things. In [sic] may happen also that when a man sees he possesses overflowing sweetness, he begins little by little to believe in his own perfection, so that he takes insufficient care to uplift his life”³³. An excess of sweetness and the craving for it can lead to extreme physical exhaustion and even illness, which prevents the believer from exercising the virtue of love. For Hadewijch, this amounts to choosing the wrong path, seduced by the devil. This can even result in self-sanctification, which is fatal to both the saint (in self-complacency) and the mystic (an obstruction to mystical growth)³⁴. This demon manipulates the believer into pursuing

32. HADEWIJCH, *Poem* 14, p. 164.

33. HADEWIJCH, *Letter* 10, p. 68.

34. *Ibid.*

the believer's own goals: confirmation of one's own election, seeking pleasant experiences, while neglecting the ultimate aim – the knowledge and execution of God's will. In her eleventh poem in couplets, Hadewijch wrote: "People preconceive themselves to be led by the Spirit, When it is chiefly their own will. Again, something that ruins them They think it is consolation and comes from God"³⁵. According to Hadewijch, the experience of divine presence cannot be sincere if the believer acts on his or her own initiative. Eccentricities are only permitted when the believer fully surrenders him- or herself to God and remains faithful to him after this experience and stays humble. As she argued in her twenty-third letter:

Above all things I counsel you to withhold yourself there very prudently from eccentricities, which are there very numerous; yield they pain or pleasure, have nothing to do with them. Always and in every way be humble, yet not so humble that you become foolish and neglect truth and justice wherever you can put them into practice³⁶.

The mystic from Brabant took a classical theological position vis-à-vis the body, which should be linked to his original sin teachings. Asceticism and the discipline of the body were indispensable to mystical growth. The immaculate soul cannot be hindered by lust driven by the flesh, but must combat these urges to make the rebirth of the Spirit possible. Christ freed humanity from the prison of the flesh and made it possible to transform the body, connecting it with the eternal soul. Yet the sinful body should be combated in moderation. As her fourteenth-century Brabantian colleague, Ruusbroec, argued in *Seven Rungs in the Ladder of Spiritual Love*:

This is why we must hate our body and scorn it as our mortal enemy, who wants to draw us away from God in sin. And we must regard our body and our sensibility as dear and worthy of esteem, insofar as it is an instrument with which we serve God. For without our body we cannot serve God in outward works such as fasting, watching, praying, and other good works that we rightly ought to do. This is why we may gladly nourish, clothe and feed our body, with which we serve God, ourselves and our even-Christians³⁷.

The answer to this battle with the body is not excessive and theatrical asceticism, but an inner and moderate virtuous life that safeguards the

35. HADEWIJCH, *Poem in Couplets* 11, p. 339.

36. HADEWIJCH, *Letter* 23, p. 103. Hadewijch warns against seeking out mystic experience for its own sake in several letters that deal with community issues. Mommaers points to *Letter* 23 in particular. See MOMMAERS, *Hadewijch*, p. 41.

37. RUUSBROEC, *Rungs*, p. 598.

body from gluttony, sloth and corruption. Only meditating on Christ's suffering body can aid this task. Ruusbroec was not talking about the imitation of that same body. He prescribed love of Christ as an antidote to carnal lusts. He sees the Desert Fathers as a source of inspiration, not because of their extreme forms of asceticism but because of their flight from the world as a resistance to sin. The mystic demanded inner spirituality, not extravagant performance. For those he could not convince, he used the fear motif. He conjured up the image of eternal damnation, in particular the miser in the story of Lazarus, who vainly gasped for water in hell – in perpetuity³⁸.

4. *Bodies on the Loose*

Ruusbroec's advice was aimed at people confronted by the fading boundaries between ascetic saints and lay audiences, who were originally only called on to venerate the excessive behavior of the saints, not imitate it. The democratization of thirteenth-century mystical culture prompted the theme of extreme asceticism as imitation of Christ to cross over from monastic practices to mainstream devotional culture. This culture lacked the same access to mystical sources and the negotiations of mystical theologians. The mystic encountered the problem of potentially apostate interpretations of both mystical teachings and mystical practices, such as extreme asceticism and jubilation. Ruusbroec emphasized the centrality of Christ, who should first and foremost be loved for the sacrifice he made for humankind, and the necessity of repaying this selfless act with virtuous behavior. Radical imitation of Christ is not meant for ordinary people and can even distract from the love due to Christ, which can be fulfilled by following the mediated path laid down by the Church.

In the context of fourteenth-century lay spirituality, popular movements like the Flagellants and the Brethren of the Free Spirit emerged. Their origins appear to overlap partially. The movements stemmed from a context in which fear of judgment and penance were carefully cultivated by the clerical authorities. This context was a natural extension of the thirteenth century, which was marked by a similar cultivation. Cohen argues that self-mortification was a method to regain command of these fears. To freely choose pain felt like agency in a situation in which the soul's salvation was not guaranteed, not even by the usual mediation of the Church. Even the mediation of the suffering saint appeared inadequate, and some laypersons wished to imitate the behavior of the saint in

38. *Ibid.*, p. 599.

order to gain foolproof redemption. Not only martyrs and saints but everyone with a body could become a pain performer, including laypersons³⁹.

Patrick Vandermeersch connects this popular movement with the advance of mystical tendencies and Eucharistic spirituality, and historical events such as the plague epidemic, which generated a culture of anguish. This fear generated practices of penance and the theory of purgatory. Although mystical pain was linked to love, as we will see later, fear seems to have been the prime mover behind the Flagellants. According to Vandermeersch, flagellation is a method to digest feelings of guilt – which the Church encouraged – and to ensure one’s salvation single-handedly⁴⁰.

The phenomenon of the Flagellants spread like wildfire throughout Western Europe. The movement also passed through the diocese of Liège in the middle of the fourteenth century. Therefore it is surprising that Ruusbroec did not mention this movement by name and only implicitly seemed to have this movement in mind in his mystical advice⁴¹. The Brethren of the Free Spirit, by contrast, were frequently criticized by Ruusbroec. The democratization of mystical ideals, of which both the Flagellants and the Brethren of the Free Spirit are symptomatic, disconcerted academic theologians, like Jean Gerson, who also turned against the mystical centers that originally inspired this democratization, although they were not necessarily the cause of these deviations. Their condemnations should be interpreted in the context of the condemnation of the Brethren of the Free Spirit and the dangerous situation this movement

39. See COHEN, *The Modulated Scream*, pp. 27-28; 36. McNamara argues that: “In the wake of the Black Death, mass movements of Flagellants, men as well as women, claimed that they could secure absolution by their own penitence without a confessor”. The numbers of Dominicans, who acted as confessors of many lay people, also decreased. The Dominicans were increasingly fixated on the threat of heresy and even witchcraft. See McNAMARA, *Rhetoric of Orthodoxy*, pp. 23-26.

40. See P. VANDERMEERSCH, *La chair de la passion: Une histoire de foi. La flagellation*, Paris, Cerf, 2002, pp. 69-77.

41. Nor did Ruusbroec take note of another folk movement that disrupted the peace in the diocese of Liège, namely dance mania. In 1375, a group of traveling lay people moved through the cities, dancing in huge crowds in order to expel evil spirit and celebrate the divine presence within the human body (similar to *jubilatio* but without the frame of reference of the monastic tradition). Louis Backman offers a historical overview of this movement and refers to the Flagellants too. See E.L. BACKMAN, *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine*, trans. E. Classen, Hampshire, Noverre Press, 2009, pp. 161-216. I have conducted a mystical-theological analysis of this phenomenon based on Ruusbroec’s theology. See S. VLOEBERGS, *Dancing between Heaven and Earth: Understanding Dance from a Historical and Mystical-Theological Perspective*, in *Louvain Studies* 43 (2020) 352-371.

created. Laypersons turned to God without the Church's mediation, undermined clerical authority and rejected the oversight of mystical teachers⁴².

It is extremely difficult to conduct a historical inquiry into the apostate Free Spirit movement, as the vast majority of available information was written by their opponents – ecclesiastical institutions denounced the movement –, Robert Lerner argues. Ruusbroec too turned against the Free Spirit doctrine and condemned the movement brutally, juxtaposing his mystical theology with their heretical ideas. In the eyes of the uninitiated outsider, after all, the movement of the Free Spirit and Ruusbroec's mysticism were rather similar. Ruusbroec was thus forced to turn the Free Spirit into a concept and antagonist in his theology. Lerner is one of the few historians who has attempted to uncover the Free Spirit's historical foundations. He writes that the movement was accused of nihilism and megalomania⁴³. The problem Ruusbroec focused on was their neglect of the sacraments and their denial of the importance of ecclesiastical authority. Lerner concludes that the movement was unsuccessful. It was not conservative enough for orthodox mystics yet insufficiently radical for idealists and freethinkers. The movement was a network of highly educated freethinkers and did not reach the lower classes, to which the movement offered no social support⁴⁴.

Both bodily mortification and *jubilatio* are performances that single out saints from society. But this physical communication is not clear cut; it is layered and ambiguous. In order for it to be accepted, there is a need for a clerical and mystical authority, which was, in the thirteenth century, primarily fulfilled by the hagiographer as mystical-theologian. The hagiographer created the *mise-en-scène* and the narrative framework in which pain and joy could be externalized. The environment was usually a private space in which the number of witnesses was limited and the eye of the reader was guided. If this performance unfolded in a public space, the hagiographer had to make sure that the meaning of this mystical event was unambiguously explained. They had to mediate between the hidden presence of God experienced in the saints' bodies and the audience of often mystically illiterate people.

42. The position of the Flagellants is often overlooked due to a dearth of texts written by the movement itself. Axters was able to find a few: some songs, a statute titled *Regula Flagellatorum* and the sermons of a Dominican from Liège who mediated between the heretical movement and the ecclesiastical authorities. See AXTERS, *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid*, 2, p. 454.

43. See LERNER, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit*, pp. 3-6.

44. *Ibid.*, pp. 232-241.

VII

PERSECUTION

Despite the mediating role of hagiographers, the excessive and transgressive behavior of saints did not always inspire reverence; quite the contrary was often the case. During their lifetimes, saints were frequently confronted with exclusion, mockery, and persecution. Members of their own communities – alongside demons – were often the primary sources of their suffering. Hagiographers did not portray these ill-fated episodes in the saints' lives as problematic; on the contrary, they sometimes seemed to emphasize them. In this section, I examine an often-overlooked dimension of the *imitatio Christi*: the experience of persecution. I interpret these dramatic episodes as performances – painful for the saint and staged before an audience¹.

The suffering that Christ experienced as a result of social exclusion and persecution was, first and foremost, of an emotional and inward nature. Yet it was primarily in the outward performance of this dynamic that Christ's passion could be emulated. Scenes were recreated and narrated in which this inner experience of suffering could be summoned. The hagiographer created a theological framework through hagiographic mediation, in which the saintly performance could be comprehended and valorized. Sometimes these occasions presented themselves, sometimes they were consciously orchestrated by the saint. This scene and performance were consistently linked to Christ and his suffering, transforming this destructive event into a restorative and productive experience. Thus, Christ was presented as an example of patient suffering, as a redeemer of pain, and as a rewarder and lover whose example should be followed. When these occasions presented themselves, it was Christ who was

1. Laura Feldt and Jan N. Bremmer focus on the transformation of religious authority by means of a creative use of media and the performance of marginality. They include figures such as heretics, ascetics, mystics, and saints and address marginality as a social and religious phenomenon. See L. FELDT – J.N. BREMMER (eds.), *Marginality, Media, and Mutations of Religious Authority in the History of Christianity* (Studies in the History of Anthropology of Religion, 6), Leuven – Paris – Bristol, CT, Peeters, 2019. The volume lacks a contribution about the roles of saints and mystics in the Late Middle Ages. In this section, I provide my own analysis of these roles, constructed via the medium of text. I study the restaging of the performance of marginality in mystical-theological discourse.

placed at their core. Like the martyrs of old, these saints reenacted Christ's suffering by being persecuted.

Several saints had to deal with hostility from their community as a result of their divine performances and their radical choice to follow Christ, including his suffering and his repudiation. They encountered different forms of exclusion and scorn resulting from their decision to live as Christ and to maintain an apostolic lifestyle. Both their radical determination to reject the sinful world, and their often excessive and transgressive performances in this world, intensified the alienation of the community. The multitudes who stood outside this mystical culture were often conceptualized and represented as antagonistic. The role of the *vita* is to theologically interpret this historical situation and to create a scene in which the saint can perform her emulation of Christ.

It is conceivable that the saints and mystics were also historically confronted with moments of incomprehension and exclusion². Yet this section deals predominantly with a narrative motif and a theological strategy which served to expand the imitation of the suffering Christ, strengthen the relationship with Christ, and contrast mystical theologies to heretical doctrines. The focus shifts from the exclusive imitation and performance of the crucified Christ to emulation of the social turmoil that surrounded him. This section deals with a number of examples, particularly from the *vita* of Juliana of Mont Cornillon and the concept of the "aliens" in Hadewijch's oeuvre.

1. *Persecuted for Love*

James of Vitry offers a good illustration of this phenomenon. In the prologue, James writes about the saints of Liège, observing that they were humiliated and derided. In this passage, James pleads for a theological understanding of the phenomenon of mockery and persecution by connecting the historical reality of the thirteenth century to biblical verse. He writes:

You have seen and marvelled at those shameless men (indeed you greatly hated them) who, hostile to all religion, maliciously slandered the religious life of these women and, like mad dogs, railed against customs which were contrary to theirs. And when there was nothing more they could do, they invented new names to use against them, just as the Jews called Christ a Samaritan

2. Aviad Kleinberg studies this motif with a historical-sociological approach: "The saints themselves were often torn between a desire to preserve their deeds and an uneasiness with the praise implied in the process of recording, and the damage it would do to their souls and to their reputations". KLEINBERG, *Prophets*, pp. 41-42.

(John 8. 48) and called Christians Galileans (Acts 2. 7). Do not wonder at this, for the Egyptians hated sheep, malicious men of darkness derided the simplicity of the innocent (cf. Job 12. 4): while these men slandered a life of abstinence, they were eating and drinking. [...] They bore calumny and persecution with wondrous patience, frequently bringing back to memory the words of Scripture: "If you have been of the world, the world would love its own" (John 15. 19), and again, "The servant is not greater than his master; if they have persecuted me, they will persecute you" (John 15. 20)³.

Another manifest example is presented in the *vita* of Mary of Oignies, who was seen as an ideal for several of the holy women who followed her. James describes how Mary and her husband chose to leave behind worldly luxury, giving up their social status for a spiritual and chaste life. Many did not welcome their decision and they became the subject of contempt and slander. These defamers included their own relatives, whose treachery could sometimes be particularly painful:

Do not fear, O handmaid of Christ, to put aside worldly joy and honour, to approach the persecutions of the cross with your Christ, your Bridegroom. It is good for you "to be abject in the house of the Lord, better than to dwell in the tabernacles of sinners" (Psalm 83. 11). You have lost the favour of relatives, but you have found the favour of Christ. Indeed, you did not lose the favour of relatives since they loved only your goods and never loved you. For as flies follow honey and wolves follow carrion, so did this crowd follow its prey that is not a man⁴.

James describes how Mary's forsaking the world, and even her family, for the benefit of Christ, will be rewarded in the eternal world yet to come. Her relatives did not truly value her, not as Christ loved her. True love will be rewarded, with jewels of virtues and miracles carried by Mary "like a solid gold vase that is ornamented with every precious stone"⁵. By turning her back on devils, wicked people and her own family, Mary showed the onlooker, and the reader, this true love, which leads to salvation and heavenly bounty⁶. Christ did not intercede in these passages, nor is he the one who brought this situation about. Instead, he was the aim of this suffering. Her love for Christ was so big that she was even capable of loving her persecutors. James wrote:

She rendered good for evil and did not reply to calumniators but prayed for those who persecuted her, persevered in her plans through constancy of

3. *Mary of Oignies*, pp. 43-44.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Ruusbroec wrote that the pain inflicted by slander and humiliation would be recompensed in heaven. See RUUSBROEC, *Mirror*, p. 552.

mind, bore everything through firmness of soul, willingly approached difficult things through magnanimity and did not fear threatening problems because of her serenity⁷.

In Lutgard's early years, for instance, the image of the excluded and condemned Christ was invoked when the saint found herself in an embarrassing situation. Once she was nearly assaulted by a young man she could barely escape, only to be confronted by a crowd of onlookers, curious as to what had taken place. By internally invoking Christ's life, the saint controlled and interpreted the situation. She inwardly told Christ:

For us, O Lord, modest innocent of all, for us O most beautiful one, you were despoiled of your garments, bound to a column, and clothed in a purple tunic for the mockery of the raging populace. You were crowned with a wreath of thorns and hung naked on a gibbet. Since I cannot find anything with which to repay you, I offer up to you my modesty, spurned as it has been for your sake⁸.

This incident tarnished Lutgard's honor and modesty, although they remained intact by dedicating the unfortunate event to Christ, as a way of repaying our debt to him for his passion and his humiliation that freed humanity. Lutgard is portrayed as a representative of humanity that owes Christ an irredeemable debt. Lutgard did not consciously seek out these situations and there is no theme of animosity between her and her community⁹. Lutgard and Thomas used this incident from the saint's youth primarily to remind the reader of the redemptive suffering of Christ, in which Lutgard shared when it was inflicted upon her. It is striking that the *vita* is more concerned with the persecution of and struggle with the devil, than with the friction between her and her community, which remained relatively slight in Lutgard's case.

Christ also intervened when persecutors endangered the chastity or bodily integrity of his virginal brides. James wrote in the prologue: "Despite all this, the merciful Bridegroom so deigned to look after his

7. *Mary of Oignies*, p. 101.

8. *Lutgard of Aywières*, p. 221.

9. Lutgard only spoke Dutch and wound up at a francophone convent, automatically finding herself isolated and excluded. Yet persecution and isolation are not important themes in her *vita*. The *vita* only mentions sporadic quarrels with other sisters, which nonetheless reveal that the saint's exuberant performances and virtue caused tension with her fellow (less fervent) sisters. Thomas wrote: "Jealous nuns slandered her stricter way of life – which they could not imitate – they would say, 'Leave her alone now while her fervour is in full flood. Afterwards, when it has cooled down, you will see her go back with shame to what she now foolishly condemns'". *Lutgard of Aywières*, pp. 222-223.

brides that not a single one in such great multitude was found who suffered either death to her body or harm to her chastity"¹⁰. Sometimes Christ did not allow persecutors to inflict mental pain either, annihilating the cause of the bride's suffering. In those cases, not the *imitatio Christi* is stressed but the loving presence of Christ who intervenes in the lives of the saints.

Christ did, for example, intercede in the *vita* of Ida of Louvain. Just as Mary of Oignies and her husband, Ida was tormented by both devils and relatives¹¹. Here too, the devils are cast as inflictors of pain not just as executors of bodily injury but as agitators and gossips. Along with these devils, people made her life miserable. It was, for instance, a devil who turned Ida's own sister against her, spreading shameful and bitter rumors about her. In Ida's *vita*, Christ is not really put forward as an example to be emulated, rather he is the redeemer who takes away her pain. He appeared to Ida's sister and made her show remorse¹². Christ's defense of his bride more strongly accentuates the relationship between him and the saint than Ida's imitation of Christ's suffering.

A similar event took place when Ida went to take communion. Just as other *Mulieres Religiosae*, Ida yearned passionately for the Eucharist. Because of her frail constitution, she frequently collapsed under the weight of this longing, forcing her to lie down on the floor. This transgressive scene violated the modest movement language associated with the liturgy. This scene of *jubilatio* and *raptus* in the public sphere once again gave the devil a chance to fan the flames of jealousy and prejudice. He encouraged the observers to avenge in their hearts and make them question if the good works performed by the innocent maiden were truly the fruit of God's charity. There were those who insinuated that these things happened through her longing for vainglory. They expected that her bodily suffering was actually a desperate cry for attention and recognition¹³.

Here too, Christ interceded, not as the one who supported the saint or gave meaning to her ridicule, but as the one who made it disappear. At Ida's request, her physical weakness is taken away during communion, so that people could no longer mock her or accuse her of vainglorious

10. *Mary of Oignies*, p. 44.

11. James wrote: "Demons looked at them and regarded them with malice. Worldly people, as well as their own relatives, looked at them and gnashed their teeth against the persons whom they had honoured before when they were wealthy". *Mary of Oignies*, p. 55.

12. *Ida of Louvain*, p. 141.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

ambition¹⁴. The hagiographer fixates on the persecution theme to create an opportunity to defend Ida's motives and to shield her from the craving that damages her divine image. Throughout her life, Ida often staged her exalted status in public spaces that did not always offer safety against condemnation. She must be protected from those who speak evil and, above all, from erroneous interpretations of her sainthood. Ida could not have been presented as a vain saint who had no compunction about showing transgressive behavior in public spaces. Her humility and dependence on Christ had to be explicitly mentioned by her hagiographer and mediator, in order that the readers may draw the right conclusions about the saint and venerate her.

In this second example, Ida's behavior was the source of jeers and humiliation. She did not control this behavior; it simply happened to her. Christ intervened to steer the event in the right direction, redirecting it back to him.

In the case of Christina Mirabilis, Christ intervened to moderate her extravagant expressions of pain. Her dramatic enactment of purgatorial suffering played a central role in the persecution she endured, making her arguably one of the most misunderstood and marginalized among the *Mulieres Religiosae*. In her *vita*, as in those of other saints, persecution emerges as a dominant theme – one that contributes more significantly to her *imitatio Christi* than bodily mortification. Christina's exuberant behavior pushed her to the fringes of society, occupying a liminal space between the earthly and the heavenly. This threshold can be interpreted as a spatial metaphor for purgatory itself – a realm between heaven and earth. As a bridge figure and mediator, Christina inhabited this edge, transforming it into a purgatorial stage where pain was viscerally embodied. She did not resemble a consoling Veronica, but rather a terrifying vision – a living warning of the torments awaiting sinners. Their fearful reactions led to her rejection and exile, which in turn intensified the purgatorial dimension of her performance.

Christina also purposely and explicitly turned against her community as soon as she returned from the dead. When she fled society, because she could no longer support the stench of human bodies, she sought out high peaks, such as the top of the church or of trees. Yet she was not left in peace, as crowds of people and even her own family followed her because they believed the saint to be possessed by demons¹⁵. The

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 215-217.

15. The demons and the circle of acquaintances and friends around the saint are the two groups of characters studied in this chapter. Here they are ironically connected:

beginning of her *vita* revolves around these persecutions that Christina always escaped, while dancing, through divine interventions. More than once her body was wounded in these chases, but she refused treatment and did not want to be seen by doctors, because allowing her wounds to be treated by someone other than Christ himself would have been disgraceful. She was tied and locked up, but could always escape¹⁶. These persecutions only stopped when her body performed a miracle: Her virgin breasts secreted oil, which she then ingested, healing her wounds¹⁷. After this miracle, Christina's *imitatio Christi* through persecution mutated into her role as compassionate spiritual mother, mediator and prophet. The relationship with society was mended and she took up a role for society from her position in the holy margin.

Christ often intervened, helping Christina escape captivity and making her hellish existence bearable. Even after her inclusion in the local community, his intervention was still necessary. The positive influence on her community led the saint to acquire a reputation that went beyond her own region of Sint-Truiden. However, her reputation as prophet had to be subjected to the regulations enforced on other saints. This time, it was not the saint who beseeched God to moderate her miracles, as in the case of Ida of Louvain, but Christina's family who feared that she would relapse into her old role of village fool. They prayed that Christina's miracles might be attuned "in accordance with the usual human state"¹⁸. Henceforth, she would resort less to bodily performances and spoke more as a prophet who could explain the Bible through her mystical knowledge, despite being illiterate. Yet Thomas remarks that Christina did not exceed the boundaries. He notes Christina's great admiration for clergymen, despite the rejection, insults, and pain they often caused her. Thanks to her love for Christ, she also loved the priests who represented Christ on earth – particularly during the Eucharist¹⁹.

Other women deliberately orchestrated the crowd to summon the experience of exclusion, mockery and persecution, to enhance the *imitatio Christi* and to strive for humility. They contemplated possible scenarios

Christina was suspected of demonic possession, causing her own family to turn against her. Her family thus took on the role of the demons and turned the saint's life into a living hell or, in this case, purgatory. Christina is often perceived as a demonic. See B. NEWMAN, *Possessed by the Spirit: Devout Women, Demoniacs, and the Apostolic Life in the Thirteenth Century*, in *Speculum* 73 (1998) 733-770.

16. *Christina the Astonishing*, pp. 136-139.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 138. This miracle invokes the image of Christ as the nourishing mother, which Bernard also used, Folkerts writes. See FOLKERTS, *Een vrome vrouw*, pp. 15-16.

18. *Christina the Astonishing*, p. 139.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 148.

in which this might happen and created scenes that enabled their performance. Take, for instance, Beatrice of Nazareth, who one day pondered the surplus of grace she had received from God during her life and the motherly tenderness he had shown her. She had always found consolation. God had cared for her when she was a child. She had always enjoyed the *jubilatio* given to her when she needed it even when it was inappropriate – especially during Mass. She wondered how she could ever repay God for this affection and stumbled across a problem. She could not imagine a reward of equal value. Finally, she observed the following:

Just as the Lord of mercies, with a view to her salvation, had suffered the disgraces of the passion in his body with a quiet affection of mind, so in her turn Beatrice would suffer disgrace and contumely for him. But how would she expose herself to suffering these injuries when she was revered by everyone as holy, and was venerated as a specially chosen handmaid of God²⁰?

Beatrice devised a plan to recreate the experience of unjust suffering. She resolved to feign madness, thereby provoking others to treat her with contempt. Such behavior would undoubtedly alter how she was perceived. As her hagiographer notes, “She would more perfectly cling to Christ’s footsteps”²¹. Yet ultimately, Beatrice abandoned the plan, recognizing that it would prevent her from fulfilling her daily responsibilities within the convent, including teaching and offering gentle correction. Although staging Christ’s exclusion initially appeared to be a meaningful way to emulate his suffering and repay part of humanity’s debt – not so much in response to his passion, but as a gesture toward God’s inexhaustible love – the practical consequences proved too disruptive.

Her spiritual friend, Ida of Nivelles, did opt for a similar staging of Christ’s exclusion, although the pain it generated served another purpose. Ida’s imitation, and the pain it led to, was apparently meant to soothe her conscience, first and foremost, and can only then be seen as a martyrdom borne for the sake of Christ. The theme of persecution is central to her *vita*. Persecution was an ideal occasion for Ida to show her patience that set her apart from the evil people who hounded her and marred her reputation. She knew all too well that the pain and evil inflicted upon her by these people could not compare to the eternal pain that would follow their death. Ida grew so used to this pain and the constant trials of her patience, that she felt like a fish out of water, a bird without air, when

20. *Beatrice of Nazareth*, pp. 241-243.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 243.

these persecutions and provocations lessened. Without this pain, she feared being led astray. Ida chose to take matters into her own hands:

And so when she had less adversity to bear than usual, she would secretly enter the church and position herself on her knees before the cross and before the ciborium in which the Lord's body was reserved within the pyx, and there, amid tearful sighs and with a half-joking smile, she would whisper to the Lord: "*Why, my sweetest Lord, are you sleeping so long a slumber* (Ps. 43.23), and permitting me, your handmaid, to lack any vexing troubles²²?

Ida created a scene in a public and consecrated space that would doubtlessly lead to reprimands and rumors. The hagiographer suggests that this scandal was necessary to maintain the permanent persecution by and exclusion from the community. This way Ida knew she would be saved because her pain would be rewarded. Only then does the hagiographer mention the martyrdom created by Ida's practices and performances. This martyrdom is dedicated to Christ²³. Ida needed the evil people to experience her own self-sacrifice and election as a saint.

2. *Lover of Wolves and Mad Dogs*

Juliana of Mont Cornillon took this one step further, not only provoking but loving the evil people. This saint used this drama not only to show her patient bearing of suffering, but to connect this suffering to love – not just the love of Christ, but also of those who hounded her. Juliana's *vita* is the best example of this *imitatio Christi*, not only imitating his physical suffering but also the suffering experienced as a result of this performance of exclusion and persecution. She did not suffer this for the sake of her own soul's salvation, but for that of the souls of her tormenters.

According to B. Newman, Juliana of Mont Cornillon was first among equals of the *Mulieres Religiosae* who made their name through their association with the Feast of Corpus Christi. The celebration was instituted at Juliana's instigation, and she labored all her life to put it on the ecclesiastical map. Newman observes that this makes her *vita* unique, as it is primarily dedicated to the validity of the liturgical celebration rather than promoting a cult revolving around Juliana. Her spiritual inspiration was far from unique, but Juliana was the only woman whose dedication was so great that her whole life hinged on the recognition of a feast for

22. *Ida of Nivelles*, p. 89.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 88-90.

the Body of Christ in the Eucharist. To accomplish this, Juliana had to strengthen her own spiritual and mystical life to enhance her credibility²⁴. More than in the other *vitae*, the hagiographer emphasizes the theme of humility that was meant to balance Juliana's fame. This humility is reinforced by also invoking the themes of humiliation and persecution. This persecution could be based on a real historical situation, but is doubtless also a narrative technique used to safeguard the saint from accusations of idleness and self-complacency, potentially fatal to her spiritual growth and her reputation as a saint²⁵.

Her *vita* consists of two books. The first book focuses on her good works and her exemplary behavior related to her visions. The second book examines her persecutions related to the promotion of the feast. Her *vita* turns persecution into a central theme and, just as other texts, connects it to the suffering of Christ and his martyrs. Juliana is a new martyr who is motivated by love for Christ and humanity. Her spiritual life is fed by the persecutions which seem to assail her from all sides, from outsiders and her fellow sisters, who were not sheep, but wolves:

Indeed, those sisters who were no longer sheep but ferocious wolves, despising every kind of spiritual medicine, wished to nurture instead of banishing the disease of vice, and having fallen into delirium, they rejected the energetic hand of the healer. Not only the sisters, but also the men Juliana tried to keep them from meeting, hated her with a vicious hatred (Ps. 24:19) and could not even speak to her civilly. They ground their teeth against her and persecuted her with slander, whispering, enmity, and every means they could devise. For shame! They gave Christ's handmaid evil for good and hatred for her love (Ps. 108:5); they spoke against her with treacherous tongues, and with hateful words they surrounded her who should have been surrounded with roses and lilies of the valley²⁶.

The hagiographer describes an incident in which the citizens of Liège, as "mad dogs", destroyed Juliana's house of prayer, after her

24. See B. NEWMAN, *The Life of Juliana of Mont Cornillon* (Peregrina Translations Series, 13), Toronto, Peregrina, s.d., pp. 7-18 (Introduction), esp. 7-10.

25. According to Newman, the hagiographer had access to reliable sources, appearing to lend this *vita* a higher degree of historical accuracy. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

26. The red roses in this passage symbolize Juliana's martyrdom, the white lilies her virginity. *Juliana of Mont Cornillon*, p. 77. A similar combination of red and white can be found in the *Life of Lutgard*, who is also referred to as a new martyr, a new Agnes. Juliana's desire to suffer a martyr's death immediately recalls a similar desire in Lutgard's *Life*. Juliana, too, suffered a martyrdom of desire, which is equated by her hagiographer with a martyrdom of action. Juliana is described by her hagiographer as both a martyr in deed and in longing. She is subjected to persecutions, physical suffering and bodily mortification, which we can also find in the *Lives* of other women and, to a lesser extent, in the *vita* of Lutgard. Lutgard did not experience persecution and disciplined her body only modestly. She was a martyr in desire only. *Lutgard of Aywieres*, p. 255.

protector, the bishop, passed away. In contrast with this brutal behavior, Juliana comported herself as a true saint, wishing to be an example for the sisters who had remained faithful to her in times of persecution and repudiation: “She made a devout effort to fortify the sisters who were loyal to her with the words and examples of saints, so that they would learn to bear all trials with the utmost patience”²⁷. She reminded them of the persecuted saints, to brace them in these turbulent times. She herself acted as the first martyr, Stephen, as she beseeched God to guard her and her circle against the attacks of the citizens who attempted to wreck their prayer space and dormitory. During this traumatic experience, she and her circle received inner strength while their external dwelling was sacked. By remembering the martyrs and Juliana’s performance of present-day martyrdom, the circle survived without speaking ill of their oppressors²⁸.

A similar scene unfolded when Juliana received shelter from the abbess of a convent in Namur and the citizens once again rose up against her. Juliana was absorbed in prayer, begging for the protection of the bodies and souls of the abbess and her convent as their external surroundings were attacked: “Many times, too, she asked the Lord to let the blows of the imminent scourging fall on her while he mercifully spared the rest”²⁹. Juliana’s compassion for her friends was great, but this is only to be expected, the hagiographer writes, as Juliana loved even her enemies and persecutors and prayed for their salvation. Her prayers for those who hounded her enhanced Juliana’s image as a compassionate saint. Her close friends wondered how this love of her enemy was possible. She replied: “I would like to be put to death once, without merit, and then brought back to life to die again, if those who persecuted me unjustly would be saved”³⁰. The hagiographer goes even further:

“Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (Jn. 15:13). But to lay down a life for enemies is the most exalted love, such as Christ had – for while we were still enemies, we were reconciled to God in the blood of his Son (Rom. 5:8-10). So although Christ’s true lover and imitator did not have love equal to Christ’s (for this never was, is, nor will be possible to any creature), nevertheless she seemed to have loved *like* his, at least in desire. She wanted to die for the salvation of her persecutors without even gaining merit for herself³¹.

27. *Juliana of Mont Cornillon*, p. 114.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*

Juliana did not suffer for her own sake, but for others, although the frequent and evident link the hagiographer makes between Juliana and the martyrs ensures the saint's privileged position in the heavenly hierarchy. A few paragraphs after the section describing the attack on the Namur convent, the hagiographer notes Juliana's desire for a heavenly union with the Lord and for her admission as a daughter of the heavenly Jerusalem as one of the Holy City's own daughters. The hagiographer reminds the reader of the preceding passage in which Juliana clearly showed her willingness to die for her persecutors and enemies. This readiness is rooted in her endless yearning to die for her love of the Crucified. The hagiographer clarifies this in the following lines:

I do not repent, virgin of Christ, that I have called you a martyr, for why should I doubt that you will be added to the choirs of martyrs? The martyrdom that was theirs in act was yours in desire. For, as I remember I said in the first book, when you meditated so frequently on the Lord's Passion and your soft and tender heart melted before his face like wax before the fire (Ps. 67:3), you often desired with a great desire to suffer death on the cross for love of the Crucified, even before all living. And should I not claim you as a martyr in desire for this reason also, because it is known that you wanted to die for the salvation of your enemies and persecutors? I recall now that one of the saints left us a reminder in his celebrated writings that it is a kind of martyrdom to mortify one's limbs on earth. To be sure, he says, it is less horrible than the kind in which they are pierced by iron, but more tiresome because of its long duration. If this is true, or rather, because it is true (its source is in fact St. Bernard, whose teaching is like a sun and moon for the whole Church), then no one of sound mind would hesitate, virgin of Christ, to say you are a glorious martyr even in deed³².

The hagiographer does not really connect Juliana's unique position as a virgin of Christ to her physical suffering or her persecutions, but to the desire and the love she displayed in spite of these ordeals³³. In Juliana's *vita*, the pain she suffered for and as Christ served as a catalyst to absorb even more pain, and to love Christ and those nearby (loved ones and enemies) even more. This is apparent in the sections describing the saint's exclusion and persecution. Juliana and her hagiographer persist in the idea of redemptive pain, including the following of Christ in his banishment. In her *vita*, a nuanced theology is elaborated around this theme, which

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 135-136.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 40. Her hagiographer wrote: "From your first years you thoroughly mortified not only your body but also your senses; you suffered constant serious infirmity; you endured many grave illnesses; you bore countless injuries, slanders, tribulations, and persecutions for the name of Christ, in which you always behaved gently and courageously". *Ibid.*, p. 136.

not only places humility and the virtue of patience at the center, but also imbues this form of suffering with a redemptive meaning. This pain does not only contribute to Juliana's own spiritual growth – to her own salvation – but to that of her spiritual friends, and even her enemies. The distribution of salvation through the figure of Juliana is based on the biblical idea of loving one's neighbor – not only friends, but enemies. Juliana's compassion for her neighbors was so great that her own suffering did not turn her against her enemies, but only strengthened her love for them.

3. *Alien Love*

Juliana's *vita* contrasts persecutors with the compassionate saint who followed Christ not only in his suffering, but also in his love. A comparable contrast can be found in the works of Hadewijch. The mystical author conceptualized wicked people as *vremden* (aliens, outsiders) an idea I believe to be crucial to Hadewijch's mystical-theological system. Hadewijch used them, first and foremost, to delineate her thinking vis-à-vis this ignorant and wicked group. The mystic called in the strangers to sharpen the contours of her love mysticism, similar to how Ruusbroec invoked the Brethren of the Free Spirit to refine his mysticism. The aliens do not understand the sophistication of Hadewijch's mystical theology. In the first place, Hadewijch's "aliens" can be interpreted as a historical reality that confronted the writer.

Van Mierlo already points to the historical context that shaped Hadewijch's oeuvre, particularly her *Letters*. He notes that the writer testified in her *Letters* to her opposition against the negative influences that threatened to tear apart her circle. Van Mierlo wonders if this may have been induced by envy and jealousy among women. Maybe Hadewijch's personality was the cause of these conflicts³⁴. Mommaers elaborates on this possibility and suggests that it was Hadewijch's task, as the leader of her circle, to keep the other women on the straight and narrow. The problem was that Hadewijch proposed a very radical mystical-theological doctrine from which she barely deviated. This surely led to the conflicts suggested in her *Letters*³⁵. She wrote: "[they] are beginning to interfere with us here and to destroy our company in order to disband us, and

34. J. VAN MIERLO, *Hadewijch: Brieven II* (Leuvense studiën en tekstuutgaven, 14), Antwerpen, Standaard Boekhandel, 1947, p. 130.

35. MOMMAERS, *Hadewijch*, pp. 39-40. Simons adopts Mommaers' interpretation and assumes it is historically accurate. He links Hadewijch's experience to the Beguine movement in general – he sees her as a Beguine. The Beguines also organized groups under the

especially me, whom they wish to leave with no one!"³⁶. Those most closely involved in her circle hurt her the most when they decided to turn against her, earning them different epithets like "false brethren", *vremden* and even "Lucifers".

In the following paragraphs, I argue that these "aliens" should predominantly be seen as a theological construction that enabled the mystic to further explore her *imitatio Christi*, based on humiliation and rejection, and to clarify her own teachings. The aliens highlight their differences with her mystical doctrine, which is based on the imitation of the human Christ who was himself subjected to persecution and repudiation.

By employing the concept of mystical culture, I can analyze Hadewijch's circle. Hadewijch's elite group was an epicenter in the mystical landscape, a hotbed that spread radical ideas. Yet Hadewijch's own circle was unstable and influenced by its environment. Hadewijch's vision clashed with the lax and watered-down practices she found in her environment and circle alike. These clashes are a central theme in her works. Yet this does not necessarily mean that they can be traced back to historical events. The problems confronting the historical writer are certainly plausible, but they predominantly serve a theological purpose. It is important not to ignore the motif of persecution, visible in the *vitae*, in the work of the mystic. The aliens became interlocutors of the didactically aware writer, while the "false brethren" offered Hadewijch the opportunity to create a scenography in which her literary *persona* could fully imitate Christ.

Thus Hadewijch could differentiate herself from the masses, just as saints set themselves apart through excessive and transgressive imitation of Christ. Hadewijch did this in a primarily literary and theological fashion. Her theology was transgressive and she made this explicit by staging the aliens as opponents. She wrote:

[...] you must also be aware that these are doings of Love, and that this must lead aliens to wonder at me and abhor me. For they cannot work in the domain of Love, because they know neither her coming nor her going. And with these persons I have little shared their customs in their eating, drinking, or sleeping; I have not dressed up in their clothes, or colors, or outward magnificence. And from all the things that can gladden the human heart, from what it can obtain or receive, I never derived joy except for brief moments from the experience of the Love that conquers all³⁷.

supervision of a mistress and were also faced with persecution and dissolution. See SIMONS, *City of Ladies*, pp. 135-136.

36. HADEWIJCH, *Letter 5*, pp. 55-56.

37. HADEWIJCH, *Letter 29*, p. 114.

Hadewijch's text is performative and dramatic. The reader is invited to imagine the scene in which the literary figure, Hadewijch, goes among the people and – just as the saints – sets herself apart from the multitude. Hadewijch created a counterculture in which she made clear that she no longer belonged to the earthly order. She also, in passing, rejected an experience-seeking culture. Hadewijch's text is no less narrative than the *vitae*. The writer was aware of the force of imagination and the power of storytelling. She created an antagonist who helped accentuate her own mystical-theological doctrine.

In the large group of aliens, Hadewijch paid special attention to the “false brethren”. These traitors originally belonged to her own intimate circle. They personify the greatest sinners, the Lucifers, who had access to Hadewijch's mystical teachings yet still became apostate, in her fifth vision³⁸. The aliens did not stay at the fringes of mystical culture: Their influence reached all the way into Hadewijch's epicenter and destabilized her “school of love”. The aliens who became part of her circle, the “false brethren”, corroded the identity of Hadewijch's circle and forced Hadewijch to reestablish her own identity as a mystic.

The writer dramatized this instability by connecting it to the experience of pain. In her fifth letter, she wrote: “It is great perfection to suffer all things from all people. But, God knows, the greatest perfection of all is to suffer from false brethren who seem to be *members of the household of the faith* (Gal. 6:10)”³⁹. Hadewijch used the breach of trust in her intimate circle to come to a deeper experience of pain. On the basis of biblical motifs, she connected this pain with the experience of early Christians and even with the pain of Christ himself. The “false brethren” served as building blocks in Hadewijch's mystical theology and were crucial components of her conceptualization, interpretation, and valorization of pain. The “brethren” were not nameless strangers but loved ones who betrayed her trust. Unlike Mary and Juliana, Hadewijch did not go on loving them. Instead, she learned how to love and hate with Love, trusting the final judgement in God's hands⁴⁰.

In hagiographic and mystical texts alike, suffering due to persecution is a dominant theme and is considered theologically valuable. This experience is consistently connected to the passion and pain experienced by Christ. Persecution offers a way to imitate Christ in an often externally visible way that does not necessarily coincide with excessive suffering.

38. HADEWIJCH, *Vision* 5, p. 276.

39. HADEWIJCH, *Letter* 5, p. 55.

40. HADEWIJCH, *Vision* 5, pp. 276-277.

Persecution is sometimes passively suffered, sometimes actively sought. If persecution is staged and this experience invoked, its purpose is to give the saint another opportunity to display patience or, in some cases, infinite love and compassion, extended even to enemies. Christ can be imitated in his suffering and his love. Hadewijch used this theme to bring the “aliens” onto the stage, as the personification and foreshadowing of the pain these people could cause. The injury which could be inflicted by aliens and false brethren went so far that Hadewijch associated it with the pain that could be caused by God/Love’s betrayal. While pain was externalized in the *exempla* and *vitae*, in the form of demons, the demons now entered one’s trusted circle disguised as apparent friends.

ACT II

INTERIORIZING PAIN

Having examined saintly performances that reenact Christ's external suffering and bodily torment – carefully documented and theologically framed by hagiographers – I now turn inward. This chapter focuses on passages in which authors construct virtual landscapes, imagined by the reader, the hagiographer, and the mystic alike. Within these inner terrains, pain imagery functions as a set of signposts, guiding the reader toward mystical insight. The texts serve as tools for devotional practice and spiritual growth. These chapters explore the physically invisible, yet spiritually vivid, virtual space in which pain is internalized and shared through compassion – particularly as cultivated within the mystical centers of the diocese of Liège during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries¹. By foregrounding compassion, I examine pain in relation to another central theme in mystical literature: love. These inner landscapes require a heightened level of mystical literacy. Pain is no longer feared or externally inflicted; it is embraced inwardly, through a loving and contemplative response. In this way, the chapters contrast with the previous ones: pain is not performed on the surface of the saintly body, but encountered within the soul.

Christ appears again as protagonist in these stories of pain. He is the central figure of this process of internalization and cultivation of pain. Not only his suffering body was imitated – his anguished and loving soul also demanded admiration, meditation and even imitation. Mystical culture, for the most part, participated in a collective meditation on the suffering of Christ, in com-*passion*, literally “to suffer with”. Compassion was not exclusive to Christ and his saints, but was encouraged among the lay population and the mystically illiterate as well. They were allowed to voluntarily suffer with Christ through visualizing, meditating, and co-experiencing his pain in their inner space. It revolved less around bodily mortification, humiliation, and persecution, and more around keeping the memory of Christ's suffering alive within the Christian community. This meditation on redeeming pain was passed down from generation to

1. Spencer-Hall calls these visionary and visualized spaces a kind of divine “virtual reality”. See SPENCER-HALL, *Medieval Saints*, p. 194.

generation, forging a collective memory that allowed everyone to partake in Christ's redemptive pain via compassion and co-redemption. It was performed in the Christian liturgy, but also developed in literary, visual, and material culture. Everyone could access and, in a way, contribute to this collective memory and imagination, thanks to the democratization of mysticism in folk traditions and visual language².

How, then, could saints – figures of spiritual exception – distinguish themselves from the broader community, when the experience of internalized pain was accessible to all? Previously, I discussed how saints set themselves apart through voluntary and extreme physical suffering. This chapter, however, explores more nuanced distinctions within the inner realm of the soul – within the imagination itself. One key difference lies in the origin of the imagery: whereas ordinary believers meditate on devotional images, saints and mystics receive visions directly from God. The former is a human devotional act; the latter, a mystical experience and divine intervention. These visions, though divinely inspired, could in turn stimulate meditative practices within popular mystical culture. A second distinction concerns the depth of compassion. While all believers could engage in affective meditation on Christ's wounded body, thirteenth-century saints were expected to go further. Their compassion had to be excessive – not only in their imitation of physical suffering, but also in their imitation of Christ's boundless love. Saints did not merely suffer; they loved without measure.

This act's central theme is infinite compassion. This compassion was not meant to be directed toward Christ only, but also toward one's neighbor; it was not exclusive. Saints and mystics, setting themselves apart from society, acted as mediators. Their meditation and compassion kindled emulation of Christ's love for his neighbor. They took pity on their communities, which they manifested through their active involvement in good works that transcended everyday reality. In her research on the Liège's medieval Cistercian spirituality, Simone Roisin argues that the focus on inner life entered the thirteenth-century saints' cults via the Bernardian spirituality and began to dominate the *vitae*. The *vitae* no longer focused on the saints' outward life or their posthumous cult, but instead studied and communicated the saints' inner life. This thirteenth-century innovation in hagiography and devotional culture was brought

2. Spaapen notes that devotions to the passion took an affective turn in the Low Countries at the end of the eleventh century. In the following centuries, the suffering of Christ's soul became as important as his physical pain. He argues that theologians increasingly refined the theme of his suffering. See B. SPAAPEN, *Middeleeuwse passiemystiek*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 35 (1961) 167-299, pp. 170-175.

about by the Cistercians, Roisin contends. She has shown how saintly ideals in the Cistercian milieu of the thirteenth century evolved both the active and the contemplative life³. Thanks to their personal relationship with God (which exceeded in degree that of ordinary people), they could act as mediators for their communities. Saints could then intercede and attempt to convince God to have mercy on the sinners. For thirteenth-century saints, this excess of compassion and love for their neighbor was the ideal way to strengthen active involvement in their communities as well as foster their own personal, mystical growth.

Hagiographers documented the saints' *caritas* not only in corporal acts of compassion – such as teaching and tending to the sick – but also in spiritual works, including prayers for the salvation of both the living and the dead. One particularly striking manifestation of this invisible *caritas* was the saving of souls from purgatory, a mystical practice reserved for saints who could freely traverse the boundaries between heaven and earth, life and death. Only saints were granted access to these liminal and virtual spaces. The theme of purgatory gained prominence in thirteenth-century literature and became an ideal setting for saints to demonstrate their excessive compassion. They did so not only by suffering voluntarily in imitation of Christ, but also by assuming the purgatorial torments of sinners, thereby reducing or even suspending divine punishment. Purgatory was shaped – imagined – through the lived experiences of these saints and through the theological reflections of mystical authors and hagiographers. These writers were tasked with probing the doctrinal implications of purgatorial intercession, often navigating the tension between divine justice and saintly compassion. Bynum notes that “Mystics, visionaries, and ordinary pious folk became increasingly interested in the progress and experience of the period between death and beatific vision”⁴. Saints, and especially female saints, contributed to these grass-root theologies, which Mulder-Bakker calls “common theology”. She states that they heavily influenced the sermons and hagiographies⁵.

3. The combination of both lives is represented in hagiographic literature via allusions to the Old Testament figures Leah and Rachel. Leah symbolized the active life, while Rachel represented the contemplative. Their New Testament counterparts – Martha and Mary – were even more influential in medieval sainthood. Roisin also notes that co-redemption became a dominant theme in Cistercian literature and was connected to saintly figures such as both Martha and Maria. See ROISIN, *L'hagiographie cistercienne*, pp. 140; 171; 245-247. I notice that this model of sainthood went beyond the Cistercian hagiographic literature and resurface in mystical literature as well.

4. See BYNUM, *Resurrection*, p. 291.

5. See MULDER-BAKKER, *Lives of the Anchoresses*, p. 16.

In what follows, I will examine the insights and implications of this “common theology”, with particular attention to visionary activity and purgatorial practices. These contributions reach into the heart of mystical theology, where saints and mystics either affirmed or challenged traditional theological imagery and the language of pain⁶. While some texts supported a straightforward model of exchange – temporary suffering in return for eternal reward – others sought to transcend this logic, exploring instead the dynamic interplay between pain, love, and desire. Such explorations required a higher degree of mystical literacy. The insights offered by hagiographic and mystical texts were directed toward a more mystically literate audience, capable of internalizing radical and often conflicting imagery, and of critically engaging with established theological paradigms. To grasp the complexity of these mystical-theological passages, readers had to truly experience compassion and reflect deeply on its nature. As a result, dramatic and graphic depictions of Christ’s and the saints’ suffering gradually gave way to intimate and contemplative reflections on the divine. The intended audience narrowed: no longer the broad mystical culture and its devotional periphery, but the inner circle surrounding the mystical epicenters.

I begin my reflections on imagined and virtual landscapes of pain by examining the meditative imagery of Christ found in the *vitae*. Particular attention is given to recurring motifs such as the side wound and the Sacred Heart. These images served as focal points for affective devotion, yet mystical theologians both encouraged and resisted their graphic representation. As the purpose of the texts evolved, so too did their intended audience. Visual depictions that invited broad meditation were gradually replaced by more abstract theological insights – insights that illuminated the intimate relationship between the saint and God, and that required a more refined mystical literacy to interpret.

I then move on to the theme of purgatory. Here, I observe a similar dynamic of naive representation that starts with folk legends and imagery, but gradually makes way for more profound mystical insights. I will pay

6. Scholars have not taken their active involvement in articulating mystical theologies seriously. Herman Roodenburg argues that affective devotions are often perceived as childish by them. However, he states that these devotions are often very complex and well thought through, supported by both theological literature and art. Affective does not imply a simple emotional reaction to an image, but a response that touches one’s entire being – including the senses, intellectual faculties and memory. Portraying the saints’ affective relationship with visions and images is therefore more theologically challenging than many scholars have conceded. See H.W. ROODENBURG, *Empathy in the Making: Crafting the Believer’s Emotions in the Late Medieval Low Countries*, in *Bijdragen en mededelingen betreffende de geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 129 (2014) 41-62, pp. 44-46.

particular attention to the saint Lutgard of Aywières, who left behind a treasure trove of visual and pain language conceived by her own meditation. Le Goff, a pioneer in the research on the doctrine of purgatory, calls her a “purgatorial saint”⁷. In contrast with Lutgard’s practice of saving souls, some *Mulieres Religiosae* appear to have rejected these practices. I thus aim to dispel the perception of the *Mulieres* as a monolithic bloc, by illustrating the multitude of interpretations and conceptualizations found in different *vitae* – some written by the same hagiographer, some by others.

Finally, I turn to Hadewijch, who offers a compelling critique of practices like those of Lutgard within her mystical theology. Her argument brings us to the heart of Hadewijch’s spiritual vision and marks the transition from act two to act three: a shift from the theological framework of reward to one of desire in the interpretation and valorization of pain. In the next chapter, pain and love will intersect repeatedly – until they become inseparable.

7. See J. LE GOFF, *La naissance du Purgatoire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1981, pp. 434-436.

VIII

VIRTUAL LANDSCAPES AND PAIN IMAGERY

Pain is not only voiced within a textual medium; expressing pain is a multi-sensory and multimedial enterprise. Within Late Medieval culture, the sense of sight cannot be underestimated. Its theology may aptly be described as imaginary, rooted in a visual culture where images are central. Visual representations, animated objects, and bodies are deeply intertwined. While the study of multifaceted images reveals rich layers of conceptualization, interpretation, and theological valorization, their agency and transformative potential often remain underexplored in classical text-based approaches to literature and theology. Importantly, medieval authors did not operate with rigid distinctions between physical, artistic, mental, metaphorical, or textual images. Instead, they recognized the fluidity and overlap among these forms. Images traversed the boundaries between material and mental existence, inhabiting artworks, texts, and the collective imagination. Their omnipresence granted them profound influence in medieval society¹. Mystical authors were acutely aware of the power images held in late medieval visual culture – particularly in their depictions of suffering, crucified bodies, and gaping wounds, which proved especially effective in conveying mystical-theological insight.

In this section I explore the use of pain imagery and the mystagogical path the authors construct for the reader in order to guide their inner eyes towards more hidden knowledge of the divine. This hidden knowledge can only be reached by a profound and affective interaction between the reader and the active image that is animated by the divine. Guiding the illiterate to this first steps towards mystical literacy urges the texts to embrace the full potential of the image which is both praised and feared in traditional Christian culture. This chapter illustrates the inward journey and the transformation caused by the pain imagery when it comes to both the protagonists of the texts and their witnesses, the readers.

1. H.H. LOHFERT JORGENSEN – L.K. SKINNEBACH – H. LAUGERUD, *Introduction*, in IID. (eds.), *Animation: Between Magic, Miracles and Mechanics: Principles of Life in Medieval Imagery*, Aarhus, Aarhus University Press, 2023, 9-42, p. 23.

1. *Painful Memories and Dangerous Visions*

Images were an indispensable element of Christian art and devotion throughout the medieval period, valued especially for their didactic power. Pope Gregory the Great recognized their pedagogical, affective, and mnemonic potential in conveying the story of salvation to the *illiterati*². His narrative use of sacred imagery, however, contrasts sharply with the Byzantine tradition, which often positioned the image as a divine prototype, as Jeffrey Hamburger notes. Over time, the didactic function of images evolved. By the Late Middle Ages, images had become *simulacra* – no longer mere representations of the divine, but sites of divine presence, either within the beholder's inner world or in the material image itself. Their potency increased, and they were no longer directed solely at the unlettered. Indeed, the very notion of illiteracy must be reconsidered in a culture that had become highly visual and oriented toward affective knowledge. This transformation unfolded within monastic and mystical traditions, particularly in female religious circles. Devotional images did not merely narrate salvation – they actively participated in the redemption of the individual soul³.

The deep fascination with images and their capacity to connect the believer with the divine also provoked resistance from certain monastic authorities. Bernard of Clairvaux, for example, sought to protect monastic – and later mystical – culture from what he perceived as the corrupting influence of visual representation, which he associated with a “carnal audience”. He feared that images could mislead the soul, diverting its attention from God and anchoring it in sensuality and materiality. In his *Apologia*, Bernard urged his fellow monks to pursue the ideal of imageless devotion. Yet his stance was not entirely iconoclastic. Bernard acknowledged the pedagogical value of images, especially for novices and the mystically untrained. In his commentary on the Song of Songs, he offered examples of sacred imagery that could inspire virtue, dispel temptation, and guide the soul from the love of Christ's humanity toward a more spiritual love. In his commentary on the Song of Songs, he offered some examples:

The soul at prayer should have before it a sacred image (*sacra imago*) of the God-man, in his birth or infancy or as he was teaching, or dying, or rising, or ascending. Whatever form it takes, this image must bind the soul

2. H. LAUGERUD, *The Miraculous Image: Vision, Rhetoric and Animation*, in LOHFERT JORGENSEN – SKINNEBACH – LAUGERUD (eds.), *Animation*, 173-204, p. 195.

3. See J.E. HAMBURGER, *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany*, New York, Zone, 1998, pp. 111-112.

with love of virtue and expel carnal vices, eliminate temptations and quiet desires. I think this is the principal reason why the invisible God willed to be seen in the flesh and to converse with men, who are unable to love in any other way, by first drawing them to the salutary love of his humanity, and then to a spiritual love⁴.

Bernard's endorsement of sacred imagery was conditional and deeply ambivalent. He legitimized its use through the incarnation, arguing that God's decision to become visible in the flesh justified the pedagogical function of images – provided they were didactic, morally edifying, and ultimately relinquished as the soul matured in *contemplatio*. For Bernard, images could assist the novice but were never to mediate the true relationship between God and the soul. He sought to protect the mystical core of monastic life by relegating visual representations to its periphery. Yet Bernard's iconoclastic impulse did not prevail. His nuanced exegesis of the Song of Songs paradoxically nourished a flourishing tradition of sacred imagery. This pictorial turn permeated monastic culture and, as Hamburger notes, found fertile ground in the mystical theology of Liège, where visual devotion became popular across social strata⁵.

While Hamburger has emphasized the significant role of visual media in medieval devotional culture, this chapter shifts attention back to textual traditions and the intermedial transmission of images – those that circulate between bodies, objects, and the faculty of *memoria*. The influential work of Mary Carruthers has drawn scholarly attention to the indispensable role of imagination and memory in medieval art, literature, and culture more broadly. Medieval authors were acutely aware of the rhetorical power of imagery. Carruthers introduces the concept of *ductus* to describe how a text guides readers through its structure and sets them in motion within it. The text becomes a spatial journey, shaped by a rich imaginary, inviting readers to internalize its content through embodied and affective engagement⁶.

Vivid descriptions serve as a rhetorical technique to conjure images and scenes before the reader's inner eye, activating the senses and resonating with the reader's lived experience and embodied knowledge⁷.

4. BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX, *On the Song of Songs*, p. 152.

5. See HAMBURGER, *The Visual*, pp. 113-114.

6. M.J. CARRUTHERS, *The Concept of Ductus, or Journeying through a Work of Art*, in EAD. (ed.), *Rhetoric beyond Words: Delight and Persuasion in the Arts of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature), New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010, 190-213, p. 190.

7. See M.J. CARRUTHERS, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd edition, Cambridge – New York, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 156; 200.

Through this sensory engagement, images come alive within the *memoria* – the faculty of the soul – where they affectively move the soul and transform the body. In this framework, memory is not merely cognitive but corporeal: a form of sense memory. The *memoria* is embedded in the body, and its sensory operations establish a continuum between the external and internal realms. As such, these images become ideal agents for tracing the dynamic interplay between outer and inner experience – an interplay that is central to both mystical theology and the conceptualization of spiritual transformation⁸.

Mental images possessed the capacity to represent a higher reality and, in certain contexts, to render the divine perceptible within the human person. Among the multitude of images stored in the *memoria*, some were considered to hold significantly greater agency and transformative power. These privileged images – referred to as visions – are central to the genre of visionary literature, which, as B. Newman argues, reached its zenith in the thirteenth-century mystical culture⁹. Such visions transcended ordinary cognition, offering access to divine knowledge through affective and imaginal experience.

These visions took place outside rational consciousness, during ecstasy, described as *excessus mentis*. Augustine, followed by Bernard of Clairvaux and William of Saint-Thierry, had already discussed visionary ecstasy and the Cistercian tradition subsumed it in its spirituality. However, the thirteenth-century visionaries expanded the traditional notions, especially in the diocese of Liège. According to Alcantara Mens, the vision tradition developed there differed from that of Hildegard of Bingen, the Rhineland mystic. Mens contends that Hildegard mainly experienced visions of a prophetic nature, while the visions of the men and women of Liège were aimed at reaching a more profound internalization, in which suffering was given a place¹⁰.

Although visions initially emerged within enclosed monastic settings – among monks, nuns, and anchoresses – Newman argues that they gradually permeated lay devotional culture. By the end of the Middle Ages, this shift gave rise to two opposing tendencies. On one side, a segment

8. According to McGinn, this new type of visions contradicts Augustine's classic three-fold division: bodily, spiritual, and intellectual vision. These visions involved the whole human being and combined all three kinds of vision in one. The body was not eschewed; the complete sensorium was engaged during visionary episodes. The visions were not static contemplations, but impassioned experiences of the whole human. See MCGINN, *Flowering*, pp. 155-156.

9. See B. NEWMAN, *What Did It Mean to Say "I Saw"?* *The Clash between Theory and Practice in Medieval Visionary Culture*, in *Speculum* 80 (2005) 1-43, pp. 8-11.

10. See MENS, *Oorsprong en betekenis*, p. 128.

of fourteenth-century religious culture fully embraced visuality, prompting the production of devotional scripts designed to guide lay practitioners in elite spiritual exercises. Thirteenth-century visionary literature, which had once documented the unique experiences of mystics, was now being repurposed into manuals that enabled ordinary believers to visualize the same sacred scenes. Newman highlights the growing ambiguity between “I visualize” and “I saw”, with the latter conferring a form of spiritual authority¹¹.

As visionary practices became increasingly accessible to lay believers – especially through popular manuals like the *Meditations on the Life of Christ* – concerns arose about the legitimacy of such experiences. Newman notes that intentional visions had long been tolerated when confined to cloistered settings and interpreted within the framework of monastic piety. However, when lay men and women began to make prophetic claims based on cultivated visions, ecclesiastical unease intensified.

Elliott highlights the resulting tensions, particularly between female visionaries and the male clerics responsible for assessing their authenticity. The visionary experience, once a privileged mode of divine encounter, became a contested space. Pope Gregory the Great warned that Satan could appear in the guise of Christ, while James of Vitry believed that Satan revealed himself to both the virtuous and the sinful. As accusations of heresy and false prophecy grew more frequent, the credibility of visionary claims – especially those made by women – was increasingly called into question¹².

McGinn’s analysis of the theological discourse surrounding visionary experience reveals that authenticity was ultimately judged by the content of the vision. A vision was considered credible if it conveyed theological and spiritual wisdom that could nourish the reader’s faith¹³. In this evaluative framework, the role of mystical theologians – especially hagiographers – became crucial. They were responsible for guiding readers through the interpretive process, safeguarding them from misreading or misusing visionary material. By carefully selecting and framing images, these authors ensured that the visual and visionary content served the spiritual growth of the reader, rather than leading them astray.

The protagonists of visionary and imaginative texts were not merely portrayed as saints to be admired from a distance; they were also

11. NEWMAN, *What Did It Mean to Say “I Saw”?*, p. 6.

12. See D. ELLIOTT, *True Presence/False Christ: The Antinomies of Embodiment in Medieval Spirituality*, in *Mediaeval Studies* 64 (2002) 241-265, pp. 246; 254; 263.

13. See MCGINN, *Flowering*, pp. 26-30.

presented as models for imitation. This dual function introduced a fundamental ambiguity into the reception of visionary experience, particularly within the democratized mystical culture of the fourteenth century. As visionary practices became more accessible, the boundary between admiration and emulation blurred. Hagiographers responded by crafting richly detailed depictions of images and scenes – often centered on the suffering Christ – that invited readers not only to contemplate but also to internalize and reenact the spiritual journey of the saint¹⁴.

2. *Sliding through the Side Wound*

The literal visualization of Christ's suffering marked the first milestone on the inward path toward mystical growth. In the Liégeois mystical tradition, scenes from the passion were adapted to cultivate a culture of compassion, enriched by virtuous imagery that invited believers to respond affectively to the story of salvation. These images were not passive representations but active agents: once absorbed into the soul's memory, they came alive through sensory resonance, triggering a deep emotional engagement with what was depicted. When the reader or viewer entered into this affective relationship – body and soul – a transformation of the inner world became possible. Suffering was no longer shunned as a harsh external reality, but internalized through meditative engagement with visual and pain language. Pain, reframed through the lens of love, became the object of a contemplative gaze. In this way, images served as mediators between human misery and divine compassion.

The selected passages from hagiographies and mystical treatises reveal a range of functions attributed to the image of Christ's wounds. These wounds often appear within dramatic visionary performances, serving to affirm the saint's spiritual authority and visionary status. At the same time, they offer readers a prototype – an imaginal scene that can be visualized and reexperienced in meditation, granting access to mystical knowledge. The wounds also function as spatial metaphors: sacred openings or doorways through which the reader is invited to enter and contemplate divine mystery. In some texts, this contemplative engagement becomes so profound that the soul of the saint – or even the reader – is

14. See D. ARASSE, *Entre dévotion et culture: Fonctions de l'image religieuse au XIV^e siècle*, in L'École française de Rome, *Faire Croire: Modalités de la diffusion et de la réception des messages religieux du XII^e au XV^e siècle* (Publications de l'École française de Rome, 51), Roma, École française de Rome, 1981, 131-146.

described as being wounded in return, mirroring Christ's suffering and deepening the bond of compassion.

The suffering body of Christ could be vividly imagined by all, regardless of literacy or theological training. Through meditative visualization within the *memoria*, readers entered into an affective relationship with the wounded Christ, forging bonds of compassion that extended to saints and fellow believers. This compassionate engagement opened the path to mystical knowledge – insight into Christ's pain and divine love. The shared language of suffering enabled a reciprocal exchange: pain became a medium through which salvation was communicated. Such images did not merely evoke empathy; they catalyzed a transformative process within the soul. Among these, the wound and the heart stood out as potent symbols, representing both the suffering body and the interiorization of divine mystery. It was therefore the task of mystical theologians and hagiographers to guide interpretation, ensuring that these powerful images were theologically sound and spiritually fruitful as they entered the imagination of the faithful.

The previous act dealt with displaying the wounded body as a performative and narrative strategy to confront the reader with a visceral response caused by an excessive pain experience. At first, this display causes repulsion and adoration. The documented pain performances are witnessed via the perspective of the author who provides the right *mise-en-scène*, the right mystical-theological context. The mystically illiterate, nevertheless, remains an outsider and learns through these examples how to live a proper Christian life to avoid eternal pain and damnation.

The same *vitae* can also be read by more advanced readers who are encouraged to visualize the wounded bodies of the saint, and especially the wounded body of Christ who appears to the saints in visions and, indirectly, via the documented visionary activity of the saint, to the reader. This section, rather literally, zooms in on the side wound of Christ which is shown to the saint and the reader. Sliding through the side wound, the reader is invited to turn inwards and engage with the imagery on an affective and personal level. Only by actively imagining the depicted scenes and imagery, the reader gains mystical-theological knowledge.

The mystical-theological knowledge associated with the wounded body of Christ and especially his side wound is embedded in a long textual and visual tradition. The motif of the wound was pushed to the forefront of twelfth-century mystical imagery by the theological interpretations of Bernard of Clairvaux and William of Saint-Thierry. These Cistercian authors were in turn indebted to an exegetic tradition that connected the

Song of Songs' wounded bride to the soul¹⁵. Building on Origen's exegesis of the Song, the wounded bride resurfaced in Gregory the Great's works. William was familiar with both works and commented on the same biblical verse (*vulnerata caritate ego sum*), Faesen argues¹⁶. William interpreted this verse by seeing the bride as the personification of the soul, wounded by God as Love. God hurt the bride in two ways: outwardly and inwardly. On the outside, the body was punished in order to return the soul to its righteous path. On the inside, Love pierced the soul with arrows or a lance. These weapons symbolized the desire Love kindled in the soul, inducing the soul to turn away from the sinful world, longingly directing itself to God. Love injured the soul and restored her to health by leading her once again to the true path. She caused the soul to yearn for her heavenly Bridegroom, Christ¹⁷. The inner wounding is represented by the arrows and the lance. These were the metaphorical weapons that the lovers used to wound one another. The wounds symbolized the lovers' game and represent the act of love as a dramatic event that could be visualized and interpreted.

A dramatic and narrative approach to the wounds also proliferated in visual images. Love was portrayed as the allegorical personification of a virtue capable (as an embodied character) of piercing Christ's side. Wounds were dramatically represented; they were the result of the bodies wounding each other. Through compassion, spectators were invited to identify with the wounded body, although some also chose to further explore the role of the inflictor, as they sought to pierce, like the lance, through to the heart of Christ¹⁸.

This piercing movement – guiding the spectator through Christ's side wound toward his Sacred Heart – reveals the spatial qualities of the

15. In his interpretation of the Song of Songs Origen introduced the image of the wound and the idea that the lovers wound each other, according to Fulton. Centuries later, she says, John of Fécamp described in his *Libellus* how he longed to be hurt by the arrows of love that pierced his heart (Isa 49,2). Bernard of Clairvaux also used the image of the piercing arrows and directed them not only at himself, but at Mary, whom he greatly revered. Mary was stabbed by an arrow of Christ's love when she witnessed her Son die on the cross. See FULTON, *From Judgment to Passion*, pp. 169; 303-305.

16. Faesen argues that, in his *Excerpta ex libris beati Gregorii*, William of Saint-Thierry built on Gregory's interpretation of the Song of Songs, developed in his *Moralia*. According to Faesen, William was also inspired by Ambrose of Milan's *Expositio psalmi CXVIII*. Cf. FAESEN, *Begeerte*, p. 79.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 76-79.

18. Hamburger notes that female spectators were invited to identify with Lady Love in the guise of a bride who wounds Christ on the cross, attempting to penetrate his inner world. He observes that this event is staged in the images of the Psalter and Hours of Bonne of Luxembourg and the stained-glass window of Wienhausen. See HAMBURGER, *The Visual*, pp. 121-123.

wounded body. The gaze is no longer passive; it becomes a form of orientation, a navigational act within a sacred topography. The body of Christ opens itself to penetration, and the wound transforms into a gateway through abstraction. William of Saint-Thierry captures this mystical desire in *On Contemplating God*, writing: “Like Thomas, that man of desires, I want to see and touch the whole of him and – what is more – to approach the most holy wound in his side, the portal of the ark that is there made, and that not only to put my finger or my whole hand into it, but wholly enter into Jesus’ very heart”¹⁹. William compared the side wound with Noah’s Ark. As William contemplated Christ, he said that he became like Thomas, who wanted to touch and enter Christ’s wound, which he also called the gates of the ark. He wanted to enter the ark completely, accessing Christ’s heart and God’s manna. The wounds become liminal spaces, the porous boundary between the two lovers, representing the penetrating movement of the love of one partner flowing into the other and vice versa. The wound thus becomes a portal to divine intimacy, where the soul seeks union not through vision alone, but through spatial immersion.

The use of spatial imagery was a common used heuristic device, according to Carruthers. Often sacred buildings from the Bible such as the ark and the tabernacle were used as architectural structures to create mental maps²⁰. The side wound too gains spatial dimensions and the reader is invited to make an abstraction of the moving and bleeding body of Christ and zoom in on the side wound. The sacred body creates a topography that is infused with mystical-theological meanings. The image helps the reader to navigate. Works like the *Visions* of Hadewijch serve both as manuals to help readers visualize the space in which images and messages are revealed and as documentation of visionary experiences that claim mystical authority through the visionary’s proximity to God²¹.

Within the thirteenth-century mystical culture of Liège, the wounded body of Christ was rendered in two distinct yet complementary modes: as a dramatic visionary performance and as a spatial structure. These representations did not merely depict suffering – they invited the reader into it. Whether through the emotive staging of visionary scenes or the contemplative mapping of sacred topographies, both approaches urged an

19. WILLIAM OF SAINT-THIERRY, *On Contemplating God*, p. 38.

20. See M.J. CARRUTHERS, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and Making of Images: 400-1200* (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 34), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 18.

21. See D. ALBERTSON, *Cataphasis: Visualisation and Mystical Space*, in MCINTOSH – HOWELLS (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology*, 347-368, pp. 349-350.

inward turn. This movement into the depths of Christ's suffering body was a path toward mystical knowledge, one animated by compassion. Mystical authors assumed the role of guides, helping readers visualize, interpret, and interiorize the divine pain and love revealed through these layered images.

Readers who have gained experience exploring these roadmaps could be considered more mystically literate than those who merely watch the suffering as outsiders or imagine themselves as part of the scenery. Incorporating the side wound results in a radical interiorization – an infiltration into the heart of the human person, of Christ, and of the mystical-theological epicenter²².

3. *Reading the Wounds*

This section traces the evolution of mystical-theological perspectives on the side wound of Christ through a comparative reading of two key sources: the thirteenth-century *vita* of Lutgard of Aywières and the fourteenth-century mystical treatises of John of Ruusbroec. By juxtaposing different genres and historical contexts, the analysis reveals how the image of the side wound was adapted to serve distinct mystagogical functions. In Lutgard's *vita*, the reader accompanies the saint on a spiritual learning journey. Smith describes Lutgard as the ideal reader of her own life story, exemplifying how both Thomas of Cantimpré and his audience must surrender to the text in order to move from doubt to belief and ultimately to love²³. Lutgard's interpretation of the side wound marks a significant step in the development of mystical literacy. Ruusbroec's treatises, in turn, offer a rich variety of theological perspectives, shaped by his exceptional pedagogical skill. The side wound becomes a central image in his textual architecture, guiding readers toward deeper mystical literacy.

A speaking example of the importance of the wound imagery in the *vita* is Thomas' *Life of Lutgard of Aywières*. Comparing Lutgard to other holy women reveals a remarkable contrast: Despite her frequent fasting and the many tears Lutgard shed, there is relatively little suffering to be found in the *vita* of this saint. She moderated the disciplining of her body and avoided overtaxing it. Ascetic practices were not wholly absent from the saint's youth, but they were markedly lighter than those of other

22. See J. BENNETT, *Stigmata and Sense Memory: Saint Francis and the Affective Image*, in *Art History* 24 (2001) 1-16, pp. 4-5.

23. See SMITH, *Excessive Saints*, p. 99.

women. Her blindness was the only real physical suffering Lutgard had to endure. This blindness, no matter how terrible, should not be interpreted as an imitation of Christ's passion, but should instead be linked to the saint's contemplation and her spiritual sight's clarity. Not her suffering, but her triumph over suffering is central to the *vita*. Her valuable contemplation compensated for her loss of sight. Her mystical-theological development and contemplative sight should however be associated with her meditation on and understanding of the side wound²⁴.

Early on in life, Lutgard, no more than a simple girl, already encountered the wounded Christ. One day, as she was talking to a young man, Christ appeared to her in human form. He theatrically and ostentatiously displayed his side wound²⁵, removing the clothing covering his chest to show his bleeding wound. Lutgard stared at the wound in a direct and unmediated encounter – body to body. Christ said to her: "Do not seek any longer the caresses of unseemly love. Here you may perpetually contemplate what you should love and why you should love it. Here I pledge that you shall attain the delights of total purity"²⁶. Lutgard would come to understand the meaning of the wounded body and why she had to adore it – why pain and love went hand in hand. She would learn this lesson repeatedly: Whenever she was in need of guidance, Christ would display his wound. This first vision set the tone for what followed. Lutgard's hagiographer immediately placed Christ's wounds center stage, as an important motif of the saint's mystical development. In contrast with other saints, Lutgard did not imitate the wounds. Instead, they primarily became the object of *meditatio* and *contemplatio*. Together with Lutgard, the reader divines the meaning of the wounds by gaining insight, little by little, into Lutgard's inner world, her imagination and her mystical relationship with God.

One day, Lutgard, already a Benedictine nun but still a young woman, was ill when the Matins prayers were said. She decided to skip the service and rest, in order to serve God better later on. At that moment, she heard Christ's voice calling upon her to attend church and to fulfill her prayers. She had the duty to pray for sinners. At the portal of the church, Christ appeared to her as the Crucified, blood soaked and nailed to the

24. See L. REYPPENS, *Sint Lutgarts mystieke opgang*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 20 (1946) 7-49, p. 20.

25. Hendrix notes that this particular passage from Lutgard's life was not widespread in the visual arts. He could only find two relevant seventeenth-century engravings. See G. HENDRIX, *Iconografie van de Vlaamse Lutgart* (Ontmoetingen met Lutgart van Tongeren, Benedictines en Cisterciënzerin, 2), Leuven, Peeters, 1999, p. 2.

26. *Lutgard of Aywières*, p. 218.

cross. He freed one arm and embraced Lutgard, before leading her mouth to his side wound, where “she drank in so much sweetness that, from that time forward, she was always stronger and quicker in the service of God”²⁷. The embrace would later figure in an iconographic tradition²⁸. The ostentatious preceding passage was translated into a choreographic movement, in which Thomas invited the reader to drink from the wound with Lutgard. The wound was loaded with meaning, but the scene remained physically intimate and graphic. The scene already introduced the idea that the reader, together with Lutgard, can penetrate into the inner world of Christ. Lutgard gazed into Christ’s being and the reader gazes along with her.

In a similar passage Lutgard evoked Christ’s image herself – rather than being visited by an apparition – by staring at a crucifix. She meditated on Christ’s suffering and experienced “disquiet in heart and body”. This meditation inflamed a form of *jubilatio* within her, weakening her whole body as she lost her corporeal presence. Thomas says: “Then, completely rapt in spirit, she would see Christ with the bloody wound in his side and, pressing the mouth of her heart against it, she would suck such sweetness that nothing at all could distress her. Whence it sometimes happened that when she was suffering from an acute fever, as soon as it had reached its critical point she would rise from her bed with no difficulty and enter the community and the choir for chanting”²⁹. The transfer of Christ’s inner world to hers – through her mouth, the wound and her heart – healed her³⁰. Blood is the medicine that streamed from Christ to the saint. Here, Thomas suggests that the wound heals, a familiar

27. *Ibid.*, p. 228.

28. The theme of the embrace on the cross inspired many artists and was also influenced by the theme of embrace in Bernard’s iconography. The combination of Bernard’s iconography with the lactating virgin and Lutgard’s vision culminated in the unique scene in the *vita* in which blood streamed from the side wound of the crucified Christ into Lutgard’s mouth. See HENDRIX, *Iconografie*, pp. 5; 36-45. Caesarius of Heisterbach documents stories that recount crucifixes coming alive. The miraculously animated image became a part of Liège’s literary and material culture. LAUGERUD, *The Miraculous Image*, p. 173.

29. *Lutgard of Aywières*, p. 229.

30. Rupert of Deutz’s (ca. 1075-1129) visions of the crucified Christ are reminiscent of the apparitions and visions of thirteenth-century holy women and men. In contrast with his male colleagues, Rupert’s visions and meditation on Christ’s suffering were extremely graphic and theatrical. The wounded figure was an attractive, living body; the injuries were not only metaphors, but real, gaping wounds. It was not Rupert’s (womanly) soul that kissed the crucified Christ, but his manly body that embraced Christ on the cross and kissed his lips, deeper and deeper. Thus Rupert entered Christ’s inner world, through his mouth and wounds, imbuing them with the metaphoric meaning of gates. See AXTERS, *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid*, 1, pp. 148-149. I argue that Lutgard’s depiction shares Rupert’s dramatic and metaphoric/spatial balance.

theme in mystical literature. A bond is shared via Christ's blood. The blood penetrates the body via the mouth and becomes a part of Lutgard's inner life – literally and figuratively. Heart, mouth, blood, and wound form one network of metaphors, taking over from the theatrical and graphic images displayed earlier. The movement between Christ's and Lutgard's inner lives takes central stage.

Later in life, Lutgard received a profound theological interpretation of the side wound's meaning. Her vocation to save souls through compassion reframed the wound not as a site of imitation – unlike the theatrical displays of suffering seen in other female mystics – but as a symbol of divine mercy and intercession³¹. Lutgard did not replicate Christ's wounds physically; instead, she internalized their significance, understanding them as signs of love exchanged between God and humanity through the saint's mediating role. Thomas of Cantimpré recounts Christ's words to her:

“Behold and contemplate, dearest, that my wounds are calling out to you, lest in vain I shed my blood, lest in vain I endured death”. Seeing and hearing this, Lutgard was wonderfully alarmed and, with fear and trembling, she asked what the cry of Christ's wounds might be. She was answered, “By your toil and your weeping you will mitigate the enkindled wrath of the Father, so that he may not destroy sinners in death, but rather, through the mercy of God, they may be converted and live”³².

In this moment, the wound becomes a theological summons – a call to compassionate action and spiritual mediation. Before, Lutgard's contemplation of the side wound had a very graphic and theatrical aspect. Only later it evolved into a loaded theological conception of compassion and a depiction of an exchange of salvation. A semantic network of metaphors and imagery related to the wound supported this compassion and developed throughout the *vita*. Heart, mouth, blood, etc. – all these bodily phenomena were charged with meaning and brought together in the side wound as a place holder, which was given a very layered meaning in Lutgard's *Life*. Amongst them, the heart was of special importance.

31. According to Zita Wenker, the side wound symbolizes Christ's endless love for the Father and his willingness to die for the salvation of humankind. This Anselmian notion was repeated in the liturgy and undoubtedly deeply impressed Lutgard and other holy women. Christ appeared multiple times during the Eucharist. To Lutgard, he confirmed the meaning of his death on the cross and the wounds representing that death. The invitation to drink from the side wound can be interpreted as an erotic desire for unity with the body of Christ and a longing to participate in his redeeming reality and accompanying mission. See Z. WENKER, *The Making of a Mystic: The Story of St. Lutgard*, in *American Benedictine Review* 47 (1996) 117-140, pp. 136-138.

32. *Lutgard of Aywières*, p. 244.

In a much-debated passage of her *vita*, Lutgard exchanged her heart with that of Christ, thus planting the seed for the devotion of the Holy Heart³³. Léonce Reypens confirms the connection between the heart and Christ's pierced side, and connects the exchange of hearts with Christ's sacrifice for and salvation of humankind³⁴. The heart does not serve as an organ, but as a symbol for mystical union, a connection between God and humankind. Lutgard discovered that the contemplation of the side wound and the heart helped her to be of service to her community as a mediator between God and humankind. Fortified by compassion for Christ, the saint turned to the community, which counted on her compassion to fight sin. How Lutgard accomplished this, through her practice of saving souls, will be discussed later in this act.

John of Ruusbroec's mysticism followed in these tracks one century later, interpreting the heart as the center of the soul's capacities³⁵. U. Notebaert argues that the heart is the first milestone on Ruusbroec's inward movement. The heart is the seat of the capacities linked to the senses, connecting them in turn to the inner faculties of the soul, namely, will, intellect and memory, which finally connect to the *apex* of the human person, the spirit. Notebaert contends that, for Ruusbroec, the devotion of the heart was a kind of passion mysticism, in which the hypostatic union of Christ was central. Christ was genuinely human and genuinely God, and in his heart these two realities met. The meditation on the Holy Heart could help pursue a unity of the external and the internal, and to uncover the personal relation to the divine as a human being inspired by Christ's perfect hypostasis. Notebaert also notes that this devotion of the heart fits with the reverence for the side wound³⁶.

For both Lutgard and Ruusbroec, the heart had transcended its physiological function as a bleeding, beating organ and had become a symbol of mystical union. Ruusbroec went further, embedding the semantics of the heart within his mystical anthropology. In his writings, both the heart and the wounds of Christ are conceived as interior spaces – sacred *loci* within the human soul where divine encounter and transformation occur. Mystical literature thus adopted a meditative approach: the heart and

33. See B. NEWMAN, *Iam cor meum non sit suum: Exchanging Hearts from Heloise to Helfta*, in A. MATTER – L. SMITH (eds.), *From Knowledge to Beatitude: St. Victor, Twelfth-Century Scholars, and Beyond. Essays in Honor of Grover A. Zinn*, Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 2013, 281-299.

34. See REYPENS, *Sint Lutgarts mystieke opgang*, p. 43.

35. See A. AMPE, *De structuur van de eenicheit des herten volgens Ruusbroec*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 31 (1957) 150-186.

36. See U. NOTEBAERT, *Ruusbroec's devotie tot het H. Hart*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 12 (1938) 5-49, p. 38.

wounds served as mnemonic anchors, linking theological insight to embodied experience. Language and metaphor gradually replaced graphic bodily performance, which now played a secondary, supportive role. The emphasis shifted from seeing to reading, from spectacle to interpretation. The wounds were no longer just visual stimuli – they became lyrical thresholds, guiding the reader on a spiritual journey toward mystical growth³⁷.

Ruusbroec very literally translated the body into text, rendering the wounds in red, uppercase letters, printed on the white canvas of Christ's humanity – a metaphor he explained in *The Seven Enclosures*. According to Ruusbroec, two other books had to be required reading for those seeking a spiritual life: the black book of our sinful life and the green-blue book of our eternal life. The white canvas with its red letters and capital letters constituted the passage from a sinful to an eternal life. The uppercase letters were inscribed on the body of Christ and had to be read with compassion, while devotedly commemorating Christ's love for humanity. The mystic encouraged the reader of his book to turn from the sinful world, through compassion with Christ's sacrificed body. Ruusbroec counseled the reader: "Place your mouth on His opened side; smell and savor the heavenly sweetness which flows from His heart"³⁸. The side wound from which Lutgard drank now became in Ruusbroec's imagery a haven where one could taste mystical sweetness in his blood-red ink.

Ruusbroec further elaborated this image in *The Spiritual Tabernacle*. He turned the wounds into the gates of inner reality. Not iron pierced the wounds, but sharp bone objects, symbolizing our inner strengths. Just as the bones carry the body, yearning and love carry the soul. We should touch Christ's wounds with the power of love and desire. Ruusbroec created an interplay between the imagery of outer and inner realities. The deeper we reach with our internal powers, the sweeter the balm secreted by the wounds, with which we can wash away and heal our sins. The sweet salve can intoxicate one. Ruusbroec invited us to live in the wounds that release a sweet ointment, as the dove hides in the clefts of the rock. Christ is a rock in which, through his wounds, we can live, and, in the wounds, the sinner will rise and be forgiven. Living in Christ's suffering body guarantees future salvation³⁹.

37. A good illustration of this is the poem *Carmen de santa cruce* (1217) by Arnulf of Louvain, abbot of Villers. This text discusses Christ's different wounds separately: the pierced hands, feet, side and, finally, heart. See D.A. STRACKE, *Arnulf van Leuven*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 24 (1950) 27-50.

38. RUUSBROEC, *Enclosures*, p. 537.

39. Another reference to the wounds can be found in his *Tabernacle*, p. 416: "The clefts of the rock are the wounds of our Lord. But the open cavity of the vineyard wall is

The wound became a space in which the passion was commemorated, like a church. Ruusbroec asked his readers to remember how Christ died for the sins of humanity, paid our debt and bought the inheritance of the Father: "He ascended before (you), opened the gates and prepared the place of eternal glory for you"⁴⁰. The wounds are the gates to heavenly reality and offer access to a mnemonic space where past, present, and future converge. The mystic built this mnemonic space with bodily images, such as the heart and wounds. These images received a broader meaning that invited a spatial approach, creating an inner scene in which believers could commemorate the story of salvation. The imagery became a catalyst for Ruusbroec to experience Christ's sacrifice and the price paid. Earlier on, Ruusbroec had already pointed out the importance of priests, who kept the memory of Christ's sacrifice alive in the Eucharist, cultivating these thoughts in collective memory and connecting them to compassion and humility, so that all could participate in this redeeming suffering by meditating on these fruitful images⁴¹.

Although this mystic stood squarely within the Bernardian tradition and seemed to prescribe the ideal of imageless contemplation for the most gifted of mystics, Ruusbroec's language is extremely vivid. This is already apparent in the passages discussed above. In *The Sparkling Stone*, Ruusbroec explained why images were not inherently bad, giving them a particular place in the second phase of mystical life, the inner life. He described how the believer starts as a good human being, then enters the inner phase, before reaching the final, contemplative stage. Ruusbroec's rich imagery also incorporated the suffering body, which he used to create a mnemonic space meant for the inner human. I argue that this mystical author – perhaps even more so than the artistic Hadewijch – was a virtuoso of images. His treatises brim with visual language, which he

the open wound in the side of our Lord. For in the power of these wounds the sinner shall rise up from all blemishes of sin". The reference to the dove in the clefts can be found in Song 2,13-14. The dove is a common image of simplicity and was also used by the hagiographer of Beatrice of Nazareth. Her hagiographer wrote: "Dwelling like a simple dove in the clefts of a rock, she made her nest in the hollows of the wounds of Jesus Christ. Everything she heard or read concerning what the man Christ Jesus, mediator between God and men, did or suffered for our redemption while he lived as a man among men, from the first day of his holy birth to the hour of his ascension – all this she daily remembered and pondered in humble meditation. Dwelling on each aspect individually, with groans and sighs, she gave thanks to the loving Lord for all the benefits of his mercy, and this she did with full affection". *Beatrice of Nazareth*, p. 49. Beatrice meditated on Christ's entire life, not only his passion. One century later, Ruusbroec would also insist on meditating on all of Christ's suffering and not only on his crucifixion and death, in contrast with many of his contemporaries, who indulged in passion devotions.

40. RUUSBROEC, *Enclosures*, p. 537.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 517.

brilliantly allowed to resonate and echo through the mnemonic space conceived in his texts. The mystic invites the reader on a guided tour of the mnemonic space. The entry requirement is creative abstraction and the ability to internalize external forms. This assumes an initiation into the mystical literature made available by mystical centers.

Ruusbroec did not limit his use of Christ's suffering to the passion narrative and the wounded body, but went beyond the images usually beheld or meditated upon in the *vitae*. The mystic helped the reader of *The Spiritual Espousals* envision tableaux in which even the Christ Child suffered from the cold and poverty, from the circumcision, and from the banishment to a strange land. The mystical author described the whole of Christ's life as filled with suffering, from which the readers could make their own selection. The passion, too, was viscerally and vividly depicted. Ruusbroec exhorted them not to forget spiritual suffering. He visualized the anger of the Jews and Christ's experience of being forsaken by God, which I will further examine in act three. Christ met both external and internal pain with forbearance and love⁴².

These scenes from Christ's life constituted the first coming of the Bridegroom and belonged to the past. In *The Spiritual Espousals*, Ruusbroec also envisioned a second coming in the present and future. As we have seen, this visualization helped bring the story of salvation into the present, through the frequent repetition of the Eucharist, inscribed in the shared memory of the community. The reader was given more responsibility than the spectator who merely observed the suffering performed by saints. The readers were free to "read into" the wounds and to write their own scenarios, in which they were actively involved, while the spectator simply registered the saints' pain. Image artists like the mystics and hagiographers, and particularly Ruusbroec, helped the believer conjure up this redemptive scene with more imagination and affection, triggering a strong reaction of compassion and love. This visualization of suffering was deployed to foster a culture of compassion and love, which fit with thirteenth-century love mysticism.

42. RUUSBROEC, *Espousals*, pp. 153-154.

IX

PURGATORIAL PAIN EXCHANGE

Christ's wounds were portals into his inner world – a sacred space where love and compassion could be encountered. In stark contrast to this realm of divine intimacy stood purgatory: a virtual landscape of pain. The wounded body of Christ was not accessible to the bodily gaze of ordinary believers; instead, it had to be visualized through meditative practices, guided by the visionary accounts of saints. Similarly, purgatory remained an invisible reality until death revealed its horrors. Saints acted as intermediaries, rendering this hidden realm visible through their mystical experiences and compassionate interventions. For many *Mulieres Religiosae*, purgatory became a destination of spiritual activism – a liminal space they entered in order to rescue lost souls. This purgatorial *topos* permeated *exempla*, hagiographies, and mystical treatises, nourished by folk legends, devotional rituals for the dead, and graphic depictions of suffering. It was a space where pain demanded theological interpretation and affective engagement¹.

The discursive construction of purgatory was shaped less by systematic theology than by the vivid imagination of mystical theologians². Purgatory was envisioned as a space of horror – designed to elicit visceral, affective responses from readers. Its torments were often described in terms of physical torture, despite the theological paradox that purgatory is entered only after death, when body and soul have been separated. To make sense of this contradiction, mystical theologians imagined the soul as temporarily reembodied, capable of suffering corporeal punishments. This re-embodiment allowed for the use of bodily language and graphic imagery to render purgatory visible and emotionally legible. Like the side wound of Christ, purgatory became a graphic and spatial site where pain was not only experienced but interpreted. This space was an

1. The development of the idea of purgatory went hand in hand with old religious practices of prayers and offerings for the dead, Le Goff writes. See LE GOFF, *La naissance du Purgatoire*, p. 183.

2. Mowbray demonstrates that the masters of Paris debated the separation of the soul and body after death and the pain that could be experienced in this time of separation. He observes a lack of consensus amongst the theologians. See MOWBRAY, *Pain and Suffering*, p. 130.

important crossroads for the conceptualization, interpretation, and theological valorization of pain.

Yet, this visual space was not just defined by pain language. Le Goff adds nuance to the modern perception of purgatory as a ghastly place of horror and pain by pointing out that it was also a space of hope³. Le Goff traces the doctrine's evolution through history and argues that it crystalized at the end the twelfth century, reaching full bloom in the following century⁴. He argues that we should associate purgatory with hope and compassion. According to Le Goff, purgatory was perceived as an in-between space, where a motley crowd of not entirely good and not entirely evil people could linger after death. It was a bridge between life and the afterlife – a layover on the journey from physical birth to the heavenly meeting with God. Theologians dating back to Augustine had developed a third space, between heaven and hell, for sinners who were not good enough for heaven, but too good for hell⁵. Purgatory was a liminal space that let souls escape God's harsh judgment⁶. It emerged from the idea of a compassionate God. Although it was portrayed as a terrible place, to be avoided at all costs, the underlying idea remained that of future redemption.

In the thirteenth century, the purgatorial in-between space of pain and hope harmonizes with the notion of the saint as a mediator between heaven and earth⁷. The *vitae* and the mystical texts played a crucial role in the imagery of this liminal space and in the theological doctrines associated with it. It was no coincidence that the *vitae* paid special attention to the theme of purgatory and linked it to the compassionate saint as a mediator between heaven and earth. The mediation and visualization of the imagery of purgatory created an active role for the saint in society. The compassionate saint pleaded with God to show the same compassion

3. See LE GOFF, *La naissance du Purgatoire*, p. 411.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 319-324. Le Goff's periodization has been contested in the secondary literature ever since his monumental work was published (see BYNUM, *Resurrection*, p. 280).

5. LE GOFF, *La naissance du Purgatoire*, p. 97.

6. Purgatory is not just a grey, in-between space for the souls of those who are neither good nor evil. It is also a liminal space in time. Jan Goossens writes that purgatory was created when the second coming failed to take place at the turn of the first millennium. This sparked the need for an individual judgment preceding the Last Judgment, after which the soul would enter a liminal space in anticipation of the end of time. See J. GOOSSENS, *De doorbraak van het vagevuur in de Middelnederlandse en Middellatijnse letterkunde in het Luik-Brabants gebied*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 78 (2004) 265-291, p. 266.

7. See S. VLOEBERGS, *Banned from Heaven and Earth: A Creative Theological Analysis of Interspace Based on the Themes of Purgatory and Exile in the Mulieres Religiosae*, in *Studies in Spirituality* 30 (2020) 145-181.

for condemned souls, by offering prayers, sacrifices, and suffrages. If these acts were insufficient, then the saints could invoke their personal, mystical relationship with God, to influence and soften his judgment. Sometimes they even managed to save souls entirely from purgatory.

The practice of saving souls, as depicted in many *vitae*, placed the agency with the saint. Female saints were the ones who primarily carried out this practice, Barbara Newman notes. Yet the practice has received but scant attention in the secondary literature. As Newman writes: “Le Goff’s work and the many articles inspired by it leave half the story untold. For of all Catholic doctrines, none has been more deeply shaped by female piety than the notion of purgatory, which filled an overwhelming place in the visions, devotions, and works of charity undertaken by religious woman”⁸. Women said suffrages and saved souls⁹. Jo Ann McNamara argues that women generally fulfilled passive/caring roles in political and military structures, ministering to the poor and sick – especially in wartime. As society grew more restrained and better organized, these important roles became marginalized. These restrictions, she argues, inspired women to experiment with spiritual almsgiving to complement or replace corporal charity. Within these boundaries, women looked for new ways to live an apostolic life of service for the weak and poor, also choosing to offer their services to the dead¹⁰. The traditionally female task of uttering suffrages and laying out the dead extended into the spiritual realm. Moreover, some holy women were believed not only to take care of the dead, but to communicate with the souls of the deceased as well. They were thought capable of petitioning God, influencing his divine judgment¹¹. Newman even argues that:

I submit that the more daring and theologically sophisticated mystics were aware of this potential and struggled with it, reflecting on their purgatorial piety to reach new and sometimes frightening insights about the paradox of justice and mercy. These explorations led them to challenge the limits of their devotion and at times, almost unwittingly, to question its very basis – God’s sacrosanct right to punish¹².

Each case presents a distinct mystical-theological interpretation of purgatory – as a space where hope and fear, compassion and justice,

8. NEWMAN, *From Virile Woman*, p. 109.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 113-121.

10. See J.A. MCNAMARA, *The Need to Give: Suffering and Female Sanctity in the Middle Ages*, in BLUMENFELD-KOSINSKI – SZELL (eds.), *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, 199-221, pp. 199-209.

11. See NEWMAN, *From Virile Woman*, pp. 107-114.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

love and pain converge. While purgatory was often rendered in vivid, graphic imagery, saints and their hagiographers also engaged deeply with its theological implications. These narratives offered rich, case-specific insights that could challenge ecclesiastical norms and provoke daring theological reflections. Yet such transgressive potential was tempered by the imperative of humility. Saints could not openly contest divine judgment or disrupt ecclesiastical hierarchies. Instead, hagiographers were tasked with revealing the saint's inner life and pure intentions, which had to be entirely altruistic and devoid of any desire for personal glory. Because intention and theological framing were paramount, suffering did not need to be spectacular. Rather, it was the saint's overwhelming love – for Christ and for the community – that could destabilize the delicate balance between divine justice and human compassion¹³.

Transgression can be found in the subtle mystical articulations of these practices. By reading between the lines, one could uncover the implicit mystical teachings driving the saints' story. I agree that these transgressions are related to the dialectical relation between divine justice and compassion. Both male and female saints explored the subtle transgressions related to the crossover between pain and love. This multitude of voices, some in favor and some against the practice of saving souls from purgatory, will be discussed in this chapter. First, I will provide a short theological analysis of the practice and highlight its importance for an understanding of the mystical-theological contestation or illustration of the exchange between pain and salvation. This pain exchange is only possible when the pain experience is accepted and interiorized, in doing so gaining a rich variety of mystical-theological meanings. Second, the case of Lutgard of Aywières will be presented who is named the "purgatorial saint" in the secondary literature. Her subtle transgressions are analyzed in detail. Third, I will compare and contrast Lutgard with other *Mulieres Religiosae*. The subtlety of the *vitae*'s mystical theology only really becomes apparent in a dialogue with mystical works, such as those of Hadewijch. Following the section on Lutgard and the holy women, I turn to Hadewijch's criticism, highlighting Lutgard's transgressions.

13. Mary Lou Shea notes that the exchange of sin and grace had theological consequences: "The aim of purgatorial piety was to reconcile justice with compassion, not override it". See M.L. SHEA, *Medieval Women on Sin and Salvation: Hadewijch of Antwerp, Beatrice of Nazareth, Margaret Ebner, and Julian of Norwich* (American University Studies), s.l., Peter Lang, 2010, p. 105.

1. *The Compassionate Virgin and the Righteous Judge*

The practice of saving souls was founded on the notion that salvation could be divided, exchanged, and passed on within a community of believers. As Bynum says: "The body of Christ was, in an almost literal sense, the medium of exchange"¹⁴. Together, the faithful formed the body of Christ, with Christ as the head. His redeeming suffering was shared among the body's members. In this theological construction of purgatory and the redistribution of redemption, pain played a crucial role. With his death, Christ created a mystical body, the Church. Christ's sacrifice on the cross saved humanity a first time and was endlessly commemorated, permeating the collective memory of Christian society. His redemptive pain was the glue that consolidated the community into the Body of Christ. Because humanity became one body, it died and rose along with Christ.

However, the memory of the redeeming suffering shared by humanity was not enough to erase the sins committed since Christ's first coming. These new sins demanded punishment too, although Christ had already joined his Father. Christians who did not succeed in surmounting their earthly trials without blemish had to be punished with the pains of purgatory or hell. Just as Christ had suffered for the sins of humanity, the individual saints of a Christian community could suffer for the wrongs of another member. The bond shared in the Body of Christ enabled the exchange of sin and grace within the community of believers, through Christ as Just Judge and his saints who acted as mediators. Communal prayers were often insufficient to save souls, especially when a hefty sentence in purgatory awaited them. These cases demanded that another type of suffering take the place of the original punishment, reducing or even annulling the sentence. This surrogate suffering created a new supply of compassionate grace, with which the soul's freedom could be bought. The suffering of a compassionate other could substitute punitive suffering. In these cases, the community called upon their saints who willingly took on this pain¹⁵.

Holy women were considered suitable candidates for co-suffering, enduring for the sake of others. They could not act as judges, arbitrating the fate of sinful souls, but, through their compassion, they could beseech the Lord to show mercy. Newman argues that an important theological distinction was made between the male role of judge and the female role

14. BYNUM, *Resurrection*, pp. 119-120.

15. *Ibid.*

of merciful sufferer. She contends that Christ fulfilled a masculine role as divine judge – along with his status as a victim and merciful giver of redemption. Holy women were solely bearers of compassion¹⁶.

I argue that saints imitated Christ's role as Divine Judge less than they emulated the role of his mother, the Virgin Mary, whose divine authority reached unseen heights in the thirteenth century. As the standard-bearer of the virtues humility and compassion she sometimes outdid her son. Her humility softened Christ's harsh judgment of sinners. As his mother, Mary was completely united with Christ in his love and pain. She was also the one who could admonish him. She had known and raised him as a young child and maintained a unique position in the cosmic order that ultimately went back to a very human relationship: mother and child. Popular literature explored this bond and argued why Mary, more than the Just Christ, could act compassionately and mildly, defending poor sinners. She could and should not fulfill the role of the Righteous Judge. Instead, she symbolized the tenderness that influenced and even altered Christ's harsh but righteous judgment, as illustrated in an *exemplum* in Thomas' *Biënboec*.

The *exemplum* revolves around a Cistercian monk who, after entering a monastery, was led astray by the devil. He relapsed into his old sins, caught in a downward spiral, which he attempted to escape by showing remorse and by praying to the Virgin Mary. One day, she appeared to the monk. On her arm, Mary carried the Christ Child¹⁷. The monk begged Christ that he deliver him from sin, allowing his return to grace. Thomas writes:

But when that child seemed to refuse his mother and turned his face away from her, the mother placed the child on the other arm, so that she could better turn her compassionate face to the face of her child. But the child turned his face away from her, and the mother often replaced him from one arm to the other. Finally, after a wonderful and compassionate request, the mother convinced the child and reconciled his face with the sinner and brought him to forgive the man's sins and restore his grace and the state of the first life¹⁸.

16. NEWMAN, *From Virile Woman*, p. 122.

17. This motif often resurfaced in Cistercian literature. See C.W. BYNUM, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1984, p. 161.

18. *Het Biënboec*, ed. VAN DER VET pp. 111-112 (my translation). Cornelis De Vooy states that devotions for Mary made the cult of the Christ Child more popular. They were portrayed together as the rulers of heavenly powers and hierarchies. See DE VOOYS, *Middel-nederlandse legenden*, p. 136.

Through their bond, Mary had a unique influence on her son. The son listened to his mother, because he loved her. Thus, the Righteous Judge heeded the voice of compassion, personified by Mary. Her compassion and love for her son, as well as for humanity, became an exemplar. She witnessed his suffering and also beheld the pain and remorse of the people. She was the mediator par excellence, not only in folk culture, but in mystical theology as well. Mary was the ultimate “co-redemptrix”¹⁹. Ruusbroec powerfully describes Mary’s role as a mediator in *Seven Rungs in the Ladder of Spiritual Love*:

Mary’s nobility of virtues and of holy life can neither be described nor related. She is profound in humility, lofty in purity, wide and broad in charity, long in mercifulness to all sinners who desire her, for she is Mother of all graces and of all mercy, and she is our advocate and our mediatrix between us and her Son; and He cannot refuse her anything that she desires, for she is His Mother, and sits at His right hand: Queen crowned with Him, Lady, and powerful in heaven and on earth, above all creatures the highest of all, and the nearest of all to Himself²⁰.

Mary’s heavenly throne cast a shadow on the entire landscape of mystical culture – from ordinary person to advanced mystic. In Mary, every believer found a mother figure who sometimes exerted authority over Christ. To put it in theological terms: compassion overrules justice. Like Mary, the saints in her wake had a chance to plead for the salvation of their community’s souls through *imitatio Mariae* and their relationship with Christ, less as a mother than as a bride. These Mary stories created a precedent that made it possible to reproach divine judgment through the excessive compassion the saints felt for their community. Christ could not just reject these complaints. He too was subject to the laws of Love. He could not deny his beloved anything or show less compassion than his mother or bride. This would have rendered him less perfect as a lover – at least from a human and folk-theological perspective. By imitating Mary in her role of Mother of God especially female saints could save lost souls, both alive and dead. By doing so, they could show their excessive compassion for/to their community members.

Imitating Mary’s role did not include physical suffering. Yet it often appeared within passages about the saving of lost souls. Mary suffered emotionally and inwardly. She was grieving for her dead son. Hagiographers

19. Kieckhefer points out the juxtaposition between the nativity and the passion, which can also be found in medieval art. The appearance of the Christ Child as judge, with his mother at his side, explains why Mary was increasingly portrayed as participating in the Last Judgment. See KIECKHEFER, *Unquiet Souls*, p. 106.

20. RUUSBROEC, *Rungs*, p. 606.

depicted the saints as imitators of both Mary and Christ. By imitating Christ's physical suffering, they obtained some leverage that could help them negotiate with God. Saints who suffered with Christ participated in the same redeeming activity, turning them into co-redeemers. They mimicked Christ's suffering, and the compassion for humanity that spurred him to die on the cross for its sins. The saints made a similar sacrifice to strike out the sins of condemned souls – the saints' pain in exchange for the salvation of others. Saints could start these negotiations on their own initiative and did not need the community, except to amplify their pleas. They were the ones who decided to exchange their pain for the salvation of someone else. The saints combined Mary's emotional suffering – compassion for lost souls – with the physical suffering of the *imitatio Christi*.

Saints were considered ideal mediators between lost souls and the Divine Judge. They fulfilled the role of mediator, positioned between heaven and earth, loved by Christ and revered by their communities. Through their rich inner life they gained first-hand mystical-theological knowledge about the faith of souls. The dead communicated with the living through the saints begging them to save them from purgatory, or revealing which souls were condemned or awaited *postmortem* punishment. Consider the example of Mary of Oignies' wake at the deathbed of an elderly holy man, who had lived virtuously his whole life and whose example had salvaged many a soul for God. Mary noticed that angels gathered around the dying man as a sweet scent was released. The Holy Spirit then told Mary that the man would enter heaven without a stay in purgatory, as the penance he had paid in life and the persecution he had suffered were sufficient. Afterward, the man's soul appeared to Mary to give her spiritual advice and support her in her virtuous life and her compassionate care of the ill²¹. On top of the knowledge on divine judgement, the soul grants Mary and her followers insight into the virtuous life and the importance of penance which will lead to future salvation without purgatory.

Not all souls were as successful as this man. Most would await a painful purgation after death. The saint would be consulted to intervene, sometimes by communal prayers, sometimes with an exchange of pain.

21. *Mary of Oignies*, pp. 88-89. See, for instance, the example of the merchant discussed in chapter one. In her conversation with this merchant, Mary made plain that the pains of purgatory are unspeakably worse than those on earth. This frightened the merchant and, finally, led to his conversion. He was even informed of his own salvation. No purgatory awaited him. In this example, Mary offered the wisdom she had gained on purgatory to help her neighbors in their quest for salvation. *Supplement*, p. 143.

Again the *vita* of Mary provides a great example. She was asked to help lost souls, not only directly by diseased people but by other saints. Through Mary, Saint Peter revealed to her community that one of its members, the sister of an Oignies monk, was being tortured in purgatory. The apostle showed the saint the terror of this punishment. As James wrote:

She [the soul] was tortured with violent heat because she had loved the pleasures of the world with an excessive ardour. Sometimes she was tortured with great cold because she has been slow to do every good thing, but especially because she had been very negligent in correcting her sons and her own family. She also was miserably tormented with thirst because when she was alive, she had wasted far too much time drinking. She suffered as well greatest discomfort from nakedness because she had possessed far too many clothes²².

The woman had had a detrimental influence on the pious community and was now being punished by God. Moved deeply by Peter's message, Mary prayed fervently for the salvation of the woman's lost soul. Not satisfied with her own prayers, she asked her community to join in. The saint led and motivated the community to tend collectively to the woman's salvation. Through communal prayer, the woman's sins could be forgiven, and her pain alleviated. Through their combined compassion, her soul could be saved²³. The accent is on the communal effort and their forgiveness, and not on Mary's thaumaturgical deeds and God's intervention. Through their communal effort, the lost soul was brought back into the Christian community at large. This was not solely Mary's achievement; she served only as the messenger.

Ida of Nivelles is another great example of a purgatorial saint who used the theological system of pain exchange to come to the rescue of members of her community. Ida's physical pain experiences resemble those of Christina, mimicking purgatory's torments. Christina also theatrically reenacted it to prevent living souls from making the same mistakes. Christina's performance of pain was an effort to encourage her community to atone. Her *vita* lays bare the close kinship between purgatory and penance motifs. Her mission to save souls was a divine order; she did not act on her own authority, but as the medium through which God could save souls on earth and in purgatory. However, unlike Christina, Ida did not

22. *Mary of Oignies*, p. 87.

23. *Ibid.* In a similar passage in the *vita* of Lutgard, Thomas reports on a communal prayer the saint and her community held for the soul of Pope Innocent. But the bulk of the interventions in purgatory described in this *vita* were Lutgard's work alone, not that of her community. *Lutgard of Aywieres*, p. 244.

wait for a divine mission and instead offered her suffering voluntarily in exchange for the redemption of sinful believers. Her hagiographer relates that when Ida – called the Compassionate – learned of the heavy purgatorial punishment awaiting a soul, she suggested to God, in her infinite compassion, that the pain be inflicted upon her instead and the soul be released. The Lord took up her proposal and Ida became ill, suffering a high fever for six weeks. Afterward, as she prayed in church, the same soul visited her in a vision. It became apparent that the soul had served half its purgatorial sentence with her help. She then begged the deceased's family for more intercessors, that the Lord might release the soul from purgatory even faster²⁴.

The purgatorial suffering of the soul manifested in Ida's body as a fever – an understated, almost mundane affliction when compared to the theatrical torments endured by Christina, such as boiling water or red-hot ovens. Yet this contrast is revealing: Ida's pain was not performative but theological. Her fever symbolized the heat of purgatory, not through spectacle but through interiorized compassion. Her suffering did not mimic Christ's passion in a literal, visible way; rather, it was a mystical participation in purgatorial pain, mediated through divine compassion. To grasp the theological significance of her suffering, the reader must rely on the narrative framework provided by the hagiographer, who interprets and legitimizes the saint's experience. While examples of extreme asceticism and mortification of the flesh often tell a story by themselves (the image of Christ is immediately recognized on the body of the saint), exchanges of pain for the salvation of souls need mediation – a narrative and theological framework. This narrative and theological interpretation and valorization of the pain experience lie in the hagiographer's hands, mediating between saint and reader. He renders visible the invisible link between illness and intercession, ensuring that the saint's orthodoxy and altruism remain intact. Ida's suffering was not imposed, but chosen – an act of voluntary substitution rooted in compassion. Her pain was not meant to erase divine judgment, but to hasten its fulfillment. The sentence was not annulled, only accelerated. In this way, Ida's fever becomes a theological event: a quiet, embodied plea for mercy that respects the integrity of divine justice²⁵.

This simple exchange between salvation and bodily suffering is not exclusively tied to the holy women. There were also male saints who saved souls from purgatory, although the secondary literature has paid

24. *Ida of Nivelles*, p. 39.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

less attention to them. Especially the mystical culture of Liège provides a fruitful case study for this topic²⁶. The *vita* of Beatrice of Nazareth mentions how her father, Bartholomew, had overcome the pains of purgatory and helped other souls avoid these pains. It is significant that Beatrice, who also endured purgatorial pains, is not connected to this saving of souls. On Bartholomew, the hagiographer writes the following:

He was known to have an abundance of compassion for the souls of the faithful departed, who through God's mercy had to suffer the pains of purgatory. He daily recited the whole psalter or its equivalent in the frequent repetition of the penitential psalm, the fiftieth, praying the Omnipotent Lord for their liberation. At the same time, through his prayers and bodily discipline or through other bodily afflictions, this devout man continually sought to alleviate them from the sufferings they endured²⁷.

The hagiographer's description of Beatrice's father parallels that of the *Mulieres*. Bartholomew was also a Martha (action) and a Mary (contemplation). He was known for his great compassion and his meditations on Christ's suffering, in which secrets were revealed to him. He used his body to help souls in purgatory. Beatrice's purgatorial pain was of a different nature and will be discussed in depth in the next chapter. Her pain was caused by her soul's desire for God that caused a burning heat, much like the fires of purgatory. She experienced God's absence, much like the eternal divine absence experienced by cursed souls in hell. The fact that the hagiographer distinguishes between the purgatorial pains of the body (Bartholomew) and soul (Beatrice) attests to his mystical-theological abilities.

The purgatorial practices of men had a long pedigree in the Liège region, according to Axters, dating back to 998, when Odilo of Cluny introduced All Souls' Day²⁸. Male saints like Arnulf of Villers were believed to, much like their female counterparts, be consultants of deceased souls who were in need of help and could benefit from their suffrages and prayers²⁹. Moreover, the prominent mystical theologians in the region, Thomas of Cantimpré and John of Ruusbroec, became priest in order to save the souls of their relatives from purgatory³⁰. Even the

26. See GOOSSENS, *De doorbraak van het vagevuur*, p. 268.

27. *Beatrice of Nazareth*, p. 15.

28. See AXTERS, *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid*, 1, p. 150.

29. *Arnulf of Villers*, p. 161.

30. See *Het Biënboec*, ed. VAN DER VET, p. 271; VERDEYEN, *Ruusbroec en zijn mystiek*, p. 13. Robert Sweetman refers to the *vitae* of women, but also to the *exempla* in Thomas of Cantimpré's *Biënboec*, in which Thomas developed a theology of purgatory. See

theologian Henry of Louvain was venerated by the Dominicans because of his ability to save souls after visiting purgatory during an ecstatic rapture. During his soul's stay in purgatory he prayed for the damned souls and managed to offer some heavenly freedom³¹. Hence, men too made important contributions to the development of both theory and practice regarding the doctrine of purgatory and the exchange of pain and salvation.

2. *The Purgatorial Saint of Aywières*

No saint is more celebrated for her effectiveness in rescuing souls from purgatory than Lutgard of Aywières. Her reputation as a “purgatorial saint” is unparalleled in the hagiographic tradition. In what follows, I examine how Lutgard – alongside her hagiographer Thomas of Cantimpré – not only fulfills the role of the compassionate intercessor but also stretches, and at times transgresses, the theological boundaries of this practice. Her interventions are not merely acts of mercy; they reveal a complex negotiation of divine justice, mystical intimacy, and spiritual authority.

Lutgard was born to a noblewoman and a prosperous businessman in the Flemish city of Tongeren in the archdiocese of Liège. She received her earliest education at a small beguinage in Sint-Truiden, before becoming a Benedictine nun. After she became prioress, she moved to a Cistercian French-speaking community in Aywières, where she died. Thomas of Cantimpré, a close spiritual friend of the saint, wrote her *vita*, finishing it shortly after 1266³². He divided the *vita* in three books, respectively purporting to describe Lutgard as a spiritual beginner, an advanced contemplative, and a perfected saint³³. This was the first Latin version of her

R. SWEETMAN, *Visions of Purgatory and Their Role in the Bonum universale de apibus of Thomas of Cantimpré*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 67 (1993) 20-33.

31. See AXTERS, *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid*, 2, pp. 61-62.

32. Traditionally, Thomas is portrayed as Lutgard's close spiritual friend or even her confessor. According to Guido Hendrix, it is incorrect to call Thomas her father-confessor. He did not visit Aywières enough to fulfill that role. See HENDRIX, *Iconografie*, pp. 10-11.

33. By foregrounding the typology of the threefold ascent of the soul in his prologue to Lutgard's *vita*, Thomas placed the *vita* in a monastic lineage starting with Origen, Smith argues. It is a subtle way of introducing Lutgard not only as the bride of the Song, but also as the exegete who sought to have the text performed within her. The plot of the *vita* is thus a key means for Thomas to link the narrative of Lutgard's life to that of the Song of Songs, and to connect her desire for God to that of the bride. See R.J. SMITH, *Language, Literacy, and the Sainly Body: Cistercian Reading Practices and the Life of Lutgard of Aywières (1182-1246)*, in *The Harvard Theological Review* 109 (2016) 586-610, p. 601.

vita, inspiring multiple translations and redactions. Alongside the literary reception of Lutgard's life, scholars like Bernard Spaapen and Peter Dinzelbacher have discovered a rich iconographic tradition dedicated to the saint across several European countries³⁴.

Guido Hendrix discusses Lutgard's visions, emphasizing not only the saint's spiritual growth, but also her theological development. Often these were not visions in the strictest sense, but apparitions of Christ and souls of the deceased. The visions of the dead, and Lutgard's task as a go-between for the salvation of her community, should be seen in light of her visions of Christ as her Bridegroom. Hendrix and Stolfi count some 43 visions, deviating from Reypens' earlier estimate³⁵. Between the visions, the *vita* offers arguments meant to persuade the reader of Lutgard's position as bride of Christ and purgatory saint par excellence – two roles that coincided for this saint. Lutgard was a lucid voice in the clamorous thirteenth-century debate on purgatory and its condemned souls. The reader receives a straightforward story that gradually builds up mystical wisdom.

It is important to clarify how Lutgard's interpretation of purgatory differed from that of other holy women. Neither the impressive number of souls Lutgard saved, nor the centrality of the practice in her *vita*, are key here. It was rather Lutgard's negotiation style when she saved members of her community that really sets her apart. I argue that these negotiations were not based on an exchange of pain, as was usual, but on a game played between lovers. Lutgard's interpretation of saving souls was rooted in bridal mysticism and was reminiscent of Mary's negotiations with her Son in Thomas' *exemplum*.

A clear illustration of this practice is the passage in which the saint saved the soul of her friend, the Abbot Simon. What immediately stands out in this passage is that Lutgard did not wait for the supplications of

34. See B. SPAAPEN, *Iconografie van de heilige Lutgardis*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 20 (1946) 102-213; 23 (1949) 210-213; B. SPAAPEN – S.T. DIRNE, *De vereering van de H. Lutgardis in en buiten de orde van Cîteaux*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 20 (1946) 324-368; also see P. DINZELBACHER, *Das Christusbild der heiligen Lutgard von Tongeren im Rahmen der Passionsmystik und Bildkunst des 12. und 13. Jahrhunderts*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 56 (1982) 217-277.

35. Reypens considers the apparitions of deceased souls inferior to the other mystical visions. He considers these nine visions as relevant only to Lutgard's mission, imparting little theological value. While Reypens thus neglects them, Stolfi studies them in the context of medieval piety. See REYPENS, *Sint Lutgarts mystieke opgang*, pp. 8-11. Guido Hendrix gives an overview, leading up to Stolfi's selection of the visions in the *vita* of Lutgard, see G. HENDRIX – E. STOLFI, *Verschijsningen uit het hiernamaals in de Vita Lutgardis* (Ontmoetingen met Lutgart van Tongeren, Benedictines en Cisterciënzerin, 5), Leuven, Peeters, 1998, pp. 1-13.

her friend to intervene in his condemnation to purgatory. She immediately acted. She was aware that the abbot had committed some grave sins that would not go unpunished. Thus, she embarked on a quest for his soul's redemption, addressing God immediately after her friend's death:

At once performing mortifications and fasts for him, she pleaded with the Lord that he liberate the soul of the dead man. After she had insisted with many prayers, the Lord replied to her, "Be consoled because, on account of the favour in which I hold you, I will be good to him for whom you pray". Yet she insisted the more importunately and received a reply for the second time that the man would soon be set free. And she said, "Whatever comfort you are willing to give me, grant to his soul in purgatory". And she added, "By no means will I desist from sobbing, Lord, nor will I ever be consoled by your promises, unless I see that the one for whom I pray has been liberated". The Lord did not suffer her to be disturbed any longer and appeared to her in person, leading with him the soul which had been liberated from purgatory and saying, "Be consoled, beloved, for behold, here is the soul for whom you pray"³⁶.

When pain exchange by fasting and mortification does not work, Lutgard changes her tactics. Instead, her emotional pain moved God. Thus, Lutgard overruled God's judgment without any compensation or real exchange of pain. The passage shows the saint in control and God in distress. God did not want to hurt his bride or risk upsetting her – as he hoped that she would return and confirm his Love. This made God vulnerable and defenseless, a fact Lutgard used to her advantage. She managed to free a soul from purgatory, which would have burned for forty more years without her intercession. God assured her that he had freed and fully pardoned the soul immediately. The saint contrived to overrule Christ's divine judgment through a manipulative game, on the pretense of her limitless compassion for lost souls and her endless love for God.

A similar example shows God's fear to distress his bride. The passage concerns the soul of James of Vitry, in life and in death. Lutgard saved James' soul a first time during his lifetime, when an irresistible temptation plagued the cardinal. When the Lord refused to intervene due to James' resistance, the saint threatened God by saying: "Either separate me from yourself or liberate that man for whom I pray, even if he is not willing"³⁷. God took this warning seriously and acted immediately. After his death, God asked James not to tell Lutgard about his short sentence in purgatory, to spare her from grief and to avoid a second intervention.

36. *Lutgard of Aywières*, p. 242.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 241.

God anticipated his bride's reaction. Kept in the dark, she was contented with her friend's salvation and God's tender affection³⁸.

These examples reveal that salvation was not exchanged for shared pain, but obtained through a shared love between the saint and God. Lutgard acted like Mother Mary in Thomas' *exemplum* and negotiated with Christ on the basis of a loving relationship. What is astonishing in these examples is that Lutgard did not become vulnerable in this love relationship – as other holy women and mystics did – but that God allowed himself to be influenced and wounded by her. Even Mother Mary suffered when she saw her son nailed to the cross. The bond of love between God and Lutgard left God unguarded, but not the saint. Just as Mary in Thomas' *exemplum*, Lutgard took charge and used her position as a compassionate bride to sway God's judgment. The special position as bride of Christ was rooted in the familiar *topos* of bridal mysticism, but took a bizarre turn in this *vita*, amplified not only in the purgatorial visions, but throughout the text.

Another telling example is the well-known scene of the heart exchange, briefly mentioned earlier. Here the dynamics of exchange were literally translated into a figurative scene. Despite the physicality of the heart metaphor, the scene remained sterile; no one appeared to be wounded and no one bled. Once again, it was Lutgard who demanded that her beloved Christ fulfill her heart's desire. This episode takes place after the first mention of the side wound. By this time, the young nun had gained a reputation as a healer. Her bodily secretions miraculously healed and crowds seeking solace overwhelmed the saint. Her wondrous powers annoyed her and she asked the Lord: "Of what use to me is this grace, through which I am so often hindered from dallying with you? Take it away from me, but in such a way that the grace is changed into something better for me"³⁹. The Lord responded to Lutgard's request and asked her what she wanted in place of her healing powers. The saint asked for an understanding of the Psalter, which she used in her prayers. This modest saintly behavior would no doubt increase her intimacy with Christ without giving the external world cause to disturb her. He granted her request, although it did not have the desired effect. The bride then blamed the Beloved because he should have known that the secrets of Scripture were lost on an "unlettered, uncultivated, and uneducated nun",

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 277-278.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 226.

as she unconvincingly feigned modesty⁴⁰. The theatrical quarrel between the two lovers culminated in the following exchange of words and hearts:

Then the Lord said to her, "What do you want?" "I want your heart". "No, rather it is I who want your heart", replied the Lord. "So be it, Lord, on condition that you temper your heart's love to my heart and that I may possess my heart in you. Indeed, with you as my shield, my heart will be secure for all time". And so a communion of hearts occurred from that time on, or rather, the union of an uncreated with a created spirit through a surplus of grace. It was this of which the Apostle says: she "who clings to God is made one spirit with him"⁴¹.

Lutgard did not mimic Christ's wounded body, as Petrus Conversus, for instance, did, but internalized it. She meditated and gazed upon the wounded body of her Bridegroom and penetrated his wound, piercing deeper and deeper into Christ's inner world – so far, that she could even exchange her heart for his. The exchange of hearts graphically depicts their union. The opening in Christ's side exposed his divine heart and allowed Lutgard to achieve the final stage in her literal pursuit of loving affection, by offering her heart in exchange for his.

Yet this union, I argue, was not a mutual self-giving. The sentence Lutgard uttered before the exchange of hearts, illustrates this point. She said: "So be it, Lord, on condition that you temper your heart's love to my heart and that I may possess my heart in you. Indeed, with you as my shield, my heart will be secure for all time"⁴². At first glance, the intimacy implied by this trade stands out. From this point on, the lovers would be part of one another, literally inhabiting each other's bodies. Yet it is worth noting that Lutgard asked Christ to "temper" his heart, as it was the unrestrained heart, burning with desire, that caused the suffering of several mystics, such as Beatrice and Hadewijch. Lutgard made sure that Christ's pulse beat to her rhythm. Lutgard was not transformed or changed, she controlled a now bounded desire. Christ gave her everything her heart desired. Lutgard's heart was surgically removed with the words: "So be it". This bloodless exchange happened on the saint's terms, following her conditions. The *sponsa Christi* was the one holding the lance, penetrating Christ, without being hurt herself. Lutgard is presented as the Love that wounds Christ – and not as a saint seeking to share and emulate the wounded Christ's suffering. Lutgard's success as undefeated saint fit with her control over Christ who longed for his bride.

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*, p. 227.

42. *Ibid.*

Lutgard's imitation of Christ was not really visible on her body, but in her conquering of suffering and death. This is made explicit in the last purgatory passage of the *vita*, narrated by Elizabeth of Wans, a contemporary of Lutgard at the Aywières convent. Elizabeth describes a revelation she witnessed shortly after the saint's death, in which Lutgard's soul raged through purgatory. Elizabeth says Lutgard took many souls with her on her way to paradise. These souls had been condemned to a punishment in purgatory. Her journey through the underworld is reminiscent of the mystery of Christ's death. Christ descended to hell after dying on the cross, freeing souls from the shackles of death on his way to heaven. Her whole *vita* led to this climax, portraying Lutgard as an undefeated vanquisher, breaking the chains of the dead and taking along several souls to heaven, without a single restraint⁴³.

Lutgard's control over her mystical love relationship with Christ, allowed her to assert her own will, even though this appeared to contravene divine judgment. By placing her own love above God's, Lutgard championed her love for her fellow human beings at the expense of her love for God. Yet, in the secondary literature, this transgression upsetting the balance between justice and compassion is not seen as problematic. Passenier notes that the distinction between purgatory and hell was crucial to thirteenth-century theology and saints' practices, and that Lutgard respected this division. She argues: "Justice is not overruled and the boundaries between hell and purgatory, reparable and irreparable sin are not blurred"⁴⁴. Passenier points to the common theological distinction between hell and purgatory and its impact on the practice of saving souls⁴⁵.

Damned souls were irredeemable, while the punishment of purgatorial souls was only temporary. When we keep this distinction in mind only, Lutgard indeed appears to have been a model saint. Nevertheless, Lutgard's actions were far-reaching and, to some, transgressive. With the exception of this one theological rule, her power as a saint seemed to know no bounds. Not all holy women and female mystics appreciated this mystical love interpretation and her saintly practice. The next section analyzes some of her opponents in Liège's mystical culture, who criticized her practice indirectly, questioning her love relationship with God and the tension between compassion for humanity and love for the Divine Judge.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 294.

44. See PASSENIER, *The Life of Christina Mirabilis*, pp. 167-169.

45. Le Goff argues that, in order to keep this sophisticated system intact, holy women could not be allowed to damage the balance between justice and compassion, the backbone of the system. See LE GOFF, *La naissance du Purgatoire*, p. 15.

3. *Destabilizing Purgatorial Exchange*

The practice of saving souls was not generally accepted amongst saints, hagiographers, and mystics. In the same *vita*, such as Goswin's *vita* of Ida of Nivelles or even within the oeuvre of one hagiographer, Thomas of Cantimpré in this case, one can find diverse and contradictory depictions of the practice. Note that the theological undertone of Lutgard's *vita* differs markedly from that of Christina – even though Thomas wrote both *vitae* and both saints can be described as purgatorial saints in their own right. The next section will also discuss the *Supplement* to the *Life of Mary of Oignies* – also written by Thomas – in which the saint refused to save a soul. This suggests that the hagiographer respected the women's theological profile, their ideas and behavior within society, and kept them in mind when writing their *vitae*. The different *vitae* studied in this section, represent various counterarguments against the practice of saving of souls that resounded from all corners of the mystical landscape, uttered by saints, as well as their hagiographers and mystical authors. These counterarguments are scattered all over the hagiographic literature and they culminate in the mystical treatise of Hadewijch, especially in her fifth vision.

Although the idea of the exchange of pain for salvation is not entirely absent in her *vita*, Mary of Oignies did not act on the basis of this dynamic. She chose to follow the will of God and only intervened through prayer when God asked her to. James describes how the saint's prayers advocated effectively for lost souls in purgatory. But unlike Ida of Nivelles, Mary of Oignies did not carry the pain of these souls for them, nor did she exploit her position as the bride of Christ, as Lutgard did. She only offered her prayers to help souls endure their punishment. A telling passage in Mary's *vita* tells how visions of innumerable hands plagued her, grasping at her. She sometimes tried to escape these visions and finally asked God what they signified. At the church's tabernacle, God answered that these were the hands of the lost souls in purgatory who begged for her prayers and the "intercession that would soothe their sufferings as if with a precious ointment"⁴⁶. Mary alleviated the pain of the souls without attempting to change God's judgment. The *vita* creates an opportunity for the saint to show mercy without challenging divine justice⁴⁷.

46. *Mary of Oignies*, pp. 63-64.

47. Mary of Oignies knew that not everyone deserved her prayers: "Do not pour out your prayers for him because he has been condemned by God. He has been transfixed by a mortal wound and has miserably died in a tournament and has been sold into the eternal fires". *Ibid.*, p. 63.

Mary used her teachings as a tool to save souls before they died, so that God did not have to judge them severely. Once condemned, Mary knew that God's judgment was final. Thus, instead of liberating souls from purgatory, Mary attempted to prepare her community's members for the coming of heaven on earth. Mary's role as a teacher can be considered the saint's most important accomplishment. She used her intellectual relationship with James to preach, through him, to the community. As Thomas writes: "the handmaid of Christ compelled this venerable man to preach to the people, to call back souls that the devil was trying to take away"⁴⁸. Like James, Mary pursued theological knowledge during intellectual conversations between the two of them⁴⁹.

Mary knew that the will of God would be done and that her intercession could not challenge God. This conviction is crystalized in the following passage, written by Thomas of Cantimpré in the *Supplement*. After her mother's death, Mary hoped for her mother's salvation because she was a generous soul – she had frequently engaged in almsgiving and lived an honest life. Yet the spirit of Mary's dead mother visited her, telling her that she had been damned to hell because of her participation in unjust commerce for which she had not repented. The *vita* goes on:

When the handmaid of Christ had pondered all these things in an orderly way, she blessed God's judgment, even in regard to her mother's damnation. Nor did she weep any more about her through whom she had received the beginnings of her flesh, who had now been handed over to everlasting death. The intellectual reason of her soul, which only the Almighty created, was in harmony with God, the judge of all to whom it was subject⁵⁰.

For Mary, divine love trumped human love, even that for one's own family. Unlike Lutgard, who tried to save her own sister, Mary did not try to save her mother's soul. After all, she knew that no hope remained. She could not save the soul against God's will.

Saints could not defy God's will – but neither could they ignore the will of the lost soul itself, when this soul's stubbornness had sentenced it to purgatory or hell. Ida of Nivelles learned this lesson during the so-called bridge vision⁵¹. She learned that her authority as a mediator was

48. *Supplement*, p. 141.

49. See also the conversation with a merchant about the fire of purgatory, quoted on p. 89, n. 6.

50. *Supplement*, p. 150.

51. Two types of purgatorial visions come together in this passage: graphic descriptions of purgatory and encounters between Christ and the souls of the deceased. See P. DINZELBACHER, *Ida von Nivelles Brückenvision*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 52 (1978) 179-194.

not omnipotent. In the vision, she wandered through purgatory, although her own soul was neither damaged nor harmed. She came to a stream of noxious gasses, arched by a wafer-thin bridge leading to the heavenly garden where the Lord waited. At the foot of the bridge stood the soul of a deceased woman. Ida told the soul as she took her by the hand: "Suffer it, sweet daughter, that a saving suffrage be thus invested on your behalf. And do not lose sight of all that I myself have suffered to redeem you from the everlasting torments of hell"⁵².

Three times, Ida tried to lead the soul across the bridge, in vain. This frustrated the Lord and he drew Ida's attention to the unwillingness of the soul to enter paradise. Thus, Ida learned that a soul could reject its own redemption. Christ knew this as he had mastered the laws of salvation. The soul must want to be saved. If the soul's will, the saint's and the Lord's did not coincide, salvation could not follow. After Ida had learned this lesson, she could no longer mourn the soul⁵³. This passage essentially questions the saint's intentions. Did she want to save the soul for her own fame? Ida got to know the harsh dilemma of love that Christ had also faced, namely, what if a soul – despite being loved – does not wish to be saved? Together with Christ, she learned that love could be very painful if the soul did not open itself to mercy. Sometimes compassion went unanswered by humans, as well as God.

The *vita* of the male saint Petrus Conversus also underscores this point. In a rather peculiar passage – just as singular as that in Lutgard's *vita* – the saint rebelled against Christ. During a sermon, Petrus heard the preacher talk about Christ's juridical power and executive power over heaven and earth, given to him by the Father. He meditated on these ideas and came to the difficult, apparent paradox between Christ's judicial power and his compassion. Petrus addressed God, the Father, and asked why Christ, who judged sinners, allowed humans to turn from him, his will and his Father's. Petrus could not comprehend why Christ did not take better care of the creatures who stood no chance without him. Petrus was convinced that Christ had neglected to take up his responsibility and even abused his judicial power. Petrus' main argument was that his own compassion for his fellow brothers appeared to exceed that of Christ, who had no problem condemning sinners without helping them. Petrus told God that:

I beg you, Father, defend my case concerning your Son and do me justice as I wish. I no longer care to serve Him more nor do I want to accept His consolations. I no longer offer him praise or thanksgiving, as long as He

52. *Ida of Nivelles*, p. 44.

53. *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

does improve his examination of the cases of sinners and as long as he does not correct them with more kindness and eagerness⁵⁴.

Because of his compassion, Petrus doubted Christ's judgment. He no longer accepted Christ's authority, only that of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and no longer bowed or prostrated himself before the crucifix. Christ appeared to Petrus when he had secluded himself to mortify his flesh. Christ asked Petrus' forgiveness for the complaints Petrus had made to God, the Father. Christ promised him a bond in which Petrus would no longer doubt him. Yet Petrus persisted and Christ wondered what he was worried about, since his own salvation was ensured through the promise and the relationship they shared. Petrus would get what he had been promised and would be rewarded for his services. But, for Petrus, this was not enough. He wanted Christ to guarantee the salvation of his fellow brothers as well. He told Christ: "Your peace, I don't want it for myself alone; it is my brothers that I want to see in peace. It is the salvation of all that I seek. O truly compassionate charity! This is what Moses, the very just defender of the people of God, said to the Lord as we can read: 'Lord, erase this punishment intended for your people or else erase me from the book you wrote'"⁵⁵.

Nevertheless, Christ managed to convince Petrus. Petrus felt firsthand what Christ had endured for the salvation of mankind. Christ afflicted the same pains upon Petrus, perpetuating and reenacting his redemptive suffering. Petrus' friends could not understand his redeeming suffering and rejected him. He felt united with Christ in his love for humankind and in their shared pain, which included exclusion and a broken relationship with the community. Petrus thus chose the love for Christ, rather than the human love for the friends who had turned against him. He realized that he needed to go further in his emulation of Christ's suffering and should not insist upon the salvation of befriended souls out of compassion. Actual love of one's neighbor could only flow from the superior and preeminent love of God. Divine love transcends human love, which is limited and sometimes leads to blindness⁵⁶.

Mary of Oignies discovered that there is salvation in the personal suffering of the soul, even when merciful bystanders want to help it. James recounts how Mary was unwittingly helped by the prayers and self-mortification of a devout man who alleviated her illness and pain.

54. *Petrus Conversus*, p. 357.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 359.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 361.

Mary was not pleased with the voluntary exchange of pain and salvation undertaken by her friend:

Once, when she cried out from the pain of her paralysis and driven to beat her breast, one of her close friends had compassion on her and hid himself somewhere and prayed to the Lord for her. When she felt the illness diminish somewhat because of the prayers of the devout man, she said to her handmaid, "Go and tell that man to stop praying for me. Although the medicine of his prayers has made me feel better, it is causing damage to my discipline"⁵⁷.

Mary did not desire assistance, because pain helped her maintain her relationship with God, by disciplining her body. Pain was an integral part of this relationship. According to her, it was the will of God and her destiny as a saint. That is why she resented the man's well-meaning intervention.

Holy women and men alike thus learned, in moments of revelation, that God's will was absolute and that they could not intercede in the personal relationship between a particular soul and God. Compassion had a limited scope and could not support souls in their own spiritual growth. Souls who were totally condemned by God could never be saved. This was the will of God that even they, as lovers of Christ, could not contest. They could also not persist in saving purgatorial souls. That would mean imposing their own will and violating the love in which the two lovers had surrendered completely to one another. This love was of a divine, and not a human, order. The mediation of saints was subject to strict mystical-theological regulations negotiated between hagiographers, mystical authors, and saints. In the polyphony of mystical culture, one note – accepted by all save Lutgard – resounded unmistakably: divine will was absolute and the saints could not interfere when their will did not coincide with the laws of love and the dynamics between the soul and God. No one articulated this idea more forcefully and radically than the mystical author Hadewijch.

Hadewijch explicitly condemned the practice of saving souls from purgatory in her fifth vision. Contrary to the *vitae*, Hadewijch's works did not circulate widely and were primarily meant for her own elitist circle. I primarily interpret her *Visions* as an imaginary theology that does not necessarily directly reflect her own personal experiences as a visionary. Hadewijch was predominantly concerned with passing on mystical knowledge through the *Visions*. As hagiographers interpreted and shaped the women in their *vitae*, Hadewijch also created a character who

57. *Mary of Oignies*, p. 102.

experienced divine revelations in visionary episodes. In her fifth vision, this character looks back on her youth, a period when she still lacked mystical wisdom, and had committed the error of saving souls. I take this fifth vision and, by extension, the complete *Visions* to analyze Hadewijch's condemnation of this practice. Her rejection can be traced to some of the core elements we found in the other *vitae*, spread across the mystical landscape, especially the plea against imposing one's own will, which prevents one from truly loving God and, through God, one's fellow human person.

Hadewijch staged the fifth vision within the liturgical context of Assumption Day. The visionary was uplifted in the spirit and shown three heavens, each named after one of the hierarchical orders of angels. In this vision, she met John the Evangelist, who appeared regularly in her visions. Seeing the angels and John in heaven reminded her of the feeling of oneness with God. Then, confronted with the possibility of exclusion from that loving union, the mystic pondered earthly reality. She asked John: "Holy Friend and true Omnipotence, why do you let those who are ours wander off to alien things, and why do you not flow through them in our oneness?"⁵⁸ The visionary questioned divine judgment and the rationale behind the selection and distinction of the heavenly loved ones and the damned. She thought about her friends and pupils whom she could not protect from God's seemingly heartless judgment. Hadewijch's basic question is: "If God is Endless Love, why does his compassion not save everyone? Why can the souls of the damned not be saved? In other words – and in sharp contrast with some holy women's practice of saving souls from purgatory – why does divine judgment prevail over compassion? If God is Love, what kind of Love are we talking about?"

The writer interrupts the vision with an aside, reflecting on the past, when the visionary did not understand how divine judgment and compassion became one in God⁵⁹. In the past, the visionary's knowledge of God – whom she called Love – was incomplete. During her visionary activity and her life as a mystic, she got to know Love inside out. We can read Hadewijch's interruption as a theological examination, shared by the master with her apprentice through the voice of the visionary. She

58. HADEWIJCH, *Vision 5*, p. 276.

59. Spaapen calls this interruption a parenthesis. The general direction of the vision from mystic growth to existential experience is interrupted by this parenthesis, in which Hadewijch elaborated on an event in the past. It is unrelated to the existential union that forms the center of the *Visions*. See B. SPAAPEN, *Hadewijch en het vijfde visioen*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 44 (1970) 7-44; 113-141; 353-404; 45 (1971) 129-178; 46 (1971) 113-199, pp. 151-155.

addressed the saving of souls and the pitfalls and transgressions associated with this dangerous undertaking. The visionary addressed God and confessed to him and, indirectly, to her reader:

In one thing I did wrong in the past, to the living and the dead, whom I with desire would have freed from purgatory and from hell as my right. But for this be you blessed: Without anger against me, you gave me four among the living and the dead who then belonged to hell. Your goodness was tolerant of my ignorance, and of my thoughtless desires, and of the unrestrained charity that you gave me in yourself for men. For I did not then know your perfect justice. I fell into this fault and was Lucifer because I did not know this, although on that account I did no evil in your eyes⁶⁰.

The mystic admitted that she had been wrong, that she had committed a grave sin and could therefore be called a Lucifer. But what was the exact nature of this sin⁶¹? Were all the holy women who saved souls from purgatory Lucifers? If compassion was an act of Love, and if God is Love, as the Bible says, how could it be sinful to take pity on the dead and, as a result, offer merits and suffrages?

The mystic underwent a struggle between these seemingly militantly opposed forces: compassion versus divine justice. Winning this interior battle, she transformed an egocentric charity and human compassion for one's neighbor into an act of true love. According to Spaapen, Hadewijch lambasted this form of charity induced by affection and religious feelings of compassion for damned souls. Instead, she preferred to let enlightened reason guide her in accordance with divine will and its judgment⁶². Some saints were Lucifers in Hadewijch's eyes because they had sinned. During this process, she had to fend off rejection and violent assaults from humans as well as God. By performing her works of charity, displaying compassion and freeing souls from purgatory, she, like Petrus Conversus, solicited the wrath of the people⁶³. They could not comprehend

60. HADEWIJCH, *Vision 5*, p. 276.

61. Spaapen argues against Albert Brounts' interpretation of the fifth vision. Brounts reads the vision as a confession of Hadewijch's past apostasy. Brounts believes that Hadewijch had once been aligned with a quietist movement, which was considered heretical by Church authorities. Brounts even alleges that she had run-ins with the Inquisition. Spaapen says that Brounts is wrong to isolate this passage from the fifth vision. He argues that the vision is not so much an attempt to confess a previous sin, as a technique Hadewijch used to show her election and her special connection to God who granted her wishes. See A. BROUTS, *Hadewijch en de Ketterij naar het vijfde Visioen*, in *Handelingen van de Koninklijke Zuidnederlandse Maatschappij voor Taal- en Letterkunde* 22 (1968) 15-78; SPAAPEN, *Hadewijch en het vijfde visioen*, pp. 10-14.

62. *Ibid.*, pp. 31-33.

63. In her fifth vision, Hadewijch wrote: "This was the one thing because of which I fell among men, so that I remained unknown to them, and they were cruel to me. Through

her divine election and perhaps even feared the miraculous abilities she was capable of. Nevertheless, as an instinctive response to the excessive Love she received from God, she chose to share that love, and the redemptive forces she felt within, with her neighbor. Humiliation and persecutions could not stop her from loving God and humankind, but she did not learn to love human persons spontaneously, but from the perspective of Love. She had to learn not to show compassion out of hidden self-love and egocentrism, but for the sake of God. This also involved learning to let go of people and, like Ida of Nivelles, allow souls to be lost. The mystic had to overcome her own disappointment in God as well as in humanity.

Charity hurt her because it was an automatic attempt to compensate for the lack of love in her neighbors and friends. She compared her own captivating longing for Love with that of her peers and could not understand the inability of men to love God more – to love him unconditionally, as she did. She was also disappointed with God, because he allowed men to become strangers to him. She then went on to say: “I would gladly have purchased love for them by accepting that he should love them and hate me”⁶⁴. If possible, she would willingly have loved those souls, turning her back on God. She was, I believe, recalling how she had saved souls by sharing the love they needed. Here, she resembled the holy women who traded their suffrages for souls. She would have overruled God’s judgment if she could, because she was furious at God for not looking after weak souls who strayed.

Hadewijch then explained that Love hurt even more than her urge for charity and her compassion for those poor souls lacking the capacity to love to the fullest. She wrote: “Also, charity has wounded me the most – except for actual Love. What is actual Love? It is the divine power that must have priority; and it does so in me. For the sovereign power that is actual Love spares no one, either in hate or in love; favor is never found in it”⁶⁵. The power of Love was divine judgment. She learned how cruel Love was, not only alienating distracted souls, but also damning them to

love I wished to snatch the living and the dead from all the debasement of despair and of wrongdoing, and I caused their pain to be lessened, and those dead in hell to be sent into purgatory, and those living in hell to be brought to the heavenly mode of life. Your goodness was tolerant of me in this and showed me that for this reason I had fallen in that way among those people”. HADEWIJCH, *Vision* 5, pp. 276-277. On the basis of the twenty-ninth letter, Spaapen argues that Hadewijch indeed fell into disgrace. He says that Hadewijch’s unique election shocked people, even to the point of disgust and rejection. See SPAAPEN, *Hadewijch en het vijfde visioen*, pp. 382-384.

64. HADEWIJCH, *Vision* 11, p. 292.

65. *Ibid.*

hell. Nevertheless, she learned to transform her charity into love and she let Love's power prevent her from hastening to save every soul. She could have lived as a free human being, enjoying the divine powers bestowed upon her – like the holy women did. Instead, she said, she chose to submit to God's judgment and was "taken up into a fuller participation in the Divine Nature"⁶⁶.

The weak souls Hadewijch mentioned in her fifth and eleventh visions were not only common people, but included the saints who saved souls. They had forgotten that they should have loved God above all, instead of indulging in self-satisfying acts of charity⁶⁷. Not, of course, because charity per se was sinful, but because a hidden narcissism, obscured by layers of charity and compassion, was. The women followed their own egocentric needs and chose to act against divine will, overruling justice with compassion. If one did not love God first, compassion for souls was no more than a distraction, unrelated to Love and therefore sinful⁶⁸. Spaapen says that these souls focused on *ongherechte Minne* (Unjust Love), which originated with the individual and not God who was the source of both love and justice⁶⁹. Humans who turned their backs on God and praised their own autonomy were committing an act of *hubris*. Therefore, they could rightly be called Lucifers. Only Lucifers saved souls from purgatory, transgressing divine justice with narcissistic human compassion.

Spaapen argues that the change from selfish love to real love was a pivotal moment in Hadewijch's life. He sees the following, crucial evolution running through Hadewijch's oeuvre: from unjust to just love, from ignorance and vice to true knowledge⁷⁰. According to Hadewijch's theological insight, judgment is a divine privilege. Humanity is too weak and self-centered to judge according to Love's standards. On their own, humans can never understand what is truly righteous. They need God. By knowing God intimately, humans can begin to understand and even judge virtuously. For Hadewijch, there could be but one judgment. God and human person must share the same will, the same judgment⁷¹. To judge alongside God means to know God intimately, to the point where both become one loving union. Yet persons can only accomplish this if they

66. *Ibid.*

67. HADEWIJCH, *Letter 4*, p. 54: "In charity men err through injudicious service, for instance when they give out of mere liking where there is no need, or render superfluous service, or weary themselves when there is no need. Often emotional attraction motivates what is called charity".

68. See SPAAPEN, *Hadewijch en het vijfde visioen*, p. 13.

69. *Ibid.*, pp. 11-14.

70. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-17.

71. *Ibid.*, pp. 135-140.

are prepared to sacrifice the egocentric will, its misguided judgment, and become God. Judging souls in heaven, purgatory and hell is a divine right. If a soul wants to judge other souls, she must become like God. This process of deification is only possible if she is willing to accept the consequences of this process. She must surrender to Love and let go of her own self-centered tendencies. Divine justice is only possible if the soul abandons her own finite wisdom. The human person must learn to look through the eyes of Love:

Now for persons, my repose lay in loving each of them in what was proper to him, and wishing for each of them that only what he held desirable and good might happen to him; whether this good was that of their will or of the divine will was a question with which I did not meddle. But what they had in love, I loved for God, in order that he might strengthen it for himself and cause it to grow to perfection; such was my desire. Because I loved God's being loved, I wished no pleasure from it but that⁷².

In order to reach the divine union necessary for righteous judgment, the mystic had to undergo a process of transformation. The key element in this process was the human will. As long as the human will remained self-centered, then the person was not just. The soul could only surrender the self if she was willing to die like Christ on the cross. This act was the final consequence of a love without end. On the cross, Christ said: *Fiat voluntas tua* – Thy will be done⁷³. Here, God and humanity met in a perfect, loving union. Indeed, humans could only judge righteously if they knew and experienced this kind of love. The process of divine illumination could only begin by surrendering the will to Love. Only then was the mystic capable of learning divine truths and could she begin to understand divine judgment, which so exceeds our meager comprehension. Humanity can only understand this divine justice by becoming like God and by letting Love illuminate reason. It is only then that they can know God's reality – a God who can love and hate at the same time in a *unio oppositorum*.

In her fifth vision, Hadewijch wrote: "Then you took my self into yourself and gave me to know what you are, and that you hate and love in one same Being. Then I understood, how I must hate and love wholly with you, and how I must be in all respects"⁷⁴. God contained both love and hate. Hadewijch thus understood Love, who is God, as a complex reality

72. HADEWIJCH, *Vision* 11, pp. 291-292.

73. Hadewijch reflected on this idea in her sixth letter. See HADEWIJCH, *Letter* 6, pp. 56-63.

74. HADEWIJCH, *Vision* 5, p. 277.

manifesting itself in many forms. Love was not only compassion; she was also cruel and hard as nails. In Hadewijch's theology, love and judgment were not opposing forces, but part of the same reality. In her twentieth letter, she argued that "Love stands on trial before none, but all things stand on trial before her (cf. 1 Cor. 2:15). Love borrows from God the power of decision over those she loves. Love will not yield to saints, men here below, Angels, heaven, or earth. She has vanquished the Divinity by her nature"⁷⁵. For Hadewijch, knowing God, was knowing the dark side of Love too, where Love's judgment is difficult to comprehend and where feeble compassion falls short. Not even saints are powerful enough to intervene in favor of a lost soul condemned by Love. Saintly compassion and charity simply do not live up to the standards of Hadewijch's Love.

Hadewijch's theology was fundamentally different from Lutgard's thaumaturgical practices. Both women interpreted the imagery of bridal mysticism, but drew opposing conclusions on the nature of Love. In Hadewijch's vision, Love acted, judged, and wounded. Love itself overshadowed the soul and even the beloved Christ. In contrast with Hadewijch's mystic oeuvre, meant for a select group of insiders, Thomas targeted a broad audience with Lutgard's *vita*. His readers first had to be convinced of the saint's ability to act as a mediator. Thomas did this by painting Lutgard theatrically and explicitly as a bride. This role imparted Lutgard with the power to alter divine judgment. In this narrative, Love was not in control. Lutgard manipulated God and managed to convince her beloved, Christ, to fulfill her wishes. Lutgard wounded the beloved, while Hadewijch was wounded by Love who would never accommodate her aspirations or expectations. Lutgard used love to persuade God to fulfill her will; Hadewijch surrendered to Love that demanded total submission from both God and the mystic. In Lutgard's case, Lutgard herself was in charge; for Hadewijch, Love was the supreme power⁷⁶.

75. HADEWIJCH, *Letter 20*, p. 92.

76. The wounds linked the two bodies together, the lover and the beloved. One would wound the other, in order to penetrate their inner world, to conquer their love. Through meditation, the soul could take the position of Love, harming Christ and piercing his heart. But God's arrows of love could also pierce the soul. The conscious choice to be hurt can be found with mystic authors such as Hadewijch, whose mysticism Karma Lochrie calls a "love noir", love with a dark side. Lochrie notes that the female mystics began to use an imagery that did not focus on the wounded lover (or on the wounded Christ), but on themselves as the victims of violence. The desire to be wounded by Christ and to share his pain was, according to Lochrie, a form of queer desire, an unconventional love that saw the wound not only as a metaphor, but also represented it graphically, admiring it with an erotic gaze. See K. LOCHRIE, *Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies*, in EAD. (ed.), *Constructing Medieval Sexuality* (Medieval Cultures, 11), Minneapolis, MN – London, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 180-200, pp. 182; 188-189. I have compared Hadewijch's positioning

Lutgard fought her battle for salvation at a cosmic level. She slayed demons and saved souls by traveling to purgatory, just as Christ descended to hell. Salvation had been dispensed beyond the power of humanity and only Lutgard was capable of intervening. Hadewijch attempted to pass on her knowledge, so that her reader might walk the same path of Love. Lutgard was the saint offering *ad hoc* solutions, Hadewijch the teacher intent on helping her disciple, like Mary of Oignies. Mary recognized that God's judgment is just and filled with love for the soul who must be allowed to grow independently toward a greater love of God. Humanity is recognized as a partner in a game of love, bearing its own responsibilities. Only by choosing to desire God, and by potentially failing and receiving punishment, can humanity truly become God. In her sixth letter, she wrote:

Toward sinners be compassionate, with fervent petitions to God; but do not take on yourself to keep reciting prayers for them or earnestly wish that God withdraw them from that state; for you would waste your time, and in other respects it would not be of much use [...] And for the lowest, who are sinners and estranged from God, neither efforts nor prayers to God are profitable, but rather the love we give to God. And the stronger that love is, the more it frees sinners from their sins and gives security to those who love⁷⁷.

Hadewijch's mysticism also had a theatrical side, but was primarily aimed at revealing the ultimate love relationship in which she and her beloved symbolized true Love. Unlike Christina, she did not embody the pains of purgatory, but, through visionary performances and rich imagery, she showed that her mystic was filled with Love. Only through Love could souls be saved. In the tenth vision, the mystic consummated her mystic marriage and unveiled this redeeming wisdom:

The dead sinners – who have come without hope, and are enlightened by the knowledge of your union – and desire grace or entrance into purgatory, cling somewhat to virtue and are not altogether naked. If only they believe in the oneness of you both, they will find full contentment through your marriage⁷⁸.

Pain cannot be exchanged or used to save other souls. Only true statements of a divine bond of love can persuade other souls to emulate a similar experience of love. This does not mean that pain is absent in the

as wounded victim to Lutgard's identification with the bride that wounds Christ. See S. VLOEBERGS, *Two Distinct Voices during the Age of Love: Hadewijch and Lutgard of Tongeren*, in M. DE KESEL – A. POIRTERS (eds.), *Mysticism and/as Love Theory* (Studies in Spirituality Supplements, 36), Leuven, Peeters, 2021, 61-80.

77. HADEWIJCH, *Letter* 6, pp. 57-58.

78. HADEWIJCH, *Vision* 10, p. 288.

game of love – on the contrary – it is so fundamental that it cannot be borne for another or be exchanged. Everyone must bear this burden, each alone but supported by community. Pain is no longer the price that must be paid for salvation, but a crucial component of mystical growth that every person must undertake individually. It is an inner evolution that transcends the simple logic of exchange and proposes a radical equation of pain and love. In these mystical theologies, the extremes of pain and love converge when God and humans meet. In Hadewijch's time, this radical teaching could only be found in the mystical centers, as it demanded a high level of mystic literacy that was largely absent at the margins of mystical culture.

ACT III

BEING IN PAIN

In the epicenter of Liège's mystical culture, radical ideas on the relationship between humankind and God flourished. These ideas were often disruptive and challenging, not the topic of ordinary conversation. They were only understood by an elite group surrounding the mystical teacher who claimed to have an embodied, lived experience of his or her mystical theologies and expected a high degree of mystical literacy in his or her followers. This literacy was not only embedded in written religious traditions and Christian imagination but also in profane literature and its courtly love themes. Especially Hadewijch of Brabant was influenced by these profane themes and the crossover to religious literature. The most important theme that connects both the religious monastic traditions of love mysticism and the courtly love literature is the allegorical figure of Lady Love, who, in Hadewijch's native Dutch, is called *Minne*, Love¹.

The cross-fertilization of love lyricism and love mysticism created a unique environment in which new and radical ideals could be explored, using Love as a point of reference. The mystical theologians at the epicenter of the culture tried to understand Love in all her depths and varieties. Researchers such as Axters and Mommaers have tried to define what mystics meant to say when they spoke of Love, but both admit that it is impossible to define Love². The richness of the character of Love and the reality she personifies helped the mystical theologians to study and experience the divine reality as both sweet and bitter, pleasurable and painful. Saskia Murk-Jansen argues that they developed a theory and

1. B. Newman states that Hadewijch stands at the crossroads of both Germanic and Romance literary traditions. She thinks it is probable that she spoke French, or even Provençal, and was familiar with the French troubadour songs. Her work, however, was not known in francophone regions but heavily influenced the Dutch spiritual authors. See NEWMAN, *God and the Goddesses*, pp. 172-173.

2. Axters argues that *Minne* in Hadewijch refers to God, to Christ and the incarnation, but Love also symbolized her relationship with Christ, the power of the universe that even God had to obey and, finally, the divine virtue of love. See AXTERS, *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid*, 1, pp. 367-368. Mommaers argues how Love is not only a concept but personifies a reality that influences individual existence. It is both the subjective experience of loving and the objective reality of the One being loved. See MOMMAERS, *Hadewijch*, pp. 6-7.

practice on the painful side of Love, which shed light on their experiences of God as divine Lover. She states that they discovered the *mysterium tremendum* aspect of God, the “horror at the enormity of the love that God has toward his creatures”³. They connected Love and the pain Love causes, poetically described in love lyricism, to a fear of God. They changed the direction of the pendulum, Murk-Jansen argues, from the twelfth-century celebration of God’s presence as Love to the thirteenth-century fear for God and of what separates him from his creation⁴.

Thirteenth-century Brabantian mystics – Beatrice of Nazareth and Hadewijch in particular – explored the relationship between pain and Love. In their texts, Love is not just associated with pleasure and satisfaction but also with fear. Love inflicts unspeakable pain and suffering on the lover who is subjected to her unpredictable nature. Fear for Love, and the pain this existential fear causes, was conceptualized and interpreted through a careful self-inquiry. The authors created a shared visual language that could map these experiences. Only then could they, and their disciples, successfully survive their adventure in the land of Love. It was crucial for their disciples to conquer this fear, which gives rise to a mentality that is beneficial at first but becomes destructive if one fails to overcome it. In the end, Love conquers fear and the mystic’s life is exclusively driven by Love. As Beatrice wrote: “Such a desire, so pure and so noble, is certainly born out of Love, and not out of fear. Fear makes a person work and endure, act and don’t act, out of fear that our Lord would be wrathful. This leads to fear for the judgment of the Righteous Judge, or for the eternal vengeance or temporary punishment”⁵. The love discussed in the mystical epicenter of Liège was eternal Love with radical consequences for the salvation of the souls of all of humanity, through time and eternity – a love that conquers fear.

In their narrative, Christ is the ideal lover, the knight who has brought his quest to a victorious end. In these tractates, Christ acts as a model to be imitated as well as the hero who has secured humankind’s salvation. The reader can follow in Christ’s footsteps. The texts internalize pain; an incorporation that goes beyond meditation on Christ’s suffering and surpasses the compassion expressed by Mary and the saints following in her wake. Readers are invited to endure a form of pain that touches the core of their being, a spiritual and existential anxiety. This adventure implies

3. See S. MURK-JANSEN, *Brides in the Desert: The Spirituality of the Beguines* (Tradition of Christian Spirituality), London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1998, p. 13.

4. *Ibid.*

5. BEATRIJS VAN NAZARETH, *Seven manieren van minne*, ed. and trans. R. FAESEN, Kapellen, Pelckmans, 1999, pp. 50-51 (all translations of *Seven Manners* are my own).

a potentially lethal struggle, much like the quests of knights in profane literature. Reynaert argues that death is not an absolute border in thirteenth-century literature. The story's hero travels between different realms, endangering his life and his sanity. The hero risks despair, a message that resonated with the mystical authors, who also experienced despair in their relationship with the divine Lover⁶. Earlier on, I discussed how the saints from the *vitae* traveled between purgatory, heaven, and earth. In the mystical treatises, the readers need to take the lead. It is up to them to vanquish death for themselves. They cannot wait for saints or heroes to come to their rescue. They have to become their own heroes in the battle for their souls, in the quest for Love's blessing.

The mystical authors developed an imagery to explore this border-crossing between life and death and challenged classical theological paradigms in which heavenly reward will be granted after death. Their experiences of Love deconstructed distinctions between pleasure and pain and collapsed hell, heaven, and earth into one. All these realities were explored to gain a full, embodied knowledge and lived experience of Love. They used the imagery of hell, earthly exile, and heavenly bliss to recreate the scene on which to stage their cosmic dramas, which take place in the inner life of the mystic and in that of the reader. The imagery is used to explore the pain of human existence when it is magnified under a cosmic and eternal lens. Heaven and hell become spaces through which the soul can move, because the authors did not interpret these spaces exclusively as cosmic *postmortem* places, but saw them instead as expanses of the human soul, passed through in her movement toward God. The imagery tells us something about their interpretation of the eternal distance and difference between God and human being, which the mystic discovered in the *apex dei*, the most inner center of the human person, which borders on the divine abyss.

This situation leads mystical acolytes – who have only experienced sweet joy – to fear and despair, feeling radical doubt about God and themselves. The true mystic faces this burdensome existence head-on. Mystical authors and their imagery reassure readers that their hard-won knowledge on God, in the depths of their soul, is the true happiness that transcends the obstacles of pain or pleasure on the mystical path. The writers argued that the path to Love itself always defies original expectations. This knowledge is not meant for everyone and is often misunderstood, as the authors emphasized repeatedly. The period of sweet compassion is inevitably followed by a long and hard stretch of pain and fear, which

6. See REYNAERT, *Beeldspraak van Hadewijch*, p. 324.

most people try their utmost to avoid. Mystical growth only occurs when the person confronts this pain and fear. The authors wanted to lead their readers through pain and fear, that they might also experience firsthand God's complex nature as Love. The mystic imagery they employed is a pain language. Pain was thus theologically highly relevant for these authors and greatly valued. Pain is an essential part of the relationship between God and human being, on earth and in heaven.

The mystical treatises discussed in this act are different from the *exempla* and *vitae*, which circulated through all of mystical culture. The *vitae* and *exempla* were written in Latin, while the tractates discussed in this chapter are in Middle Dutch. The Brabantian authors, Beatrice and Hadewijch – as well as their fourteenth-century successor, John of Ruusbroec – developed their own accents and nuances, and helped readers overcome their painful transformation as unscathed as possible.

The first chapter of this act starts with Beatrice of Nazareth. I will discuss and compare two manuscripts: Beatrice's *vita*, penned by an anonymous hagiographer, and her own tractate, *Van seven manieren van heiliger minnen* (*Seven Manners of Holy Love*) which she wrote for a group of mystical insiders – students who needed her advice in their mystical evolution. Like her contemporary Hadewijch, Beatrice wanted to help her students' souls beyond superficial eruptions of intense happiness, establishing instead a relationship with God that would withstand the test of time. The second chapter moves on to Hadewijch, who also placed the mystical evolution of her disciple at the center of her creative and poetic works, aiming to guide and stand by her disciple whenever possible. Her mystagogy led her to mystical-theological insights that – even in her own time – were eccentric and radical. Finally, I will consider the fourteenth-century mystic Ruusbroec, who had a similar goal in mind when he wrote his extensive oeuvre, although he was part of a different generation. In his time, the configuration of mystical culture became unhinged as mystical ideas further democratized and the authority of scholastic theologians, who no longer supported mystical and devotional ideas, grew. Therefore, Ruusbroec – more so than either Beatrice or Hadewijch – had to act as a mediator, much like a thirteenth-century hagiographer.

BEATRICE'S PAIN, FEAR, AND DESIRE

Few figures are better placed than Beatrice of Nazareth to help bridge the work of hagiographers and mystics. Beatrice was born in Tienen in 1200, the youngest daughter of the deeply pious Bartholomew and Gertrude. After her mother died when Beatrice was just seven, she began to attend the local school of the Beguines of Zoutleeuw. At the age of ten, she became an oblate at the Cistercian convent of Bloemendaal, where she stayed until 1236. She then moved to the convent of Nazareth, which had been founded by her own father, Bartholomew, where she died in 1268. A fellow sister later commissioned Beatrice's *vita* from a hagiographer whose name has not been handed down¹.

The hagiographer's unique situation has led to considerable academic speculation. Like most hagiographers, he relied on eyewitness accounts to write the *vita*. But quite unlike other hagiographers, he also had access to Beatrice's own manuscripts. Beatrice reportedly kept a spiritual diary, which the hagiographer appears to have drawn on. Although this diary has been lost, one tractate written by Beatrice has been preserved: *Seven Manners*². Comparative studies of the treatise and the *vita* have generated a great deal of conjecture and assumptions that persist to influence the academic debate today. I argue that comparing both mystical-theological works reveal a genuine dialogue between the hagiographer and his sources at hand. This section aims to add nuance to these premises and to analyze the radical ideas on pain articulated by both Beatrice and her hagiographer, which challenge and baffle modern audiences as much as they did medieval readers.

"I am only the translator of this work, not the author", Beatrice's hagiographer declared in the *vita*. He presents himself as a faithful translator of the vernacular diary notes. Despite this claim, most academics

1. For an introduction to Beatrice of Nazareth and for a detailed overview of the reception history of her *vita* and treatise, see J. DEPLOIGE – V. FRAETERS, *750 Years on: Beatrice of Nazareth Revisited*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 89 (2018) 211-224.

2. The text of the *Seven Manners* was rediscovered in 1923 by the Jesuit philologist Léonce Reypens, who proclaimed it to be "a hidden pearl of mysticism". See L. REYSENS, *Een verdoken parel der mystiek: De 'Seven manieren van heileger minnen'*, in *Dietsche Warande en Belfort* 23 (1923) 717-730.

question the hagiographer's intentions and stressed the impact of his theology on the *vita*. They consider his work less than competent next to the mystically outstanding *Seven Manners*. This section argues that the anonymous hagiographer of Beatrice of Nazareth should be recognized as a mystical theologian in his own right, alongside Beatrice herself. While scholarly literature has often dismissed his *vita* as theologically inferior – primarily due to its emphasis on physical suffering – I contend that his work reveals a sophisticated engagement with mystical theology. Rather than merely documenting ascetic practices, the hagiographer mediates Beatrice's inner experiences for a broader audience, translating her mystical insights into a narrative form that is both accessible and spiritually profound.

Beatrice's *vita* was commissioned by a fellow sister and written by a hagiographer who, unusually, had access not only to eyewitness accounts but also to Beatrice's own spiritual writings. Although her diary has been lost, one tractate – *Seven Manners* – has survived and offers a rare opportunity to compare mystical doctrine with hagiographic narrative. Comparative studies of these two texts have generated enduring scholarly debate, often centered on the question of theological depth.

Amy Hollywood, for instance, argues that the hagiographer failed to grasp Beatrice's inner life, projecting onto her body a male fascination with Christ's suffering. According to this view, the *vita* reduces Beatrice's mysticism to visible signs of pain and ecstasy, in contrast to the introspective depth of *Seven Manners*. Hollywood suggests that the hagiographer believed Beatrice's body spoke for her, subordinating her mystical insight to external performance. She interprets *Seven Manners* as a form of resistance against this gendered equation of women with Christ's suffering body³.

While this critique rightly highlights the gendered dynamics of medieval hagiography, it underestimates the theological intentionality behind the hagiographer's choices⁴. His emphasis on bodily suffering is not a

3. Here, Hollywood rightly points out the similarity with Arnulf, although the comparison with the *Life of Petrus Conversus* is even more striking (Petrus also cut open his scars to keep the wound to his side open). Hollywood concludes that the borrowing of the tying of ropes around the loins suggests that the hagiographer forced this practice upon Beatrice's life, and that the mystic never experienced it. See A. HOLLYWOOD, *Inside Out: Beatrice of Nazareth and Her Hagiographer*, in EAD., *Acute Melancholia and Other Essays*, 191-212, p. 195. Obviously, this argument does not rule out that Beatrice might have experienced similar forms of asceticism and self-mortification, let alone suggest that she did not practice a single form of asceticism.

4. The hagiographer indeed appears to have added the external, bodily pain typical of other *vitae*, even though Beatrice made no mention of this suffering in her *Seven Manners*.

distortion, but a deliberate strategy to communicate Beatrice's mystical theology – particularly her understanding of fear, pain, and love – to a wider audience. Herman Vekeman notes that the hagiographer embedded Beatrice's asceticism within a Cistercian framework of purification and grace, and that the *vita*'s emphasis on doubt and divine abandonment sets it apart from conventional hagiographies. Doubt, in particular, is presented as a persistent and sanctifying force – a pain of the soul that does not diminish over time⁵

Rob Faesen goes further, arguing that the hagiographer should not be dismissed as a mere compiler of external phenomena. He identifies a mystical-theological literacy in the *vita* that has been overlooked due to its genre. Faesen acknowledges that the hagiographer softened some of Beatrice's more radical mystical doctrines – such as deification – but interprets this as a conscious act of mediation⁶. The hagiographer adapted Beatrice's teachings to suit a broader audience, often unfamiliar with mystical language and imagery. In doing so, he did not dilute her theology but translated it into a form that could be spiritually effective for readers outside her immediate circle⁷.

I agree with Faesen's reassessment and argue that the hagiographer must be understood as a mystical theologian and cultural mediator. His narrative is not merely descriptive but pedagogical: it guides the reader through Beatrice's inner landscape, using the dynamics of fear, pain, and love as theological tools. He portrays Beatrice not as a miracle-working saint, but as a mystic engaged in rigorous self-examination. Her psychological pain and fear – her constant questioning of her own salvation – are central to her sanctity. Physical suffering is subordinated to this inner drama: pain and penance serve the motif of fear. The *vita* thus becomes

In the *vita*, Beatrice's early years follow the standard pattern found with her contemporaries. She disciplined her young body, for instance chastising the soles of her feet with yew needles. She also wounded the rest of her body, until she bled. She did this to pay penance and to discipline her body but found these measures wanting. She then bound her body with ropes, removing them twice a week to reopen the lacerations they inflicted. Beatrice stopped at nothing and dared to practice forms of mortification that went far beyond convent rules or popular practices. See *Beatrice of Nazareth*, p. 33.

5. See Hoezeer heeft God mij bemind: *Beatrijs van Nazareth 1200-1269* (Mystieke teksten en thema's, 7), ed. and trans. H. VEKEMAN, Kampen, Kok; Averbode, Altiora, 1993, pp. 15-19.

6. See R. FAESEN, *Mystiek en hagiografie: Hoe behandelt de anonieme auteur van de Vita Beatricis het verschijnsel mystiek?*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 73 (1999) 97-110, pp. 96-105.

7. Faesen argues that this confirmation of Beatrice's deification doctrine went against the theological trends of the time and thus hewed more closely to Beatrice's own *Seven Manners*. See R. FAESEN, *Beatrice as a Theologian of Deification in the "Vita Beatricis"*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 89 (2018) 317-337, p. 333.

a mystical pedagogy, training the reader to recognize the spiritual value of emotional and psychological anguish.

This pedagogical intent is reinforced by the hagiographer's access to Beatrice's manuscripts, which allowed him to integrate her mystical knowledge into the *vita*. He emphasizes that true saints inspire not only through outward acts but through hidden wisdom. In his view, love for God – not miracles or signs – is the decisive criterion for salvation. The hagiographer's theological voice emerges clearly in his rejection of externalism and his praise of Beatrice's mystical love as superior to miraculous deeds. Beatrice subjected her soul to a strict self-inquiry, gaining insight into the inner human, avoiding the devil's snares and thus God's disappointment⁸. She was a saint and a mystic. For her hagiographer, Beatrice's mystic knowledge served the saint's personal development. Her mystical knowledge was the decisive argument in favor of her beatification, more than the driving out of demons or other external miracles, writing:

[...] with all due reverence to the saints, I prefer Beatrice's love to many miracles and signs, of which it is said elsewhere: "Signs are given not to believers, but to unbelievers", especially since many arrive at the kingdom of heaven without signs. But anyone who is caught at the last judgment without love, which is very aptly symbolized by the wedding garment, will be bound hand and foot and thrown into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, and will be subject to eternal punishment with the devil and his angels. But among the workers of signs I think, will be found some who will lack this wedding garment in the future. While they are boasting about their wonder-working and saying: "Lord, did we not cast out devils in your name and work many miracles in your name", the Lord will answer: "Amen, I say to you, I know you not. Depart from me, you cursed, into everlasting fire", and the rest which follows⁹.

The hagiographer presented Beatrice primarily as a mystical theologian who devoted her life to making sense of Love and to overcoming

8. The hagiographer recalls that: "When the Lord's elect felt herself stripped of the sweetness of spiritual grace, she became suddenly consumed with great fear that, snared by the many traps of the enemy and softened by his delusions, she might finally be forced out of her holy way of life. Quickly therefore she began to examine her inner heart and her exterior acts and behavior with the strictest circumspection, and she continued her careful exploration to see if some fault of hers had earned divine severity and the loss of the grace formerly given to her". *Beatrice of Nazareth*, p. 159. In the *Seven Manners*, Beatrice says that the soul investigates what she is and what she can be. She longs for this knowledge, and she cannot keep her mind from the investigation. She does not want to give in to distractions because her heart is never resting, always doubting her own intentions and efforts. BEATRIJS, *Seven manieren*, ed. FAESEN, pp. 48-49.

9. *Beatrice of Nazareth*, p. 285.

her own fears. Her greatest mystical-theological accomplishment, Vekeman writes, is her short treatise *Seven Manners*. She wrote this text at the end of her life, compiling her knowledge in order to pass it on to the next generation of mystical insiders. Vekeman writes that she had to record her own experiences as clearly as possible, in order to lead her fellow sisters to the path of Love and salvation¹⁰.

In her own treatise, Beatrice eschewed a narrative structure in favor of abstract insights gleaned from her own lifelong relationship with Love. In the *Seven Manners*, the mystic wrote about the relationship between God and a generic soul. She did not use the first-person singular but generalized her own life and created a character, a soul, with whom every reader can identify. Her tractate is not an autobiography but a mystical doctrine on a loving soul who passes through seven different stages. The stages – the seven ways – are not necessarily in chronological order and do not cancel each other out. The hagiographer, on the contrary, consciously chose a narrative approach that alternates pain with pleasure, fear with love. This pendulum swings back and forth throughout the *vita* and really comes into its own in the *Seven Manners*, in which joy and pain constantly alternate.

Beatrice and her hagiographer, each a mystical theologian in their own right, sought to move the reader through their words. Mere *admiratio* was no longer sufficient; the reader was to be stirred to act on their own initiative and to explore their personal love of God. The language of pain is a crucial component of these texts. It serves to help the reader overcome the distractions of fear and suffering – whether fear of pain or abandonment, a psychological anguish – and to persuade them to entrust their life to Love. As Beatrice wrote in the introduction to her treatise: love conquers fear¹¹. I argue that this is the core idea of her tractate, which also inspired her hagiographer.

Both Beatrice and her hagiographer develop a language of pain that operates across two registers: bodily suffering and eschatological imagery. While Beatrice's treatise privileges inner pain, she does not exclude the body. Rather, she presents it as a threshold between life and death, a site where divine desire manifests. Her mystical term *orewoet* captures this paradoxical experience: an unquenchable longing for God that wounds the soul and body alike.

The hagiographer translates this into narrative form, using visible signs – fevers, ecstasies, fainting – to express invisible truths. His use of

10. See *Hoezeer heeft God mij bemind*, ed. VEKEMAN, p. 12.

11. BEATRIJS, *Seven manieren*, ed. FAESEN, pp. 50-51.

bodily imagery is not superficial, but theologically charged, revealing the soul's longing for union with God. In this shared language of pain, both authors articulate a mystical theology in which fear must be overcome by love, and suffering becomes a path to divine intimacy.

1. Orewoet and the Wounded Ephemeral Body

The body occupies a central place in the theological imagination of both Beatrice and her hagiographer. Hollywood has drawn attention to the prominence of bodily metaphors in Beatrice's fifth and seventh manners, arguing that the mystic invoked the body not as a site of ascetic purification, but as a human limit – an existential boundary between the soul and God. This interpretation challenges the assumption that bodily suffering in mystical texts is merely performative or externally imposed. Hollywood repeatedly critiques the hagiographer's graphic and visible depictions of bodily limitation, suggesting that they reflect a conventional hagiographic aesthetic¹². However, I propose to reexamine these passages and compare the embodied theologies of both authors. In doing so, I focus on the fifth and seventh manners, where themes of desire, death, and pain converge. I argue that Beatrice and her hagiographer share a theological understanding of embodied existence as a temporal and painful constraint – one that must be endured and interpreted in light of the soul's longing for eternal union with God.

This theological reading of the body as a site of limitation and longing is further deepened in the way both authors mobilize pain language to express the soul's inner dynamics. Beatrice and her hagiographer each develop a metaphorical vocabulary in which bodily pain becomes a vehicle for articulating the triangular relationship between fear, pain, and love. While such language is often attributed to hagiographers alone, Beatrice herself explicitly links physical sensations to her inner search for divine Love. In her *Seven Manners*, bodily and spiritual realities are not opposed but interwoven: the soul's yearning for God manifests in the flesh, and the body becomes a medium through which mystical experience is both endured and communicated. In both the *Seven Manners* and the *vita*, the body becomes the expressive medium through which divine Love manifests herself – not as a passive recipient of suffering, but as an active participant in the soul's mystical transformation. Beatrice's term *orewoet* encapsulates this dynamic: an overwhelming, unfulfilled desire for God that pierces the soul and reverberates through the body. This

12. See HOLLYWOOD, *Inside Out*, p. 204.

longing is not abstract; it is viscerally felt, described in terms of burning veins, boiling blood, and a heart that seems to rupture under the pressure of divine presence. The hagiographer, too, engages this embodied language, not to dramatize Beatrice's sanctity, but to render her inner experience legible to his audience. He stages the interplay of wounding and healing as a spiritual pedagogy, guiding the reader through Beatrice's interior landscape where fear and love collide. In both texts, the body is not merely a site of pain – it is the *locus* where mystical knowledge is inscribed, where the soul's yearning for God becomes visible, tangible, and transformative.

Beatrice had to find a suitable mystical language to describe this experience. Boundless Love, pure and free, can be experienced by the soul as overwhelming grace or excruciating pain. Beatrice described the two sides of this coin in the fourth and fifth ways. In the fourth way of her *Seven Manners*, Beatrice wrote of the experience of *jubilatio*. During *jubilatio*, Love is active in the heart of the person without any interference of human activity. Love directs her arrows at the heart, touching, grasping, overwhelming and embracing her. Here, the heart is viewed as a node that stirs the entire human soul. The heart is a metaphorical space where the soul and God as Love meet. The soul's senses are made one and she descends into the depth of Love, becoming one with her will:

Thus, when she feels herself within the abundant bliss and in the great fullness of heart, then her mind begins to sink completely in Love and her body begins to escape, her heart begins to melt and she loses the power to dispose of her powers. And so much is she overcome in Love that she can hardly control herself and that she often loses control over her body and her senses¹³.

Here, Beatrice offered a description of *jubilatio* for those who experience it inwardly. She related how the pervading presence of God overpowered the body. This description notably deviates from the *jubilatio* documented by hagiographers who described bodily performances as they are perceived by witnesses – from the outside. The hagiographer describes many examples of jubilation in the *vita* often related to Beatrice's Eucharistic devotion. He writes:

The consolation of divine grace would suddenly present itself, so inebriating and flooding her heart with an ineffable joy that not only would the nectar-like taste refresh her inwardly with much delight, but, also outwardly

13. BEATRIJS, *Seven manieren*, ed. FAESEN, pp. 60-61.

effervescing into bodily form, it would stir her up to a spiritual dance, in which she would excitedly strike parts of her body¹⁴.

When she finally received the host, her manner changed, and her happiness revealed itself in uncontrollable fits of laughter and tears. This upset the mystic. The hagiographer writes: "By such outer disclosure she showed her inner feelings, however hard she willed to resist"¹⁵. Beatrice wished to comport herself humbly and to follow the prescribed modest body language of the monastic liturgy, but she was forced to move ecstatically by divine intervention. Her body was manipulated because of Beatrice's susceptibility to the divine. After the Eucharist, Beatrice could hardly speak and lay inert in her bed, her soul melted by the excessive jubilation kindled by divine presence¹⁶.

In the jubilating performance, the heart remains hidden from onlookers. The nuns might have remembered these events taking place in their public church. They would not have known what happened at the time, but the hagiographer helps his readers – initially the same nuns – understand what Beatrice experienced inwardly. He, therefore, cannot only focus on external deeds. Beatrice herself gives an even better in-depth analysis of her experiences with *jubilatio*, which she describes as painful sometimes, even though the outsider might think it is a joyous event.

As a node of the inflamed soul, the heart rages and Love pierces it so impetuously that it nearly bursts. This performance may appear beatifying, but Beatrice reminded the reader that the soul can also experience it as a great pain. External appearance does not always correspond with inner reality. The soul can become aware that the endless greatness of Love has exceeded the heart's endurance. The soul then wishes nothing but sweet rest in Love's embrace, yet the heart, already beating at full capacity, only throbs for more. The soul is so active internally, so undertaking, that she burns while the physical body ceases all activity – comparable to the experience of *raptus*. In this activity, the soul realizes how restless she is and how terrible her desire. For Beatrice, this was the fifth way, the discovery of her own dissatisfaction and restlessness. This discovery is painful. The pain stems from the realization that the human heart fails and can never claim Love for itself. Beatrice called this *ore-woet*, a desire that is impossible to fulfill. The heart cannot keep up with

14. *Beatrice of Nazareth*, p. 233.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 103.

16. *Ibid.*

Love's rhythm, no matter how fast it beats. Beatrice expressed this psychological pain in very physical terms:

Now and then Love becomes so immense and overflowing in her soul – when she moves deeply and furiously within – that it seems to her that her heart is hurt in many ways. The wounds seem to regenerate daily and become more painful; a sharp pain that makes itself felt again and again. It seems to her that her veins are tearing open, her blood is boiling, her marrow wears out, her bones become limp, her chest is burning, and her throat is dried out, so that all her appearance and all her limbs feel the inner heat of Love's frantic longing. She often experiences an arrow going through her heart, down to her throat and further into her brain, as if she were going insane¹⁷.

The all-consuming fire of *orewoet* engulfs Beatrice internally, an endless desire that can never be sated. Although this longing is first manifested in psychological distress, the realization of eternal dissatisfaction does not leave the body unscathed. Beatrice, in her *Seven Manners*, masterfully intertwined body, spirit, and soul in this all-encompassing experience. We cannot reduce her bodily pain language to metaphors or dismiss its psychosomatic impact as literary fantasy. Like Petrus Conversus, Beatrice reopened her wounds daily, they remained fresh – just like the open wound in Christ's side. Contrary to Petrus, these injuries were not self-inflicted but caused by mental pain. The wounds were internalized only to materialize later as physical marks. Beatrice prioritized mystical hidden knowledge, but this does not automatically exclude a bodily (and visible) impact. Bodily phenomena were simply of secondary importance to the mystically informed reader. In Beatrice's tractate, the performance of *jubilatio* and the physical expression of *orewoet* remain subordinated to the inner forces of desire. The outer phenomena are rich illustrations of inner struggles. It is the latter that the reader must truly grasp. He who decouples this bodily impact from the inner dynamics has comprehended but half of Beatrice's truth. Beatrice needed a bodily pain language in order to clarify this experience to her readers.

Her entire human being is permeated by *orewoet*, in body, soul, and spirit, unified and scorched by an excess of Love that the heart can no longer bear. Yet the soul cannot break free from this spiral and desires only more – after all, without Love she could not survive. She wants all or nothing. The flames continuously attract her even as they singe her. She cannot overcome the fire and must surrender to it. Beatrice wrote: “and the very thing that plagues and hurts her the most, that is the thing that

17. BEATRIJS, *Seven manieren*, ed. FAESEN, pp. 64–65.

cures and heals her the most”¹⁸. The soul realizes that Love is impervious and that she will never regain control. The excessive presence of Love is thus experienced as healing (Love comes close and is no longer felt to be absent) and as wounding (the nearness of Love reminds the soul of her own shortcomings and her insatiable desire). It is not Love who is present or absent, Beatrice explained in this diptych, but the soul who experiences Love as ephemeral and constantly seeks out Love’s presence, desiring to capture Her. This conflict unfolds in the soul, with *orewoet* raging through the human being. It is up to the individual – author as well as reader – to learn to live with *orewoet*. God as Love remains unchanged, but the soul has the potential to grow and transform.

Beatrice’s goal was to support the readers in their mystical growth, to oversee their transformation to mystical maturity. This transformation demands a lot of mystical knowledge and responsibility of the reader. Beatrice’s intended audience was therefore rather limited – no more than a circle of mystically schooled individuals led by Beatrice as their *magistra*. Beatrice used her own embodied knowledge to explain this process of injury inflicted by *orewoet* and to lead her readers to spiritual healing. Her hagiographer also incorporated the dynamics between wounding and healing in his text. He translated it into a narrative structure that can be interpreted by a broad audience. He registered Beatrice’s wounding and healing in their outward effects, because his readers had a greater need for narrative and graphic depictions of sanctity.

Burning fever, for instance, is a frequently recurring motif in the *vita*. Yet the hagiographer also connected these visible afflictions to the mystical doctrine at their root. The hagiographer was aware of the limitations of his genre, which, more than mystical treatises, needed to take into account the tension between inner and outer events. It was his task to frame external events within inner experiences. He explained the wounded and ill body of his saint by connecting it with the wounding and healing power of the Holy Body of Christ. Throughout the *vita*, Christ’s body is visualized internally in apparitions and externally in the host. The hagiographer made Beatrice’s raging *orewoet*, an invisible force, manifest by adding another body – that of Christ – thus creating a dialogue between two bodies. This dialogue is an accessible approach to Beatrice’s mystical doctrine. The hagiographer staged this conversation during the liturgy, offering the reader more context and guidance. He generally resorted to a simple pattern, which starts with Beatrice’s meditation upon a liturgical text while attending the service.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

The hagiographer explicitly drew attention to the witnesses' sometimes incorrect interpretation of events, especially when they focused solely on bodily symptoms. During Mass on one Octave of Christmas, for instance, an ecstatic vision left Beatrice in tears. Mourning her return to earthly reality, which she experienced as an exile, she collapsed. As she fainted, a fellow choir nun – who believed Beatrice suffered from a terrible illness – caught her. The hagiographer writes: “when Beatrice returned to herself and saw that she has been recalled from heavenly delights to the miseries of the human condition, and found herself on earth whereas shortly before she had shared the joys of the heavenly spirits, she began to sigh and sob violently, bathing her face with such tears that the nun who had aroused her was much shaken, thinking she had suddenly taken sick”¹⁹. The women tried to comfort her and wiped her tears. She was then taken to bed. The hagiographer revealed the sister's misinterpretation of the event by emphasizing that Beatrice's flood of tears led to the healing of her body. He introduces this knowledge about the saint's inner life by documenting Beatrice's self-reflection when she was lying in bed. He and the reader will know the true meaning of what happened because Beatrice is sharing this information. The hagiographer continues:

When she turned over in her mind what had just happened to her, and remembered where she had been and what she had seen, she began inwardly to be filled with unspeakable gratitude and unusual delight because God's immense prodigality could in no way be understood by someone who had not previously experienced it, nor could it be demonstrated in words even by an experienced person²⁰.

She recovers her health and does not feel the troublesome burden of sickness although for the complete day people thought she had great fever or some other infirmity. The hagiographer used Beatrice's tension between healing and wounding, body and soul, to lead his reader in the inner mystical teachings that go beyond misleading external symptoms. The body can be interpreted in multifarious ways and can even jeopardize mystical growth.

In another example in the last book of the *vita*, the hagiographer says that: “Occasionally, too, affected by the sweetness of heavenly joys she became pale and trembled in her whole body as though at the crisis of a strong fever or paralysis. Not without reason either, since she was burning

19. *Beatrice of Nazareth*, p. 71.

20. *Ibid.*

with the fever of incomprehensible desire²¹. However, it is not Beatrice's body that is wounded but her soul, pierced by love's dart. Her desire, inflected by love, wounding her soul, is causing the fever – a literal translation of the fire of desire within. She alone knew what was happening to her as the drama occurred within her inner life. She experienced both bodily pain and illness and heavenly joy at the same time, both sweet and bitter. Her hagiographer understood her inner reflections very well when he related the sweet experience to the superabundance of the Bridegroom's presence and the bitter to the limitation of the human existence to repay the favor and to the heart's insatiable desire. She felt separated from the eternal joys as long as she lived in her body, the hagiographer argues, which caused her the most pain. Her desire would not end; it would only get worse, wounding and healing her at the same time²². This is *orewoet*, although the hagiographer did not use this Middle Dutch term in his Latin *vita*.

I argue that the hagiographer successfully managed to grasp Beatrice's bodily pain language and interpreted it in light of her love mysticism. He did not allow himself to be thrown by the apparent contradiction between pain and pleasure, wounding and healing, but played with these dichotomies. Although the hagiographer expressly calls this sacramental experience joyous, the description appears to suggest the opposite: a bodily and spiritual pain brought on by going beyond one's personal limits. Beyond these extremes, pain and pleasure come together and merge. The sudden presence of God as Love and the overwhelming of the spirit, soul and body can also lead to a painful experience. This experience is complex and layered. Beatrice's body appeared to suffer while she burned with desire. Her body remained in its earthly state and could not bear this overwhelming experience. Like *jubilatio*, it was a fleeting moment touching the whole human being. Pain was the other side of the coin. The body and its earthly limitations were pushed to the forefront. The hagiographer made Beatrice's mysticism intelligible by connecting her ideas to illnesses such as fevers, phenomena that affected Beatrice's body internally and externally. Beatrice was burning from the inside out, and her hagiographer understood what caused this burn, namely Beatrice's *orewoet*. Pain can thus be conceptualized and interpreted at a visible as well as a hidden level. Like his colleagues, this hagiographer created a narrative and theatrical structure, without diminishing mystical-theological accuracy.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 235.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 235-237.

2. *Life after Love*

The other prominent pain language used by Beatrice and her hagiographer is rooted in popular eschatological beliefs. Images associated with hell and purgatory were omnipresent in thirteenth-century mystical culture. It is thus hardly surprising that they also surface in mystical treatises, although these texts often give them a different meaning. Anke Passenier writes: "In the writings of female mystics it is generally not so much physical suffering through self-mortification and illness, which releases tormented souls from purgatory by paying vicariously for their sins, as justice demands. Rather it is the mystic's love and the pain love causes her, which makes God's mercy prevail over absolute justice"²³. A comparison of the *vita* and the *Seven Manners* offers a unique opportunity to put this claim to the test. Beatrice and her hagiographer both built on a triangular relationship between fear, love and pain and interpreted hell and purgatory as psychological states of mind and not just as eschatological places. They used the body as an instrument of expression and portrayed it as an obstacle for perfecting the mystical growth in Love. They assumed that crossing the borders of life and death creates new possibilities.

Beatrice first referred to the dying body in her third way, in which she lamented her own shortcomings in her service of Love. This familiar *defectus amoris* motif resurfaces frequently in her treatise and in the *vita*. The soul realizes that she cannot fully respond to Love, whom she desires to follow. She is prepared to withstand all pain, but this is not enough. She cannot reciprocate Love's gift because she is mortal and this endless love is foreign to mortal beings. Yet she cannot stop herself from yearning excessively and restlessly, unable to tame her desire. As Beatrice wrote: "but all this does not give her rest. It is a great pain to her that she cannot help but desire that which she cannot obtain. Therefore, she must abide in the pain of her heart, and dwell in discontent. It seems to her that she is dying alive, and dying experiencing the pain of hell"²⁴. Her human

23. See A.E. PASSENIER, *The Life of Christina Mirabilis: Miracles and the Construction of Marginality*, in A.-M. KORTE (ed.), *Women and Miracle Stories: A Multidisciplinary Exploration* (Numen Book Series, 88), Leiden, Brill, 2001, 145-178, p. 167. Bynum argues that female authors tended to describe purgatory as the act of suffering itself, and not as a "counting house" where good deeds are measured, rewarded and exchanged. The idea of rewards, according to Bynum, is an interpretation of purgatory. She says that the "imagery of the marketplace – however much it may dominate contemporary male writings – is almost absent from their [women's] poetry and visions". See BYNUM, *Resurrection*, p. 235.

24. BEATRIJS, *Seven manieren*, ed. FAESEN, pp. 56-57.

shortcomings and endless desire for perfection in a dying life are what Beatrice called a hellish pain. Hell was humanity's inability to feel and express divine love. She blamed its created nature for this blemish.

In the fourth and fifth ways, this imagery of death and hell is absent. As noted, Beatrice used physical visual language that created a vivid vision of the overpowering presence of God as Love in the human being. The *defectus amoris* theme resides in the impossibility to receive God's endless love in the created being. This leads to a situation of *orewoet*, in which body and soul, united in the heart, burn with desire. This predicament appears to change radically in the sixth way. The maid mentioned in the second way has now become a housewife who has put her soul in order and has matured in her service of love. The evolution from girl to womanhood is significant. It allowed Beatrice to connect the second and the sixth ways, which bridge several painful experiences that transform the mortal soul. In the sixth way, the soul is moved by Love and her external works flow from her relationship with Love, not from her own exertion. She is of entirely one mind with Love and spares no one, be it devils, angels or saints, to fulfill Love's command, at rest or at work. The soul has not grown insensitive, on the contrary – she feels everything more clearly – but no longer depends on Love's caprice. She has endured all pain and pays attention to any detail until Love works in her. Then all burdens would be light and all pain sweet and all debts paid off. The transformed soul in her earthly body acts in time and space. Yet Beatrice called this the life of angels, which would finally be followed by the eternal life²⁵.

At first glance, the sixth way appears to end the relationship between the soul and Love, and that is how researchers have interpreted it. Yet, for the writer, the love adventure was far from over. In the seventh way, the mystic returned to a painful experience that seems to negate the perfect state of the soul on earth. Reypens argues that the sixth way reached the height of mysticism and that the seventh way was a later insertion, a needless appendage to the original text²⁶. Vekeman disputes this hypothesis, arguing that this explanation is more telling of the twentieth-century reader and academic than of the thirteenth-century disciples and readers of Beatrice's mystical teachings, who probably comprehended the text as a whole²⁷.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 68-73.

26. L. REYPENS, *De Seven Manieren van Minne geïnterpoleerd?*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 5 (1931) 287-322, pp. 289-292.

27. H. VEKEMAN, *Vita Beatricis en Seven Manieren van Minne: Een vergelijkende studie*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 46 (1972) 4-71, p. 4.

Vekeman rightly notes that Beatrice's text should not be read through the lens of other great mystics who, unlike Beatrice, brought linear order and schemata into their writings. He argues that the order of the different ways is not crucial and that the seventh way is not necessarily superior to the sixth. Still, he is tempted to scour the seventh way for elements considered, at the time, as typical of high-standing mysticism, such as the development of contemplation. He imposes a contemplative aspiration on the seventh way and attempts to find this in the *vita* as well. He has to formulate different hypotheses to fit the seventh way into a very complicated and measured chronology that, I argue, is alien to the hagiographic genre²⁸. Vekeman runs into the same problem other researchers encountered, namely, that Beatrice, despite her angelic existence on earth, continued to suffer and doubt herself and God. Hollywood also struggles with applying the seventh way to the *vita*. Studying the awkward transposition of the tractate to the *vita*, she concludes that the hagiographer did not correctly interpret Beatrice's desire for death²⁹. However, Vekeman shows that this death drive, as it were, forms an integral part of the *vita* and is not a simple longing for a corporeal death³⁰.

I follow Faesen's helpful schematization of the *Seven Manners* as three concentric circles, in which the inner circle (the sixth and seventh ways) represents Love's inner reality. According to Faesen, the ways form three distinct diptychs. The second and third ways belong together, as do the fourth and fifth, and the sixth and seventh, while the first way forms the introduction. The first diptych is concerned with what humanity can do for God. The second deals with the sudden experience of God, by his grace. Finally, the third revolves around the infinite elevation of life in God. This most inner space is hidden from human reason. Human beings transcend themselves and are drawn into divine life itself, into the abyssal Love between the Father and the Son, in which the human person is taken up³¹.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 20-22.

29. Amy Hollywood argues that in personalizing and somatizing the seven stages of loving, the hagiographer subtly alters this mystical path. Moreover, in making the madness of love a bodily experience, the desire for death becomes a movement toward death, one whose extremity troubled the hagiographer and led to his most obvious abridgment of Beatrice's text. See HOLLYWOOD, *Inside Out*, p. 199.

30. VEKEMAN, *Vita Beatricis en Seuen Manieren*, p. 48.

31. The structure of three diptychs of the *Seven Manners* reminds Faesen of Ruusbroec's masterpiece, *The Spiritual Espousals* and its three-fold division of the active, inner, and contemplative life. The similarities Faesen finds between Beatrice's tractate and Ruusbroec's work also lie in the idea of concentric circles; they don't represent stages that end after a fixed period of time. This cannot be said about the *vita*, which is structured

In this last and most intimate circle, Beatrice shed light on two sides of divine life: the life lived within Love (the sixth way) and the moment when one gazes upon Love's countenance (the seventh way). Furthermore, I contend that the model of concentric circles should be complemented by interconnections between the second and the sixth ways, and between the fifth and seventh ways. In the first connection, the actions of the human person are central, alongside the transformation of human-driven to love-driven action – the metamorphosis of an individual human being into a *ghemene* (common) human being. The second connection focuses on the evolution of a desire that seems eternal. Desire is also carried over to the final circle or diptych, in which the soul gazes longingly into the being of Love.

The circles can also be represented spatially. The inner circle then symbolizes the *apex dei*, the space in the human soul that borders the divine abyss. In this circle, the human soul moves freely. In the sixth way, Beatrice wrote: “and like a fish that swims in the meadow and rests in the deep, and like the bird that flies boldly into the high expanse of the sky, so she feels her spirit moving in the vastness, the depth, the expanse, and the height of Love”³². This wide-open space lies in the depths of the human being. In this space, the person encounters other beings who, too, overflow with superabundant love. The seventh way mentions the seraphim in particular, who burn with desire. The soul, turned inward entirely, moves between other beings who have become channels of divine love. In the sixth as well as the seventh way, the soul has worked its way up to the point where the hidden sovereignty of Love dwells. “However, she has hidden the sovereign power (*geweldicheit*) from the soul”, Beatrice wrote in the sixth way³³. The emphasis here is on the presence of Love inside the human person, ensuring unification in the earthly life, even in the working, mortal body. The sovereignty of Love guided and led her, Beatrice wrote.

The seventh way does not describe earthly reality, or the noble, created souls of angels, but looks straight into the being of Love. The space takes on a different meaning as soon as the soul begins to seek Christ in his majesty (*in sire majesties*) and desires only him. She follows Christ and sees him with her heart and her spirit. The soul now looks into the hidden sovereign power of Love (*de geweldicheit der Minne*) that overwhelms

primarily chronologically, according to Faesen. See BEATRIJS, *Seven manieren*, ed. FAESEN, pp. 37-41.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

33. *Ibid.*

her with fear and pain. The soul now experiences the same space, high and wide, as an abyss, in which the soul has become a plaything of Love. "Love pulls her up and takes her down. Love caresses her unexpectedly and hurts her again. Love gives death and brings back life, gives health and injures again"³⁴. Beatrice returned to the image of the dying life that she introduced in the third way. The frenzied, human heart, which went unmentioned in the sixth way, reemerges and burns with desire. This is reminiscent of the fifth way and revealed another side of the angelic existence of the soul, after the soul has regained its nobility and freedom. This freedom cannot be separated from a still unsated longing. Beatrice attributed her own yearning to her created nature and, in addition, to her physicality. Her body prevented her from being completely one with Christ whom she longed for. She was forced to live on earth in "a real exile (*groet ellende*), a harsh prison and a great pain"³⁵. Beatrice emphasized that the soul wishes to leave the earthly life, not because life saddens her or because she fears the burdens awaiting her, but only because she so strongly desires the holy and eternal Love, which she will only attain perfectly "in the landscape of eternity and the glory of fruition"³⁶.

The pain of anticipation linked to the postponement of heaven, was a central theme for Beatrice. This pain is "a blissful suffering, a sharp torture, an all too long pain, a treacherous death and a dying life"³⁷. Precisely this pain is redeeming and may not be ignored. After all, "the one who has actively devoted himself to this in the time of grace will enjoy Him in the time of glory, when one will not do more than praise and love"³⁸.

At the eleventh hour, Beatrice once again constructed a dynamic of exchange that guarantees a heaven free from pain and desire. The angelic existence that the soul lived on earth is not without suffering and desire because the sovereign power of Love continues to wound her – as long as she inhabits her earthly body. When her wounded heart is transformed after death, she will be delivered from all obstructions and her beloved will lovingly welcome her. She will look upon him and not fear him but possess him. Only physical death can transform the human being in such a way that the freedom gained through mystical maturity can actually be enjoyed in full satisfaction³⁹. With these closing phrases, I argue that

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77.

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 80-81.

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 84-85.

39. *Ibid.*

Beatrice showed her hand. The fear motif, although repressed in the first way, reemerges. Only in eternity after death can one conquer the fear caused by the sovereign power of Love. On earth, one can only hope, even though this hope hurts. The soul can no longer be consoled by God or other created beings, only by a perfect union with her beloved after death. In the inner circle – the *apex dei* where the soul meets God – the soul constantly runs into the limitations of mortality, ensuring that this space is no longer experienced as a land of angels (the sixth way) but is instead described as a place of pain and desire (the seventh way).

The hagiographer went one step further and explicitly called this place hell and purgatory, words Beatrice did not use. This does not mean that the hagiographer departed from Beatrice's mysticism, but rather that he complemented it with popular imagery of purgatory and hell. The prelude to the land of glory (or heaven) is, after all, remarkably similar to the landscape of purgatory, although suffering is primarily interpreted as psychological and spiritual – typical of mystical texts but also of some hagiographies. The hagiographer extensively discussed Beatrice's experience of anticipation, hope, and despair, which caused her fear and pain, although he also connected this fear to the idea of penance, a familiar refrain in hagiographic literature. Beatrice was afraid that she would be banned from heaven. The *defectus amoris* theme resurfaces several times in the *Seven Manners* and is connected, by the hagiographer, to fear of hell. This fear is fundamentally linked to a lack of Love on the part of humanity and the impossibility to be united with God. In other words, it is a fear driven by a want of Love.

The hagiographer translated Beatrice's structure of the concentric circles and its diptychs to a narrative structure in which he attempted to incorporate the different ways, in particular the sixth and seventh ways. He often presented Beatrice's oscillating struggle with Love and fear in the *vita*, usually linked to eschatological imagery. The Beatrice in the *vita* constantly seeks confirmation of her love relationship with God. The first illustration of this insecurity is a three-year period in which Beatrice went through a cycle of fear and confirmation. After three years of sweet presence, God deliberately and temporarily chose to withdraw his sweetness of spiritual grace. Beatrice sank into a period of deep fear and spiritual pain that lasted for another three years. The hagiographer expressly referred to eschatological imagery to explain this psychological pain. He argued that Beatrice feared falling prey to the devil's temptations. She was exposed to the forces of hell, which took the opportunity to torment her with spiritual, rather than physical, pains. She fought these attacks with a profound self-inquiry, attempting

to erase all sins, even though she continuously doubted whether she could win the fight⁴⁰.

The devil took advantage of her fears, showing various representations of misdeeds she had not committed, thereby increasing her doubt and despair. Beatrice took solace and succor in the example of Job and his words: "What I feared has befallen me, and your indignation, O Lord, has come down upon me (Job 3:25-26)"⁴¹. She also drew strength from Job's plea: "Even if I were plunged into the depth of hell, you will free me from it (Job 17:16; 33:28)"⁴². These words consoled her and reminded her that no one reached paradise without falling prey to one of the devil's snares⁴³. This three-year period was, according to the hagiographer, an expression of the Lord's relationship with his saints. He wrote:

God is truly wonderful in his saints, for he deserts his elect struggling in conflict in such a way that he instructs their hands for battle and their fingers for war. He exposes and seems to abandon them to be taught by the insults of their foes in such a way that he not only snatches their souls from death, but also their eyes from tears and their feet from falling. He intentionally so hides the face of his favor from them that he grants the palm of victory to those who struggle faithfully, and to those who persevere he promises the crown of glory⁴⁴.

Beatrice survived this period unscathed, triumphantly winning the battle, like the martyrs of old. She learned to transform the ordeal's pain into a firmer belief in Christ. She knew that God gave her these long trials as a test and that they did not herald her real damnation. Its purpose was "a divine favor, not given that she might forfeit or lose grace, but that she might acquire divine grace more lavishly by this exchange"⁴⁵. This heavenly revelation gave her much joy and led to a short *jubilatio*. But this brief moment was followed by harsh reality: "But after a little while the sweetness of grace she had tasted was taken away, and coming to herself she fell again into the abyss of violent fear, and as though going from paradise to hell she once again exchanged the happiness given her for sorrow"⁴⁶. Heaven and hell had become real and temporal states of mind that constantly alternated. Beatrice thus learned that God's will would be done and she would happily have accepted damnation, even if Christ

40. *Beatrice of Nazareth*, pp. 159-163.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 165.

43. She followed the example of the Holy Anthony and believed that traps could only be survived through unfeigned and deep humility. *Ibid.*

44. *Ibid.*, p. 169.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

46. *Ibid.*

could not have saved her. The reader discovers this new twist when Beatrice declares:

O just and merciful Lord, terrible and very strong, if it is pleasing in your sight that I, the most wretched of your handmaids, should sink for no reason into the depth of hell, or be subjected without cause to the power of the roaring enemy, I willingly consent to your good-pleasure, but I shall bear the eternal separation from you most grievously, more than all the hideous tortures of hell. Even if this is necessary, yet shall I never stain with the foulness of any mortal sin this wretched soul of mine, created to your image and likeness, even if I have to fight till my heart breaks. But in the day of judgment when you come to judge the living and the dead, I shall offer it to you clean and immaculate, by your grace. And if even then you condemn it to be eternally punished, I shall obey your judgment, humbly consenting and acquiescing⁴⁷.

This declaration, a battle cry of sorts, is unconvincing, especially since it is followed by a period of insecurity. Shortly prior to it, the saint still believed that Christ would save her from hell, and that infernal tortures on earth, inflicted by the devil, were of a temporary nature and would strengthen her faith. Pain thus had a function and was an essential part of the barter. The eternal pain she was willing to bear was of a different order and broke the barter's internal logic. She professed willingness to suffer for Love, even if Love damned her to hell. She sought to forge a bond of unconditional loyalty with God. In reality, the mystic failed to think through her radical vow and appeared to recoil repeatedly from its consequences. Nor did she, over the course of her life, grow toward contemplation of these uncompromising oaths. Instead, she relied on familiar patterns of distrust and spiritual pain linked to eschatological imagery. Apparently, her hagiographer did not think this problematic: In his account, God always intervenes to take away Beatrice's fear and doubt.

Beatrice's radical statements on the willingness to suffer for the beloved Christ, or to exchange her eternal desire for God for infernal pain, are not unique. A similar passage of a bargain with God can be found in Lutgard's *vita*, although the speaker is none other than Christina Mirabilis, appearing to Lutgard in a moment of crisis. Lutgard hesitated to move from the Benedictine convent of Saint Catherine to the Cistercian monastery in Aywières. According to Christina, it was Lutgard's duty to follow the will of God and move, although Lutgard was reluctant to do so due to the language barrier. Christina imbued this moment with a deeper meaning that easily transcended Lutgard's mundane problems:

"I would rather be in hell with God than in heaven with the angels without God". To be sure, she replied beautifully and worthily. For wherever Christ

47. *Ibid.*, pp. 175-177.

is, there is paradise – since Truth, who could not lie, said to the thief on the cross, “Today you will be with me in paradise”. It is established that on that day the soul of Christ by no means ascended either to the empyrean or to the earthly paradise, but descended to hell with his divinity, and with him went the soul of the thief, who he had foretold would be with him. Thereby he proved, by a necessary a priori argument, that paradise is wherever he himself is. For the presence of Christ renders every place, no matter how hateful, supremely delightful and remarkably desirable⁴⁸.

The hagiographer, Thomas, wrote that, although one should not compare hell and paradise, Christina’s response still contained a lot of wisdom. Christina was willing to overcome eternal pain if her covenant with Christ remained intact. In this pact, she would always find Christ nearby. Only Christ’s presence could transform a place into a true paradise, a heaven. Beatrice and her hagiographer used this imagery in a similar way, to emphasize the saint’s willingness to suffer for her beloved Christ. This loyalty endured, even when she believed herself in an earthly hell. The pact guaranteed that even in this situation, Christ was near. Beatrice was ready to conclude a similar pact: an infernal existence in exchange for an eternity with Christ – removing her yearning desire for union with him – because wherever Christ is, is heaven.

A final, striking example from the *Life of Beatrice* can be found in the last book. Beatrice once again longed intemperately for the heavenly consummation she had come to know from brief tastes in the present. She tried to cool this desire by serving God with physical toil, but this failed and her longing suddenly flared up:

Although she had kept her will conformed to this desire all her life long, at this time the desire was thriving more vigorously than usual in the blessed woman’s mind. It grew so far beyond the possibilities of human strength that Beatrice would most willingly have supported the very pains of hell in her body for a time so long as she could have arrived at the fulfilment of this insatiable desire after the fires of hell⁴⁹.

This statement gives away the hagiographer’s interpretation of hell on earth as an experience of physical or spiritual pain inflicted by demons in the form of a trial. This trial was of a cyclical and temporary nature and would, eventually, be compensated with a heavenly reward. Longing, by contrast, was more painful – otherwise Beatrice would not have sought to exchange it for infernal pain. Infernal pain is the lesser of two evils compared to the eternal longing for God which she experienced as more painful. The hagiographer’s Beatrice negotiated on the basis of

48. *Lutgard of Aywières*, pp. 237–238.

49. *Beatrice of Nazareth*, pp. 259–261.

temporary obstacles – a desire and a physical affliction – which would disappear after death.

To him death was just a temporally veil that clouded reality but that would disappear as soon as the soul would leave the body. He writes: “Her body, like a thin membrane which is easily broken or like a shining cloud which is easily penetrated by the clear radiance of the sun, seemed still to obstruct her spirit which was always aspiring upward”⁵⁰. Although Beatrice was lifted up to the choir of seraphim (as in the seventh vision), the angelic existence did not commence on earth in the *vita* any more than it did in Beatrice’s treatise, or at least not in the way one would expect. The contradiction resides in the understandable but mistaken belief that an angelic existence must preclude suffering, physical as well as spiritual. The hagiographer discovered this paradox. Beatrice continued to burn: First, with a trying fever, then alongside the angels in the seraphim choir, enflamed by desire. The emphasis, however, was on her earthly existence – a created, corporeal existence – in stark contrast with the celestial paradise and the Creator, who could only be reached by (temporarily) leaving the body. The tension in the text is caused by the elevation of Beatrice’s soul and the simultaneous conviction that the earthly body prevented this elevation. The earthly life in the body, and the potential sins she could commit when not with God, worried her. Her limits stemmed from her earthly existence and not from her identity as a created being. As soon as earthly pain ceased, she could fully come into her heavenly reward. The core of this mystical theology is still the notion of an exchange of pain and salvation, despite the complex dynamics of both bodily and spiritual pain inflicted by the divine.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 231.

HADEWIJCH'S HELLISH LOVE

The mystic Hadewijch went one step further than her contemporary Beatrice, weaving the imagery of heaven, hell, and purgatory into a complex network of meaning in which the present and the hereafter appear to merge. Hadewijch's Love is not only prepared to accept hell temporarily but even displays a willingness to endure eternal infernal pain. For Hadewijch, Love itself was painful, hellish. According to Vekeman, Hadewijch's conceptualization and interpretation of heaven, purgatory, and hell are very complex. He states that these places were spiritualized by the authors and that they represent painful and traumatic experiences that occur in the mystical life on earth¹. I agree with Vekeman and will take his argument one step further. I say that Hadewijch did not avert her gaze from the sovereign power of Love and conceived of a mystical theology that did not pause at the border between grace and glory. One century later, Ruusbroec developed a system that drew on Hadewijch's insight into the radical nature of infernal Love, while also heeding Beatrice's division of grace and glory – earthly and heavenly body.

Hadewijch is an enigmatic figure about whom we know but few historical facts with certainty. No *vita* of her life has been handed down and the mystic seldom forayed into autobiography. At first glance, Hadewijch's mystical work appears to differ markedly from the *vitae* and their explicit attempt to document the saints' holy lives. Hagiographers aimed to encourage the reader's admiration, while mystical authors attempted to support their reader's personal growth with mystical knowledge. In other words,

1. Herman Vekeman developed this argument in reaction to Spaapen's study of Hadewijch's fifth vision. Vekeman criticizes Spaapen for focusing too much on Hadewijch's general theology when discussing the meaning of the vision, especially the idea of saving souls from purgatory. In his article, Vekeman conducts a textual analysis of Hadewijch's *Visions* only by focusing on the meaning of key concepts such as "heaven", "purgatory", "hell", and "death". He interprets the practice of saving souls as an attempt of the mystic to encourage her disciples to move beyond the state of hopelessness and despair (hell). He does not believe the practice has anything to do with the salvation of damned souls in the afterlife, only with guiding souls in the here and now. See H.W.J. VEKEMAN, *Die ontrouwe maectse so diep... Een nieuwe interpretatie van het vijfde Visioen van Hadewijch*, in *De nieuwe taalgids* 71 (1978) 385-409. I do not follow Vekeman's interesting and radical reading in its entirety. I will argue in this chapter that hell and purgatory are realities that span both the here and now and the hereafter.

the reader of the *vitae* counted on the redeeming intercession of saints, who were portrayed as holy as possible, while the reader of mystical treatises was expected to engage actively with the text. Readers of mystical texts found themselves at the epicenter of mystical culture, at its source, which presumed a high degree of mystical literacy. The reader was no longer a spectator or an admirer but an active participant – a mystic in training.

However, the *vitae* and the works of Hadewijch are definitely not the opposites of the spectrum. I have already shown how many *vitae* contain interesting mystical-theological elements that rise to the level of the mystical treatises and that demand a certain affective engagement of the readers and a willingness to imitate the virtues of the saints. I now state that Hadewijch used similar narrative strategies to keep her readers engaged. She staged characters and allegorical figures to help them relate to her mystical theology. Her characters, like the reader, matured in their mystical practice of Love. Thus, Hadewijch's visual language was replete with vivid scenes and dialogues that appear, but are not necessarily, autobiographical. She deliberately contrasted opposing characters, not only in her songs, but throughout her work, and approached the painful relationship with Love from different angles.

I suggest that Hadewijch, like the hagiographers, meticulously created a "Hadewijch" character who developed from young acolyte to mature mystic in her texts. I make a distinction between the historical Hadewijch and the character Hadewijch that appears in the literary corpus, much like the distinction made between the historical saint and the saint in the *vita*. I view the historical Hadewijch primarily as a writer who consciously used her autobiographical material. However, I still believe the author based her character on personal experiential knowledge about the mystical process. She used this knowledge to recreate these characters. Her entire corpus is a mystagogical work that provides the reader with different characters embodying mystical growth, with whom the reader can identify². I argue that Hadewijch's mystical imagery is a pain language that aims to support the reader during the crucial moment of transition from mystical acolyte to mystical maturity³. Her wisdom, gleaned from experience, had two focal points: the young mystic's jubilant experience and the painful shift from youthful infatuation to abandonment.

2. Fraeters argues that Hadewijch's *Visions*, in particular, are a mystagogical work. See FRAETERS, *Visioenen als literaire mystagogie*.

3. Mommaers observes that, according to Hadewijch, the mystic evolves from youthful *ghebruken* (enjoying) to *ghebreken* (the absence of pleasure), which Mommaers describes as the evolution from youthful to mature mystic. The mystic first becomes aware of this *ghebreken* when she cannot fulfill Love's *eyschen* (demands). Thus, she cannot *ghenoegh doen* (satisfy Love). See MOMMAERS, *Hadewijch*, p. 96.

The transition between childlike jubilation and painful desire forms the core of Hadewijch's mystical teaching. Her pain language is an expression of this crucial transformation in the life of the mystic. Faesen observes that despair (*onthope*) is a pivotal moment in the service of Love, encouraging the mystic to desire more and not take satisfaction in the sweet rewards that are not Love itself⁴. I argue that Hadewijch aimed to help her reader in this state of despair, which she described repeatedly with eschatological imagery. This is the crucial pain that the reader must overcome, not by becoming insensitive, but by giving this experience a place within the all-embracing theory of Love proposed by Hadewijch. McGinn even states that: "This mysterious state occurs when the soul's frustrated desire passes beyond humility and knowledge to a consciousness in which she ceases to believe in the faithfulness of *minne*. This indifference to, even hatred of, love's consolations allows her to engage in a far deeper struggle with love on love's own grounds"⁵. He argues that this mystical knowledge is one of the most original aspects of Hadewijch's work.

Putting her creative talent to use, Hadewijch took this visual pain language further than the mystical interpretations in the *vitae* and the *Seven Manners*, which I discussed earlier. In this section I explore Hadewijch's contribution to eschatological pain imagery and to mystical theology in general. I will start with positioning the reader as her mystical acolyte and I will stress the key ideas of her pain theology. I will then continue with an exploration of the eschatological language used by the mystic to discuss the dynamics of painful endless desire that moves the mystic towards true salvation. This traditional exchange of pain and salvation, however, is completely overwritten by Hadewijch's inversive imagery. Her imagery suspends time and space, making pain eternal and the choice to serve Love radical. Her radical theology is truly revolutionary, surpassing the theological proposals of her contemporaries.

1. *A Rose for the Mystical Acolyte*

In her *Visions*, Hadewijch illustrates the growth from acolyte to mature mystic very clearly⁶. Hadewijch's main character is a young mystically gifted visionary who serves to illustrate the importance of the transition to mystical maturity and unconditional painful service of Love. The first

4. See FAESEN, *Begeerte*, p. 275.

5. See MCGINN, *Flowering*, p. 209.

6. Willaert argues that the *Visions*, in particular, portray an ascent from young mystic to mature mystic. See F. WILLAERT, *Hadewijch und ihr Kreis in den "Visionen"*, in K. RUH (ed.), *Abeländische Mystik im Mittelalter: Symposium Kloster Engelberg 1984* (Germanistische Symposien-Berichtsbände, 7), Stuttgart, Metzler, 1986, 368-377.

vision sets the tone and immediately shows that saintly performance of pain, ascetic practices and good works do not automatically lead to mystical perfection. The young mystic, just like other fervent young saints, does her utmost to please God and does not eschew physical pain to attain this goal⁷. However, the disciple will have to face pains that surpass the level of other *Mulieres Religiosae*. She will learn this soon enough.

The vision opens with a time and place: the mystic's sleeping quarters on the Sunday of the Octave of Pentecost, as she lies in bed. Her body stays there because she feels such an intense desire to be one with God that she cannot sufficiently control her body to go among the people. This form of *jubilatio* can also be found with the other holy women, including Beatrice, who was ashamed of this excessive and transgressive behavior. In Hadewijch's vision, *jubilatio* and *raptus* are confined to the private sphere as the reader enters the image-filled visionary world of the young mystic. Hadewijch thus appears to have been familiar with a form of hagiographic mediation that seeks to curb the transgressive nature of physical performances. She went beyond this aspect of performance and led the reader into a visionary space in which her mystical doctrine on suffering and love are theatrically and evocatively envisioned. In the vision, the reader follows the mystic through an allegorical orchard representing different virtues – virtues the young mystic has already mastered, despite her tender years. Her guide, a throne angel, enumerates and praises the young woman's accomplishments⁸. He calls her a "chosen soul of high aspirations", one who is "dying of the death [her] Beloved died of", a "pure pillar in the church of the saints", an innocent and enlightened creature⁹. She never falters and always follows God's divine law, which he had sanctified with his own life. In her, God finds the loyalty of the true lover; in her, he would possess this fidelity in all eternity. She endures this without complaints and with loving serenity, even during inconceivable pains. She has suffered as a saint and thus the angel allows her to drink from a chalice brimming with blood representing patience.

7. In both genres – visions and *vitae* – physical suffering takes place at the beginning of the text. Physical suffering is thus associated with the spirituality of a mystically immature individual, a saint or mystic embarking on their mystical journey.

8. Angels are messengers in Hadewijch's works and creators of the images in her visions. They can also appear under different guises related to Light, namely as an eagle or as John the Evangelist. They are guides and proclaim hidden mystical knowledge. Listening to these angelic creatures, Hadewijch herself became a messenger writing down her mystical theology as a kind of artistic practice. See VEKEMAN, *Angelus sane nuntius*, pp. 249-252.

9. HADEWIJCH, *Vision* 1, pp. 264-265.

In this first vision, the mystic, and the reader, also learn that the bodily suffering associated with saints and their wonders is insufficient to reach the highest peaks of the mystical landscape. She longs for unification with God and is no longer satisfied with the wonders she brought about. At the end of the vision, the mystic is led to Christ, whom she has desired so fervently. The conversation with Christ that follows reveals several fundamental building blocks the young mystic needs to continue her spiritual development. First, Christ recognizes her attempts to follow God's will. Then he dictates a new command: "If you wish to be like me in my Humanity, as you desire to possess me wholly in my Divinity and Humanity, you shall desire to be poor, miserable, and despised by men; and all griefs will taste sweeter to you than all earthly pleasures; in no way let them sadden you"¹⁰. The people would no longer praise her, instead, the derision and misery of mortal life would prevail¹¹.

This new command urges the mystic one step further. Prior to this, the mystic believed her suffering was equal to that of Christ. She was at peace, believing that her suffering – of great value – could be exchanged for unity with God. Christ clarified that she primarily had to desire unification with him in his humanity. The young mystic felt entitled to greatness because of her suffering and she expected a reward. She did not truly desire unification with Christ's painful human nature; she was not yet ready to be one in the human Christ. Christ tells the young mystic: "You are young in days, and you want me to recognize the sore pain of your body, and the fidelity of your handiwork, and your new will always overflowing with charity for others, and the desires of your heart, and the languishing of your senses, and the love of your soul. All this I do recognize"¹².

The first step in this new command was to recognize that Christ had also suffered as man. The mystic mistakenly believed that Christ had not suffered greatly, because he commanded the Holy Spirit's seven gifts and because the Father was always with him. In their conversation, Christ owned that this assumption vexed him. Although it is true, he said, that he possessed the seven gifts and that his Father never parted from him, this was not the whole truth. He shared with Hadewijch his hidden wisdom on Love, namely, that he never used his power to save himself from any kind of misery and that he never called on the gifts of the Holy Spirit¹³. Going even further, he told the young mystic:

10. *Ibid.*, p. 268.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 268-269.

13. This command is very similar to Hadewijch's portrayal of Jesus' suffering in her sixth letter, in which she commands her reader to live with Christ in his humanity. She

[...] And I ask you also, when were you forsaken by my Father in any state of soul, so that my Father was not always with you, as he was with me and I with him, while I lived as Man? Since, then, you are a human being, live in misery as man. I wish that on earth my life in you should be so fully lived in all virtues that you may in no point fail me in myself. Possess the seven gifts of my Spirit and the power and help of my Father in the perfect works of virtues with which man becomes and remains God eternally¹⁴.

This also meant that the mystic had to persevere in this misery, especially when no end appeared in sight. It is precisely in periods of misery that the mystic can learn the most: The lover transforms as the teachings of Love become increasingly intricate. At first, Love's teachings offer "indubitable joy" only to be followed by a period of pain, she writes in her second poem¹⁵. It is up to the school's disciple to infer lessons from this pain. Hadewijch wrote: "She [Love] first led me to her school, Where I sought her wise secrets, Whereas she has withdrawn them from me since then And has hidden many from me. Yet I will gladly suffer all things, For Love has never revoked The promises she held out to me"¹⁶.

The mystical acolyte would face pains of a different kind than the familiar bodily pains and ascetic and virtuous practices with which she was familiar. The author introduces this topic very early on in her works to stress the importance of conquering this fear of abandonment by God, which causes great mental distress and even a crippling anxiety that can be detrimental for the young mystic's future development. More pain is required to grow to mystical maturity. She writes in her sixth letter: "And since you are still young and as yet have had nothing to suffer, you must make the strongest efforts to grow as if out of nothing, like one who has nothing and who can attain nothing unless he struggles from the depths of his being"¹⁷. Suffering needs to come from the depths of the human person and not only from the human body. This is the pain Christ

repeats the point made in the first vision about the suffering of Christ, which was not easier for Christ to endure than for any other human being. She writes: "We do not find it written anywhere that Christ ever, in his entire life, had recourse to his Father or his omnipotent Nature to obtain joy and repose. He never gave himself any satisfaction, but continually undertook new labors from the beginning of his life to the end. He said this himself to a certain person who is still living, whom he also charged to live according to his example, and to whom he himself said that this was the true justice of Love: where Love is, there are always great labors and burdensome pains. Love, nevertheless, finds all pains sweet: *Qui amat non laborat*; that is, he who loves does not labor". HADEWIJCH, *Letter 6*, p. 58.

14. HADEWIJCH, *Vision 1*, p. 269.

15. HADEWIJCH, *Poem 2*, p. 132.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

17. Hadewijch, *Letter 6*, p. 60.

conquered with the knowledge about his Father's loyalty, which he passes on to the writer and her disciples.

In her second letter, Hadewijch advised a young mystic on the tensions between loyalty and disloyalty, hope and despair. She drew the reader's attention to some dangerous misapprehensions on Love and to the errors a young mystic can make¹⁸. The writer pictured how upset the young lover would be when the divine Beloved was suddenly absent for a long stretch of time. She felt sympathy for her predicament and counseled her not to be needlessly saddened or to hold onto her self-will. Hadewijch understood that the young mystic might believe that the Beloved had given up, because of the mystic's inability to reciprocate his love perfectly. Like Beatrice, the mystic doubted her own abilities – the *defectus amoris* theme that we discussed earlier. Hadewijch argued that one should trust God's grace and should never breach this faith. She wrote: "But anyone who is truly faithful will know that the goodness of his Beloved is greater than his own failures"¹⁹. She enjoined her disciple to keep hoping that Love might triumph if the lover desired nothing but perfect Love. This meant the lover could not be satisfied with rewards or repose but had to long only for what Love itself desired. Hadewijch wrote that the true lover could not allow herself to be distracted by a drive for "any profit, or any blessedness, or any damnation, or any salvation, or any martyrdom"²⁰. Everything had to be done for "the honor of Love"²¹, not for oneself. In this sense, the young mystic, as in the first vision, had not yet suffered enough. To learn this lesson, Hadewijch claims that: "And all things considered, you have suffered too little to grow up, and in justice you owed it to God to do – although, now and then, you willingly comply in this"²². Therefore, she offers her hard-won knowledge which she, in turn, received from Christ and gained during her own life.

God had taken her into his protection, and she had not yet had the opportunity to grow spiritually. Hadewijch wrote: "For if a man knew God's will – that misery is dear to him – he would gladly be, by his will, in the depths of hell; but he could never make progress or grow in a place where he could taste no pains. If a person knew that God took pleasure

18. According to Mommaers, Hadewijch addresses a young mystic with her letters using phrases like "sweet love", "dear love", "sweet child", "dear child". She expresses friendship and advises her reader on personal matters. Mommaers determines that Hadewijch was close to the reader and a limited audience of insiders. See MOMMAERS, *Hadewijch*, pp. 51-56.

19. HADEWIJCH, *Letter 2*, p. 49.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*

in his deeds, he would not be grieved at anything that happened to him"²³. Hadewijch wrote:

Let no doubt or disappointment ever turn you away from performing acts of virtue; let no ill success cause you to fear that you yourself will not come to conformity with God. You must not doubt this, and you must not believe in men on earth, saints, or angels, even if they work wonders (Gal. 1:8); for you were called early, and your heart feels, at least sometimes, that you are chosen, and that God has begun to sustain your soul in abandonment²⁴.

The mystic's relationship with Christ involves many trials. Love is anything but bliss. Hadewijch was aware of this. She attempted to shape the tensions between joy and pain, hope and despair, throughout her oeuvre. She designed a mystagogy meant to transform the experience of pain. The young mystic struggled with tensions also prominently present in the lives of the *Mulieres Religiosae*, particularly in the life of Beatrice. Beatrice, too, attempted to deal with the perpetual fear of not living up to Love, although she attributed this to her earthly, temporary existence. Hadewijch, in contrast, proposes her own interpretation of fear. She writes in the same letter:

One thing only is excepted, to wit, we must always continue to fear that we do not serve Love sufficiently according to her dignity. This fear fills us with love because it is strongly felt and brings us into a storm of ardent endeavor. At times it seems to us that we have done what we could for Love, and that Love helps and loves us too little, in proportion to the worthiness of our service. As long as we thus accuse Love of unfaithfulness, this fear is wanting. You should rid yourself of every other fear but this and take this one to yourself as it comes and goes²⁵.

This fear should not, as we have seen, stop mystical growth or prevent the mystic's belief in her own abilities. God's tests aim to lead humanity to perfection, not to damnation. Only when the young mystic is able to confront her fear, and surrender herself completely to God and all the pains he visits upon her, only then will she truly gain wisdom on Love: "Thus you will hear his mysterious counsel, as Job says of him: *You have spoken to me a hidden word* (Job 4:12)"²⁶.

To help her reader, Hadewijch first had to foster a fundamental faith in God that would strengthen the mystic's resolve during her exile. This faith in the relationship to God was crucial to survive the trials and obstacles on the path to mystical perfection. The first vision prepares the

23. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

ground for a fundamental trust in Christ and Love, and the conviction that Christ demands suffering – that suffering is not in vain. The mystic can then go on to follow the rules of Love – as Christ did – and be united with him in their shared will, in suffering. In the first vision, Christ articulates this vision to her with the image of a tree of roses, saying

If you wish, take from this tree a leaf to symbolize the knowledge of my will. And if you are saddened, take a rose from its summit and one petal from the rose to symbolize Love. And if you cannot bear it, take from the rose what is within it. This signifies that I will grant you myself in fruition²⁷.

The rose symbolizes the knowledge that Love will always reward and support her loved ones. The image of the rose resurfaces a second time in Hadewijch's corpus, not in the *Visions*, but in the *Poems*²⁸. In her second song, Hadewijch conjured up the image of a rose surrounded by thorns. Here too, the rose represents a consolation offered by Christ. Hadewijch wrote: "As the beautiful rose Appears to us in the dew between the thorns, So shall he who loves, in spite of disasters, Endure Love's storms with confidence"²⁹. The rose helped brave the storm of Love. On the perfect lover and his reward, Hadewijch wrote: "He whom Love touches cannot die – Her name is *a-mor*, 'delivered from death' – If he has done what Love commanded And in this has failed in nothing. She is the wealth of all things; Love is that *living bread* And above all sweet in taste"³⁰. To reassure her reader, she used the imagery of the rose. Hadewijch deemed the images necessary for the reader to overcome the dark and painful side of Love. The writer guarded her reader's fundamental faith, while simultaneously challenging her with unexpected pain language, which deconstructed the classical notion of exchange, leading the reader to a layered understanding of God as Love.

27. HADEWIJCH, *Vision* 1, pp. 270-271.

28. She uses the image of the rose one more time in her nineteenth letter. In this letter she refers to her enemies who plant nettles where roses should grow. The enemies are the people who cannot believe the true destination of the human soul, namely to be united with God. They therefore destroy Hadewijch's doctrine that supports her mystical theology. Without a fundamental trust in the relationship with God, everything is lost. HADEWIJCH, *Letter* 19, p. 90.

29. HADEWIJCH, *Poem* 2, p. 133. In this poem, the symbol of the rose also represents the tensions between fidelity and infidelity. Love is portrayed as a noble maiden and queen who rewards her lover, although she does not easily allow herself to be won. She is the mother of the virtues and brings forth fidelity. Fidelity, in turn, advises the lovers and rewards their hardships. Love expects the lover's complete loyalty, although she is all but generous with her own displays of fidelity and can seem mercurial. The lover must become acquainted with the ways of Love and learn to live with them, a painful process. The lover must imitate Christ himself, who pursued the virtue of love until the bitter end. Christ is the rose the mystic nurses.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 132.

2. *Journey through the Promised Land*

After establishing a basic trust in the relationship with God, based on a knowledge of his will, the time has come to act out this will, namely to imitate Christ in his humanity. "O soul, creature And noble image, Risk the adventure!"³¹ The initial period of intense happiness, in which young Love flourishes and completely wins over the budding lover, is followed by a period of hardship, leaving her feeling abandoned, orphaned and betrayed. The beloved Christ appears to have deserted the lover. The moment of eternal heavenly unity has not yet commenced, but one can strive to attain it. Hadewijch connected this period of eschatological suspension with the individual's spiritual growth, attempting to fulfill the needs of young mystics. The acolyte started with the assumption that the mystical road – the transformation – has a destination: the promised land where the lover will be forever reunited with the beloved in Love. After all, who would embark on this journey if no reward beckoned on the horizon³²? The young mystic starts with a clear idea of what this promised land should look like: sweet, never-ending moments of divine presence hitherto only briefly experienced.

In her fourth poem, Hadewijch expressed the idea that those who remain loyal to Love will receive their reward and will reach the promised land. In the *Natureingang*, she conjured up the image of a bird needlessly saddened by winter, forgetting spring would soon return. Natural and divine laws rule Love as they rule the seasons and if the lover, symbolized by the bird, keeps faith, all will be well. Those who have heard these "hidden words"³³, know better than to let winter, representing spiritual barrenness and abandonment, dishearten them. One should not stray from this path and should always keep the ultimate destination in mind. Hadewijch wrote

O hearts, let not your many griefs
Distress you! You shall soon blossom;
You shall row through all storms,
Until you come to that luxuriant land
Where beloved and loved one shall wholly flow through each other:
Of that, noble fidelity is your pledge here on earth.

31. HADEWIJCH, *Poem* 36, p. 231.

32. The journey and the road are common tropes in Hadewijch's imagery, according to Reynaert. He traces these tropes back to patristic literature, especially the works of Augustine. They find their common origin in the Bible. See REYNAERT, *Beeldspraak van Hadewijch*, pp. 247-248.

33. The "hidden words" are heard by Job and refer, in Hadewijch's works, to the knowledge of Love and her fundamental loyalty.

God must give noble souls an insight
 That will enlighten for them the life of exile,
 Since they are now wounded and driven from their goal
 Under the blow of cruel aliens.
 If the loved one shall be *lifted up* in the Beloved,
 How blessed that will be for him³⁴!

The message of this song is simple and reiterates the idea that loyalty to Love brings solace. The mystic has something to hold onto while she dwells in a life of exile, in a strange land where she endures many hardships. The underlying idea is that the mystic will be rewarded with entry into the kingdom of Love. The tone of this song is rather optimistic. Hadewijch called on the reader to bear this exile because Love will reward and keep her word. In stark contrast with the promised land, earthly reality is a miserable exile. In this land, many stray from Love and lose their way. Those who desire to follow Love are persecuted, just as Christ was in his own time. For Hadewijch, repudiation and persecution by society were an essential part of the imitation of Christ, as discussed in the first act. The pain inflicted by aliens created a space Hadewijch called the "strange land". The young mystic embarks on her journey in this land and it remains an integral part of mystic growth, never escaped in this earthly life. After visionary episodes, in which the mystic enters a parallel space, she is forced, time and again, to return to the strange land. Back in this exile, Love is missing and is not reflected in her fellow creatures³⁵.

Murk-Jansen connects this land of exile to the imagery of the desert popular with Beguine authors. The image of the desert is rooted in biblical literature and was further developed in monastic circles, especially by Richard of Saint Victor. Hadewijch lent it a unique meaning. Just like the Israelites, the soul travels to the promised land and undergoes many trials. It is a foreign land, a strange land, whose inhabitants are hostile toward her. Under the beatings of these cruel aliens, the soul grows mystically. The desert is also the place where Moses met God. Thus, the desert also becomes a *locus* of divine meeting, even though the fulfillment of the actual promise is not yet in sight. Like the people of Israel, the mystic must wander on, awaiting her eventual entry into the

34. HADEWIJCH, *Poem* 4, p. 139.

35. Faesen connects Hadewijch's strange land to the term *regio dissimilitudinis*, used in Plotinus' work and popularized in Augustine's theology. The latter linked this land to the reality in which people turned their backs on God and refuse to grow in likeness to his Image. Underneath the otherness remains the original nobility of the human soul that is created in God's image. See FAESEN, *Begeerte*, pp. 37-38.

promised land. Hadewijch thus lent the desert a temporal dimension. In the desert, the mystic waits, hopes, and despairs³⁶.

The tests the young mystic endures while imitating the human Christ become more profound as their duration increases. Hadewijch also experimented with the dimension of time to describe the space of Love. The lover cannot choose when to display her loyalty to Love in works and in pains, on the contrary, Love chooses when she can act. The mystic must live according to a divine rhythm, a God-given time that she must follow faithfully. This is unsurprising: even Christ had to await his hour. As Hadewijch wrote in her sixth letter:

When Christ lived on earth as Man, all his works had their time (John 7:6). When the hour came (John 2:4), he acted; in words, in deeds, in preaching, in doctrine, in reprimands, in consolation, in miracles, and in penance; and in labors, in pains, in shame, in calumny, in anguish, and in distress, even to the passion, and even to death. In all these things he patiently awaited his time. And when the hour came in which it befitted him to act, he was intrepid and powerful in consummating his work; and he paid, by the service of perfect fidelity, the debt of human nature to the Father's divine truth³⁷.

Not only must the mystic suffer her pain and complete her works when God desires this, he will only reward her when he – as Love – sees fit. She has no control over these events. The young mystic's reward is delayed. In several songs, Hadewijch emphasized this aspect of the journey: The constant shifting of the destination on the horizon, the end never emerging when the mystic desires or wants it. Yet this is no reason to give up because Love always rewards. She repeats this promised-based approach to the service of Love, for example, in her forty-third poem where the first-person narrator – not yet the fundamentally perfect lover personified – is prepared to wait for Love, in her service. Even in this difficult period of never-ending and futile waiting, she endures. She cries out: "Alas, Love! Might you find this a fit time (I have long felt the hour was come) To pity my misery's broad extent, Which for me is too long and too wide, And to confer joy on my heart, Which all too rarely has been gladdened Since I first came to long for you"³⁸. The perfect and accomplished lover will receive her reward when the time is ripe and persist when this reward is withheld, "For Love can very well repay Those who painfully follow her paths"³⁹. She reminds her reader how Love repays all pain with love, if the lover continues to search for new

36. See MURK-JANSEN, *Brides in the Desert*, pp. 102-112.

37. HADEWIJCH, *Letter* 6, p. 58.

38. HADEWIJCH, *Poem* 43, p. 251.

39. HADEWIJCH, *Poem in Couplets* 14, p. 346.

sufferings for Love's sake⁴⁰. Love, however, is unexpected and unpredictable, always demanding more.

The sentence the lover must serve in the strange land, in an exile shunned by God and humans alike, will not lead to the expected reward but to the metamorphosis of the lover. In her tenth poem, Hadewijch wrote: "Lo, the day of love is dawning When men will never fear pain for Love's sake, And the pain of Love will never be oppressive"⁴¹. What stands out is that the reward is not a heavenly bliss free from pain. Instead, the lover has reached a point when pain and love no longer trouble her. Hadewijch thus implied that it is up to the lover to grow. Love will not miraculously take away pain and fear. The author does not believe in a *deus ex machina*, a God who disrupts human freedom. Hadewijch's idea of reward is very complex. The promise of repayment depends more on the lover's metamorphosis than on Love's intervention. But when this time will draw near, she knows not. Hadewijch wrote: "Love always rewards, even though she comes late. Here is my answer to that: They who follow her suffer from night in the daytime"⁴²!

The reward's delay plunges the young mystic into darkness. While wandering in the strange land, night falls. The land is the same, but the lover will need to find her way in the dark, symbolizing pain and misfortune. In her twentieth letter, the writer beautifully described how the soul travels through the night, through twelve unspeakably dark hours. In the second and third hours, Love gives the heart a taste of death without actually allowing her to die. There can be no loving without great pain, no living without dying⁴³. Thus, she learns what it is like to live and die for Love, as Beatrice also expressed in her third and seventh ways, "dying alive" (*al leuende steruet*)⁴⁴. But unlike Beatrice's *vita* and tractate, Hadewijch's road does not end with physical death but runs on. The road and darkness merge, until the lover has learned to find light in this bleak night⁴⁵. It is the mystic's job to find this spark by herself – she can no longer count on God's miraculous interventions.

40. HADEWIJCH, *Poem in Couplets* 5, p. 328. Note that Love is explicitly referred to with a male pronoun ("You must let Love – himself – act; He will repay all pain with love"), which is very rare in her work. Lady Love is usually a female character. She probably had Christ in mind who is the ideal Lover.

41. HADEWIJCH, *Poem* 10, p. 153.

42. HADEWIJCH, *Poem* 9, pp. 150-151.

43. HADEWIJCH, *Letter* 20, p. 91.

44. BEATRIJS, *Seven manieren*, ed. FAESEN, pp. 56-57.

45. In *Poem in Couplets* 16 (pp. 353-354), Hadewijch wrote that Light is the second name for Love. Light reveals what is most in accordance with Love. "In this light we can learn How we shall love the God-Man In his Godhead and his Manhood". However, light

3. *Hellish Spaces, Broken Promises, and Endless Desires*

By manipulating time, and picturing the exile and the desert, the writer was able to play with the imagery of hell and purgatory, which amplify and prolong the darkness of the night and painful earthly reality. Hadewijch used an interesting interplay between time and space, probing eschatological borders. Physical death no longer matters. The lover crosses a border into a kind of non-death, descending into hell. Trapped in hell, the lover plunges into a downward spiral in which redemption seems impossible. This eschatological imagery magnifies the themes above and is ideal to initiate the reader in the mysteries of Love unfolding between the human soul and God. This pain language describes the eternal chasm between God and humanity. This space, in which Love shows herself, takes the young mystic by surprise and initially terrifies her. This fear is expressed with eschatological imagery. Conquering this fear will take a big effort from both the author and her disciples. It will lead through a personal purgatory where the soul will be purified and will burn in desire for Love. Only Christ and his representative, the mystical author, can lead these lost souls from hell, to purgatory, to an unexpected and inexplicable heavenly unification with the Beloved.

In her eighth letter, Hadewijch elaborated on the lover's fear for God during the eternal night. She divided this fear into two components. First, the lover fears that she will fall short in her practice of love⁴⁶. Hadewijch repeatedly emphasized that Love's command is onerous and her just service arduous. It is hardly surprising that the lover fails. As in Beatrice's third way, the lover blames herself and experiences this *defectus amoris* as an excruciating pain; an unavoidable pain linked to being human. In her twenty-second letter, Hadewijch, like Beatrice, called this an infernal pain. At the outset, Hadewijch wrote, the magnanimity of God's invitation, defying human reason, overwhelms the mystics who follow this road to hell. They question their own competence to satisfy God and curse themselves every hour of the day. They do not believe that they can attain the preeminence put aside for them. Hadewijch argued: "Thus their heart remains devoid of hope. This way leads them very deep into God, for their great

metaphors are less lyrical, and they often do not describe Love to her full extent, Reynaert argues. They often describe the rational and intellectual nature of the enlightened soul's relation to Love. Light often relates to the revelation of Love's truth and will. It is also contrasted with darkness to create an affective undertone, Reynaert says. Darkness is used by the author to stress the soul's longing for light which is scarcely given by Love, who is in full control. The soul needs to dwell in the dark. See REYNAERT, *Beeldspraak van Hadewijch*, pp. 72-73.

46. HADEWIJCH, *Letter 8*, pp. 64-65.

despair leads them above all the ramparts and through all the passageways, and into all places where the truth is"⁴⁷. These souls no longer trust their ability to love and have ceased to believe that they will conquer Love and receive their promised reward. They give up and sink into despair. They are lost in the strange land and can no longer find their way to Love: "Thus God stirs them interiorly in a madness without hope"⁴⁸.

But the *defectus amoris* motif is but one part of this fear. Second, the fear relates to the dread of the shortcomings of Love itself, who will not give her what she desires. The second fear is greater than the first. Hadewijch calls it Love's *ontrouwe* (unfaith). It is the fear that "Love does not love us enough, because she binds us so painfully that we think Love continually oppresses us and helps us little, and that all the love is on our side"⁴⁹. The mystic does not know if this pain will ever end. Is this Love's repayment? Is there hope for better? In her first letter, Hadewijch wrote:

Alas, dear child! although I speak of excessive sweetness, it is in truth a thing I know nothing of, except in the wish of my heart that suffering has become sweet to me for the sake of his love. But he has been more cruel to me than any devil ever was. For devils could not stop me from loving God or loving anyone he charged me to help forward; but this he himself has snatched from me. What he is, he lives by, in his sweet self-enjoyment, and lets me thus wander far from this fruition, beneath the constant weight of nonfruition of Love, and in the darkness where I am destitute of all the joys of fruition that should have been my part⁵⁰.

This fear fits with the notion that Love hurts more than the devil. The mystic realizes that the Other is not the demonic enemy but her own Beloved who leaves her bewildered. In this state, the mystic doubts Love. Although Christ promised to be always present in their shared will, she no longer feels his presence. All pleasure has vanished. In the strange land where everyone turns against her and devils plague her, her Beloved has disappeared. In her twenty-second letter, Hadewijch equated the road to this knowledge with hell⁵¹. The strange land in which the lover must roam in the eternal night can be called hell, because it lays bare the inadequacy of both the lover and the Beloved, and stokes fear that this suffering will never end. In this predicament, Love reveals a painful reality: The lover will never attain the wished-for naive union with the Beloved, which reflected the young mystic's self-will more than it represented Love's

47. HADEWIJCH, *Letter 22*, p. 98.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

49. HADEWIJCH, *Letter 8*, p. 65.

50. HADEWIJCH, *Letter 1*, p. 48.

51. HADEWIJCH, *Letter 22*, p. 98.

eternal will. Hadewijch even argued that Love would always be felt as an infernal reality, a dying life that corporeal death cannot alter. Hadewijch's heaven is a living hell for souls who love themselves more than they love God. The souls, waiting for their reward, will be forever disappointed.

In her sixteenth poem in couplets, Hadewijch described the seven names of Love, the name Hell being the highest of all. The other names are Chain, Light, Coal, Fire, Dew, and Spring. Every name reveals an essential and different aspect of the Love experience⁵². Despite some striking similarities with the *Seven Manners*, noticed by Reynaert⁵³, the crucial theological point Hadewijch made diverges from the conventional vision on the human body and the time of grace (on earth) and glory (in heaven) found in Beatrice's tractate. Beatrice believed that a painless and fearless union with God was impossible in earthly life, whereas Hadewijch argued that such a naive union existed neither on earth nor in heaven. Both authors linked this experience of pain to eschatological imagery; however, for Hadewijch, this hellish reality was eternal rather than temporary, as Beatrice and her hagiographer suggested. Earthly life is not the only infernal existence. It stretches through eternity, fundamentally linked to the relationship between the soul and God. A passage on the seventh name illustrates this well:

Hell is the seventh name
 Of this Love wherein I suffer.
 For there is nothing Love does not engulf and damn,
 And no one who falls into her
 And whom she seizes comes out again,
 Because no grace exists there.
 As Hell turns everything to ruin,
 In Love nothing else is acquired
 But disquiet and torture without pity;
 Forever to be in unrest,
 Forever assault and new persecution;
 To be wholly devoured and engulfed
 In her unfathomable essence,
 To founder unceasingly in heat and cold,
 In the deep, insurmountable darkness of Love.
 This outdoes the torments of hell.
 He who knows Love and her comings and goings
 Has experienced and can understand
 Why it is truly appropriate
 That Hell should be the highest name of Love⁵⁴.

52. HADEWIJCH, *Poems in Couplets* 16, pp. 352-358.

53. See REYNAERT, *Beeldspraak van Hadewijch*, p. 178.

54. HADEWIJCH, *Poem in Couplets* 16, pp. 356-357.

Love is Hell, her highest name – because, I argue, this was the mystic's greatest discovery. Love is pain, a pain not of a temporary nature but an eternal one. Love denies the naive and childish presumptions of the young mystic and checkmates her. Hell is the realization that the Beloved's eternal otherness will never bend to the lover. Humanity will never cease to be human, with all its pain and all its joy, and God will never cease to be God. The division between the two realities is, according to Hadewijch, mystically indispensable to keep the dynamics of Love in motion. The promise the young mystic had in mind of a total merging of the lovers (found in Beatrice's seventh way) was, according to Hadewijch, unrealistic. She was wary of Love, because she had learned how Love works. The fear of this kind of Love causes a shift from love based on loyalty to love based on disloyalty. In her tenth poem in couplets, Hadewijch wrote:

Love does not allow it to be at rest;
 It undergoes pressure from noble unfaith,
 Which is stronger and higher than fidelity:
 Fidelity, which one can record by reason,
 And express with the mind,
 Often lets desire be satisfied –
 What unfaith can never put up with;
 Fidelity must often be absent
 So that unfaith can conquer;
 Noble unfaith cannot rest
 So long as it does not conquer to the hilt;
 It wishes to conquer all that Love is:
 For that reason it cannot remain out of her reach⁵⁵.

The experience of Love's infidelity is needed, Hadewijch wrote, to demolish the young mystic's naive beliefs. Yet, she cannot allow this fear of Love's dark side to paralyze her. As a writer, Hadewijch went along with this breaking down but simultaneously offered her reader building blocks, helping her through hell and protecting the vigor of mystical growth. The way out of despair lies in a complete surrender and in a burning desire for Love that can never be extinguished, even when Love is unfaithful and the mystic experiences her faith as an utterly hopeless hell. Love is the Other and can never be fathomed, only desired eternally. Only when Love is painfully felt as the Other can desire grow. Otherness and absence are indispensable in igniting longing, Hadewijch states in her third poem⁵⁶. The storms of Love are not trials for the lover. They

55. HADEWIJCH, *Poem in Couplets* 10, p. 337.

56. HADEWIJCH, *Poem* 3, p. 136.

belong intrinsically to the relationship between Creator and created. The tempests, Faesen rightly argues, do not lead to a period of quietude – the effacing of desire – but to more yearning⁵⁷. This pain – fueled by desire rather than fear – never ends. I argue that the pain the lover experiences is eternal, because the desire for infinite Love is eternal. It is the lover, not Love, who must transform. The lover must remain faithful to the Beloved even in hellish pain and without chance of reward or redemption, only then can her metamorphosis be brought about.

The lover must surrender to Love's total sovereignty and readily burn what is left of her own will. Only by burning in Love's Fire (the fourth name), Hadewijch wrote in her sixteenth poem in couplets, could one arise from the ashes like the phoenix⁵⁸. As she said of the fourth name of Love:

Someone we love or someone we hate, refusal or desire,
Winnings or forfeits, convenience or hindrance,
Gain or loss, honor or shame,
Consolation at being with God in heaven
Or in the torture of hell:
This Fire makes no distinction.
It burns to death everything it ever touches:
Damnation or blessing no longer matters,
This I can confess⁵⁹.

The soul is purified and conforms to God's will and Love's doctrine. Love destroys the soul, preventing the lover from returning to the naive state she was in before her love adventure. The soul will never recover from this⁶⁰. The mystic's desire propels her onward toward Love. The mystic knows that she cannot be at peace with the pleasure of her youthful experience or in the bitter pain of unfaith. The fact that God as Love is radically different from what she anticipated should not keep her from striving for a form of unity with her Beloved. She must keep moving and yearning for more. This takes her on a new path that succeeds the road to hell, leading her to wisdom on Love – and purgatory.

57. This desire has no end, Faesen argues. He associates Hadewijch's interpretation with those of William of Saint-Thierry, Bernard of Clairvaux, Richard of Saint Victor and of the author of *Audivimus*, and argues that Hadewijch stresses the union between desire and pain. More than her predecessors, Hadewijch developed this idea of painful desire in relation to Christ and his humanity. This desire has no end, according to Hadewijch. This endless desire is an idea she borrowed from William, Faesen states. See FAESEN, *Begeerte*, pp. 320-321.

58. HADEWIJCH, *Poem in Couplets* 16, p. 357.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 355.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 357.

4. *Purgatorial Salvation*

In her twenty-second letter, after describing the road through hell, Hadewijch described the road to knowledge through purgatory⁶¹. She once again manipulated time. As in hell, time is suspended, the wait extended. The absence of Love puts in motion an irrepressible dynamic of inner desire. The mystic follows this purgatorial road to knowledge on God, which reaches deeply into her own soul, but she cannot find gratification. She only desires to accept Love, but Love is inscrutable. Hadewijch wrote: "They burn with interior desires without ceasing, because everything is inclined toward them: The mouth is open; the arms are outstretched; and the rich Heart is ready. That fearful outstretching renders the depth of their souls so deep and so vast that they can never be filled. The fact that God opens himself so wide for them invites them at all hours to surpass their faculties"⁶². This desire exceeds rational thought and forces the mystic to reach deeper. She does not pause at the seemingly impossible – the despair that appears to render union in love unattainable – but strives for more. An inextinguishable fire engulfs her, like the souls burning in purgatory. These souls do not burn in order to be purified or in punishment for committed sins – as is traditionally assumed about the souls in purgatory – but they burn to satisfy Love. After all, they know that this painful reality is the Beloved Christ's will, completely united with them in desire. The feeling of this mutual desire gives the mystic strength and the confidence to persist, even if she remains unfulfilled. Everything she has gained goes up in smoke in Love: "these souls consume without being satisfied"⁶³. Only Love can still her hunger, but Love itself is unfathomable and endless, leaving her unsated.

Hadewijch wrote that the road through purgatory is a way to attain knowledge of God's being as Love. In her letter, apart from describing this road and the road to hell, she also talked of the path to heaven and that to eternity, which are unknown to her. Each road demands the total

61. The first way to knowledge about God leads through heaven, Hadewijch argues in the twenty-second letter. Then come the ways of hell and purgatory. However, the author does not elaborate on this way. She writes that: "They who follow the first way, according to which he gave us his Nature, live on earth as if in heaven/ They apply themselves to Love without great woe, and in devotion, and in delight, and in abundance, for they can have these things without great woe". The author has no experiential knowledge about this way. She might think about the saints and martyrs of the Church. They appear to be mythical figures who cannot be imitated by her or her disciples. There is a final way, for ordinary people who can only reach knowledge about Love through exterior deeds. HADEWIJCH, *Letter 22*, pp. 97-98.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

63. *Ibid.*

surrender of the self, before one returns to one's self in God and feels God within. The mystic learns to know God as an eternity within herself and discovers that God is endlessly high and deep and fathomless. The different roads represent a way to cope with this unfathomable eternity. I argue that these ways are not separate: all lead to the road to hell before going on to purgatory and, finally, heaven. Hell is not an eternal damnation; it is a road that leads through hell and the road is Christ himself. It is imperative that the human person does not continue to live in fear of the invitation extended by God to partake in his inter-trinitarian bliss: "The spirit of some of them is frightened by his just warning, and they go astray. But others, the proud souls, he awakens, and they stand up with a violent new will and raise themselves toward his non-elevation, which eternally escapes us and, in its highest height, is beyond our reach"⁶⁴. Humanity is only capable of overcoming this fear because Christ stands by it. Christ gave himself (his substance) in his body and humans must feed on him. He descended to hell and there exclaimed his name for all to hear:

The Son poured out his name in a wonderful way when by this death he bore life and light into hell, which indeed is death without life. He carried life and light where no light shall be, and his name drew his beloved ones there into clear light and full fruitfulness. This same name burned those who remained there with the eternal fire of dark death. Oh, how dark is death where his name is not known⁶⁵!

Yet, Hadewijch wrote, many souls continue to find themselves unworthy or do not succeed in consuming Christ's Holy Body: "They live in the land of debt, and reason penetrates all their veins and invites them to lift themselves up to this divine self-offering and to the height of all men who are beloved. They cannot believe what they feel"⁶⁶. In her sixth vision, Hadewijch attested to witnessing souls damned by Love: "In his left hand I saw the sword of the fearful stroke, with which he strikes all down to death. In his hand I saw hell and all its eternal company"⁶⁷. Hadewijch repeatedly urged her reader to love and hate with Love, who encompasses both realities. Thus, there exists a group repudiated by Love, because they failed to fulfill their service to Her. These souls languish in pleasure and pain alike, failing to appreciate these two states as one, despite Christ's example. They fail to conquer their self-love or forgot about their fundamental relationship with the divine.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

65. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

66. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

67. HADEWIJCH, *Vision 6*, p. 279.

It is up to them to save themselves from this predicament and to accept Christ's invitation to be one with the Father through him. According to Hadewijch, purgatory is not so much a period in which souls are punished, as it is the extended time in which God waits for the souls to conquer their fear and to embrace Love. Hadewijch's God opens his arms to everyone, reaching out to one and all, even to strangers who do not know Love. Everyone can partake in his glory. He embraces them all – his friends with his right arm, the strangers with his left. All humans must transcend reason and give themselves to Love, burning with desire⁶⁸. God is the endless depth that every being carries within. No one is ever without God, although fear and despair can numb one so much that one can no longer yearn. These souls find themselves in hell, a hell of their own making because they do not allow Love to embrace them.

They can only overcome this fear by trusting Christ and loving him. In Christ, they find the perfect image of unification with God. Christ is their travel companion through this dark land and only he keeps them in motion and stops them from decaying, which would truly lead to perdition. This regained trust and newfound hope stem from the lovers' eternal longing for Love in Christ, bound together in a shared will. This hope is not a naive hope but has literally passed through hell and back, and has vanquished the terror of eternal pain. The lover had to become proud and had to overcome her twofold fear of Love (in herself and in Love). Overcoming this fear lies at the heart of Hadewijch's teachings. She wrote that the true lover would continue to love, even if she had to love the devil himself. Hadewijch thus called on the lover never to give up, not even under pressure from infernal fear. She wrote that the lover must endure this pain because its blows will shape her. The lover cannot give in, despite the intrinsic inadequacies of being human. If the lover is not only capable of loving the devil but even the Love that has betrayed and hurt her so, then she is truly selfless. The lover then loves the Beloved not for what Love means to her but for Love itself. She desires nothing better than Love itself, even though Love does not reward as initially expected. The lover no longer needs Love's loyalty to remain faithful.

Thus, the mystic becomes an *alter Christus*; she has passed through hell and back with him and is now ready to lead other souls. She is the bride entering the heavenly city of the tenth vision. She has endured the pains of the strange land and the land of darkness (Job 10,22), Hadewijch writes. However, suffering does not end with death; the bride will also suffer with Christ in the heavenly Jerusalem. Suffering does not just take

68. HADEWIJCH, *Letter 22*, p. 98.

place in the earthly vale of tears – in exile – but is a more fundamental, eternal reality. Experiencing Christ in a union still implies bearing pain. Pain is connected, as we have seen, with the eternal desire and the ontological divide between God and humanity, Creator and created, which can never be lifted. If we could bridge this divide, Love would cease to exist. The relationship, consisting of two equal partners, would disappear. The space of the divide between God and humans is eternal. The promised land, the heavenly Jerusalem, is not that different from the desert, the dark land where the lover endures pain⁶⁹. The “strange land” – earthly reality – can be both day and night; Love’s kingdom – the promised land – can be experienced as both heaven and hell. The difference is in the eye of the beholder. Here, the reader, along with the mystic, discovers the secret meaning of suffering. Christ speaks to his bride, saying:

You alone have never tasted earthly poison; you like no other have superhumanly suffered much among men. You shall suffer everything to the end with what I am, and we shall remain one. Now enjoy fruition of me, what I am, with the strength of your victory, and they shall live eternally contented through you⁷⁰.

In her twelfth letter, Hadewijch wrote that heavenly reality – eternal life – already commences for those willing to desire and strive to serve God. Death was no longer an absolute boundary in her eschatology. Heaven and earth serve Love. This means that the lover, in her love service, can already content Love in the present. Yet, the author claimed, neither living humans nor their souls in heaven can ever truly satisfy Love. Their work falls short. This causes them to long to serve Love ever more perfectly, progress that increases infinitely on earth and in heaven⁷¹. Hadewijch’s heaven burns with the fire of desire and thus resembles the imagery usually reserved for hell and purgatory. This similarity of heaven and hell means that the soul can feel both cursed and blessed. But this should not prevent her from serving Love. Despite pain, she continues to desire unity with the Beloved in Love, as written in the Song of Songs: *Dilectus meus mihi et ego illi* (My beloved is mine and I am his) (Song 2,16)⁷². This union in Love is, alas, not as sweet as seems at

69. HADEWIJCH, *Poem* 17, p. 172: “What joy can surround Him whom Love has thrown into close confinement, When he wishes to journey through Love’s immensity And enjoy it as a free man in all security? More multitudinous than the stars of heaven are the griefs of love”.

70. HADEWIJCH, *Vision* 10, p. 288.

71. HADEWIJCH, *Letter* 12, p. 70.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

first glance – it is pain and joy at the same time, on earth as in heaven. Hadewijch wrote:

This is an unspeakably delightful bliss but, God knows, in the bliss there always remain woe. For the heart of the courtly lover, however, that is the law of chivalry: The only rest of such a heart is to do its utmost for the sake of its Beloved and to render him love and honor in view of his sublimity; and to offer him noble service as a gift – not for pay in the hand, but because Love herself at all times is satisfaction and pay enough⁷³.

Hadewijch's ideal lover – just as the crucified Christ – bears the wounds of her struggle. Like Jacob, she must be defeated in the night in order to conquer Love. The mystic goes through hell without hope for salvation but is at peace with the essence of her relationship with the Beloved, knowing that she executes his will and satisfies him with her service of love, despite its imperfection. The mystic remains human and God remains God. This ontological divide can never be bridged. The liminal space between the partners is a strange land – darkness and hell but also the promised land and the heavenly Jerusalem. Here, the lovers meet in a space capable of inspiring the greatest joy and inflicting the harshest pain, although this no longer affects the true lovers. They desire only each other. In her tenth poem in couplets, she succinctly articulated this idea: "If anyone did not fear hell, And did not serve for the hope of heaven, And if for hell's sake and for heaven's sake He were equally glad and equally daring, And if he loved without rest, And desired above measure, And above reason, and above thought, That were great profit in love"⁷⁴.

Hadewijch radically refuted the idea of reward and deconstructed the idea of pain exchange. The embodied and earthly reality is not much different from the heavenly realm and the death of the human body does not change anything about the dynamics between the person and God. She states that Love rewards but not as one expects. She does not give herself in human measures but exceeds these, wounding the lover and causing her suffering. Suffering persists in heaven. Hadewijch needed this powerful image of infernal pain and Love as hell to break the deep-rooted paradigm of promise and its reassurance of self-love. Hadewijch's works assume a mystically literate reader who picks up on her rich imagery and aspires to grow mystically. The character of the mystic is a model for the reader. She imitates Christ and the reader imitates Christ through her counsel and example. The reader must travel through hell and must

73. *Ibid.*, p. 71.

74. HADEWIJCH, *Poem in Couplets* 10, pp. 335-336.

feel the pain of the human Christ in his own body. The writer offered a visual language and a number of successful examples of figures who won the battle by allowing themselves to be overcome. One could argue that these figures are missing in Beatrice's tractate, although the soul in her works strives for the same mystical heights, resulting in a reoccurring theme of fear and anxiety that cannot be solved.

At the end of the twenty-second letter, Hadewijch wrote that the soul must be like an eagle, like John the Evangelist – whom she cited repeatedly in her works – unblinkingly staring straight into the sun⁷⁵. The soul must fly straight to its origin and not allow herself to be distracted by the dark surroundings. This journey is fundamentally painful because, at humanity's origin, a love relationship lies that always retains its otherness. This painful distance between the two partners, different and yet united, is the core of Hadewijch's mystical doctrine and the source of her pain language.

75. HADEWIJCH, *Letter 22*, p. 102.

XII

RUUSBROEC'S DARK LUMINOSITY

This chapter discusses Ruusbroec's interpretation of the pain language of Liège's thirteenth-century mystical culture and how he incorporated the teachings of Beatrice and Hadewijch in his own work. Their imagery was an integral part of the thinking of the fourteenth-century Brabantian mystic. But the mystical landscape of the thirteenth century had evolved and the topography of mystical centers shifted along with it. In devotional culture, meditations on the wounded body became ever more popular. Ruusbroec, too, used these meditations in his treatises, as demonstrated in chapter two. Yet, Church authorities often questioned the ideas of mystical authors and not everyone understood their sophisticated and complex mystical theologies. Ruusbroec, as a mediator, was caught between nominalist branches of scholastic theology, which emphasized absolute transcendence, and heterodox movements such as the Brethren of the Free Spirit, who believed that they were in a glorified state in the here and now and claimed direct access to the divine¹.

The secondary literature portrays Ruusbroec as a translator and defender of the mystical tradition, who – more than his predecessors – had to carefully and systematically construct his ideas on mysticism. The mystic was, first and foremost, an intelligent writer and interpreter who correctly gauged his target audience. Ruusbroec's layered texts testify to his insight into the devotional and mystical life of ordinary people as well as the mystically literate. His works speak to a broad audience. Some readers are only interested in his clear and visually rich approach to articles of faith, while others find a lodestar for their own mystical life. For the second group, Ruusbroec unearthed layer upon layer, digging to the core of the relationship between humanity and God. Ruusbroec

1. Warnar states that Ruusbroec was engaged in theological debates that were not exclusively reserved for scholars who wrote in Latin. He was also familiar with devotional practices and alleged heretical ideas that were mainly developed by lay people, who misinterpreted complex theological doctrines. Based on his reading of Ruusbroec's *The Twelve Beguines*, Warnar argues that Ruusbroec was familiar with Bernard's critique on Peter Abelard and the nominalist school of thought. He used the same Cistercian literature to combat heresies such as those of the Brethren of the Free Spirit. See WARNAR, *Ruusbroec*, pp. 146-147.

discussed pain in these various layers – the sensory layer, the life of the soul and the *apex mentis* – the height of the mind, what Ruusbroec called the “bare mind”. Ruusbroec’s pain language, connected to his mystical imagery and ideas, is a well-thought-out system, strongly determined by his role as a teacher and mystagogue².

Ruusbroec successfully reconciled two theological traditions. The first is the classical idea that, after death and the last judgment, earthly suffering will be rewarded, and human beings will finally meet and contemplate God in his entirety (*visio Dei*). This is the idea expressed, for instance, in Beatrice’s tractate and *vita*. A perfect meeting with God is possible only after death, when the human person passes from a period of mercy to a period of glory. The second tradition, by contrast, suggests that God can already be experienced on earth through an infinitely growing human desire that does not cease after death. This desire is part of the dynamics of a Love that wounds the human person. Ruusbroec mined both traditions and developed a complex mystical theology that attempts to strike a balance between the classical and progressive elements found in the mystical tradition and normative theology of his age – that of the Parisian university, for instance.

Nevertheless, one cannot forget that Ruusbroec did not utilize essentialist frames of references like most scholastic theologians, McGinn argues. Hence, scholars should not force those frameworks on Ruusbroec’s texts which are interested in conveying a sense of movement and transformation. He does not research metaphysical and ontological questions, nor does he create very abstract theories. His theology is about growing in likeness and unity with God. The Godhead Ruusbroec describes is very dynamic, an inter-trinitarian interaction based on Love that is both rest and action. The human person is constantly transforming in relation to the dynamics of the Trinity³. Van Nieuwenhove argues that this brings the person into a new state, in which work and rest alternate each other as the tides, mimicking the absolute self-surrender of the figures of the Trinity, the *perichoresis*. Van Nieuwenhove finds a similar theology with

2. In his analysis of the articulation of the mystical transformation in *The Spiritual Espousals*, Loet Swart states that Ruusbroec is a mystagogue. Ruusbroec’s text creates a virtual reality, constructed with shared references such as the gospel, faith, the Church and saints. The author used his texts to recreate a community that is still growing and transforming, without fixed positions. Everything and everyone is in motion. See L. SWART, *De articulatie van de mystieke omvorming in ‘De Geestelike Brulocht’ van Jan van Ruusbroec*, Nijmegen, Uitgeverij Vantilt, 2006, pp. 485-486.

3. See B. MCGINN, *Essential Themes in Ruusbroec’s Mysticism*, in ARBLASTER – FAESEN (eds.), *A Companion to John of Ruusbroec*, 130-178, p. 139.

Hadewijch, although she never fully developed this trinitarian theology⁴. Axters too noted how Ruusbroec might have been inspired by Hadewijch's idea that heaven can be experienced on earth in the mystical experience; or in other words, the idea that what the human person experiences on earth, also his pain, will be eternal and heavenly. Axters states that Hadewijch's conceptualization of Love who rules over time and eternity is reflected in Ruusbroec's works⁵.

The following section will focus primarily on Ruusbroec's imagery, rather than on the theological argumentation behind grace, glory, and *visio Dei*, which have been extensively discussed by other Ruusbroec scholars⁶. Based on the previous analysis of the eschatological imagery and mystical theology of Beatrice and Hadewijch, I propose to study the dialectics of grace and glory and earthly and heavenly contemplation. Scholarship has suggested to locate the distinction within the duration of the contemplation – short-lived contemplation during a long period of exile versus eternal beatific vision after death – or within the intensity and precision of the vision before and after death⁷. Both proposals recall the theologies of Beatrice and Hadewijch that conceptualize and interpret the mystical pain associated with the eternal desire for God. I therefore propose to investigate Ruusbroec's imagery with special attention to its dynamic qualities and to the resemblances it shares with Hadewijch, the *vita* of Beatrice and her *Seven Manners*. I look at the imagery related to the body as a border between grace and glory, life and death, to the dynamics of desire and the pain of fear and despair that are expressed using eschatological imagery. This imagery will help me evaluate Ruusbroec's mystical theology and the place of pain within the relationship between God and the human person.

1. *Heavenly Bodies*

As already noted in act one, Ruusbroec's audience did not consist solely of elitist mystical-theologians or scholastic scholars. He also relied

4. See R. VAN NIEUWENHOVE, *Jan van Ruusbroec: Mystical Theologian of the Trinity* (Studies in Spirituality and Theology), Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 2003, p. 134. For a detailed and systematic study of Ruusbroec's mystical theology and key concepts, see P. MOMMAERS, *Jan van Ruusbroec: Mystical Union with God*, Leuven, Peeters, 2009.

5. See AXTERS, *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid*, 2, p. 270.

6. See C. TROTTMANN, *La vision béatifique: Des disputes scholastiques à sa définition par Benoît XII* (Bibliothèque des Écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome, 289), Roma, École française de Rome, 1995.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 256-258.

on genres such as the *exempla*, which were known to a broad audience, and applied mystical-theological strategies used by hagiographers, such as frightening readers with eschatological pain language to encourage conversion and confession. This language was widespread in the fourteenth century and aimed to instill end-of-time terror and a fear of death and punishment in the believer. Ruusbroec complemented this popular layer with meditations on the suffering body, which became very popular in his lifetime. Like Hadewijch – who exclusively addressed a mystical-theological elite – Ruusbroec did not stop here but created his own version of existing imagery in order to discuss the core of mystical teaching: the relationship between humankind and God.

An analysis of Ruusbroec's layered pain language and eschatological imagery needs to start with these popular, folkish layers. Unlike Hadewijch, who starts her mystical path with the mystically gifted acolyte, Ruusbroec addresses the ordinary believer. In chapter one, I discussed the *exemplum* of the three gluttonous monks and how their greed condemned them to the torments of hell. This is a good illustration of the mystic's introductory teachings on eschatology. The *exemplum* is found at the end of Ruusbroec's short tractate *The Christian Faith*, which he wrote when he was chaplain of Saint Gudula in Brussels, prior to his time in Groenendaal. In his treatise, Ruusbroec discussed the *credo* along the lines of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. He placed his own accents and chose which themes to highlight and develop in detail. He primarily paused at the eleventh and twelfth articles on the glorified body and the last judgment with its eternal damnation and eternal salvation, Moereels argues⁸. This treatise is a good example of how Ruusbroec mined classical imagery and relied on a basic knowledge of classical doctrine. The reader must first accept these images and doctrines as true before moving on to the first steps of the mystical life.

The key figure of these eschatological doctrines and their imagery is Christ, who traveled through the underworld after his death and will judge the living and the dead at the end of times. In his summary of the Creed in *The Christian Faith*, Ruusbroec described how Christ descended from the heavens to become human, enduring myriad torments to save humankind. After his death, Christ traveled to hell. There, he broke the chains of the damned with his divine powers, which he used only for the sake of infernal souls – not for his own sake, when he was tested or abandoned. Christ may have felt forsaken, yet he never called upon his

8. See L. MOEREELS, *Ruusbroec: Drie kleinere traktaten* (Ruusbroec hertaald, 7), Tielt – Amsterdam, Lannoo, 1979, pp. 15-17.

special relationship with the Father. Still, the Father was always with him, even during the three days when his body lay in the tomb and his soul was in limbo. When his body and soul were once again united, he ascended with the glorified bodies of those he deemed worthy of salvation. These souls had not committed mortal sins and had always loved God. Upon his arrival in heaven, Christ's human nature was given power to reign over earth as well as heaven and hell. The figure of Christ bridged the dichotomies of life and death, salvation and damnation, grace in mortality and glory in heaven⁹.

The reader meditates on Christ's role as redeemer and begs for his mercy. After all, he would judge the reader after death, at the last judgment. At that eschatological moment, bodies would rise up and reunite with their souls. This event would transform the person in accordance with Christ's judgment. A positive verdict places souls in heaven, transforming their bodies into their eschatological perfected state. These heavenly bodies do not suffer from any bodily pain or illness. In contrast with these souls, the writer described the damned bodies, which are disfigured and suffer eternally. For those who had lived virtuously and suffered sufficiently, this bodily transformation would be a blessing, for the wicked, a curse. Ruusbroec wrote:

And even if good people can be crippled on earth, lame or blind, they shall rise perfect, with all their limbs unstained and unblemished, glorious as the body of our Lord Jesus Christ. But those who are evil and damned will suffer the reverse of this in all things. Look, in this way every soul shall put on its own body, and (people) shall come to judgment with soul and body¹⁰.

Ruusbroec argued that the pains and shortcomings of earthly life would cease when the end of time dawned. This is what Christian faith promises its believers. This would demand a bodily transformation that is only possible after death. All of creation would transfigure, Ruusbroec wrote, in the fire of hell and purgatory. This elemental fire is the material fire which will purify and renew all. The elements of nature would be refashioned in splendor, elevating the glorified bodies to their true potential. The body would no longer hinder or torment the soul but would only bring forth heavenly joy. Through the reordering of the purified elements, the glorified body would attain the four attributes: resplendence, impassibility, subtlety, and agility. Through the exaltation of the element earth, the body would no longer suffer, just as Adam did not suffer before the fall. Physical suffering only came into existence when Adam committed

9. RUUSBROEC, *Faith*, p. 273.

10. *Ibid.*

the first sin. Earthly reality then became permeated by sin and thus pain. The fires of doomsday would purify all and transform the body into its resurrected state¹¹. In *The Realm of Lovers*, Ruusbroec used similar imagery, calling the resurrected bodies resplendent – seven times brighter than the sun and as transparent as crystal or glass. They would become impassible – impervious to physical pain – neither swords nor fire could wound them. Finally, their bodies would no longer be an obstacle but would become agile – their soul leading them anywhere, becoming part of humanity's glorified, eternal state¹².

This transformation of body and its senses would also lead to a better knowledge of God, the author continues. The human person will know God clearly and will love him. With a vivid approach passing through all the senses, Ruusbroec evoked the somatic experiences that continue after death and the bodily resurrection. The transformed body contributes to a more complete knowledge of God. This more perfect wisdom is, of course, impossible on earth, where God's creation shows more discord than harmony, and where the bodies are flawed¹³. In *The Realm of Lovers*, Ruusbroec unambiguously stated that clear knowledge of God is only possible after the earthly exile. All hidden wisdom humanity gains during life is fundamentally unspeakable. By utterly trusting and believing in God now, everything will be fulfilled later – as promised – and we will know God forever, love him with a burning desire and thank and praise him eternally. We will understand and know what we have longed for. We will behold Christ, Mary, and all the saints in their natural beauty and, with our inner eye, we will discern God's Wisdom. We will hear the melodies and songs of saints and angels, who adore God forevermore and, with our inner ear, we will receive God's Word. We will smell the Holy Spirit, sweeter than balsam and precious spices. This scent will take us outside ourselves and draw us into God's infinite love. Finally, we will taste God's goodness, sickeningly sweet¹⁴. Ruusbroec wrote: "And it shall feed us and go through our souls and our bodies and we shall be hungry and thirsty for it always, and through that hunger and thirst both our tasting and our being fed shall remain always and be made new: and that is life eternal"¹⁵.

For most ordinary people, however, death was followed by a period of purification in the fires of purgatory – on the condition that they had not

11. RUUSBROEC, *Faith*, p. 272.

12. RUUSBROEC, *Realm*, pp. 139-140.

13. RUUSBROEC, *Faith*, pp. 274-275.

14. RUUSBROEC, *Realm*, pp. 140-141.

15. RUUSBROEC, *Faith*, p. 275.

committed any mortal sins and had always feared and loved God¹⁶. Those less virtuous would experience a period of purifying pain or, in the worst case, an eternity of pain in hell, if they had failed to love God and had committed grave sins. They would then burn forever with Lucifer and his devils, leading the never-ending existence of a slave, stunted by their own doomed bodies, which could not transform into glorified bodies. But even worse than the eternally doomed body is the eternal absence of God, Ruusbroec wrote. Infinite fire represents these pains, both physically and spiritually. Biting cold and blistering heat reign in hell, along with utter darkness, where light shall never shine. Damned souls will always fear the ever-menacing pains of hell. Sadness and despair feed them forever, because they know that pain will never cease. It is a place of eternal abandonment where the dimly-lit damned souls and terrifying devils are beheld. They shall have an inner darkness because of their sins. There will not be external light in this uttermost darkness, except just enough to illuminate the horrible grotesque faces of devils and damned bodies. These damned souls will only see horror and they will be fed with despair like the glory of God feeds the saints. Ruusbroec wrote: "They shall die and die again for ever, but never fully die. And that is why the pains of hell are called a death eternal"¹⁷. Those souls will never gain clear knowledge of God and will never experience his love. It is a spiritual pain that is the biggest torment of all hellish pains, worse than all the physical torments¹⁸.

Ordinary people, within their flawed bodies, cannot gain personal knowledge about God in this life, only in the next. They have no choice but to believe in the articles of faith and the opinions of enlightened minds like the mystics and the scholars. They have to accept Ruusbroec's description of heavenly reality, as they have not yet experienced it. They must hold on to the *credo*, which reveals how the good will receive reward and the wicked punishment in body and soul. They will only gain this knowledge about God and the world personally after death, when their bodies are glorified. However, the exalted whom Ruusbroec called

16. RUUSBROEC, *Mirror*, pp. 575-576. In *The Spiritual Espousals*, Ruusbroec divided humanity into five groups based on their merits. The first group is determined to end up in hell because they commit severe sins without confessing them before death. The second group consists of non-believers who will die forever, although their torture will be less extreme than the first group. Most people belong to the third group who already confessed but whose debts are not fully paid. The fourth group paid their debts while still alive. They will go straight to heaven. The fifth group already experiences heaven on earth. RUUSBROEC, *Espousals*, pp. 156-157.

17. RUUSBROEC, *Faith*, p. 276.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 276-278.

saints in *The Christian Faith* defy eschatological delay and attain reward in the here and now. The deceased martyrs and saints already live in heaven, while ordinary people on earth live in exile and will only be rewarded at the last judgment¹⁹. Contrary to most people, they never had to face purgatorial or hellish pains and they could consume hidden wisdom and reach a heavenly unification with Christ. They would reach salvation before the end of time. At the end of time, they will judge alongside Christ and will not be judged themselves. Even prior to the third coming of Christ, they will contemplate, taste and experience God in his “fathomless riches of the divine essence eternally and evermore”²⁰.

Moreover, because of their spiritual and virtuous excellence, their holy bodies could not be hurt, not on earth, in the depths of the seas, or even in hell, Ruusbroec explains in *The Realm of Lovers*. He uses the saint’s resurrected body to illustrate the impassibility of the resurrected bodies of ordinary people on judgment day. Just as martyrs could attain impassibility, the bodies of ordinary people could reach this state through purification, the burning of their sins and the transformation of the elements of the created body, after death²¹. The martyrs and saints serve as an example. Although their extraordinary gifts could not be imitated in this life, their virtuous lives were meant to be inspiring and could be imitated. Ruusbroec does not want to use their extraordinary lives as mere entertainment, I argue. They serve as an illustration of an ideal that should be pursued. He says:

I could tell you more about the special reward of the martyrs, the virgins and the doctors of the Church and of their eminent dignity, but I let it be: enough words. This is the life eternal that belongs to those who shall stand at the right hand of God on the day of His judgment and to whom Christ shall say: “Come, blessed of My Father, take possession of the kingdom that has been prepared for you from the beginning of the world”²².

Nevertheless, the figure of the exalted disrupts an absolute eschatological division between earth and heaven. Their bodies became deified on earth and inspired ordinary people to pursue a similar state of being in the hereafter. In the first part of Ruusbroec’s *The Spiritual Espousals*, called “the active life”, the author uses this figure of the impassible martyrs to clarify how a virtuous life contributes to a heavenly existence on

19. *Ibid.*, p. 272.

20. RUUSBROEC, *Espousals*, p. 157.

21. RUUSBROEC, *Realm*, pp. 139-140.

22. RUUSBROEC, *Faith*, p. 275.

earth, starting with the core virtues of *caritas* and justice. He linked the virtues in a chain that guides and helps the soul go forth and meet God – the Bridegroom – in a working life. The first link is the virtue of humility, which in turn brings forth obedience, leading to a rejection of one's self-will²³. Surrender of the will leads to the virtue of patience, enabling the exalted to withstand the painful reality they find themselves in. God calls upon them to overcome all trials and pains. Being human alongside Christ helps the blessed to become so adept in the virtues that nothing can bring them disquiet: neither loss of earthly goods, family or friends, nor illness, misfortune or death. Not the devil, hell or purgatory can frighten or hurt their souls. All that God desires from them, they can patiently bear, now and in all eternity²⁴.

Ruusbroec suggested that his readers could emulate a similar practice of virtue, although this practice would be of a lower level than that of the saints. Life on earth will determine the reward and the clarity with which human beings behold heavenly reality after death. In *Seven Rungs in the Ladder of Spiritual Love*, Ruusbroec said:

But on the last day, at the judgment of God, when we are risen with our glorious bodies by means of the power of our Lord, our bodies will be white and shining as the snow, shining brighter than the sun, as transparent as a crystal. Each one is going to have a sign in honor and glory, according to every way that he has suffered and endured, in martyrdom and in other sufferings, willingly and freely, for God's honor. For all things shall be ordered and rewarded according to the wisdom of God and the excellence of our good works²⁵.

These other sufferings could be seen as both physical suffering (such as the deeds of the martyrs) and mental/spiritual suffering. The author argues that imitating the virtues and the suffering of Christ and his saints and martyrs is a way of securing a place in heaven. Interestingly, he argues that it is not so much the physical suffering that guarantees this heavenly reward, but the mental/spiritual suffering. Again, Ruusbroec stresses that spiritual pain is worse than physical pain. In parallel with Christ's redemptive suffering, ordinary people can embark on adventure that does not imitate the martyr's and saint's excessive bodily pain but

23. Ampe argues that humility (*ootmoed*) is not only an ascetic practice but a metaphysical reality that mirrors Christ's kenosis that, in turn, enabled humanity's deification. The individual must strive for more humiliation and pain, which will free him. He needs to be free and humble to love God and accept his transcendence and his own flaws. See A. AMPE, *De vrijheid en de ootmoet bij Ruusbroec*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 30 (1956) 400-421.

24. RUUSBROEC, *Espousals*, pp. 159-160.

25. RUUSBROEC, *Rungs*, p. 618.

Christ's spiritual suffering and the virtuous responses to pain. Ruusbroec argued in the following passage in *The Spiritual Tabernacle*:

And therefore, He [Christ] was alone in the Holy Church when He carried out this (work of) propitiation; for His inward activity was hidden to the whole world. And He wrought this alone. And that has redeemed us more than His outward suffering, for it was the (very) inspiration of His outward suffering. And therefore, the figure says that He sprinkled the blood with His finger, for His effusion of blood and all His suffering was by means of the Holy Spirit and by His free will. Nevertheless His outward suffering consummated His inmost activity unto (God's) eternal honor²⁶.

We were saved because Christ overcame and vanquished his fear and spiritual pain. He was led by the will he shared with the Father and guided by the Holy Spirit, who symbolizes the love between Father and Son. We must praise Christ for his sacrifice. That is the theme of this passage from *The Spiritual Tabernacle*. Yet, this was not all, as far as Ruusbroec was concerned. His reader could also imitate Christ in his inward activity.

Ruusbroec offered his readers a different path (a new kind of martyrdom if you will) that would also lead to salvation and hidden knowledge about God. This mystical path follows the movement inward, which, just as with Hadewijch, is not free from pain. The writer addressed his readers as a mystagogue and mentor. These readers do not simply wish to lead an active/serviceable external life but are destined to grow toward an inner and contemplative life. This contemplative life involves different challenges and is often not a straightforward passage of a life in grace to a life in glory. There is no certainty that this path will lead to the same exalted heights of the martyrs and the saints of old. It involves a transformation of the human being that commences on earth. It is usually a painful process that shatters illusions. Although Ruusbroec – starting with the idea of reward – pictured a future paradise for those who led a good life, his mystical disciples, thwarted by their finite bodies and the limits of mortality, walked a different path.

2. *The Mystic*

My analysis of this separate path of the mystic will question some classical distinctions made in scholastic theology, especially between grace and glory. In his detailed and complex study, Albert Ampe makes a distinction between grace and glory, although the two realities also

26. RUUSBROEC, *Tabernacle*, p. 455.

reveal continuity. He argues that humanity in glory can behold God more perfectly than humanity in grace. Grace and glory function in a similar way but are divided by the reality of death. Human beings are elevated above themselves and transformed, allowing them to know God in what lies hidden. In the state of grace, Ampe says, this knowledge is rooted in the realm of faith, for during their earthly exile human beings are but pilgrims on their way to God and cannot yet encounter him *ad faciem*. The resemblance between grace and glory thus seems to suggest a gradual transition from one to the other. According to Ruusbroec, life in grace influences life in glory. The idea of reward therefore reemerges: a good life on earth is rewarded with a good life in heaven. How hard and virtuously one toils on earth determines one's place in heaven's hierarchy. The mortal form of the earthly body, however, does not yet possess the *forma corporis* that can behold the glorious light. Only death abolishes the reality of time and space, allowing the human person to meet God face to face. The true *visio Dei* can be experienced only in the afterlife²⁷.

In this section, however, I will propose a more nuanced mystical theology and eschatology that does not follow Ampe's absolute distinction between grace and glory. I argue that the distinction is prominent in Ruusbroec's writings that are more popular. He, nevertheless, nuances the distinctions in passages where he is inspired by Hadewijch's mystical theology. This sophisticated mystical-theological system included pain imagery and is positioned between grace and glory, ordinary believers and saints.

Ruusbroec seems to suggest this distinction between mystics, saints, and ordinary people in *The Sparkling Stone*. Saints experience God in his entirety in the present and in eternity, unlike ordinary people who will never gain an inner or contemplative knowledge about the hidden presence of God. Ruusbroec wants more for his reader than just an ordinary existence and an underdeveloped relationship with God on earth. Ruusbroec creates another group of characters for his readers, which represent the mystical acolytes. He addresses this group with the first-person plural, "we". The reader can grow toward a form of hidden mystical wisdom on God but cannot hope to compete with the unclouded knowledge of saints. The saints' existence continues immediately after death – they do not have to await the bodily resurrection at the end of

27. See A. AMPE, *De geestelijke grondslagen van de zieleopgang naar de leer van Ruusbroec: B – Genadeleer* (Studiën en tekstuitgaven van Ons geestelijk erf, 11-13), Tielt, Lannoo, 1952, p. 74.

time. They already live in the time of glory. The mystics will have to discover other ways to gain knowledge about God because they do not have the eyes of the glorified body like the saints.

The saint is a transgressive figure who overturns the eschatological frameworks established for ordinary believers and represents an inspiring continuum between grace and glory, earth and heaven. Ruusbroec's readers, however, have not received the saints' supernatural gifts; they thus identify with the "we" group rather than with the saints²⁸. The saints are characters that represent "the others", a reality not accessible to the reader. The contrast between saints and readers sheds light on an important mystical-theological notion, namely, that we lead but a shadow existence in this life. God's shadow brightens our inner desert, Ruusbroec wrote in *The Sparkling Stone*. Only on the high peaks of the promised land do the shadows flee away. The saints have access to these summits and command knowledge of God so dazzling that mere mortals cannot behold it. The brilliant sun shines on the desert as well as the mountain, but, in the desert humanity wanders in obscurity. Nevertheless, the saints reveal that God can indeed be known by human beings, something ordinary people without experiential knowledge of God might question²⁹.

As mortals, we can only seek wisdom in what is hidden and can only come into the sun's brilliance by following Love into a state of modelessness – when all distinctions fade into one blinding light, Ruusbroec continues. It is thus possible for us to grow thanks to Love and to gain secret knowledge, although we will have to stumble in the dark first. Christ, who is the light that has conquered darkness, blinds mortal humans because his eternal light is too strong. Their eyes cannot yet behold him like the glorified eyes of the saints can. Because his light is too bright for mortals, they are blinded and wrapped in obscurity. They can at best only hope to attain mystical knowledge, but they can never match the clarity of the saints on this earth. Most human beings walk in the cool morning shade, shielded from the sun, while saints emerge at midday. The saints behold the sun at her zenith. Her radiant light is the nourishment the true lover consumes³⁰.

Ruusbroec used an imagery that evokes movement. The impossibility of attaining complete access to divine knowledge should not stop us, the readers, in our tracks. We must continue our pilgrimage and move through

28. See SWART, *De articulatie van de mystieke omvorming*, pp. 486-489.

29. RUUSBROEC, *Stone*, pp. 253-254.

30. *Ibid.*

the shady landscape. Fortified by heavenly bread, which tastes of the secret knowledge occasionally granted to mortals, we are led to the mountain – not to the peaks of the promised land where the saints dwell in glory, but to the summit of Mount Tabor, where Christ's transfiguration took place, he tells his reader in *The Sparkling Stone*³¹. This imagery is reminiscent of Hadewijch's imagery of the journey to the mountain in her eighth vision³². The bread that invigorates the travelers in their earthly exile, Ruusbroec wrote, represents Christ's human nature – also key to Hadewijch's understanding of a mystical life on earth. The bread is a foretaste of the knowledge we will possess after death. We taste a human nature that gives us hidden knowledge on God and eternity. This wisdom only ripens on Mount Tabor³³.

On the mountain, light blinds us and we must rely on our other senses, especially our hearing. When we arrive on the mount, we are reduced to what Ruusbroec termed our "bare mind", in which all images dissolve. This is the *apex mentis*, the height of the human spirit and the most inner of the human faculties of the soul, and closest to God. The mountain represents the highest peak in the human soul where God can be encountered. The resurrected Christ, in his humanity, leads us to the highest summit within us, where God addresses us as chosen sons³⁴. Here we feel the burning heat of the Holy Spirit that enflames and melts us in God's unity. We thus return to our origin and are constantly renewed. This powerful experience can only be endured with the support of God who keeps us upright and allows us to taste him completely, although we cannot digest him. Because this experience transcends human abilities, we cannot capture it in words. Our earthly exile prevents us from beholding God, yet seeing hidden knowledge – "through a glass darkly" – remains possible. Ruusbroec used the interplay between light and darkness as a metaphor to set off the shaded part of the contemplative life, which often baffles those unable to experience it. This meeting forces human beings

31. Ruusbroec introduces a similar image illustrating the overwhelming reality of the divine truth, this time related to the sense of taste: Like the bride in the Song of Songs, men on earth taste a sweet fruit that overwhelms the senses and makes them drunk. RUUSBROEC, *Stone*, p. 255: "This fruit is so unfathomably sweet to our throat that we cannot swallow it or change it into ourselves; rather it swallows us and changes us into itself".

32. HADEWIJCH, *Vision* 8, pp. 282-284.

33. RUUSBROEC, *Stone*, pp. 254-255.

34. This passage is inspired by the biblical story of the transfiguration in Matt 17,1-9. Ruusbroec interpreted the fifth verse and applied it to the readers who become "beloved sons", whom he called "hidden sons". He described the characteristics of the hidden sons (who are more intimate to God than the faithful servants and the secret friends) in *Stone*, pp. 243-247.

to transform. They transcend their own nature in order to be initiated into God's depthless being³⁵.

In *The Spiritual Espousals*, Ruusbroec described the shift from an inner to a contemplative life. Here, the imagery of light is particularly important. Lustrous light transforms the human soul and brings her into a modeless state, which Ruusbroec described as an abyss. The inner person is led to the summit, the *apex* of human abilities, where God lets himself be heard and makes the human soul one with his Spirit. The person then reaches the "wild darkness of the Godhead"³⁶. The light does not clarify reality but shows us, more than anything else, our darkness, bareness, and nothingness. He says: "In the darkness, he is enveloped and falls into modelessness as one who wanders about lost"³⁷. This darkness is a bareness that is caused by a transcendence of human rational existence and a loss of perception and distinction. We cannot do anything anymore, we are overpowered. He cannot be active anymore but needs to surrender. The light that leads him to this point illuminates a darkness that effaces all images and distinctions³⁸. The Brabantian author connected this visual language and paradoxical reality of light and dark with a fundamental trinitarian theology. He wrote:

For the heavenly Father wishes us to be seeing, for He is the Father of light. And therefore, without intermediary and without cease, He speaks eternally in the hiddenness of our spirit a single fathomless word and nothing more. And this word, He utters Himself and all things. And this word is nothing other than "See"; and this is the going-out and the birth of the Son of eternal light, in whom one knows and sees all blessedness³⁹.

Christ is the Word of the Father and the eternal light that is born from his unfathomable darkness. Christ leads humanity to this darkness on the road of their mutual Love, which Ruusbroec called the Holy Spirit. Thus, we transcend our capabilities and succumb to the depthless divine being. Our individual ego dies, and we lose ourselves from the darkness into the light, where the Son emanates incomprehensibly bright rays that directly touch the human soul. Ruusbroec wrote: "See, this hidden brightness, in which one contemplates everything that one desires according to the mode of emptiness of spirit, the brightness is so great that the loving contemplative neither sees nor feels anything in his ground, in which he

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 256-257.

36. RUUSBROEC, *Espousals*, p. 220.

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*, p. 231.

rests, except an incomprehensible light"⁴⁰. The eyes of those who behold God in this life are blessed, for they possess eternal life. They are elevated in the inner dynamics of the Trinity, a whirling darkness. According to Ruusbroec, this meeting takes place outside of time, in an eternal now. In the eternal present, the blessed take part in the self-surrender of the Trinitarian Persons who give themselves to one another. This is only possible if one offers a similar sacrifice of the self to the divine being and is prepared to burn in darkness. In *Seven Rungs in the Ladder of Spiritual Love*, Ruusbroec said the following about this seventh and last stage:

Next, there follows the seventh rung, the noblest and the highest that can be lived in time and in eternity. This is when we, above all recognizing and knowing, discover in ourselves a fathomless unknowing; when we, above all names that we give to God or creatures, die and pass over in an eternal namelessness, where we lose ourselves, and when, above all practice of virtue we behold and discover in ourselves eternal emptiness, in which no one can work: and above all blessed spirits, a fathomless blessedness, where we are all one, and that same One that the blessedness itself is in selfhood; and when we behold all blessed spirits essentially sunken away, having flowed away, and being lost in their superessence, in a modeless, unknown darkness⁴¹.

All blessed souls descend into this not knowing, losing the ability to distinguish between each other and between themselves and God. Thus, the *visio Dei* is not a clear and transparent beholding of the divine being, which seems possible for the exalted state of the saints. On the contrary, as the soul is pulled deeper into the being of the Trinity, everything becomes darker. To gain this eternal knowledge, the readers do not have to attempt to hopelessly mimic the saints' lives but explore their inner world and travel to their mountain, the *apex dei* of their soul. The "we" group will transform their senses and listen to the divine voice, and taste the excessive sweetness of God. They will not wait for their resurrected bodies and their transformed senses to experience something about God. We do not have to wait for death to come and transform us. Ruusbroec encourages his reader to start this transformation here on earth. However, the exalted knowledge about God associated with the saints will never be possible for us on earth. This did not signal the indifference of a God who does not wish to be known by us, but a love dynamic, in which both partners remain distinct from one another, never fully known and always new⁴². This reality is something that the mystic, even more than the saint, can explore.

40. *Ibid.*

41. RUUSBROEC, *Rungs*, p. 620.

42. *Ibid.*, pp. 620-623. Verdeyen stresses that God wants to be known and that Christ eternally longs for humanity. God is not the perfect transcendent being as philosophers

3. *Eternal Fire*

Ruusbroec explores this intimate reality in which the mystic can achieve unification with God without fully knowing him throughout his entire oeuvre; however, he is especially precise in his *Little Book of Explanation*. He wrote this work in 1362, when he visited the charterhouse of the Carthusians in Herne. The order asked him to clarify *The Realm of Lovers*, a book that was not meant for publication but had nonetheless found its way into their charterhouse⁴³. Ruusbroec's expression "without difference (*sonder differencie*)", which he used to express the highest unity with God, confused the monks. They wondered if the contemplative person, who experiences God without difference, could actually become God.

In his treatise, Ruusbroec rejected the idea that unity without difference leads to a deification of the human being – understood as a loss of the human identity. One could mistakenly believe that God and humanity can become one and the same being, identical, but this form of deification is off limits in Christian doctrine. Ruusbroec used the image of iron in fire to describe the relationship between God and humanity. Iron never bursts into flames but takes on the fire's heat and becomes malleable. Like iron, human persons are reshaped without losing their identity, deified without losing their humanity. The image of the human person burning like fire is a common trope in mystical theology. It relates both to the idea of purification – as in the example of iron placed in the flame – and to the desire that consumes the human person from within. This burning desire reflects the human condition and the experience of God's eternal otherness – of the One whom the human being can never become by nature. This causes an eternal longing of human beings for God who remains unfathomable in his otherness⁴⁴. This insight is fundamental, the mystic wrote: "[...] there is still an essential forward inclination and that is an essential distinction between the essence of the soul and the essence of God; that is the highest distinction that can be felt"⁴⁵. This eternal distinction is the cause of an eternal and painful desire. To express this idea and its consequences, Ruusbroec turns to imagery that is very reminiscent of Hadewijch's and Beatrice's.

might argue but a love-seeking God. According to Verdeyen, Ruusbroec reconciled both perceptions of the divine within his trinitarian theology. God is perfect and complete and yet the persons of the Trinity desire each other. In their mutual love for each other, they show their own vulnerability. See VERDEYEN, *Ruusbroec en zijn mystiek*, pp. 171-172.

43. See ARBLASTER – FAESEN, *John of Ruusbroec's Life and Works*, pp. 68-69.

44. RUUSBROEC, *Little Book*, pp. 631-634.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 634.

The pain of desire starts on earth, but, as I interpret Ruusbroec, will continue in the time of glory. The mystics know this from experience as they cannot see God like the saints do. They have discovered the divine dark side. They are exposed to an external longing for the otherness of the Triune God. This eternal pain of desire is strongly reminiscent of Hadewijch's mystical doctrine and deconstructs the eschatological borders defined by human embodiment and death. Ruusbroec follows Hadewijch's abandonment of Beatrice's division of grace (earth) and glory (heaven) while picturing a dynamic between jubilation with healing and pain and illness reminiscent of Beatrice's *vita*. Ruusbroec described these painful periods using a by now familiar eschatological visual language:

The most beneficial impulses which this man can feel and of which he is capable are heavenly health and hellish pain, and responding to these two with adequate works which are fitting. Heavenly health raises man above all things, in free power to praise and love God in every way which the heart and the soul desire. After this comes the hellish evil, which sets man down in misery and in deprivation of all savor and of all consolation that he has felt till now. In this misery health sometimes shows itself and gives hope which no one can frighten away and then he falls again into a despair which no one can console⁴⁶.

The human beings become mere playthings in the hands of God and no longer know if they understand God or are totally lost, miserable sinners who know nothing of God. In contrast to the hagiographer, Ruusbroec did not suggest in these passages that human death and resurrection alter this situation. The "desolation" and "dark misery" that confront the person are inherent to the human condition and are not caused by earthly reality, but by humanity's relationship with God. Nothing can comfort the person in periods of spiritual illness and injury – only God, but he refuses to make himself felt. Then human reason speaks and despairs: "Where is thy God now? Where has all thy experience of God fled?"⁴⁷.

The value of these moments lies in our fitting response to his predicament. When in good "heavenly health", we laud and praise God, but we will inevitably experience periods of infernal pain, hurtling us into despair. We must then do without any taste of God and the consolation felt earlier. Sometimes, good health can return, feeding hope, but even deeper despair will follow, seemingly intractable and unconquerable.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 629.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 630.

In good health, we learn heavenly teachings, devote ourselves to charity and feel mystically drunken and happy. But it is the period of wounding and illness that teaches us more about God than the initial period of good health. We, in desperation, feel like God has abandoned us. The way out of this predicament is resignation. We can only endure periods of misery if we give in and surrender to God. God, as Love, fully determines our fate – we belong to him. This leads to the total rejection of our self-will, now and in eternity. Our mystical health will only return when we learn to carry the burdens of despair and divine abandonment. For many, this insight is unobtainable, the writer argued, because most people are too absorbed by self-love. He wrote:

If he can bring himself to do this without oppression of heart, with liberty of spirit, then at that very moment he recovers his health and he brings heaven into hell and hell into heaven. For however much the scale of love goes up or down, he always rests in balance even and steady. For whatever love wishes to give or to take, he who denies himself and loves God finds peace therein. He who has lived in suffering without resentment, his spirit remaining free and undisturbed, is capable of feeling the union with God without intermediary⁴⁸.

The life of the inner human, who experiences unity without intermediary as periods of healing alternated by wounding, sounds familiar by now. The similarities with Hadewijch's doctrine are obvious. Ruusbroec, too, found a resting point in the conformity of will power. The idea that the young mystic follows the will of God, even in suffering, mitigates the despair caused by Love's disloyalty. For Ruusbroec, this disconsolation leads to a complete surrender to God. This surrender can bring about an experience of unification without distinction. At first glance, unification without distinction seems less Hadewijchian. However, Hadewijch certainly experienced moments of unification without distinction in her visions, especially in her seventh vision, when she was transported above her spirit and lost herself in an unspeakable oneness with Love⁴⁹. Yet Hadewijch did not really develop an explicit theological system that shapes and analyzes this experience; Ruusbroec did.

Despite the moments when we lose ourselves in God in his bare mind, we also realize that those moments are not lasting because we cannot become God and lose our own nature. Therefore, Ruusbroec's mystical theology is constructed around two focal points: action (going out) and contemplation (going in). The core of his system is the interplay between

48. *Ibid.*, p. 630.

49. HADEWIJCH, *Vision 7*, pp. 281-282.

werke (work) and *raste* (rest) which translates to experiences of pain (sickness) and pleasure (health). He writes in his *Little Book*: "With God they will ebb and flow, and (will) always be in repose, in possessing and enjoying. They will work and endure and rest in the superessence without fear. They will go out and in and will find nourishment both within and without. They are drunk with love and have passed away into God in a dark luminosity"⁵⁰. For Ruusbroec, pleasure (*ghebruken*) is possible on earth and in heaven, when we lose ourselves completely in God in an experience of unification without distinction and when we conquer our fears. Nevertheless, this does not mean that there is no real difference. Because we are human, we cannot lose ourselves eternally in God. As humans, we live forever in *ghebreken* – in the absence of pleasure and unification and in the failure of our human abilities.

Humans always fall short of fathoming God and grasping their ways, of mapping the promised land. The abilities of the human soul can only be activated when it returns to its senses. The eternal interplay between surrender in peace and return to work causes them to be constantly aware of the essential difference between God and humanity. We should be conscious of human fallibility and the ungraspable infinity of God. Ruusbroec wrote: "He is hungry and thirsty, for he sees the angels' food and heavenly drink; he labors greatly in love, for he sees his rest; he is a pilgrim, and he sees his homeland"⁵¹. Ruusbroec's mystic sees the promised land but cannot capture it; it is ephemeral like a dream. At first sight, the unreachability of the promised land might be related to the limited state of the mortal body that cannot cross the border yet. However, what is ungraspable is not so much the heavenly realm but the presence of God within it. Even in heaven, the soul longs for more hidden knowledge about God. This fundamental unknowability is not related to heaven or earth, but to the human condition. However, it is not the body that is holding the human person back, but the created nature. This creates an eternal desire for God that does not change after death or with the transformation of the human body. The mystic's hidden knowledge of God will never become fully clear and graspable for human reason.

This insight ties back to the opening of the *Little Book* and its three levels of unification of the human person with God, namely from unification with intermediary to unification without intermediary and without difference – stages that stretch on infinitely, in grace as well as in glory. Unification with intermediary in the time of glory looks like the

50. RUUSBROEC, *Little Book*, p. 636.

51. RUUSBROEC, *Espousals*, p. 222.

much-anticipated heaven, with all the saints and resurrected bodies dwelling together in the promised land, led on by Christ, as all creatures worship his humanity. In this time of glory, unification with intermediary is facilitated because all sins are purged, and the resurrected bodies are competent enough to attain unity with Christ and his glorified creation in the promised land. However, the unification without intermediary and without distinction, which are the experiences the mystic discovers within the hidden reality, not the sunlit landscape of the saints, reveals an everlasting desire for knowledge and unification with God. Ruusbroec speaks in *The Seven Enclosures* about this unsatisfied desire, relating it to fire metaphors⁵²:

Where the human mode is deficient, on the other hand, and may go no higher, it is there that God's mode commences. That is, when the person cleaves to God with intention and with love and with unsatisfied desire and still cannot achieve union with Him, the Spirit of our Lord comes like a mighty fire that burns, consumes, and devours all within Himself, so that man forgets himself and all exercise and he experiences himself only as though he were on spirit and one love with God⁵³.

This passage about the eternal fire of God's Spirit is reminiscent of Hadewijch's depiction of Love as Fire, her fourth name. Hadewijch describes how this fire devours everything, it does not make any distinctions. It does not matter if the person is in consolation at being with God in heaven or in the torture of hell. She says that damnation and blessing no longer matter⁵⁴. Ruusbroec does not seem to go as far as to suggest that heaven is a hellish reality. Nevertheless, Ruusbroec borrows this imagery of fire (and health and sickness) to describe the soul's experience of God without distinction. Ruusbroec's *visio Dei*, when it comes to the unification of God and the human person in the "bare mind", is an overwhelming reality that suggests pain and desire. Ordinary people might not understand this, for them Ruusbroec develops an imaginative theology based on a classical eschatology and clear distinctions between heaven and hell, the good and the bad. In his sophisticated mystical-theological passages though, those distinctions become less clear. He depicts the Trinity as a scary reality borrowing from Hadewijch's imagery, making

52. McGinn argues that Ruusbroec, like Hadewijch, followed the mystic tradition of *epektasis* or perpetual evolution of the soul, rooted in the teachings of Gregory of Nyssa and his interpretation of Phil 3,13-14. Ruusbroec was not directly familiar with Gregory's work, but likely inherited his ideas through the oeuvre of Bernard of Clairvaux. Ruusbroec made a unique elaboration on this mystical doctrine, combining it with his own mystical anthropology. See MCGINN, *Essential Themes*, pp. 174-177.

53. RUUSBROEC, *Enclosures*, p. 533.

54. HADEWIJCH, *Poem in Couplets* 16, p. 355.

a similar point: Love overrules fear. The darkness of the unknowable side and the limitations of human existence should not scare persons to embark on this mystical adventure. He wants to encourage his readers to discover hidden wisdom for themselves which would only strengthen their service to Love and transform their self-will to a common love for God.

This point becomes even more clear with yet another group of characters that Ruusbroec introduces in opposition to the "we". There are people who take delight in themselves, thinking they are pleasant to God because they are great of life. Ruusbroec argues in *Seven Rungs in the Ladder of Spiritual Love* that these people are actually deviated from God and that they are rooted in the principle of all sin. Not only are they very unpleasant people, but they also pretend that they are wise. They hide their pride with humble matters and deep down they are anxious, and they only care about themselves: about their sickness, about dying, about hell and purgatory and God's final judgement. Ruusbroec explains: "This is why they have doubt and fear about anything that could happen, for they love themselves in a disorderly way, neither for God nor unto God"⁵⁵. In his first letter, Ruusbroec writes something similar about these group of people:

They find joy and sadness as they are affected by transient things as other people do who are still in the world. They are weighed down with worry about themselves in fear and trembling of all that might happen to them in time and eternity. They think they are trustworthy but cannot find trust or sympathy in anyone. Inside they are impatient about all that goes against them; God is strange and unknown to them for they live without having died to themselves nor given themselves up in any way⁵⁶.

In his *Little Book*, Ruusbroec equates this group of antagonists with the Brethren of the Free Spirit whose heretical doctrines destabilized the careful balance in Liège's mystical culture in the fourteenth century. These heretics did not accept the fundamental otherness of God and believed they became God by nature. They could not be more wrong, Ruusbroec argues, because the darkness they experienced was not the overwhelming reality of God but the emptiness of their "bare minds" which were focused on themselves and not on God. This emptiness does not bring any reward, Ruusbroec says, resulting in eternal damnation. He says:

See, this is a hellish fruit, springing from their disbelief, and nourishing their incredibility till eternal death. For when the moment comes that their nature is oppressed with bitter woe and fear of death, then they are inwardly

55. RUUSBROEC, *Rungs*, p. 613.

56. RUUSBROEC, *Letter 1*, p. 775.

assailed by images, and dismayed and beset by fears within; they lose their vacant turning-inward in repose and fall into despair, so that no one can console them, and they die like rabid dogs⁵⁷.

Contrary to the vacant turning-inward of these pretenders, Ruusbroec's readers are guided on the difficult and right path. They do not expect any reward for their suffering. They got familiar with the darkness of God and surrender their being to God. They follow Christ in his painful humanity. He wrote in *A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness*: "For no one comes to the Father but through the Son and His passion and His death, and those practiced in love. Those who want to climb up and go in otherwise are deceived, and they are thieves and murderers; they all belong in the fire of hell"⁵⁸. Living with Christ and with his pains, the readers practice a virtuous life in both action and contemplation. They cannot be terrified because they explored the complete spectrum of human experiences related to Christ. They are rooted in God, and therefore, they are saved. Ruusbroec wrote about the "free/hidden sons" who experienced contemplation and descended Mount Tabor with Christ in suffering: "'Blessed are those who suffer persecution for justice' sake, for the realm of heaven is theirs'. The realm of heaven is Christ living in us with His grace"⁵⁹. Through becoming part of Ruusbroec's community of mystics, "we" become blessed, like the saints of old. We too can encounter God's presence on earth, in the hidden corners of our bare mind".

I argue that the self-knowledge gained in this inward pursuit of hidden knowledge enables the mystic to persevere in the service of Love and to carry it out more perfectly. Deification does not lead to a naive fulfillment of the desires of self-centered humanity and its self-will. Rather, the human person is transformed and learns to live with a fundamental sense of lack, dissolving into the love of the divine being. The mystical acolyte must learn to cope with an eternal desire that will never be sated, not even upon reaching contemplation in the "bare mind". Although the moment of contemplation is infinite in nature, this does not mark the end of created existence. Contemplation and *ghebruken* form the core and crowning achievement of Ruusbroec's theology, yet they do not constitute the end of the journey toward God. On the contrary, once one arrives at this point, movement intensifies within the turbulent Trinity and its perichoresis, only to return again to an active life in *ghebreken*.

57. RUUSBROEC, *Little Book*, p. 628.

58. RUUSBROEC, *Mirror*, p. 543.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 552.

The reader must follow Ruusbroec's mystagogy along dark and narrow lanes to reach God. Via this path, the reader can attain a form of sainthood via the way of the mystic and a *visio Dei*, a reward that always diverges from original expectations. It is up to the readers to take his fate into their own hands, instead of relying on a metaphysical metamorphosis at the end of time. The mystic has learned that the promised unification with God always involves an otherness that cannot be bridged. Even the saints in heaven cannot gaze upon the divine being with their intellectual grasp intact. Even the resurrected body will need to surrender to the dynamics of desire that continue to rage between God and humanity in eternity. Resurrection will not efface this darkness. On the contrary: Ruusbroec attributed eternity to this obscurity. If seeing in glory and eternity is also hazy, then it is not fundamentally different from beholding in grace, in mortal time. This would suggest that students of Ruusbroec need to keep in mind the possibility of a radical eschatology that introduces a painful otherness into heaven. Despite Ruusbroec's often careful and subtle mystical-theological framework, Hadewijch's radical vision of God as pain shines through.

4. *Visions of Paradise*

This act discussed three mystical theologians who, unlike hagiographers, did not write about others' experiences but based their writing on their own. This does not mean that they faithfully recorded their own lives or that they vied for sainthood through their memoirs. The mystics were not autobiographers, intent on glorifying their own mystical growth, hoping to be counted among the beatified. Although they undoubtedly drew on their own personal experiences, their oeuvres are not – nor aimed to be – direct reflections of their lives. Their primary aim was to support their readers in their personal quest for God, through mystagogical and imaginative texts. I argue that the mystical writers did not, in the first place, strive to write down their own experiences aiming for recognition and authority, but that they created mystical characters whom the readers could admire or identify with. The mystical experiences in the texts are thus all about the reader, not about the author. They wanted to help readers choose the right mystical path on difficult crossroads, when they encountered spiritual pain and fear. They did this through a rich and creative visual language based upon the fundamental theological insight that God is Love. Precisely because this mystical language was used at painful crossroads, we can rightly call it a pain language.

Young mystics follow a trajectory leading from fear to love, from self-love to self-surrender. How far this surrender of the self must go is the subject of the mystic tractates. A true surrender of the self can only take place, the authors wrote, if the mystic is ready to bear all pain for the sake of Love. Beatrice argued that this pain is related to humanity's shortcomings in the service of love as well as the overwhelming and overpowering presence of God. Hadewijch and Ruusbroec also described these experiences, in their own way, and emphasized that God has to be experienced as a gaping absence, as an endless distance that cannot be bridged. These situations inflict pain and instill fear but cannot prevent the readers from persisting in their service of love. Pain and fear will transform readers and turn them into the perfect lover, Christ. At the foundation of this transformation lies a will shared with Christ and a longing to be one with him, which is decisive for the interpretation of pain. Christ wants us to partake in his suffering, because only then can we resurrect with him and participate in the glory promised by his Father.

This glory, this promise, is very different from what the mystically immature readers expected. They need to wait long for the reward – too long – increasing the weight of the already burdensome service of love. Again and again, the characters in the mystical tractates are forced to return to reality on earth, which is experienced as an exile or even a temporary hell. Beatrice, for instance, surprised her readers by ending her *Seven Manners* with a return to the exile, as if to deny the angelic existence celebrated in the sixth way, breaking the promise of eternal happiness on earth. But she never went as far as her contemporary Hadewijch. Beatrice held onto the absolute border of death and never looked beyond it. The reader thus ultimately appears to be rewarded for his or her endeavors on earth. Yet these exertions have led the mystic so far, that he or she is no longer the same person who first embarked on the mystical path. Because Beatrice is silent on the heavenly experience, the reader does not know whether the pain that appeared intrinsic to mystical growth on earth persists after death, when the soul is with God. Beatrice hoped it did not and that her *orewoet*, her raging and endless desire, would finally be at peace.

Hadewijch, by contrast, refined the continuity between mortality and the hereafter, and expressed extraordinary ideas that help the reader overcome self-love. She used images such as purgatory and hell to describe the Love that is God. The process of attaining knowledge on God via Love is arduous, but the wisdom gained is also painful. Hadewijch portrayed Love as a reality in which one cannot escape pain. This should not deter or prevent from pressing on. For Hadewijch, this process of

transformation is infinite and painful. Heavenly reality is also dynamic, full of movement toward God. All dwellers of heaven continue to burn and desire. Hadewijch's reader learns that the imagined heavenly reward is no longer important, but that only Love itself is sufficient, a Love that wounds as well as heals. For Hadewijch, physical death brings no change; it is up to the individual to keep growing, even after death. Responsibility lies entirely with the mystic who cannot passively rely on cosmic or eschatological change. The transformation takes place on the basis of the individual's relationship with God as Love. True lovers no longer allow pain to touch them, not even when it reaches their deepest core and their relationship with God. Pain is part of being human and is a burden no more, because they now live entirely in Love. The power of hell is broken. Their trials will be sweet, their suffering heavenly.

Ruusbroec took a nuanced view, combining the insights of his predecessors. At first glance, he appeared to follow Beatrice in her preservation of death as an absolute boundary. For Ruusbroec, too, death – and particularly the resurrection of the body – brings about an important change in the contemplation of God. The resurrected body's physical suffering will cease. Ruusbroec thus seemed to describe a state of impassibility. Impassibility only applies to physical pain, which Ruusbroec wrote was of a lower order than spiritual pain. His ideas reveal striking similarities to Hadewijch's mystical theology on deification and *epektasis*. Ruusbroec also described the inner life that occasionally swells into moments of contemplation, where we find a never-ending process of desire. Ruusbroec's mystics – even those already in heaven with the saints – still experience the most fundamental form of pain that burdens us in life: the eternal difference between the Creator and the created that does not cancel out the possibility of unification. The Creator will never be one with the created, because this would bring love entirely to a halt. Love needs two partners. Like Hadewijch's heaven, Ruusbroec's paradise – the dynamic trinitarian existence – is filled with movement and vitality. The figures of the Trinity dance an infinite *perichoresis*. We are invited to participate in this complete self-surrender. This is only possible when we lose ourselves in God, in a shining darkness. This confusing reality is not at all self-evident. This is precisely where the mystic's mission lies: Guiding the readers through the eternal darkness and helping them see through new eyes – the eyes of Love.

The three authors no longer put faith in a simple exchange of pain and salvation, but interpreted pain as an intrinsic part of being human. Beatrice conceptualized this pain with the help of eschatological imagery, but she did not imply that God as Love would also be painful after the

death of the body. Hadewijch did make this step. Ruusbroec used eschatological imagery to discuss the earthly existence of the mystic and he returned primarily to the images of darkness and fire to describe the eternal dynamism of the inter-trinitarian life in which the human person will participate. All three valued inner pain more than bodily pain and were primarily inspired by Christ's spiritual suffering in order to help their readers grow toward mystical maturity. They handed the reader a rich imagery, which circulated within a network of mystical elites. In the cases of Beatrice and Hadewijch, these circles likely had a limited reach or sphere of influence. Ruusbroec continued this imagery in the fourteenth century but added nuance and maintained a delicate balancing act between different theological traditions.

ACT IV

EXPRESSING PAIN

I now come full circle on the journey I embarked on in the first act, from outer to inner pain and back. This act returns to the physicality of living as embodied creatures in the outside world and studies the expression of the inner experiences that shape young mystics into true mystical lovers. I will consider the process of mystical speaking and writing, I consider the *Mulieres Religiosae* in particular and analyze how their performances of the spoken word were portrayed by their hagiographers as painful episodes. The hagiographers, in turn, and Thomas of Cantimpré in particular, expressed their own pain and insecurities while writing about the *Mulieres Religiosae*. They were insecure and anxious because they could not grasp the full extent of the saints' mystical experiences. Furthermore, they risked their own careers while documenting the miracles and mystical theologies of the saints and preaching to an audience that was often resistant or even violently opposed to those wonders. Like the saints and their hagiographers, Hadewijch and Ruusbroec were mystical theologians who suffered while expressing their mystical knowledge. I have already argued that these two Brabantian writers were, first and foremost, mystagogues, who aimed to guide novice mystics. This final chapter will further develop this argument and describe how a painful process – in which human reason was conquered and enlightened – gave rise to reflections on the mystical path. Hagiography and mystical writings show striking similarities when it comes to the conceptualization and interpretation of mystical speech and the transfer of knowledge as a painful experience within the public sphere of the mystical culture of Liège.

Some crucial themes once again resurface in this reflection on mystical writing as a pain language. The first chapter of this act will analyze the tension between speaking and maintaining silence, which authors used to place themselves in the mystical landscape and helped them reflect on their calling as religious leaders. They had to place themselves and their texts within the public eye of society to express themselves and be heard. They revealed parts of their inner being in order to serve their communities, subjecting the saintly performances, and the mystical authors and their corpus, to socio-political and religious forces. Mystical theologians,

performers, and writers were exposed to the same saintly conventions, which favored physical and external signs, and often left half the story untold. In this act, speech and silence are central themes. Speech and silence were subjected to the dialectics of humility and divine election, as both saints and mystics had to transform the vice of pride into a genuine mystical understanding of the nobility of the human soul. They had to claim their right and duty to speak up while being grounded in the trinitarian dynamics of activity and contemplation. Saints, and especially women, could only be portrayed as speaking about their hidden knowledge under certain conditions, carefully stage-managed by their hagiographers (what I have called hagiographic mediation). One of the recurring conditions is the pain of expressing divine wisdom and the fear of speaking out in the public sphere. In their writing, both hagiographers and mystical authors had to navigate between these extremes, avoiding self-complacency and irrelevance for themselves and their “characters”. The way to achieve this goal was to connect their painful expression to their mystical experience of God and their mission as mystical theologians.

The second chapter discusses the mystical theology behind the constant exchange of mystical action and rest (the foundation of mystical knowledge) and the necessity to speak. The authors could not lose themselves in a contemplative trance but were compelled to speak and let their voices be heard within a community of like-minded followers and hostile dissidents alike. Work and action followed contemplative rest. The power of human reason guided externalization and became enlightened through this process. The notion of “enlightened reason” is central to understand the pain of expression discussed in this act. It focusses on the pain experience in the here and now, while the previous act addressed a similar kind of anxiety and existential pain on an eschatological spectrum. The mystic’s struggle with rationality was a constant battle that did not end when contemplation was reached. Although the defeat of human reason enabled mystics to attain spiritual heights, reason never completely surrendered, reminding them of their imperfections and otherness from God. Enlightened reason was never inactive on the mystical path and was once again key to externalizing their inner experiences and understanding mystical growth. Enlightened reason deals with the expression of the soul’s pain and her eternal activity. This activity of reason, the service of Love, is captured in the mystic’s work. The mystical authors fulfilled their service to Love by writing, channeling both divine inspiration and their human capabilities.

XIII

THE SOUND OF SILENCE AND THE PAIN OF SPEECH

The corpus of literary texts examined in this book emerged when learned mystical theologians in the diocese of Liège took up their quills and addressed an audience. In doing so, mystical growth transcended the boundaries of private experience and entered the public sphere. Saints and mystics, though often portrayed as withdrawn from the world, were deeply embedded in social, cultural, and ecclesiastical structures that shaped – and constrained – their expression. Mystical theologians, in turn, were compelled to negotiate these structures, carefully framing the transgressive behaviors and ecstatic utterances of their subjects within acceptable religious and political discourses. Speaking and writing about mysticism, especially for women, was itself a transgressive act. It required not only spiritual authority but also rhetorical strategy, as authors navigated the tension between divine inspiration and institutional suspicion.

In the first act, I argued that both male and female saints' lives are shaped by the mediating hand of male hagiographers, particularly in their portrayal of transgressive pain performances. This chapter extends that analysis by focusing on the performance of speech – an even more precarious domain for hagiographers to navigate. For female saints and authors, the act of speaking in public was fraught with theological and social tension. Scholastic thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas and Henry of Ghent drew sharp boundaries between public and private spheres, relegating women's theological expression to enclosed female communities¹. Mystical knowledge, when voiced by women, risked being silenced or dismissed. Some women, like Mary of Oignies, experienced rapture that led to silence; others felt compelled to speak and guide others. Yet none could claim an official magisterium or occupy the *officium praedicatoris*

1. Heene also discusses misogynistic ideas in scholastic literature and confession manuals, for example in the works of Dominican friar Albertus Magnus, who was Thomas of Cantimpré's teacher at the University of Paris. Heene argues that Albertus clearly believed that women were by nature less intelligent and more inclined to evil than men. See K. HEENE, *Hagiography and Gender: A Tentative Case-Study on Thomas of Cantimpré*, in E. RENARD et al. (eds.), *Scribere sanctorum gesta: Recueil d'études d'hagiographie médiévale offert à Guy Philippart* (Hagiologia: Études sur la sainteté en Occident – Studies on Western Sainthood, 3), Turnhout, Brepols, 2005, 109-124, pp. 112-113.

within the Church². Even highly educated women were denied access to public theological debate. Male lay saints, by contrast, could invoke divine inspiration to legitimize their speech³. As Heene notes, this disparity did not necessarily reflect a belief in female intellectual inferiority, but rather a demand that women conform to ecclesiastical expectations of humility and discretion. Hagiographers were acutely aware of these dynamics and tailored their texts accordingly, balancing the saint's social position with the sensitivities of their readership⁴.

Female-authored mystical texts are often celebrated for their bold transgressions of social and literary norms, particularly in their challenge to the taboo on public speech. In contrast, hagiographies are frequently seen as conservative, restraining such transgressions through male mediation⁵. Yet this dichotomy oversimplifies the complex strategies at play in the *vitae*. Rather than merely suppressing female voices, hagiographers engaged in subtle negotiations that allowed those voices to enter the public sphere under carefully managed conditions. These texts do not simply reflect patriarchal invention; they function as theological and cultural mediations, where the pain of expression becomes a necessary credential for mystical authority. The *vitae* thus reveal their own forms of transgression – less overt, perhaps, but no less significant in their capacity to reframe female speech within the boundaries of ecclesiastical acceptability.

All mystical writers – whether composing hagiographies or treatises – had to carefully shape and instruct their audiences: both the internal audience within the narrative and the external community of readers. As shown in earlier chapters, hagiographers constructed imaginative thresholds that regulated access to the saint's bodily expressions. They guarded the liminal space between interiority and public performance, choreographing literary bodies inspired by real ones. These authors did not merely document suffering; they staged it. They also captured moments of speech – instances when saints broke their silence and addressed others. In doing so, hagiographers created a seemingly direct channel between the saint and the reader, often mediated through fictional witnesses who stood in for the audience. The pain experienced by the saint became the

2. See A. MINNIS, *Religious Roles: Public and Private*, in ID. – R. VOADEN (eds.), *Medieval Holy Women in the Christian Tradition c. 1100 – c. 1500* (Brepols Essays in European Culture, 1), Turnhout, Brepols, 2010, 47-82, pp. 47-77.

3. Heene gives the example of Gobertus, an illiterate knight of Villers who assumed a clerical office after a vision of the Holy Spirit and his own fervent battle against his sinful body, while Christina Mirabilis was reluctant to explain the Bible despite her exegetic knowledge. See HEENE, *De litterali et morali*, pp. 160-162.

4. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 164-166.

5. See PETROFF, *Body & Soul*, pp. ix-x; 177.

currency of legitimacy: suffering was the price of speech. To claim spiritual authority, the saint had to be wounded – visibly or invisibly. Pain was not only endured; it was performed, and through this performance, the saint's voice was sanctified. If saints and their hagiographers aimed to defend the saints' authority as religious leaders of their community, the saints had to suffer to safeguard their humble intentions.

Female mystics, too, were required to suffer in order to speak. The same conditions that governed the public expression of sanctity applied to them: pain was the price of articulation. A comparative reading of female saints and female mystics reveals not only the shared dynamics of speech and suffering, but also the theological depth of the hagiographers themselves. Their texts do not merely record divine truths – they wrestle with them. As Smith has shown, these authors were acutely aware of the fragility of their craft. They feared misinterpreting the saints' theologies, misreading the signs inscribed in their bodies, and misrepresenting their revelations to an audience untrained in mystical literacy. To mitigate this risk, they embedded reflections on the limits of language and the weakness of signs. Like the mystics they portrayed, hagiographers were tasked with guiding their readers through a landscape of doubt and imperfection, toward a transformation of perception. Their writing was not just descriptive – it was pedagogical, apophatic, and deeply vulnerable⁶.

Saints, hagiographers, and mystics were all compelled to speak – despite their doubts, despite the fragility of their words. The act of articulation was not reserved for the confident or the institutionally sanctioned; it was a burden borne by those marked by divine election and humble intent. I propose a dialogical model in which both men and women, across genres and vocations, expressed pain and hesitation when voicing their mystical theologies. Female saints, in particular, had to be portrayed with extreme caution, given the persistent cultural anxieties surrounding women who spoke freely⁷. Yet the criteria for legitimate speech were not gender-exclusive. Whether male or female, mystics had to suffer in order to speak. Pain was the indispensable credential – the wound that authenticated the word.

1. *Intimate Conversations and Private Visits*

Despite their portrayal as humble and obedient women, the saints were well known in their communities. They were living saints who were

6. See SMITH, *Excessive Saints*, pp. 10; 96-97.

7. See PASSENIER, *Women on the Loose*, pp. 61-88.

consulted and asked to speak on spiritual matters, and consoled desperate souls. Yet the hagiographers were careful to stage-manage the audience in the *vitae* that was permitted to hear the words of the female saints from their own lips. I observe that the audiences consisted of a few witnesses only and that the writers emphasized the intimacy of these conversations. Rather than projecting their voices in the public space, these women invited audiences into their own intimate space. They shared their hidden wisdom in private conversations. It was up to the hagiographer to mediate between the saints and the audience at large.

A clear example of a teaching saint is Mary of Oignies, who James of Vitry revealed as educated woman, well versed in the Holy Scriptures thanks to the sermons she frequently attended, and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and divine revelations she received. He stressed that the sermons were in accordance with the Holy Spirit. Alistair Minnis observes that, in this way, James made sure that Mary was perceived as a charismatic figure who did not contradict the clergy – the official interpreters of Holy Scripture and theological knowledge⁸. Moreover, he also ensured that Mary did not immediately address big crowds. Instead, he became her spokesman – her mouthpiece and mediator in the public sphere. As Thomas of Cantimpré later recalled:

The handmaid of Christ [Mary of Oignies] compelled this venerable man [James of Vitry] to preach to the people, to call back souls which the devil was trying to take away. There shone forth in him a special miracle: by the prayers and merits of the most blessed woman he reached in a short time such a pre-eminence in preaching that scarcely any mortal equaled him in expounding the Scriptures and destroying sins⁹.

Mary of Oignies mediated the grace between God and James, while James mediated the same grace between Mary and ordinary people. James explicitly praised Mary's silence and portrayed it as a virtue willed by God. He considered it her strength, writing: "In quiet and silence she followed the injunction of the Apostle and she ate the bread which she had won by 'the labor of her hands' (1 Thessalonians 4. 11), for her 'strength was in silence and hope' (Isaiah 30. 15)"¹⁰. She loved quiet places and fled noisy crowds, maintaining long periods of silence. James wrote that: "The Holy Spirit revealed to her that the Lord had accepted this kind of silence and, because of it especially, that she had obtained from the Lord that she would fly up to heaven without going to

8. See MINNIS, *Religious Roles*, p. 63.

9. *Supplement*, p. 141.

10. *Mary of Oignies*, p. 73.

purgatory”¹¹. The virtue of silence that grants direct access to heaven is contrasted with the loquaciousness of ordinary people, who were destined for purgatory because “a man full of tongue shall not be established in earth”¹². James equated Mary’s silence with heavenly peace, while speaking could lead to pain or, even worse, damnation.

James illustrates this idea with another example, recounting how Mary was visited by strangers who, attracted by her reputation, sought her advice. James recalls how the light of the Father with the “spirit of knowledge” illuminated Mary¹³. Mary was a consoling and celestial presence in her community, for her friends and enemies alike, but, inwardly, she was constantly and tenderly united with God. When people wished to speak to her, she found it tormenting to leave the inner space where she encountered God. The brothers had to forcefully awaken her from her blissful trance. James describes this in the following passage:

Another time when she was sweetly and smoothly made one spirit with the Lord, she clung to the Lord with the paste of fear; we reported to her that some people had come to see her from distant places and had to return home quickly. Although the Lord had adjured us through [the example] of “the roes and the harts” not to “stir up nor to awaken the beloved until she please” (Song of Songs 2. 7), sometimes we confidently roused her because she never wished to be awakened but always desired to lie with the Lord in the noonday (Song of Songs 1. 6). Sometimes when she heard a stranger arrive, she did violence to herself lest perhaps she cause scandal to anyone. She tore her spirit with such great sorrow from that sweetly joyful contemplation and from the embraces of the Bridegroom that sometimes it seemed that her entrails had burst and she vomited and spat out pure blood in great profusion. She, however, preferred to be afflicted by this kind of martyrdom than to disturb the peace of the brothers or, even more so, the peace of the pilgrims¹⁴.

Sometimes she had to tear herself away from the embrace of her Bridegroom with such violence that her innards appeared to rupture as she coughed up blood. Mary also underwent great pains in order to speak. She did this, first and foremost, to preserve her community’s peace, as well as to avoid causing scandal by disappointing guests and pilgrims. She went to great lengths to avoid contact with visitors, but the Holy Spirit often enjoined her to seek it. Then she would speak to them, not out of curiosity, but duty. When she did, James says, she would pass on the honey-flavored sweetness that she herself experienced with the Beloved, and that could be experienced spiritually in the heart and

11. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 96-97.

palpably in the mouth of her visitors. When she spoke, Mary suffered while her listeners received divine consolations transmitted by the lips of the spouse of the Beloved (Song 4,11)¹⁵. The female saint's pain performance was not immediately related to a literal *imitatio Christi* or an ascetic practice, but to the act of speech, of giving birth to the Word that is passed on through her to the Christian community. Those words brought salvation and could only be transmitted in an intimate relationship with Mary as a listener or reader. Vain words and gossip, although seemingly innocent in the moment, would lead to *postmortem* pain.

According to her hagiographer, Beatrice of Nazareth was also very sensitive when it came to intimate conversations with friends and visitors. Her hagiographer links the tandem of speech and conversation to the dynamics between health and sickness, prominent themes in Beatrice's *vita*. He recounts an episode in Beatrice's life in which her body was immobilized. It occurred during the days following the feast day of Saint Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Beatrice was so overpowered by a longing for divine knowledge that an impassioned and irrational love took over and weakened her body. During this time, she would only receive visitors who were pure of spirit and who could talk with her about heavenly things. People who were impure would endanger her health and even her life, as they weakened her body even more, to the point of breaking. Beatrice, like saints such as Lutgard, tried to moderate her bodily suffering caused, in this case, by speech. Like Mary, speaking hurt her. That was why she was only willing to converse with people who could uplift her – people who reflected her grace and did not only swallow the sweetness she emanated¹⁶. Her hagiographer also adds a reference to Beatrice's humility, as she preferred not to speak in this period because she feared she could not help spilling her enflamed love and passionate desire, which would impress people too much. Yet trained eyes could detect this desire in her behavior. They did not need passionate speech to be captured by the saint's love for God. They kept her company, day and night, to help her carry the burden of her weakened body, not through spoken words but through physical presence. Only they understood that her affliction was caused by divine desire. Others thought it was an ordinary disease, the symptoms and causes of which were unknown to them¹⁷. Divine knowledge of Beatrice's infliction was not communicated by words and was often misunderstood. The hagiographer,

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Beatrice of Nazareth*, p. 255.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 257.

however, helps the reader understand with words what Beatrice's comrades understood intuitively, physically.

A similar incident can be found in the *vita* of Ida of Louvain, who was inspired by other earlier *vitae* of the *Mulieres Religiosae*. After miraculously healing a man with a festering tumor, Ida fled from rumors about her sainthood, which erroneously assumed that she had healed the man through her own accomplishments. She had to flee from gossip and praise from ordinary people, leaving the public space to return to the safe enclosure of the monastery¹⁸. The monastery became the backdrop for an episode in which Ida, like many other holy women, experienced ecstatic *raptus* during Mass. Her hagiographer explains what happened to her on the inside, which he frames within a longer story describing the entire day and the people Ida encountered. During Mass, while receiving the Host, Ida had a divine revelation. She was overwhelmed by the Word. However, the only thing the frightened churchgoers experienced was Ida's body collapsing to the floor, after which she was brought to the infirmary¹⁹. Only a few people actually heard Ida's own words explaining what she had learned directly from God. These figures are carefully introduced by the hagiographer, staging the intimate dialogues that lead to a successful transfer of mystical knowledge. Only in private conversations could her experience be described, and it took a literate male confessor to commit her simple words (already an attempt to capture an inexplicable experience) to paper. Later on, she had a private conversation with a friar, whom she helped to discover the secrets of his heart and gave spiritual advice because, during her euphoric experience, she had experienced the purity of his soul²⁰.

In contrast with Ida of Louvain's intimate conversation and modest audience (through the mediation of the clergy), Juliana of Mont Cornillon was known to be a public prophet. According to her hagiographer, she was a prophet who, like Saint Gregory, could reveal hidden knowledge besides knowing the past, present, and future²¹. Juliana was a public figure and thus entangled in religious and political networks. This was tolerated because she had gained authority thanks to her inner and intimate connection with God and her visionary experiences. Instructed through the Holy Spirit, she had direct access to God's wisdom, and was never tempted by the wisdom of the flesh. This did not go unnoticed and earned her

18. *Ida of Louvain*, pp. 163-165.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 245-247.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 247-253.

21. *Juliana of Mont Cornillon*, pp. 52-53.

praise. Her hagiographer hastens to add: "she did not become more insolent thenceforth, as it usually happens, but rather she was found to be humbler and gentler than anyone in every way"²². Her humility only encouraged her renown, which she experienced as painful. She even attempted to avoid meeting figures of authority. Her hagiographer writes: "Even in her advanced age, if she was compelled to speak with her visitors to keep from offending them, she did so with such great modesty and heartfelt anguish that she compared it to the pain of purgatory"²³.

A bit later in the *vita*, Juliana's hagiographer again lauds her humility. He cannot conceal the fact that, before her death, heavenly mysteries in hidden knowledge were revealed to Juliana as she consumed the body of Christ, an important motif in the *vita*. Yet she kept this secret wisdom to herself and was very discreet with whom she shared it. Not only did she hide it from strangers, she even kept her most intimate friends in the dark, as she did not want to give anyone the opportunity to idolize her as a saint. Her hagiographer writes: "But she concealed these secrets in such indiscreet humility (if it is right to say so) that she could justly appear to cry with the prophet, 'My secret for myself! My secret for myself!' (Isa. 24:16). Not only did she hide these secrets from strangers, but even to her closest and dearest friends she revealed them very rarely, except when she was drunk in the Spirit and could not be silent"²⁴. Since her childhood, humility dominated her life and she despised herself in the privacy of her heart. She felt no one should estimate her higher than the little value she accorded herself²⁵.

Juliana's hagiographer turned her public presence into a core theme. It was thus necessary to repeat the *humilitas topos* several times and to combine it with the theme of pain. In Juliana's *vita*, pain is present in her private sanctuary as well as in the public arena. In public, as we have seen, she had to deal with persecutions, while in private, in her heart, she felt herself to be indescribably small and insignificant, according to her hagiographer. With this statement, he deflected accusations that she tried to glorify herself. The humility Juliana experienced was not induced by self-hatred but should be understood as a loss of the self in her relationship with God. There, she received hidden truths. But as soon as she had to pass these on and thus jeopardize her humility, she suffered. Her hagiographer compares this experience of externalization to

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

the pains of purgatory. This idea is reminiscent of Mary's *vita* and James' prediction that people who speak too much will suffer in purgatory. Juliana already experienced this reality when she had to speak, even though her words were neither empty nor idle. This reference to purgatory can be interpreted as a forced return to exile. Just as purgatory is a painful space between heaven and earth, Juliana found herself in a liminal space between her heart – where all truths remained secret – and the outer world, where she was adored as well as persecuted. Unlike Ida of Louvain, Juliana expressed her mystical knowledge during moments of rapture, when she could not control herself, thus addressing larger audiences than Ida, who only disclosed the meaning of her behavior to a select few.

All these women and their hagiographers took different approaches to the dialectical interplay between speaking and silence. Yet all of them mentioned the pain felt at the moment of speaking. Mary, Beatrice, and Juliana experienced speaking as painful, while Ida tasted heavenly bliss during moments of rapture as her body seemed to suffer. Like Beatrice's, Mary's body was misinterpreted by bystanders. Only a select few, and the reader, learned the meaning of her experience through her words, while others could only perceive the grace that radiated from her sacred body. The lucky few who had the honor of exchanging words with these women, experienced heavenly joys. They knew that it was not the women who spoke to them, but Christ himself, through their female bodies²⁶.

2. *The Hagiographer's Rejected Corpus*

Hagiographers suffered too while expressing their mystical theology and sharing their work in public. And no hagiographer in the mystical culture of thirteenth-century Liège wrote as many *vitae* as Thomas of Cantimpré. Moreover, no hagiographer left as many autobiographical comments in his works as Thomas did. Not only can readers learn more about his portrayal of women in the public space, they can also encounter Thomas in his *vitae* in a personal way. In these encounters, Thomas creates a *persona* for himself of a somewhat tortured author who scarcely believed his own stories and struggled to capture the ineffable experiences of others, especially those of the holy women recorded in the *Supplement*

26. James writes about Mary: "Christ was for her a meditation in the heart, a word in the mouth, and example in her works. I do not remember that I ever heard a worldly statement from her lips, for she could barely speak a single sentence without repeatedly interspersing it with a Christlike seasoning". *Mary of Oignies*, p. 81.

to the *vita* of Mary of Oignies and the *vitae* of Christina Mirabilis, Margaret of Ypres and Lutgard of Aywières.

Elliott and Alexandra Barratt have addressed Thomas' alleged misogynistic comments in his work. They believe Thomas repeated misogynistic stereotypes, including the notion that women cannot keep silent. He explicitly referred to the proverb "be quiet women – if you can" in his *Life of John of Cantimpré*, when a prioress, despite her good intentions, could not keep quiet about John's miracles²⁷. Elliott argues that, after this first work, Thomas' slender but steady stream of misogyny swelled, leading up to his *Biënboec*, which Elliott marks as the most misogynistic of his writings. This evolution is as surprising as it is predictable. Surprising, because Thomas was, ironically, one of the first sponsors of the Beguine lifestyle. Predictable, because of the increasingly general distrust of spiritual friendships between men and women, and because of Thomas' academic ventures into the realm of natural sciences, which often depicted women as more driven by lust than men, Elliott argues. While Thomas portrays women as victims of sexual assault (in Margaret's and Lutgard's *vitae*), in his *Biënboec* he argues that women are sexual predators who endanger holy men. Nevertheless, even in his *vitae*, Thomas expresses his concerns on the danger of women, especially when they speak in public. In a passage in the *Life of Lutgard*, for example, Thomas vents his frustration with the abbess and the nuns of Lutgard's community, because they told the saint about his wish to receive her relic after her death. He again repeats the proverb mentioned above. Other examples can be found in the *vita* of Margaret, when she is praised for only discussing her revelations with her confessor, or when Thomas comments on a dialogue between two women, writing that women should be paid no mind when they speak to each other²⁸. Using the same examples, Barratt claims that Thomas was an anti-feminist at heart, even in the *vita* of his spiritual friend Lutgard²⁹.

Heene disagrees with labeling Thomas as an anti-feminist, arguing that Thomas' attitude toward women even had a positive ring. He did not praise the women he described for their transcendence of the alleged weaknesses of the female sex but for their exceptionally virtuous lives. Heene argues that this does not only apply to his depiction of Lutgard but

27. *John of Cantimpré*, p. 115.

28. See ELLIOTT, *Bride of Christ*, pp. 210-213.

29. See A. BARRATT, *Undutiful Daughters and Metaphorical Mothers among the Beguines*, in J. DOR (ed.), *New Trends in Feminine Spirituality: The Holy Women of Liège and Their Impact* (Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts, 2), Turnhout, Brepols, 1999, 81-104, p. 87.

that positive appreciation of virtuous women can be found in his earlier works too, even in the *vita* of John. This would set Thomas apart from other university-trained clerics. In contrast with Barratt's arguments, Heene focuses on the positive aspects of Thomas' depiction of women, instead of on the influence of his misogynistic naturalistic theories. Heene emphasizes that individual men, Thomas in this case, could place their own accents, transcending the presumed prejudices of their contemporaries and the conventions of the genre³⁰. His depiction of women is more complex than Elliott and Barratt suggest, and this translates into a more complex role of women within the public sphere as well.

Moreover, Smith claims that, although Lutgard was indeed portrayed as an illiterate woman, Thomas also describes her as a charismatic interpreter of her own life. She was not only a body to Thomas – she even surpassed him in her true understanding of the word and in her *lectio divina*. She received inexplicable visions which she learned to interpret, turning her into the perfect bride of Christ and the ideal reader of the *vita*. Smith argues that Thomas had difficulties imitating Lutgard's capacity to read her life and that he explicitly reflected on the limitations of hagiographic representation and his own understanding, putting him in the vulnerable position usually occupied by women. Smith claims that Lutgard's overwhelming sanctity and mystical powers annul potential exploitation and sexualization by the hagiographer³¹.

I argue that Thomas offered an interesting depiction of women and their painful private and public speech, challenging notions of female sanctity and destabilizing his own position as a literate writer. More than Smith, I emphasize the similarities of Thomas' depictions with those of other hagiographers. In the case of Margaret of Ypres, I have to agree with Elliott, who argues that Thomas himself seemed unconvinced of the young woman's sainthood. She displayed no enduring calling or any form of self-possession, but was utterly dependent on her father confessor, whom Thomas happened to have met. This relationship completely overshadowed her private life and Thomas believed he had to problematize and correct this dependency in her *vita*, Elliott writes³². Compared to the two other saints, Lutgard and Christina, Margaret did not speak. In Margaret, Thomas found a blank canvas and the raw material with which he could experiment and create a voice. This voice attested to the value of silence, particularly in women. The hagiographer capitalized on the virtue of

30. See HEENE, *Hagiography and Gender*, pp. 121-122.

31. See SMITH, *Excessive Saints*, pp. 134; 154-159; 170.

32. See ELLIOTT, *Bride of Christ*, pp. 193-198.

silence of his Beguine saint and used it to distinguish her from others. Comparing her to enclosed nuns and monks, he wrote: "According to Isaiah, 'silence is the cultivation of righteousness' (Isaiah 32. 17). This virtue in Margaret was so praiseworthy that she surpassed even many cloistered monks and nuns, who could not be compared to her"³³. Margaret's mother complained about her to the saint's confessor, because Margaret hardly spoke to her family, although she lived in the same house, sharing the same private space. Margaret only listened to her confessor, who entreated her to interact with her sisters. The saint obeyed, although she was only willing to talk exclusively about God. She would fall asleep when they gossiped or talked about anything ordinary. The saint distinguished between virtuous speech and ordinary speech and did everything in her power to block all things profane and ordinary, aiming to transform her private quarters into a space where she could meet her divine Bridegroom³⁴. Thomas thus created a scenario in which the mute saint, while contemplating God, was forced to leave heaven to talk to people. Nevertheless, this also created an opportunity for her to hear the sweet words of her confessor, who shared her gracious speech. Thomas wrote:

She used to sit hanging on his words, and her soul internalized his conversation as the body incorporates the food by which it lives. For the sake of peace, she would briefly answer questions, but if they lasted more than a minute, this was a torture to her and she could not hold back her tears. For the same reason she sometimes fell into trance. Although she had great grace in speech, what seemed greater to her was the fruit of meditation, prayer, and contemplation in the presence of Almighty God³⁵.

Thomas used Margaret's quiet life to expound on the value of contemplation in silence, countering the sensation-seeking culture popular at the time. His criticism resembled that of Hadewijch, but while Hadewijch admonished an entire culture – men and women alike – Thomas addressed only women when he wrote: "many religious women in our day follow the pernicious conduct of the hen: as soon as they produce an egg, they begin to cackle"³⁶. This should not be read as a misogynistic remark, as Elliott writes. Rather, I argue that Thomas expressly mentioned female

33. *Margaret of Ypres*, p. 174.

34. Margaret's private space already overlapped with heaven through her inner connection with God. She was frequently depicted as lying down, rapt in the spirit in the company of Christ or Mary Magdalene. Thomas imagines her lying prostrate at the threshold of paradise where she received consolation. To Margaret, her private space, both physically and mentally, could become heaven's doorstep. *Ibid.*, p. 196.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 188.

believers, not the entire flock, in order to create a stark contrast between Margaret and other women, much like James who criticized vain speech in the *vita* of Mary of Oignies. As a woman, she was subject to the same social conventions as other women, but, unlike them, she did not seek entertainment, fame or spiritual thrills.

Margaret often turns out to be a safe saint, precisely because she was so reserved and barely entered into public life. She only reached the outside world when Thomas, as her hagiographer, spread the word. In contrast to the other women, Thomas emphasized Margaret's divine mission to speak, rather than her humility, in order to establish a balance between painful speech and silent contemplation.

His depiction of Christina Mirabilis could hardly be more different. While Margaret's confessor informed Thomas in person, Thomas already knew of the legendary and notorious Christina Mirabilis³⁷. Much had already been said about this woman, who had become the subject of stories and gossip. Thomas had to make clear in his introduction that he had utter faith in the reports he had received and in the trustworthiness of the witnesses who had informed him about Christina, whom he did not know personally. Thomas wrote that: "I personally heard other things that no one could have known except Christina herself from people who swore they learned them from her own mouth"³⁸. Thomas had to admit that this account of supernatural events surpassed all human understanding and that he could only believe it himself because he knew James of Vitry personally – James who had written about Christina's miracles. Moreover, these miraculous events took place in the public sphere, he argued, and were therefore witnessed by many good and truthful people, whom he questioned personally. Thomas stressed the need for a personal relationship with eyewitnesses, even when writing down the story of a public figure such as the legendary Christina.

I wrote that Christina's *Life* was written with the same intentions as many *exempla*: to remind the readers to do penance, convert and confess. In the epilogue to the *vita*, Thomas recalled that Christina had "taught with many words, tears and lamentations and boundless cries and with the example of her life. This, indeed, she taught more insistently and shouted louder than anyone we have heard of before or since"³⁹. Thomas

37. In the *vita* of Lutgard, Thomas reminds the reader that James mentions Christina in his prologue to the *Life of Mary of Oignies*. *Lutgard of Aywières*, p. 237. In the *vita* of Christina Mirabilis, he also states that he knew about Christina via the prologue. *Christina the Astonishing*, p. 127.

38. *Christina the Astonishing*, p. 128.

39. *Ibid.*, pp. 154-155.

captured the cries that frightened her community and fueled the fear for future damnation. Christina's exaggerated pain performances draw the reader's attention, but we should not forget that Thomas also mentioned the saint's miraculous literacy. She was illiterate all her life and yet miraculously understood Latin and fully grasped the meaning of the Holy Scriptures. Thomas wrote:

When she was asked very obscure questions by certain spiritual friends, she would explain them very openly. But she did this most unwillingly and rarely, for she said that to expound Holy Scriptures belonged to the clergy and not to the ministry of such as her. Because of her very great love of Christ, she wondrously venerated the clergy and especially priests, even though for her part she had suffered many injuries from them. She would gently admonish sinning priests or clerics lest they blaspheme the good name of Christ through their public excesses, but she did so in great secrecy and with a wondrous reverence as if they were her own fathers⁴⁰.

Thomas confirmed that Christina was willing to accept ecclesiastical authority and respect the prerogatives of male clergy. She did not really preach in public but taught by example. She did not address big crowds with her mystical-theological knowledge. Nevertheless, in private conversations, she dared to denounce the excesses of the clergy if they happened in public. In this passage, Thomas shows his familiarity with the debates about female public speaking. But Christina's pain was not related to an urge to speak. Thomas did not conceptualize the pain of expression. Christina suffered publicly, but her speech was private.

Thomas accepted the difficult task of speaking on behalf of the astonishing Christina. As stated in his introduction, Thomas knew how unbelievable his account would be to many readers, which might jeopardize his reputation as a successful hagiographer. He problematized the crowd's interpretation of Christina's performances, which were often considered demonic instead of holy. Smith states that Thomas deliberately blurred the lines between the grotesque and divine and created occasions of disbelief to create a kind of apophatic mystical theology that helps the reader (and himself) overcome doubt. This supports the reader's affective relationship with the saint on a personal level, beyond an intellectual understanding. Smith develops this theory in detail in her work on Lutgard and Cistercian reading strategies, based on a reference to Augustine in Lutgard's *vita* about loving the truth in the words and not the words themselves⁴¹. Readers are called upon to go beyond language to a deeper engagement

40. *Ibid.*, p. 148.

41. Thomas writes in Lutgard's *Life* that: "Nevertheless, they ought not to be rejected by the wicked on that account, for, as the most glorious Augustine says, 'it is a mark of

with his text⁴². But not every reader or listener is willing to go this far. By capturing Christina's often unpopular behavior, Thomas risked being subjected to similar aggressive reactions of the community. Christina's performance left a bitter taste in the mouth of the audience. They were distressed – not consoled like Mary's interlocutors. I submit that Thomas chanced the same rejection when he passed on this bitter flavor, creating a sense of doubt and insecurity in his own work.

Prior to Thomas' experimental approach to hagiography in the *vita* of Christina, he wrote his first hagiography, the *vita* of John of Cantimpré. John was a man and an abbot, and could therefore speak publicly, which he did with great eloquence. In John, Thomas saw his own goals as a preacher reflected, yet, at the same time, Thomas also recounted moments when John too met with disbelief and doubt in his abilities, despite his marvelous and terrifying power of speech⁴³. Thomas compared John's preaching to a thunderclap, leaving all in "such ecstasy that their hair stood on end" and "without delay this divine horror, transfused into their souls, brought a great many to eternal salvation through compunction"⁴⁴. Whenever John encountered disbelievers, he used his abilities of charismatic speech to convert them. Thomas recalled the following example of gravediggers, hundreds of them, who jeered at John as he passed by.

They shouted with uproarious laughter as he passed, "Look at the monks! Look at the monks!" That blessed and marvelous man, delighted by their laughter, removed his cowl and shouted merrily, "Laugh all you like! Laugh at the fool from Montmirail!" At the sound of his humble voice their clamor ceased and the whole crowd fell silent as if they had lost the use of their tongues, not because they knew who he was – for they had no idea – but because the voice of one who humbles himself gains power⁴⁵.

John silenced the noise of the common people with his speech. Again, we encounter the victory of mystical theology over gossip and vain talk. Thomas wrote: "I have recounted this one example to show the wonderful way he had of calling noblemen to Christ, but also to correct those who beat their plowshares into swords who think they can overcome the world

good and distinguished minds to love the truth within words and not the words". *Lutgard of Aywières*, p. 212.

42. See SMITH, *Excessive Saints*, p. 56; EAD., *Language, Literacy, and the Saintly Body*, pp. 586-610.

43. Smith compares John's ability to induce horror and marvel with his speech to Christina's horrifying body. She observes that both have the same effect on audiences. SMITH, *Excessive Saints*, p. 87.

44. *John of Cantimpré*, p. 98.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

with pompous words or stinging rebukes”⁴⁶. John, like his female colleagues, was a humble saint. He opted for gentleness rather than disdainful eloquence, provocation or insults, modeling himself after Christ and his style of preaching. John imitated Christ, not in his suffering but in his preaching. The way Thomas wrote about him reveals how much admiration he had for John and how much he wanted to become like him by imitating him and, ultimately, Christ. Writing about John, Thomas mimicked his eloquence and graceful speech, while writing about Christina he risked losing his faith and that of his readers. I argue that, in his *vita* of Lutgard, speech and silence, hope and fear come together.

Like Mary, Lutgard is often depicted while consoling community members in private conversations. For instance, she helped a man who was in despair over the stain of his sins. He listened to her words and saw above her a bright light, brighter than any other. Her words and her brightness brought the man hope of pardon and comfort⁴⁷. Thomas did not only know the power of her words secondhand, he also experienced it personally. He described the following personal experience:

Concerning this matter I have unerring testimony to her, as I hope in all conscience. Although she seemed and indeed was rather uncultivated and very simple in common speech, yet in private spiritual conversations, never from anyone’s lips have I heard more genuine, more ardent, or more decisive words in accord with the spirit of truth – to such an extent that I often accounted myself to be quite uncultivated and dull in my understanding of her speech. I remember the place and time when, I confess, I was so astonished by the subtlety of her words that, had that sweet and ineffable wonderment held me any longer, it would either have rendered me mad or utterly destroyed me. Yet this did not happen at the time about which I am writing, but about sixteen years before her death⁴⁸.

In this interesting passage, Thomas wrote that Lutgard was not a public speaker because she was too simple and illiterate to captivate an audience. Yet, in private conversation, her charismatic power was inspired and overwhelming. In private conversation, Lutgard rendered Thomas insecure. In these moments, the hagiographer felt illiterate and doubted his capacities to speak about the mystical truth the saint knew so well. The memory of Lutgard’s speech haunted him for sixteen years until her death and until the moment he wrote down these words. Lutgard did not suffer, but Thomas did. He was troubled by the ineffability of the wonderful knowledge that she shared with him. In this dialogue, one can

46. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

47. *Lutgard of Aywières*, p. 261.

48. *Ibid.*, pp. 230-231.

recognize a mystical process that Hadewijch described. Thomas became Lutgard's mystical acolyte as he was confronted with the apophatic nature of mystical knowledge⁴⁹.

Furthermore, Thomas' career as hagiographer and confessor was heavily influenced by Lutgard. Thomas admitted as much in a later passage. When he was a young man, he started taking confessions although he did not feel ready to carry this responsibility. He recalled that: "I began this duty with great fear in my heart, and when my ears were troubled outwardly by what I heard, I became agitated inwardly with the stirrings of temptation"⁵⁰. The young confessor was affected by what he heard. Mentioning this tension between outer and inner and listening and speaking created a tension between Thomas' early career and the moment he met Lutgard, whose words had the opposite effect. Her words drove out temptation and introduced the truth of the real Word. Thomas went on sharing his memory: "Seized with the greatest fear and horror because of this, I approached the gracious Lutgard as my most special mother and, touched with sorrow, I revealed my burden to her"⁵¹. Moved by compassion, Lutgard removed Thomas' fear and compelled him to continue his vocation. She reminded him that Christ would always be with him as a protector and teacher. Lutgard, like the mystic Hadewijch, reminded her acolyte of the power of Christ, who would deliver him from the enemy's attacks and who would bestow greater grace to make up for Thomas' lack of knowledge, of which Thomas was ashamed. Thomas revealed his initial embarrassment because Lutgard was the one who reminded him of the power of Christ through her words. Nevertheless, he could not keep silent about what had happened and praised Christ and his handmaiden⁵².

Lutgard was a pivotal figure in the construction of Thomas' identity as a preacher and hagiographer. She taught him how to listen carefully and convey the truth in private conversations. Moreover, she showed him how this mystical process was painful and created moments of doubt and insecurity. Thomas' other *vitae* contain fragments of what is fully disclosed in his autobiographical confessions in the *Life of Lutgard*. In John's character, he saw his own hopes mirrored, the preacher he wanted to become – a preacher whose close relationship with the Word saves souls. If he could reach this goal, he would not have to feel ashamed or embarrassed anymore when speaking to Lutgard. They would share the charismatic power of the Word: he as a male public preacher and she as a female private

49. SMITH, *Excessive Saints*, p. 33.

50. *Lutgard of Aywières*, p. 266.

51. *Ibid.*

52. *Ibid.*, pp. 266-267.

mystical teacher. In order to reach his goal, he would have to face – like other mystics and saints – the pain of rejection of his body, his corpus of literature. He actualized this risk most clearly in the *Life of Christina*, although he also expressed the same doubt in his credibility and ability as a writer in other *vitae*. In the prologue of the *Life of Lutgard*, he applied the *humilitas topos* to himself⁵³. He, an unworthy friar of the Order of Preachers, had to write down in unpolished language (not something one would expect from a literate cleric) the truth he had learned about Lutgard, in order to praise Christ (and her). Not yet a fully matured reader and writer of her saintly life, not yet a fully accomplished mystical theologian, he started writing, knowing ordinary people might reject his truth.

Other hagiographers expressed a similar pain and doubt. “*Who, then, will tell the Lord’s mighty deeds?*” Goswin of Bossut asks in one of his autobiographical passages in the *vita* of Ida of Nivelles, expressing both doubt and a sense of mission in his vocation as a hagiographer⁵⁴. Hugh of Floreffe, who wrote the *vita* of Yvette of Huy, summarizes this experience beautifully in the prologue to this *vita*:

Your [The Abbot of Floreffe] paternity in the Lord must know that when you forced this summary of a certain saint’s virtue from me, I was struck dumb, at a loss and marvelling intensely about the novelty of God’s work as much as about the excellent virtue of a Saint so close to God, and I remain somewhat astonished. At best I could only guess at things which inclined to the good and so I thought to place a guard upon my mouth. Then I argued that the tongues of humans might seem to give exceedingly credible witness so as to detract from God though they themselves are animals. Not having the spirit that gives life, they disbelieve or mock. Unable to believe what they cannot see – that operating grace in those who are worthy to be operated on by grace – they show themselves to be outside the grace of God. Then knowing myself insufficient and less adequate to this, I feared my own presumption, so strongly did this work make me fear that I would succumb under the weight of the responsibility as much as under the burden you pressed upon me⁵⁵.

Writing hagiography, like writing mystical treatises, entailed a risk of being rejected and misunderstood. Hagiographers were familiar with this *topos* of persecution, as I described in the first act. What I have not mentioned so far is that they also applied this *topos* to their own writing. They

53. Anxieties in the prologue invite the reader to reflect on the nature of the text as well as the reader’s relation to the words, Smith argues. The nuns of Aywières and Brabant had to imitate the virtuous life and further their own spiritual path, to overcome suspicion. According to Smith, the most challenging passages of the *vita* that could lead to suspicion are the passages describing mystical union. See SMITH, *Excessive Saints*, pp. 103-106.

54. *Ida of Nivelles*, p. 56.

55. *Yvette of Huy*, pp. 74-75.

were the spokesmen of the saints and they, too, risked being rejected. They were aware of the dangers of the idle speech and gossip in which the mystically illiterate ordinary people indulged. They feared their truth would be lost, their words rejected. It was therefore crucial for them to undergo their own mystical path, leading to the goal of expressing the private words of their saints. They were the ones risking pain and suffering if they failed to succeed in their task. They had to mediate between the saint and the people, which also meant selecting which miraculous deeds and mystical truths would be made public, leaving “many more such deeds in silence”⁵⁶.

Thomas mentions how his mentor, James, who wrote Mary’s Life with outstanding eloquence, leapt up with immense joy when she spoke to him. Thomas says: “For that most reverent man neglected to write a great many things about Mary lest he tire his readers with excess, or lest the incomprehensible greatness of her miracles become an odor of death rather than life in the hearts of unbelievers”. Yet all these things are possible if the readers truly believe. The writer, as mystical theologian, needs to guide his reader to this kind of believing. Those people will rejoice in the truth, like Beatrice did with her spiritual friends. Like Beatrice, James shared the miracles Mary experienced with his spiritual friends, his inner circle⁵⁷.

In his *vita* of Ida of Nivelles, Goswin of Bossut argues that hagiographers always need the right imagination, even if they have the right education. Their imagination needs to carry the overwhelming miracles of the saints. Goswin argues that writing the saints’ lives is not a human enterprise. It needs to be inspired by God “who *opens the dumb mouth and makes infant tongues fluent of speech* (Wisd. 10. 21)”⁵⁸. Little wonder that this task makes his mind tremble, Goswin confesses. Like Thomas, he cannot grasp the depth of the saints’ revelations, but he also needs to write to stop up the mouths that speak wicked things (Ps 62,12). He writes so that God may be glorified in this holy virgin’s wondrous deeds⁵⁹. He praises Ida’s willingness to perform her saintliness and enact what needs to be done, even though she is mocked and ridiculed, her visions dismissed as mere fantasy. His praise can be seen as a way to uplift his own spirit and face the challenges ahead, as he exposed her miracles and reached out to the periphery of mystical culture and into the

56. *John of Cantimpré*, p. 107.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

58. *Ida of Nivelles*, p. 29.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

strange land. He writes: "Ida's Life was admirable enough on its own to afford progress for all the faithful; but neither should we suffer her miracles to lie hidden under the fruitless cover of silence, since God may well have wrought them precisely as pointers to her holiness"⁶⁰. These miracles involved posthumous deeds, but also Ida's ability to peer with the hidden mind into the consciences of her community members and the hidden truth of God. She serves as an example for Goswin, and all hagiographers, to gain expertise in the kind of private speech and deep conversation that the *Mulieres Religiosae* engaged in and translate their mystical theology for the common people.

I would argue that the hagiographers belonged to the inner circle of mystical theologians. What sets them apart, is that their primary source of inspiration was not their own private conversations with God but with saints, witnesses, and common people alike. They were tasked with passing on hidden knowledge and translating it into common speech – which I called hagiographic mediation. They too had to stay humble and suffer under doubts and insecurities, risking persecution and attacks on their corpus of literature. In a way, writing hagiographies was an imitation of Christ, not primarily via a physical body but via a body of text. Christ was the ideal preacher, and hagiographers and confessors strove to walk in his footsteps. Like Christ, they had to have faith in their mission and relationship with God in order to succeed and overcome doubt, insecurities and persecution/rejection. They were storytellers because it was their way of imitating Christ and keeping his memory alive through their words about his saints.

3. *Hadewijch's Pride*

Female authors, as did female saints and hagiographers, respected the same rules and had to suffer in order to speak and write. Authors such as Hadewijch also had to place themselves on the spectrum between self-complacency and humility. The similarities of the painful experience of expressing authoritative religious counsel, found in both female-authored texts and hagiographies, are often overshadowed by the differences in pain experience – between inner and outer pain.

As frequently noted in the secondary literature, Hadewijch was less concerned with the documentation of external phenomena and the outer environment, although liturgical spaces were also an important part of the staging of her visions⁶¹. Hadewijch did not describe physical performances,

60. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

61. See SUYDAM, *Beguine Textuality*, pp. 181-183.

such as rapture, self-flagellation and jubilation, as frequently as hagiographers did⁶². She even seemed to mistrust these phenomena, separating them from the core task – the loyal service of Love. Selfish striving for religious experiences could very well distract from the path of Love, Hadewijch wrote. With this critique, she appeared to reject the sensation-seeking popular culture in vogue in the mystical landscape around her. She shared her criticism with her pupils, who also attempted to carry out the service of Love to the end. Hadewijch's teachings and texts formed the core of a mystical epicenter. She and her followers couched the pain experience in an inner transformation wrought by God, who wounded the faithful. This does not mean that outer mystical performances had to be entirely absent, but Hadewijch as an author did not think it necessary to document such events. We should recall that Hadewijch was close enough to her intimate audience to include eyewitnesses. She acted as a religious leader within her private sphere. Her bodily performance did not need to be reconstructed to confirm her religious authority for a broader audience because she did not aim to address a wider audience that could only be reached via the written word.

Fraeters argues that the author addressed a select circle of the initiated, which I call the core of mystical culture. Hadewijch did not intend for her work to be widely circulated. This would have been counterintuitive for a woman. Women were barred from preaching in public and could only act as religious leaders in their own communities. Fraeters compares Hadewijch to other mystical women who did receive Church backing, such as Hildegard of Bingen and Mechthild of Magdeburg. They received special permission to claim religious authority and to address a broad audience. Clerics supported and endorsed their cause, and believed in their charismatic gifts. Hadewijch's authority was not amplified, but directed at a specific community of believers⁶³. The writer used the medium of text to carry her voice to the members of her circle who were in need of her counsel and encouragement. In this group, ideas on love could be discussed without the need for a *humilitas topus*, Fraeters writes. She argues: "In a text addressed exclusively to like-minded souls who acknowledge her status as spiritual mistress, there was no need to moderate the assertive sense of self and the authoritative voice that accompany the

62. See AXTERS, *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid*, 1, p. 358.

63. Fraeters argues that both Mechthild of Magdeburg and Marguerite Porete called their works "books". Hadewijch did not. See V. FRAETERS, *Hadewijch of Brabant and the Beguine Movement*, in E. ANDERSEN *et al.* (eds.), *A Companion to Mysticism and Devotion in Northern Germany in the Late Middle Ages* (Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition, 44), Leiden, Brill, 2014, 49-71, p. 51.

status of holy woman”⁶⁴. She preferred to touch her close environment at a deeper level with her undocumented bodily presence and her literary corpus, which was constructed as an extension of her role of mystical teacher in a tight-knit private community. Nevertheless, Hadewijch, too, had to pay a price for writing her mystical treatise.

Hadewijch was, above all, a mystical writer and theologian. In this sense, she differed from other holy women whose lives were documented by hagiographers acting as mystical theologians. Hadewijch addressed her readers directly as an author, without an intermediary. She also went one step further and offered autobiographical notes on speaking and writing in certain passages of her work, showing a profound authorial awareness. Hadewijch singled out speaking and writing as crucial components of her own mystical growth and, in her oeuvre, the reader gets to know her on a personal level, as a writer. I argue that writing was Hadewijch’s way to complete the service of Love, which she thematized in her work. Hadewijch’s character of the young mystic sometimes coincides with Hadewijch’s own voice as an author. Both women dared, in similar ways, to speak. Through these characters, Hadewijch revealed herself as an inspired writer whose speaking was rooted in mystical wisdom. It is only because she shared this knowledge with others, because she spoke and wrote, that we can study her oeuvre. As a female author, Hadewijch had to hold her own in the outside world, which could have questioned her claim to religious authority. She could only achieve this if she conquered the insecurities that limit young mystics, speaking freely and proudly.

Hadewijch’s works illustrate the tensions between the young mystic and herself as a writer, on one side, and the cruel world, hostile to their innovative ideas and experience-based authority, on the other. However, in order to speak, she needs to return to the ordinary world and face both the hostility of the aliens and the fear of losing her intimate contact with her Beloved, much like other holy women. Therefore, the return is always painful⁶⁵. Moreover, the external world is a strange land, inhabited by

64. *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

65. The cycle of mystical ascension, leading up to “out-of-the-spirit” moments in Hadewijch’s works, and the return to ordinary life, is reminiscent of William of Saint-Thierry’s commentary on the Second Song in *The Golden Letter*. He argued that it is impossible to sustain contemplation while in the body. Like the bride in the Song of Songs, the soul needs to return to the house of poverty, only to leave it again later on. There is a cycle of advance, retreat, and repeat, in which pain occurs when the soul needs to retreat and when she is confronted with delayed satisfaction, creating a desire that purifies her, Smith argues. She applies William’s Cistercian spirituality to the structure of Lutgard’s *vita*, linking it to William’s stages of beginning, progress and perfection. She argues that the *vita* should be read with William’s spirituality in mind, which aims to transform the

hostile beings who wish her harm⁶⁶. In the fifth through eleventh visions, Hadewijch describes this painful phase in the visionary journey when the mystic is forced to return to the earthly exile after a contemplative experience in which she lost herself in the being of Love. In her sixth vision, Hadewijch writes:

Then I was called back again in a spirit, and again I recognized and understood all reasoning as before. And once again it was said to me by him: "From now on you shall never more condemn or bless anyone except as I wish; and you shall give everyone his due, according to his worth. This is what I am, in fruition and in knowledge, and in entrancement for those who wish to content me according to my will. I direct you – to live in conformity with my Divinity and my Humanity – back again into the cruel world, where you must taste every kind of death – until you return hither in the full name of my fruition, in which you are baptized in my depths". And with this I returned, woeful, to myself⁶⁷.

The mystic must woefully return to her earthly existence after a joyful union with the Beloved. The return to the human condition is part of the learning process described, for instance, in the sixth vision. The young mystic yearns to enjoy Love, but first she must learn that unification with the Beloved is no simple experience of bliss. Becoming one involves conformity with God as well as with Christ's humanity, especially his life in pain and exile⁶⁸. In the sixth vision, Hadewijch writes that this process involves dying multifarious deaths – a dying life, as Beatrice described

reader and increase spiritual receptivity. See SMITH, *Excessive Saints*, pp. 138-146. I observe that William's Cistercian spirituality can also be applied to Hadewijch's mystical texts, especially her *Visions*. In Hadewijch's *Visions*, the mystic needs to retreat from visionary ecstasy, an experience that is conceptualized as painful. It is also reminiscent of Richard of Saint Victor's *Benjamin major* and the steps of meditation, contemplation, jubilation, and compassion. Fraeters sees these stages reflected in Hadewijch's visionary liturgical settings, visions in the spirit, union out of the spirit and return, potentially even connected with Richard's four degrees of violent Love. See V. FRAETERS, *Gender and Genre: The Design of Hadewijch's Book of Visions*, in DE HEMPTINNE – GÓNGORA (eds.), *The Voice of Silence*, 57-81, pp. 76-77.

66. Faesen argues that Hadewijch's concept of *vreemde landen* (strange lands) should be connected with her ideas about the service of Love, which is obscured by the doubt and anxieties that troubled late medieval culture. Faesen argues that those anxieties were caused by ideas about the relationship between humanity and God, which was represented as a division. Contemporary thirteenth-century theologians and their rational theologies highlighted the fact that God was endlessly out of reach, stressing the absolute transcendence of God. See FAESEN, *Begeerte*, p. 41.

67. HADEWIJCH, *Vision* 6, pp. 279-280. Or, for example, *Vision* 8, p. 284: "Then I came back to myself as someone in new severe pain, and so I shall remain until the day when I am again recalled to the experience from which I then turned away".

68. HADEWIJCH, *Letter* 6, p. 58: "We must be continually aware that noble service and suffering in exile are proper to man's condition; such was the share of Jesus Christ when he lived on earth as Man".

it. This martyrdom is not physical but implies the constant attraction and rejection of Love, who defines the basic outlines of the mystical path. The road involves bliss with God and suffering with Christ. The latter can only be learned in the earthly exile, when the young mystic is forced to tear herself away from divine unity. This initially hurts, a pain that will only cease when she recognizes and accepts suffering in the oneness with God and Christ. This violent separation from God is reminiscent of the *vita* of Mary of Oignies, rather than that of Juliana of Mont Cornillon, although Hadewijch, unlike Mary, did not explicitly connect this experience with an intense visceral reaction.

Hadewijch also contributed another element to the debate on female religious authority, which is not made explicit in the *vitae*, namely the idea of the nobility of the proud soul. The pride and nobility of the soul precedes the pain of expression because the soul of the individual, male and female alike, is intrinsically created to express love for God. One could even say that for Hadewijch, pride overshadowed humility.

In her analysis of the thirteenth vision, Suydam discusses the tension between the concepts humility and pride. She argues that Hadewijch used these opposing traits to destabilize their traditional meaning and gain new mystical insights. This pair of concepts is often discussed along with another pair of opposites, loyalty and disloyalty, discussed in the previous chapter. The classical interpretation of pride as a sin is subverted by Hadewijch and turned into a virtue. In her thirteenth vision, Hadewijch reached seventh heaven, where she looked directly into God's countenance – a sight beheld only by the saints in heaven. Six wings surrounded his face and, as they unfolded, she looked ever deeper into the divine being. The lowest wings symbolized humility. Humility was thus no longer the ultimate virtue. Hadewijch went beyond these lowly wings, on to the other pairs, and thus transcended the classical virtuous life with humility as its crown jewel. According to Suydam, humility is a recurring motif in Hadewijch's work, but, in this particular vision, it is not the apogee of the moral virtues that brought Hadewijch ever closer to God. Hadewijch went beyond the souls who merely remain humble and fall at God's feet. She was allowed to stop bowing down in fear and admiration of God's presence and lifted up. Suydam writes: "Thus, Vision 13 exalts humility and exhibits an extraordinary degree of self-promotion. For example, when Hadewijch sees the terrifying depiction of Love, a Seraph tells her that Love had never been shown before to any created being. Moreover, Vision 13 explicitly elevates Hadewijch above even the Virgin Mary"⁶⁹.

69. SUYDAM, *A Touch of Satisfaction*, p. 22.

The humble demeanor of the Virgin – humility personified – was not enough for Hadewijch. She even surpassed Mary's patient suffering and dared to be one with Christ, beholding the divine being with the pride of her noble soul⁷⁰.

In Hadewijch's mystical growth, pride ultimately trumps humility. This pride utterly upends the classical notion that pride represents the sin of idleness. Hadewijch's pride is not *superbia*, the capital vice condemned as the gravest by medieval believers. Hadewijch wrote about proud souls who deliver proud work. This pride is necessary to weather the storm of Love and to become truly one with her. Humility does not mean that the soul should be kept down forever, on the contrary. As Hadewijch suggested in her second poem, humility pleases God and causes him to descend among the people⁷¹. Humility confirms the pride and nobility of the human soul, which entices God. In humility, the soul finds her noble source and realizes that she charms God and is loved. The humble soul becomes God's bride. One cannot imagine a more exalted position.

In her fourteenth vision, Hadewijch wrote that the soul's humility and nobility ensure that the soul will not have to fear or flee anything. In the conclusion of the book of *Visions*, the writer argued that the mystic could now taste Christ in his divinity and know him in his humanity – the goal set by the first vision. The mystic has come full circle. I argue that the image of the rose in the first vision is the guiding principle that enables this evolution from young to mature mystic. The rose alleviates the pain of parting and shortcoming. She is a light in the miserable darkness that the mystic is condemned to. The rose symbolizes the fundamental insight that Hadewijch gained in the course of her own life, namely, that humanity is worthy of God and that God loves humanity. The human person can fulfill God's will, despite, or rather, because of the imperfections. As soon as the young mystic receives the rose's wisdom, she knows just how proud the noble soul may be. This is what Hadewijch sought to pass

70. Reynaert states that, according to Hadewijch, the highest heaven can only be reached by imitating the humility and motherhood of Mary. He observes that Hadewijch connected the themes of humility and motherhood to the imagery of water and the valley. The imitation of humility leads to suffering, working and deification. This virtue will help the young mystic to be patient, a pivotal moment in the mystical growth toward deification. See REYNAERT, *Beeldspraak van Hadewijch*, p. 300.

71. Philosopher Karmen MacKendrick calls Hadewijch's luring seductiveness – in which she provocatively makes God desire her – an example of "ascetic arrogance". Ascetic arrogance is the idea that one can attract God through humility and submission, challenging the presumed impossibility for the divine to refuse the human offer. God cannot withstand a virtuous, ascetic and humble lifestyle. MacKendrick argues that Hadewijch's humility is connected to a kind of arrogance and that her sacrifice brings about the sacred. See K. MACKENDRICK, *Counterpleasures* (Postmodern Culture), Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 1999, pp. 84-86.

on to her readers. Via Christ's intervention in the first vision, the writer dictates an essential wisdom to her audience. The young mystic can follow Christ's will; she can reach total unity with his humanity and his divine being. Christ affirms that he will always be with her and promises unity, even though trying times lie ahead. It is precisely when Love is unfaithful that the mystic learns to be proud and does not allow herself to become disheartened by remembering her imperfect service of love. This pride is necessary to endure Love's disloyalty felt in periods of exile. Only through disloyalty can pride develop, survive the deepest depths and ascend to God's countenance, face to face. This pride is rooted in a true knowledge of Love that, despite this painful situation, will never cease to exist. The promise Christ made in the first vision, which Hadewijch shared with her pupil, becomes a first-hand experience, a lived wisdom that can no longer be distracted by pleasure or pain. Hadewijch's hard teachings, guided by her own critical rationality, finally lead to a confirmation of the power of the soul.

The fourteenth vision leads to the final stage, when the young mystic has evolved into a mature and proud lover⁷². She can now be with God in her suffering. This is when the adult mystic becomes a writer. She writes for someone else's sake, completing the cycle and passing on Christ's rose to the next generation. The student becomes the master and possesses a lived knowledge of Love that can be handed down. These works are the will of God. Knowledge of the soul's pride facilitates the transgression of the vow of humility expected of female religious leaders in particular. The narrator's compassion for the student's discontent is so great, that she is driven to write. The young mystic turns the mature mystic into a writer, and the writer transforms the novice mystic into an experienced lover. Here, Hadewijch was clearly articulating her own mission as a writer: "there were all kinds of powerful miracles and works; and there were persons I delivered from sins, persons I delivered from despair, or persons who rose from spiritual death through the power that God desired in me"⁷³.

72. Fraeters does not consider the fourteenth vision a "vision" in the strict sense of the word. She says it is a letter instead, addressed to one of Hadewijch's mystical acolytes. It provides this addressee with a cluster of messages. First of all, the still immature acolyte, striving for spiritual perfection, learns that Hadewijch will not forsake her and will be her spiritual guide until she, too, has reached perfection. She also learns that the ecstatic fruitful union – so vividly depicted in the thirteenth vision – is not the culmination of the mystical life. The highest stage is the *imitatio Christi*, a life in exile as a representative of God on earth, tasked with saving other human beings. This is the "new power" Hadewijch acquired through the ecstatic experience related in the fourteenth vision. See FRAETERS, *Gender and Genre*, p. 74.

73. HADEWIJCH, *Vision 14*, p. 304.

In speaking and writing, Hadewijch went through an evolution in which she conceived her own mystical teaching. To transmit the rose, or to pass on her mystical knowledge in written form, was her way to perform the service of Love. Her writing was an essential component of her own mystical growth.

Writing the *Visions* was Hadewijch's crowning achievement, a fulfillment of her duty to be actively present in society and to care for her disciples. The book grew from her awareness of the constant cycle of sweet repose and bitter speech. The knowledge the writer gained, and that prompted her to write, is rooted in the experience of the never-ending return to human mortality that involves exile and imperfection. When Love's overwhelming presence and thundering voice silences the mystic, she learns what it means to be human. She takes this knowledge with her in her exile. I argue that the visions – and, by extension, Hadewijch's writing – were a method through which she could find meaning in the earthly existence; a way to experience God while in exile, through a game of words. By connecting words to the hidden secrets Love told her, she gained control over her own mystical growth and learned to find beauty in her exile. She even discovered a miracle in her own words. She realized that writing was her method to perfect her service for Love. Writing was her way to find God in her work, in her oeuvre. She learned how the wonder of writing was born when she returned to mortal life. In her tenth vision, Hadewijch wrote:

And he took me out of the spirit in that highest fruition of wonder beyond reason; there I had fruition of him as I shall eternally. The time was short, and when I came to myself he brought me again into the spirit and spoke to me thus: "As you now have fruition of this, you shall have fruition of it eternally". And John said to me: "Go to your burden, and God shall renew his old wonders (cf. Ecclus. 36:5) in you". And I came back into my pain again with many a great woe⁷⁴.

The wonders the mystic performs are not like the external and paramystical miracles found in hagiographic literature. These wonders, I argue, are of an invisible and internal nature and refer to the hidden knowledge that supports the mystical life in the ideal service of Love. The mystic must live among the people and she will be able to help some in their own search for Love. The miracle lies in speaking – in externalizing and incorporating secret mystical wisdom. For the writer, this externalization does not take place through paramystical wonders, but in a more prosaic transfer of knowledge. As Hadewijch made abundantly clear to her

74. HADEWIJCH, *Vision 5*, p. 277.

reader: She prized these small, hidden wonders above the heroic deeds of saints.

Hadewijch's writing process – transforming inner knowledge into a material, textual corpus – taught her how to become human with Christ. Lived experiences showed her how she could bring about small miracles through her words. During her own mystical growth, Hadewijch came to recognize the healing power of her writing. In her twenty-sixth poem, she expressed her doubts about young mystics who languish too long in wonders and use them to their advantage “Before their deeds of love Are proclaimed as wonderful”⁷⁵. Instead, the true mystic needs to devote herself to Love, although she must also suffer Love's miserable tricks. Living through this suffering caused by her life in exile, which is enforced by Love herself, is the true wonder. While writing, Hadewijch learned how to cope with the pains of the earthly exile, the torment of being torn from sweet and silent contemplation. This acquiescence allowed her to dwell in her imagination, seeking images and words that could help her speak about these wondrous moments of unification with God. Her duty to speak and write encouraged her to actively seek and desire a unity of the Lord's Word and her word – a union of Christ and her quill. She longed to be permeated by the Love that flows from the source of the divine being to her ink on paper. She yearned to become a medium through which Love works, thus experiencing God in tender and peaceful contemplation, even in exile and in the pain of Christ's humanity.

75. HADEWIJCH, *Poem* 26, p. 201. Hadewijch plays with the words *wonde* (wound) and *wonder* (miracle). True healing is related to the wounds of love and those wounds are the true wonders.

XIV

THE VOICE OF REASON

The mystical theologian must speak, even though it hurts. Moments of contemplation and silence go together with work and action in exile. For mystical writers, working meant writing. They were artists and mystagogues who shared their God-given grace with their communities. The mystical experience thus goes hand in hand with writing. For the reader, it was of crucial importance that the author had, in fact, received God's grace. This is far from self-evident, because this grace can only be given through divine intervention and cannot be attained through human striving alone. Human work cannot reach mystical contemplation without divine intercession. According to Albert Deblaere, God acts through human beings, who receive his action. Yet, they are not passive, and their response to this experience through active deeds is not optional. Mystics sought a closer collaboration with the Word and their vocation led to a mission. They were called by the Word to contemplate and act, a mission to incarnate the Word and to share it with the Christian community¹. Through the mystic, the Word became living words and images, carefully choreographed to move the readers.

The act of writing constitutes a human response to the overwhelming – and often painful – presence of God. Through the externalization of their inner experience, mystics found a way to voice and communicate this pain, which they understood as salvific for their communities. It was the task of mystical authors to craft a language capable of bearing such expression. To do so, they relied on a vivid and embodied imagination, nourished by past lived experiences, bodily practices, and memory. Mystics were called to incorporate divine wisdom acquired in the depths of the mind – the *apex mentis* – and to cultivate the soul's faculties of memory, will, and intellect in preparation for receiving knowledge. Their mystical theology was thus both passive, as an experience of divine illumination, and active, as a process of purification and reflection. In this chapter, I will focus on the latter: the reflective dimension, and more specifically, the role of human reason in the works of Hadewijch and

1. See A. DEBLAERE, *Christian Mystic Testimony*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 72 (1998) 129-153, p. 152.

Ruusbroec. Both offer profound mystical-theological insights into the interplay between silence and speech, contemplation and action. Drawing on their introspective and autobiographical reflections, I argue that the writing of mystical texts is a painful process – one compelled by the voice of reason.

1. *Lady Reason*

Hadewijch introduced human reason as the antagonist of the naive soul, represented as an allegorical figure, Lady Reason. She ensures that the mystical process does not degrade into self-glorification. She hurts the young mystic who believes that all her wishes about Love will come true and emphasizes the limits of mortality. She questions the pride needed to speak and the faith necessary to trust in a unity with God's humanity. Reason is a crucial player in the pain experience of speaking and writing, and the mystic must overcome its enforced deficiencies in order to communicate.

Hadewijch lyrically and dramatically described this defeat of reason in her ninth vision, in which Lady Reason, disguised as a queen, assails the mystic. Hadewijch wrote: "The queen approached me dreadfully fast and set her foot on my throat, and cried with a more terrible voice, and said: 'Do you know who I am?' And I said: 'Yes indeed! Long enough have you caused me woe and pain! You are my soul's faculty of Reason'"². However, Reason is in turn vanquished by Love, who embraces the mystic and leads her to an unspeakable oneness with God, transcending the soul's capacities³. Thus the mystic reaches a wisdom human reason believed impossible and discovers the true pride of the soul. This does not mean that reason is completely eliminated. Reason is indispensable when it clarifies the limits and individuality of human beings, and calls for radical introspection⁴. Reason remains active, even when overcome

2. HADEWIJCH, *Vision* 9, p. 285.

3. Fraeters notices that the violent depiction of Lady Reason is peculiar. She argues that Hadewijch associated Lady Reason with Boethius' *Philosophia* as well as with the figures of *Sapientiae Dei*, the Virgin Mary, and *Ecclesia*, who steps on the head of the snake. Hadewijch's Lady Reason steps on the neck of the young mystic. See FRAETERS, *Wijshheid verbeeld*, pp. 101-125. Mary Suydam connects the aggressive and theatrical reactions of Lady Reason with stereotypes of demonic behavior. See SUYDAM, *Beguine Textuality*, p. 182.

4. As I have argued in the third act, insecurity and self-reflection are also dominant *topoi* in the *vita* of Beatrice of Nazareth. Her insecurities about her relationship with God and about the state of her soul are the catalysts of her self-reflection, which she further developed in her mystical writing. The hagiographer successfully captured this cycle of

or transcended. Reason is included in Love's dynamic embrace and will act out of love, still conscious of human faults but no longer hindered by them. She continues to exist, but is incorporated in Love and her eternal desire. Hadewijch called this enlightened reason. The enlightened mystical writer can act in the earthly exile without losing the constant flow of divine inspiration⁵. Thanks to this process, Hadewijch gained self-knowledge and appropriated the divine attribute of Wisdom. She accepted that human reason always fails to comprehend fully, but this did not stop her from speaking. Human reason is not annihilated but it is transformed. She now serves, not the individual, but Love.

Veerle Fraeters discusses a similar interplay between Reason and Love on the basis on the allegorical-didactic style of the twenty-fifth poem. In this poem, Hadewijch sent the allegorical figure Reason into battle against two other figures, Desire and Pleasure. The battle is fought in the soul of the knight-lover who, at that moment, finds himself in a blissful union with Love. I have called this the naive experience of the young mystic. Pleasure, which looks forward to this youthful naivety, is contradicted by Reason and Desire, which seek out each other's support. Hadewijch wrote:

Pleasure would certainly close her eyes
And gladly enjoy what she possesses
If fierce Desire, who always
Lives in fury, would tolerate it.
For every hour Desire begins anew
To cry: "Alas, Love! Be all mine!"
Thus she awakens Reason, who says to Pleasure:
"Behold, you must first reach maturity!"
Alas! That Reason should refuse Pleasure
Cuts more than all other pains⁶.

In this poem, Reason again acts as a force of pain, as the faculty that reminds the human soul of its insignificance. Reason judges the lovers unequal and thus deals the soul a heavy blow, hurting her. "What will become of the wounded soul?" the writer asked, provokingly. I have already argued that the answer to this conundrum – how to live and grow in pain – lies at the heart of Hadewijch's mystagogy. Only reason can heal the soul and free her from this predicament. Reason is the one who

insecurity, reflection, and writing, and it is highly reminiscent of Hadewijch's autobiographical notes in her works.

5. Reynaert states that enlightened reason is a crucial *topos* in Hadewijch's work and is mentioned twelve times in her *Letters*, which are considered her most systematic expositions and were inspired by the mystical theology of Richard of Saint Victor. See REYNAERT, *Beeldspraak van Hadewijch*, pp. 58-63.

6. HADEWIJCH, *Poem* 25, p. 197.

heals and cures. When she cures, Reason leads to new wonders and bestows the “highest glory” on the soul⁷. Together with Desire, Reason can accept that God always remains the Other and that the human person always falls short. This recognition should not lead to utter despair, but can be overcome if human reason is also transformed and enlightened.

This metamorphosis is possible, Fraeters writes, when Desire allies herself with Pleasure and together reject the painful existence Reason readily accepts and wants to endure. In this period of *ghebreken*, transformation is possible because Desire and Pleasure refuse to tolerate the difference between humanity and God. Pleasure must tear herself away from the naive desire for human joy, and must fully dedicate herself to Love. She goes beyond fleeting satisfaction and longs for an ever-deeper pleasure that gives a place to the pain Reason inflicts by pointing out human shortcomings and the otherness of the Beloved⁸.

The same victory over human reason can be found in Hadewijch’s letters, in which the mystical theologian took a more prosaic approach to the dynamics between silence and speech, reason and love. In her eighteenth letter, Hadewijch described how the reader should look God in the eyes with both the eye of reason and the eye of love. She argued that love strengthens rather than crushes reason. Sight needs two eyes to see everything clearly. God gives himself in overflowing love to humanity. The mystic responds to this and desires to contemplate God. To do so, she needs two eyes: the eye of reason and the eye of love. Hadewijch wrote:

The power of sight that is created as natural to the soul is charity. This power of sight has two eyes, love and reason. Reason cannot see God except in what he is not; love rests not except in what he is. Reason has its secure paths, by which it proceeds. Love experiences failure, but failure advances it more than reason. Reason advances toward what God is, by means of what God is not. Love sets aside what God is not and rejoices that it fails in what God is. Reason has more satisfaction than love, but love has more sweetness of bliss than reason. These two, however, are of great mutual help one to the other; for reason instructs love, and love enlightens reason. When reason abandons itself to love’s wish, and love consents to be forced and held within the bounds of reason, they can accomplish a very great work. This no one can learn except by experience⁹.

Reason highlights that the individual can never become God, but this is not the end of the story. The true lover still experiences unity, even

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 197-199.

8. See V. FRAETERS, *Lyrische lessen: Personificatie als mystagogisch middel in de Liederen van Hadewijch*, in *Spiegel der Letteren* 57 (2015) 113-128, pp. 122-123.

9. HADEWIJCH, *Letter* 18, p. 86.

if the lovers always remain ontologically distinct. The two eyes need to learn to work together in order to fathom the depths of the relationship with God, past naive notions of oneness or fear for human failing. This depth is viewed from two distinct angles. First, reason attempts to capture God through images and mediators, using its ability to distinguish. Then the experience of unity bewilders reason and surpasses the soul.

Human persons need to learn how to look through both eyes (reason and love) at once and thus must rely on divine will and the nobility of their own nature. They continue to fall short, wounding the soul. This pain is undoubtedly constructive. It aids mystical growth and perfects the service of love, but it must not prevent them from experiencing their noble pride. Reason continues to play a part, even when they reach heavenly contemplation; reason keeps mediating and continues to remind persons of God's essential otherness while supporting the author's search for words and distinct images to convey hidden truths. Enlightened reason sees that this otherness is indispensable to attain true Love and does not prevent it. The mystical theologian needs both eyes in order to speak and write truthfully about the mystical experience.

Both Reason and Love need to be conquered in Hadewijch's mystical drama. Barbara Newman argues that Hadewijch borrows the vocabulary from the *Minnesang* (love lyricism) to articulate this combat, in which the writer subverts the theme of humility and pleasure, exchanging it for pride and fierceness. Newman states that Hadewijch relied on this pride in her quest against a false sense of humility induced by a rational understanding of God as the absolute transcendent force, an understanding shared by many of Hadewijch's contemporaries¹⁰. Newman claims that Hadewijch's character of the bold knight makes her work unique, embracing both the fierce power of Reason and the supremacy of Love¹¹.

Hadewijch's creativity as a writer allows the reader to feel the pain inflicted by Reason's yoke and to transcend it through allegorical figures. These characters occasionally resurface in her oeuvre and are consistently typecast. They offer the reader diverse points of view, allowing the reader

10. Mommaers writes that Hadewijch did not agree with authors who only accepted God's transcendence, as determined by reason. On the forefront of this new development in theology, in which thinking about God was dissociated from experiencing him, was twelfth-century theologian Peter Abelard. Hadewijch chose the side of William of Saint-Thierry, who fiercely defended his monastic spirituality and affective theology against these new – what would later be called nominalist – tendencies introduced by Abelard. Hadewijch stressed the pride of the human soul and its ability to relate to God, conquering reason's logic, which declares God to be the absolute transcendent. See MOMMAERS, *Hadewijch*, pp. 74-83.

11. See NEWMAN, *God and the Goddesses*, pp. 180-181.

to identify with them, intellectually and affectively. The reader's reason is questioned, in order to help her restore her own wounded soul and make it worthy of a noble pride. She should never lose sight of Love and should never give in to the naive pleasure of sweet rest or the paralyzing darkness of despair. The mystic must learn to stand up and look Love in the eye. She cannot allow pain or false humility, induced by human reason, to hold her back, nor is she allowed to rest in the silence of perfect union. Her proud soul is allowed to speak, even though she might have preferred to stay silent.

This interaction between speaking and keeping silent transforms the young mystic into a mature writer, as is described in more detail in Hadewijch's letters. Her twenty-eight letter is a good illustration of this transformation. In this letter, the writer abandoned the structure of the *Visions*, which always end with the return to the earthly exile. Instead, she proposed a dialogue in which different souls describe their own silent experience of Love. This chorus can also be found in the *Poems* and can be seen as a didactic tool to dramatically highlight different approaches and nuances. Not only is the letter told in different voices – it is also about voices, adding an additional layer of meaning to the text. The letter's polyphony informs the reader that the unspeakable mystery of Love can be approached from different directions, with different voices. Some understood Love better, or in a different way, than others – even though each had tasted the hidden secrets enlightened by the Holy Spirit. Only a few of these voices possessed the talent to speak of Love full of grace: the mature mystical writers. They became theologians, spokespersons of God, and their divine words depended on the distance they had walked with Him. Some souls spoke of God's sweetness and greatness, while others communicated deeper insights on his love, nobility and triune nature. The most perfect among them attested to the heavenly bliss they already tasted in the here and now.

The souls in the letter repeatedly speak in the first person. This "I" speaks with experience gained through speaking and writing. The other souls and their statements amplify Hadewijch's story of ineffable and shared divine knowledge. The "I" values the silence of the other souls. They refuse to speak, preferring to extend their enjoyment of God's company. They can only be moved to speak when God demands it or when their help is needed. Hadewijch wrote:

So I kept silence then and reposed in God, until the time when God bade me speak. I have integrated all my diversity, and I have individualized all my wholeness. And I have enclosed all my individuality in God until the time when someone will come with such discernment as to ask me what I

mean. And since I feel with God in God, that nothing separates me more from him than having to speak, for this reason I keep silence¹².

Despite the beauty of blissful silence, the souls are called upon to speak. The most perfect souls need to articulate their hidden knowledge. They are not prompted by vanity, but by genuine humility and faith in the truth. Hadewijch rejected false idleness. This idleness implies that being one in the unspeakable is the ultimate stage of mystical growth. Hadewijch contrasted this with humility, a descending movement that returns to the vale of tears of the earthly existence. Hadewijch learned to be idle in God, to lose herself in Love, even as she spoke. She had to reconcile herself with the oneness of Love that, seemingly paradoxically, generates the multiplicity of earthly life. All working, all speaking is one in Love, who lies at their origin. There is no division or vanity, because the speaker is a channel, a medium of Love.

In her thirtieth letter, Hadewijch showed that enlightened reason plays a pivotal role in the service of Love, which the individual owes to the Trinity. The Father demands eternal fruition from the Son and the Holy Spirit and, in return, they expect the same from the Father. Humans also live with a debt that can only be repaid by striving for unity in eternity. This does not include a pursuit of one's own pleasure but demands a wasting away in the pain of Love. This pain helps one to grow rapidly and ascend, without returning, to a point where one reaches unity, where blinding lightning flashes and deafening thunder resounds. This lightning is the light of Love and shows what Love is. Hadewijch wrote: "But after that comes the thunder. Thunder is the fearful voice (cf. Apoc. 1:6) of threat: and it is retraction; and it is enlightened reason, which holds up before us the truth, and our debt, and our failure to grow up to conformity with Love, and our smallness compared to Love's greatness"¹³. The booming voice of reason corrects a naive understanding of Love and helps to position the individual vis-à-vis the Trinity as both different and related to the triune God.

However, this experienced oneness with the triune God cannot be expressed in human words. Reason fails again and is conquered by the fathomlessness of Love. She is incapable of communicating the hidden wisdom of the Trinity. Hadewijch's seventeenth letter relates that the mystic must care for her fellow creatures, but not out of selfishness or vainglory. Analogous with the figures of the Trinity, she must be one in

12. HADEWIJCH, *Letter* 28, p. 113.

13. HADEWIJCH, *Letter* 30, p. 119.

the divine being and complete good works as the Trinitarian Persons fulfill theirs. The mystic must express herself, yet would inevitably fail, as Hadewijch wrote:

For earth cannot understand heavenly wisdom. Words enough and Dutch enough can be found for all things on earth, but I do not know any Dutch or any words that answer my purpose. Although I can express everything insofar as this is possible for a human being, no Dutch can be found for all I have said to you, since none exists to express these things, so far as I know¹⁴.

Hadewijch described the confrontation of the writer with her own shortcomings. Even in her beloved medium, language, the writer is not ingenious enough to capture God – there is not “enough Dutch” for it. Human reason is a double-edged sword, responsible for the art of language as well as the realization of humanity’s flaws vis-à-vis God. Although the mystic has overcome the pain of separation, highlighted by human reason, and linked to speaking, as a writer she will still be confronted with the pain of failing as a wordsmith. The writer will never succeed in a perfect match between her words and the Word. Her writing becomes a painful exercise in *imitatio Christi* which can never be fully completed. Humans cannot grasp God through language and images. The images that surface afterward, while writing, serve as symbols to channel this powerful divine intervention. While writing, Hadewijch learned to live with the painful awareness of their incapability to grasp the divine. She learned how to experience the *defectus amoris*, the defect in her work – her service to Love in the form of writing – as intrinsically human. She expressed her human nature in contrast with the divine and did not shy away of the pain it caused. Her mystical language is a pain language. This language does not aim to express what God is, but offers the readers a possibility of learning about God themselves and discover the hidden truth of the Trinity that drove Hadewijch to be active and to speak up. In this process, enlightened reason becomes a trusted ally. Reason cannot grasp Love, but it can help identify words and images – no matter how flawed – to transfer a hidden painful knowledge that is connected to both pleasure and desire, that is inexplicable but not inaccessible.

2. *The Common Person*

Hadewijch’s Brabantian heir, John of Ruusbroec, incorporated both the idea of the nobility of the soul and the notion of enlightened reason and

14. HADEWIJCH, *Letter* 17, p. 84.

developed a complex but clear mystical-theological system. Ruusbroec was, first and foremost, a humble author with little desire for fame. He only aimed to support his community with spiritual advice on a wide range of topics. Yet his community of readers reached much farther than that of his predecessor Hadewijch. Ruusbroec was an acclaimed writer and his ideas attained religious authority in his lifetime. His fellow canons at Groenendaal decided to compile his writings, to ensure that he could continue to address future generations, preserving his voice in the mystical epicenter of Groenendaal. Ruusbroec's voice carried far beyond the verdant tranquility of the Sonian Woods, even reaching the Parisian intelligentsia. Thus, despite his retreat to Groenendaal, his authority transcended the immediate mystical culture in which he was active.

He spoke and wrote in a different era, in a changing and shifting mystical culture. The cards of Liège's mystical culture had been reshuffled and left no room for nuanced and more complex mystical theologies. Some masters of mysticism, such as Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart, had been forcibly silenced, their works branded as heresy. At a time when mystical ideas were no longer deemed credible, authors such as Ruusbroec had to watch their step. In this sense, Ruusbroec's position was similar to that of thirteenth-century holy women. Like the *Mulieres Religiosae* and Hadewijch, Ruusbroec could not speak freely; all were subject to social conventions. They were ensnared in a tangled, socio-political and religious web, from which only the most gifted writers could spin a convincing narrative. Yet Ruusbroec wrote with mystical and ascetic humility. He did not seek theological renown. One could even argue that his humility and dedication to his mystical calling prompted him to flee the religious power struggles of Brussels, withdrawing instead to the woods around Groenendaal. Ironically, his seclusion sealed his growing fame as a mystical author. Through his externalization in the form of an extensive oeuvre, and the wide circulation and reach of his manuscripts, Ruusbroec decisively shaped the mystical landscape of his time.

The Brabantian mystic shared Hadewijch's optimistic view of humankind. Persons can express the inner experience of their relationship with the divine. Despite all of their shortcomings and their mortal existence in time and space, they can still be united with God through the nobility of their souls. Ruusbroec scholar Albert Ampe analyzes Ruusbroec's view of humanity and argues that, in his *wesen* (being), to use Ruusbroec's term, the human person is made for supernatural unification with God. Despite the ontological distinction that reason observes between God and humanity, the soul is eternally united with God in its *wesen*. Ruusbroec

argued that the soul is created in God's image and that the soul, in its essence, is this image. However, because of the fall, the soul lost her likeness to God, which was only restored thanks to Christ's sacrifice. Christ, acting as a role model, restored humankind's access to grace¹⁵. Like Hadewijch, Ruusbroec engaged with the pride of the noble soul (the image of God), the fall of humanity, and humanity's humble position in relation to God (likeness). The soul bearing God's imprint does not suffer from the fall from grace. God's image in the soul is never diminished, even after the fall. This allows the soul to increasingly resemble God, although sins can diminish this likeness. Ruusbroec wrote:

Furthermore, we are other than God and cannot become one, but eternally remain in otherness, that is: where we subsist in ourselves, each in his own person, there God has made us like to Him in bare nature, after the mode of our higher faculties. But this likeness that God has given us all in common in nature makes us neither holy nor blessed, but grace and the gifts of God, which come from above into us, give us a virtuous life, and thereby God lives in us we in Him. And in this way we are like to God above our nature, and thus we remain eternally like unto God in grace and in glory¹⁶!

Even though the soul can never completely resemble God, the nobility of the soul remains intact. Reason, however, will always try to humble the person, pointing out his flaws and unlikeness to God, although even reason cannot neglect the fundamental union with God, found in the essence of the human soul. Ruusbroec's analysis of the role of reason is crucial to the understanding of his mystical theology. Keep in mind that, unlike Hadewijch, the author addressed a broad audience. Ruusbroec was not solely concerned with guiding the mystically trained. He sought to lead every believer to an authentic practice of faith, in which the soul's nobility endures and the soul can come to resemble God, living up to her abilities. Ampe observes that, according to Ruusbroec, everyone is tasked with honestly working for their own salvation, made possible by Christ's redeeming self-sacrifice¹⁷. The enlightenment of human reason, however, is only attainable for certain people, who have mastered the balance between the soul's activity and passivity. Ruusbroec calls these gifted few *ghemeyne menschen*, common people. One could argue that every mystical author had to be a common person.

15. See A. AMPE, *De geestelijke grondslagen van de zieleopgang naar de leer van Ruusbroec: A – Schepping en christologie* (Studiën en tekstuutgaven van Ons geestelijk erf, 11-13), Tiel, Lannoo, 1951, pp. 202-112.

16. RUUSBROEC, *Beguines*, p. 657.

17. See AMPE, *Genadeleer*, pp. 6-7.

Human reason plays an important role in the person's inner life and in the transformation to a common person. Reason is instrumental in the ascent to mystical heights as well as the descent from contemplation to action. In order to reach unity with God in both action and contemplation, the human person must transform reason and dare to let go of all rational distinctions (concepts and images), allowing the stream of divine grace to flow¹⁸. This means that human reason will have to surrender and give in to a potentially paradoxical reality¹⁹. If someone wants to possess love to the highest degree, one needs to let go of the distinctions and images made by human reason. There shines the light of the eternal sun, Ruusbroec wrote in *The Seven Enclosures*, and blessed are the eyes that can see this, eyes that follow the river of grace back to its source: the living fountain of the Holy Spirit. This place, Ruusbroec enigmatically claimed, is a desert, but a desert of eternal blessedness²⁰. Ruusbroec explored this inner landscape and introduced the paradoxical imagery of the spring and the wasteland, challenging the rational comprehension of his readers. Furthermore, he introduced the possibility of union with God without distinction, which seems impossible to human reason, blinded as she is by this eternal light. In *The Sparkling Stone*, Ruusbroec wrote:

For we feel an eternal inclination for a being other than we are. And this is the most intimate and the most secret difference we may feel between ourselves and God, for there is no other difference beyond this. And still, our reason stands open-eyed in the dark, that is in unfathomable unknowing. And in this darkness the unfathomable brightness remains covered and hidden from us, for its overwhelming unfathomableness blinds our reason, but it enfolds us in simplicity and transforms us with its own selfness. 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 God²¹.

18. RUUSBROEC, *Espousals*, p. 204: "The second coming of which we have spoken, we likened to a fountain with three streams. But this coming we wish to liken to the vein in the fountain, for there is no stream without fountain, nor fountain without living vein. In like manner, the grace of God flows into the higher faculties with (its) streams, and impels and enkindles a person to all virtues. And it is situated in the unity of our spirit like a fountain, and it wells in the same unity whence it arises, just like a living vein welling out of the living ground of God's richness, where neither fidelity nor grace can ever be wanting. And this is the touch which I mean".

19. The tension between inward and outward flow is crucial to Ruusbroec's work, McGinn argues, and is typical of his general use of dialectical tensions between opposites in his teachings. But this dialectic between opposing forces is not unique to Ruusbroec's work. On the contrary, Ruusbroec's logic fits in a long Christian tradition influenced by the Greek philosophers. McGinn writes that Ruusbroec was particularly inspired by the Neoplatonic paradigm of turning inward and outward in a constant in and outflow between God and the human person. See MCGINN, *Essential Themes*, pp. 131-133.

20. RUUSBROEC, *Enclosures*, p. 518.

21. RUUSBROEC, *Stone*, p. 251.

God's reality overwhelms reason, but reason does not cease to function, despite the losses it endures. Human persons must remain fully human, continuing to employ their reason and to love actively. Reason becomes ever more active and impassioned. Reason keeps staring in the darkness and is joined by love who immerses us. As in Hadewijch's writing, reason is not annihilated, but is subsumed in Love's greater being. "For as long as we inwardly see that God wants to be ours, God's generosity will touch our greedy lust, and this causes restlessness of loving, for God's touch that flows out to us, fans our restlessness and demands our action, namely that we love the love eternal", Ruusbroec continued in *The Sparkling Stone*²². Even when humans are connected with God and transcends their own being, they remain embodied creatures. They remain human and want to know and love – otherwise a stone could equally be lifted up into the loving union with God, Ruusbroec argued²³. Human reason desires to understand its union with God, even if this is eternally unfathomable. This is reason's activity and eternal inclination, which takes the lead after a contemplative experience in which reason is overwhelmed and her capacity to make distinctions is no longer active. The extreme inward movement to a supernatural union appears to lead to an unquenchable thirst to master this unification with the human faculties. In *The Sparkling Stone*, Ruusbroec wrote:

And this is a hunger unstilled: to always strive in failure is to swim against the current. Man cannot leave it, nor grasp it; he cannot do without it, nor can he obtain it; he cannot speak about it, nor can he be silent about it; for it is above reason and understanding and above all that has been created, and therefore he can neither reach it nor overtake it²⁴.

Reason does not allow God's depths to immerse her but continues to struggle for her own existence as a faculty of the human soul, swimming against the current of God's overflowing grace, trying not to drown in the ocean of God's infinity. Reason realizes how mercifully God imbues the soul and floods all faculties. Like the sea, the tide turns and retreats, leaving the soul behind parched and enflamed with desire to taste God once again and to feel his touch.

Ruusbroec's conceptualization of pain primarily lies in burning desire, less in the struggle with reason personified – Hadewijch's allegorical Lady Reason. Nevertheless, the mystic's metaphors suggest violence as well. Ruusbroec uses light and flood metaphors to discuss human reason

22. *Ibid.*, p. 253.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 251.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 249.

and its fight with the fathomlessness of God. Reason is an eye blinded by the darkness of God's presence. God returns with high tide and once again overwhelms the human faculties, vanquishing reason without crushing her completely. Reason is immersed in God, obtaining a kind of serenity²⁵. This does not mean that the struggle between reason and God cannot take a violent turn, similar to Hadewijch's dramatic characterization of the enlightenment of reason²⁶. In *The Sparkling Stone*, Ruusbroec likened this moment to a storm:

And for that reason the heat is so intemperate that the practice of loving between us and God goes and comes like lightning in heaven, and still we cannot be consumed. And in this storm of loving our works are beyond reason and beyond manner, for love desires what remains impossible for it and reason bears witness that love is right but it can neither advise love in this case nor forbid it²⁷.

God and reason engage in a game of shadows and a play of light, which Ruusbroec described as lightning. Reason is illuminated by lightning flashes. The author connects this lightning to thunder as well. A similar image can be found with Hadewijch and in some of the *vitae* of the *Mulieres Religiosae*. The combination of enlightenment caused by lightning and the terrifying sound of thunder had already been developed by these women and their hagiographers

Goswin of Bossut, for example, recalled Ida using the expression "the thundering of the Trinity", when she was ready to come down to earth, back to a private conversation with her sister. She explained to her sister that she used this expression to refer to the incarnate Son, who is the merging of ancient prophecies, as thunder is the converging of clouds. Christ appeared visibly among men "flashing like lightning in his miracles, thundering terribly against sinners in his salutary preaching"²⁸. She continued: "Thus too did he, at *the will of* the Father and by co-operation of the Holy Spirit, deign by *his* passion and *death to give life to the world* (Ordo Missae)"²⁹.

A similar reference to enlightened reason and the Trinity can be found in Beatrice's *vita*. Her hagiographer explained that she was suddenly struck by lightning in her mind. Her rational powers could not grasp the

25. *Ibid.*, p. 253.

26. See J. REYNAERT, *Ruusbroec en Hadewijch*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 55 (1981) 195-233.

27. RUUSBROEC, *Stone*, p. 253.

28. *Ida of Nivelles*, p. 91.

29. This what Ida understood spiritually of that thunder, but her sister could not catch the meaning of the term, for it was too obscure and figurative for her to understand. *Ibid.*

fleeting experience that was forcefully bestowed upon her³⁰. This usually happened when she was reading scriptures about the Trinity, the hagiographer observed, because when she was reading her heart was opened and the Holy Spirit could enter it like lightning, while her reason could not grasp the full extent of what was happening. Nevertheless, she was not capable of holding on to the knowledge revealed to her when everything turned dark again, when the light of knowledge dimmed. The Holy Spirit retreated from her heart and left it open, longing for more³¹.

In her twentieth letter, Hadewijch mentioned how Love “cries with a loud voice, without stay or respite, in all the hearts of those who love: ‘Love ye love!’ This voice makes a noise so great and so unheard-of that it sounds more fearful than thunder (cf. Apoc. 6:1)”³². Thunder accompanies the lightning that enlightens reason. It is a dreadful sound that scares her disciples.

Lightning blinds reason, leaving an afterimage on the retina, before being plunged into darkness. It is a struggle in the dark, reminiscent of the battle the visionary fought with Lady Reason in Hadewijch’s ninth vision. Combined with the thunder, lightning creates a violent drama that is also evoked by the imagery of the storm. In the seventh rung, Ruusbroec went further and described the meeting between God’s Spirit and the human soul as a raging storm, which suggests a similar degree of violence and pain that is suggested by the hagiographers and Hadewijch. Lightning represents God’s shining darkness, while thunder symbolizes God’s Word. Ruusbroec wrote the following about this voice, which not only belongs to the Father, but also to the Holy Spirit who is Love:

The Holy Spirit works in us and we with Him all our good works. He cries out in us with loud voice, without words; “Love the Love that loveth thee eternally!” His outcry is an inward touch in our spirit. The voice is more fearsome than thunder. The lightning bolts that come out of it open heaven to us and show us light and eternal truth. The heat of His touch and His love are so great that they will burn us up entirely. His touch in our spirit calls out without cease: “Pay thy debt; love the Love that hath eternally loved thee!” From this comes great restlessness within, and modeless conduct, entirely without modes, for the more we love, the more we lust to love, and the more we pay what Love demands of us, the more we keep on owing. Love does not keep silent, it cries out eternally without cease: “Love Love!” This is a strife very much unknown to alien senses³³.

30. *Beatrice of Nazareth*, p. 247.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 214.

32. HADEWIJCH, *Letter 20*, p. 92.

33. RUUSBROEC, *Rungs*, p. 621.

Ruusbroec explicitly borrowed from Hadewijch's twentieth and thirtieth letters. The greatness of God demands a more perfect service of love from the human person. The storm brings deluge, hail, and calamity, but ultimately symbolizes humanity flailing in vain. The human person tries to conquer God and is constantly overcome in an eternal game of Love, the intensity of the battle never diminishing. Humans can never abandon this combat but must continue to brave the storms of Love, through hope and despair. Here, Ruusbroec combined this darkness with a burning desire that can be painful, just as the touch of the divine can inflict terrible burns. Like Love itself, this desire is eternal and divine. It can only come into being because God remains the Other, the darkness. The Holy Spirit makes this truth knowable in the human soul through sound and touch. Christ is the blinding light that is like lightning and the Word that sounds like thunder. This lightning blinds the inner eyes and the human person hears the terrible, incomprehensible truth about God, silencing them and ordering them to listen and obey Love's commands.

In Ida's imagery, human beings and God converge like clouds, while Hadewijch presented this meeting as a duel between knights, a joust. The reference to "alien senses" suggests that Ruusbroec studied and understood Hadewijch well. In the following passages from *The Seven Enclosures* and *The Spiritual Espousals*, Ruusbroec too interpreted the Middle Dutch *storm* as a battle, not a tempest. It is reminiscent of Hadewijch's creative wordplay:

You have certainly noticed that in summer as two strong contrary winds clash and storm together in the air, thunder and lightning, hail or rain are produced here below, and sometimes tempest and plagues. You can note the same thing in storming and impetuous love, where the person's spirit is raised up in union with the Spirit of the Lord, and each spirit touches the other with affection, and each invites the other and offers him all that he is and all he can do. Thence reason becomes enlightened and clear and wants to know at all cost what love is, and what that touch may be that moves and wells up in the spirit³⁴.

In this storm of love, two spirits contend: the Spirit of God and our spirit. God, through the Holy Spirit, inclines Himself towards us, and thereby we are touched in love. And by God's operation and the faculty of loving, our spirit presses into and inclines itself towards God, and thereby God is touched. From these two, there arises the strife of love: in the depths of the encounter and in that innermost and most intense visit, each spirit is wounded the most by love. These two spirits, that is, our spirit and God's Spirit, flash and shine each into the other, and each shows the other its face. This makes each spirit continually crave for the other with love. Each exacts

34. RUUSBROEC, *Enclosures*, p. 531.

of the other that which he is, and each offers and invites the other to that which he is. This makes the lovers flow away (into each other). God's touch and His gifts, our loving craving and our giving in return, keep love steadfast. This flowing-out and flowing-back cause the fountain of love to overflow. Thus God's touch and our love's craving become one single love³⁵.

The notion of violence and pain is strongly influenced by Hadewijch. However, in Ruusbroec's imagery, this painful event turns into a loving union: as the partners collide, they are invited to mutually penetrate – not crush – one another, an image reminiscent of Ruusbroec's view of the Trinity as *perichoresis*. More than Hadewijch, Ruusbroec stressed the constant flux between entering and returning, which makes this experience less violent and fleeting, and more constant and predictable. In *The Spiritual Espousals*, he stated that touch of God is a storm, a violent attack during which human reason stands in the front lines. But the storm of God and human beings is turned into a solid relationship. They belong to each other and both belong to Love. This is what Ruusbroec called "common", although he could not perfectly grasp this reality in words. Human reason keeps fighting in order to understand what God is, while love already experiences his reality.

Contemplative persons find themselves in a heart-wrenching predicament: they are dying to speak but cannot. Speech would help them comprehend this fathomless reality; language and its distinctions between words would help reason master the situation. Speaking was painful for Ruusbroec too, although he did not express it as dramatically or poetically, nor as often, as his colleague Hadewijch. The overwhelming experience of God's touch and voice prompted the mystic to speak, but his rational faculties prevented this. He preferred to stay with God and lose himself in him, but Ruusbroec knew that this was impossible because mortal beings can never lose their created nature. Yet the human person cannot live without God either: to renounce this joyful speechlessness is to give up God³⁶. Two opposing forces drive the person – the need to remain human and the desire for God, to speak while keeping silent.

Humans must experience both extremes fully and simultaneously. In earthly reality, they must put their capabilities to work, while resting within their being. They must be like the persons of the Trinity, who work as independent entities, yet are united by their shared nature where they

35. RUUSBROEC, *Espousals*, p. 206.

36. RUUSBROEC, *Stone*, p. 250: "For we cannot become God at all and lose our createness: that is impossible. And if we remained in ourselves completely, separated from God, we would be wretched and beyond bliss. And therefore we should feel ourselves completely in God and completely in ourselves".

rest. According to Van Nieuwenhove, this theoretical insight was nothing new. The unification of the ideals of action and contemplation is much older and was already present in the saint cult of the thirteenth century. Yet, Van Nieuwenhove writes, what Ruusbroec did with this insight is truly unique. He linked the interplay of action and contemplation to the inner workings of the Trinity and derived his own anthropological structure from it. The figures of the Trinity are united in their essence but remain eternally active. They are active in their personhood and resting in the enjoyment of mutual interpenetration, called *perichoresis*. They flow back into the shared being of their essence and they flow out in their activity as persons³⁷.

According to Ruusbroec, the human person, the image of God, will forever remain a being that needs to unite work and rest, but a balance can already be found on earth. By gaining knowledge on the triune God the mystic learns that work and rest go hand in hand. The insight that human beings are both active and contemplative beings, united in a superessential union with the godhead while performing virtuous works of Love in the world, makes reason enlightened. Enlightened reason should not be discouraged by this fundamental unknowing but should strive for a balanced dynamic between its experience of restful contemplation and its active reflection on the nature of the relationship with God. Reason discovers that this give-and-take defines being human and she learns to live with the never-ending ebb and flow of God's grace that allows her to conquer and to be conquered in turn. The goal is to experience these two movements as one, in one and the same moment, rather than as distinct and sequential³⁸.

Enlightened reason plays a crucial role in this process. When the mystic descends and returns to reality, his focus remains on God. He acts through God who is Love as Love still streams through his faculties. He has become a channel and medium of Love. Enlightened reason mediates between God and humanity and guarantees a combination of unity in God while actively loving one's fellow person in *caritas*. Enlightened reason synchronizes time and eternity³⁹. She possesses no words to fathom the

37. See VAN NIEUWENHOVE, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, pp. 176-177.

38. The "common person" learns to experience these two movements – work and rest – in the earthly exile. Arblaster and Faesen trace Ruusbroec's use of the word *ghemeyne* (common) back to his thirteenth-century colleague Beatrice of Nazareth. The mystical authors use the term to discuss the reality in which all creatures are united under God and loved by and in him. See R. FAESEN – J. ARBLASTER, *Commune à tous par largesse de pure charité: Common Love in Beatrice of Nazareth and Marguerite Porete*, in *Ons geestelijk erf* 83 (2012) 297-323.

39. RUUSBROEC, *Stone*, pp. 252-253.

divine being because the experience is fundamentally unspeakable. Yet humans can still speak through God and understand that they remain essentially connected to God, even in toil, although the ultimate source of his words remains hidden. The mystic knows that he speaks with God, but he does not know how he can express this divine being. He has found his own origin in God, anchoring all his capabilities in his endlessness. The Lord works through human abilities, although reason cannot comprehend how. As Ruusbroec explained in *The Twelve Beguines*:

But what is impossible to us, is possible to Him, for where our spirit and all our faculties fail in their work the Spirit of our Lord works above our faculties and above our works. And there we are wrought by the Spirit of our Lord, and we undergo His activity above all our activity; and in undergoing, we comprehend Him. In our works we always fail and cannot comprehend Him; and above our works, where He works and we undergo, we comprehend, in undergoing, above all our works. But this is what it means to comprehend God in an incomprehensible manner, that is: undergoing and not-comprehending⁴⁰.

God works through the human person and thus he rightly receives all honor. The contemplative person descending the *apex mentis* is filled with the truth, the virtues strengthened. The burdens are no longer heavy. Ruusbroec states at the end of *The Sparkling Stone*:

And he seeks nothing for himself but only the honor of the One who sent him, and therefore he is just and true in all his actions. And he has a rich, mild foundation which is grounded in the wealth of God, and therefore he must always flow into all those who need him, for the living fountain of the Holy Spirit is his wealth which cannot be exhausted. And he is a living, willing instrument of God with which God does what He wants, the way He wants; and he does not claim this for himself, but gives the honor to God. And therefore he remains willing and ready to do all that God commands, and strong and courageous to suffer and bear all that God allows to befall him. And therefore he has a common life, for contemplation and action come just as readily to him and he is perfect in both⁴¹.

The mystic stands between God and the human community, he is *ghemeyne*, common. He is in constant connection with humanity through his *caritas* and simultaneously united with God. In work and in the earthly exile, he continues to experience God. Therefore, his burdens are light and his pain sweet. The mystic has become a channel and medium through which God and human beings live in unity and through whom Love flows. His service of Love is guided by Love itself and he no longer

40. RUUSBROEC, *Beguines*, p. 658.

41. RUUSBROEC, *Stone*, p. 258.

suffers the many possible pains connected to this service. The mystic has not become insensitive, but mortal life is now experienced through celestial bliss. Suffering remains a part of being human, but no longer affects the mystic. His works cease to be a burden.

Ruusbroec understandably criticized those who strive for contemplation without images and without virtues. He portrayed these antagonists as heretics, out to glorify themselves. Guided by self-love, they live the opposite of Ruusbroec's ideal *ghemeyne* life. They adore only themselves and can love neither humanity nor God. They reject all mediation and seek a blind, essential rest. They refuse to take part in the life of the Christian community. Yet these heretics do not remain silent, isolated in their trance, but believe they must share their insights and thus boost their prestige. They are not humble but arrogant, unduly proud. Nor do they wish to be instructed – they know everything better already.

Ruusbroec was particularly harsh because movements such as the Brethren of the Free Spirit insisted on passing on their heretical insights to innocent people, potentially condemning them to the same hellish fruit and eternal death. They spurred people on to a wicked and empty life in search of the contemplative, even though, Ruusbroec scathingly wrote: “they are inwardly assailed by images, and dismayed and beset by fear within, they lose their vacant turning-inward in repose and fall into despair, so that no one can console them, and they die like rabid dogs”⁴². Ruusbroec reacted strongly because he wanted to contrast his own teachings with this erroneous doctrine. If his readers listened to the duplicitous words of false prophets, they could jeopardize his own mystical theology. He wrote:

And therefore, as I have told you before, watch out for the conceited men who, through their vacant imagelessness, with their bare, simple vision, have found within themselves in a natural manner the indwelling of God and pretend to be one with God without the grace of God and without the practice of virtues and in disobedience to God and to the Holy Church. And with all this perverted life, which I have already described, they wish to be a son of God by nature. And if the Prince of angels was cast out of heaven because he exalted himself and wished to be like God, and the first man was driven out of Paradise because he wished to be like God, how shall the worst of sinners, that is the unfaithful Christian, come from earth to heaven, he who himself desires to be God with no similarity (to Him) in grace and virtue? For no one ascends to heaven through his own power save the Son of Man, Jesus Christ⁴³.

42. RUUSBROEC, *Little Book*, p. 628.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 637.

Unlike these conceited men, Ruusbroec held on to the images of Christ: his virtuous life, his suffering and death, which he took as the example of the perfect human life. Despite his imageless unification without means and without distinction, he clung to the image of Christ. Ruusbroec beheld God through these images of Christ and within other people. Everything is united in Love and nothing prevents a union with means. Ruusbroec adored the images; he cherished all of creation. At the end of his *Boeske der Verclaeringe*, the mystic explicitly described his imitation of Christ. Ruusbroec served the Church through Christ – his work was the work the Savior made possible within him. He wrote:

At this time I cannot make my view more clear to you. Concerning all the things that I understand, and feel, and have written, I submit myself to the judgment of the saints and of the Holy Church. For I wish to live and die Christ's servant in the Christian faith and I desire to be, by the grace of God, a living member of the Holy Church⁴⁴.

The mystic loved himself, not as the pretender aggrandizes himself, but because he experienced himself as an image of God, a member of the Holy Church, and a vessel through which God acts in his Christian community⁴⁵. Strengthened by his contemplative life and the knowledge that God's grace flowed through his faculties and through his quill, Ruusbroec dared to share his rich mystical theology in a culture plagued by growing legions of fanatic scholars and alleged heretics.

3. *The Writing Mystic*

In this act, I have reflected on the conceptualization and interpretation of the pain that is caused by expressing mystical-theological ideas in the public sphere. In a way, it serves as a meta-reflection on the mystical-theological literature and its writers. The writers and speakers take center stage. I have sought to highlight the various moments when holy men, women, hagiographers, and mystics spoke. On the stage of the mystical culture of Liège, they perform different roles: some of them are speaking bodies, others are embodied writers. But all share an experience of pain that seems inseparable from mystical growth, in which expression and action are crucial parts.

The acclaimed mystical authors Hadewijch and John of Ruusbroec offer insights into the inner dynamics of the process of expression, based on their interpretation of the concept “enlightened reason”, which both

44. *Ibid.*

45. RUUSBROEC, *Letter 1*, p. 774.

authors connect to the imagery of the *storm*. Enlightened reason, a grace-infused faculty of the human soul, serves as the puzzle piece uniting God and his creation. Enlightened reason positions the mystics within their communities, in which they play an active role as prophets of hidden wisdom. They are mouthpieces of the inexpressible, a paradoxical reality that causes suffering and healing at the same time. They embody the thirteenth-century ideal of being both active and contemplative, and they use the salvific pain associated with the writing process (deficiency, insecurity and possible rejection) to grow toward mystical maturity. The enlightenment of reason is a painful process and is conceptualized with imagery associated with the Middle Dutch word *storm*, accentuating the violent rapture that is caused by the touch of God. Reason needs to surrender itself to this overwhelming flood of grace, which is attributed to Love, who organizes the inner workings and activity of the Trinity. The mystics train their enlightened reason by constantly altering the subversive contemplative experience of the loving embrace and their mission to express mystical-theological knowledge. This is their service to Love, which leads to further perfection of the common person. Only then can they become proud mature mystics, who are encouraged to speak, looking through both the eye of love and the eye of reason in order to gaze into the terrifying depths of the divine mystery and see created life through God's eyes.

For Hadewijch and Ruusbroec, the weight of their divine mission was only bearable because they possessed a lived experience of the fundamental trust and bond between Christ and themselves. Their seemingly harsh pain language is infused with a loving presence of God through Christ, who supported them all the way. The authors did not question this fundamental presence and unbreakable link to God. They believed in the pride and ability of the human soul to achieve these unthinkable mystical heights. The hagiographers lacked this immediate mystical knowledge of the pride of the human souls – or they did not verbalize it explicitly. Thomas of Cantimpré sometimes portrayed himself as a tortured writer, who had to mediate between his saints and mystical culture. He doubted his capacity to capture the unspeakable mystical knowledge his saints incorporated. He only gained this knowledge through witnesses, in private conversations or passed on by word-of-mouth. These hidden words never resonated in the public sphere. Yet, despite his inability to fully understand and describe this wisdom, the hagiographer is asked to address the public audience. For this transgression – for proclaiming hidden mystical knowledge – he had to pay the price. He risked being rejected and persecuted, much like the saints. Like the mystics, he drew strength from

the idea that he, in a way, imitated Christ, who preached and suffered the consequences.

By comparing the figures of the mystics and hagiographers to the saints, I observe that all these characters transcend literary genres and show striking resemblances when it comes to their positioning in mystical culture. They all need to speak and be active in their communities, distinguishing themselves from ordinary people. Their speech is not vain, they do not indulge in gossip. Their words are true and reflect the Word that is Christ. The hagiographers make sure that their saints – and, thanks to medieval stereotypes, women in particular – were portrayed as humble truth-tellers who were willing to suffer for expressing their hidden knowledge. Like Hadewijch and Ruusbroec, they had to interrupt their loving union with God in order to help their visitors, consoling them and guiding them on their journey to mystical wisdom. However, word about their less obvious miracles (compared to the paramystical events associated with them and their bodies) got out, attracting both admiration and aversion. Not everyone is ready for the hidden truth of God. The clash between God's word and human gossip, or even heresy, is conceptualized as a painful confrontation. This rippling effect of hidden mystical knowledge, passed on and meeting rejection, creates the concentric circles in mystical culture. These writers and speakers were highly aware of which circles they addressed and how they went about this. They were not worried about the pain caused by these confrontations but about the position of their readers on a spectrum of mystical growth and maturity, aiming to help them grow without dashing their beliefs. Like Christ, they were inspired by love, not fear, to speak the truth.

CONCLUSION

Arriving at the end of the journey through the mystical culture of Liège, some conclusions present themselves. I have studied different characters, audiences, dramas, and scenarios that were created by mystical theologians to help readers conceptualize and interpret their own painful experiences. The journey took me through historical and virtual spaces. I mapped the locations where ordinary believers, mystical acolytes, saints, and mystics suffered. I drew concentric circles around the mystical epicenters where mystical-theological ideas were created and negotiated. I highlighted moments of friction and tension between mystical centers and their periphery, resulting in different pain interpretations. These epicenters often coincided with gateways to inner experiences and imaginary landscapes. These inner realities were not visible to ordinary believers who had to trust the saints and mystics to tell them truthfully of all that is hidden from physical eyes.

These authors often felt the need to conceptualize that common people did not believe the horrors they had seen. Like Jacob, they were marked after they struggled with a transcendent reality beyond the borders of earthly existence, terrifying anyone too scared to look the Other straight in the eye. These travelers found the unexpected, a hidden presence that is ephemeral and cannot be described. However, like Christina Mirabilis and Hadewijch, they had to return to earth and tell their community what had happened. Their stories were not lighthearted. Their voices were drained with sorrow and pain. Therefore, these saints and mystics were portrayed as persecuted because their mystical theologies were detrimental to anyone seeking to live their life according to their own will. Faced with animosity, these mystical figures had to be creative. They decided to speak and convince their communities, taking into account their audiences' point of departure. They acted out of love, for beings on earth and in heaven, the community of Christians. They did not take away the fear and pain of their community but transformed it with Love. Trusting Christ, who conquered the full range of human experiences, especially fear, pain, and even death, they encouraged their audience to follow Christ on this path to human transformation, a path of deification. Through Christ, pain – both physical and mental – became the pathway to salvation, a road everyone needs to travel sooner or later.

At the periphery of mystical culture, most people did not respond to the call of the mystical theologians. They would suffer after death in hell

or purgatory, the theologians predicted. However, to reduce their punishments, they could pursue virtuous lives, repent and confess regularly and pray to God and the saints. Nevertheless, to truly be saved, they could not expect pain to remain an external reality. They had to face pain. The first step I discussed was partaking in the saint's performance of pain as a witness, listening to the preachers' exemplary tales. These performances and stories are both marvelous and horrifying, entertaining but moralistic. They rely on imagery that drew heavily on eschatological dramas, depicting the most horrible scenes that would scare listeners, driving them to repent. The saints' performances and their restaging in hagiographic literature served a similar purpose and added a heroic character whose virtuous behavior had to encourage imitation. Yet the saints' excessive physical pain – the visible marks of salvation not meant for ordinary people – had to be admired only, not mimicked. To ensure that the physical suffering still served to assist the reader in their relation to Christ's path of salvation, the authors had to make sure the readers understood the meaning of suffering. They guided the spectator's eye and commented on the attitudes and motivations that moved the saints' bodies to suffer. This motivation, namely their love for God and their willingness to suffer for him and the Christian community, was the actual source of the salvation of both the performing saint and the audience.

In the next step, individuals were encouraged to visualize and meditate on their own dramatic scenes, inspired by imagery developed by visionaries and mystical theologians and depicted as divinely inspired. The readers were invited to turn inward and use their inner eyes to look within their own souls, and especially their imaginations, which the texts influenced with good and virtuous images, such as the wounded body of Christ. The onlooker was supposed to welcome Christ's pain through compassion. The saints served as exemplary yet exalted figures within mystical culture. They were depicted as extremely compassionate for lost souls, especially the souls in purgatory. The purgatorial saints showed that it was possible to allow pain in, even when this pain was not your own. These acts of voluntary suffering were only possible when pain was experienced through love. However, this was a human love, with its own limitations. Only when one was willing to let go of these common conceptions of love and truly embrace pain could one conquer the fear for true divine Love that lured from the abyss.

At this stage, one entered the epicenter of mystical culture as a mystical acolyte. To continue this path, one needed a mystic, an experienced traveler, to act as a guide. These mentors did not present themselves as exploring the virtual places of hell and purgatory, nor did they trust the

interference of saints. Typical of these mystical-theological texts at the core of mystical centers was the attempt to strip classical imagery of its mythological layer and utilize classical imagery to talk about humanity's one-on-one experiences with the divine, without mediation. Purgatory and hell are realities that represent experiences of mystical growth. Only when one truly faces the pains of hell and does not expect any reward or help from God is one ready to be united with God as the Other, the Terrible and Wonderful. This realization and complete surrender goes hand in hand with a recognition of human existence and its limits. Yet these limitations drive humans to long for God even more, despite human shortcomings and God's greatness. The difference between God and humanity creates a purgatorial desire that burns from the inside. This desire increases even more when the acolytes move closer to God. They learn how to conquer fear with Love; they are willing to move through the complete spectrum of human existence, even pain, because, in the end, all of it is connected to Love.

Of these marvels and wonders, the mystical theologians cannot speak. They can only help the acolyte, the reader, to be receptive to the voice of God roaring like thunder, blinding human reason. When the acolytes progress, they become the masters who must teach the next generation, creating genealogies of mystical thought. The mystical theologians decided not to remain silent. They spoke and wrote. They created the possibility for other people to approach the divine in the depths of human existence. They became words, literary *personae* who transcended the limits of time and space of the human body. They were incarnated in their literary bodies and move with readers through their inner imaginary spaces, filling the readers' memories with virtuous images, enlightening their reason with challenging ideas, and transforming the human will by inspiring it to let the painful yet wonderful reality of Love in. Only then can the readers ascend with them to the highest peak of human existence, the bare essence, where the readers are left alone with the abysmal reality which will present itself when the time is right.

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