

WORDING THE SILENCE: INITIATORY READING OF MYSTICAL TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

Hadewijch, the 13th-century Brabantine woman mystic, was the magistra of a small group of beguines. We know almost nothing about her life, except that she wrote letters, visions and songs of love mysticism that most probably circulated among her followers and disciples. In her letters there are a number of passages in which she asks the addressee – whom she often calls “dear child” or “sweet love” – to read and re-read what she had received from her, suggesting on the one hand that she as magistra cannot say more about her own experience of God than what she had already said and written, and on the other hand that meditative reading could lead the “dear child” to a more profound knowledge or even experience of the divine. Indeed, if we keep re-reading her letters about the ineffable unio mystica and can listen to the modus mysticus in which she writes, we can conclude that she invites her disciple to an initiatory reading, which sometimes, through the power of unfathomable images arranged in repetitive (rhythmical) patterns, leads to a seeing beyond the imaginable.

THE WORD AND THE SILENCE

Before a mystic author finds the right words and utters them, a process of ‘becoming word’ takes place within the mystical one-ing. The mystical experience of oneness happens within the person’s innermost being, at an unfathomable depth. God’s touch, there, is itself a form of speaking. Mystical speech is a response to the divine touch which is God’s Word: what the mystic as mystic says emerges from *unio* and leads back to *unio*.

This is what we understand from the oeuvre of Hadewijch, a Brabantine woman love mystic of the 13th century who was an author of visions, songs

(or “poems in stanzas”), and letters in rhyme and prose.¹ She was the *magistra* of a small group of beguines – known as *mulieres religiosae* (devout women) – belonging to the higher social strata, and therefore literate. Hadewijch addressed her words to this small group of like-minded souls, but her writings were known for at least two centuries and highly appreciated outside her own circle. Within a network of Augustinian canons and Carthusian monks they were even considered sacred.²

According to one of her letters, God touches (*gheraect*) with His own fathomless depth the deepest part of the person and thus further deepens that abyss of the soul, drawing her to Himself. In that space, the soul hears the word that is ‘hidden’ (*verholen*) from those who do not serve God in the freedom of a perfect experience of love (*minne*). In this freedom the soul sees and hears the secret words that are ‘unsayable’ (*onuertellec*) and ‘unheard’ (*onghehoert*).³ In Letter 2 we also learn that this word is ‘hidden’ (*verborghen*): the soul, Hadewijch says, will hear from God the hidden counsel, as Job says: “To me was spoken a hidden word”.⁴ This clearly alludes to Gregory the Great’s *absconditum verbum*,⁵ which can also be understood as an inner longing that arises from within. To hear the hidden word is to receive the words of the Holy Spirit with one’s heart. The Spirit’s speaking cannot be known except by someone who is capable of taking in the words. It can be felt in silence but not expressed verbally.⁶ In Letter 28, as we shall see later on, Hadewijch speaks of the soul that is ‘guided into a blessed stillness’ (*gheleidet in ene verweende*

¹ Her 14 Visions, 31 Letters in prose, 45 Songs or Poems in Stanzas and 14 Rhymed Letters have been preserved in four extant manuscripts. The earliest one, Manuscript “A” (Royal Library of Brussels, 2879–80), was copied in the first half of the 14th century, “B” (Royal Library of Brussels, 2877–78) is a copy of A from around 1380. The third one, “C” (Library of the University of Ghent, 941), was copied at the end of the 14th century. There is a fourth manuscript, “R” (Antwerp, Ruusbroec Society 385 II), from the 16th century, but it does not contain all of the works of Hadewijch.

² In the prologue of the Middle High German 13th-century translation of Hadewijch’s Letter 10 she is called St. Adelwip (...) who is a great saint in the eternal life” (*sante adelwip ... die do ist ein grosse heilige in dem ewigen lebende*) whose teachings have enlightened “friends of God living in Brabant.” The author Jan van Leeuwen in his *Zeven tekens uit de zodiac* calls Hadewijch “a holy glorious woman” (*een heyligh glorieus wif*), whose “books” are begotten of God and whose teachings are as true as the teachings of Saint Paul. Within a Brabantian network of Augustinian canons and Carthusian monks her works were considered to be sacred texts Cf. Fraeters 2014, p. 32 and 182 (Textual Appendix).

³ ‘Dan alre eerst moechdi rusten met sente ianne die op jhesus borst sliep. Ende alsoe doen noch die ghene die in vribede der Minnen dienen: Si rusten op die soete wise borst ende sien ende horen die heimelike worde die onuertellec Ende onghehoert sijn den volke ouermids die soete runinghe des heilichs gheests.’ (Letter 18, 182–188)

⁴ ‘... soe suldi den *verholenen* naet van hem horen, Alsoe iob van hem seghet: Te mi es gheseghet een *verborghen woert*’ (Letter 2, 119–121, my italics)

⁵ *Moralia in Job*, 5.28.50 (PL 75.705, rep. CCSL 143, Turnhout: Brepols, 1979).

⁶ Cited from Reynaert 1981, 199–200.

stilheit), in which she ‘hears a great murmur from the wonder which is God Himself in everlastingness’ (*een groet gheruchte van dien wondere dat god selue es in ewecheiden*).⁷

The same idea is found in William of Saint-Thierry, who writes of one word that arises in the Bride in her unity with the Bridegroom, and that word is God. The Word is not divided into syllables but is communicated through a simple touch.⁸ The image of the Bridegroom who speaks to the Bride so as to make his mark on her can shed light on the nature of the communication between Hadewijch, in her capacity as a *magistra*, and her followers. The touch of the divine voice (*gherochte*) moves Hadewijch to a speaking that will in turn affect those who read it or listen to it. It may be no coincidence that Hadewijch in Letter 1 attributes to herself the role of the Bridegroom in a climactically structured sentence that, as we shall see below, is characteristic of her own speech act. She commands her addressee as a bridegroom commands his beloved bride (*alse brudegom ghebiedet siere lieuer bruyt*) to ‘open up the eyes of [her] heart in clarity’ (*ontpluuct die oghen claelike*) and see herself in God (Letter 1, 18-24). Seen in this light, Hadewijch’s language is not only a means of expression but also an experience, for it is part of God’s working in the soul. God’s voice, active within Hadewijch, turns her into the commanding, speaking Bridegroom and by the same token gives rise – among other writings – to the *Letters*.

READING AS FEELING AND HEARING

There are places in Hadewijch’s *Letters* that provide us with some notion of how these texts were read. Hadewijch closes Letter 24 by noting that God’s name is loveable to ‘the ears of the reasonable soul’ (*de ore der redeleker zielen*) and that the addressee should allow all the words which she has heard about God in Scripture ‘and which you read yourself and which I have told you and which someone else tells you, in Dutch or in Latin’ to go into her heart (*laet in uwe herte gaen*).⁹ The meaning of ‘heart’ is multi-layered, but can be assumed

⁷ I am making use of a new translation of Hadewijch’s *Letters*, by Paul Mommaers, in: Anikó Daróczy and Paul Mommaers: *The Complete Letters of Hadewijch*, Peeters (in press). All her works have been published in English by Columba Hart (*Hadewijch. The Complete Works*, Paulist Press, 1980). There is a more recent translation of her Poems in Stanzas or Songs by Marieke van Baest: *Poetry of Hadewijch*, Peeters, 1998.

⁸ *Enarrationes in Psalmos* §149, in Mommaers 1987, 144-145. William also recounts how all of a sudden he realised that he hears what he does not see, and feels through an inner sense what he does not understand, namely, the presence of the Divine. (‘Et subito videtur sibi primo audire quod non videt, et sentire sensu interiore quod non intelligit, praesentiam Divinitatis.’ *Expositio super Cantica canticorum*, in Mommaers and Willaert 1988, 123.)

⁹ Ende alle die woerde die ghi hoert van hem inde scrifture, ende die ghi selue leset Ende die ic v gheseghet hebbe Ende die v yeman seghet in dietsche Ochte in latine, die laet in uwe herte gaen, Ende merct ende beneydet te leuene na sine werdicheit. Dus oefent v in al dat ic

to refer here to the 'seat of the effects of love and attachment'.¹⁰ At the same time, the heart is the seat of the memory (*memoria*).¹¹ The addressee must allow the words to penetrate deeply into her being. She must meditate on the words and concentrate her attention on them so that they may have the desired effect on her life. In the same vein, Letter 24 contains yet another noteworthy passage, which suggests what else can happen in the heart that has taken into itself the words spoken about God: the addressee should remember God and carry Him in her heart and embrace Him "sweetly with an open, expectant heart, always longing for His hearty sweetness and for the heartiness of His hearty, sweet nature"¹² (italics mine).

This information indirectly sheds light on the practice of the reader of Hadewijch's letters and lends support to the approach to the texts taken in this study. First, it appears that meditative reading is considered to be the norm.¹³ We are also given to understand that reading involves the body and the senses. Reading the words, remembering them, ruminating on them and allowing them to speak to the heart are the constituent elements of meditation. The meditator reads the text slowly, divided into segments with the aim of memorising them. This can entail word-for-word memorisation, or concentration on the keywords of the text, so that the content of the larger units remained imprinted in the memory. But reading often meant reading aloud. 'Reading' thus also means 'hearing', as one would read with and for the ears, so to speak. As for the influence of what is read upon the senses, we must also bear in mind the power of sound, of the word that is spoken and thus heard.

About the influence of the words heard, Hadewijch says at the end of Letter 25:

Once I heard a sermon which spoke of Saint Augustine. At the moment when I heard it, I became so inflamed within, that I felt as if everything on earth was to be burned by the flame which I felt within me. Love is all. (Letter 25, 34-39)

v gheseghet hebbe. Want menne mach nieman Minnen leren, Mer dese dogheden volleiden den mensche ter Minnen. (Letter 24, 104-111).

¹⁰ Verdam, *Middelnederlandsch Woordenboek*, pt. III, col. 387-392.

¹¹ Cf. Carruthers 1994, 48-49 and Jager 2000.

¹² 'Memorileke seldi gode van herten draghen. Ende lieflec behelsen met openre hopender herten, ende gapen altoes jeghen sine herteleke soetheit Ende ieghen die hertelecheit siere herteleker soeter naturen.' Letter 24, 64-71. Italics mine.

¹³ On the reading method of *lectio divina* (ruminating on and tasting the sweetness of the words) as this appears in—for instance—Jean de Fécamp (ca. 990-1078), see Gehl 1987 and Leclercq and Bonnes 1946. On the body of the reader as a musical instrument on which the *voces paginarum* resound, and on how to practice *lectio spiritualis*, see Illich 1998. See also Duncan Robertson: "John of Fécamp's *Confessio theologica* ... and its various revisions offer what may be described as original 'meditations' on sacred writings, quoted at length and focused through extended first-person prayers. In these works, reading flows into writing, the quotations into the quoting texts, in an unbroken continuum." Robertson, 133.

Te enen tide hoerdic een sermoen, Daer men seide van sinte Augustine. Op die vre dat ic dat hoerde, werdic soe sere ontfunct van binnen, Dat mi te moede was, Ochte alle dat in ertrike was, verberrent soude hebben vander vlammen die ic in mi gheuoelde. De Minne es al.

This passage makes it clear that through hearing, other sense perceptions are also made possible – in this instance the sensation of warmth ('inflamed from within ... burned by the flame'). It is as though this sensation brought her, in the last sentence, to the conclusion that 'Love is all' (39). Something external (a sermon by Saint Augustine) gives rise to a sensation within (*in mi*), i.e. which has been internalised.

READING AS EXPERIENCING WORD AND SILENCE

The excerpt from Letter 24 cited above goes even further: it is indeed 'words' (*woerde*) that point the way towards the mystical experience of *minne*, but 'one cannot teach love to anyone' (*menne mach nieman Minne leren*, 109). The possibilities open to Hadewijch as a spiritual leader were thus limited. This is also clear from Letter 19: Hadewijch marvels at the equanimity with which the addressee accepts the fact that she does not enjoy fruition of God (*ende ghi niet sijns en ghebruket*), whereas this deficiency disturbs Hadewijch so greatly that at that moment she can find no words for it, "about that I must keep silent", she says, and she adds: "Read, if you want, what you already have; I shall be silent."¹⁴

Again, the addressee is asked to reread texts. But we also find a topos here that appears in various forms in Hadewijch's Letters: she implies that she will keep silence. This silence may often be understood as the powerlessness of Hadewijch to teach her 'dear child' to love (*minne te leren*), as she says in Letter 24, but it also opens up a space for silence and the stillness of meditative reading that, in her powerlessness, she recommends to the addressee.

At the end of Letter 19, there is yet another moment of silence, a different one, one of not daring to speak. But for now it is enough to understand that reading in Hadewijch's time and in her circles was meditative in nature, and as such involved both soul and body. Reading that implies hearing conveys knowledge but is first and foremost interspersed with silence. No matter how the reader strives to memorise and internalise, she experiences the silences or stillnesses that result, and experiences their ineffable content in her entire being. In both Letter 19 and Letter 24, Hadewijch indicates that she can

¹⁴ Hoe mi dat becomt, dies moetic swighen; wat dat ghi hebbet dat leset, also ghi wilt. Ic sal swighen. (Letter 19, 41-42)

accompany the addressee only up to a certain point, after which she has to leave her friends to their own devices; her words must be powerful enough to open their heart to receive *minne*.

Yet only if silence follows upon powerful speech can silence be weighty and fruitful. It is this voice of silence that the addressee must hear and allow to work deeply within. For this reason, we must also read Hadewijch's *Letters* in such a way that the vitality of this stillness that lies enclosed can come to the fore.

In order to make it easier to understand this way of reading and its mechanics, in what follows I write out the texts *per cola et commata*. This is one of the oldest forms of punctuation, a system used to help the reader know where to pause or take a breath in order to recite the text correctly.¹⁵ The text was broken up into 'rhetorical units' or 'lines of meaning' – the copyist begins a new line after every sentence or textual segment.¹⁶ Here I expand on the system a bit further by striving to ensure that main clauses and subordinate clauses are placed under each other, as a result of which we can also follow a syntactical analysis.¹⁷ By reading the texts below in this manner, we can hear and feel the *vox intexta* more clearly. For a member of Hadwijch's mystical circle, such a reading might have been enlightening – and, at certain moments, as we shall see, even initiatory.

READING/LISTENING AS SEEING

In the very first Letter we can distinguish the various steps that lead to the formulation of the essence of Hadewijch's teaching: *Fiat voluntas tua*. The letter begins with the word *God*, followed immediately by 'clear Love' (*clare minne*). A link is thus made between God and this clear Love. Words denoting light continue to dominate the entire first sentence (italics are mine).

God,
 who *clarified* clear Love
 – that was unknown – by His life,
 by which He *clarified* all life with the *clarity* of Love,
 He may *enlighten* and *clarify* you
 with the *clear clarity*

¹⁵ The system was introduced by St Jerome for writing out biblical texts in order to make their meaning clear. Parkes 1993, 35.

¹⁶ The *cola et commata* method was discussed extensively in medieval treatises on grammar and music, along with *distinctio*, *periodus* (which consists of several *cola et commata*) and *pausa*. There are slight differences in nuance in the meanings given these terms by various authors. See, among others, Gysin 1958, 76.

¹⁷ In the new translation of the Letters (see note 6) the text is printed according to this segmentation.

by which He is *clear*
 to Himself
 and to all His friends and His nearest beloved. (Letter 1, 1-7).

God / die de *clare* minne die onbekint was / *verclaerde* bi siere doghet / daer hi alle doghet bi *verlichte* in siere *clae*heit der minnen, / Hi moet v *verliechten* ende *verclaren* / metter *clae*re *clae*heit / daer hi hem seluen *clae*r met es / ende al sinen vrienden ende sinen naesten gheminden

Given the way Hadewijch formulates and constructs her sentences, light emerges in this text as a reality that can unexpectedly bring something about that does not belong to the realm of understanding or a person's own will. She then goes on to evoke a community that is enlightened by God's clarity and in which 'you' and 'I' (the *magistra* speaking) are bound to each other, as well as to those who are 'beloved by God'.

Further on, Hadewijch makes use of other rhetorical stances. One of these is her role as the *magistra* who shows the way towards *minne*.

This is why
 I pray you
 as a friend his dear friend,
 and I admonish you
 as a sister her dear sister,
 and I demand of you
 as a mother her dear child,
 and I order you from your Beloved,
 as the bridegroom orders his dear bride,
 to open up the eyes of your heart in clarity
 and regard yourself holy in God. (17-25)

Hier omme / bidic v / alsoe vrient sinen lieuen vrient / Ende mane v / alsoe suster haere lieuer suster / Ende hete v / alsoe moeder haren lieuen kinde / Ende ghebiede v van uwen gheminden / alsoe brudegom ghebiedet siere lieuer bruyt / Dat ghi ontpluuct die oghen uwer herten *clae*like, / ende besiet v in gode heilichleke.

The link between God, speaker and addressee is represented by a crescendo along two separate lines: that of an increasing exhortation ('I pray you, admonish you, demand of you, order you'), and an ever more personal appeal (friend, sister, mother, bridegroom) to the sensibilities of the listener. 'Order you from your Beloved' (*Ghebiede v van uwen gheminden*) is clearly the high point of the first series, just as bridegroom/bride is of the second. This long sentence hearkens back to the beginning of the letter with the word *clae*like,

but with a clarity that now becomes a mirror for the human being who can thus see herself in God. At the same time, by the reference to sight, the next sentence ('Learn to see what God is', *Leert te besiene wat god es*) is being prepared.

The eyes must be opened up in order to see. It is as if this seeing were the source and objective of all other admonitions and commandments. The message is: learn to see with the eyes of your soul. The notion of 'opening' (*ontpluken*) the eyes was prepared in the preceding step by means of a twofold crescendo. Its force is then developed in the following sentences through the verbs 'learn to see' (*besiet*).

Learn to see what God is.

How He is

the Truth

that lends presence to all things,

and the Goodness

that makes all richness flow,

and the Wholeness

that makes all life into a whole,

for which they sing Sanctus three times in heaven,

because those three Names in their one Being gather all powers,

whatever their working from these three Beings. (25-32)

Leert te besiene wat god es: / Hoe hi es / waerheit / alre dinghen ieghenwerdichlike / ende goetheit / alre rijcheit vloyeleke / ende gheheelheit / alre doghet gheheeleke / omme de welke men singhet .iij. sanctus inden hemel / omme dattie .iij. namen in haren enighen wesene alle doechde versamenen / van welken ambachte si sijn uten desen .iij. wesenen.

This long sentence comprises three parts: an introduction, a subordinate clause that contains an elaboration (*amplificatio*) of 'what God is' and consists of a single form repeated three times; subordinated to the second part, is the third, which is an evocation of that which flows forth from God's nature. The second and third parts are structured in such a way that what is being said has time to imprint itself on the mind of the listener/reader. Hadewijch's audience is not given information or didactic material to be remembered but experiences a power that gradually prepares it for the praise (*laudatio*) of God. The latter is almost a form of invocation. The technique deserves special attention. What we are dealing with here is practically a doxological song: 'for which they sing Sanctus three times' (the liturgical *sanctus, sanctus, sanctus*). This song of praise is continued in the following sentences, culminating in the articulation of the core of Hadewijch's teachings:

Because this is what God is,
 therefore one shall let Him enjoy Himself
 in all the works of His clarity,
Sicut in celo et in terra,
 always with words and with works saying:
Fiat voluntas tua. (41-45)

Om dies dit god es / daer omme salmenne sijns selues laten ghebruken / In al sinen werken van siere claeurheit / *Sicut in celo et in terra* / Altoes met woerden ende met werken te segghene: / *Fiat voluntas tua.*

There is no concrete admonition here; it is as if Hadewijch could now allow herself to address her reader at a more abstract level and to formulate another core message of the Letters in its most concise form: *Fiat voluntas tua*. This is the unmistakable culmination of the great enigmatic beginning of the Letters.

The message with which she leaves the addressee at a certain point: she must open (*ontpluken*) her eyes herself, see God (and herself in the divine clarity) and allow herself to have fruition (*ghebruken*) of God.

KNOWING BY FEELING

A quest for passages about speaking and keeping silent leads naturally to those letters where – like in her very first one – Hadewijch states the kernel of her mystical teaching. In Letter 17 she describes the insight, given her directly by God, concerning the complexity of the experience in union. There is a constant back-and-forth movement between, on the one hand, the human level where commandments apply to ‘works’ (*werken*) among humans and, on the other hand, the divine level where other commandments (actually prohibitions) are in force, the need for ‘resting’ (*rasten*) in God – in other words, between earth and heaven. The juxtaposition that permeates the structure of the text is not a contradiction but a paradox – one must learn, by experience, how one can find the balance between ‘working’ and ‘resting’ – there is an ineffable level of existence, only accessible by one’s own experience, where working and resting, human and divine, are one.

In the focus of Letter 17 Hadewijch expresses simultaneously both the apex of the experience of union as well as the ineffability of that experience (101-122). Hadewijch relates that she had been taken up into the unity of God:

There He took
 Him together with me
 and me together with Him.

And in the unity
 in which I was then absorbed and clarified,
 there I understood this being-one
 and I knew more clearly
 than by speaking
 or by reasoning
 or by seeing,
 one can know any object knowable on earth.
 (Letter 17, 106-111)

Daer nam hi / hem ouer mi / ende mi ouer hem. / Ende in die enicheit / daer ic
 doen in ghenomen was ende verclaert, / daer verstondic dit wesen / ende bekinde
 claerlikere / dan men met sprekene / ocht met redenen / ocht met siene enighe sake
 / die soe bekinleec es in ertrike bekinnen mach.

Taken up into this divine being (*dit wesen*), she understands what it is that God explicitly says to her. This is reinforced by the threefold repetition of 'knowing' (*bekinnen*) and by the comparative 'more clearly' (*claerlikere*) – a word that is already familiar from Letter 1. This is a crucial moment, for here we are approaching the source of mystical communication and of all mystical utterance. She continues with the word *wonder*, used three times, as if to echo or expand on the terms 'knowing' and 'understanding' (*verstaan*) – or perhaps intended as a juxtaposition? – to what we heard three times in the previous sentence:

This seems wonderful indeed,
 but although I say that this seems wonderful,
 I do know that it does not astonish you
 (Letter 17, 112-114)

Doch schijnt dit wonder. / Mer al segghe ic dat dit wonder schijnt / Ic weet wel /
 dat v niet en wondert.

Hadewijch now returns to the communicative context in which she as a *magistra* speaks to her circle and tells them what she underwent in her oneness with God. This experience is so obvious that it far exceeds in clarity any other experience whatsoever. Both human perception (*sien*) and the clearest form of understanding and ability to express oneself – reasoning (*redene*) and speaking (*spreken*) – fall short of any comparison with this form of 'understanding'.

In the lines that follow, Hadewijch explains how human language lacks the capacity for expressing this experience. The opposition between earth

and heaven is what gives structure to the statement: the language of heaven (*hemelsche redene*) cannot be understood by means of earthly things (*ertrike*). But for what she has experienced, she does not know 'any Dutch or any language', although she does know all 'sensible speech of which a person can know' (*alle redene van sinne alsoe mensche connen mach*, 114-120)

For all I have said to you
is like no Dutch in regard to this,
for no Dutch belongs to this, so far as I know. (Letter 17, 114-122)

Want al dat ic v *gheseget* hebbe / dat en es alsoe *gheen dietsch* daer toe / want daer en hoert *gheen* toe *dat ic weet*.

At the end of the letter she demands the works of love of her friend and disciple. She does so by means of a construction that in its form unites 'working' and 'resting'. At the centre of the same syntactic form repeated four times, are four verbs that in each case express activity but in the impersonal infinitive: 'to take upon', 'to work', 'to protect' and 'to further'. This active core is surrounded by the harmonising 'nothing else... than Love', in which the stress falls naturally on *Minne*:

Nothing else to take upon one than Love,
nothing else to work than Love,
nothing else to protect than Love,
nothing else to further than Love. (Letter 17, 131-134)

El niet te onderwindene dan Minne / El niet te werkene dan Minne, / El niet te bescermene dan Minne, El niet in staden te stane dan Minne.

But then, her role as *magistra* ends:

How you are to do and to leave undone each of these things,
may God, our Beloved, point out that to you

hoe ghi elc doen selt *ende* laten, / dat moet v god wisen, onse lief.

God himself must show her how to find her own balance.

Hadewijch uses a similar rhetorical device in her shortest letter, which I am going to quote from beginning to end below. Whereas in Letter 17 her conclusion is that the addressee must obtain knowledge from God by experiencing Him in unity, here she introduces the letter with the following topos. She starts with the remark that God himself must teach the 'beloved

child' what He is and how He treats 'His maidens' (*meiskenen*). He must devour her, swallow her up, and there, in that unity the two shall dwell in each other. What is noticeable here is the spatial, the flowing and the sensual elements that emerge from the doxological, mystical litany:

May God make known to you, dear child,
 who He is
 and how He deals
 with his servants
 and specifically with His handmaids;
 and devour you in Him:

where the depth of His wisdom is,
 there He will teach you
 what He is,
 and how wondrously sweetly
 one beloved dwells in the other
 and so through and through indwells the other
 that neither of them recognizes himself,
 but they mutually enjoy each other
 mouth in mouth,
 and heart in heart,
 and body in body,
 and soul in soul,
 and one sweet divine nature flowing through them both,
 and both of them one through each other
 and also both remain,
 yes so they remain.

God doe u weten, lieue kint/ wie hi es / Ende wies hi pleghet /met sinen knechten
 / Ende nameleke met sinen meiskenen; Ende verslende v un hem: daer de diepheit
 siere vroetheit es / daer sal hi v leren / wat hi es / Ende hoe wonderleke soeteleke
 /dat een lief in dat ander woent / Ende soe dore dat ander woent / Dat haerre en
 gheen hem seluen en onderkent / Mer si ghebruken onderlinghe ende elc anderen /
 Mont in mont / ende herte in herte / Ende lichame in lichame / Ende ziele in ziele
 / Ende ene soete godlike nature doer hen beiden vloyende / Ende si beide een dore
 hen seluen / Ende al eens beide bliuen / Ja ende bliuende.

Although she states that it is only God himself who can teach the 'dear child', she at the same time suggests to her what obtaining the knowledge would be like and in which space this would take place. The highest points of Hadwijch's creative mystical language generated by the experience of unity are the texts

in which the sensual images are raised to a more abstract level by means of spatial images – here, as often when suggesting the ineffability of the union, described as ‘divine nature flowing through them both’. The nature of the *unto* is on the one hand suggested through images of sensory experience and of spatiality (depth) and fluidity (flowing), and on the other hand emerges in the litany-like, repetitive structures connected by *ende* – the latter not only as a conjunction (and) but also echoed in the gerund *vloyende* (flowing) and *bliuende* (remaining), suggesting, through the sound, this flow.

SEEING AND FEELING THE INVISIBLE

The introductory paragraph of Letter 22 refers to a non-speculative knowledge of God. This is given to persons who lose themselves and become one with Him. Hadewijch makes it clear that the knowledge of God – of who He is ‘in his Name and his Being’ (*name, wesen*), is only possible if one is ‘completely His’ (*hi moet gode al gheheel sijn*) by being ‘wholly His’ (...dat hi hem al is), and this being wholly His is only possible if a person surrenders herself, loses herself (*sonder hem seluen, verliese hem seluen*, 1-8).

Hadewijch then responds, in two stages, to the statement by Augustine which she translates as: ‘anyone who knows little, can say little’ (*die luttel weet, hi mach luttel segghen*). Her knowledge of God is limited and therefore she is able to say only little about Him. This inability to speak of God is generally true of all human beings: ‘one cannot show God by means of human understanding’ (*men mach gode niet toenen met menschen sinnen*, 13-14). But there is another type of knowledge of God that is part of the experience of being touched by God. Someone who receives this grace ‘might be able to show something of Him’ (*hi soudere yet af moghen toenen*, 15). Enlightened reason (*verlichte redene*) shows ‘a little of God to the inward-turned faculties’ (*den inneghen sinnen een lettelt van gode*). Note that Hadewijch uses the word ‘show’ (*toenen*) in both cases.

Hadewijch clearly sets out one of her key themes, in which two important points come together. She understands how far the human capacity for understanding – and thus for speaking – falls short when it comes to God: ‘I can disentangle a little bit of the riddle He is’ (*een cleyne gheraetsel maghic van hem gheraden*). She assumes that as a person whose soul has been touched (*gherenen*) by God, she should be able to show something about God to those who ‘understand with the soul’ (*diet metter zielen verstonen*). This also implies, in the light of the first paragraph of the letter, that only a person who is touched by God can lose herself. Because these two aspects of mystical ineffability go hand in hand, the result is a tension between ‘not being able to’ and ‘yet doing’; this is the fundamental paradox in the linguistic craft of

the mystic. This kind of speaking is a speaking that 'shows' and that can only be received with and by the soul. In the rest of Letter 22 this form of speaking comes into force.

This speech mode, driven by the paradoxical force of mystical speaking, results here in a four-part paradox that is traditionally expressed through the elusive spatial image of the divine dimensions. Hadewijch uses the language of seeing when she speaks of God's *nature*, which is 'a wonder to contemplate' (*ane te siene van wondere*). 'Contemplate' is followed by an image that is incomprehensible, since it contains the four divine dimensions: 'He is all to all things and in all things wholly'.¹⁸

God is above all
and not high;
God is beneath all
and not low;
God is within all
and not shut in;
God is outside all
and wholly enclosed.

(Letter 22, 17-24)

... Ende dat hi *alle dinc es te allen / Ende in allen gheheel. / God es bouen al / ende onuerhauen; / God es onder al / ende onuerdruct / God es binnen al / ende onghesloten / God es buten al / ende al omgrepen.*

Hadewijch begins the letter with the ineffability of God that is the result of His incomprehensibility. She now combines the ineffable with the inconceivability of the divine space, giving form to the paradox of speaking of God by using paradoxical spatial images. Through the repeated phrase 'God is all' she removes the paradox with which the speaker is confronted and reduces the four dimensions into one. By using visual representation enclosed in rhythmical speech, she moves beyond all images.

¹⁸ The paradoxical spatial image is inspired by a hymn by Hildebert of Lavardin. On the ingenious manner in which Hadewijch transforms Hildebert's hymn – namely, with its repetitive *totus* – and on the connection between this passage and Gregory the Great and Isidore of Seville, see Daróczy 2007, ... The repetitive 'God es ... al (*ende*)' was added by Hadewijch – *God es* does not appear in Hildebert's hymn, while in Hadewijch the repetition has an invocatory force.

THE MODUS MYSTICUS

The repeated words in the quotation above form a euphonious whole; the dimensions may change, but what remains unchanged is: *God is ... all ... and...* This constant unites the four dimensions. Although the spatial images are unfathomable, there is nevertheless something about this way of speaking that one can grasp. That is, one can understand the fundamental rhythm that, even without understanding the content, puts everything in its rightful place; thus, the *dimensiones* become part of a structure that is imprinted in the whole body and memory.

The description of the unfathomable space structures this long letter – the way Hadewijch segments the text is very clear up to a certain point, and is more or less predictable when the topos of ineffability appears: there are five moments of silence, which can be divided up into those of ‘keeping silent about’ something and those of ‘keeping silence’. Keeping silent about something is the result of the limitation of human beings who are unfamiliar with the experience of God, and indicates a boundary that cannot be crossed. Keeping silence, by contrast, is due to Hadewijch’s own inability to express in human language that which is beyond our faculty of understanding. There are two reactions to this: the first is that the mystic recognises human limitations by humbly saying no more. The second reaction is to overcome this weakness by nevertheless speaking, but in a different language: speaking, as Letter 22 puts it, ‘with an inspired soul to an inspired soul’ (*ghegheest spreken te ghegheester zielen*).

There is one mysterious text, Letter 28, that is written in this inspired language that I call the real *modus mysticus*: a language driven by the tension between silence and speaking, a speaking that is not ‘about’ something but dwells ‘in’ and moves ‘towards’ something. She takes the reader/listener into the dynamics of this space of words and there, already taken up in this flow, she says: ‘He who about this wants to say something, he must speak with the soul’ (Letter 28, 92-93) (*Die hier toe iet spreken wilt, hi behoeuet metter zielen te spreken*), and later on she states that the soul speaks with ‘her wholeness’.

But before this is uttered, Letter 28 brings us, with the very first sentences, to the space where the encounter with God takes place:

In the richness of the clarity of the Holy Spirit,
therein the blessed soul celebrates blessed-making feasts.

In de rijcheit der claarheit des heilichs gheests,
Daer inne maket de salighe ziele verweende feeste.

The account begins in an overflowing ‘clarity’ (*claarheit*), which we know both from Letter 1 and Letter 17. The term ‘therein’ emphasises the spatial nature of

this clarity given by God. Clarity—the word is repeated—is experienced here by regarding and seeing (*besien, sien*). This gift of sight renders God visible, a visibility that is expressed in a series of abstractions that are repeated and embellished:

She sees how God is in His everlastingness: God with natural Godhead.
 She sees how God is in His greatness: mighty with natural might.
 She sees how God is in His wisdom: blessed-making with natural blessedness.
 She sees how God is in His nobility: clear with natural clarity.
 She sees how God is in His presence: sweet with natural sweetness.
 She sees how God is in His fluidity: rich with natural richness.
 She sees how God is in His wholeness: abundance with natural profuseness. (15-28)

Si siet / hoe god es / in siere ewelecheit: / god met naturleker godheit
 Si siet / hoe god es / in siere groetheit: / gheweldich met naturleker gheweldicheit
 Si siet / hoe god es / in siere wijsheit / verweent met naturleker verweentheit
 Si siet / hoe god es /in siere edelheit /clare met natuerleker claeheit
 Si siet / hoe god es / in siere ieghenwordicheit: /soete met natuerleker soetheit.
 Si siet / hoe god es / in siere vloyelecheit /riike met natuerleker rijcheit
 Si siet / hoe god es /in siere gheheelheit / weelde met naturleker weldicheit.

Hadewijch turns this part of the letter into an incantation. On the one side of the symmetry are abstractions that suggest spatiality by means of the preposition *in*: 'in His everlastingness, in His greatness, in His wisdom, etc., and on the other hand, by the use of repetitions: 'She sees how God is' is repeated without variation. There is also a repetition of form, the central part of which – 'with natural' (*met naturleker*) – remains invariable. 'With natural' is surrounded in each case by a repetition that does vary. This process occurs seven times, in a litany-like repetition, while the flowing movement continues: 'natural' here echoes the 'understands in accord with their nature' (*naturlike versteet*) of the introduction.

If the reader/listener – the receiver of words – does not ponder each abstract term, she (or he) will quickly hear the regularity in the rhythm and will go along with it. The abstractions thus pass by the eye of the spirit in a seeing without images, a knowing without understanding. Space in Letter 28 thus seems more than a 'somewhere' or an extended space. It is, rather, the medium in which a phenomenon takes place, namely, that of the mystic becoming one with God. The space in which words are spoken, and the movement of words in that space, have a reciprocal influence. The same process can be seen repeating itself: the soul perceives something in the space in which she finds herself, and she sees and speaks – as Hadewijch puts it, the 'words well up' from the 'fineness of God' (*woerde...comen wallende uter fijnheit gods*, 81).

The reader – receiver of unfathomable images through sounds – is taken up in the same movement that occurs over and over again. The text unfolds in a forward movement in which repetition occurs constantly, albeit in different forms: syntactic patterns are repeated as in a litany; particular spaces or activities of the soul are described repeatedly; speaking regularly ends in silence. We can feel frequent circular movements. These movements are not, however, independent of each other, but one moves further into the next, in which the same words and word combinations appear with variations.

The result is an organically structured syntax that gives order to the incomprehensible abstractions of which the images in this letter are made up, enabling the reader to follow and feel that development. Each part is a reflection of another, and while tracing one circle after another, one nevertheless does move forward. The content of the letter can either be reduced to a few words only – for example, to the first, introductory sentence or simply to the image of clarity – or, alternatively, can be further expanded by means of additive constructions. These groupings of words and the repetitive syntactic (and thus also rhythmical) patterns convey a sense of openness, but they are structured by the space in which they are spoken. The segmentation is expressed in an ever repeating circularity that gives the impression of an endless movement, where the midpoint of the concentric circles changes, through the forward movement, into the axis of a spiral. The two fundamental movements that characterise Letter 28 – the description of a series of successive circles and the growth from seeds – appear together, with now the one, now the other occupying the foreground, without any discernible rule.

The text/speech at a certain point moves to where the heavens are ‘opened up’ (*ontploken*) – a word rarely used but uttered in Letter 1 where the *magistra* commands the disciple to open up her eyes in clarity – and the soul is again led into a ‘godlike clarity’ that harks back to the first sentence of the letter – and to the very first letter of the collection. The soul sees, but as in Letter 22, which simultaneously offers an image and strips it away, this is a seeing without seeing (134):

Thus she sees, and she sees not.
Soe siet si; / Ende sine siet niet.

God, who cannot be seen by humans, ‘gives’, and the soul can ‘receive’ (138):

She stands,
and God gives
and she receives.

Si steet, / ende god gheuet / Ende si ontfeet.

She finds herself in stillness: 'And she must remain in stillness in the freedom of that blessedness (*Ende si moet bliuen in stilheiden / In die vriheit derre verweentheit*, 141).

The freedom the soul receives goes hand in hand with the silence that makes listening possible:

What God speaks to her then
of lofty spiritual wonders,
that nobody knows,
 except God,
 who gives this to her,
and the Soul,
 who is spiritual like God,
 above all spiritualness.

Wat god dan te hare sprect / van hoghen gheesteleken wondere, / dan weet niemand
/ dan god, / diet hare gheuet / Ende die ziele, / die gheestelec es also god bouen alle
gheestelecheit.

God's 'giving' in this freedom thus appears to be a speaking. God first speaks to the soul, and then the soul speaks herself 'in God'. The following passage reflects what is said by 'a human being in God' and takes the form of an incantatory, overpowering song of praise followed by yet another:

A soul in God's friendship said this:
I have heard the voice of blessedness,
I have seen the land of clarity,
I have tasted the fruit of gladness. (154-156)

Dat seide ene ziele inde vrientscap gods:
Jc hebbe ghehoert de stemme der verweentheit.
Jc hebbe ghesien dat lant der clærheit,
Ende Jc hebbe ghesmaect de vrocht der bliscap.

The situation of the soul which speaks 'in the presence of God' (196) suggests a strongly affective experience of God that is described here, like at the beginning of the letter, as that of the blessed soul that has received 'sensitivity, sweetness, gladness and blessedness'. These 'powers' (*crachticheiden*) appear to be heavenly ones. The soul is led into 'a blessed stillness' (*verweende stilheit*) that is reminiscent of the 'blessed soul' that must 'remain in stillness in the freedom of that blessedness'. There the soul perceives the following:

And in that blessed stillness
 she hears a great murmur from the wonder
 which is God Himself in everlastingness. (211)

Ende in die verweende stilheit / hoertse een groet gheruchte van dien wondere, /
 dat god selve es in ewecheiden.

That murmur (*gheruchte*) is the sound that comes forth from God himself, and we also know that blessedness is not situated in a soundless space: cf. 'I have heard the voice of blessedness' (155). Now we see that the soul is raised up and is taken up in wonder, as it were, there to enjoy 'lofty blessedness' (*hoghe verweentheid*) (224).

The holiness that was one of the elements in the beginning that created a space in which words could be heard, at the end of Letter 28 leads the soul to keep silence. This enables her to sum up what she has hitherto said about hearing, speaking and keeping silence, and to add that it is God alone who moves her on occasion to break through that language barrier.

From this moment on she uses the past tense, which implies that the states she has described up to now had happened to herself and now she looks back at them. She has experienced 'wholeness' (*gheheelecheit*) at various levels: in her consciousness, her activity and her experience of the world. We see the same wordplay here as at the beginning of the letter: from silence comes hearing, from hearing comes holding back, and so on, culminating in silence. Here I quote the last paragraph of the letter:

Since God's holiness made me keep silence,
 since then I have heard much.
 And since I have heard much,
 why did I keep it for myself?
 I did not without reason keep for myself what I kept for myself.
 I kept everything for myself, before and after.
 Therefore I am silent and rest with God
 till the moment when God commands me to speak.
 I have healed all my distinction-making,
 and I have appropriated all my wholeness,
 and I have kept all that is proper to me enclosed in God
 till the moment
 when someone comes with that sort of distinction-making,
 who asks me what it is,
 that I mean and feel
 with God
 in God.

Then am I all the more distant [from God]
 in so far as I have to speak,
 and therefore I gently keep silent.

(Letter 28, 247-263)

In the last paragraph of the letter (263-270) Hadewijch describes her consciousness now as 'healed', a consciousness that is no longer conditioned or limited by the type of knowing that proceeds by making distinctions. In the 'freedom of God' she understood 'all distinctions in a wholeness'. The 'feasts' of the introduction here become the 'delight in the dwelling of the Lord', and this 'dwelling' could be understood as referring back both to the beginning of Letter 28, and to the space formed, in Letter 22, by the coincidence of the four dimensions. Here space turns into time, the 'time of blessedness', in which 'all the regions of the land' were 'flowing into the land'. There, then, she remained 'standing above everything and in the middle of everything' and sees. Now, in these last sentences of the letter, it is not the *magistra* commanding the disciple to open up her eyes in the clarity of God and see herself in His light. The mystic herself shares her most intimate and highest experience and insight – a memory of a state of consciousness – with the one who can receive what she is saying: that in that time of the blessedness, standing in the unfathomable space she was dwelling in, with her wholeness, she did see the 'gloriousness without end'.

In the following letters – the last three – Hadewijch seems to prepare the 'dear child' to accept the fact that they might have to part. The reason is unknown to us, but she mentions 'wandering about in the country', and even imprisonment (Letter 29, 1-10). She first speaks comforting words with the tenderness and strength of a mother: 'Ah, dear child, your sadness hurts me, and your dejection and your sorrow'. But soon in this tender voice we also hear, as an overtone, that of the *magistra* from Letter 1: 'I pray you, (...) and admonish, and counsel and command like a mother her dear child' – she writes now (cf. Letter 1: 'I pray you and I admonish you and I demand of you and I command you (...) that you open up the eyes of your heart in clarity and regard yourself holy in God'). She asks the 'dear child' to dismiss the sorrow from her because, 'however it may be, it is the work of Love'. In the next long letter Hadewijch once more elaborates on the essence of her mystical teaching and her view on human failure to live in Love. In the last letter, a short one, she informs the 'dear child' of a dream she had about her taking over the role of *magistra*. She then exhorts her to the 'most perfect freedom of love' and urges her to demand all those she can, 'with strength, effort and counsel' to honour God (Letter 31, 30-33).

In this light we may interpret the *modus mysticus* – 'inspired speaking to inspired souls' or 'speaking with the soul' – as offering entrance to a space

of clarity where the reader can be prepared for a state of consciousness in which she can open herself up for the touch of the secret Word of God. It is as if in the long letters written in this modus (Letter 22 and 28), and a series of paragraphs in other letters, Hadewijch had said everything that she as *magistra* could say or 'teach' about the state a mystic can strive or hope for. By reading and rereading the texts she has in her possession, the disciple and would-be *magistra* may be able to undergo the words that have welled up in one who has already been touched by the Word and has dwelled in the unfathomable space of clarity. Reading can then be an intimate, always accessible ritual of initiation led by the words of the powerful mystic that Hadewijch was.

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