

## HADEWIJCH VAN ANTWERPEN (c. 1250)

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Although **Hadewijch van Antwerpen** is one of the most important mystical poets of the thirteenth century, little is known about her life except that she may have been a woman of noble birth who later became a Beguine in the environs of Antwerp. Her surviving literary works include eleven *Visions*, forty-five *Strofische Gedichten* or *Poems in Stanzas*, sixteen *Poems in Couplets*, and thirty-one prose *Letters*.

Hadewijch's works were both popular and influential. Translated from Diets (the middle-Netherlandic dialect in which she wrote), they survive in several medieval versions.<sup>1</sup> The great Flemish mystic Jan van Ruysbroek (1293-1381) took some of his most important ideas from Hadewijch and passed his reverence for the "heylich glorieus wijf, Hadewijch" on to his followers. One of those followers, Jan van Leeuwen, praised Hadewijch as if she were equal to one of the evangelists:

Aldus spreekt ook een heilige, glorieuze vrouw die Hadewijch heet. Ze is een waarachtige lerares, want Hadewijchs boeken zijn zeker goed en geloofsgetrouw, uit God geboren en door Hem ingegeven. Want haar boeken zijn door Gods ogen gelezen en onderzocht ....<sup>2</sup>

(And so speaks the glorious woman called Hadewijch. She is a miraculous teacher, because Hadewijch's books are certainly true and faithful, born out of God and inspired by him. Because her books have been read and studied by God's eyes. . .)

Van Leeuwen's comments aptly sum up the medieval appreciation for Hadewijch's work: she is a "waarachtige lerares," a miraculous teacher whose books are born out of or conceived by God. For the Middle Ages the essential value of her writing was that it contained religious truth and that, like the gospels, her writing was the creation of a religious authority.<sup>3</sup> Hadewijch's thought continued to have deep influence on the mystical tradition in the Low Countries and Germany through the fifteenth century; an appreciation for the literary and poetic importance of her work

was to come much later.<sup>4</sup>

Because we know essentially nothing about Hadewijch's life, we can only make some guesses based upon qualities found in her writing and by comparing her to contemporary Flemish women about whom we know more. It seems likely that Hadewijch was a woman of noble birth, and she may also have been a Beguine. A religious group that came into being toward the end of the twelfth century, the Beguines originated in the Low Countries largely among women of patrician and noble families. These women rejected the courtly life in order to lead a life of apostolic poverty and contemplation without taking vows as a nun.<sup>5</sup> In her *Letters* and a few of her poems, Hadewijch appears as a "mistress" or spiritual guide to a group of women whom she addresses with authority. There are allusions that she experienced some opposition both in- and outside the community, and she may even have been threatened with banishment and imprisonment. Hadewijch seems to have been separated from her beloved sisters, although she still manages to correspond with them after her separation, especially with the "lieve kindt" to whom many of her letters are addressed. As Hadewijch is familiar with the subjects of a traditional education and is proficient in Latin and French, her education seems to have been substantial. It has been suggested that her schooling might have resembled that of Beatrice of Nazareth (1197-1231), also a Beguine, or of Ida of Gorsleew (c. 1203-1260), who later became a Cistercian nun.<sup>6</sup> Like these women, Hadewijch may have been taught at home to read the Latin

Psalter, and after a year at a liberal arts school she may have continued her training at an abbey school like those of the Cistercian order. There she could have continued to study the traditional medieval subjects of the *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric and dialectic) and the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music).

Hadewijch's writing is influenced by a variety of texts and traditions. The Scriptures are certainly the most important source of her religious and therefore literary inspiration.<sup>7</sup> Other influences include the Latin church liturgy, especially the sequences from which she derives many of the metrical patterns for the *Poems in Stanzas* (Weevers 35). Some of Hadewijch's writing, especially the *Visions*, are patterned after allegorical and apocalyptic aspects of the Book of Revelation. She is indebted to the poetry of courtly love, which she seems to have known via several secular medieval texts.<sup>8</sup> Of the great theologians and church fathers, Hadewijch names several in her *List of the Perfect* (which follows the fourteenth vision), among them Augustine, Origen, Hilary of Poitiers, Gregory the Great and Isidore of Seville.<sup>9</sup> Of the contemporary writers that influenced Hadewijch, the Victorines and the Cistercians, especially Bernard of Clairvaux (1053-1109) and William of Saint Thierry (1085-1148), are the most important (van Mierlo, "Hadewijch en Willem," and Verdheyen). Hadewijch, like William before her, took up the Augustinian ternary of memory, intelligence and will and applied it to the dynamic relationship of loving God. Following the Trinitarian view, she argues that we must love each of the three persons in one God with the faculty that corresponds to the other persons: the Son with memory (attributed to the Father); the Father with enlightened reason (that is, the Son); the Holy Spirit with the "high flamed will," which refers to the love uniting Father and Son.

Hadewijch seems to have had two religious reasons for writing clearly in

mind. Firstly, she was determined to describe her mystical experience of Christ. Secondly, she wanted to teach others about this mystical experience. During the second half of the twelfth century, love mysticism or *Brautmystik* became a popular kind of ecstatic and largely feminine religious phenomenon. The ideal of love mysticism was to live in perfect love and union with God, this devotion taking the form of a love relationship lived on earth. The ecstatic and emotional character of much of Hadewijch's writing comes from her own dynamic knowledge of God. Hadewijch's *Minne*, "the way in which the soul experiences its relation to God," the way it loves and knows divine love, is the subject of her writings.<sup>10</sup> Like the courtly lover, Hadewijch becomes psychologically withdrawn from her self and finds solace in ecstatic visions of her union with God. In these visions, God wholly surrenders himself and at the same time is transcendent. At that moment she and he are in complete Christological imitation of Jesus, both God and man. From this mystical and ecstatic vantage comes "oneness" and the final outcome of the ecstasy, a "love bond" with God and the realization of a "loving knowledge." Hadewijch's attempts to clarify and grasp this experience, to come to terms with the coming and going of love, to understand the loneliness and confusion associated with *Minne*, culminates in the frustration and agony that is "To become God with God" (Hughes in Brunn and Epiney-Burgard 112), or as she describes in one of the *Poems in Couplets*:

To see oneself devoured, engulfed  
In Love's abyssal essence,  
Ceaselessly to founder in ardour or in  
[coldness]  
In the profound and lofty darkness of Love:  
This indeed surpasses the torments of  
[Hell]  
(*Poem XVI*, tr. Hughes in Brunn and Epiney-Burgard 112).

These torments are soothed at other times by the mystical union in which she

describes her soul in terms of the moon, which takes all its light from the sun only to vanish from the sky at sunrise (*Letter XIX*, 64-74; cf. *Corinthians* 3:18).

### *The Visions*

Hadewijch's *Visions* are dramatized monologues and conversations, situated in the imaginative dream landscape of thinly veiled Scriptural and theological precepts. Set in the present tense with Hadewijch as the principal character, the *Visions* revitalize biblical stories or church teaching by dramatizing and co-mingling them with Hadewijch's adventures, culminating in her union with God. As de Paepe has pointed out, Hadewijch's visions often follow a pattern (*Bloemlezing XXXI*). They begin with a specific description of a time (usually a holy feastday such as Pentecost or Christmas) and a place. At this moment the heroine is frequently in turmoil about the state of her soul. This confusion leads to a feeling of being drawn inward to experience the vision. The greater part of the vision is composed of descriptions of everything Hadewijch sees, hears and feels. The strong influence of St. John the Evangelist is evident in Hadewijch's borrowing of the symbols of the Apocalypse, the lamb, the eagle, the New Jerusalem and so on, as well as the landscapes, events and the marvelous "koninklijke proza" of the Book of Revelations (de Paepe *Bloemlezing XXXII*). The third part of the vision consists of Hadewijch's interpretation of what she has experienced; this portion is followed by a short conclusion, assuring that the outcome of Hadewijch's mystical experience was to receive grace.

The allegorical, apocalyptic and ecstatic qualities of Hadewijch's *Visions* are illustrated in this passage taken from the *Eleventh Vision*:

Daar sagic comen also enen vogel die men hiet fenix; hi verslant enen grauwen aar die jond was, ende enen blonden met nuwen vederen die out was. Die are plagen te

vliegene sonder cessinge dore die diephheit die daar was. Doen hoordic ene stemme als een donder die seide: Kinstu wie die sijn daar so menegerande varwe hebben? Ende ic seide: Ic woudt weten bat. Doen ict eischede te wetene, ic sach nochtan die dingen welc si waren van allen dat ic sach. Want al dat men siet metten geeste, die met Minnen es opgenomen, dat dorekint men, dat oresmaact men, dat dorsiet men, dat dorehoort men.<sup>11</sup>

(Then I saw coming the bird men call the phoenix; he ate a gray eagle that was young, and a yellow eagle with new feathers that was old. The eagles kept flying about incessantly in the deep abyss. Then I heard a voice like thunder that said: "Do you know who these different colored eagles are?" And I said: "I would like to know better." And though I wanted to know this, I nevertheless knew the essence of all things that I saw. Because all that one sees with the spirit when one is ravished by love is understood, tasted, seen and heard through and through).

Hadewijch goes on to explain the significance of the eagles who are swallowed by the phoenix who is Christ. The young but gray eagle is Hadewijch, new in the knowledge of love, while the old eagle, with the young yellow feathers, is St. Augustine, "old in the Love of our Beloved" (Brunn and Epiney-Burgard 118). This interpretation leads to a Trinitarian understanding: the phoenix that swallowed up the two eagles is the unity of the Holy Trinity in which both Augustine and Hadewijch are lost. The vision continues and Hadewijch, like an unfaithful lover, regrets her happy union with Augustine and wonders why she cannot enjoy the pleasure of her own will to know union with God alone.

### *The Letters*

The style of Hadewijch's *Letters* seems more polished than that of the *Visions*. They are real letters, usually addressed to a young woman called "lieve kindt," and they are designed to teach and lead others through the mystical progress of the soul.

In the *Letters*, Hadewijch says that the soul has been part of God through all eternity, and in this oneness all the soul's nobleness is contained. The struggle of faith is to find once again this fundamental being with God: "If you wish to possess finally all that is yours, give yourself entirely to God and become what He is" (*Letter II* 163-165). But as the *Letters* progress, Hadewijch cautions that the path of spiritual growth is through suffering. To grow spiritually, to "become God with God," we must suffer and pass through the depths of despair (*wanhope*) through the paradoxical "noble unfaith" (*ontrouwe*).<sup>12</sup> It is only after suffering through continuous spiritual growth, a growth likened to "the labour of a woman in confinement," that the illuminated lover with the "totality of God as his own wealth," is born.<sup>13</sup>

### *The Poems*

Hadewijch's poems are her most important literary achievement. With them, she can be considered one of the first Dutch lyrical poets. The poems are divided into two groups: forty-five *Poems in Stanzas* (*Strofische Gedichten*) and sixteen *Poems in Couplets*, which are often rhymed letters (*Mengeldichten*).

Perhaps the most important influence on Hadewijch's poetry, in addition to the religious and scriptural traditions that pervade all her writing, is the poetry of courtly love. For her lyrical works Hadewijch adopts the traditional forms and tropes of courtly love poetry as a vehicle to express the emotional tension of longing for God, and displays a mastery of all the techniques of her secular and courtly model: stanza structure, tornada, meter, rhyme, assonance, concatenation, and figures of speech. Furthermore, she adapts the plight of the secular lover to suit the sacred counterpart: the service of a knight offered to a lady becomes the service of love offered by a soul to God, and so forth. Following the pattern of courtly poetry,

Hadewijch often begins her poems with a stanza on the seasons, generally Spring, following a "reverie" like the troubadours' who frequently place their own emotional state in accord or conflict with the beauty of the earth's rebirth:

Men mach den nuwen tidd,  
Wel bekinnen overal:  
Die vogele hebben delijt;  
Die bloemen ontspringen in berch, in dal.  
Waar so si staan,  
Si sijn ontgaan  
Den wreden wintre diese qual.  
Ic ben ontdaan,  
Mij en trooste saan  
Die minne jeghen mijn ongeval.  
(*Strofische Gedichten XVI*).

(We can see the new season everywhere. The birds have their delight; the flowers burst into bloom on the mountains and in the valleys. Where they [the flowers] stand they have escaped the cruel torments of winter; I am undone unless my one comfort, love, consoles my misfortune).

The subject of Hadewijch's poems is *Minne* ("love" in Dutch as in German is grammatically feminine) and, following the courtly model, this Love sometimes takes the form of a queen or lady to whom one can speak but who often withholds her rewards:

Doe mi minne eerst minne gewoech,  
Ay, hoe ic met al hare al beloech!  
Doen deed mi haselen slachten  
Die in deemsteren tide bloeien vroech,  
Ende men lange hare vrucht moet wachten  
(*Strofische Gedichten XVII*).

(When Love first spoke to me of love, / O how with all that I was I greeted all that she is! / But then she made me resemble the hazelnut trees / That bloom early in the dark season, / And for whose fruit one must wait a long time) (Tr. Hart 174).

When Hadewijch describes the many states of Love, its desire, ecstasy, confusion and loneliness, she achieves her most complex and enigmatic expressions:

Orewoet van minnen  
 Dat een rike leen;  
 Ende die dat woude kinnen  
 Hine eischede hare el negeen:  
 Die tiersten waren twee  
 Die doetse wesen een.  
 Dies ic die waerhet toge:  
 Si maact dat soet es suur  
 Ende den vremden nagebuur,  
 Ende si brenct den nederen hoge  
*(Strophische Gedichten XXVIII).*

(The madness of love / Is a rich fief; /  
 Anyone who recognizes this / Would not  
 ask Love for anything else: / It can unite  
 opposites / And reverse the paradox. / I  
 am declaring the truth about this: / The  
 madness of love makes bitter what was

sweet, / It makes the stranger a kinsman, / And  
 it makes the smallest the proudest) (Tr. Hart  
 206).

Herein Hadewijch can indeed be likened to Emily Dickinson, who many years later would contemplate the same subjects in very similar language, wondering precisely as Hadewijch does, how

'Tis Opposites-entice-  
 Deformed Men-ponder Grace-  
 Bright fires-the Blanketness-  
 The Lost-Day's face-

To lack-enamour Thee-  
 Tho' the Divinity-  
 Be only  
 Me-

*Poem 129, c. 1862 (Johnson 77-78).*

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> In the fourteenth-century the entire volume of Hadewijch's *Letters* was translated into High German, her name being rendered as "Adelwip." The full translation of these works was lost, but the Berlin State Library obtained a small portion of it in fragmentary copies of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, both containing *Letter X*, one of which adds some sentences from six other letters. Another German translation comprising parts of *Letters III* and *VI*, and *Poems V* and *VI*, has recently been discovered at Einsiedeln in the Abbey Library (codex 277), in a manuscript dating from the second half of the fourteenth century. The Royal Library at The Hague also owns a manuscript, probably written at the end of the fifteenth century, which contains a brief anthology of extracts, in the original language, from six different letters. For the medieval German versions of Hadewijch's writings see Gooday. Hadewijch's works were rediscovered in the Royal Library in Brussels in 1838, in a manuscript collection composed in medieval Dutch and copied in a fourteenth-century hand (now catalogued MS A 2879-80 and MS B 2877-78). Both of these manuscripts, which originally belonged to the Canons Regular of Rooklooster of Windesheim, originated in Brussels. Another fourteenth-century manuscript, originally owned by the Canons Regular of Bethlehem, near Louvain, was acquired by the library of the University of Ghent in 1878 (MS 941). A fourth and incomplete manuscript is now in the library of the Ruusbroec-genootschap in Antwerp (MS D 385 II).

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in de Paepe *Bloemlezing XII*. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of Hadewijch's importance and influence as a religious authority see Willaert "Hadewijch und ihr Kreis" and de Paepe *Bloemlezing XIII-XIV*.

<sup>4</sup> Hadewijch's writing is still not well known to non-Netherlandic circles but appreciation for her work has certainly shifted from the medieval emphasis on her spiritual contributions to more recent appraisals of her genius as a writer. In a review of *The Penguin Book of Women Poets* (ed. C. Cosman, J. Keefe, and K. Warner) Joyce Carol Oates singled out the selections of Hadewijch's poems as remarkable: "And there is Hadewijch, a lay nun of thirteenth-century Netherlands, who composed mystical writings and whose brief poems, given here, have the enigmatic and disturbing authority of Emily Dickinson's" (*The New Republic* 21 April 1979: 28-30).

<sup>5</sup> Most scholars agree that Hadewijch was probably a Beguine, although de Paepe disagrees (*Bloemlezing X*). For an overview of the women's movement in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries see Grundmann and McDonnell.

<sup>6</sup> For introductions to and analyses of the lives and accomplishments of Hadewijch's contemporaries, see: Lagorio, Dronke, and Brunn and Epiney-Burgard.

<sup>7</sup> For a summary of the scriptural sources of Hadewijch's writing see Hart, "Introduction."

<sup>8</sup> On the influence of the literature of courtly love on Hadewijch's poetry, see de Paepe, *Strofische Gedichten*; on other sources of Hadewijch's poetry see Hart 6-7.

<sup>9</sup> *The List of the Perfect* contains the names of eighty-five persons, among them several of the great church writers. The *List* also contains the names of contemporary "friends of God." These thirteenth-century persons form a network which is not confined to the Netherlands, but spreads to Cologne, Thuringia, Bohemia, Paris, England and Jerusalem.

<sup>10</sup> Van Mierlo explains Hadewijch's use of *Minne* as signifying primarily God, Christ and divine love: *Strofische Gedichten*, 2: 121. De Paepe, however, disagrees: "Minne in Hadewijchs *Strofische Gedichten* is niet God, Christus of de goddelijke Liefde—tenzij in een zeer beperkt aantal plaatsen. Minne is evenmin een 'amorce' entiteit. Minne is een beleving, de wijze waarop de ziel haar verhouding tot God beleeft, een dynamische relatiebeleving" (*Strofische Gedichten* 331).

<sup>11</sup> All quotations are taken from van Mierlo's editions of Hadewijch's works.

<sup>12</sup> The concept of paradoxical "noble unfaith" (*ontrouwe*) recurs in *Vision XIII* and in *Poem X* 87-102. Poiron (119) believes Hadewijch may have borrowed the idea from Alan of Lille's *De planctu, quaest.*

<sup>13</sup> There are other references in Hadewijch's writings linking spiritual growth to the pre-natal growth and birth of a child, such as the comparison of the growth of spiritual life to the nine months gestation period of a baby in *Poem XIV*. Her example is the growth of Jesus in the womb of the Virgin.

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