

HADEWIJCH: HOW SWEET HER SONG!?

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Though it may seem excessively "cute", the double punctuation in the title is intentional. As an exclamation, it falls into line with a long list of similar praises concerning the beauty of Hadewijch's poetic language. The question mark, however, introduces a new aspect. Just how sweet is Hadewijch's song? To answer this question will involve us in a formalist investigation of Hadewijch's verse language, more specifically the language of her Strofische Gedichten,¹ but first we ought to examine further the reasons one is so tempted to resort to quantification and linguistics in this case.

There is a very strong tradition in the secondary literature: every scholar, be it ever so briefly, pays homage to the beauty of Hadewijch's language. Over and over again, one encounters such adjectives as melodious, flowing, harmonious, rich, full, compelling, rhapsodic, etc. Theodoor Weevers refers to her "consummate artistry".² Tanis Guest sings an even more enthralled tune:

. . . a magical feeling for the sound of words,
for the harmonious combination of sounds and
rhythm, the indefinable gift which makes the
songs almost sing themselves.³

But Weevers and Guest are by no means alone in their panegyric. Indeed, I have yet to uncover a single negative statement about Hadewijch's use of language, a situation unique in my experience with several early verse traditions. And thus we have the exclamation in the title: "Hadewijch: How Sweet her Song!"

The same scholars who so overflow with praise for Hadewijch's language are totally mute when it comes to

analysing the reasons for their unanimous positive impression. Guest offers at least an attempt in that he refers to such phenomena as the emphatic "ee" sound or the pleading "ie" sound or weighty long vowels or frequent repetitions of similar as well as identical sounds.⁴ And yet he does not go beyond simply sharing with us these subjective impressions. We may agree with them, or we may disagree with them, but neither we nor Tanis Guest will ever prove them. There is something inherently unsatisfying, at this time when linguistic science is no longer in its infancy, in reading descriptions of language which are devoid of even the most primitive linguistic categories.

The situation with Hadewijch is a classic case for a formalist approach. If so many scholars share the same impression of a poet's language, there must be something about that poet's writing which we can identify and attempt to give clearer definition. But we must not plunge into the fray like a blind counting machine spewing figures in our wake. Let us rather proceed with caution, like master detectives, resorting to quantification only when the results are likely to yield some truly useful information about the language of Hadewijch's Strofische Gedichten.

The first step in an investigation of this kind is usually the undertaking of a phonemic transcription of the materials. Let us take van Loey's phonemic inventory of Middle Dutch as the basis of our further analysis. The next step is critical. Which sounds in the language might account for the sense of melifluousness so many have felt? We must exercise caution not to fall into the same trap as Guest, not to give ourselves over to highly personal subjective impressions. The linguistic category with which we begin must be as broad and as non-controversial as possible. For this reason, I suggest that we begin simply by ascertaining the proportion of voiced versus voiceless

phonemes in Hadewijch's poems. We must anticipate that the higher the proportion of voiced sounds the greater will be the impression of flowing and harmony. Let us also keep in mind, even at this early point, that we can pursue in this same direction a linguistic distinction based on levels of sonority.⁵ Voiceless consonants are lowest in sonority, voiced consonants are higher and vowels, as the Dutch term klinkers ("sounders") suggests, are highest.

How do we begin? A simple count yielding the percentage of voiced versus voiceless sounds? Perhaps, but a moment of reflection will clearly indicate that this kind of count may not tell us very much about the poet's language. We are treating all the phonemes as equals. A very democratic procedure, but it seems quite obvious that certain syllables are linguistically much more prominent than others. Are we to treat the root morphemes of nouns, main verbs and adjective-adverbs (i.e., the lexical roots) the same as definite/indefinite articles or inflectional endings? Our results would be distorted if a high percentage of voiced phonemes could be accounted for by the high frequency in Middle Dutch of the ubiquitous, obligatory -en inflectional ending. If we wish our count to be at all persuasive, we must concentrate on the lexical roots, that is, on those syllables which have the greatest grammatical weight and offer the writer the freest choice in creating a melodious-sounding poem.⁶

Yet we are still not ready to begin our count of the corpus. Within the lexical roots, we must decide which phonemes to include in the count. All syllables will have vowel nuclei; most will have pre-vocalic consonants; and many will also have post-vocalic consonants. The pre-vocalic consonants and vowels are not problematic, but the post-vocalic consonants will force us into a discussion of syllable boundary. This issue is a very sticky one, in a word - controversial. Let us assume, for now, that a count

of the pre-vocalic consonants and vowels only will give us a clear indication of the assumption we wish to test: namely, does the harmonious sound of Hadewijch's language rely in part upon a high proportion of voiced phonemes? In any case, we can not be accused of having padded our results through the inclusion of questionable post-vocalic phonemes in lexical syllables.

It would now appear that we are ready at last to proceed to a count of the corpus: to determine the proportion of voiced phonemes among the pre-vocalic consonants and vowels of the lexical syllables in Hadewijch's Strofische Gedichten. Before we actually undertake this enormous and tedious task, allow me to select a hypothetical result so that we may ascertain what interpretation can be made of it. Let us suppose we have found that 70% of the phonemes in question are voiced. What exactly does that mean? At least two major problems confront us. Firstly, all vowels are by definition voiced and approximately half our sample is made up of vowels. We have already committed ourselves to the notion that artistic choice is important in our count. Therefore, we now exclude vowels, where the writer has no choice between voiced and voiceless, from our count. The second problem is far more fundamental. Seventy per cent voiced phonemes, even if we discount the vowels, is a meaningless figure because there is no such thing as an absolute scale relating harmonious sound to the proportion of voiced pre-vocalic consonants in lexical syllables. We simply do not know whether 70% is high, low or average. We need a comparison, a control sample.

An ideal control sample for our materials would be a corpus of poetry also written by Hadewijch which is identical in length and form to the Strofische Gedichten and about which scholars have expressed a unanimous opinion of the harshness of the language. Obviously, ideal control samples exist only in laboratories, and we must couch our expectations

in more reasonable terms: 1) Middle Dutch; 2) Contemporaneous with Hadewijch; 3) Courtly strophic form; 4) Strong Romance influence; 5) of high literary merit; and 6) has not drawn special attention for melodious-sounding language. Unfortunately, there is no corpus in Middle Dutch which satisfies even these more reasonable demands. If we were to relax our expectations in the category concerning literary merit, we might be able to find something. But then we would severely limit the interpretation of the results, especially concerning artistic choice. A lesser writer may be striving to achieve melodious sound but be incapable of doing so. If at all possible, we must compare Hadewijch with writers who have at least been recognized as skilled in the tradition of the courtly lyric. So long as we are restricted to Middle Dutch, we are stuck. Fortunately, in Middle High German (MHG) we have a closely related cognate language with poetry which satisfies all our expectations except, obviously, the one demanding Middle Dutch. We can proceed, but a cautionary note is in order. Though MHG is a very close cognate language to Middle Dutch (A. J. Toubert's recent collection of courtly lyric forms includes both languages),⁷ the frequency in MHG of pre-vocalic voiced consonants is likely to be somewhat lower than in Middle Dutch.⁸ Let us select our MHG sample from the Istvan Frank collection Trouvères et Minnesänger⁹ so that we are guaranteed strong Romance influence. In matching the strophic form of the two collections (Hadewijch and Frank) as closely as possible, we arrive at the following Hadewijch poems with control sample:

<u>Hadewijch</u>	<u>MHG Control Sample</u>
Lied X	"Ich lobe got der siner güete" (F. von Hausen)
Lied XII	"Min herze min lip die wellent scheiden" (F. von Hausen)
Lied XXXI	"Iche horte ein merlikin wol singen" (U. von Gutenberg)
	"Minne gebiutet mir daz ich singe" (R. von Fenis)

Now, at long last, we are ready for our first count. We are comparing the percentage of voiced pre-vocalic consonants in the lexical syllables of the two samples:

Voiced Pre-Vocalic Consonants

<u>Hadewijch</u>	<u>MHG</u>
<u>59.7%</u>	<u>46.2%</u>

The Hadewijch sample is higher (as we anticipated), but whether the magnitude of the gap between the samples (13.5%) is significant, remains to be seen. It must be put in some kind of perspective, be compared with some other result. All we have accomplished is to prove that our initial assumption concerning the higher proportion of voiced sounds was not incorrect. The result encourages us to pursue our investigation in the same direction.

If voiced versus voiceless is in fact a linguistic category which helps explain Hadewijch's harmonious language, then increasing the factor of artistic choice for our next test of the samples should provide an even more striking result. For that reason, let us ascertain the proportion of voiced pre-vocalic consonants in lexical syllables which alliterate. This test immediately demands clarification of what is intended with the term "alliteration". Which identical pre-vocalic consonants will be considered as part of an alliterative pattern? If we consider three alignments of the lexical syllables (horizontal, columnar, diagonal), the question becomes simply: How many syllables will we allow to intervene in any of the alignments and still count the repetition as an occurrence of alliteration? This point could be debated at great length, but we are best advised to stick to our initial promise: be as conservative and as non-controversial as possible. Therefore, only repetitions of pre-vocalic consonants in contiguous lexical syllables

(all three alignments) will be included in our count as instances of alliteration. The result is as follows:

Alliterating Voiced Consonants

Hadewijch

25.1%

MHG

10.2%

We are able to make something of this result. There is no apparent linguistic characteristic inherent in MHG or Middle Dutch which would account for Middle Dutch poems showing a significantly higher level of alliteration than MHG poems. Here we have isolated an area of artistic choice, and the Hadewijch sample is higher by 14.9%. The exact figure is not so important as the fact that it is higher than the gap which separated the two samples for our first count. We have increased the factor of artistic choice, and the gap between the samples has likewise increased in favor of the Hadewijch poems. A pattern is emerging: as the specificity of the linguistic/artistic categories in our tests increases so also does the gap in our results in favor of the Hadewijch text over the MHG control sample. Should this pattern be more firmly established, we would have strong linguistic evidence to support the subjective impressions of Hadewijch scholars.

Though it is not within the scope of this investigation to test exhaustively the linguistic evidence in the two samples, one additional attempt should indicate whether we are on the right track. Since vowels (klinkers = "sounders") have the highest level of sonority among the phonemes, it would be quite significant if vowel assonance, in the lexical syllables of the Hadewijch text, were a frequent phenomenon, especially if the gap between Hadewijch and the MHG sample were even greater with vowel assonance than with alliterating voiced consonants. The melody of assonant vowels would be an essential factor in creating the rich, full, harmonious texture

so many have experienced so profoundly in Hadewijch's language. In this test, as with the alliterating consonants, only the assonant vowels in contiguous lexical syllables (horizontal, columnar and diagonal alignments) will be counted as part of a pattern of assonant vowels:

<u>Assonant Vowels</u>	
<u>Hadewijch</u>	<u>MHG</u>
<u>42.5%</u>	<u>20.6%</u>

The hoped-for dramatic result is achieved. The Hadewijch sample is higher in assonant vowels by an amazing 21.9%, a gap between the MHG sample and the Hadewijch text significantly greater than that produced by the test for alliterating voiced consonants. The pattern which was beginning to emerge in our second test is now quite clear. We might pursue this path of increasingly more specific linguistic/artistic categories, but the point has been made now. We have answered in part the question: "Hadewijch: How Sweet her Song?" so that we may now, with increased appreciation, rejoin the chorus in the exclamation: "Hadewijch: How Sweet her Song!"

Footnotes

¹Hadewijch, Strofische Gedichten: Een Keuze, ed. N. de Paepe (Gent-Leuven, 1972).

²Theodoor Weevers, Poetry of the Netherlands in its European Context 1170-1930 (London, 1960), p. 26.

³Tanis M. Guest, Some Aspects of Hadewijch's Poetic Form in the 'Strofische Gedichten' (The Hague, 1975), p. 247.

⁴Guest, pp. 64-69.

⁵R-M. S. Heffner, General Phonetics (Madison, 1950), pp. 74-75.

⁶Prosodists have recently dealt in detail with the problem of identifying lexical syllables in verse texts. I include here a sample of some of the more important studies. In chronological order: Morris Halle and Samuel J. Keyser, "Chaucer and the Study of Prosody," College English 28 (1966), 187-219; Karl Magnuson and Frank G. Ryder, "The Study of Prosody: An Alternative Proposal," College English 31 (1970), 789-820; David H. Chisholm, Goethe's Knittelvers (Bonn, 1975); Beth Bjorklund, "A Study in Comparative Prosody: English and German Iambic Pentameters" (Diss. Indiana University, 1975); Ray M. Wakefield, Nibelungen Prosody (The Hague, 1976).

⁷A. J. Touber, Deutsche Strophenformen des Mittelalters (Stuttgart, 1975).

⁸I am thinking here especially of the shift of voiced to voiceless stops in High German dialects. However, this shift is quite incomplete in MHG except for the very southernmost dialects. In the Hadewijch sample about to be counted, only five pre-vocalic voiced stops were found in which the MHG cognate would have a voiceless stop.

⁹Istvan Frank, Trouvères et Minnsänger (Saarbrücken, 1952).