Christian Classics Study Group on Hadewijch

Introduction

The texts you are going to read are texts by Hadewijch, a 13th-century mystic who wrote a large number of texts on her mystical, spiritual development. In this introduction, I will shortly describe who Hadewijch was, what kind of texts she has written, and which themes you can pay extra attention to while reading the texts.

We know little about the historical figure of Hadewijch. A biography (a ‘vita’) of her has never been written and in her texts itself we find very little clues to tell us something about her life. However, scholars agree that Hadewijch probably was the leader of a beguine community and that she lived and wrote around 1340. We know some of the women in her beguinage by name through the letters, but it is likely that her beguinage was larger and might even have included men. Hadewijch has probably received a good education: her texts show great knowledge about the theological and mystical tradition, as well as about contemporary love lyric.

Research shows that Hadewijch’s beguinage was probably located in the area around the Flemish city Antwerp. However, it is likely that Hadewijch has traveled (she refers to this in one of her letters). We do not know why she traveled, but she does say in several letters and visions that her beguinage was under some kind of threat. She talks about ‘false brothers’: brothers in faith that are against her. It is not surprising that Hadewijch and her beguinage might have been under threat: her writings sometimes do not so easily fit the ideas of the Catholic church at that time. Hadewijch speaks of being completely taken into the Trinity and being inseparable from it, even being it. This might have crossed the thin line between devotion and heresy for Christian authorities at the time.

Hadewijch wrote in four different genres: visions, letters, rhymed songs and rhymed letters. All her texts are written in Middle Dutch, which makes her one of the first persons and the very first women to write in this language (and no longer solely in Latin). Hadewijch’s Middle Dutch shows a great feeling for the language: she uses not only the meaning (or several meanings) of words but also a word’s sound, rhythm or ‘melody’ to strengthen her texts.

Hadewijch’s mystical ideas are part of the tradition of ‘love mystic’, in which the discourse of the Song of Songs plays an important role. The central idea is that the human soul is the beloved bride of the holy Bridegroom (Christ or God). The aim of Hadewijch’s texts is to learn her readers how to recognize, appreciate and embrace their potential as ‘beloved of the Beloved’, and how to live their earthly life in this knowledge.

I thought it might be good to start with Hadewijch’s twelfth vision. The book of visions consists of fourteen visions, that describe Hadewijch’s spiritual development. Her final goal, which she eventually achieves, is to form a complete unity with God, whom she calls ‘Minne’: Love. In the vision you are going to read, Hadewijch is taken into the spirit and brought to a large space, where she sees a miraculous disk, with at its centre Someone, who eventually appears to be God. She falls down out of respect and anxiety but is told by four eagles to stand up again and look around. She sees a bride approaching the great disk, with on her dress all twelve virtues. Hadewijch describes these virtues and their role in someone’s spiritual and mystical ‘upbringing’. Then one of the eagles tells Hadewijch that she is indeed that bride, and at that moment she sees herself being transformed in the bride and being received in the Union on the disk. She is then fully taken up in her Beloved and her Beloved in her: the unity between both is completed.

Secondly, you can read Hadewijch’s eleventh prosaic letter. This is one of the letters in which Hadewijch shows us a little bit of her life: she tells us that she was just ten years old when she was already so much taken by Love that she almost died of it. The letter is about Hadewijch’s question if it would be possible that someone might love God more than she does. The letter shows how convinced
Hadewijch is of her love for God and that she is not afraid to tell so. It suits her role as leader of a religious community.

The third text is very different from the letter. It is a song of Hadewijch on how Love can be so incomprehensible harsh towards people. The ‘I’ in the song explains how Love seems to play tricks with her, and how hard it is for her to handle that. She knows that she should accept it and even appreciate it (because Love always does the right things), but that is not easy. However, everyone should be certain that Love will always heal the wounds she made and eventually give good and loving people the treasures they deserve. This song by Hadewijch shows that it is not easy to reach the unity with God as described in the vision: God/Love can seem to be very far away, very unpredictable and incomprehensible. However, whoever keeps giving love to Love will eventually receive the ultimate goal.

While reading those three texts, I think it might be interesting for you to observe and think about Hadewijch’s notion of ‘Love’. What does this mean, how is it connected to her notion of ‘God’ and the human soul, and how is it connected to love between human beings?\(^1\) I am looking forward to your ideas about this: scholars do not yet agree. Every other idea, thought or question you have about something else in these texts is of course just as interesting and important! Please try not to be discouraged if you do not understand something in the texts: these texts are written more than seven centuries ago, in a context so very different from ours, so they seem indeed alien to us in several ways. However, the central questions on how to live, how to deal with difficulties in life and how to position yourself as a human being in the world and towards a greater being or greater goal, are still relevant.

Renske Hoff

\(^1\) If you like to look further into these questions, you might like to read the chapter on Hadewijch by Bernard McGinn, in his book ‘The Flowering of Mysticism’. This chapter is attached as a separate document.
Once on Epiphany, during Mass, I was taken up out of myself in the spirit; there I saw a city, large, and wide, and high, and adorned with perfections. And in the midst of it there sat Someone upon a round disk, which continually opened and closed itself again upon hidden mysteries. And he who sat there above the disk was sitting in constant stillness; but in the disk his Being circled about in unspeakable swiftness without stopping. And the abyss in which the disk ran as it circled about was of such unheard-of-depth and so dark that no horror can be compared to it. And the disk, seen from above, was set with all kinds of precious stones and in the colour of pure gold; but on the darkest side, where it ran so fearfully, it was like fearful flames, which devoured heaven and earth and in which all things perished and were swallowed up.

And he who sat upon the disk was One whose Countenance none could perceive without belonging to the terrible flames of this disk and being thrown into the deep abyss which lay underneath. And that Countenance drew all the dead to it living; and everything that was withered blossomed because of it; and all the poor who saw it received great riches; and all the sick became strong; and all who were in multiplicity and division became one in that Countenance.

And he who sat in this high place was clothed with a robe whiter than white, on the breast of which was written: “The Most Loved of all beloveds”. That was his name. Then I fell down before that Countenance in order to adore the truth of that terrifying Being whom I there saw revealed.

Then came a flying eagle, crying with a loud voice, and said: “The loved one does not yet know all she shall become!” And a second eagle said: “The loved one does not yet know what her highest way is!” And a third said: “The loved one does not yet know what the great kingdom is that she as bride shall receive from her Bridegroom!” And the fourth said to me: “Have patience, and watch, and do not fall down before that Countenance! They who fall down before the Countenance and adore receive grace; they who contemplate the Countenance standing receive justice and are enabled to fathom the deep abysses that for those unacquainted with them are so terrifying to know.”

At that moment I was taken up, through the voice of this eagle who spoke to me. And then there came into the city a great crowd in festive apparel, and each one rich in her own works. They were all virtues; and they were conducting a bride to her Beloved. They had served her nobly and had looked after her so proudly that they could present her as worthy to be received by the mighty great God as his bride.

And she was clad in a robe made of her undivided and perfect ill, always devoid of sorrow, and prepared with all virtue, and fitted out with everything that pertains thereto. And that robe was adorned with all the virtues, and each virtue had its symbol on the robe and its name written, that it might be known.

The first of the virtues was Faith: She had lifted her up from her lowness. The second, Hope, had raised her above herself to great confidence of attaining eternal joy. The third, veritable Fidelity, bore witness that she was noble; for she never departed from fidelity because of any distress, however great it was.

The fourth, Charity, bore witness that she was rich, for she never gave up her works outward or inward, and she never lacked rich gifts by which she honoured Charity; for she practiced rich liberality because of lofty abandonment.

The fifth, Desire, bore witness how vast she was in her territory, and how beautiful and splendid in her full wealth, so that she might well entertain all the greatness of heaven.

The sixth, Humility, bore witness that she was so deep and so unfathomable that she could truly receive greatness to the full in her unfathomableness.

The seventh, Discernment, bore witness that she was so clear-sighted that she set every being in its place: heaven in its height, hell in its depth, or purgatory in its manner of being; the Angels in

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2 Translation by Mother Columba Hart in Hadewijch, the complete works, p. 293-296.
their orders; or men, each according to what befits him, when he falls, and when he gets up again. Thus to let God act accorded well with the robe of the undivided will.

The eighth, her veracious might Works, bore witness that she was so strong that nothing could hold her back, so that she alone would not have conquered all opposition and made all lowness lofty and all loftiness low.

The ninth, Reason, showed that she was well ordered and that Reason was her rule, by which she always performed works of justice, and which enlightened her with regard to all the dearest will of her Beloved, so that like him she gave blessing and condemnation in all that he loved an all that he hated; and she gave all that he gave, and she took all that he took.

The tenth, Wisdom, showed her to be familiar with all the power of every perfect virtue that must be encountered in order to content the Beloved perfectly. Wisdom showed that she also had profound knowledge of each Person of the Trinity, in the Unity that was the very deep abyss beneath the wonderful, terrifying disk on which sat the One who was to receive the Bride.

The eleventh, Peacefulness, showed and bore witness to her, as pleasing in appearance and beautiful, and as possessing knowledge of the total embrace and of a perfect kiss, and of all the honour and all the encounter the loved one must offer to the Beloved in love. And she showed that she had been announced and born with him; and that her body was born from the other; and that she grew up with him and lived together with him as man in all like pains, in poverty, in ignominy, and in compassion for all those with whom justice was angry. And she showed that her body was nourished interiorly and exteriorly from the other, and never received alien consolation, and that she died with him, and freed all the prisoners with him, and bound what he bound, and with him rose again, and one with him ascended to his Father. And that she there with him acknowledged his Father as Father, and him as Son with him, and with him she acknowledged the Holy Spirit as Holy Spirit. And with him, like him, she knew all as One, and in the essence in which they are One. To all this her Peacefulness bore witness for her, that she has thus lived and that, later on, she will live perfectly as his, truly with Love in Love.

The twelfth was Patience, who had protected her from all evil, without any sorrow in all sorrow, and was as it were an instrument of good works, through which she was as if in a new embrace. And Patience showed her as conformed to God, in one Being and in one work.

Thus is the robe of undivided will wholly adorned through the divine Nature. Thus festively attired comes the bride, with all this beautiful company represented in symbols. She wore on her breast an ornament with the divine seal, by which she had knowledge of the undivided divine Unity. This was a symbol that she had understood the hidden word of God himself out of the abyss. So in this company she came into the city, led between Fruition of Love and Command of the Virtues; Command accompanied her there, but Fruition met her there.

And when she was led thus to the high seat I have already described, the eagle, who had previously spoken to me, said: “Now see through the Countenance, and become the veritable bride of the great Bridegroom, and behold yourself in this state!” And in that very instant I saw myself received in union by the One who sat there in the abyss upon the circling disk, and there I became one with him in the certainty of unity.

Then the eagle said, when I was received: “Now behold, all-powerful one, whom I previously call the loved one, that you did not know all you should become, and what your highest way was, and what the great kingdom was that you as bride should receive from your Bridegroom. When previously you fell down before the Countenance, you, like an ordinary soul, confessed it as frightening. When you stood up and contemplated it, you saw yourself perfect, together with us, a veritable bride, sealed with love. You, all-powerful one, have received most profoundly that hidden word which Job understood, in the text beginning: Porro dictum est.

In that abyss I saw myself swallowed up. Then I received the certainty of being received, in this form, in my Beloved, and my Beloved also in me.
2. Letter 11

O dear child! May God give you what my heart desires for you: that God may be loved by you worthily.

Yet I have never been able, dear child, to bear the thought that anyone prior to me should have loved Him more than I. I do believe, however, that there were many who loved Him as much and as ardently, and yet I cannot endure it that anyone should know or love Him so intensely as I have done.

Since I was ten years old I have been so overwhelmed by intense love that I should have died, during the first two years when I began this, if God had not given me other forms of strength than people ordinarily receive, and if He had not renewed my nature with His own Being. For in this way He soon gave me reason, which was enlightened to some extent by many a beautiful disclosure. And I had from Him many beautiful gifts, through which He let me feel His presence and revealed Himself.

And through all these tokens with which I met in the intimate exchange of love between Him and me – for as is the custom of friends between themselves to hide little and reveal much, what is most experienced is the close feeling of one another, when they relish, devour, drink, and swallow up each other – by these tokens that God, my Love, imparted to me in so many ways at the beginning of my life, He gave me such confidence in Him that ever since that time it has usually been in my mind that no one loved Him so intensively as I.

But reason in the meantime made me understand that I was not the closest to Him. Nevertheless, the chains of love that I felt never allowed me to feel or believe this. So that is how it is with me: I do not, finally, believe that He can be loved the most intensely by me, but I also do not believe there is any man living by whom God is loved so much.

Sometimes Love so enlightens me that I know what is wanting in me, that I do not content my Beloved according to His sublimity. And sometimes the sweet nature of Love blinds me to such a degree that when I can taste and feel Her it is enough for me. And sometimes I feel so rich in Her presence that I myself acknowledge She contents me.

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3 Translation by Mother Columba Hart in Hadewijch, the complete works, p. 69.
3. Song 3

The tokens make very clear to us,
The birds, flowers, fields, daylight,
that they will triumph over the pains
that oppressed them sorely during the winter.
Because the summer can comfort them
they can be joyful soon,
while I have to suffer heavy adversity.
I would have been joyful too, if Love gave me this:
Good fortune. But that has never been mine.

O what have I done wrong towards good fortune
that it has always been so hostile to me?
That it has inflicted me so much pain,
much more than to other people?
That it does not reward my fidelity,
unless sometimes with a dirty trick?
Well, it was probably my fault.
Therefore I will move around:
Love can do with me whatever She wishes.

If I could trust myself to Love,
that would be great support to me.
The suffering she gave me in fidelity,
if I could only be sure
that Love gave it to me out of fidelity,
and that she would consider my sorrow.
If so, it would be just in time,
because my shield is so damaged
that it can’t take any other gash.

Whoever could understand all this as something good
could do something I can’t do yet:
in loss, in sorrow, in misery,
to suffer everything without bitterness because of Love,
and, despite everything, be pleased
and say: “These are my best successes!”

Who does so can be called wise.
It is not me, and that hurts.

Sometimes comfort, sometimes pain
Love gives, she can do so much.
After heavy blows she gives back health,
how can someone protect himself from this?
Even if he would give all he ever had,
She would still hide from him all knowledge of Her.
The one, whom She grants it, She gives

Translation by Renske Hoff, based on the Middle Dutch text and Modern Dutch translation by Veerle Fraeters and Frank Willaert (2009).
the sweet kisses of Her mouth,
the other She puts under the ban.

O God, who would free the one
that has been put under the ban by Love?
She Herself! If someone wants to bring a lawsuit against her,
he must oppose her so bravely
that he counts it all as a great success,
the pain and joy at the same time,
and finds them all equally good.
This way Love learns him to shout for joy,
and teaches him all of her miracles.

After raging storms it turns to nice weather,
we see that so often.
Anger and reconciliation afterwards,
that is what makes Love enduring.
The one that realises that Love is noble in every way
will become so brave, by the pain of Love,
that he proclaims: “Love, I am all yours!
I have nothing else but you to revive me.
O, noble Love, please be all mine.”

If the good fortune, that always hated me,
would let me be cured in Love,
I would be all Love because of Love,
hoping my pain would be diminished somewhat.
I would, in all of her dangerous depths,
read all my judgements
and give Love room in Love.
If I would have been lifted up so high,
my hunger would be satisfied.

We are too slow in our spending for Love,
which makes us alien to her.
Therefore we remain poor. Know this, everyone:
who lives for Love as she wishes,
to him She shall give Her riches and treasure.