The Promise of Eternity: Love and Poetic Form in Hadewijch’s *Lieder* or *Stanzaic Poems*

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The thirteenth-century Brabantine Beguine Hadewijch uses what Barbara Newman has termed “la mystique curtoise” to construct a devotional system of oscillating genders for both God and narrator; this complicated web of relations between the speaker of the poem and Minne (Love, most often allegorically personified as a courtly woman) produces a series of variations on the *Brautmystik* first developed in monastic commentaries on the Song of Songs. The poetic form of the *Stanzaic Poems* forces the reader or hearer to consider the coexistence of alternative temporalities in the moment of ecstatic fruition: the past moment of revelation or union Hadewijch describes, the present temporal moment of readerly experience, and the promise of an eternal heavenly future of constant fruition. This fusion of temporalities is closely linked to the use of erotic imagery in religious discourse; Jean-Luc Marion’s recent phenomenological analysis of erotics offers a new theoretical approach to the intersection of time and love in the *Brautmystik* tradition. Hadewijch writes of the renewal of time in the circular procession of seasonal change even as she considers the need for a divine lover that is eternally new. The act of processing her metaphor-laden, intricately formed poetry provides the reader with a cognitive experience that mimics the representational and linguistic paradoxes of mystical writing itself.

**KEYWORDS** Beguine spirituality, Hadewijch, *Brautmystik*, eros, gender, mysticism, phenomenology

*The future is a filler of void places. . . . When we are disappointed by a pleasure which we have been expecting and which comes, the disappointment is because we were expecting the future, and as soon as it is there it is present. We want the future to be there without ceasing to be future. This is an absurdity of which eternity alone is the cure.*  
A desire to bring the absent into presence, or to collapse far and near, is also a desire to foreclose then upon now. As lover you reach forward to a point in time called “then” when you will bite into the long-desired apple. Meanwhile you are aware that as soon as “then” supervenes upon “now,” the bittersweet moment, which is your desire, will be gone. You cannot want that, and yet you do.

— Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*

He does not need time to end to be finished with time. . . . The lovers do not promise one another eternity, they provoke it and give it to one another starting now. . . . Love willed eternity in time, and from the first instant; and it obtains it here, because it anticipates it and provokes it. Love enjoys eternity from the instant that it enjoys itself.


Were mystical union imagined as a frozen, static state of perfection, describing it might still require the expected ineffability topoi, but would nevertheless be far more achievable than attempting to represent the infinitely dynamic still point of an ever-turning world: more Bernini’s *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, less the final canto of Dante’s *Paradiso*.¹ But how to sing a new song about the eternal? How can the infinitely iterable turning of the heavenly spheres and the endless renewal of the seasons be incorporated into a soteriology that stresses a linear march to grave and judgment — and how can it be captured in the inexorable procession of word to word in a text? How does union with the divine in this life — coupled with the constant oscillation between fulfillment and lack that typifies erotic desire — afford us a foretaste of an eternity in which God will be all in all?² Hadewijch, a thirteenth-century Brabantine Beguine (fl. 1220–1250?), grapples with these questions in her *Stanzaic Poems* (*Strofische Gedichten*) or *Songs* (*Lieder*),³ fusing the exuberantly erotic language of courtly love with strict poetic structures; in this she forges a language in which love, both celestial and sublunary, might be new in every hour.⁴

Jean-Luc Marion’s recent phenomenological account of the erotic provides a captivating analysis of the intersection of language, temporality, and the divine in the erotic phenomenon. In particular, he emphasizes the mutuality of the “crossing of the flesh” in which the lover’s flesh is fully awakened only by the moment of flesh yielding to the flesh of the other: we only know our flesh insofar as it is known and felt by the other in the saturated phenomenon in which the distinction between feeling and felt dissolves (“the flesh only lives to intermingle the two” [Marion 2007, 121]). In this sense, we are *given* our flesh only by its eroticization, only in reciprocity with the Other. Although the implications of his study might be said to apply principally to post-Cartesian subjectivity, it is his treatment of the hybrid temporality (what he terms a “finitude that in fact has a false bottom” [2007, 141]) occasioned by the erotic phenomenon that is particularly relevant to this essay.

The finitude of the erotic phenomenon, Marion writes, “does not condemn me to renunciation . . . but only to its endless repetition; it thus trains me to temporalize myself without end according to the eroticization of the flesh of the other. . . . Eroticization’s finitude assures me the infinite repetition of the erotic reduction itself” (2007, 143). Just as the lover’s oath must, of necessity, offer the promise of eternity,
so too does the erotic phenomenon instantiate a structure of expectation even in the midst of imminence: “the conflict between the temporal finitude of the flesh that is aroused and the eternity demanded by the oath finds its reconciliation in an eschatological temporality in which each moment is a final moment, a moment that is *sub specie aeterni*” (Romano 327).

Although it would be counterproductive to cage Hadewijch’s poetry entirely within Marion’s phenomenological system, the rigorous meditation on the erotic Marion offers might lead readers to consider different interpretive frameworks and ask different questions about the role of sexual imagery in medieval mysticism and devotion. Indeed, in an observation similar to my argument about the act of reading and interpreting Hadewijch developed below, David Jasper writes that the process of interpreting Marion’s text itself in part instantiates its meaning (a process he compares to reading the later novels of Henry James): “the act of interpretation is more than an act of understanding but an acknowledgment that only in our own imperfect experience can we begin to construct a response to the ‘other’ who is calling” (181). The moment in which readers of Marion’s text reach a sense of the aporetic impossibility of love coincides with what Jasper, following Marion’s almost inevitable turn to a theological register, calls “the fully liturgical place in present expectancy” (181). This expectancy, however, is often poetic as much as it is liturgical.

T.S. Eliot writes at the end of *Burnt Norton* that

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  Only by the form, the pattern,
  Can words or music reach
  The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
  Moves perpetually in its stillness. (5.4–7)
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Music and words end silence and are in turn themselves ended by silence; by belonging to time they are ever subject to the present, performed moment alone. Form rescues them from impermanence: to begin with, without the conventions of writing and notation — negotiable, agreed-upon, socially-constructed symbolic systems — there would be no past, no memory, no history. These artifices are necessary disappointments: they promise as much as they withhold, they preserve as much as they deaden. The permanent record of a series of dynamic moments can only escape a fossilized stultification through a form that can somehow restore newness and presence to its preservation of the past. Eliot explains the trouble with the limited tools we have to make use of in attempting to achieve this impossible unity of past and present, of making the past immediate and new in the language of the present. He famously writes:

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Words strain,
  Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still. (5.13–17)
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But it is just this imprecision that requires a constant series of raids on the inarticulate and a continual effort to make both old and new, past and present, somehow provide us with an intelligible, if ever partially falsifying, pattern. These patterns of language and signification, always all too ready to collapse with a sharp deconstructive prod, are reinforced by the structure of poetry to produce a textual and literary tradition, a series of patterns that can carry the old while making it seem ever new — preserving without fossilizing, maintaining the traditions of history without succumbing to an uncompromising slavishness to the past.

As with language, so too with body and soul. The only permanence of the soul’s joy is in heaven; medieval attempts to represent the afterlife go to elaborate lengths to provide a structure that can contain the eternity of beatitude in heaven while acknowledging both the interactional dynamism of the Trinity and the ephemerality of earthly joys and earthly bodies. Nothing succeeds better at this, structurally, than the *Commedia*: “Dante’s invention of *terza rima* makes his great poem at once linear and cyclical, with the progression of rhymes sustaining the forward motion of the narrative even as the tercets circle around each other like the celestial spheres” (Newman 2007, 187). Through these and other poetic, musical, and ultimately interpretive structures, medieval imaginative representations of the infinite and eternal joys of heaven can reproduce, however crudely, artifices of eternity within historical and artistic time.6

**Hadewijch and Minne**

Hadewijch’s *Lieder* *en* Stanzia Poems — in which a narrator details his or her courtship of Minne (the figure of Love, often allegorically personified as a woman) and consequent exile — are Hadewijch’s poetic and imaginative attempts to recreate or re-embodi the sensation of the love between the individual and God that will be perfected only in a union without distinction after death, while offering some representation of how that joy might be foretasted here, however fleetingly, on earth.7 The narrator-figure is often gendered male, although Mary Suydam convincingly argues that Hadewijch’s poetry “plays with gendered frameworks, savors erotic double meanings, gender confusion, and ambiguity” (“Ever in Unrest” 178) even as it “continually blurs subject-object boundaries” (175). In Hadewijch’s *Visions*, however, Minne’s role as Queen is especially pronounced: in Vision Nine she reports looking into the eye of the divine countenance and seeing, within God’s very eye, “Queen Love on her throne, adorned magnificently” (Fraeters, “Handing on Wisdom” 151).

The suffering lover and narrator serves as an exemplar for the reader’s own experiences of divine love and loss; the anguish of Minne’s absence serves to help us understand the dialectical nature of this love — even “falling short” (*ghebreken*) is to be understood as “a positive term which refers to the moment when the human person is freed from selfishness, a freedom which is a necessary condition for having fruition of what *is*” (Mommaers 2004, 69). That is to say, suffering and fruition are
two sides of the same coin; both are necessary components of the entire structure of
the narrator’s relationship with Minne.8

The shifting temporalities of the poems are also central: throughout, Hadewijch
points forward to heavenly reward (and the concomitant hope) and backward to
remembered moments of union with Minne (as a source of succor amidst present
woes). Although many scholarly attempts to define Hadewijch’s use of Minne begin
or end by quoting her exuberant declaration in the conclusion to Letter 25 that “de
Minne es al” (“Minne is everything”), Wilhelm Breuer soberly reminds us that such
an expansive account of the term is not a definition at all, as it fails to narrow or
delimit Minne in the slightest (115). Bernard McGinn attempts to define Minne, a
peerlessly polysemous term, by noting that it can signify Son or Holy Spirit, but often
is addressed as feminine world spirit, and thus can be “personified and addressed
as Lady and Queen” (202).9 The necessity of the term’s extreme polyvalence for
Hadewijch’s understanding of human relationships with the divine is best summa-
rized by Jessica Boon: “only Minne, referring at once to God as lady, the soul as
knight, and to the loving relationships within God and between lover and God, can
capture in one many-layered phrase the multiplicity of the experience of simple union
with a God beyond descriptors” (493).10 Reinder Meijer instead focuses on the rela-
tional meaning of the term, writing that “these connotations [of Minne] were all
aspects of the same thing: the relation between God and man” (17).

Relying heavily on the complicated metrical patterns and rhyme schemes of trou-
badour lyrics, Hadewijch creates a textual experience in which the eternal and the
temporal intersect in a moment of ecstasy (ghebruken, usually translated as “frui-
tion”). Barbara Newman writes that while “all we need to do to imagine hell is
take a moment of physical or mental torture, which seems subjectively endless, and
conceive it as objectively so,” imagining heaven is far more challenging insofar as
“happiness makes us all too conscious of its brevity: the more intense our joys, the
more intensely we perceive that they are fleeting. Nor can we readily imagine perfect
joy, even for an instant” (2007, 185). As difficult as erotic fruition might be to de-
scribe, its comparative (sublunary) brevity makes the task seem just barely possible; it
would seem that neither a perfect joy nor an eternal joy can be imagined, let alone
described.11

And yet this impossibility — this aporetic lack and the impossible attempt to fulfill
it — is precisely what leads Hadewijch to the heights of poetic sublimity. This treat-
ment of the aporetic heart of eros stems in part from the mystical tradition, but also
sets itself apart by drawing on contemporary courtly paradigms of love in which
repetition and unfulfilled desire are also central. J. Reynaert writes that Hadewijch’s
experience of love occurred within “a sensibility in which the personification of
Love represented primarily a frustration, a lack” (212). The religious use of erotic
metaphor was, of course, well-established in Hadewijch’s day: biblical exegetes had
long worked tirelessly to appropriate the relentlessly sexual imagery of the Canticum
Canticorum into the strictures of orthodox theology.12 While contemporary scho-
larship is well aware of the dynamics of eroticism in medieval devotion, I aim to
situate my analysis of Hadewijch’s *Stanzaic Poems* within a framework that incorporates both the Cistercian tradition of Canticle-commentary and Jean-Luc Marion’s provocative meditation on the erotic reduction.

Although many of the *Stanzaic Poems* open with a mention of the season, month, or holiday in which the poem is set (known as the *Natureingang*), in *Stanzaic Poem VII* this topos reaches its rhetorical peak in the invocation of the New Year. Starting from the expected language of renewal and rebirth, the poem becomes an extended meditation on the meanings and difficulties of newness. The rhyme scheme itself is rare: ABCD ABCD EEE A. Reading or hearing the first quatrain, one hardly expects a rhyme scheme at all — perhaps looking for patterns of alliteration or consonance instead. Failing that, we see only repetition: a variation on *nuwe* in each line, a word that attempts to signify novelty in the process of destroying itself by becoming stale and old. After the first quatrain — it would not be overreading to see the sequence of the four seasons in this pattern — we suddenly realize the first line is being rhymed in line five. The word *nuwe* drops out for the second quatrain; the poetic form is called upon to perform the newness, not the words themselves.

This effect is more visual and readerly than it is auditory: the mnemonic work required of a listener would seem to be too great for the pattern to have been appreciated — or perhaps even noticed. Instead, Hadewijch reminds the reader that while song may initially have more affective power, parchment’s fixity can allow one both to experience more of the work simultaneously and to see deeper circular structures at play within the written poem.\(^\text{13}\) The singular linear progression of discrete moments in audition is replaced by a more circular pattern of reading: only in slow rumination of the written word can we understand a rhyme scheme that sends us back four lines for each line we progress.

**Eros and temporality**

Anne Carson writes that the “act of speech, then, is an experience of temporal process: when you pronounce the word ‘transient,’ the second syllable is not present until the first has ceased to be (c.f. Augustine *Confessions* 11.27). An act of reading and writing, on the other hand, is an experience of temporal arrest and manipulation” (121). In Hadewijch’s rhyme scheme readers see a precise deployment of this attempt to perform the passing of seasons within a stanza: a circularity that will make each line both new and old, both a memory of lines past and an anticipation of an unending pattern.\(^\text{14}\) One can find this general principle in the music Hadewijch employs to a degree, the use of repeated melodies and refrains making the experience of hearing slightly more circular, but this intricate level of attention to formal patterning must be principally textual, if initially only experiential. This is doubly true for the mystical poem: as de Certeau writes, the extra-textual temporality of the mystical act gives way inexorably to the text: “it founds, on the basis of its instantaneity, the time (the developments) of discourse. Upon an unrepeatable present, it founds a textual space
amenable to the returns, the repetition and reversibility of readings” (167). The richness of both the form and content of Hadewijch’s verse ensures that multiple readings will still surprise the attentive reader: her poems can, in this sense among others, indeed bring readers to the coexistence of old and new.

After the complex octet form, Hadewijch reverses this structure: three rhyming lines in a row press home the musical roots of the poem, and mirror the insistent knocking of the present in the midst of the gentle eternal repetition of nature’s cycles. The last line, however, then packages the stanza tidily by returning to the rhyme of lines one and five. The year is still new; the stanzaic cycle reassures us that the novelty of the New Year will not disturb the certainty of the eternal.

The first quatrain boldly announces the Natureingang with an invocation of the new year:

Bi den nuwen jare
Hoept men der nuwer tide
Die nuwe bloemen sal brenghen
Ende nuwe bliscap menichfout (7.1–4)

At the new year / One hopes for renewal of the season / Which will bring new flowers / And renewed gladness manifold.15

The New Year brings the hope of changes to come — a temporality already looking forward to future changes, an expectation furthered by the multiplicity of new forms of bliss yet to come. This hope, however, is immediately tempered in line five by fear (vare) — the first A-rhyme, returning us to the opening line’s jare. Line five is also the entrance of Minne: an entrance perhaps first unnoticed on the manuscript page (nuwe and minne quite possibly looking very much the same: seven or eight minims and an e).16 After commenting on the new sweetnesses to be granted the servant of Minne, the stanza ends darkly, commenting that these new rewards will be granted only in order to compensate for “alle nuwe sware” (12; “every new heaviness”).17

This contrast between sweetness and heaviness, between the sorrows and joys of Minne, forms the basis of the courtly love imagery Hadewijch adopts throughout her poems. It is worth noting in broad outline the main reversal this engenders: whereas male mystics would often take on a weak and feminine persona to become the mystical bride of Christ (with anima gendered feminine and the Canticum Canticorum as scriptural encouragement for the eroticization of the relationship),18 the allegorical project of courtly love allows Hadewijch to take on a male persona who is similarly weak at the hands of the haughty, aloof Lady Minne. (Barbara Newman refers to this reversal as la mystique courtoise [1995, 137–81].) The standard paradoxical, or rather kenotic, dichotomies between high and low, strong and weak, foolish and wise thus similarly obtain in her oeuvre.19 Indeed, Saskia Murk-Jansen writes that Hadewijch exemplifies the maxim that for Christianity “paradox could be described as the basis of all truly religious expression” (54). Hadewijch’s authorial project amplifies these inherent tendencies through a textual program of gender reversals by “frequently
referring to her own sex immediately after creating the imaginative context of masculine endeavor” (Murk-Jansen 59). This constant gender oscillation forces the reader to determine consciously the ever-shifting boundary between the literal and metaphorical meanings of the poem: a process that of necessity delays the poem’s completion and slows the process of reading itself so that the reader might be made acutely aware of the temporal situation in which he or she reads the poem and the ongoing procession of temporal change as applies to the characters of Hadewijch’s verse.

The second stanza of the poem proclaims the newness of the hypothetical servant of Minne: the narrator would be surprised by the very newness — perhaps boldness — of such a person, even while acknowledging that this is exactly what a newly-made just person (rechte) ought best to do. The second quatrains of the stanza imagines the social isolation of such a figure before restoring the idea of Minne as granting a “nuwe goet” (21; “new goodness”) that will give the servant “nuwen moet” (22; “new courage”) — and, most intriguingly, “in al nuwen doet” (23; “renews itself in all/always”). These iterations of newness are set apart from the first quatrains by a precise break of four lines in which nuwe is entirely absent: just as daily and annual cycles allow every morning and each spring to feel new despite their endless iteration, so too does Hadewijch’s poem allow readers to experience the very word new anew.

This structure of nuwe coming and going echoes the troubadour and courtly love tradition of mourning a lover who has gone away, only to rejoice ever the more intensely with her return. This need for repetition that yet remains ever-fresh is especially acute in the erotic mode, as will be seen below in a discussion of Stanzaic Poem XL.

The third stanza opens provocatively: “Ay die minne es nuwe in alle uren / Ende si vernuwet alle daghe” (25–26; “Ah! Love is new in every hour, / And she fully renews every day”). First, love is understood as that which itself manages to be new in each subdivision of the day; next, love is the agent that, perhaps by this very quality of newness, is able to transform the days by a perfect, ongoing renewal. The newness of Minne herself on a briefer temporal scale somehow allows her to perform an act of renewal on the larger sequence of the days.

This combination of temporalities — seen in even richer detail in Vision VIII and Mengeldicht XIV — points towards what Patricia Dailey has discussed as mysticism’s inherent need to use different temporal registers simultaneously. In this she means not only the altered time of the vision in which both body and moment are bifurcated, but also the gap between the moment of ecstasy or union and its remembrance or memorialization in the text itself. The same holds true, exegetically, on an eschatological level: Denys Turner writes of the sense of history in exegesis of the Canticle that “every fulfilment . . . [i]s a previous longing now satisfied and yet is also a further promise generating a new, as yet unsatisfied, longing” (86). William of St Thierry examines the experiential role of memory and anticipation in his Exposition on the Song of Songs (a text Hadewijch may have read): “the fragrance of perfumes which vanish with him is a certain impression, still living in the memory, of vanished
sweetness and, in what thought still recaptures, the joy of dwelling on the remembrance of consolation once past” (33–34). This lived memory provides consolation while “hope of benefits to come” and “hope for the future” restrain us from “wishing to withdraw from him” (36) in the moment of union itself. The visionary experience is remembered in the rewriting of the vision or poem even as it is in turn reenvisioned in its rereading today. It is in these corporeal, temporal, and linguistic lacunae (from inner to outer body, from quotidian to celestial time, from experience to text, from song to parchment, from text to reader) that the mystical text gains its peculiar affective power and complex textuality; the reader’s understanding of the space between Minne and servant in the *Stanzaic Poems* is ever heightened and mirrored by an awareness of his or her own distance from Hadewijch and her intricate, opaque language.

**Signification and eros**

Amy Hollywood details the use of similar gaps in a Lacanian system of semiotics in which the endless desire for the other and the self-as-other “mimics the open play of signification made possible . . . by the gap between subject and object, body and psyche, signifier and referent. The signifying function of language depends on this gap, and yet because of the gap meaning can never be fully stabilized, nor the subject’s desire completely fulfilled” (157). In keeping these gaps ever present before the reader’s mind — ontologically it seems impossible not to, although tropes of ineffability and union often mean that rhetorically the issue is either tacitly ignored or boldly overcome — we are made aware not only of the distance between creature and creator, but even more importantly the renewal of desire that can be engendered when that distance is, however momentarily, diminished. The coming and going of Minne occasions sorrow, but also hope for a future return and an ever-new joy.

The poem continues highlighting the newness that envelops the lover of Minne: “sie maect die nuwe nieboren / Altoes in nuwen geode” (27–28; “the renewed she causes to be re-born / In continuously new goodness”). Again, the constancy of her goodness is contrasted with the transformative novelty when she remakes or rebirths this hypothetical servant. After detailing the poverty of the old, the rejecter of Minne, the poem on the page ends with an explosion of descenders: after two lines with neither *nuwe* nor *minne*, the ninth line applies the sorrows of the previous quatrains to “hi es van dat nuwen ontweghet / Ende hem es dat nuwe ontseghet” (33–34; “he does not walk along the road of renewal, / And the newness is denied him”). As if to represent love’s constant growth, these two lines are followed by: “Dat in nuwe minne gheleghet / In nuwer minner minnen natuere” (35–36; “Which is the condition of love / In the nature of lovers in love renewed”). With each line, Hadewijch increases the mention of *nuwe* or *minne* until the final line speaks of almost nothing else.

In the course of these lines the manuscript reader is assailed with the technique mentioned briefly above: a barrage of nearly indistinguishable descenders or minims
which demonstrates the chaotic, ecstatic growth of love/nature better than the meaning of the words themselves could possibly hope to. But the difficulty in making out what is written in the midst of so many vertical lines brings one face to face with the opacity of the sign, with the distance between what is written on a page, experienced textually, and what is understood in Hadewijch’s mind as she creates words to memorialize her service to Minne. The endless blurring of minne and nuwe climaxes here, showing readers their lack of control over textuality and temporality. Signification is fragile, language about eternity even more so.

The text confronts its own failings here: one can imagine a scribe tortuously counting out how many vertical strokes to make in each of these final lines, until reaching the last line of the stanza in which, out of forty-three graphemes, only ten are not minims. For the scribe, at any rate, this is the least new line one could imagine: repetition without renewal. It renders readers as far as imaginable between signifier and thing signified, who find themselves “striving after the point that would fix meaning.” In the face of such an impenetrable string of graphemes, readers are suffused with a desire for “the One, the transcendental signifier in which signifier and signified are united” (Hollywood 165), and, at the same time, they are encouraged to long for such a transcendentally unifying One, only to find that their gazing eyes are met by a string of blankly indistinguishable minims.

Hadewijch anticipates this readerly crisis by immediately launching us into a study of abjection and despair: “Ay waer es nu nuwe minne / Met haren nuwen geode” (37–38; “Ah! Where is new love now / With her new goodness?”). After the textual abyss from which we have just emerged, the question seems especially apt — in the sea of identical signifiers, looking for Minne on the page seems futile. But this search, more than textual, leads Hadewijch to imagine the departure of Minne, bringing “nuwe wee” (40; “new woes”) that “smelten mine sinne” (41; “smelt my senses”). She next fears “die afgront daer si mi in sende / Die es dieper dan die zee” (43–44; “the abyss she may fling me into / [That] is deeper in than the sea”). The language of nature now becomes the specter of a terrifying abyss into which the departure of Minne will throw the lover.

After this chilling quatrain comes a potential for redemption situated in the body — more specifically, in the relationship of the body to precisely this abyss of abjection: “hare nuwe diepe afgronde / Die vernuwet mi die wonde” (45–46; “her abyss, deep ever anew, / Tears open my wound afresh”). This is the first hint towards the redemptive power of the circular pattern of Minne’s coming and going. The wounded body in the abyss is precisely what allows the renewal of that body: the metaphor of a purely self-contained regeneration in which the reopening of the wound is a fairly optimistic gesture backwards, remembering both past trauma and past healing in the present moment’s pain and abjection. In essence, we have what seems to be a Boethian moment in which Hadewijch makes clear that those who are cast down will inevitably be raised again and the wounded healed once more (a theme that will be echoed over a century later in Julian of Norwich’s master-servant parable).

The stanza ends: “Ic en soeke meer ghesonde / Eer icse mi nuwe al kinne” (47–48; “I look for healing no more, / Until, again, I shall utterly know her”). The A-rhymes
in this stanza — *minne*, *sinne*, and *kinne* — are of particular significance: the smelting of the senses provides the bridge between *minne* and *kinne*. It is only in this passionate language of self-annihilation and self-abasement can Minne be fully understood, experienced — once again, and yet as if for the first time. The new wound is the only path to a new knowing or a new loving.

The fifth stanza proposes a solution to these woes insofar as those who utterly abandon themselves in Minne can be both “nuwe ende out” (52; “new and old”). These “nuwe oude vroede” (49; “new-old wise”) are completely dependent on Minne: even as they wean themselves like children, they need to lean against Minne for support as they follow her “met nuwen moede in nuwen woede” (62; “with renewed courage in renewed raging desire”). The emphasis on internal rhymes in this stanza (*oude vroede, nuwen moede, nuwen woede*) heightens the sense of a harmonious union of Minne with these servants: the sense of restful assuredness is only dissipated by the fiercely unsettled, aggressive, martial language of the final line and its “raging desire” or “violent longing.”

This proscription of self-abandonment to Minne thus expounded, Hadewijch turns to the outside perception of such a radical program of self-abasement. After a glorious quatrain of growing confidence and exuberance —

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Die nuwer minnen scolen
Met nuwer minnen volghen
Na nuwer minnen rade
In nuwer trouwen ere (61–64)
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Those that pursue the schooling of new love / With love renewed, / According to the recommendation of ever new love, / In undaunted new faithfulness —

— she abruptly concludes: “Si scinen dicke in dolen” (65; “They often seem astray”). This hesitation about social perception is only hinted at here, but it is repeated in stronger terms in the final quatrain of the poem. Ultimately, this awareness of a potentially critical audience or public is described positively as an opportunity to reveal truths anew:

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Ende so comt dat nuwe clare
Met allen nuwen ware
Ende brenghet nuwe openbare
Dat mi hade stille bevoelen. (69–72)
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And thus the newness becomes clear, / With all new truth, / And newly it is made public / What I was commanded to keep silent upon.

**Sweetness of interpretation**

Finally, the poem describes the sweetness, not of union with Minne, but rather of openly preaching what was once hidden and surrounded in silence (the joy, in essence, of making the very poem we are reading):
Ay hoe suete es nuwe melden
Al ghevet nuwen kere
Ende menich nuwe doghen
Het es nuwe toeverlaet (73–76)

Ah! How sweet it is to announce renewal (anew)! / Even if it causes new reverses / And
many new sorrows to be endured, / It is a new pledge.

Here, the newness lies not in the experience of Minne, but in proclaiming it widely; the
same excited performances may lead to suffering, Hadewijch acknowledges, but they
are a small price to pay for Minne’s new pledge (an image that may well bear resonances of the biblical covenant). These reassurances continue in a rapturous exposition of the rewards of Minne as we are drawn “in minnen hoechste raet” (80; “into the highest decree of love”). The poem finally reaches the emblematic term Hadewijch employs throughout her oeuvre to signal unitive moment: ghebruken. We are transported “in nuwen ghebrukene fijn / Alse nuwe minne es al mijn” (82–83; “in the new magnificent fruition / Of: ‘New love is all mine’”).

The climax of the poem introduces both the first use of ghebruken and the most direct biblical allusion in the poem; the stanza ends wistfully, “Ay dit nuwe ghesciete selden” (84; “Ah! This renewal [or newness] occurs too seldom”). This Canticum Canticorum-inspired possession of Minne by the lover slips away almost as soon as the moment of ecstasy passes; the two lines of highest bliss are followed by a wistful memorialization of the rarity of the experience. As soon as it is written, it is recognized as a lack: if it were an eternal union, there would be no Hadewijch (indistinctive unity) — or at least no Hadewijch capable (or desirous) of writing. Rapture can only be written down afterwards in a moment both remembering past joy and longing for joys yet to come. It always represents a lack of the absolute, the presence of an absence, the “anguished ecstasy in which the real, the recognition of the endless gap in being and the ceaselessness of desire, emerges” (Hollywood 166). Perhaps defensively, recognizing the suspiciousness of the poetic project at hand, the poem ends on a quatrain almost hyperactively denouncing those who avoid this process of renewal and instead embark upon a shadowy procedure of “vremden nuwen vernuwen” (86; “renewing themselves with [an alien newishness alien]”).

Eros and appetite

Hadwijch also employs the human relationship with food as a potent metaphor for the cyclical presence and absence of Minne: language of satiety and hunger provides her with an apt analogy for the longing for presence and the inevitable path towards absence that the soul experiences in its relationship with Minne. Stanzaic Poem XXXIII opens with a mention of the cycle of the seasons — “die tijt vernuwen met sinen jaren” (1; “year after year the seasons renew themselves”) — before marveling that those who long for Minne yet lack her still manage to persist in the pursuit. The following stanzas contrast those for whom pain in the service of love is ultimately all delight and those who avoid pain and suffice themselves with “vremden ghenuechten”
Again, temporality plays a vital role in Hadewijch’s formulation of fruition: the works of the true servant of Minne are deemed “emmer onghefijnt” (20; “ever unfinished / imperfect”). One can hear in this phrasing echoes of the apophatic tradition: both language and works can only approximate divine perfection or unity, and in this world all can only ever be an unfinished, ongoing process.

After detailing the dual nature of life in “der vrier minnen leen” (26; “the fief of lavish love”) — that is to say, “sat ende hongher beide in een” (25; “satiety and hunger, both in one”) — the poem ends with a bizarre image detailed in arresting language: “Met nuwen storme nuwen hongher so wijt / Dat nuwe verslende nuwe eweliken tijt” (55–56; “may a new storm give such ravenous hunger / That again and again eternity may be devoured afresh”).

She voices a tantalizing wish for a hunger so powerful that somehow eternity itself can be consumed in a mystical feast that somehow never manages to satiate: a meal that can be infinitely repeated, yet with the savor and sensation of exquisite relief at the first bite forever present.

This rapturous language cannot but lead the reader to consider hungers both physical and erotic.

It is the dream of every gourmand and every lover: that one can eat constantly yet retain the newness of hunger just first fulfilled, that ecstasy of any sort might never fade. Or that each reading of a favorite text can surprise, startle, and enthrall in just the way the first reading once did. As Marion writes, the promise and expectation of an erotic eternity “demands that the first time already coincide with the last time” (2007, 211). Even the ambiguity of language itself (in this passage especially, but throughout Hadewijch’s dense oeuvre) encourages a practice in which rereading ever reveals new meanings and new connections. Donald Duclow, commenting on the differences between translations of this poem’s ending, concludes that “the line’s ambiguity enacts a fusion of meanings at the poem’s final, most intense moment when hunger — whether of the sisters’ ardor, the new, Love, or all of these together — becomes so huge that it breaks into God’s own life. At this point hunger and eating coincide” (429). One might only wish that this point could be maintained eternally.

It is in Stanziaic Poem XL that this vision — of an infinite union in which the eternity of God and the temporality of the lover can fuse in an ecstatic moment of pure joy — reaches its fullest expression. Again, language of the New Year is invoked in the opening of the poem to express the longing for renewal; the season is at hand, “doch es die bliscap onghereet” (5; “but that gladness yet remains out of reach”).

Similarly out of reach is a complete structure of repetition within the poem: rather than a perfect chain of concatenations (as one would find in troubadour lyric, and there principally for mnemonic aid), we find a far more intricate system of links and disjunctions at work.

Although the beginning and ending of most stanzas are joined by a concatenating phrase or word, all are joined by a thematically progressive rim estramp concerning Minne. Tanis Guest points out that while “the repetition of ‘minnen’ and similarity
of structure gives continuity, the different attributes mentioned in each pair, in conjunction with the different verbs, form a rising scale of tension through the first six stanzas: overtake distance, overcome strength, enjoy sweetness” (1975, 46). The fruition in stanzas five and six is far more significant than Guest makes out, however: the verb in both instances is *ghebruken*, Hadewijch’s stock term for ecstatic union or rapture. The two stanzas are worth looking at in detail:

Dien minne verwint dat hise verwinne
Hem wert hare suete natuere noch cont
Als hi ghevoelt die soete minne
Wort hi met haren wonden ghewont
Als hi met wondere hare wondere kinnet
Sughet hi met nieede der aderen gront
Altoes met dorste van nuwen beginne
Eer hi ghebruert der zueter minnen (33–40)

To whomever love overthrows so that he may overpower her, / Her sweet nature will yet become manifest. / When he feels this sweet love, / He is wounded with her wounds. / When in wonder he perceives her wonders, / He ardently sucks the ground of love’s veins, / Always thirsting after beginning afresh, / Until he has fruition of sweet love.

The opening line borrows directly from the courtly love tradition; Minne first proves her strength over the lover, then allows him to conquer or overpower or win her. Being wounded with her wounds might seem to allude to the stigmata, although the matching repetition of *wondere* in the next line and the successive imagery brings the tenor of the stanza deeper into the erotic. It might be best to read these wounds as a crossover bearing resonances of the stigmata, the eroticized side-wound of Christ, and the wounds of Cupid’s arrows. The lover sucks at the *gront* of Minne’s veins, perhaps the heart or perhaps simply blood; the language of penetration is obliquely invoked as the lover is both inside Minne with his lips to her heart and outside lapping up her blood. This bafflingly dual position seems ultimately satisfactory — the lover longs for a new beginning, another, closer union with Minne (with this desire for union echoed insofar as the A-rhyme matches the *rim estramp* for the only time in the poem).

The next stanza provides this union, as far as any poem possibly can:

Soe werdet utermaten goet
Begherte scept ghenuechte drincket
Die fiere die dat sine in minnen verdoet
Ende met woede in hare ghebruiken sincket
Soe heeft hi vol der minnen spoet
Daer minne met minnen haer minne al scincket
Ende soe wert die minne al minne volvoet
Daer hi ghebruuet der sueter minnen (41–48)
Then he feels surpassingly good — Desire pours out and delight drinks down — / The fierce one forfeiting all he owns in love, / And sinking with fury into fruition of her; / Then he experiences good speed in love to the full, / Where love with love pours out all of her love. / And thus the belovéd is all sated with love, / Because he has fruition of sweet love.

The newness of the ecstatic, unmistakably erotic union in this stanza is marked in part by the lack of concatenation between this and the previous stanzas — however sweet the previous bloody oral fruition was, this ghebruken is entirely of another order. Although any ecstatic moment unfolds over time, however brief, the absolute climax of the poem would seem to begin at line forty-four with ghebruken and reach the pinnacle of erotic sublimity in line forty-six, where nearly the entire line is given over to an ecstatic cry of minne. After the climax, the energy gently dissipates over the next two lines: from the three-fold repetition of minne in line forty-six, she is mentioned only twice in the following line, and only once as the last line prepares us to transition from the textual experience of ecstasy/ghebruken to a coda of reflection and afterglow.

After attempting to represent this impossibly ineffable moment (and succeeding, one must admit, remarkably well), Hadewijch immediately tempers the reader’s excitement with an admonitory quatrain:

Der minnen ghebruken, dat es een spel
Dat niemant wel ghetonen en mach
Ende al mocht dies pleghet iet tonen wel
Hine const verstaen dies noet en plach (49–52)

The fruition of love, that is a game / No one can interpret satisfactorily. / And even if someone who practices it might elucidate something of it, / One never having practised it could not understand.

The curt niemant of line fifty is lightened by the disclaimer that follows — it can be described discursively, to an extent, but in a language that will be utter gibberish to one who has not experienced the same ghebruken. Whatever we have understood of the preceding two stanzas has been entirely by the grace of our sharing the experience with Hadewijch’s narrator: although the opening couplet of the quatrain dismisses the linguistic possibility of singing of Minne, the second couplet suggests that to whatever extent the poem has been understood, just so much have readers experienced the ecstasy of union with Minne.

This hermetism-cum-experientialism then shifts the vista of the poem to a glorious meditation of Minne’s inscrutability compared to the workings of the universe itself:

Die loep des troens ende diere planeten
Ende der tekenne die metten troene gaen
Machmen iet met ghelike weten
Ende met maten van ghetale bevaen (57–60)
The course of the cosmos and of the planets / Of and the constellations that move in the universe, / We can imagine to some extent by likenesses / And capture with the measure of figures.

Although these highest astronomical mysteries can be in some ways measured, tallied, and understood in the universities, “gheen meester mach hem dies vermeten / Dat hi minne met sinne mach doen verstaen” (61–62; “no master may therefore arrogate the presumption / Of being able to make love understood to the senses”). Even cosmic mysteries are insignificant when compared to the necessity of an utterly experiential knowledge of Minne. The course of the planets through the void of the cosmos is minuscule compared to the vastness of the course followed by the servant of Minne. We can measure the stars, but not the sufferings and joys of the lover in the moment of ecstasy, the moment of union with Minne. An eternity in a flash; the infinite in a wound. Through the experience of these necessarily aporetic moments, and through reading the poetic performances of a language that miraculously can repeat itself ever anew, that anticipates future joys even as it virtuosically memorializes those long since past, one can come closer to understanding the subtleties of Hadewijch’s ecstatic, eternal, erotic, and ultimately poetic relationship to Minne.

Notes

1 By contrast, Hadewijch’s construction of the eternality of heaven in the Visions offers a different account of both union and temporality: even as she creates an imaginative, discursive space for the representation of her fleeting visionary experience of heaven, she also invokes a temporality that emphasizes the “eternal, timeless space . . . of the disembodied literary text” (Suydam 2006, 101).

2 The comparison of eternal union with endless fruition can be found in Cistercian commentaries on the Song of Songs, a tradition to which Hadewijch is indebted; the momentary experience of fruition is in turn compared to a foretaste of that eternal union. See, for instance, William of St Thierry’s commentary on lectulus noster floridus: “a paradise is set out for the Bride’s soul and, for her conscience, a little flowery bed where she finds not that eternal kiss and perfect union, but a certain remote imitation of that kiss and perfection, a certain likeness of that union and likeness. . . . [Something experienced fleetingly] grows sweet and ravishes the lover. And for a moment, for an hour, this affects him and shapes his efforts until it seems to him that no longer in hope but in quasi-reality he sees with his eyes, and holds and handles with his hands, by a sort of evidence of experimental faith, the very substance of things to be hoped for of the Word of life” (80).

3 Dutch scholarship (particularly that of Louis Peter Grijp) has documented sufficient metrical commonalities with troubadour lyrics to allow a reconstruction of the melodies to which the poems were originally sung. This is epitomized in the new edition, (modern Dutch) translation, commentary, and four accompanying audio CDs by Veerle Fraeters and Frank Willaert (Historische Uitgeverij, 2009) which prefers the title Liederen (Songs) (as, indeed, Johanna Snellen’s 1907 edition did). For the sake of continuity in Anglophone scholarship, however, I refer to them as Stanzaic Poems in this essay.

4 The best concise overview of Hadewijch’s theology can be found in Bernard McGinn’s The Flowering of Mysticism, 200–22. See also Paul Mommaers definitive work, available in English with a forward (and updated bibliography) by Veerle Fraeters, Hadewijch: Writer — Beguine — Love Mystic.

5 In one passage (2007, 143–50), Marion draws parallels between the three lexica used to talk about sexuality (the obscene, the puerile, and the theological) and the three modes of mystical theology (the affirmative or cataphatic, the negative or apophatic, and the hyperbolic). For Marion’s contribution to the apophatic tradition, see God without Being, first published in French in 1982 as Dieu sans l’être: Hors-texte.

6 For an exploration of these themes in the works of fourteenth-century mystic Henry Suso, see my essay “The Visual, the Textual, and the Auditory in Henry Suso’s Vita or Life of the Servant.”

7 Gordon Rudy’s account of the role of somatic terminology in Hadewijch’s language of indistinctive
union with the divine is persuasively argued; see his Mystical Language of Sensation in the Later Middle Ages, 67–100.

8 Or, as Diana Neal writes, “the point of the Beguine’s mystical project is that abjection, like vulnerability, is taken into the divine and experienced as the divine in mystical fruition. Thus the language of the divine/human narrative collapses the human and the divine as separate ontologies, eschatologically divinising the human” (90). This pattern of alternating presence and absence can be found elsewhere in both courtly love and mystical traditions as the ludus amoris: see, for instance, the account of Henry Suso’s courtship of Divine Wisdom in the Middle English Seven Points: “if þou wilt knowe more specially what is þe pleie of loue, wete welle þat hit is joye and sorowe, þe whiche oon aftir anþer of my presens and of myne absence fallen to þe lover. For þat is þe propirte of loue, þat in þe presence of þat þinge þat is louede hit is hidde and not knouwen, but in þe absence þerof hit shewiþ hit selfe & is more knouyn” (28).

9 Barbara Newman’s God and the Goddesses goes further, and treats the rich tradition of devotion to Minne as a form of medieval Goddess-worship (138–89).

10 See also Tanis M. Guest’s essay “Hadewijch and Minne” in European Context: Studies in the History and Literature of the Netherlands Presented to Theodoor Weevers, 14–29.

11 One might say John Keats’s Ode on a Grecian Urn comes close, yet it perfectly describes eternally deferred joy rather than its endless fulfillment. Singing the final forty-six bars of the second movement of Brahms’s Ein deutsches Requiem (a setting of the text Evige Freude wird über ihrem Haupte sein) in concert is the closest I have come to understanding what this might mean.

12 For an invaluable account of the reception of these patterns of thought in vernacular poetry and devotion, see Barbara Newman’s Frauenlob’s Song of Songs: A Medieval German Poet and His Masterpiece, esp. 64–78. See also Timothy Jackson’s perceptive article on the cognitive implications of Frauenlob’s use of erotic metaphors: “Erotic Imagery in Medieval Spiritual Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Metaphor.” For an essay exploring the Patristic roots of this topos, see Elizabeth A. Clark’s “The Celibate Bridegroom and His Virginal Brides.”

13 This account differs from Mary Suydam’s use of performance studies to understand Beguine spiritual texts in her “Beguine Textuality: Sacred Performances.” Although these texts were undoubtedly sung and performed, they were also experienced as written texts; I believe that a fuller understanding of their intricacies requires their treatment as text as well as lyric. Suydam addresses the entry of Hadewijch’s lyrics into textuality (and its concomitant timelessness) in “Bringing Heaven Down to Earth.” In the end, it may be best to turn to Brian Stock’s influential discussion of “textual communities” in Listening for the Text, which aims to appropriate both orality and textuality within a single interpretive framework.

14 This pattern, in which finitude demands repetition and rebirth, consequently ensuring infinitude, is linked in Marion to the erotic phenomenon; he concludes “eroticization’s finitude assures me the infinite repetition of the erotic reduction itself” (2007, 143). The necessary finitude of the erotic, he claims, leads inevitably to an expectation for (infinite) repetition. In the time of expectation, he writes, “only my expectation lasts: it suspends the flux of time, because it still finds nothing in time that arises, and, thus, that can disappear. In the world’s time, that which passes does not last. In the erotic reduction’s time, only the expectation for which nothing happens lasts” (33).

15 Citations of the Stanzic Poems and their translations are taken from Marieke van Baest’s edition; when there are significant ambiguities to be resolved, I also cite Mother Columba Hart’s translation from Hadewijch: The Complete Works in footnotes.

16 Johanna Snellen’s 1907 edition of the Liederen includes manuscript variants that indicate some scribal uncertainties in these passages: MSS A and B have mu rather than nuwe in line 24, and both MSS similarly insert a de between in and nuwe in line 35. MSS B and C have nuwe in line 48 for mu in MS A. Wybren Scheepsma notes in his study of the thirteenth-century Limburg Sermons that the early manuscripts contain relatively rare (and, so far as we know, exclusively Dutch) abbreviations for minne and minnen: m with superscript e or n. He reports that these abbreviations are also found in some Hadewijch manuscripts, including MS Brussels Royal Library 2879–80 (dated 1325–1350), f. 96vb, line 7, in the rhyme position (318, fig. 21 in Scheepsma’s book offers a facsimile of this folio). These scribal maneuvers provide further evidence of the careful attention given to the portrayal of this key mystical term on the manuscript page.

17 Mother Columba Hart’s translation renders this line “every new sadness” (144).

18 For an excellent, accessible overview of the role of the Canticle in the Bible by an Old Testament scholar, see David M. Carr’s The Erotic Word: Sexuality, Spirituality, and the Bible. See also Hildegard Elisabeth Keller’s My Secret Is Mine: Studies on Religion and Eros in the German Middle Ages, although her book is concerned primarily with the sexualization of this motif, i.e., the “increasingly exclusive allocation of the female role [as bride of
Christ] to female human beings” (61). For a contrasting view, see Shawn Krahmer’s “The Virile Bride of Bernard of Clairvaux” in which Bernard imagines himself as a bridegroom with “a soul who is virtuous for having renounced male privilege and become a weak woman and a soul who is valorized for having overcome feminine weakness and become virile” (305).

24 When courtly love and Marian devotion are joined, Mary Suydam sees this in terms not only of temporality but also of spatiality (particularly in the “construction of heaven” in the Visions): “She is at various points absorbed in mystical rapture, addressed by, and in turn speaking to, the angel, and acclaimed by the heavenly hosts. The vision also spans the past, present, and future, even as it stops time” (2006, 99).

25 On this, and a brief critique of the history of Hadewijch’s oeuvre. See Promised Bodies.

26 She addresses this both in her 2002 University of California, Irvine, doctoral dissertation and her forthcoming book, Promised Bodies.

27 Agatha Bardoel, following Ricoeur, writes that symbolic language itself can be used to express desire because “it contains elements that look backward to origins in the being of the individual expressing the desire and it looks forward to the goal, to what can never be fully articulated in language, the possibility of being, what being may become” (29).

28 Columba Hart’s translation: “He has lost sight of the new path, / And he is denied the newness” (145).

29 Columba Hart’s translation: “That lies in new service of Love, / In the nature of the love of new lovers” (145).

30 Many thanks to Nicholas Watson for this observation, as well as for more extensive commentary on an earlier version of this essay.

31 De Certeau writes that mystic texts draw attention to their own textuality, thus highlighting their own inadequacy as representational units and thereby focusing attention “on the sign-as-thing” and “opacifying” the sign (145).

32 This language of mutual wounding also appears in Stanzia Poem XVIII: “Nuwe tijt ende nuwe minne / Dat wondet beide in enen gront / Dat ict over nuwe bekimne / Dat heeft mijn herte nu ghewont” (15–18; “A new Spring and love ever new: / Both strike a wound in the same ground. / That I recognize this again / That has now wounded my heart”).

33 Columba Hart’s reading differs significantly: “I look for no more health / Until I experience Love as all new to me” (145).

34 Columba Hart’s translation: “with mind renewed by new violent longing” (146).

35 Paul Mommaers points out the wordplay Hadewijch frequently engages in by juxtaposing ghebraken with ghebreken (to fail, to miss, or to lack) in The Riddle of Christian Mystical Experience 170–71.


37 Carolyn Walker Bynum’s classic study Holy Feast and Holy Fast contains a summary of themes of hunger and satiety in Hadewijch (153–61). Bynum writes that “metaphors of eating are usually to Hadewijch not metaphors of engulfing and incorporating but metaphors of emptiness and hunger. No matter how much one ‘tastes,’ one is never full. The more profound the intimacy with God, the greater
the unrequited craving” (157). Similarly, William of St Thierry concludes the preface to his Exposition on the Song of Songs by asking Love: “Teach us to attain the state of soul which issues in this jubilation of one who feasts, or rather of one who after the banquet finds his hunger sharper yet and cries: ‘Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth!’” (19).

Jean Leclercq describes a similar account, understood in a paradisiacal context, in Peter Damian’s On the Glory of Paradise 59–60.

Tanis Guest writes that “the whole history of Hadewijch’s service to Love is told in these beautifully arranged lines which form the burden of the whole poem” (1975, 46).

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