Mysticism in the Low Countries before Ruusbroec

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This contribution examines the mystical literature of the Low Countries preceding John of Ruusbroec. Naturally, we do not intend to provide a complete overview, which would be utterly impossible within the constraints of one chapter. Nor is it our intention to identify Ruusbroec’s literary or theological sources. Indeed, detailed research into Ruusbroec’s sources has yet to be conducted—a lacuna that has previously been signaled.¹ The intention of this contribution is merely to explore the mystical-spiritual landscape and to indicate a number of important elements.

Background

We need not reiterate that there was a long tradition of mystical experience and reflection in the Low Countries before John of Ruusbroec. In his concise overview, Albert Deblaere indicated a number of significant elements of this tradition:

The mysticism of the Low Countries exhibits characteristics which reappear in various groupings of mystics from Carolingian times to the 17th century—what is now Flanders played the dominant role in the 13th and 14th centuries, while in the 15th and the 16th it was the present-day Netherlands. The Vita of St Gertrude of Nivelles (7th century, family of Pepin) mentions her bridal mysticism. This mysticism is generally considered to be the high-point of the spirituality of the West and is often traced back to Bernard of Clairvaux. Since Carolingian times, devotion to the Trinity was cultivated in the diocese of Liège. The feast was first introduced by Stephen of Liège († 920). Out of devotion to the Eucharist, the feast of Corpus Christi was introduced in the 13th century at the instigation of the saintly nuns Juliana of Mont Cornillon and Eva of St Martin. The creator of the doctrine of the amor illuminatus, William of St Thierry, friend of St Bernard, to whom it has often been ascribed, was likewise from Liège. His writings were widely read throughout the Netherlands. Inner union with Christ, bridal mysticism, devotion to the Trinity, inner union with Christ, bridal mysticism, devotion to the Trinity,

¹ See de Baere (1992).
Eucharistic and Christocentric piety, as well as the teaching on the development of the life of prayer, which the doctrine of the *amor illuminatus* further developed—these are the characteristic elements of the mysticism of the Low Countries.²

Stefanus Axters conducted extensive research into the sources in this regard. The first volume of his *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid in de Nederlanden* provides an overview of his findings beginning from the first forms of spirituality after the Christianization of the Low Countries under the Romans. It is impossible to summarize all Axters’ work or the recent research into the older sources here.³ We will therefore limit our discussion to one example from the Carolingian period.

In the above quote, Albert Deblaere notes a ‘trace’ of nuptial mysticism in the *vita* of Gertrude of Nivelles. A similar trace—in this case of Trinitarian mysticism—is to be found in the *Vita Bavonis*. Bavo was born into a noble family in Haspengouw, and was later married to the daughter of the Merovingian Count Adilio. The couple had a daughter, Agletrudis. After his wife’s unexpected death, Bavo came into contact with the missionary bishop Amandus and converted to Christianity; his baptismal name was Allowin. He gave his possessions to the poor and accompanied Amandus on his missionary journeys. After spending several years at the Abbey of Ganda, which had been founded by Amandus, he received permission to live as a hermit at Medmedung (the present Mendonk, a borough of Ghent). He lived there in seclusion for three years, and died c.654. There are four extant biographies of Bavo, the earliest written in the ninth century and undoubtedly based on older sources.⁴ Near the end of his *vita* we find the following:

The day upon which he would be rewarded approached and Allowin, the man of God, remained steadfast in the confession of God. When he had succumbed to sleep for a time, he saw the angel of the Lord descend upon him in the form of a dove. This vision made him very afraid, but the grace of divine consolation cheered him immediately. The entire cell in which the man of God lay was filled with an ineffably fine fragrance, clearly indicating that an angel of light and sweetness had arrived. And it was right and just that the angel of light appeared to him in the form of a dove, considering that he bore the simplicity of a dove in his heart—

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³ See Opgenhaffen (2013).
⁴ Cf. Podevijn (1941).