Ruusbroec, Jordaens, and Herp on the Common Life: The Transformation of a Spiritual Ideal

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Towards the end of the second book of *Espousals*, Ruusbroec reminds his readers that ‘enjoyment and activity (ghebruken ende werken) constitute the blessedness of Christ and all his saints.’\(^1\) This is one of the many places in which he expresses one of the distinguishing features of the medieval spirituality of the Low Countries, namely, the spiritual ideal in which activity and rest (or fruition) are in perfect harmony with one another. Ruusbroec’s ‘common life’ is perhaps the best known exponent of this ideal. However, other authors, writing before him (Hadewijch) and after him (e.g., Willem Jordaens), also adopt this dialectic of activity and repose, albeit in different ways.

In order to draw a meaningful comparison between Ruusbroec and his successors I must also examine how they adopt, or fail to adopt, Ruusbroec’s theological anthropology and his Christian Neo-Platonic theology of the Image. These comparisons have, hopefully, some scholarly interest in their own right. More important, however, they may teach us something about the changing nature of mystical theology in the late 14th and 15th centuries. I will suggest that in Hendrik Herp’s oeuvre we see a subtle move towards a less ontological (or exemplarist) and more psychological-experiential approach.

Before Ruusbroec, Hadewijch had developed a profound spirituality deeply shaped by the divine dynamics of flowing out and drawing in.\(^2\) In *Letter 17*, a profound and beautiful text, she outlines in a couple of verses a dynamic of detachment, on the one hand, and involvement, on the other, which in turn mirrors the divine nature in its pulsating movement: ‘Pouring out and keeping back are the pure divinity and the entire nature of Love.’\(^3\) Hadewijch sees the Divinity in terms which are both dynamic and dialectical, that is, as fruitive unity, on the one hand, and activity in the Persons, on the other. In the fruition of Love at the heart of the Deity, ‘there never was and never can be any other work than that one fruition...’\(^4\) The Persons, in contrast, represent the active, out-going aspect. While the divine justice swallows up all things into itself,

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1 *Espousals* Eb2204.
2 The translation is from Hart (1980).
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‘yet each Person separately has given out what is proper to him.’ Similarly, we are encouraged to be active and yet fruifie, involved and detached. Thus, the fruition of love clearly refers to each of the second pair of the verses (‘Do not apply yourself to any one virtue; Perform no particular work; Take nothing under your protection’) while the active life refers to the first of the three pair of verses (‘Be generous and zealous for every virtue; Fail not with regard to a multitude of things; Have good will and compassion for every need’).

John of Ruusbroec will adopt this theme (which has its roots in the Neo-Platonic dynamic of exitus and reeditus), but he will develop it in an even more explicit Trinitarian manner.

John of Ruusbroec and the Common Life

An exposition of Ruusbroec’s ideal of the common life is a fairly complex affair. Bernard McGinn has already given a detailed exposition of key themes of Ruusbroec’s mysticism in this volume. In what follows, I will briefly revisit two aspects central to Ruusbroec’s spiritual ideal of the common life: his original theology of the Trinity; and the rich theological anthropology in which it finds expression.

Trinitarian Theology

Drawing on a rich medieval tradition (Augustinian, Ps.-Dionysian, 12th-century Cistercian, Bonaventurian, and beguine and Rhineland influences), Ruusbroec develops a highly original mystical theology of the Trinity which shapes every aspect of his thought. The Bonaventurian influence shows itself in Ruusbroec’s view that the Father generates his Son from the fruitfulness of his paternal nature. From the mutual contemplation of the Father and his Word, the Holy Spirit proceeds as their bond of Love. However, Ruusbroec then introduces an important innovation. He argues that the Holy Spirit, as the bond of Love between Father and Son, is the principle of the return of the divine Persons into their perichoretic unity, from which the whole dynamic process starts all over again. Ruusbroec therefore describes the Trinity as ‘an ebbing, flowing sea’ in which the Son and the Holy Spirit (a) go out from the Father, then (b) flow back into the divine unity, where (c) they rest in enjoyment or fruition: