CHAPTER 8

Eye to Eye, Text to Image? Jan Provoost’s Sacred Allegory, Jan van Ruusbroec’s Spieghel der eeuwigher salicheit, and Mystical Contemplation in the Late Medieval Low Countries

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Introduction

The visio Dei was one of the central issues in late medieval debates on mystical theology, but there is little evidence for cross influences between textual and visual culture relating to this theme.\(^1\) Seeing God in this life might have been the ultimate goal of the medieval mystics; their theories of vision, speculation and contemplation concerned the intellectual faculties of the human mind. Images of all sorts—pictorial, mental, literary—were crucial to medieval practices of meditation that moved the mind’s eye to focus on the divine in forms of ‘imageless contemplation’.\(^2\) Seeing God was a matter of theological and philosophical debate, including papal doctrines on the possibility and nature of a direct vision of God in this life and/or the hereafter. Considering the abstract and scholastic nature of these discussions, it is hardly surprising that the visual

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arts had not much to contribute to a field that lies beyond what is visible or could be visualized.3

However, there were exceptions, such as the early sixteenth century panel now in the Louvre, rather confusingly called *Sacred Allegory*, or *Christian Allegory*, and ascribed to the Flemish painter Jan Provoost [Fig. 8.1].4 This article

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