

## Jan van Ruusbroec and the Modern Devotion

Jan van Ruusbroec's original theology of the Trinity illustrates the ongoing vibrancy of Trinitarian thinking throughout the fourteenth century. Ruusbroec also develops a rich spirituality which is deeply shaped by this Trinitarian vision – and this constitutes one of the most attractive aspects of this thought. It illustrates the transcendental thrust of Ruusbroec's theology – one that is deeply Trinitarian.

Jan van Ruusbroec (1293–1381) first became a priest in Brussels but later retired to a new monastery in the Zonien Forest, where the members of his community adopted the rule of St. Augustine (Augustinian canons). He wrote all his works in Middle Dutch (Flemish) although a number of letters survive only in Latin translation.<sup>1</sup> He wrote his most influential book, *Die Geestelike Brulocht* [*The Spiritual Espousals*] sometime in the early 1340s. Vernacular religious literature flourished in countries with Germanic languages from the early thirteenth century onwards. In countries in which Romance languages were spoken (closer to Latin) vernacular religious texts originated somewhat later. A number of important religious writers from the early thirteenth century, mostly beguines and Cistercian nuns, such as Hadewijch and Beatrijs van Nazareth, had written religious texts in Middle Dutch in the thirteenth century.

The influence of female spirituality on Ruusbroec is, however, fairly limited.<sup>2</sup> Drawing on a rich medieval tradition (Augustinian, Pseudo-Dionysian,

<sup>1</sup> Jan van Ruusbroec's own works (*Opera Omnia*, as edited by Guido De Baere) are available in a trilingual edition (Middle Dutch, Latin, English translation) in *CCCM* 100–10, published by Brepols in Turnhout (1988–2005). The following are some of his more important works: *The Spiritual Espousals* (*Die Geestelike Brulocht*); *A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness* (*Een Spiegel der Eeuwigher Salicheit*); *The Sparkling Stone* (*Vanden Blinkenden Steen*); *The Realm of Lovers* (*Das Rijke der Gbelieven*); *The Little Book of Clarification* (*Boecksen der Verclavinghe*); *The Four Temptations* (*Vanden Vier Becoringhen*); *The Seven Rungs* (*Van. VII. Trappen*); *The Twelve Beguines* (*Vanden XII Beghinen*), amongst others. An easily accessible selection is to be found in *The Classics of Western Spirituality series, John Ruusbroec. The Spiritual Espousals and other Writings*, trans. James Wiseman (New York: Paulist Press, 1985). An overview of Ruusbroec's theology and mysticism can be found in: Rik Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec. Mystical Theologian of the Trinity* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> J. Reynaert, "Ruusbroec en Hadewijch," *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 55 (1981): 193–233.

twelfth-century Cistercian, Bonaventuran and beguine and Rhineland influences), Ruusbroec develops a highly original mystical theology of the Trinity which shapes every aspect of his thought. The Bonaventuran 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 (a) the Son and the Holy Spirit go out from the Father; (b) they flow back into the divine unity, where (c) they rest in enjoyment or fruition:

For this noble nature that is the principal cause of all creatures is fruitful. Therefore it cannot rest in the unity of the Fatherhood, because of the stirrings (*ghedueren*) of fruitfulness; but it must without cease give birth to the eternal Wisdom, that is, the Son of the Father. Always, without cease, the Son of God was born, and is born, and will remain unborn: nevertheless it is all one Son. Where the Father beholds his Son, the eternal Wisdom, and all things in the same Wisdom: there he has been born and is a Person other than the Father . . . Neither out of the fruitful nature, that is, Fatherhood, nor out of the Father's giving birth to his Son does Love, that is, the Holy Spirit flow; but out of the fact that the Son is born a Person other than the Father, where the Father beholds him as born, and everything one with him as the life of everything, and the Son, in turn, beholds the Father giving birth and fruitful, and himself, and all things, in the Father – this is seeing and seeing-back in a fruitful nature – from this comes Love, that is, the Holy Spirit, a bond from the Father to the Son and from the Son to the Father. By this Love, the Persons are embraced and permeated and have flowed back (*wedervloeit*) into that unity out of which the Father without cease is giving birth. Now, even though they have flowed back into unity, there is no abiding, on account of nature's fruitfulness. This birth-giving and this flowing back into unity is the work of the Trinity. Thus, there is threeness of Persons and oneness of nature.<sup>3</sup>

The Bonaventuran influence is obvious in Ruusbroec's description of the processions of Word and Holy Spirit. The fruitfulness of the divine nature leads to the generation of the Son from the Father, and from their mutual contemplation the Holy Spirit proceeds as their bond of Love. The innovative element in Ruusbroec's view is the notion that the divine Persons flow back into the divine essence. This is *regiratio* in scholastic Latin or *wederboeghen* in

<sup>3</sup> *Opera Omnia*, vol. IV, *Das Rijke der Gbelieven*, lines 1597–624 (translation partly modified. All references to the *Opera Omnia* will include references to the lines in the Middle Dutch text).



Middle Dutch. The Holy Spirit is the principle of this return because the Holy Spirit, as the mutual bond of Love between Father and Son, is the unifying principle who initiates the loving return into the divine unity. After all, it belongs to the nature of Love to return what it receives (*Minnen natuere es altoes gheven ende nemen*), not because it feels indebted and wants to settle the balance, but rather out of sheer gratuity, in order to allow the other to give once more, in a never-ending dynamic of giving and receiving.<sup>4</sup>

Ruusbroec describes the Trinity as “an ebbing, flowing sea,” with the Son and the Holy Spirit *going out* from the Father, and then *flowing back* into the divine unity, where they *rest* in enjoyment. This never-ending dynamic of divine going-out, flowing back in, and resting in enjoyment determines every aspect of Ruusbroec’s thought. The notion of Love as bestowed and returned molds, for instance, his understanding of the economy of grace: God bestows his grace but we need to “return” (or respond to) his gift through our charitable works. Similarly, the gift of the God-man can be seen in the same way: God bestows his Son but in the humanity of the God-man we are allowed to participate in the return of this gift – a perspective which allows us to interpret the Cross and the Eucharist in terms of the Trinitarian dynamic of Love bestowed and returned.<sup>5</sup>

This dynamic vision of the Trinitarian life has important implications for the way Ruusbroec conceives of the Christian life. Indeed, in a beautiful passage from his short treatise *The Sparkling Stone* (*Vanden Blinkenden Steen*) Ruusbroec outlines how the Trinitarian life shapes our transformation. It is effectively a description of growing self-transcendence of the human person through participation in the Trinitarian life. Ruusbroec adopts the traditional distinction between hired servants, faithful servants, secret friends, and hidden sons to describe this process.<sup>6</sup>

The *hired servants* only want to serve God for their own gain. They are profoundly self-centered, only concerned with their own self. They have no idea what true love is about, and hence “they always remain alone with themselves.”<sup>7</sup> Even if they fulfil religious obligations they do so only out of fear, which illustrates their self-love and self-preoccupation (*minnen die si tot hem selven hebben*). They are effectively intent on themselves in all their activities (*want si zoeken ende meinen hem selves in al hare werken*). However,

<sup>4</sup> *Opera Omnia*, vol. VIIA, *Vanden XII Beghinen*, 2b 674; see Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 136–38.

<sup>5</sup> Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 138–56.

<sup>6</sup> *Vanden Blinkenden Steen* from *Jan van Ruusbroec. Opera Omnia*, vol. x, CCCM 110 ed.-in-chief, G. de Baere (Turnhout: Brepols, 1991), lines 265–476 in Middle Dutch text. See Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec*, 67–70.

<sup>7</sup> *Vanden Blinkenden Steen*, 269–79.

when, with God’s assistance, they overcome their self-centeredness (*sine eyghenheit*) God becomes their focus and they are intent upon God in everything they do. Thus they become *faithful servants*.<sup>8</sup>

Faithful servants lead a busy, active life of virtue. They are preoccupied with improving the world. God sent his servants out for his service “in all manner of outward (*uutwendighen*) good works.” They remain, however, interiorly unenlightened and know little of a loving and fervent adherence to God. The latter is a feature of the *friends*: they are drawn inwards (*inweert*), attracted to an interior, spiritual life.<sup>9</sup> The faithful servants are too preoccupied with, or distracted (in the Pascalian sense of the word) by their works (*verbeelt met den werken*), and these become a source of self-satisfaction to them. As a matter of fact, the faithful servants are critical of the friends, claiming that the latter are wasting their time with their inwardness and inner devotion. Predictably, Ruusbroec refers in this context to the Biblical story of Martha and Mary.<sup>10</sup> Mary chose the best part, an interior life, desirous of God, unlike Martha who lost herself in her busyness and preoccupations. But the interior life, symbolized by the secret friends, has its own temptations. The friends remain too preoccupied (*verbeelt*) with themselves and their interior practices. Religion and the spiritual consolations it offers may become a source of attachment in their own right. In that case devotion itself – or rather the self-centeredness that is still attached to them – may become a hindrance in our transformation. It is only the hidden *sons* who have attained the utter detachment or selflessness which allows them to rest in God with a love which is its own reason. Ruusbroec describes this as a passing away of the self and its possessiveness, in God (*in gode ghestorven haers selves ende alre eyghenscap*).<sup>11</sup> Whereas the faithful servants lead an active life (i.e., a life of charitable activity), and the friends an interior or God-yearning life, the hidden sons lead a contemplative life.<sup>12</sup>

There is nothing particularly original about these metaphors of servants, friends and sons. They are inspired by John Cassian (from a passage in the *Conferences* where he comments on the story of the prodigal son) and had been adopted by Bernard of Clairvaux.<sup>13</sup> There are, however, two aspects which make Ruusbroec’s outline of particular interest to us. First, he points out that these dimensions of the spiritual life do not cancel one another out. That is: even the sons must still be servants (i.e., lead an active life) and friends (i.e., lead an inward or interior life). This implies that the contemplative life is

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 307ff. <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 325–29. <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 329–84. <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 429.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 477–78 Ruusbroec sometimes calls it a super-essential life; he adopts the Pseudo-Dionysian term “super-essential” because this life perfectly reflects, and participates in, our archetypal existence as idea in the Word.

<sup>13</sup> See John Cassian, *Conferences*, XI.vii.1–6 and St. Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God*, chs. 13–14.



not the highest life for Ruusbroec. The most perfect life is a life which combines all of these dimensions. This Ruusbroec calls the common life, which harmoniously integrates charitable activity and contemplation. I will come back to how Ruusbroec understands this combination.

Secondly, what is profoundly original is the Trinitarian interpretation Ruusbroec gives to these different dimensions of the spiritual life. The active life of the faithful servants, as a life of virtue and external activity, mirrors the “out-going” aspect of the Trinity (the generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit). The inner or God-yearning life of the friends from *The Sparkling Stone* mirrors the “in-going” aspect of the divine Persons (*regiratio*) at the heart of the Trinity. The contemplative life of the hidden sons, in which we possess God in utter emptiness of self, detached and totally focused on God, mirrors the “fruition” or enjoyable “rest” of the divine Persons in their perichoretic unity.

The common life is then a combination of these aspects; that is to say: the mature Christian will engage in virtuous activity (thereby mirroring the “activity” of the divine Persons in the bosom of the Trinity) and also “rest” in God (just like the divine Persons “rest” in the shared essence). This is how Ruusbroec describes this integration of activity and rest in the common life (perhaps better translated as universal or catholic life):

God’s Spirit breathes us out to love and perform virtuous works, and he draws us back into him to rest and enjoy: this is an eternal life, just like in our bodily life we breathe air in and out . . . to *go in*, in idle enjoyment, and to *go out* with works, and *always remaining united* with God’s Spirit: that is what I mean. Just like we open and close our bodily eyes, so quick that we do not feel it, likewise we die in God and live from God, and constantly remain one with God. Thus we will *go out* into our ordinary life and *go in* with love and cleave to God, and always remain *united* with God in stillness.<sup>14</sup>

Ruusbroec’s ideal of the common life echoes and radicalizes Gregory the Great’s ideal of the *vita mixta* (the mixed life) in which charitable activity and contemplation are in perfect harmony with one another. But how exactly are we to understand this? How can we both enjoy and rest in God, and yet be active? What does it mean to rest in God or to enjoy God?

Ruusbroec’s language of “enjoying God” or “resting in God” (he treats the expressions as synonymous) recalls the Augustinian distinction between *frui* and *uti*.<sup>15</sup> I explained in an earlier chapter that Augustine’s notion of fruition

<sup>14</sup> *Van Seven Trappen*, *Opera Omnia* IX, CCCM 109, 1121–32 (my translation and italics).

<sup>15</sup> Augustine too had associated enjoyment and rest, as in the following quotation from *De Trin.* X.13: “We enjoy things we know when the will repose (*conquiescit*) in them because it is delighted by them for their own sakes; we use things when we refer them to something else we should enjoy. And what makes the life of men vicious and reprehensible is nothing but using things badly and enjoying them badly” trans. E. Hill from St. Augustine, *The Trinity* (New York: New City Press, 1994), 296.

of God refers to a radical theocentric focus we should adopt in all our dealings with the world. Only God should be our *ultimate* concern. Similarly, Ruusbroec explains the notion of “enjoying God” by developing the notion of the single intention (*die eenvuldighe meyninghe*), or theocentric focus – a term which we encountered in Eckhart’s writings as well (*meinunge*). “Resting in God” means that our love and knowledge have to be solely focused on God: “Whoever is not intent on God and does not love him above himself and all things (*die gode niet en meynt noch mint boven hem selven ende boven alle dinc*) will always be reckless and not heed the honour of God and all true virtue and God himself.”<sup>16</sup> In a small treatise, entitled *The Four Temptations*, Ruusbroec stresses the importance of “dying to our own will,” “breaking the bonds of disorderly affections for creatures”<sup>17</sup> etc., so as to be raised above ourselves, “free in mind, unhindered, above all things into the eternal Good that is our inheritance and our bliss.”<sup>18</sup> Again he emphasizes the importance of an intention (*meyninghe*) or disposition which focuses solely on God and which does not allow for disordered creaturely distractions or attachments. Once we realise that the contemplative aspect of enjoyment of God refers to a theocentric focus or intention we can begin to understand how this aspect can be combined with a life of virtue. Fruition of God refers to a radical theocentric focus in all our activities and practices (be they acts of virtue or more devotional acts). As Ruusbroec puts it succinctly: “therefore he has a common life, for contemplation and action come just as readily to him and he is perfect in both.”<sup>19</sup>

In summary, Ruusbroec distinguishes between three “lives” or aspects of the mystical journey: the active life, which refers, for him, to a life of charitable activity; an interior or God-yearning life; and a contemplative life in which we enjoy God. His spiritual ideal, then, is the common (or universal) life, i.e., a life which combines virtuous “out-going” activity, interior and devout “in-going” practices, with the fruitive aspect of contemplation – thus mirroring the three-fold aspect of the intra-trinitarian movement, i.e., the going-out, the going-in, and the moment of enjoyment of the divine Persons.

Ruusbroec’s successors in the Low Countries did not retain his ideal of the common life conceived as a participation in the intra-trinitarian dynamics. Henricus Herp (d. 1477), for instance, who incorporated huge chunks from Ruusbroec’s works into his own *Theologia Mystica* (a work which exerted a profound influence upon the Spanish mystics of the sixteenth

<sup>16</sup> *Vanden Vier Becoringhen*, 51–54.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 292–94; 329–30; 39–40; 302–5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 340–45.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 948–49.



century) only focused on Ruusbroec's more phenomenological descriptions of the transformative effects of grace upon the soul. He does not, however, mention the common life. His spirituality, therefore, becomes more experiential and less Trinitarian.

Similarly, Geert Grote (d. 1384), the translator of some of Ruusbroec's works into Latin and founder of the *Devotio Moderna*, develops a Christocentric spirituality which steers away from Trinitarian speculation.<sup>20</sup> The same can be said about the writings of Florens Radewijns, Gerard Zerbolt van Zutphen and Thomas a Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*, the most celebrated exponent of the Modern Devotion. The Modern Devotion can therefore be best characterized as a practical, somewhat moralistic, ascetic, Christocentric, non-speculative movement, with initially at least an important impetus from lay people, aimed at reforming the Catholic Church in the Low Countries. It should be seen neither as a movement of Christian humanism (Albert Hyma), nor as a precursor to the Protestant Reformation or the Italian Renaissance. John Van Engen has argued, convincingly in my view, that the movement can be best understood as a Catholic Reform movement. It was not anti-clerical and had no ambitions of making theological innovations. Its emphasis upon cultivation and discipline of the will must have struck Reformers as deeply alien to their way of thinking.<sup>21</sup>

If one wants to link the Modern Devotion with a Renaissance, one will first have to explore in more depth the nature of the Renaissance as it took place in Northern Europe (and specifically the Low Countries) during the first half of the fifteenth century. This Renaissance was very different from the Italian one, if only because it was deeply religious. It found its most magnificent expression in some of the paintings of the School of Flemish Primitives (Jan van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden, Petrus Christus, Hans Memling, Hugo van der Goes). In their works, the religious aspect often grounds the portrayal of everyday life. For instance, in the famous painting by Jan van Eyck, *The Madonna with Chancellor Rolin* (c. 1435), the gaze of the onlooker is drawn towards the center of the painting which looks out to a town with people going about their daily business. This scene is surrounded or "framed," so to speak, by the Madonna and Child on the right, and the praying Chancellor on the left. (Rogier van der Weyden adopted this layout in his

<sup>20</sup> For texts from the Modern Devotion in English translation, see especially John Van Engen (ed.), *Devotio Moderna. Basic Writings* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1988) and also Rik Van Nieuwenhove, Rob Faesen and Helen Rolfson (eds.), *Late Medieval Mysticism of the Low Countries* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2008). The latter includes extracts from Herp.

<sup>21</sup> See John Van Engen, "Introduction" to *Devotio Moderna. Spiritual Writings*. Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 58–61.

own painting of *St Luke drawing the Virgin*.) Similarly, Jan van Eyck's famous, homely portrayal of the *Arnolfini Marriage* (c. 1434) is imbued with religious references and symbolism, such as the enclosed garden (cf. Sg 4:12), fruit on the windowsill (Gen. 3:2) and sandals (cf. Exod. 3:5). Thus the works of the Flemish Primitives portray our everyday world in perfect harmony with, and permeated by, the Christian faith, thereby expressing the Christian world-view of the medieval period in a superb artistic manner.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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