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Mediating Medieval Mystical Literature in Interwar Belgium: The *Histoire Croisée* of Hadewijch's 'First Vision' in the Periodical *Hermès* (1933–39)

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ABSTRACT

In a context in which various artistic groups resorted to periodicals to stage their public appearance, the editors of the Brussels-based magazine *Hermès: Revue trimestrielle d'études mystiques et poétiques* (1933–39) mobilized Middle Dutch mystical literature to carve out a space for themselves in the cultural scene of interwar Belgium. Drawing on methods and concepts of transfer studies and research into ethos construction, this article analyses the transfer strategies underpinning the publication of the French translation of the 'First Vision' of the Middle Dutch mystic Hadewijch (c. 1240), with which *Hermès* programmatically opened its inaugural volume. The analysis uncovers a complex *histoire croisée* which involved confrontations, both collaborative and conflictual, between *Hermès* and two very different groups of cultural actors: the circle of Brussels Surrealists, with whom the editors of *Hermès* shared a history, and the Catholic philologists of the Ruusbroecgenootschap [Ruusbroec Society], who equally sought to disseminate Middle Dutch mystical texts to a wider public, albeit with very different goals.

KEYWORDS

Belgian Surrealism, medieval mysticism, Hadewijch, *Hermès*, transfer studies, *histoire croisée*, collective ethos

In November 1934, the Belgian Surrealist and artistic jack-of-all-trades E. L. T. Mesens wrote a scathing review of *Hermès: Revue trimestrielle d'études mystiques et poétiques* (1933–39).¹ The periodical had been founded one year earlier and counted three issues by the time Mesens took aim at it in the second issue of *Documents 34*:

Hermès, Revue trimestrielle d'études mystiques et poétiques, is a new model of its kind. This model, if not bringing any new content, is new as far as its origins and the attitude of its main zealots are concerned. *Hermès* is a refuge. Its refugees talk about God on every page. Rimbaud would reply: 'Fuck God'. But in order to bestow on themselves an air of seriousness, if necessary in this case, the refugees surround themselves with experts of mysticism who equally hope to attain heaven by frisking the underwear of the Virgin Mary.²

Appearing in an issue of *Documents* that proposed to provide the first overview of Surrealist activities in Belgium, this review may be interpreted as a settlement of accounts between current and former members of La Société du Mystère, the Brussels-based group of Surrealists around Paul Nougé and René Magritte, which counted Mesens among its members. One of the two chief editors of *Hermès*, the poet and painter Marc Eemans (pseudonym of Marcel van Hemelrijck), and one of its co-founders and closest collaborators, the author and (by then bankrupt) gallery owner Camille Goemans, previously belonged to the circle of Brussels Surrealists, but clearly no longer figured on the guest list of the group's gatherings by 1934. That is made poignantly clear by Mesens's review of the periodical. Still a member of La Société du Mystère, Mesens depicts *Hermès's* editors as 'refugees' who fled their former peers to find 'refuge' in a new project. They are portrayed as zealous 'petits curés' ['little priests'] who attempt to reclaim their piece of heaven by putting together a periodical that explores the interplay between poetry and mysticism.

In the editorial to the first issue of *Hermès*, the editors made clear that they intended to lay bare the 'obscure and little explored stream' between *la mystique* and *la poésie*, two phenomena the periodical's editors considered to be either 'mysteriously linked' or 'radically opposed', but in any case worthy of intense comparative scrutiny.³ The harvest of that investigation would, in their view, not uniquely bear literary fruits: it would provide the necessary ammunition to counter the cultural malaise Belgium's interwar society saw itself confronted with — and which other projects had, according to *Hermès's* editors, failed to address adequately. To that aim, *Hermès* published eleven issues between 1933 and 1939. (Fig. 1) These contained primary source texts, comprising French translations of medieval mystical texts from the Western and Eastern traditions as well as translations of Symbolist and Romantic poetry, on the one hand, and essays exploring the bonds that connected poetical and mystical texts from various traditions

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- 1 In 1936, the editors would change the name of the periodical to *Hermès: Mystique – Poésie – Philosophie*. The issues under scrutiny concern the periodical when it used the name mentioned in the article's title.
- 2 '*Hermès, revue trimestrielle d'études mystiques et poétiques*, est un nouveau modèle du genre. Ce modèle, s'il n'est point neuf par le contenu, l'est, du moins, par les origines et l'attitude de ses principaux zéloteurs. *Hermès* est un refuge. Les réfugiés y parlent de Dieu à chaque page. Rimbaud leur répond "Merde à Dieu". Mais pour donner l'apparence du sérieux, si nécessaire en l'occurrence, les réfugiés s'encadrent de doctes professeurs ès-mysticisme qui, eux aussi, espèrent trouver le ciel en fouillant les dessous de la Vierge.' E. L. T. Mesens, 'Les Revues', *Documents 34*, 2 (1934), 67. All translations are the authors'.
- 3 [Camille Goemans], 'Note des éditeurs', *Hermès*, 1.1 (1933), 1.

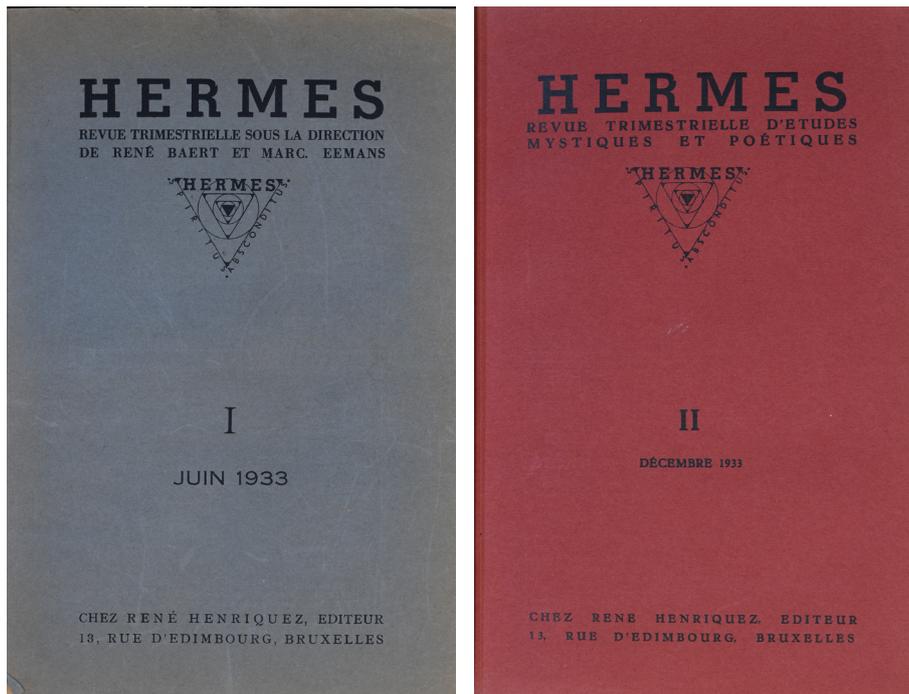


Fig. 1 Covers of the first two issues of *Hermès*, published in June 1933 and December 1933, respectively

and epochs, on the other.⁴ In this diverse collection of textual materials, an important place was reserved for the medieval mystical text tradition of the Low Countries.⁵

Hermès's focus on mysticism can be considered as an exponent of what has been referred to as the 'revival of mysticism' in interwar Belgium.⁶ This mystical vogue manifested itself both in a renewed interest in medieval mysticism and its embedment in the spiritual practices of 'traditional' religion, and in the so-called 'new' mysticism which flourished in certain late-nineteenth-century artistic circles, where the mystical was commonly equated with an ecstatic experience of feeling one with some Absolute.⁷ As a result, the 1920s and 1930s witnessed a boom in translations, editions, and anthologies of mystical literature, which were mediated by a wide range of intellectuals with at times radically different profiles: Catholics as well as liberals, scholars as well as artists. While in recent years a considerable number of studies have explored a wide range of transfer activities carried out in interwar Belgium, the ease with which Middle Dutch

4 These included texts by mystical authors such as Hadewijch, John of Ruusbroec, Meister Eckhart, Ibn Al Faridh, and Rumi and by Romantic and Symbolist poets such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Karel van de Woestijne, Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Edgar Allan Poe.

5 On the prominent place of Middle Dutch mystical literature in *Hermès*, see Veerle Fraeters and David Vermeiren, 'Een sombere Viking die durfde spreken over Ruusbroec en Hadewich als voorlopers van het surrealisme schilder-dichter Marc. Eemans en de Nederlandse mystiek in de context van *Hermès* (1930–1939)', *Zacht Lawijd*, 16 (2017), 8–29.

6 On the popularity of mysticism in interwar Belgium, see Rajesh Heynickx, *Meetzucht en mateloosheid: Kunst, religie en identiteit in Vlaanderen tijdens het Interbellum* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2008) and Rajesh Heynickx and Evert Peeters, 'The Muse of Mysticism. Transforming, Recycling Catholicism, 1900–1950', *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire*, 88.4 (2010), 1161–70.

7 For a perspective on 'new mysticism' from the point of view of literary history, see Jacqueline Bel, 'Nieuwe mystiek in Nederland en Vlaanderen rond 1900', in *Bloed en rozen: Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1900–1945* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2015), pp. 159–76.

mystical texts crossed linguistic, cultural, and ideological frontiers in that context has thus far not been examined.⁸

This article proposes to take a first step in that direction by analysing the transfer history of the French translation of the ‘First Vision’ of the Middle Dutch mystic Hadewijch (c. 1240), with which *Hermès* programmatically opened its inaugural volume. In doing so, it will shed light on how the editors mobilized the mystical tradition to carve out a space for their new periodical in the cultural scene of interwar Belgium.⁹ The discourse scientist Ruth Amossy coined the term ‘collective ethos’ to denote the textual self-image conveyed by a collective entity in order to distinguish itself from competing groups.¹⁰ Considered to be fundamental to the periodical’s ethos, *Hermès*’s publication of Hadewijch’s ‘First Vision’ involved, as we will show, unforeseen interactions between different cultural actors which may have been ‘bien étonnés de se trouver ensemble’: the circle of Brussels Surrealists, with whom the editors of *Hermès* shared a history, and the Catholic philologists of the Ruusbroecgenootschap [Ruusbroec Society], who equally sought to disseminate Middle Dutch mystical texts to a wider public, albeit with very different goals.¹¹ The transfer history of Hadewijch’s ‘First Vision’ in *Hermès* can therefore be considered an *histoire croisée* or ‘entangled history’ which involved confrontations, both collaborative and conflictual, between various Belgian (sub)cultures.¹² Following the approach to the study of cultural mediation in periodicals as proposed by Tom Toremans, who advises to ‘combine contextual analysis (the concrete circumstances of the founding of the periodical, the agents involved and its ideological programme) with detailed close readings (of reviews and translations)’, this article will uncover this *histoire croisée* by analysing key programmatic texts as well as less overtly programmatic, but equally strategic, (para)texts published in the first and second issue of *Hermès*.¹³

Positioning with respect to the Brussels Surrealists

While *Hermès* never explicitly allied itself with Surrealism in any of its published issues, its ties with the avant-garde movement are undeniable. Surrealist lore has it that the Flemish bilingual poet and painter Marc. Eemans recited his French translation of the ‘First Vision’ of the Middle Dutch mystic Hadewijch — which would later be published as the first contribution in the inaugural issue of *Hermès* — at a meeting of the Brussels Surrealists in Saint-Gilles, Brussels, towards the end of the 1920s, when he himself was still a member of the group. This recital allegedly constituted one of the reasons for the

8 See, for example, Reine Meylaerts et al., ‘Cultural Mediators in Cultural History: What Do We Learn from Studying Mediators’ Complex Transfer Activities in Interwar Belgium?’, in *Doing Double Dutch: The International Circulation of Literature from the Low Countries*, ed. by Elke Brems et al. (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2017), pp. 67–92.

9 On how various (artistic) groups, avant-garde or other, resorted to periodicals in staging their public appearance, see Peter Brooker, ‘General Introduction: Modernity, Modernisms, Magazines’, in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, ed. by Peter Brooker et al., 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), iii, pp. 1–21 (p. 14).

10 Ruth Amossy, ‘“Nous”: La question des identités de groupe ou la construction d’un ethos collectif’, in *La présentation de soi: Ethos et identité verbale* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010), pp. 165–82.

11 The Ruusbroecgenootschap [Ruusbroec Institute] still exists today as a scientific research institute (University of Antwerp) rather than as a ‘society’. Both authors of this article are affiliated with the institute.

12 Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, ‘Penser l’histoire croisée: Entre empirie et réflexivité’, *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 58.1 (2003), 7–36. The notion of *histoire croisée* has become a central concept in transfer and translation studies; see, for example Judy Wakabayashi, ‘Connected History and *Histoire Croisée*’, in *A History of Modern Translation Knowledge: Sources, Concepts, Effects*, ed. by Lieven D’hulst et al. (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2018), pp. 261–66.

13 Tom Toremans, ‘Cultural Mediation Through Translation in *The Edinburgh Review*, 1802–1807’, in *Cultural Mediation in Europe 1800–1950*, ed. by Reine Meylaerts et al. (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2017), pp. 73–89.

subsequent split of the Brussels Surrealists in 1930.¹⁴ At the basis of the controversy lay a divergence of views between two subgroups of the Brussels Surrealists: the core group around Paul Nougé and René Magritte was not keen on a marriage between Surrealism and (Middle Dutch) mysticism, while Marc. Eemans, Marcel Lecomte, and Camille Goemans were convinced that mystical text traditions could contribute to the revitalization of the Surrealist project.¹⁵ They found support for this claim in the *Second Manifeste du surréalisme* [*Second Manifesto of Surrealism*] (1929), in which André Breton, the grandmaster of French Surrealism, had called for ‘une occultation profonde, véritable du surréalisme’ [‘a profound, veritable occultation of Surrealism’].¹⁶ While this plea could be interpreted in various ways, it was interpreted by the Belgian dissident trio as an encouragement to mine mystical texts for resources which could help them unlock the divine core buried in the unconscious.¹⁷



Fig. 2 Marc. Eemans (on the left) and René Magritte (on the right), photograph taken by Paul Nougé in 1929–30

14 In many avant-garde groups, schisms were common practice, see Brooker, p. 14. On the implications for Surrealist periodicals in Belgium, see Francis Mus and Hans Vandevoorde, “Streetscape of New Districts Permeated by the Fresh Scent of Cement”: Brussels, the Avant-Garde, and Internationalism. *La Jeune Belgique, L’Art Moderne, La Société Nouvelle, Van Nu en Straks, L’Art Libre, Signaux, 7 Arts, Variétés*, in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, ed. by Peter Brooker et al., 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), III, pp. 336–60 (p. 356).

15 Fraeters and Vermeiren, pp. 9, 11, 17.

16 See Tessel Bauduin, *Surrealism and the Occult: Occultism and Western Esotericism in the Work and Movement of André Breton* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), pp. 104–05 and Daniel Zamani, ‘In Search of the Holy Grail: Medieval Tropes and the “Occultation of Surrealism” in the Work of André Breton, ca. 1928–1957’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Cambridge, 2017).

17 Fraeters and Vermeiren, pp. 11–12.

Whereas Lecomte never severed his ties with La Société du Mystère entirely, Eemans and Goemans left the group to pursue a new joint project. The periodical *Hermès* would focus on precisely that element that played a decisive role in the split of La Société du Mystère: the interplay between mysticism and poetry (the latter term being often used by Surrealists to metonymically refer to literature and art in general). Eemans and Goemans would find a partner in the Brussels poet and art critic René Baert, an old friend of Eemans's, who became, together with the latter, editor-in-chief of the periodical.¹⁸ Although there were certainly financial and relational troubles at play in the split of La Société du Mystère as well, the argument about the (ir)relevance of mysticism to the Surrealist project would be adduced as the main reason for the split in the posterior mythologization of the rupture.¹⁹ This dispute between Belgian Surrealists, however, not only served as a nice cover story to account for their separation; it would also impact the activities of the dissidents after the split, and determine the reactions of the core group around Nougé to the undertakings of their former peers.

Having broken with La Société du Mystère, the dissident editors of *Hermès* felt the need 'to let their existence and dissidence be known'.²⁰ In the vibrant magazine culture of interwar Belgium, which was marked by a rapid succession of publications, newly-founded magazines commonly conveyed their project through a manifesto, taking pains to delineate their own project from the ones they competed with.²¹ In the inaugural issue of *Hermès*, the 'Note des éditeurs', a short text that outlined *Hermès*'s ambitions in seven paragraphs, and the very first contribution, a French translation of Hadewijch's 'First Vision', accompanied by an introduction, served this function.²² While the editorial set out the stakes of *Hermès*'s project, the translation of Hadewijch's text and the introduction accompanying it were to embody the first concrete realization of the project.

'Note des éditeurs'

The 'Note des éditeurs' was written by Goemans, as was the case for all of the following editorials.²³ Left unsigned, the editorials were to channel the voice of the entire editorial board and its collaborators, thereby laying the basis for the construction of *Hermès*'s collective ethos. The 'Note des éditeurs' opens with a vague sketch of an artistic project

18 During the German occupation of Belgium, both Eemans and Baert would engage in cultural collaboration with the Nazi regime. (The scope of this article does not allow for a close scrutiny of the role Middle Dutch mystical texts played in their collaborationist activities. That issue will be explored in the doctoral dissertation that is currently being prepared by the first author of this article). Baert and Eemans were assisted in the daily management of the periodical by the author and former gallery owner Camille Goemans.

19 Important factors at play in the split of the Brussels-based Surrealists were the bankruptcy of Goemans's gallery and the marriage of Irène Hamoir, Eemans's ex-girlfriend, to Louis Scutenaire. See Henri-Floris Jaspers, 'De Laatste Gids (1930) "We zouden die gids toch eens tot leven moeten brengen..."' Marc. Eemans, Gaston Bursens en E. du Perron: *De Laatste Gids, tijdschrift-in-spè*, *Zacht Larwijd*, 2.3 (2002–03), 28–44 (p. 31).

20 Alain Badiou quoted in Brooker, p. 14.

21 See Sascha Bru, 'The Low Countries: Introduction', in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, ed. by Peter Brooker et al., 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), III, pp. 289–92.

22 [Camille Goemans], 'Note des éditeurs', *Hermès*, 1.1 (1933), 1–2; Marc. Eemans, 'Présentation de Sœur Hadewijch', *Hermès*, 1.1 (1933), 3–6; Hadewijch, 'Première Vision', trans. by Marc. Eemans and René Baert, *Hermès*, 1.1 (1933), 6–15.

23 'Dossier administratif de la revue Hermès' (ML 08652), preserved at Archives & Musée de Littérature in Brussels.

or ‘formula’ that sought to remedy the cultural malaise left by the First World War.²⁴ Although that project is described as appearing to be ‘opérant’ [‘effective’] at first sight, Goemans goes on to characterize it as having quickly derailed:

But it is true that everything is running out, that certain means are dwindling in the long run, and that a continuous overbidding which tended to lead the spirit into an impasse, a formal notice that at times lacked any specific purpose, could lead to misunderstandings, to abuses of logic in a field from which one would have demanded rather that it be absent.²⁵

Although the above-quoted fragment is deliberately opaque, it is not difficult to read a critique of the project and the attitudes of La Société du Mystère between the lines. As mentioned previously, the dissidents of the circle of Brussels Surrealists did not agree with how Paul Nougé — who sculpted the main tenets of the Brussels-based circle in his tracts — conceived of the Belgian branch of Surrealism, which differed in some points from the Bretonian one favoured (in large part) by the dissidents.²⁶ While Breton, and some other French surrealists with him, propagated methods to dive deep into the subconscious in order to dig up the ‘surreality’ buried under the crust of bourgeois belief, the circle around Nougé believed that the bourgeois order could best be attacked by subverting existing artistic codes through rewriting, re-composition, and rearrangement of existing materials. Eemans and his fellow dissidents, by contrast, deemed this conception of Surrealism to be shallow as such play with surfaces could never attain the ‘surreal’ core of things which was to be found *under* those surfaces. Later, Eemans would later characterize the branch of Surrealism propagated by La Société du Mystère as indebted to ‘a kind of Cartesian rationalism for which poetry [and other types of art] could only be the subject of attentive consultation’ — a statement which reads as an echo of *Hermès*’s condemnation of the circle’s ‘abuses of logic in a field from which one would have demanded rather that it be absent’ in 1933 (see above).²⁷ The emphasis on the irrational, the subconscious, and occultation propagated by Breton, by contrast, appealed far more to Eemans, Goemans, and Lecomte. Seeking to differentiate their project from La Société du Mystère’s, the editors of *Hermès* explicitly point out that ‘[leur] entreprise est fort éloignée de celles dont il vient d’être parlé’ [(their) undertaking is far removed from the one (they) have just mentioned’].²⁸ The editors could not limit themselves to criticizing their former peers, however: in order to demonstrate that they were more than mere ‘refugees’ from La Société du Mystère, they had to construct a collective ethos of their own, conceiving of their own project in opposition to the one they had just attacked. If we take into consideration Amossy’s view that the construction of ethos contributes to the recognition of the cohesion of

24 ‘Mais ces dernières années, après la guerre particulièrement, on semble avoir recouru de préférence à une formule que peut-être les circonstances commandaient, et qui, en fin de compte, s’est montrée des plus opérantes. En fait, on n’imaginait plus rien d’authentiquement valable que transposé dans faction la plus directe, la plus violente. Sans doute, il n’est pas permis encore de conclure et d’assurer qu’il n’y a plus rien à attendre d’une attitude aussi entière, d’un mépris aussi forcené.’ Goemans, p. 1.

25 ‘Mais il est vrai que tout s’épuise, que certain moyens à la longue s’émeussent, et qu’une surenchère continuelle tendant à mener l’esprit dans une impasse, une mise en demeure parfois sans objet biens précis, pouvait mener à des méprises, à des abus de la logique dans un domaine d’où l’on aurait exigé plutôt qu’elle fût absente.’ Ibid.

26 Bibiane Fréché, ‘Surrealism in Belgium between the Wars’, in *From Art Nouveau to Surrealism: Belgian Modernity in the Making*, ed. by Nathalie Aubert et al. (London: Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2007), pp. 161–73 (pp. 165–67).

27 ‘le surréalisme d’un Magritte et d’un Nougé est proche d’un certain rationalisme cartésien pour lequel la poésie ne peut être que l’objet d’une concertation plus qu’attentive’. Marc Eemans, ‘Ce que fut la revue méta-surréaliste *Hermès* (1933–1939)’, *Le Journal des Poètes*, 49.2 (1979), n. p.

028 Goemans, p. 2.

a group, it is striking to note that *Hermès* reclaimed its autonomous position in the cultural landscape by foregrounding the diversity of its contributors:²⁹

The periodical *Hermès* does not represent a well-defined group, a cluster of common wishes directed towards the same goal, a single intention. On the contrary, it seems that the personalities involved in this project will be as dissimilar as one may expect from people whose convictions and ways of being and acting are completely different from the outset.³⁰

By emphasizing that their project entailed the collaboration of people with very diverse perspectives, the editors not only demonstrated that they were not in any way restricted by the straightjacket of tracts or manifestos; they also presented the unique concern shared by all of *Hermès*'s collaborators as being of almost universal importance:³¹

Only the subject of their concerns, that to which they apply their thinking, brings them together, regardless of their basic assumptions and points of view. Mysticism and poetry; between these two phenomena passes an obscure flood, little explored until now, of which we do not know if it radically opposes or mysteriously unites them. Let us not be surprised when we see HERMES appeal to those who attach some value to the study of mysticism, on the one hand, and to those poets and writers who consider poetry as one of the most natural modes of existence, on the other. Both, we think, are equally important, their language meets in many respects and we do not hesitate to believe that their confrontation will provide us some advantage.³²

Although neither 'poetry' nor 'mysticism' are defined in the 'Note des éditeurs' or elsewhere in the periodical, the collective ethos of *Hermès* seemed to be firmly anchored in the editors' and contributors' shared concern for the interplay between these two phenomena. Contrary to 'mainstream' Belgian surrealism, which, according to the dissidents, limited itself to a superficial play with objects, treating poetry (or art) in isolation, the intention of *Hermès* was to dive deep in the obscure flood between poetry

29 Amossy points out that the construction of a collective ethos can 'contribute to the formation and recognition of a group that is not recognized as such in the social space, whose autonomy is contested, or whose cohesion is uncertain' (p. 158, our translation).

30 'Notre entreprise est fort éloignée de celles dont il vient d'être parlé. La revue HERMES ne représente pas un groupe bien défini, un faisceau de volontés communes dirigées vers un même but, une seule intention. Il semble bien au contraire que les personnalités qui s'y coudoieront, seront aussi dissemblables qu'il est possible de le penser d'hommes dont les convictions profondes, la manière d'être et d'agir apparaissent dès l'abord comme aussi différentes.' Goemans, p. 2.

31 The editors and contributors of *Hermès* indeed constituted a colourful ensemble. Its editors-in-chief were René Baert and Marc. Eemans, the former being a Francophone Flemish art critic and poet and the latter a Brussels-based Flemish poet and painter. The two of them were assisted in the daily management of the periodical by the author and former gallery owner Camille Goemans. Among its frequent collaborators *Hermès* counted eminent academics such as the French orientalist Henri Corbin and the Belgian Catholic Neothomist philosopher Marcel De Corte. For information on the daily management of the periodical, see 'Dossier administratif de la revue Hermès: correspondance (1933-1939)' (ML 08652/0120-0147), Archives & Musée de Littérature, Brussels.

32 'Seul le sujet de leurs préoccupations, ce à quoi ils appliquent leur pensée, les réunit, quel que soit par ailleurs leur point de départ et leurs tendances. La mystique, la poésie, on ne contestera guère qu'entre ces deux apparitions passe un grand flot obscur, peu exploré encore, dont on ne sait pas bien s'il les oppose radicalement ou mystérieusement les unit. Que l'on ne s'étonne pas des lors de voir Hermès, en-dehors de tous ceux qui attachent quelque prix aux études de la mystique, faire appel à ceux parmi les poètes et les écrivains qui lui paraissent à quelque degré considérer la poésie comme un des modes les plus naturels de l'existence. La même gravité, pensons-nous, convient aux uns et aux autres, leur langage en bien des points se rencontre et nous n'hésitons pas à croire que leur confrontation nous ménagera quelque avantage.' Goemans, p. 2.

and mysticism, the ‘confrontation’ of which was to function as the cornerstone of its collective ethos. The contribution following the ‘Note des éditeurs’ exemplified how *Hermès* aimed to stage that confrontation.

Hadewijch’s ‘First Vision’

The first contribution of the inaugural issue was the French translation of the ‘First Vision’ of the Middle Dutch mystic Hadewijch (c. 1240). Marc Eemans and René Baert translated the text from Hadewijch’s *Book of Visions*, in which the mystic recounts how her soul was repeatedly rapt ‘in and out of the spirit’ as part of a process of spiritual transformation geared to becoming a perfect image of her divine Beloved.³³ The first and longest vision of the collection zooms in on how Hadewijch’s soul-in-ecstasy traverses a garden, where a throne-angel shows her seven trees symbolizing seven virtues. Teasing out the allegorical meaning of the branches and leaves of each of the trees with the help of the angel, Hadewijch gradually learns that she has already acquired all but one of the virtues: the knowledge of *minne* or mystical love. Thereupon Christ appears to her, teaching her that not the blissful experience of God’s presence, but the surrender to him at all times — especially when he appears to be absent — constitutes the very essence of mystical love. In other words: mystical love amounts to partaking in the Passion of Christ.³⁴

Since Eemans’s translation of Hadewijch’s ‘First Vision’ was the subject of controversy within the Surrealist group in Brussels, the decision on the part of the editors to allot it such a prominent place in the inaugural issue may be regarded as a positioning act in itself. Importantly, much of the position-taking is effected in the paratextual material surrounding the translation of Hadewijch’s vision. The translation was accompanied by a short introductory text of about three pages, which was written by Eemans and entitled ‘Présentation de Sœur Hadewijch’ [‘Presentation of Sister Hadewijch’]. This introduction functions, as Gérard Genette would have it, as a ‘threshold’ to the translation itself, as a ‘zone not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public’.³⁵ It reveals a number of transfer strategies that shed light on how *Hermès* mobilized the translation of Hadewijch’s ‘First Vision’ in shaping its collective ethos.

In the first lines of his introduction, Eemans characterizes the work of Hadewijch as lying at the origin of a literary tradition as well as of Western mysticism as a whole:

Sister Hadewijch is of great importance to the history of Flemish spirituality, because her works do not only place her at the origin of a literary tradition, but

33 On the stages ‘in the spirit’ (*in den geeste*) and ‘out of the spirit’ (*buten den geeste*) in the dynamics of the ecstatic encounter with the divine as reported by Hadewijch in her visions, see Veerle Fraeters, ‘The Mystic’s Sensorium: Modes of Perceiving and Knowing God in Hadewijch’s *Visions*’, in *Mystical Anthropology: Authors from the Low Countries*, ed. by John Arblaster and Rob Faesen (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 28–40 (particularly pp. 31–34).

34 Fraeters and Vermeiren, p. 18. For a Dutch edition and translation of Hadewijch’s *Book of Visions*, see Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: Visioenen*, trans. and ed. by Imme Dros and Frank Willaert (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1996); for an English translation, see Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, trans. by Columba Hart (London: Paulist Press, 1980).

35 Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 2.

also of a mystical tradition that was to play a predominant role in the reality of Western mysticism.³⁶

By situating Hadewijch's oeuvre at the origin of a *literary* tradition as well as of Western *mysticism*, the editors turned her into a precursor to *Hermès's* very project: her 'First Vision' constituted the perfect opening text for a new periodical revolving around the interplay between poetry (literature) and mysticism. The diversity of the periodical's contributions demanded a source to which all of them could be traced back, and which Hadewijch's 'First Vision' could provide, being presented as the pioneer of a mystical tradition that spearheaded the whole of Western mysticism. This view is corroborated in the special issue on the mystical tradition from the Low Countries (published in 1938), where Hadewijch's oeuvre is referred to as one of the loci where one 'can detect for the first time [...] everything that will one day determine the originality of Western mysticism' and is described as 'a true *poetic-mystical* compendium that constitutes one of the highlights of Western thought in the thirteenth century' (our italics).³⁷ The combination of the adjectives 'poetical' and 'mystical' clearly signals that Hadewijch's oeuvre was made to embody *Hermès's* project, providing a firm basis on which its collective ethos could be constructed.

The presentation of Hadewijch as the precursor to *Hermès's* project mirrored a strategy deployed by Breton. In his manifestos and other metapoetical texts, Breton would frequently refer to what he called 'the precursors of Surrealism', a varied and often-readjusted canon of writers and thinkers considered to be the forerunners of the Surrealist enterprise.³⁸ This canon included a host of Romantic and Symbolist poets such as Novalis and Arthur Rimbaud, as well as a large number of mystical and esoteric authors, among which Eckhart and Swedenborg are important points of reference. According to Breton, these thinkers pushed through the surface of reality in order to attain surreality. Breton's canon of Romantic and Symbolist precursors of Surrealism figures prominently in the pages of *Hermès* as well. By publishing Hadewijch's 'First Vision' as their very first contribution, the editors of *Hermès* signalled that they considered her work as the source from which all mystical, Romantic, and Symbolist efforts would spring.

In this way, they not only aligned their project with Breton's, but also provided it with its own distinctive bent. As the art historian Tessel Bauduin has convincingly shown, Breton's interest in mystical texts had mainly been prompted by his reading of Romantic and Symbolist poets.³⁹ In the heyday of Surrealism from the late 1920s to the 1930s, Breton primarily read mystical and esoteric source texts through the lens of either (semi-)scholarly studies on these topics or by means of Romantic and Symbolist texts that displayed an interest in occult thought. The mystical source texts were, in other words, predominantly accessed via a detour. Yet, while Breton would only turn to the mystical source texts themselves in the 1940s — a source of inspiration which would become increasingly prominent in the post-war period — *Hermès* focused on the mystical source texts, in (their own) translation, as the very foundation of its project. The

36 'Grande est la signification de Sœur Hadewych dans l'histoire de la spiritualité flamande, car par ses œuvres elle ne se trouve pas seulement à l'origine d'une littérature, mais aussi d'une mystique qui devait jouer un rôle prépondérant dans la réalité du mysticisme occidental.' Marc. Eemans, 'Présentation de Sœur Hadewijch', *Hermès*, 1.1 (1933), 3–6 (p. 3).

37 'C'est dans l'œuvre de Beatrice de Nazareth et de Hadewych que nous pouvons déceler pour la première fois, d'une manière peut-être encore confuse, tout ce qui fera un jour l'originalité de la mystique occidentale'; 'Cette œuvre est une véritable somme poético-mystique qui constitue un des hauts-lieux de la pensée occidentale du XIII^e siècle.' Marc. Eemans, 'Introduction à la mystique des Pays-Bas', *Hermès*, 3.2 (1938), 3–22 (pp. 7, 9).

38 Bauduin, pp. 15–26.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 94.

publication of the translation of Hadewijch's 'First Vision' as the opening text of the periodical can thus be understood as being constitutive of the construction of *Hermès's* collective ethos: it distanced their project from the Société du Mystère by choosing to follow in Breton's footsteps, while also radicalizing the latter's project by turning to the translated mystical source texts *themselves* from the very outset.

Positioning with respect to Catholic Intellectuals

In his short 'Présentation de Hadewijch', Eemans signals that outside the Dutch-speaking borders, Hadewijch's work is almost completely unknown, adding that the only exception he knows of is an article published in the French *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique* (1924). In this article, the Flemish Jesuit philologist Jozef van Mierlo, one of the founders of the Ruusbroec Society, introduced the Middle Dutch mystic to the Francophone public.⁴⁰ (Fig. 3) An inquiry into the transfer practices underpinning Eemans's 'Présentation' reveals that he not only made extensive use of this French publication by Van Mierlo, but also of the latter's Dutch edition of Hadewijch's *Book of Visions* (1924–25).⁴¹ This transpires from the following juxtaposition of excerpts of Eemans's text with passages from Van Mierlo's publications. Placing these quotes side by side gives an insight into which of Van Mierlo's words and phrases were adopted by Eemans, but also into significant omissions, additions, and modifications applied by the latter. In this way, it is possible to shed light on the 'multiple discursive transfer modes' underpinning the mediation of Hadewijch's 'First Vision'.⁴²

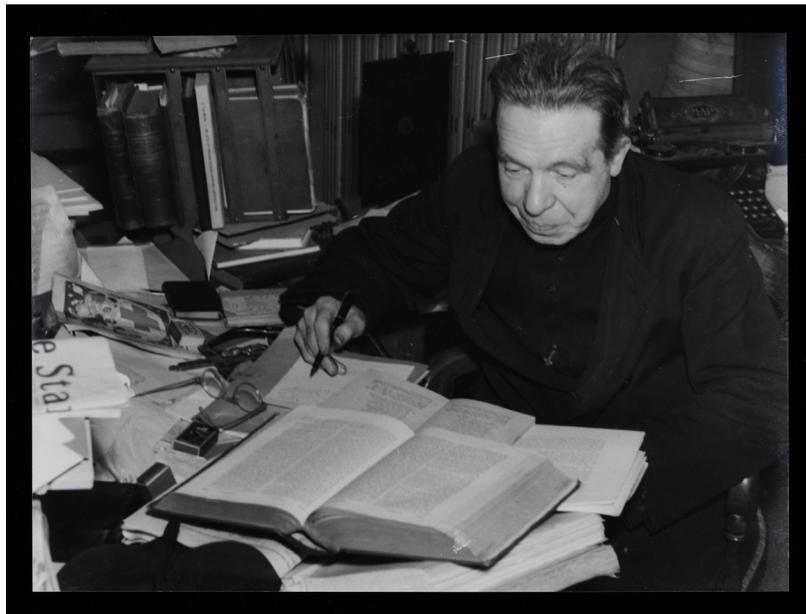


Fig. 3 Jozef van Mierlo, SJ (*De Standaard*, Paul Van den Abeele, 1948), Bibliotheek van het Ruusbroecgenootschap, Prentenkabinet

40 On the foundation of the Ruusbroec Society in 1924, see Christian De Borchgraeve, *Eerst Vlaanderen voor Christus: De pioniersjaren van het Ruusbroecgenootschap* (Averbode: Altiora, 2001).

41 Jozef van Mierlo, 'Hadewych, une mystique flamande du XIII^e siècle', *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique* (July, October 1924), pp. 269–89, 380–404; Jozef van Mierlo, *De Visioenen van Hadewych* (Leuven: Leuvense studiën en tekstuutgaven, 1924–25).

42 On the relevance of analyzing 'multiple discursive transfer modes' (such as translation, multilingual writing, self-translation, adaptation, summary, parody, plagiarism, pastiche) to the study of the activities of cultural mediators, see Meylaerts et al., p. 72.

Van Mierlo (1924)

Ce n'est que depuis quelques années que les historiens de **notre littérature** s'occupent de son œuvre, at déjà ils y ont reconnu un des sommets de notre art en Moyen-Âge. Mais elle appartient aussi, et surtout à **l'histoire religieuse**. Avec elle nous sommes ramenés aux **origines** mêmes de notre **mystique flamande**, ou plus généralement la **mystique germanique**. (269)

It is only in recent years that the historians of **our literature** have taken to study this work, and they have already recognized it as one of the peaks of our medieval art. But it also belongs, and above all, to **religious history**. Hadewijch's work brings us back to the very **origins** of our **Flemish mysticism**, or more generally **Germanic mysticism**. (269)

Eemans (1933)

Grande est la signification de Sœur Hadewych dans **l'histoire de la spiritualité flamande**, car par ses œuvres elle ne se trouve pas seulement à **l'origine** d'une **littérature**, mais aussi d'une **mystique** qui devait jouer un rôle prépondérant dans la réalité du **mysticisme occidental**. (6)

Sister Hadewijch is of great importance to the **history of Flemish spirituality**, because her works place her at the **origin not only of a literary tradition**, but also of a **mystical tradition** that was to play a predominant role in the reality of **Western mysticism**. (6)

Van Mierlo (1924–25)

Vooreerst dient gewezen op de **voornaamste rol**, die de **Godmensch** heeft in deze mystiek. Met Hem toch moet de ziel zich vereenigen: Hem beleven: geheel zijn **Menschheid** in zich opnemen en **uitdrukken**, om aldus ook zijn Godheid in zich op te nemen: *per Christum hominem ad Christum Deum*. Uit de wijze, waarop HAD. hiervan gewaagt, zou men mogen besluiten, dat hierin **het voornaamste leerstuk** van hare mystiek gelegen is (r. 288). (7)

First of all, we should signal the **predominant role** of the **God-Man** in **her mysticism**. With Him, the soul must unite itself: experience Him: **participate** in and express all of his **humanity** so as to **participate** in his **divinity**: *per Christum hominem ad Christum Deum*. From the way in which HAD. describes all this, one might conclude that herein lies the **principal doctrine of her mysticism**. (7)

Eemans (1933)

Avant de terminer ce trop bref expose disons encore **quelle place prépondérante l'Homme-Dieu** occupe dans le déroulement de cette vision, ainsi que dans toute la mystique de Hadewych. L'on pourrait presque dire que c'est dans la **participation à la Passion de l'Homme-Dieu** que le mysticisme de Hadewych trouve sa **véritable originalité**: c'est par son adhésion à ce qu'il y a d'humain dans l'Homme-Dieu, et par la **réalisation de cette humanité**, que l'âme y atteint à la nature de sa Dèité: *per Christum hominem ad Christum Deum*. (6–7)

Before concluding this brief presentation, let us add something on the **predominant place** the **God-Man** occupies in the development of this vision, as well as in all of **Hadewijch's mysticism**. One could almost say that Hadewijch's mysticism finds its true originality in its **participation in the Passion of the God-Man**: it is through its adherence to what is human in the God-Man, and through the **realization of this humanity**, that the **soul reaches the nature of its Deity**: *per Christum hominem ad Christum Deum*. (6–7)

The similarities between the fragments are, indeed, striking: without explicitly signalling his indebtedness to Van Mierlo's work, Eemans adopts the latter's arguments, reproducing them by means of (translated) paraphrases of the French and Dutch source texts. The juxtaposition reveals that Eemans not only freely cherry-picked from Van Mierlo's publications in order to substantiate his own claims on Hadewijch's mysticism, but also modified the claims of the philologist, tailoring them to his own needs. One modification made by Eemans is the omission of the word 'religieuse' ['religious'], which he replaces by 'spiritualité' ['spirituality'] and 'mysticisme' ['mysticism']. This may indicate that Eemans situates his Hadewijch image at a distance from institutionalized religion. A second modification resides in the characterization of the scope of the mystical tradition springing from Hadewijch's oeuvre. While Van Mierlo characterized Hadewijch as the breeding ground of the Flemish and, by extension, Germanic mystical tradition, Eemans went so far as to claim that it provided the basis from which the entire *Western* mystical tradition would spring. A third modification concerns Eemans's emphasis on the originality of Hadewijch's mysticism, to which we will return later. For now, it suffices to say that Eemans, in order to model his own Hadewijch as the embodiment of *Hermès's* project, relied heavily on publications by the Catholic scholar Van Mierlo. This appropriation had not escaped Van Mierlo's attention, as is evident from the editorial to the second issue of *Hermès*.

Catholic Criticism

The second issue of *Hermès* opened with the notice that the editors had received a letter of complaint written by the eminent Jesuit philologist Jozef van Mierlo.⁴³ The editorial reproduces translated excerpts from the letter, in which Van Mierlo accuses *Hermès* of adhering to 'une attitude d'indifférence vis-à-vis de toute mystique' ['an attitude of indifference towards all mystics'].⁴⁴ Quoting *Hermès's* mission statement from the editorial to the inaugural issue, the Jesuit adds that he 'cannot see anything valid or permanent' in its proposal to study the interplay between poetry and mysticism.⁴⁵ In his view, the periodical displayed 'une conception naturaliste de toute mystique et même de la mystique chrétienne' ['a naturalistic interpretation of all mysticism and even of Christian mysticism'], while he considered it inappropriate to lump together Christian or 'Catholic' mysticism with other mystical, esoteric, or poetical traditions.⁴⁶

In the quoted passages from Van Mierlo's response to the first issue of *Hermès*, Hadewijch is not mentioned explicitly. Yet, given her programmatic prominence in that issue, it is obvious that the philologist must have felt that 'his' Hadewijch had been touched in the worst way possible. She appeared subsumed under a syncretic header, bereft of her Catholic identity and mobilized in what must have seemed to him to be a highly unorthodox endeavour. According to Van Mierlo, Hadewijch was an orthodox Catholic mystic; her work was thus profoundly indebted to the doctrine of the Catholic Church.

This conception of Hadewijch's mysticism does not come as a surprise: Van Mierlo and the Ruusbroec Society, which he co-founded, were firmly anchored in the prominent Catholic faction in interwar Flanders.⁴⁷ Feeling that Middle Dutch Christian mysticism

43 Quoted in Goemans, pp. 1–2. Van Mierlo's original Dutch letter could not be traced in the archival material of *Hermès* in Archives et Musée de Littérature, nor could we find a copy in Van Mierlo's archives at the library of the Ruusbroec Institute, KADOC (Louvain) and the Letterenhuis (Antwerp).

44 Ibid.

45 'Je n'y puis rien voir de valable ni de permanent'. Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 De Borchgraeve, pp. 242–44.

was being threatened by esoteric and universalist interpretations that bore the stamp of nineteenth-century new mysticism, the Jesuit philologists of the Ruusbroec Institute aimed to anchor the mystical source texts they considered as *their* spiritual heritage firmly in their ‘original’ context, tracing their lineage to the ‘Catholic’ medieval tradition by submitting them to meticulous philological study.⁴⁸ While other members of the Society strived to win back the Middle Dutch mystic John of Ruusbroec (1293–1381) from heretical hands, Van Mierlo strained every nerve to construct a philological bulwark around Hadewijch’s oeuvre.⁴⁹ In order to protect it from heterodox appropriation by disseminating ‘his’ Hadewijch both in the intellectual and in the wider sociocultural sphere, he regularly published philological editions of her work as well as more popular anthologies.⁵⁰ Since Van Mierlo felt the need to frame Hadewijch as a ‘Catholic’ mystic, he presented the doctrines of the Catholic Church as the primary points of reference for her mystical oeuvre, and did so primarily through Catholic publication channels. His French commentary on Hadewijch’s oeuvre in *Revue d’ascétique et de mystique* is a case in point, as the aim of that periodical was precisely to stress the distinctly Catholic character of the mystical tradition, which had, according to the contributors, too often been misread as but one expression of a universal longing for the absolute, and thus facilitated incorrect and misleading non-doctrinal interpretations.⁵¹

Quite ironically, Van Mierlo’s philological efforts to shield Hadewijch’s oeuvre from non-Catholic use made her works circulate more widely in the cultural field, and thus available for new heterodox appropriations, such as the one by *Hermès*. Its heterodox (re)positioning of Hadewijch is evident from the co-texts in which she appears in the first issue, which presents Hadewijch alongside mystical and esoteric texts from different religious traditions and Symbolist poetry.⁵² This syncretic presentation may account for Van Mierlo’s allegation that *Hermès* held ‘an attitude of indifference towards all mystics’, thus downplaying what he saw as the specifically Catholic character of Hadewijch’s mysticism. This unorthodox outlook on the part of *Hermès*’s editors is also made evident by a very telling paratextual element slipped in between two contributions appearing in the first issue. The final page of a commentary on the Eleusian mysteries figured a call for papers listing the kinds of texts *Hermès* was interested in publishing, thereby

48 See Heynickx, p. 56.

49 For an analysis of how Léonce Reypens, a co-founder of the Ruusbroec Society, attempted to ensure the Catholic embedment of Ruusbroec while also striving to gain him a broader audience, see Heynickx, pp. 34–78.

50 Van Mierlo felt compelled to do so because the late nineteenth century had witnessed the creation of two opposed Hadewijch images: liberal intellectuals proclaimed her to be a heterodox free-thinker and enlightened sparkle in the ‘dark’ Middle Ages, while Catholic philologists sought to safeguard what they regarded as ‘their’ spiritual heritage from heterodox use by upholding the orthodox embedment of her oeuvre in the Mother Church. See Joris Reynaert, ‘F. A. Snellaert en de receptie van Hadewijch in de 19de eeuw’, in *Huldnummer Prof. Dr. Ada Deprez*, ed. by A. Blockmans (Gent: Academia Press, 1988), pp. 157–80; Annette Van Dijk, ‘Welk een ketter is die vrouw geweest!’ *De plaats van Albert Verwey in de Hadewijchreceptie* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2009); Veerle Fraeters and Sarah Menu, ‘Moderne Hadewijch-receptie: zes markante momenten’, *Paukeslag: digitaal platform voor levend poëzie-erfgoed* (2017) [accessed 13 March 2020]. Van Mierlo’s philological endeavours were also informed by his flamingant views, which exceeds the scope of this article. See Frank Willaert, ‘Van Mierlo. De voordelen van vooroordelen’, *Literatuur*, 6 (1989), 345–49; and Geert Warnar, ‘De studie van de geestelijke letterkunde tussen 1900–1950. Van Mierlo (1878–1958) en de anderen’, in *Der vaderen boek: Beoefenaren van de studie der Middelnederlandse letterkunde*, ed. by Wim Van Anrooy et al. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003), pp. 179–94.

51 Heynickx, p. 52.

52 The first issue contains contributions on Kierkegaard, Stefan George, yoga, and the Eleusian mysteries, among other topics. For further characterization of the first issue, see Fraeters en Vermeiren, pp. 18–19. Other unorthodox recollections of Hadewijch are discussed in Tijn Nuyts, ‘Remembering Hadewijch: The Mediated Memory of a Middle Dutch Mystic in the Works of the Flemish Francophone Author Suzanne Lilar’, *Journal of Dutch Literature*, 11.1 (2020), 1–28.

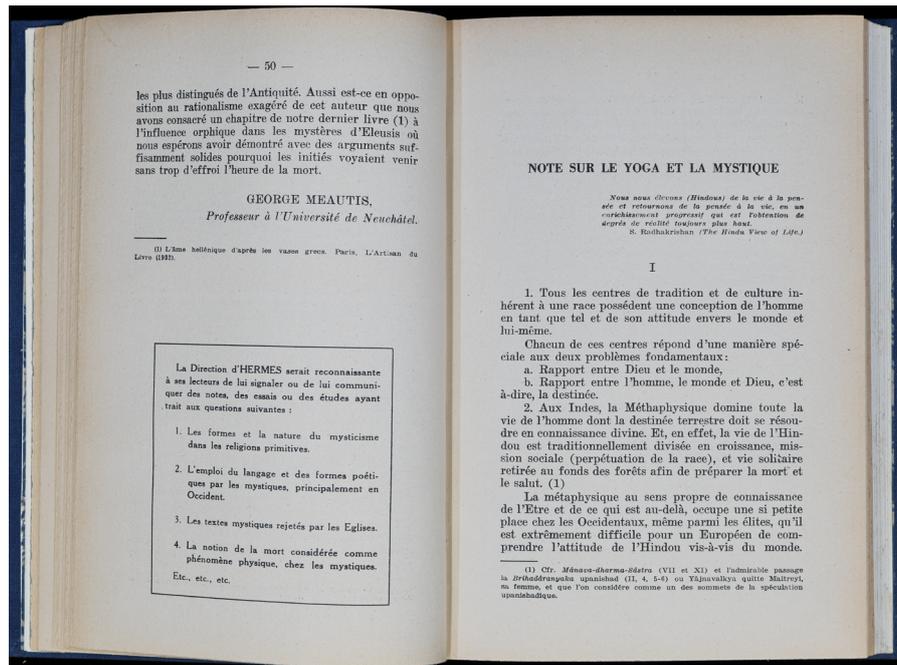


Fig. 4 *Hermès* 1.1 (1933), p. 50

revealing a clear preference for ‘les textes mystiques rejetés par les Eglises’ [‘mystical texts rejected by the Churches’] (Fig. 4).

If the contrast between the respective projects of *Hermès* and the Ruusbroec Society is aptly captured by this element, the divergent views of Hadewijch’s oeuvre held by Van Mierlo and Eemans were manifest especially in their distinct appreciation of the precise nature of the ‘originality’ of Hadewijch’s mysticism. The juxtaposition of the transfer techniques adopted by Eemans in paraphrasing Van Mierlo’s studies on Hadewijch demonstrates that Eemans modified Van Mierlo’s statement on the importance of the participation in Christ’s humanity as a gateway to his divinity to Hadewijch’s Visions by adding that this idea constituted the ‘véritable originalité’ [‘true originality’] of her mysticism (see the overview on p. 99). This assertion was not made by Van Mierlo, who presented the classical Christian credo *per Christum hominem ad Christum Deum* as the ‘voornaamste leerstuk’ [‘central message’] of Hadewijch’s text. From Van Mierlo’s Catholic point of view, this phrase was a signal of orthodoxy rather than a token of originality.⁵³ Instead, for Van Mierlo, Hadewijch’s originality resided in how she rooted her vernacular mystical writings in the teachings of the Mother Church, whose textual corpus was in Latin.⁵⁴ As a result, her visions were, according to Van Mierlo, to be regarded as ‘perfectly orthodox’:

It is in this so profound, so perfectly theological and Catholic form that Hadewijch’s imitation of Jesus Christ is presented. The mystical life is the life with the God-man. It is one of the great ideas that runs through all of her work. Her visions symbolize

53 Van Mierlo characterizes Hadewijch’s stress on deification by referring to Saint Augustine, a saint figuring prominently in the Catholic canon — and thus considered to be beyond any suspicion of heterodoxy.

54 ‘Où il faut voir surtout l’originalité de Hadewijch, c’est, nous semble-t-il, dans la maîtrise parfaite avec laquelle elle s’est assimilée la spiritualité de l’Église.’ [‘It seems to us that Hadewijch’s originality must be situated above all in the perfect mastery with which she integrated her mysticism in the spirituality of the Church.’] Van Mierlo, ‘Hadewych’, p. 284.

it and express it [...] Merely signalling it should suffice to have us understand the role played by the mystery of the Incarnation in this spiritual doctrine that is so perfectly orthodox. It is through Christ and in Christ that man will achieve his last end, his divinization.⁵⁵

Tellingly, such passages on the indebtedness of Hadewijch's work to the teachings of the Church were tacitly omitted by Eemans. For him, the originality of her oeuvre did not have anything to do with orthodoxy, but with the idea that the divine could be reached 'via the most direct and also the most humble way... the one that leads to the peaks while starting from the Flesh'.⁵⁶ Eemans's stress on this bodily aspect was most probably motivated by his Bretonian conception of the visionary woman as the physical bridge to the unconscious and surreality.⁵⁷

To Eemans, Hadewijch's mysticism and the Bretonian branch of Surrealism favoured by the dissidents of the Belgian Surrealist group must have appeared as compatible. Just as Hadewijch, according to Eemans's interpretation of her First Vision, showed that the identification with the incarnated Christ could lead to unity with the Divine and the realization of one's divine core, Bretonian Surrealist artists searched for the 'surreality' lying behind everyday reality by attempting to merge with the figure of the visionary Woman, who functioned as the physical and spiritual bridge to their unconscious, where a deeper, more authentic, surreal, and, possibly, godlike 'I' laid hidden.⁵⁸ Hadewijch's text could thus function as a compass which set the course of *Hermès*. Contrary to the members of La Société du Mystère, who, according to the editors of *Hermès*, stuck to the bleak surface of reality in their work, Hadewijch's oeuvre dared to go beyond surfaces; it strived to return to the very 'origin' of humankind: to the divine core buried in the human soul.

While being nourished by Van Mierlo's philological inquiries into Hadewijch's mysticism, *Hermès*'s heterodox approach to her oeuvre clearly parted ways with Van Mierlo's orthodox appreciation of the Middle Dutch mystic, which accounts for the latter's furious response. The Jesuit philologist might not have expected that his letter of complaint proved of use to the editors of the periodical whom he sought to criticize. And yet, it served as a welcome occasion for reiterating the periodical's collective ethos in the opening pages of the second issue, thereby helping to ensure the continuity of *Hermès*'s project.⁵⁹

55 'C'est sous cette forme si profonde, si parfaitement théologique et si catholique, que se présente chez Had. l'imitation de Jésus-Christ. La vie mystique c'est vivre l'Homme-Dieu. C'est une des grandes idées qui traversent toute son oeuvre. Les visions la symbolisent et l'expriment [...]. Il suffit de la signaler pour faire comprendre toute sa place que tient le mystère de l'Incarnation dans cette doctrine spirituelle si parfaitement orthodoxe. C'est par le Christ et dans le Christ que l'homme réalisera sa fin dernière, sa divinisation.' Ibid.

56 'par la voie la plus directe et aussi la plus humble... celle qui porte vers les sommets tout en partant de la Chair.' Marc. Eemans, 'Présentation de Sœur Hadewijch', p. 6.

57 On the depiction of (visionary) women in Surrealism, see Katherine Conley, *Automatic Woman: The Representation of Woman in Surrealism* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996).

58 In his poetry debut *Vergeeten te worden* (1930), Eemans had equally drawn on what he must have regarded as a link between Hadewijch's mysticism and Bretonian Surrealism; the Surrealist poems of that collection all revolve around the union with a visionary woman and are replete with references to Hadewijch's 'First Vision'. See Tijn Nuyts, 'Mystiek als strategie: Surrealistische appropriatie van Middelnederlandse mystiek als modern nostalgisch project in Marc. Eemans' *Vergeeten te worden* (1930)', *Voors: Tijdschrift voor letteren*, 37 (2019), 6–17.

59 In this context, Dirk de Geest refers to the 'syntagmatic continuity' periodicals aim to establish between their issues. Dirk de Geest, 'Avant-garde als strategie: Het tijdschrift *De Tafelronde* — het literaire tijdschrift als vertoog', *Nederlandse Letterkunde*, 15.3 (2010), 221–40 (p. 227).

Hermès's response to Catholic Criticism

When positioning their project with respect to Van Mierlo's, the editors of *Hermès* were obliged to perform a careful balancing act. If they wished to continue their efforts to 'provide documents for the comparative study of mysticism' and to 'identify the nature of the relationships that might exist between mystical and poetic activity', they were obliged to acknowledge the expertise and authority of a cultural mediator such as Van Mierlo.⁶⁰ At the same time, however, *Hermès* needed to differentiate its project from Van Mierlo's, emphasizing on which points it differed from an 'orthodox' take on the mystical text tradition in order to shed the label of 'petits curés' conferred on them by their former Surrealist peers. The balancing act they performed to pursue this aim was carried out in two sections of the second issues: in the 'Note des éditeurs', the prototypical place for programmatic statements, and in the review section, which provided room for more subtle, but no less strategic position-taking with respect to Van Mierlo's 'orthodox' philological endeavours.

The editors of *Hermès* adopted a double strategy when replying to Van Mierlo's accusations in the 'Note des éditeurs' of the second issue. On the one hand, the editorial defended itself by bringing to the attention that *Hermès* counted a considerable number of 'jeunes catholiques notoires' ['prominent young Catholics'] among its contributors, as if to demonstrate that the latter's Catholically-inspired contributions countered Van Mierlo's claim that the periodical failed to do sufficient justice to the specificity of 'la mystique chrétienne' ['Christian mysticism'].⁶¹ On the other hand, the editorial endeavoured to neutralize Van Mierlo's charges by stating that *Hermès's* project transcended the intentions of the individual contributors: their common purpose was to mediate mystical texts and to examine the interrelations between poetry and mysticism:

Let us recall that the periodical *Hermès* essentially aims, on the one hand, to provide documents for the comparative study of mysticism and, on the other hand, to identify the nature of the relationships that might exist between mystical and poetic activity, by producing studies that, in both fields, seem most appropriate to achieve its purpose. Any other consideration, however justified, would distort the intentions of its publishers. Let us therefore not attribute intentions to the periodical that are only those of some of its collaborators.⁶²

This balancing act was further pursued in the review section of the second issue of *Hermès*, for which Eemans was responsible.⁶³ Whereas four of the reviews were allotted a quarter to half a page, one extended over three pages. The review in question concerned *The Life and Works of John of Ruusbroec*, a publication that had been edited in 1931 — the commemoration year of the mystic — by the members of the Ruusbroec Society. While praising the ingenious interpretations of Ruusbroec's mystical texts that had been provided by Van Mierlo and his colleagues, the review also makes some subtle critical

60 'apporter des documents à l'étude comparée de la mystique'; 'dégager la nature des rapports qui pourraient exister entre l'activité mystique et l'activité poétique.' Goemans, p. 1.

61 Ibid.

62 '[Q]u'il nous soit permis de rappeler que la revue *Hermès* vise essentiellement d'une part de n'apporter que des documents à l'étude comparée de la mystique, et, d'autre part, à dégager la nature des rapports qui pourraient exister entre l'activité mystique et l'activité poétique, cela en produisant des études qui, dans l'un et l'autre domaine, lui semblent les plus propres à réaliser son objet. Toute autre considération, aussi justifiée qu'elle soit, dénaturerait les intentions de ses éditeurs. Que l'on veuille donc ne point prêter à la revue des intentions qui ne seraient que celles de certains de ses collaborateurs.' Goemans, p. 2.

63 Marc. Eemans, 'Pages de bibliographie', *Hermès*, 1.2 (1933), 64–70.

remarks: 'All these studies, all these essays shine with undeniable qualities of erudition, although here and there, rather unfortunate inaccuracies have disfigured the rigour of the scientific apparatus.'⁶⁴ Signalling these 'unfortunate inaccuracies' while abstaining from specifying or correcting them, the review shows itself to be primarily concerned with positioning *Hermès's* project with respect to the one of the Ruusbroec Society. Indeed, *Hermès* asserts an air of authority by claiming that its editors are capable of detecting inexactitudes in an edition made by specialists. By simultaneously praising and criticizing the efforts of the Ruusbroec Society, in other words, *Hermès* places itself on the same level as these experts. This also transpires from Eemans's concluding remark: 'The only thing we regret is that we lack the space to quote other passages of his study. As for any reservations we may have, we are happy to drop them. The effort undertaken by the edition of Het Kompas [the publishing house] deserves admiration rather than criticism.'⁶⁵

The effect of this subtle differentiation strategy is carried on in Eemans's review of a special issue of the Catholic periodical *Revue Carmélitaines* on comparative mysticism, a topic of utmost importance to *Hermès*. Stating that this periodical is less contaminated by doctrinal sectarianism than other Catholic periodicals, Eemans emphasizes the importance of such study.⁶⁶ The final paragraph of his review, however, concludes with a biting remark: 'Most of the specialists in the field [of the comparative study of mysticism] are suspected of syncretism. In one of our next issues, we intend to return to this issue in more detail and perhaps we could listen to the defence and justification of those who are accused of syncretism.'⁶⁷ It does not require much imagination to see that this last observation lashes out at Van Mierlo, who criticized the supposedly syncretic conception of mysticism underpinning *Hermès's* endeavours.

Conclusion

The collective ethos which the editors of *Hermès* sought to promulgate did not go unnoticed, as is evident from a number of reviews published in periodicals and newspapers of the early 1930s, which quoted extensively from the first 'Note des éditeurs' when describing the periodical's project and frequently referenced the translation of Hadewijch's 'First Vision'.⁶⁸ Interestingly, the pin-pricks directed at the circle of Belgian Surrealists — and the way in which these served to differentiate *Hermès's* project from La Société du Mystère's — seem not to have been registered as such in the reviews, nor is the relation of the founders of the periodical to the circle of Belgian Surrealism ever signalled. The only exception is to be found in the review by E. L. T. Mesens in *Documents* 34. That an issue aiming to map Surrealist activities in Belgium included a review of *Hermès* not only signals that its editors were still considered as being related in some way to the Belgian Surrealist movement, but also that the attack directed at

64 'Toutes ces études, tous ces essais brillent par d'incontestables qualités d'érudition, quoique par-ci, par-là, des inexactitudes assez malencontreuses soient venues défigurer la rigueur de l'appareil scientifique.' Eemans, 'Pages de bibliographie', p. 65.

65 'Nous ne regrettons qu'une chose, c'est que la place nous manque pour donner d'autres passages de son étude. Quant aux réserves que nous pourrions formuler, nous les laissons volontiers tomber. L'ensemble de l'effort entrepris par l'Édition Het Kompas s'appelle plutôt l'admiration que la critique.' Eemans, 'Pages de bibliographie', p. 68.

66 'Parmi les revues catholiques Les Etudes Carmélitaines sont certainement le moins entachées de sectarisme doctrinal.' Ibid., p. 69.

67 'La plupart des spécialistes en la matière y sont soupçonnés de syncrétisme. Dans l'un de nos prochains numéros, nous comptons revenir avec plus de détails sur la question et peut-être nous serait-il donné d'écouter la défense et la justification de ceux que l'on taxe de syncrétisme.' Ibid.

68 Examples include *Het Laatste Nieuws* (20 July 1933); *Le Carillon* (30 September 1933); *La Nouvelle Revue Française* (1 March 1934); *Le Courrier de la Presse* (May 1934).

the circle of Brussels Surrealists had been registered by its target. The strategies carried out by the editors of *Hermès* in order to differentiate themselves from the activities of La Société du Mystère can thus be considered as successful. According to Mesens, the persistent God-talk in *Hermès* could not be considered as a convincing component of any serious Surrealist enterprise: the editors clearly were Surrealists gone astray. To the editors of *Hermès*, however, the negative review by one of their former peers would have proven that they had taken the right direction.

In choosing Hadewijch's 'First Vision' as the first contribution of their periodical, the editors of *Hermès* revealed the programmatic importance of this text to their project. Hadewijch's Vision was mobilized not only in a project that situated itself at a remove from the one of the Brussels Surrealists, but also from those of Catholic mediators of her oeuvre such as Van Mierlo. The transfer strategies involved in the mediation of Hadewijch's text clearly show that *Hermès* played a double game: while relying on the philological expertise of a Catholic philologist who defended the 'orthodox' roots of medieval mysticism, it propagated a conception of mysticism that corresponded more to how avant-garde artists in the interwar period such as Breton approached mystical or esoteric literature as a toolkit offering materials to excavate the hidden truth buried under everyday reality.

The interactions between Eemans and Van Mierlo reveal an intriguing *histoire croisée* between these two mediators of Middle Dutch mysticism. The Jesuit philologist Van Mierlo made available both the Middle Dutch text and a first interpretation, which Eemans and Baert could draw on when translating and reflecting on the text. In order to highlight Hadewijch's significance to the project of *Hermès*, Eemans resorted to multiple discursive transfer modes: he selected excerpts from Van Mierlo's interpretation of the vision, paraphrasing, translating, and adjusting these to make them fit his mobilization of Hadewijch's mysticism. Van Mierlo, who considered his project as well as his ethos threatened by the presentation of Hadewijch in *Hermès*, responded to the editors with a letter of complaint, which is reproduced in the editorial of the second issue with a view to asserting *Hermès's* ethos, a strategy that is further corroborated by identification and differentiation techniques employed in the review section. In this way, the transfer practices that were central to *Hermès's* project can be read as constitutive elements of the construction of *Hermès's* collective ethos.

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