

INTRODUCTION

The life and works of Karel van de Woestijne: An Overview

It is regrettable that relatively little attention is paid in the English-speaking world to the rich vein of literature that has been written in the Dutch language over the centuries. There may be a variety of reasons for this, and whether for example the fact that there are so few departments in British universities which teach Dutch is cause, effect or both is a matter for debate. However, the unfortunate consequence is that in the English-speaking world little is known of this literature, much of which is of merit and stands favourable comparison with literature produced in other European languages such as French, German and Russian. From the Dutch Golden Age, poets such as Joost van den Vondel, P. C. Hooft and Constantijn Huygens¹ are fêted in their own country, although even there the majority of the attention paid to their work is within the narrow confines of the academy. In more recent times, poets of note have made their mark in both the Netherlands and Belgium. Perhaps the most famous of these is the recently deceased Belgian, Hugo Claus (1929-2008), though his international fame may owe more to his novels such as *The Sorrow of Belgium* (*Het Verdriet van België*) rather than to his poetry.²

¹ For a set of translations of Huygens' work into English, see my *Poems on the Lord's Supper by the Dutch Calvinist Constantijn Huygens (1596-1687): A Facing Dutch-English Translation with Annotations and an Introduction by Christopher Joby* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008). I am currently preparing an edition of Vondel's long poem (5,170 lines) *Altaer-geheimenissen* (Mysteries of the Altar), which will include a translation of the poem, a commentary and extensive introductory essay, and will be published by Amsterdam University Press in 2011. Little of his work has been translated into English. A notable exception is Noel Clark's translation of Vondel's play, *Lucifer* (Bath: Absolute Press, 1990).

² A very recent biography of Claus is: Hans Dütting, *Hugo Claus: De Reus van Vlaanderen* (Soesterberg: Aspekt, 2009). A significant amount of his poetry may be found in: Hugo Claus, *Gedichten, 1948-1993* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1994). Little of his poetry has however been translated in English. One exception is: Hugo Claus, *Selected Poems, 1953-1973*, ed. Theo Hermans, trans. Theo Hermans et al. (Portree: Aquila Poetry, 1986).

Several poets from the Low Countries express spiritual concerns in their work, often drawing on the rich tradition of spiritual literature³ and indeed fine art in the region.⁴ In the nineteenth century, the most notable figure in this regard was the Belgian Catholic priest, Guido Gezelle (1830-1899),⁵ whose attention to the work of the divine in nature has been compared to that of his English contemporary, the Catholic convert and Jesuit priest, Gerald Manley Hopkins (1844-1889). Another Belgian poet who often expressed spiritual concerns in his work was Karel van de Woestijne (1878-1929) (henceforth VdW),⁶ whose late collection *God aan zee* (God by Sea), published for the first time in 1926, is our main concern in the current volume.

Having said that VdW often expressed spiritual concerns in his work, we should perhaps qualify this statement and say that this was more so towards the end of his life, whereas in the earlier part of his career, although he does make reference to the spiritual at times, a more notable concern of his seems to be a certain sensuality.⁷

³ One figure whose work stands out and whose influence on Van de Woestijne's later work can clearly be discerned is Jan Ruusbroec (1293-1381). English translations, together with a sixteenth-century translation into Latin, of his works are to be found in: Jan Van Ruusbroec, *Opera Omnia*, 10 vols., eds. G. de Baere et al. (Tiel: Lannoo, 1981-2006). For a further example of Ruusbroec's work translated into English, see John of Ruysbroeck, *The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage: The Sparkling Stone: The Book of Supreme Truth*, trans. C. A. Wynschenk Dom, intro. and notes Evelyn Underhill (facsimile of edition published in 1916 (London: J. M. Dent and Sons) (Felinfach: Llanerch, 1995).

⁴ For a good general overview of the work of the Flemish Primitives, see Dirk de Vos, *Flemish Primitives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). For a more scholarly approach to the subject, see: Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting: its Origins and Character* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964).

⁵ For a short overview of Gezelle's life and work, Reinder P. Meijer, *Literature of the Low Countries: A short History of Dutch Literature in the Netherlands and Belgium* (Cheltenham: Stanley Thornes, 1978), 233-6. For a recent collection of translations of some of his poems, see: Guido Gezelle, *The Evening and the Rose, 30 Poems Translated from the Flemish by Paul Claes and Christine d'Haen* (Antwerp: Guido Gezellegenootschap, 1989) (originally (Deurle: Colibrant, 1971)).

⁶ One other poet of this period for whom God is a primary concern is the Dutch poet, Gerrit Achterberg (1905-1962). See Meijer, *op. cit.*, 367 ff. Translations of a selection of his poems into English can be found in: Gerrit Achterberg, *But this land has no end*, trans. Pleuke Boyce (Lantzville, B.C.: Oolichan Books, 1989).

⁷ Meijer, *op. cit.*, 278, and M. Rutten, *Karel van de Woestijne, Ontmoetingen* ([Brugge]: Desclée De Brouwer, 1970), 8.

Indeed, one commentator on VdW, Mathieu Rutten, sees three distinct periods in the development of the literary career of VdW: 1. a sensualistic period, 2. a period of transition from sensualism to spirituality, and 3. a spiritual, ascetic-mystical period.⁸ As might be expected, there is a certain overlap in these periods and the sensual does not disappear from the poet's work in the third of these stages, although I would argue that he is trying to escape from the sensual in this final stage in order to draw closer to God.

What is also interesting in this regard is that these three periods coincide with three distinct phases which could be described as geographical or career phases in VdW's life. The first of these phases, which Rutten refers to as the first Ghent period, runs from 1878, the year of VdW's birth, to 1906. During this period, from 1889-1899, VdW attended the Royal Athenaeum in Ghent and then studied philosophy and Germanic languages at Ghent University for one year, leaving without graduating. In 1900, he moved with his brother, the artist Gustave, to the village of Sint-Martens-Latem, on the River Leie a few miles outside Ghent. Here, they were joined by Gustave's friend and fellow artist, Jules de Praetere, other artists including Albert Servaes and Albijn van den Abeele, and the sculptor, Georges Minne.⁹ In 1904, VdW married Maria Ernestina Joanna van Hende (Mariette) and moved with her to Sint-Amandsberg, a suburb of Ghent where, in 1905, their son Paul was born. Shortly afterwards, as a result of Mariette's ill-health, they moved again, this time to Sint-Martens-Latem, and stayed there for a year, which provided VdW with a prolonged period for reflection.

During this initial period, as well as producing and publishing a number of individual poems, VdW also produced two significant collections, *My Father's*

⁸ Rutten, *op. cit.*, 8. Hans Vandevoorde is probably right in saying that the poet presses the erotic-sensualistic imagery of his earlier poetry into the service of his later religious verse. Hans Vandevoorde, *De Spiegel van Achilleus: Karel van de Woestijne en de allegorie* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2006), 318.

⁹ These artists are collectively known as the first Latem group and often referred to as 'mystic symbolists'. See François van Elmbt, 'Karel van de Woestijne en Hadewijch,' in: *De Nieuwe Taalgids, 77de jg., 1984*, 235-246, at 235, n. 1 for a list of works discussing the first Latem group. For a more recent study, see also Piet Boyens, *Een Zeldzame Weelde: Kunst van Latem en Leiestreek 1900-1930* (Ghent: Ludion, 2001).

House (*Het vader-huis*) (1896-1903, published 1903) and The Orchard of Birds and Fruits (*De boom-gaard der vogelen en der vruchten*) (1903-5, published 1905). The early influences on VdW's work are several. Reinder Meijer¹⁰ sees the influence of both impressionism, in particular its preoccupation with sensory perception, and symbolism,¹¹ expressed through introspection and devotion to the sound of the poem, in VdW's early work. Elsewhere, another commentator goes one step further, calling the poet 'the representative type of French symbolism [in the literature of the Low Countries].' This reminds us that VdW drew heavily on the work of French symbolist poets such as Baudelaire, Verlaine and Mallarmé in his early verse.¹² He also drew on the poetry of his Belgian contemporaries such as Emile Verhaeren (1855-1916) and the Nobel Prize-winning poet and playwright, Maurice Maeterlinck (1862-1949). But perhaps what sets VdW apart from his fellow Flemish contemporaries, Verhaeren and Maeterlinck, and others such as Charles van Lerberghe and Grégoire Le Roy, is that although he clearly could have written his poetry in French, he chose to do so in Dutch.¹³

¹⁰ Meijer, *op. cit.*, 277-8.

¹¹ See also Anne Marie Musschoot, *Karel van de Woestijne en het Symbolisme* (Ghent: KANTL, 1975). I discuss the influence of symbolism on VdW's later work in the final section of this essay.

¹² Hanna Stouten et al. eds., *Histoire de la Littérature Néerlandaise (Pays-Bas et Flandres)* (Paris: Fayard, 1999), 557.

¹³ A brief word here about the terms used to describe the language of VdW. It is often assumed that the language used in Flanders is Flemish. However, commentators seems agreed that Flemish is in fact a dialect of Dutch, although to be even more precise, Flemish is a term applied to two dialects, West and East Flemish, spoken in modern-day Belgium. (For a good introduction to this subject, see: B. C. Donaldson, *Dutch: A Linguistic History of Holland and Belgium* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983, 7 and 17). Therefore he spoke the Flemish dialect of Dutch. However, when we consider what he wrote, the picture is more complicated. Donaldson writes, 'there is no such thing as written Flemish: it is but one of several Dutch dialects and exists only in speech – a literate Fleming writes Dutch.' So, by this account VdW wrote Dutch and indeed there is no doubt that in his extensive work as a journalist, academic and literary critic, VdW wrote in Dutch. However, when it comes to his poetry, the same is not necessarily the case. Anne Marie Musschoot states that his idiom (*taaleigen*) has Flemish aspects to it, not only in its use of words specifically from the Southern Netherlands, but also in its use of archaic grammatical forms, such as the negatory *en*. (See: Karel Van de Woestijne, *Verzameld Dichtwerk*, eds. Anne Marie Musschoot et al. *2 delen, deel 1* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2007), 459). I would suggest therefore that the specificity of poetry is such that it challenges bold statements such as those which Donaldson makes, and it is perhaps better to use a term such as 'Flemish Dutch' to describe the language van de Woestijne uses in his poetry. For a more recent account of the history of the Dutch language and its dialects, see also G. Janssens, Ann Marynissen, *Het Nederlands vroeger en nu*, 2nd ed. (Leuven: Acco, 2005).

The second period in VdW's life runs from 1906-1920/1 and may be seen as his Brussels period. In 1906, he was made Brussels correspondent for the Dutch newspaper, the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, and during this time lived in various places in and around the Belgian capital. Between 1911 and 1920, he was particularly active as a civil servant for the Ministry of Fine Art, a period which was of course punctuated by the First World War. Unlike many of his contemporaries such as the artists Emile Claus, who moved to Britain, and Rik Wouters, who moved to neutral Netherlands and Maeterlinck, who moved to France,¹⁴ VdW stayed in Belgium during the German occupation, though he joined the 'passivists,' who as the name suggests undertook passive resistance to the occupation.¹⁵

As we have noted, this second period of the poet's life marks a shift in his work from the sensual to the more spiritual. One commentator sees this shift occurring between 1915 and 1920,¹⁶ whilst another places the beginning of this shift earlier, in 1913.¹⁷ In 1910, he published the collection *The Golden Shadow* (*De gulden*

A second question that we need to address here though is why VdW chose to write his poetry in this language and not in French. If we look at map of modern Belgium, this may seem an unnecessary question, for Ghent, where VdW was born and brought up, clearly lies in the Flemish-speaking part of the country. However, the dividing lines between those who speak Flemish and those who speak French (the Walloons) have not always been purely geographical ones. Even into the twentieth century, the dividing lines were also determined by education and class. This is perhaps best exemplified by the fact that well into the twentieth century, tuition at the University of Ghent was given in French. So, it was by no means a foregone conclusion that VdW would choose to write his poetry in what we may call Flemish-inflected Dutch. In his extensive biography of VdW, P. Minderaa (*Karel van de Woestijne. Zijn leven en werken* (Arnhem: Van Loghum Slaterus 1942)) notes that although the poet's father, Alexander Joannes, belonged to an old Flemish family (13), his mother was educated in France and much French was therefore spoken in the van de Woestijne household (14). Nevertheless, Minderaa argues that the young VdW saw rich possibilities of serving Flanders. During his school years he became a fiery *Flamingant* ('supporter of the Flemish movement'). Unlike other commentators such as Rutten, though, Minderaa ascribes this to the fact that at school VdW went round with *Vlaamsch gezinde makkers* ('buddies disposed to Flemish').

¹⁴ Before the war, Maeterlinck had written a play which clearly criticized Germany, so it became a matter of life and death for him to move to France.

¹⁵ Hans Vandevoorde, 'On Yeats' Footstool: The Poet Karel van de Woestijne,' in: *The Low Countries: Arts and Society in Flanders and the Netherlands* (Rekkem: Stichting Ons Erfdeel, 2002), 214-224, at 215.

¹⁶ Stouten et al., *op. cit.*, 559.

¹⁷ Leo Jansen in: Karel van de Woestijne, *Wiekslag om de kim*, ed. Leo Jansen, 2 delen, deel 2: *Commentaar en apparaat* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1996), 127 ff.

schaduw), which he developed between 1905 and 1910 and which is more in keeping with his earlier work. Later in this period, though, he began to compose a series of couplets which mark a clear shift in his concerns from his earlier poetry. He began to compose the couplets in 1918 and although they were not published until 1924, they were completed by 1921. The collection is entitled *Substrata* and is divided into five sections, *Stad* (City), *Zee* (Sea), *Vrouw* (Woman/Wife), *Ik* (I) and *God*.¹⁸ Although this was not the first time VdW had treated these subjects, they clearly come to the fore in this collection and are also prominent in much of his later work, including *God by Sea*. As I discuss in more detail below, there is clearly a sense in which *God by Sea* can be seen as a poetic account of VdW's attempts to free himself of earthly distractions, including his wife and to develop his personal relationship with God. The fact that he seeks God at the seaside may have something to do with the fact that in April 1921, he and his family moved to the Belgian seaside resort of Oostende. This move marks a dividing line between the intermediate and final stages of his life and career, characterized in his work by a spiritual, ascetic-mysticism.

Several months earlier, in August 1920, VdW was made a lecturer and eventually Professor in Dutch literature at the University of Ghent, a post he held until his death in 1929. He continued to live in Oostende until 1925, after which he moved to the town of Zwijnaarde, near Ghent, where he remained for the rest of his life. During this time, he wrote and published a significant volume of poetry, but for our purposes, the most important works that he published during this time were an extended poem, *The Human Bread* (*Het menschelijk brood*), and three collections,

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 133, n. 90, Rutten, *op. cit.*, 12, n. 2, and Karel van de Woestijne, *Verzameld Dichtwerk, op. cit.*, 291 ff. For an earlier edition, see Karel van de Woestijne, *Verzameld Werk, Eerste Deel: Lyrische Poëzie*, eds. P. N. van Eyck et al. (Brussels: A. Manteau, 1948), 437. For a good recent article on *Substrata*, which identifies the collection as a key turning-point in van de Woestijne's oeuvre, see Hans Groenewegen, 'Tant pis voor wie ons onder den grond niet volgen kan' substrata als keerpunt in het lyrische oeuvre,' in: *Al Ben Ik Duister, 'k Zet Me Glanzend Uit: Over Karel van de Woestijne*, eds. Anne Marie Musschoot et al. (Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij, 2007), 213-250.

The Man of Mud (*De modderen man*), God by Sea (*God aan zee*) and The Mountain Lake (*Het berg-meer*).¹⁹

Although it is clear that VdW had long had in mind the idea of producing a trilogy, the three collections just mentioned were not published together as a triptych until thirteen years after his death, in 1942, under the title Wingbeat on the Horizon (*Wiekslag om de kim*).

The central panel of this collection, God by Sea, which will henceforth be our chief concern in the present volume, was first published in 1926 by the Dutch publisher, A.A.M. Stols,²⁰ and received favourable reviews the following year from the critic Urbain van de Voorde²¹ and from VdW's fellow poet and critic, the Dutchman Martinus Nijhoff.²²

This then provides us with a brief introduction to the life and work of VdW²³ and gives us the context in which God by Sea was written. What I shall do now is to give a brief overview of the development and structure of the collection before going on to consider two specific questions, which take us away from the tendency in most academic studies on God by Sea to consider it primarily from a literary perspective rather than from a theological perspective: first, the extent to which poetry such as that which we find in God by Sea may be considered theology and secondly, which mystical writings VdW draws on in developing the complex of imagery that we find in his later works, including God by Sea, through which he mediates the journey towards the divine, which is the central motive of this collection.

¹⁹ First published as: *Het menschelijk brood* (Bussum: A. A. M. Stols, 1926), *De modderen man* (Brussels: Het Roode Zeil, 1920), *God aan zee* (Bussum: A. A. M. Stols, 1926) and *Het berg-meer* (Maastricht: A. A. M. Stols, 1928).

²⁰ Interestingly, although of course the Stols edition would have been available in Belgium, God by Sea was not published in VdW's homeland until 1942, in Wingbeat on the Horizon by the publisher A. Manteau in Brussels.

²¹ In *De Stem*, 1927, 7de Jaargang, Deel I, 488-496.

²² In *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, 12.2.1927, reproduced in Martinus Nijhoff, *De veelkantige criticus, intro. Jan Engelman* (Hasselt: Heidelberg, 1965), 65-68.

²³ For more detailed accounts of his life, see the bibliography at the end of this volume, in particular the new biography on van de Woestijne by Peter Theunynck.

God by Sea: An Overview

The reader will find an overview of each poem in the collection, together with a summary of each of the sections into which the collection is divided, in the Commentary which follows the section containing the Dutch text and parallel translation. Here, we give a brief introduction to each of the sections and thus to the collection as a whole.

Most of the material in the collection dates from after 1920, the year in which he became Professor of Dutch Literature at Ghent University, although one or two fragments can be dated to before 1920, such as GZ6 and GZ38.²⁴ Leo Jansen provides an extensive account of the history of the collection and readers concerned with the details of this are advised to refer to his work.²⁵ As we have noted, for some time prior to 1920, VdW already had in mind the idea of producing a poetic trilogy. It was VdW's habit to write notes and poetic sketches in the notebooks that he carried with him and in one of these on a page dated 21st April 1921, in the same month that he moved with his family to the seaside resort of Oostende, he wrote a poem with the title *God aan zee*, which would later become the Dutch title for this collection. The extent to which this directly inspired the creation of the collection is open to question, but the phrase *God aan zee* appeared repeatedly in VdW's notes and at the very least it seems that the poem itself became a motive which would form an important impetus for the development of the collection.²⁶

VdW continued to develop the poems which were eventually to appear in this collection and earlier versions of many of them appeared in poetry journals such as *Orpheus* and *Elsevier's geïllustreerd maandschrift*. Eventually, by 1926, VdW had completed the poems which he intended to include in the collection *God by Sea*. He chose the Dutch publisher, A.A.M. Stols, based in Bussum, to publish the collection and after discussions over the length and scope of the collection, by

²⁴ Jansen gives a date of 1917 for both poems. (Karel van de Woestijne (1996), *op. cit.*, 397 and 496).

²⁵ Karel van de Woestijne (1996), *op. cit.*, 131 ff.

²⁶ *ibid.*, 133.

September of that year, VdW had delivered his final version to Stols. The type was set, VdW read and corrected three proofs and finally in November, 1926, it was published.²⁷

The collection consists of five sections of poems ranging in length from eight lines to thirty-three lines. It is then framed by two longer poems, each consisting of eighty lines, the former called Baptism of the Beggar (*Doop van den Bedelaar*), the latter called Exit of the Beggar (*Uitvaart van den Bedelaar*) and in turn they refer to the birth and death of the poet. The reference to a beggar probably stems from the idea that for VdW man is born and dies a beggar, always seeking, but ultimately never finding, sufficient spiritual bread. For VdW, mankind's state of being a beggar is his tragedy.

The five intermediate sections of the collection may, in general terms, be seen as stages in the poet's attempt to break free from those earthly things that cause him to sin and to be separated from God and then to approach the divine, though the progression is not entirely linear.

The first of these five intermediate sections is called The Hot Ash (*De Heete Asch*). The title refers to the ash that remains after the fire of the passions which VdW had experienced in the collection which was to become the first part of the triptych, Wingbeat on the Horizon, The Man of Mud.²⁸ Here, like Adam before him, VdW is consumed by sin, and in The Hot Ash, he continues to be preoccupied by the things and people, which as he sees it cause him to sin, including his wife (GZ7 and GZ8).

Unlike the other four intermediate sections in this collection, the second section itself is divided into three sub-sections. At the end of the first section, in GZ11, the poet begins to recognize that the only way to escape his own sinfulness and that of the world is to turn towards God. A quest for something else is made explicit by the very first line of the first poem, GZ12, of this section: 'I come alone, at night, to this city by the sea' and here we get the first inkling that it is in

²⁷ *ibid.*, 188.

²⁸ Mathieu Rutten, *De Lyriek van Karel van de Woestijne* (Paris: E. Droz, 1934), 190.

the sea and his own response to the sea that the poet may find a way towards the divine. The title of the section itself, *The Scabby Dancer (De Schurftige Danser)* is also instructive. Dance, rhythm and by extension poetry, which is typically marked by rhythm, act in some sense as intermediaries between man and God,²⁹ and so reference to a dancer in this title may suggest that VdW acknowledges the role of poetry in helping him to approach God. However, it is a scabby dancer, so this may suggest that the poet still recognizes that he is sinful and that he needs further cleansing before he can come into the presence of God.

The third section is entitled *Verzoeking van God*. I translate this in the text and commentary as *Temptation of God*, but the title carries with it a certain ambiguity and it may refer to God tempting or seducing us, much like a lover,³⁰ or to the idea that the poet himself is putting God to the test or mocking him,³¹ or to one of a number of other possibilities which we discuss in the commentary below.³² The section starts with a poem focusing on the fact that, although the poet has begun his journey towards the divine, he is still very much beholden to his senses, e.g. line one: ‘we are not yet cured of our eyes.’ The section concludes with a poem that seems to recognize that even for a poet, words and language cannot take us all the way into the divine presence and that ultimately words will fail us in this attempt. Instead, it is an attitude of silence that will have more success and tellingly VdW ends the poem and thus the section with three dots.

Once VdW learns this lesson about how to approach God, there is hope. This is exemplified in the title of the fourth section, *Birth of Honey (Geboorte van den Honig)*. For VdW, honey is a product of our encounter with the divine and this notion is strengthened when we consider that VdW uses the image of a flower to refer to the presence of God.³³

²⁹ François van Elmbt, *Godsbeeld en Godserving in de lyriek van Karel van de Woestijne* (Brugge: Orion, 1973), 108 ff., 222 and 263-4.

³⁰ Rutten, *op. cit.*, 202.

³¹ Karel van de Woestijne (1996), *op. cit.*, 146.

³² Vandevoorde (2006), *op. cit.*, 314, notes 763-4.

³³ Van Elmbt (1973), *op. cit.*, 242.

The final of the five intermediate sections has the same name as the whole collection, *God by Sea* (*God aan zee*). Perhaps surprisingly, there is little mention of the sea in this section and I discuss possible reasons for why the sea is mentioned in title in the commentary on the introduction to this section below. Rutten argues that this section does not offer any new elements which allow us to answer the question of whether the poet makes progress in his quest towards God.³⁴ However, what I suggest we do encounter in this final section are glimpses of the divine that the poet has. In GZ38, the poet casts God as a rose, drawing on the use of this flower in the mystical tradition. In GZ39, he pictures God as a glass, which has time and again sated his thirst. In GZ42, he likens God to a golden oriole. However, in between, he alludes to himself first as an apple, then as a raspberry. This latter image is particularly attractive and effective for he talks of the raspberry being ‘bruised to death’ (l. 18), but as it is so it releases a scent which fills the air, and so in some sense its spirit, like that of the poet, will continue to live on after death. Death, in fact, the poet comes to realize is the only way to God, and although this is a tragic fact in itself, once it is realized, he concludes, one is truly free to encounter the divine.

As we have said, though, *God by Sea* forms the middle panel of a triptych and so the reader will need to read the final ‘wing’ of this triptych, *The Mountain Lake* (*Het berg-meer*), to see whether VdW is finally able to draw any closer to God.³⁵

Poetry as Theology

Throughout the poetic triptych, *Wingbeat on the Horizon*, though, there is no doubt that the motive of God stands central and this leads us naturally to reflect on whether we may consider this poetry as theology. It is to this question that we now turn, beginning with a discussion of poetry in general before moving on to look at the specific case of *God by Sea*. Few commentators have reflected on the question of the extent to which *God by Sea* may be considered as theology and by

³⁴ Rutten (1934), *op. cit.*, 210.

³⁵ It is my intention to produce an edition including translations of this collection in due course.

extension its author as a theologian,³⁶ and indeed at first sight it may seem that this exercise is at best unnecessary and at worst a waste of time, for the title of the collection itself and even a cursory reading of the poems in the collection leave one in no doubt that God, as understood by the poet, is one of the main, if not the main, themes of the collection. Thus we should conclude that of necessity it concerns itself with issues which are theological.

However, there are those who may question whether this and other poetry can so readily be considered as theology. They might argue that poetry is not concerned with bringing clarity and order to the questions it addresses and that it is not therefore theology as they would understand it. Alister McGrath, for example, suggests that when he uses the term ‘Christian theology,’ he is referring to the ‘*systematic* study of the fundamental ideas of the Christian faith.’³⁷ Similarly, the twentieth-century German Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner (1904-84), calls theology ‘the science of faith’ and goes on to say that it is ‘the conscious and *methodical* explanation and explication of the divine revelation received and grasped in faith.’³⁸ Words such as systematic and methodical do not sit easily

³⁶ One notable exception is François van Elmbt’s *Godsbeeld en Godservaring in de lyriek van Karel van de Woestijne*, *op. cit.*, in which the author considers how VdW alludes to the divine in his poetry.

³⁷ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 139. (My italics).

³⁸ Quoted in McGrath, *ibid.* (My italics). That said, in another place where Rahner defines theology, he seems less concerned with the question of whether or not it is methodical and more concerned with what the theological project entails. He writes ‘Theology consists in a process of human reflection upon the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and, arising from this, upon the faith of the Church.’ (‘On the current relationship between philosophy and theology,’ in: *Theological Investigations, Vol. 13*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1975), 61. It is interesting to note here, of course, that if we take this as a definition of theology, then we could argue that at least the first part of the definition describes well the activity in which VdW is involved in the poetry considered in this volume. Elsewhere, Rahner seems to recognize that it simply will not do for theology to consist wholly of abstract philosophical reasoning when he says, ‘so long as theology remains stuck at the merely conceptual level-however necessary this may be in itself-it has failed in its true mission.’ (‘Reflections on Methodology in Theology,’ in: Karl Rahner, *Theologian of the Graced Search for Meaning*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 345. Nevertheless, as several commentators note, it is clear that philosophy did play an important part in Rahner’s theological project (see, for example, William V. Dych SJ, *Karl Rahner* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 29, and Karen Kilby, ‘Rahner, Karl,’ in: *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, eds. Adrian Hastings et al. (Oxford: OUP, 2000), 591-3, at 593).

with poetry,³⁹ but all is not lost for there are voices within modern theological discourse which argue that poetry, and the language of poetry, which can include tropes such as metaphor, simile and allegory, should be accorded space within what we understand by the term theology.

Sallie McFague seems to be onto something when she says that theologians are not philosophers, something which she says they have often become in the Christian tradition.⁴⁰ Although she wrote these words over twenty years ago, they still seem to ring true to-day.⁴¹ On the other hand, she says theologians are not poets. Perhaps in both cases she should have added the word ‘exclusively’, for she goes on to say,

[theologians] are poets insofar as they must be sensitive to the metaphors and models that are at once consonant with the Christian faith and appropriate for expressing that faith in their own time, and they are philosophers insofar as they must elucidate in a coherent, comprehensive, and systematic way the implications of these metaphors and models.⁴²

³⁹ This is not to say that poetry cannot be systematic or methodical in the sense that it presents words and ideas that have been marshalled and manipulated for a particular poetic purpose, as is often the case in the current collection. Rather, to use Rahner’s words again, it is to say that the intention of the poet is not necessarily to provide an explanation and explication of divine revelation which is systematic and methodical and which is governed by clarity, order and convincing argumentation.

⁴⁰ Although this should be the case, I suggest that today, theologians far too often appropriate the tools of philosophy. Further, there is a tendency towards abstraction and it is the arts which can, I suggest, fashion a modern Christian identity. Cf. Jeremy Begbie, ‘Art,’ in: *Dictionary of Ethics, Theology and Society*, eds. Paul Barry Clarke and Andrew Linzey (London: Routledge, 1996), 50-54, at 54.

⁴¹ There are of course exceptions. A good example is David Brown. Although, interestingly, early in his career he was concerned with philosophical theology, in such books as *The Divine Trinity* (London: Duckworth, 1985), more recently his own interest in the arts has been reflected in the production of a number of books which consider the extent to which the arts, including poetry, as vehicles for communicating human experience, can speak to us theologically. Of particular relevance to the current study is his *God and Mystery in Words: Experience through Metaphor and Drama* (Oxford: OUP, 2008).

⁴² Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (London: SCM Press, 1987), 32. Criticisms have been made concerning the Metaphorical Theology that McFague argues for in this book and in *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), by Hans Frei, amongst others, but this should not prevent us from seeing the value of her assertion that theologians should not merely be philosophers. See: Graham Ward, ‘Metaphor,’ in: *OCCT, op. cit.*, 425-6, at 426.

Few theologians are capable of being both poet and philosopher, but if we change the terms of the debate slightly and suggest that theology itself should be both poetry and philosophy then we allow both poets and philosophers the opportunity to contribute to the task of making theology. In the present context, we can then affirm what VdW offers in his poetry as a valuable contribution to the overall project of making theology and regard what a commentator, such as the present author, does as bringing clarity and order to the theological content of his poetry, making a different but no less valid contribution to this project. That said, of course, some of this content may be resistant to attempts to bring clarity and order to it and it is part of the responsibility of the commentator to be attentive to this.⁴³ Another approach to understanding the task and scope of theology, which also offers a place to poetry whilst at the same time affirming the need for clarity and order, is offered by Adrian Hastings. He suggests that there are five types of theology, which can be distinguished, ‘all valid and even necessary, but each with its own language, methodology, and purpose.’ These are ‘Liturgical and pastoral,’ ‘Scriptural commentary,’ ‘Thematic,’ ‘Experiential,’ and ‘Allegorical (in a wide sense).’⁴⁴ The first of these, Liturgical and pastoral, is not the type of theology that one would readily associate with VdW’s collection, *God by Sea*, and it need not detain us here long. But, it is worth briefly noting one way in which it is of interest in the present context. Hastings writes that this type of theology is concerned with ‘the basic celebrations that bring the Christian community together, Eucharist and baptism.’ Such theology, he goes on to say, is often in the form of sermons, though also in liturgical prayers, hymns and catechetical instructions. One of the central themes of the first poem of the present collection, *Baptism of the Beggar*, is, as the title suggests, the sacrament of baptism. The fact that it is in the form of a poem may raise concerns for those for whom order and

⁴³ David Brown makes a similar point in relation to metaphor in the second chapter, ‘Metaphor and Disclosure,’ of *God and Mystery in Words*, *op. cit.* In particular, he warns against the danger of ‘reductionism’ in relation to the meaning of texts, which he suggests is a constant temptation in Western theology (p. 59).

⁴⁴ Adrian Hastings, ‘Theology,’ in: *OCCT*, *op. cit.*, 700-702, at 700.

clarity are the touchstones of theology. But surely if we are to allow liturgical prayers and hymns to be vehicles for theology, we should at least entertain the possibility that poetry too can act as such a vehicle.

Again, Hastings' second type of theology, Scriptural commentary, need not detain us long and there is certainly no sense in which VdW is attempting to offer us an ordered commentary on Scripture in his poetry. That said, we should always be open to the fact that poetry can offer a valuable challenge to the way we read Scripture.⁴⁵

We shall return shortly, for reasons that will become clear, to Hastings' third type of theology, Thematic. But let us now consider the final two types of theology he offers, Experiential and Allegorical (in a wide sense), for these provide us with the best opportunity for affirming the present collection, *God by Sea*, as theology. We shall take the latter first. Hastings acknowledges that the borders of this type of theology are 'hazy' and rather than trying to give it a hard and fast definition, it might be more beneficial to see what sort of work can be included in it. As well as, *inter alia*, almost everything in Blake and Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, one work which is of particular interest in the current context is Dante's *Divine Comedy*. As we have noted, both this work and VdW's *Wingbeat on the Horizon* are of course collections of poems, ordered in three main divisions. They also both contain not only allegory, but many other tropes and each alludes to a spiritual journey by the author towards the divine. So I suggest that if we consider Dante's work as theology, as Hastings and other commentators do, then we should do the same for VdW's trilogy.⁴⁶ One feature of this type of theology is that of all

⁴⁵ In both the opening and closing poems of this collection, VdW refers to God as Sweeper of the Deserts. If we remember that the Dutch original for this phrase is *Veeger der woestijnen*, then we can see that there is a playful allusion to the poet's own surname in this phrase. But there is also a sense in which the phrase suggests that the desert is a place of testing and spiritual growth, where the faithful can be cleansed and their sins swept away. This may be present in biblical references to deserts but the modern view of deserts as barren, desolate places which cannot support life may lead us to a different understanding of biblical references to them in the first instance. So poetry can, at least in this instance, offer a challenge to how we interpret Scripture: cf. David Brown, *God and Grace of Body: Sacrament in Ordinary* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), 207.

⁴⁶ For Karel van de Woestijne and Dante, see: P. Minderaa, 'Van de Woestijnes ontmoeting met Dante,' in: P. Minderaa, *Opstellen en voordrachten uit mijn hoogleraarstijd (1948-1964)* (Zwolle:

types, it has the potential to penetrate furthest into the meaning of things.⁴⁷ But this may be at the cost of some precision and furthermore there is a danger that without the rigour of more systematic approaches to theology, what Hastings refers to as the ‘bogus’ may be more evident here than elsewhere. That said, as we hope the reader will recognize, this type of theology does have much value and the fact that it is not systematic does not mean that we should dismiss it as not being theology without first reflecting on it in a considered, ordered manner.

Turning now to Experiential theology, Hastings’ fourth type, we see that this consists of ‘the perception of the divine in and through particular experiences in space and time.’ Amongst works that he lists here are Augustine’s *Confessions* and Newman’s *Apologia*, but he does not include examples of any poetry in this category.⁴⁸ There is perhaps a sense in which poetry involves a stylized re-shaping of experience and as such may take us one step away from other types of autobiographical work. There may also be a sense in which the poet adds details to his experience for literary effect, although it is worth noting that commentators have raised questions about the historicity of certain episodes in Augustine of Hippo’s ostensibly autobiographical work, *Confessions*.⁴⁹ But in relation to the present task, commentators seem agreed that the sense of VdW’s own sinfulness and a desire to move closer to God, both of which are central motives in *God by Sea*, reflect the poet’s own life experience,⁵⁰ just as many of the details and desire

Tjeenk Willink, 1964), 255-268, and Karel Wauters, ‘Karel van de Woestijne: “Ontmoeting met Dante”’, in: *Ademloos moment. Opstellen van Prof. dr. Karel Wauters over literatuur en muziek*, eds. P. Couttenier et al. (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 115-133. For the theology of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, see: Giovanni Fallani, *Dante: Poeta Teologo* (Milan: Marzorati, 1965) and more recently, C. Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante’s Comedy* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), and the excellent translations of and commentaries on the three *cantiche* by Robin Kirkpatrick, published by Penguin Classics (*Inferno*, 2006 and *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, 2007).

⁴⁷ For a valuable contribution to this discussion, see John Hospers, *Meaning and Truth in the Arts* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1974).

⁴⁸ Hastings, *op. cit.*, 701.

⁴⁹ See Frederick van Fleteren, ‘Confessiones,’ in: *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, eds. Allan D. Fitzgerald et al. (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1999), 227-232, at 231.

⁵⁰ Van Elmbt, for example, notes that some of VdW’s earlier religious poems are not merely ‘emotional-aesthetic images’ (*emotioneel-estetisch[e] beeld[en]*), but are rather signs of an inner discord (*innerlijke tweespalt*) (van Elmbt, *op. cit.*, 41). David Brown, several of whose books are

for a more holy life lie, at least in part, at the root of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.⁵¹ One final point in this regard is that within this type of theology, we find mystical theology. This is important for there is a clear mystical dimension to VdW's later work, including the collection *God by Sea*, as we discuss in more detail shortly in the final section of this essay, and as will become apparent, the poet draws widely on both the mystical tradition of the Low Countries and on that of other European countries, particularly Spain.

So far, we have tried to make the case that VdW's collection, *God by Sea*, deserves to be taken seriously as theology as it may be considered both Allegorical (in a wide sense) and Experiential. Yet there will still no doubt be those who worry that because the theology which it contains is not formulated in a clear, ordered manner, there is still the chance that the 'bogus' may lurk within it. They may argue that the poetry is too subjective and that it therefore provides us with an insufficiently objective account either of God or of the relationship between the human and divine. Those who voice such concerns may point to the one remaining type of theology that Hastings delineates, namely Thematic theology, such as Anselm's *Cur Deus homo* and Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, as being the type of theology that best brings clarity, order and reason to its object. To such a claim, we would respond first that, despite attempts to bring clarity, order and reason to their object, the meaning of some passages in these and similar works remains a source of disagreement. Secondly, we should not forget that part of the role of this type of theology down the centuries has been to bring clarity and order to the work of other thematic theologians, such as Anselm and Aquinas, and more recently Karl Barth and Karl Rahner, and in a similar vein it is one of the principal tasks of a commentator such as the present

referred to in the notes to this essay, is one recent theologian who takes the category of human experience seriously.

⁵¹ It is generally acknowledged that a recognition by Dante of a need to redirect his life lies behind the opening words of his *Divine Comedy* in ll. 1-3 of Canto I of *Inferno*: *Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita / mi ritrovai per una selva oscura / che la diritta via era smarrita*. ('In the middle of the journey of our life, I found myself in a dark wood where the straight path was lost') (my translation). For a similar comment, see Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy, 1: Inferno*, trans. and ed. John D. Sinclair (New York: OUP, 1939), 30.

author to bring such a clarity and order to the work of a poet with theological concerns, in this case Karel van de Woestijne. That he had such concerns is beyond doubt, but what is perhaps more contestable is the question of the theological sources in *God by Sea*. There is little doubt that at the core of this work is a belief in the Christian God. He is mediated to us in this poetry through a complex of imagery drawn from the mystical tradition, primarily in the western Christian Church, and what we now want to consider in the final part of this essay is the question of which mystics or mystical writers VdW is likely to have drawn from in constructing such a complex of imagery.

Mystical influences on Karel van de Woestijne

We must begin by admitting that attempts to define the word mystic and related words such as mystical and mysticism, and, further, to determine which writers could be classed as mystics or mystical, are notoriously difficult. Indeed, one commentator goes so far as to suggest that ‘no mystics (at least before the [20th] century) believed in or practiced “mysticism.”’⁵² Some commentators see a close relationship between mysticism and symbolism and one of these defines mysticism as ‘the tendency to approach the Absolute, morally, by means of symbols.’⁵³ This definition certainly tells us something about what VdW is trying to do in this collection, although the nature of the symbolism in his work is often complex and often paradoxical. Another approach to providing a definition of mysticism comes from Denys Turner,⁵⁴ who limits himself primarily to the history of mysticism in the western Christian tradition, which is appropriate for our current discussion. After arguing that it is unproductive to use a strict set of criteria such as whether or not a writer claims to have had a visionary experience to define who is a mystic and who not, or whose writings are mystical and whose

⁵² Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, vol. i. *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), xvi, and quoted in: Denys Turner, ‘Mysticism,’ in: *OCCT*, *op. cit.*, 460-2, at 460.

⁵³ Edouard Récéjac, quoted in: John Ferguson, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Mysticism and the Mystery Religions* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), 181.

⁵⁴ Turner, *op. cit.*

writings are not, Turner suggests that most of those who might be included in a canon of mystical writers draw ultimately on two biblical sources and further that their work is typically characterized by certain common features. It is worth discussing these here, for we suggest that we shall see both that VdW stands in this tradition and also that many of the writers on whose work he draws in *God by Sea* also stand in this tradition.

The first passage from the bible which for Turner stands behind the mystical tradition in western Christianity is Galatians 2:20, where St. Paul writes ‘It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me’ (NRSV). This passage gives rise to the tradition of the imitation of Christ, the goal of which is for the will and action of the soul and Christ to become one. Bernard of Clairvaux, Bonaventura and Thomas à Kempis are writers who place an emphasis on this aspect of the mystical tradition and we find echoes of their work in VdW’s construction of an imitation of Christ in his later work, including the poems in *God by Sea*.⁵⁵ The second passage which may be seen as a source for mysticism in the western Christian tradition is 1 John 3:2. Here, the author writes ‘Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is’ (NRSV). This points to a final, perfect transforming vision of God. Often, this vision is expressed in terms of an ascent towards the divine, as in Dante’s *Paradise*, but for VdW it is more a case of a journey outwards and inwards towards God. So, what I suggest we see in *God by Sea* is a fusion of the imitation of Christ and a journey towards the divine, though here at least he only gains glimpses of the divine. What we also see is that VdW’s collection is characterized by a complex of imagery and paradox, two features which, according to Turner, are marks of mystical writing.

François van Elmbt has devoted an entire book to the imagery that VdW uses to allude to the divine, and by which, to borrow from an earlier quote, he approaches

⁵⁵ Van Elmbt (1973), *op. cit.*, 237-8.

the Absolute.⁵⁶ The reader will find frequent reference to this imagery later in this introductory essay and in the extensive commentary on the poems in the collection after the texts and translations. One central image that Turner quotes that is worth pointing to here is that of darkness, and associated tropes such as night and shadow. It is in the night that VdW seeks God in several of the poems in the collection. For example, in GZ12, it is at night that he comes to the sea, another allusion to the divine, trying to escape from the worldly pleasures he describes in the preceding poems. The shadow may be seen as a mark of God,⁵⁷ though as I discuss below, the transformed human soul may also be seen as a shadow of God.⁵⁸ Van Elmbt notes that in VdW's complex of imagery, the shadow has something in common with crystal (*kristal*), which itself has something in common with light, being seen as 'petrified light.' This may seem paradoxical for light and dark would seem to be irreconcilable opposites. But such a paradox is common in mystical writings and indeed, as Turner suggests, is in fact a distinctive feature of such writing. Another paradox we find in VdW's work is that for him true life seems only to be available in death, an idea we discuss in more detail at the end of this essay. Again, the reader will find discussions on other paradoxes in the commentary below, but perhaps a central paradox that VdW encounters on his journey towards the divine, which again firmly allies him to other writers in the mystical tradition,⁵⁹ is that although he is a writer, language is ultimately insufficient as a means for approaching the divine. This is expressed most vividly in the present collection in poem GZ29, where, after searching for appropriate similes with which to describe his journey towards

⁵⁶ Van Elmbt (1973), *op. cit.* A translation of the title of van Elmbt's book is 'The image of God and the experience of God in the lyrical poetry of Karel van de Woestijne.'

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 180. One has to be careful here about how one describes the relationship between the shadow and God. For example, van Elmbt talks of the shadow as being an *Emanatio Dei*, but this would seem to take us close to emanationism, which stands in opposition to the orthodox Christian account of creation, *creatio ex nihilo*. Terms such as this may also be suggestive of pantheism and compromise the complete transcendence of God, something which VdW would want to avoid.

⁵⁸ We see this expressed in the writings of one of VdW's most important sources, John of the Cross. See R. A. Herrera, *Silent Music: The Life, Work, and Thought of St. John of the Cross* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2004), 110.

⁵⁹ Cf. Turner, *op. cit.*, 461.

God, he recognizes that such an approach is futile and ends the poem with: for God is silence (*Stilte*) and we are reminded of this by the fact that he starts the very next poem, GZ30, with that word.

One writer who asked whether or not VdW was a mystical poet himself was Mathieu Rutten. He gave an answer which is itself a paradox. He wrote that VdW is

A mystical poet, since parts of his work witness to an essential individual experience of God: [but he is also n]ot a mystical poet, since nothing in this work proves that we can talk of the theological-catholic *unio mystica*.⁶⁰

Perhaps this points to a problem inherent in trying to provide definitions of who is and who is not in the canon of mystics or mystical writers, in that it is often expected that those who are in the canon have had an experience of the divine denied to those we might call lesser mortals. But this raises questions such as what level of experience of the divine one might have had, what it was that was experienced and the extent to which the writings handed down to us give an accurate account of the experiences which they mediate. In the case of VdW, it seems to us that what he is trying to do, rather than claiming to have had an *unio mystica*, is to seek God through the complex of imagery and paradox that we have discussed, and to communicate to the reader that he has experienced glimpses of the divine. He does this by appropriating the language of writers who are often described as mystical writers, and reconfiguring this language through the prism of his own experience, and it is to these writers that we now turn. But in doing so, we must sound a note of caution. According to Hans Vandevoorde, for VdW much (though not all) of this language and imagery is common property

⁶⁰ M. Rutten, 'Is Karel van de Woestijne een Mystiek Dichter?' in: *Miscellanea J. Gessler, red. Rob Roemans and Jan Gessler, 2 delen, deel 2* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1948), 1086-8.

(*gemeengoed*). Vandevoorde also agrees with Dirk van Poucke⁶¹ that an extensive study of the mystical writings that were VdW's sources, such as that conducted by van Elmbt (1973, *op. cit.*), can lead one, incorrectly in his view, to see the development of his imagery as being a religious one rather than a poetic one. So, he determines not to investigate the sources of the mystical imagery in VdW's later work.⁶² While these are important reservations, we do not think they should prevent us from considering the mystical sources of what by the poet's own account constitutes an important aspect of his work, seen most explicitly in the later collections, such as *God by Sea*.⁶³ Clearly, as the reader will see, the ascription of specific images in VdW's poetry to specific authors in the mystical tradition, is not without its problems, and often we have to be content with suggesting that there are parallels between his use of images and that of other mystical writers. But we would argue that not to undertake such a study would deny us the opportunity of identifying potential sources, reduce our understanding of his use of particular images and run the risk of divorcing him from a tradition in which his later work stands. Further, such a study will be of particular use to English-language readers who may be unfamiliar with many of the writings from the rich mystical tradition of the Low Countries in particular, and in some small way draw them into conversations about mystical writings from which they are sometimes excluded.⁶⁴ With this in mind, let us begin by considering a mystical writer, who may well have influenced VdW's later works such as *God by Sea*, but for whom direct evidence of influence on his work is scarce: the great Flemish mystical poet, Hadewijch.

Unfortunately, we know next to nothing about Hadewijch's life apart from the fact that she lived in the Southern Netherlands in the first half of the thirteenth

⁶¹ Dirk van Poucke, *Een onderzoek naar de relatie tussen poëtische en religieuze beeldspraak in het werk van Karel van de Woestijne*, unpublished Master's thesis (Leuven University, 1982), 93-4.

⁶² Vandevoorde, *op. cit.*, 257.

⁶³ Van Elmbt (1984), *op. cit.*, 235.

⁶⁴ To give but one example here, in his survey of mystical writers, Denys Turner (*op. cit.*) does not mention Jan Ruusbroec, whose influence on VdW we discuss below.

century. Beyond this, observations that she may have been a beguine and that she may well have come from a noble background are probably correct, though not beyond refutation.⁶⁵

Several attempts have been made to make connections between Hadewijch and VdW, although the evidence for direct connections is limited. Interestingly, in his major work on the experience of God in VdW's oeuvre, François van Elmbt does not include Hadewijch in his index of personal names.⁶⁶ However, he later wrote an article in which he tried to find substantive evidence of the influence of her writings on VdW. Here, he begins by noting that one of his aims is to try and find specific examples to support the conviction expressed elsewhere by Mathieu Rutten that Hadewijch was one of VdW's sources.⁶⁷ However, van Elmbt seems to recognize that direct evidence is in short supply, although he suggests that VdW's reading of medieval literature during his year at the University of Ghent and during the period when he lived with other artists in Sint-Martens-Latem stayed with him and influenced him in his later works, such as *God by Sea*.⁶⁸

In relation to *God by Sea*, van Elmbt argues that one of the poems, in which we see, as he himself admits, one of the more uncertain cases where Hadewijch may have influenced VdW, is GZ24. I reflect in more detail on van Elmbt's claims in the commentary on this poem below, but here I provide a brief summary.⁶⁹

In her first vision, Hadewijch refers to a tree with decayed roots, leaves on the tree on which are written the words 'nothing can escape me' (*mi en mach en gheen*

⁶⁵ For these assertions, see respectively Fiona Bowie ed. and intro., *Beguine Spirituality: An Anthology* (London: SPCK, 1989), 96-7, and Meijer, *op. cit.*, 17.

⁶⁶ Van Elmbt (1973), *op. cit.*, 304-8.

⁶⁷ Van Elmbt (1984), *op. cit.*, 235-36.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, 246. It is also worth noting here that a recent study (Annette van Dijk, 'Welk een ketter is die vrouw geweest!' *De plaats van Albert Verwey in de Hadewijchreceptie* (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2009)) points to the role of a poet who was slightly older than VdW, Albert Verwey (born 1865), in the reception of her work in the nineteenth century, in drawing on her visions in his own poetry and in introducing her work to students in his role as university professor at Leiden. VdW was certainly familiar with Verwey's work, so it would be interesting to investigate whether Verwey might have played any role in mediating Hadewijch to VdW, although Verwey's translation of Hadewijch into Modern Dutch would have been published too late for VdW to draw on it (van Elmbt, *op. cit.*, 243) if he was indeed influenced by Hadewijch's first vision in producing poem, GZ24.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, 242-44.

dinc ontbliuen) and a cup or chalice full of blood. Van Elmbt argues that the tree in VdW's poem corresponds to the tree in Hadewijch's vision, that God's eye in GZ24, whose attention nothing can escape, equates to the leaves on Hadewijch's tree and that in both works there is reference to a cup/cups. Further, as van Elmbt sees it, the putrid flesh in the cups in VdW's poem (l. 8) finds its equivalent in the blood in the cup that Hadewijch comes across, but it is not just any blood; it is the blood of Christ. So, Hadewijch moves from a tree with decayed roots, which is a symbol of man's fallen nature, to a cup containing the blood of Christ, a clear allusion to the Eucharist, and in doing so alludes to the motive of man in his fallen, sinful state, and then to the salvation of man through the blood of Christ. Such a shift is of course at the heart of the progression at work in *God by Sea* and more generally in the triptych, *Wingbeat on the Horizon*, of which *God by Sea* forms the central panel, and if van Elmbt is right, and, despite his own reservations and differences between the writings discussed in the commentary below, he seems to make a good case, then not only does this support the idea that VdW draws directly from Hadewijch's work in his later work as a mystical poet, but it also points to a powerful, dense poetic re-imagining by VdW of the symbolism of his medieval predecessor.

Van Elmbt also points to one other possible way in which Hadewijch may have influenced VdW, which is worth a brief mention. Taking his lead from Rutten, he considers the extent to which the seventh vision of Hadewijch may have influenced the second *verbeelding* or imagining that VdW recounts in his collection of three imaginings, *Goddelijke verbeeldingen*.⁷⁰ The point that van Elmbt makes is that the physiological reactions that both Hadewijch and VdW experience have something in common as does that fact that the experiences of

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, 244-5. For an edition of this work, see Karel van de Woestijne, *Goddelijke Verbeeldingen 'Bewerkt en van een 'Ten geleide' voorzien door Prof. Dr. P. Minderaa, 4de editie* (Brussels: A. Manteau, 1963). The term *verbeelding* is usually translated as imagination. It can also mean 'representation' or 'image', which leads me, as I note above, to use the slightly antiquated term 'imagining.' It might be going too far to use the term 'vision', for there is no internal evidence that the author would claim that he had visions in the sense that other mystical writers such as Julian of Norwich did, but perhaps as with his later poetry, they represent attempts to engage the imagination in the search for the divine.

both Hadewijch's vision and VdW's imagining take place in time and space. However, as van Elmbt admits, other mystics too had their mystical experience in time and space, so it is possible that VdW took his lead here from somewhere else rather than necessarily from Hadewijch. This raises several points. First, it again reminds us that the evidence for a direct influence on VdW's work by Hadewijch is often tenuous. Secondly, it does raise an interesting point regarding VdW's own mystical experiences, that in *God by Sea* at least they are typically located within time and space, rather than in a realm beyond time and space in which some other mystical writers seem to experience the divine.⁷¹ Thirdly, it points us to an example of VdW's mystical writing in prose and reminds us that his mystical writings are not merely limited to the poems which comprise the triptych, *Wingbeat on the Horizon*.

One final point regarding the possible influence that Hadewijch had on VdW's mystical writings needs to be made, and this concerns the concept of God that each communicates in their writings. Here, what I suggest we shall see is an example of the limits to which one can attempt to draw parallels in their work, something of which Hans Vandevoorde warns us above.

A central motive, if not the central motive of Hadewijch's mystical writings is *Minne*. A standard bilingual Van Dale dictionary tells us that this word means 'love'⁷² but there is much more at stake in Hadewijch's use of the word than love as we may commonly understand it. Reinder Meijer argues that *Minne* as she uses it 'escapes sharp definition.' Sometimes, he goes on, 'it seems to mean love of God, in other cases God himself, or the Holy Ghost, or even the soul.'⁷³ In her definition of *Minne*, Fiona Bowie brings out a more earthly dimension to the term, belying a possible courtly influence on Hadewijch's writing, and points to a tension in it between a love very much grounded in time and space and a love

⁷¹ So, for example, dawn (*dageraad*) is a time of deep significance in VdW's writing. In GZ37, when Death comes, the uninvited guest (ll. 17-20), then night becomes day.

⁷² Van Dale, *Groot Woordenboek Nederlands-Engels*, 3rd impression, eds. W. Martin, G.A.J. Tops et al. (Utrecht: Van Dale, 1999), 826.

⁷³ Meijer, *op. cit.*, 17.

which transcends these limits. She writes ‘For Hadewijch, Love (*Minne*) becomes her spouse, her Lady mistress, her God, her companion, a mistress who leads Hadewijch through bleak moments...as well as giving her periods of rapture and delight.’⁷⁴ Tanis Guest devotes almost a whole chapter to considering the meaning of *Minne* in her study of Hadewijch’s poetry and concludes with possibly the best definition of the term. She writes,

Minne in its basic meaning is Hadewijch’s name for the all-powerful being she adored, probably best understood as God in His aspect of Love; but it is a concept of many and varied nuances, under which may be subsumed her own relationship with that being, and also herself both as love and beloved of it...[Hadewijch] was totally bound up in a total experience of which *Minne*, her Beloved, was an integral part, and not an outside experience.⁷⁵

Reinder Meijer concludes his discussion of *Minne* by saying that the multiplicity of connotations of the term is not a reflection of unclear thinking on the part of Hadewijch, but rather different aspects of the same thing: the relationship between God and man. This is important in regard to our current discussion for I would suggest that the central motive in VdW’s *God by Sea* is the relationship between him and God.⁷⁶ However, where I suggest VdW fundamentally differs from Hadewijch is in his account of God. Although there are clearly parallels in their respective understandings of God, in that, as we discuss above in relation to GZ24, both recognize the salvific work of God, through the blood of Christ, there is a sense in which VdW’s God is a much more wrathful and vengeful God than that which Hadewijch alludes to with the term *Minne*, particularly in the early poems of *God by Sea*.

⁷⁴ Bowie, *op. cit.*, 96.

⁷⁵ Tanis Guest, *Some Aspects of Hadewijch’s Poetic Form in the ‘Strofische Gedichten’* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), 14.

⁷⁶ In this regard, it may be a valuable exercise in the future to create a dialogue between VdW’s collection and a prose work published only a few years before *God by Sea*, which also explores the relationship between the self and the divine: Martin Buber’s, *Ich und Du* (Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1923).

Despite this, it seems reasonable to suggest from the foregoing and also from VdW's interest in the Flemish mystical tradition, that he would have read some of Hadewijch's works. However, when it comes to talking of the divine, rather than drawing on the *Minne*-tradition of writers such as Hadewijch, VdW uses terms such as *ijlte* (void) and *klaarte* (clarity) and in doing so gives us a good indication that another Flemish mystical writer influenced his later mystical writings more directly than Hadewijch may have done: namely Jan Ruusbroec.

Ruusbroec was born in the province of Brabant, most probably in the village near Brussels from which he derives his name, in 1293. He became a priest at the age of twenty-four and spent most of his life in an abbey at Groenendaal, again in the vicinity of Brussels. He wrote a number of mystical works, almost entirely in prose, and died on December 2nd in 1381. In a moment, we shall consider the influences on Ruusbroec's own work, but it is also briefly worth mentioning here some of the authors whom he himself influenced, for to my mind he is someone to whom too little attention is paid in the English-speaking world, both in terms of the quality of his own work, which demands our attention, but also in terms of the influence his work had on others. Perhaps the most notable writer and indeed thinker who came into contact directly with Ruusbroec was the founder and leader of the *Devotio Moderna*, Geert Groote (1340-1384). Groote was sufficiently impressed by Ruusbroec's work to translate some of it into Latin and although the *Devotio Moderna* movement was far more concerned with ethics and practical living than Ruusbroec's works are, there was a clear mystical dimension to the movement, which seems to have been inspired in part at least by Groote's contact with Ruusbroec. To put the significance of this in proper perspective, the religious communities which grew out of this movement, known as the Brethren of the Common Life, produced several leading humanists of note, above all Desiderius Erasmus. Further, a few years after Groote's death, some of his followers founded the Congregation of Windesheim, whose most famous son was

Thomas à Kempis (c. 1379-1471). His *Imitatio Christi*⁷⁷ was and still is an exceptionally popular aid to piety and in relation to the present discussion may well have influenced the work of VdW. Reinder Meijer tells us that Ruusbroec also had a strong influence on the German mystics, Heinrich Seuse (Suso) (c. 1300-1366) and Johannes Tauler (c. 1295/1300-1361),⁷⁸ as well as on mystical movements in France, Italy and Spain, through the translations into Latin of his works by Geert Groote and others.⁷⁹

Turning now to look at possible influences on Ruusbroec, although there were clearly a good number of predecessors and contemporaries to Ruusbroec in northern Europe, particularly along the Rhine, who could be described like him as mystics, they were by no means homogeneous in their approach to mysticism and it is difficult to pick out any one of these as having a particular influence on Ruusbroec's own mystical writings. What may be more fruitful is to consider a stream of thought which influenced Ruusbroec significantly and which evolved much earlier, at around the time of Christ, namely neo-Platonism. Although this began with pagan thinkers such as Plotinus, it was drawn into Christianity above all through the writings of Augustine of Hippo and Dionysius the Areopagite,⁸⁰ with which Ruusbroec would have been familiar.⁸¹ One of the central motives of neo-Platonic thought, including in its Christianized form, is a progression towards God. In one of his works, *Dat rijke der ghelieven* (The Kingdom of the Beloved), Ruusbroec maps out a three-fold way of progression towards God,⁸² and it is here that we see some of echoes of his ideas in the poetry of VdW. The

⁷⁷ Although traditionally attributed to Thomas, John Ferguson (*op. cit.*, 85) notes that the work consisted of pre-existing material edited by him. He suggests some of this material may have been in notebooks of Geert Groote.

⁷⁸ Both Suso and Tauler were also influenced by another German mystic, Meister Eckhart, so the extent to which they were influenced by Ruusbroec and the extent to which Eckhart influenced them would require further investigation.

⁷⁹ Meijer, *op. cit.*, 29-32.

⁸⁰ Early in the sixth century he wrote a treatise, 'On mystical theology,' to which the use of the term mystical to refer to the spiritual as opposed to the purely academic aspect of theology can be traced. See McGrath, *op. cit.*, 146.

⁸¹ W. H. Beuken, *Ruusbroec en de Middeleeuwse Mystiek* (Brussels: Het Spectrum, 1946), 90.

⁸² Geert Warmar, *Ruusbroec: Literatuur en Mystiek in de Veertiende Eeuw* (Amsterdam: Athanaeum, 2003), 58 ff.

first of these ways is the *lijfflijc sinlijc wech* (corporeal sensory way). This way leads one through creation, via the four elements of which it was believed at this time that the world was composed, to the three heavens, the third and highest of which is where God resided. This approach is without doubt informed by the medieval view that creation was full of meaning and one could discern the essence of things from what could be perceived of them. In two consecutive poems in *God by Sea*, GZ38 and GZ39, VdW in turn takes a rose and a glass as symbols of the divine as each has qualities which he associates with God. Above, we mentioned two qualities of the divine associated with the work of Ruusbroec, *klaarte* (clarity) and *ijlte* (void). Both of these are alluded to in his use of the motive of *kristal* (crystal). In GZ39, VdW appropriates these ideas. The crystal finds expression in the glass which is the subject of the poem. The glass is clear (l. 5) and thus it is (or comes as close as possible to being) invisible, yet it is there, which of course points to the divine. For Ruusbroec, the almost ethereal quality of crystal, invisible, yet present, also refers to the notion of the divine as *ijlte*, void. In line five of GZ39, VdW again draws on this, saying that the clarity of the glass ‘carries her freight like an invisible void.’⁸³

The second way in which Ruusbroec approaches God is the *natuerleec wech* (natural way). For Ruusbroec, all creatures are in God and God is in all creatures.⁸⁴ The natural way is the inner journey that is undertaken to find and uncover the divine in each of us. In GZ44, VdW refers to a rough (*onbehouwen*) diamond.⁸⁵ Jewels in general are allusions to the divine in Ruusbroec’s work, but this is a diamond inside the body suggesting God is to be sought out in the natural way and that there is still work to be done on the divine carried internally, for it is a rough diamond.⁸⁶ Finally in this regard, a theologian⁸⁶ on whose work Ruusbroec may have drawn in formulating the notion of an inner journey towards God was

⁸³ Cf. van Elmbt (1973), *op. cit.*, 251-2.

⁸⁴ Beuken, *op. cit.*, 96. Some of Ruusbroec’s contemporaries accused him of pantheism and so this statement is a response to these voices, affirming Ruusbroec’s belief that God and creature, uncreated and created, were two distinct realms rather than one.

⁸⁵ See also van Elmbt (1973), *op. cit.*, 249.

⁸⁶ See below for the influence of Teresa of Ávila here.

the Franciscan writer, Bonaventura (c. 1217-74). He described the journey of the soul towards God in his *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*⁸⁷ and there are clear traces of this work in Ruusbroec's *The Kingdom of the Beloved*.⁸⁸

Evidence of Ruusbroec's third way, the *overnatuerlijc godleec wech* (supernatural divine way), which is the result of the work of the Holy Spirit, is less clear in VdW's collection, although we may see it in the way in which VdW makes frequent references to the sense in which his soul matures, particularly through the motive of ripening fruit.⁸⁹ A couple of other motives in his work which can be traced back to Ruusbroec are also worth a brief mention here.⁹⁰ One is that of the beggar, which dominates both the first and the last poems in this collection, GZ1 and GZ45. It is the eternal state of being a beggar which is the tragedy of man and we find this motive at the end of what is probably Ruusbroec's best-known work, *Die Gheestelike Brulocht* (The Spiritual Wedding).⁹¹ Another motive which VdW draws on from the writer whom one might call his spiritual ancestor is that of the inner being as a desert. The Dutch word for desert is *woestijn*, which in the form *woestijne* is of course part of the poet's surname. In GZ1 and GZ45, he refers to God as the *Veger der woestijnen* (Sweeper of the deserts), and there is a clear play on the word again when he refers to Christ being tempted in the *woestijn* (desert/wilderness) in the second of his *Goddelijke verbeeldingen*.⁹² I should also point out that this gives us a small insight into the fact that far from being a purely melancholic, introspective individual, a picture one might gain of

⁸⁷ We should note that the word *mens* is sometimes translated as 'mind', though the ideas of both 'soul' and 'mind' are present in the classical use of the term. For the translation 'soul' see Turner (*op. cit.*, 461) and for 'mind,' see Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy 3: Paradiso, trans. and ed. Robin Kirkpatrick* (London: Penguin, 2007), 471.

⁸⁸ Warmar, *op. cit.*, 61.

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, 58. See for example GZ6.

⁹⁰ The most extensive list of ways in which VdW may have drawn on Ruusbroec's work is to be found in van Elmbt (1973), *op. cit.*, 307.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, 280, n. 94.

⁹² Van de Woestijne (1963), *op. cit.*, 73 ff. For a recent account of the desert in the Christian tradition, see David Jasper, *The Sacred Desert, Religion, Literature, Art, and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

the poet if one only read his later poetry, his letters and those who knew him attest to a lively man with a wonderful sense of humour.⁹³

A final example from the many we could point to is that of the golden candlestick (*gulden kandelaar*). In GZ24, a poem we have already discussed in this section in relation to Hadewijch's influence on VdW, the poet says that the tree that grows out of him carries cups and is like a golden candlestick. As I note in the commentary on the poem below, there are several possible sources for this reference but one is Ruusbroec, for whom the golden candlestick is a symbol of the humanity of Christ.⁹⁴ Christ is of course the means of salvation for Ruusbroec and indeed for VdW and although it is somewhat difficult to place this allusion to Christ neatly in the schema described above, it is at least another reference to Christ in the poem which arcs quickly from sin to salvation.

The reader will find other references to Ruusbroec's work in the commentary below. Whilst there are good grounds for suggesting that some of these owe their place in VdW's poetry predominantly to Ruusbroec, others may be found in the works of other mystical writers, and definitive ascription to one or the other may not be possible. One motive which recurs regularly in this collection and which may fall in to this latter category is that of the night, particularly in the sense of the metaphysical night. We find it in a number of poems in the collection and it is a motive found in Ruusbroec's work, but it plays a larger role in the work of another mystical writer, the Spaniard John of the Cross (1542-1591). For van Elmbt, John of the Cross is, along with Jan Ruusbroec, one of the two great teachers of VdW of the mystical tradition.⁹⁵ For John, night is the place where the

⁹³ Vandevoorde (2002), *op. cit.*, 215. For a small example of this, in a letter to his publisher, C. A. J. van Dishoeck, he signs off with a little poem, or indeed ditty, saying its time to shut his cake-hole (*snoet*). See Karel van de Woestijne, '*Altijd maar bijeenblijven*', *Brieven aan C. A. J. van Dishoeck, 1903-1929*, eds. Leo Jansen and Jan Robert (The Hague: Letterkundig Museum, 1997), 164. See also *Niks genial vandaag. De briefwisseling tussen Karel van de Woestijne en Emmanuel de Bom*, ed. Bert van Raemdonck (Kapellen: Pelckmans, 2010).

⁹⁴ Beuken, *op. cit.*, 84.

⁹⁵ Van Elmbt (1973), *op. cit.*, 259.

quest for God can be undertaken in earnest.⁹⁶ Likewise, night is often the time when VdW seeks God in the present collection. In GZ2, he talks of praying through the night, in GZ6 ‘the night curves its bow majestically around [him]’ and in GZ12 he comes to the sea at night in search for God, and the reader will find other references to the night throughout the collection. Allied to the notion of night is that of shadow, which we also find in the work of John of the Cross,⁹⁷ though we also find it in the work of other mystical writers, such as Jan Ruusbroec.⁹⁸ In GZ21, VdW writes

Being a shadow in the shadow
And forgetting oneself,
-Was that not the new bite
Of old pain?

For John, if I read him correctly, shadow is both a mark of God and reference to the human soul transformed through union with God,⁹⁹ and I suggest that both of these aspects of shadow are present in GZ21 quoted above. Here, VdW longs to lose himself in the shadow which is God. Van Elmbt writes that the shadow represents protection and also fulfillment and satedness. In relation to the notion of *ijlte* (void) we discussed above, the shadow is a sign that the void, itself a sign that God is receptive and expectant, has been filled: VdW longs here to seek the safety of God’s embrace and in doing so fills the receptive hollow that is God.¹⁰⁰ We also find clarity (*claridad*) in the work of John, but again need to be careful about ascribing references in John’s work directly to those in VdW’s.¹⁰¹ As the reader will know, the life of John of the Cross is closely associated with that of Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582). Like John, she was a mystical writer, and

⁹⁶ Iain Matthew, *The Impact of God: Soundings from St. John of the Cross* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995), 51 ff.

⁹⁷ Van Elmbt (1973), *op. cit.*, 181.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, 180, n. 49

⁹⁹ Herrera, *op. cit.*, 109-110.

¹⁰⁰ Van Elmbt (1973), *op. cit.*, 182.

¹⁰¹ San Juan de la Cruz, *Poesías*, ed. Paola Elia (Madrid: Castalia, 2000), 130.

van Elmbt lists a number of ways in which VdW may have drawn on her work.¹⁰² One which is worth noting here is that of the rough diamond (*onbehouwen diamant*) mentioned above. We observed that Jan Ruusbroec uses jewels to refer to the divine, but the inspiration for the notion of a rough diamond in VdW's work is harder to trace. It may be that he is contrasting it with the clear, cut diamond in Teresa's work which alludes to God.¹⁰³

Suffering features prominently in this collection and there may be a sense in which this allows the poet to empathize with Christ in his Passion. To suffer in order to empathize with Christ is, as the reader will know, part of a long tradition of *Imitatio Christi*. It may be that this aspect of the *Imitatio*, on which VdW draws, was particularly influenced by Teresa's writings.¹⁰⁴ As we have mentioned, this tradition is associated in particular with Thomas à Kempis, and although it is again difficult to draw firm conclusions, it is likely that he was at least familiar with his work, *Imitatio Christi*.¹⁰⁵

The trope of diamond mentioned above is also one we find in Dante's Paradise¹⁰⁶ and, as we have already suggested, parallels between the language of Dante and that of VdW are not difficult to find.¹⁰⁷ One of these is that Dante's *The Divine Comedy* and the trilogy, *Wingbeat on the Horizon*, of which *God by Sea* is the central collection of the three, both concern a journey, or a pilgrimage, towards

¹⁰² Van Elmbt (1973), *op. cit.*, 307.

¹⁰³ Teresa writes, *Digamos ser la Divinidad como un muy claro diamante, muy mayor que todo el mundo*: 'Let us say that the Godhead is like a very clear diamond, much larger than all the world'. Santa Teresa de Jesús, *Obras Completas*, eds. Efrén de la Madre de Dios et al. (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1967), 186.

¹⁰⁴ Van Elmbt (1973), *op. cit.*, 238.

¹⁰⁵ We do not assert that the link is any stronger than this, for despite the usual lack of definitive evidence, it is striking that van Elmbt does not mention Thomas in his 1973 book on the experience of God in VdW's poetry (*op. cit.*), not even when mapping out the *Imitatio Christi* at the heart of his later poetry, including *God by Sea* (239-40). For a recent translation of Thomas à Kempis' *Imitatio Christi*, see *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Stephen MacKenna, intro. Vrej N. Nersessian (London: Watkins, 2006).

¹⁰⁶ See the commentary on GZ44 below and van Elmbt (1973), *op. cit.*, 249.

¹⁰⁷ For a list of references, see van Elmbt (1973), *op. cit.*, 304. The fact that VdW was familiar with Dante, above all *The Divine Comedy*, should not surprise us, and his knowledge of Dante's work finds perhaps its clearest expression in the title of a series of poems which were unpublished at the time of VdW's death, *Ontmoeting met Dante* (*Meeting with Dante*) (Vandevoorde (2006), *op. cit.*, 334-338). See also note 46 above.

the divine, although of course there are other examples in Christian literature of such a journey.¹⁰⁸ We should also note that whereas the title of the third part of the trilogy, *The Mountain Lake*, may suggest an ascent towards the divine, there is less a sense of the upward movement we find in Dante's poem than one of movement outwards in VdW's work.¹⁰⁹ Again, the very fact that VdW conceived of *Wingbeat on the Horizon* as a trilogy, although it was not published as such until after his death, may lead one again to draw parallels with the three-fold structure of Dante's masterpiece. However, another way of considering VdW's trilogy is as a triptych, of which *God by Sea* is the central panel.¹¹⁰ If we do this, then we come to another influence upon VdW's mystical writings, the group of medieval painters in the Low Countries, often, but somewhat misleadingly, referred to as *The Flemish Primitives*.¹¹¹ Amongst VdW's earlier attempts to find his poetic voice is a series of poems entitled *Gothiekbeeldjes* (Little Gothic pictures). One of these poems is entitled *Miniatuurschilder* (Miniature Painter) and the first stanza runs

At the window with the narrow view in the distance
Of houses on which the sunlight comes to shine
And dance: purification of colour and line,
He paints the parchment that before him lies.¹¹²

Although the title refers to miniatures, the narrow views of houses to which VdW refers here can also be seen in larger paintings that he would probably have been

¹⁰⁸ John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* to name but one.

¹⁰⁹ Van Elmbt (1973), *op. cit.*, 268.

¹¹⁰ For a detailed discussion of the tri-partite form in VdW's work, see Leo Jansen's discussion of the subject in: Karel van de Woestijne (1996), *op. cit.*, 170 ff.

¹¹¹ This term was coined in the nineteenth century, and was probably the one, in its Dutch form, *De Vlaamse primitieven*, which VdW and colleagues used to refer to these painters. Although art historians such as Erwin Panofsky prefer the term Early Netherlandish painters (viz. the title of his great work on the medieval artists of the Low Countries: *Early Netherlandish Painting: its Origin and Character*, *op. cit.*), the former term seems to have endured in the popular mind, viz. the title of a recent general account of these artists: Dirk Vos, *The Flemish Primitives*, *op. cit.*

¹¹² Dutch: *Bij 't venster met het enge vergezicht // van huisjes waar het zonlicht op komt schijnen // en dansen: loutering van kleur en lijne, // bemaalt hij 't perkament dat vóór hem ligt.* Karel van de Woestijne (2007), *op. cit.*, 737.

familiar with such as Jan van Eyck's *The Ghent Altarpiece* (The Adoration of the Lamb) and Hans Memling's *The St. John Altarpiece*, both of which have a clear mystical dimension to them.¹¹³ The poet's brother himself, Gustave, was an artist and some of his works point back to those of the Flemish Primitives.¹¹⁴ Perhaps the most explicit reference to VdW's interest in these artists, though, is his commentary in a publication for an art exhibition in Brugge at the turn of the 20th century, *The Flemish Primitives*.¹¹⁵ That said, we again need to be careful about linking particular motives in their work to those we find in VdW's later poetry, but one can at least conclude that his interest in these artists is another indication of his interest in the Flemish mystical tradition and also in the medieval heritage of Flanders, on which he draws both in his use of tropes and his use of language. Moving into the early modern period, one author whose work certainly contains a strain of mysticism who influenced VdW profoundly is Blaise Pascal.¹¹⁶ Human concupiscence is a theme that we find both in Pascal's *Pensées* and VdW's later poetry,¹¹⁷ and the short, sharp aphoristic quality that VdW's collection of one and two line verses *Substrata* shares with Pascal's *Pensées*¹¹⁸ are but two indications of the debt VdW seems to owe to the French thinker. But perhaps the clearest sign that VdW was drawn to and admired Pascal's work was that he had been planning to write a biography on him before his somewhat premature death in 1929.¹¹⁹

Finally, a survey of the influences on VdW's development as a mystical writer would not be complete without reference to a more recent generation of writers, and indeed artists, the Symbolists, whom we touched on earlier in the essay. This

¹¹³ Cf. Van Elmbt (1973), *op. cit.*, 40. See Vos, *op. cit.*, 35ff. and 169ff. respectively for pictures of these works.

¹¹⁴ See for example a painting he produced in 1900 and donated to the Sint-Martinuskerk, Sint-Martens-Latem. This depicts the Virgin Mary giving her rosary to St. Dominic and is clearly influenced by the Flemish Primitives.

¹¹⁵ Herman Teirlinck, *Karel van de Woestijne 1878-1929* (Brussels: A. Manteau, 1956), 22. *De Vlaamsche Primitieven. Hoe ze waren te Brugge* (De Nederlandsche Boekhandel, 1903).

¹¹⁶ Van Elmbt (1973), *op. cit.*, 38.

¹¹⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 191, and John Cruickshank, *Pascal: Pensées* (London: Grant & Cutler, 1983), 56.

¹¹⁸ I thank Peter Theunynck for drawing this parallel to my attention.

¹¹⁹ Vandevoorde (2006), *op. cit.*, 378.

is not to say that the Symbolists themselves were mystical writers, though they clearly owe something to the Swedish mystical writer, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772),¹²⁰ but rather that VdW's appropriation of their language and ideas played an important role in his development as a mystical poet. At the heart of the Symbolist philosophy is a dualism between the natural and supernatural worlds. For such poets, though, what it is that inhabits the supernatural world is not always clear. For Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-95), Anne Marie Musschoot suggests that the supernatural is an empty void, or Nothing,¹²¹ and Jean-Paul Sartre asserts the poet had 'killed God with his own hands.'¹²² Yet to kill God one first has to believe that he exists¹²³ and although he used the term Nothing to point to what inhabits the supernatural world, we should remember that VdW, who certainly did not kill God (although the thought may have crossed his mind as he wrestled with him), also uses the term Nothing (*Niet*) to refer to what lies beyond the given order in some poems of his oeuvre.¹²⁴ Another poet associated with the symbolist movement who used the word God in an early poem was Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926).¹²⁵ However, there is something tongue-in-cheek about the line 'What will you do, God, when I die?' though we find echoes of the language Rilke uses to describe what inhabits the supernatural realm¹²⁶ in later verse in the work of VdW. Rilke writes that this supernatural being is *schwer aus Einfachheit* (heavy with simplicity) and that it is simple, in the sense of

¹²⁰ For an introduction to Symbolism, see: Anna Balakian, 'Symbolism,' in: *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, eds. Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 1256-9. For the debt the movement owes to Swedenborg, see 1256.

¹²¹ Anne Marie Musschoot (1975), *op. cit.*, 24.

¹²² In a foreword to a collection of Mallarmé's poems: Stéphane Mallarmé, *Poésies, Préface de Jean-Paul Sartre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), 7.

¹²³ Georges Cattai makes a similar point when he asks the poet rhetorically whether by the term Nothing (*Néant/Rien*), it was not in fact God himself whom he was looking for and notes that mystics such as Suso also used the term to refer to God (Cattai, *Orphisme et Prophétie chez les poètes français 1850-1950* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1965), 133).

¹²⁴ See van Elmbt (1973), *op. cit.*, 279-82, for a discussion of this concept in the work of VdW.

¹²⁵ Some commentators refer to Rilke and other Yeats who participated in a strong resurgence of symbolism at the start of the twentieth century as postsymbolists. See Balakian, *op. cit.*, 1257 and Vandevoorde (2006), *op. cit.*, 539, n. 628.

¹²⁶ See also Heinrich Imhof, *Rilkes 'Gott': R M Rilkes Gottesbild als Spiegelung des Unbewussten* (Heidelberg: L. Stiehm, 1983).

indivisible, and this finds a parallel in VdW's poem GZ39, where he refers to the divine as *simple koelte* (simple coolness).¹²⁷ Elsewhere, Rilke uses the motive of a tree to refer to the dualism of man and makes reference to the notion of putrid flesh, which alludes to man's fallen nature.¹²⁸ However, as elsewhere we need to be careful in ascribing a direct influence of Rilke on VdW in these cases, for as we have seen, the tree motive was also used by Hadewijch. It is of course possible that VdW could have been influenced by more than one source in his decision to use this motive and this may also be the case for motives that VdW's work has in common with the final symbolist poet whose work we shall consider here, Charles Baudelaire (1821-67).¹²⁹ One of these motives is that of putrid flesh. We meet it in VdW's poem GZ24, which we discussed above in relation to the possible influence of Hadewijch on the poem, and as well as seeing it in Rilke's work, we also find it in, for example, Baudelaire's poem *Une Charogne* (A Rotting Corpse), from the collection *Les Fleurs du Mal*.¹³⁰

It was Baudelaire, in fact, whose appropriation and modification of the terminology and ideas of Emanuel Swedenborg provided much of the impetus for the development of the symbolist movement.¹³¹ In particular he appropriated the dualism of the material world and the supernatural inherent in Swedenborg's thought and as we note above, this came to be a central motive in the work of symbolist poets and artists, including that of Baudelaire himself.¹³² We certainly see a dualism of this nature at work in VdW's later poetry, which echoes that of Baudelaire. Apart from the motive of putrid flesh, we also see those of flowers, beauty, night, dawn and death, amongst others, in the work of both poets. We should as ever be careful to avoid trying to map Baudelaire onto VdW, for the

¹²⁷ Van Elmbt (1973), *op. cit.*, 279.

¹²⁸ *ibid.*, 241.

¹²⁹ Hans Vandevoorde notes that Baudelaire came to VdW's attention as early as December, 1894 (Vandevoorde (2006), *op. cit.*, 183).

¹³⁰ Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, ed. John E. Jackson (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1999), 77 ff.

¹³¹ Balakian, *op. cit.*, 1256.

¹³² Vandevoorde (2002), *op. cit.*, 216. A theologian who draws attention to this is David Brown, in: *God and Enchantment of Place* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), 133.

latter's individual poetic voice is too strong for this, but if we take as an example the motive of death, then we see that for both poets, far from being the end of existence, it can bring release or deliverance from what one experiences here and now.¹³³ In one poem, Baudelaire says 'It is Death that consoles...and it is the only hope'¹³⁴ and we meet death in several poems in the collection *God by Sea*. In GZ36, line seven, VdW says he goes no way other than the way of the dead, in GZ40, he writes in line six that he knows the use of flowering and of dying and in GZ43, he seems to anticipate the release that death will bring him when he concludes that he hears the drum-beat of Death, which 'calls us on the march to freedom.' For both poets, a spiritual realm lies beyond the material, given realm. Sometimes Baudelaire refers to the spiritual force that inhabits this realm as God. It is not clear beyond doubt from his writings whether this is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who, for Christians, became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ,¹³⁵ or some more indeterminate spiritual force, but if it is the former, then Baudelaire

¹³³ Baudelaire, *op. cit.*, 182.

¹³⁴ French: *C'est la Mort qui console, ... et c'est le seul espoir* from *La Mort des Pauvres* in: *ibid.*, 183.

¹³⁵ In one of his earlier poems, *Le Reniement de saint Pierre* from the collection *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Baudelaire reproves Christ for failing to fulfil his promise, then, somewhat like Peter, denies Christ, concluding *Saint Pierre a renié Jésus ... il a bien fait!* For Barbara Wright, Baudelaire feels that humanity has been duped by Christ and she suggests that he sees Christ more as a man, rather than the Son of God. (B. Wright, 'Baudelaire's poetic journey in *Les Fleurs du Mal*' in: *The Cambridge Companion to Baudelaire*, ed. Rosemary Lloyd (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), 31-50, at 47). Two other commentators, E. H. and A. M. Blackmore, discuss another poem from *Les Fleurs du Mal* and suggest it tells us that for Baudelaire, God is made in man's image. In *Le Voyage*, the poet writes (ll. 101-104), 'Drunk on her genius, Humanity, // Mad now as she has always been, or worse, // Cries to her God in raging agony: // "Master, my image (*mon semblable*), damn you with this curse!" (Translation by James McGowan in: E. H. and A. M. Blackmore eds. and intro., *Six French Poets of the Nineteenth-Century* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), xxiv and 193). In fact, *semblable* also carries the sense of someone or something of the same kind, which seems to support the idea that for Baudelaire, God is of the same order as man. However, other evidence seems to point in another direction. In an essay on Wagner, Baudelaire wrote that 'God ordained the universe as a complex and indivisible whole' (quoted in: E. H. and A. M. Blackmore eds. and intro., xxii). Now it may be that he is merely using a figure of speech and merely referring to the fact that at some point the world was brought into being by some force, but this is not the end of the matter. For elsewhere, Georges Cattai notes that Baudelaire had sympathy for the Catholic Church and reminds us of the influence of Swedenborg on Baudelaire, who, although he clearly has what one might call an un-orthodox understanding of the Christian God, particularly in relation to the Trinity, does at least draw from that tradition to a large degree (Cattai, *op. cit.*, 86). So, although there is no sense in which we would wish to argue that Baudelaire worshipped the Christian God, it seems that it is this God with whom he struggles and to whom, despite his protests and his poetic denials, he was not entirely indifferent.

does not seem to consider that he is worthy of being worshipped. And here VdW departs from Baudelaire, for despite all his struggles and doubts, which one may liken to Jacob wrestling with the angel, it is the Christian God in whom VdW believes and whom he seeks in *God by Sea*. That said, the correspondences between the poetry of the two writers are striking and it is clear that VdW has incorporated elements of Baudelaire's work in creating the structures and language with which he undergoes his journey towards the divine.¹³⁶

Conclusion

This then brings us to the end of our preliminary discussions on VdW's collection *God by Sea*, in which, unlike several other authors, we have focused very much on questions of theology rather than ones of literary criticism. We develop many of the points raised in more detail in the commentary to the poems which follows the facing Dutch-English text and translation below. It must be admitted that the meaning of some of the lines in the collection is either opaque or multivalent, and so certain questions remain unresolved in the commentary. However, there is much where the meaning is reasonably clear, or where the meaning reveals itself to the reader over time. Poetry such as this allows the reader to reflect and to return to it time and again when new meaning may emerge. For those with faith, this poetry will, I suggest, take them on a journey into the mystery of God. For those with no faith, it will, I hope, still provide a valuable introduction to the work of a poet, whose work, for the very reasons I listed at the start of this essay, remains too little known outside those areas where Dutch is spoken.

Christopher Joby
Autumn, 2009.

¹³⁶ See also Anne Marie Musschoot, 'Karel van de Woestijne, een baudelairiaans dichter', in: *Jullie gaven mij Modder, Ik heb er Goud van Gemaakt: over Charles Baudelaire*, ed. Maarten van Buuren (Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij, 1995), 111-130.

NOTE ON DUTCH TEXT AND TRANSLATION

The Dutch text that I have used for *God by Sea* (*God aan zee*) in this edition is that given in volume one of Leo Jansen's two-volume critical edition of the poetic triptych *Wingbeat on the Horizon* (*Wiekslag om de kim*). This text does contain a number of variant readings from the first edition of the collection, published in 1926, but where this is the case, for reasons such as typesetting errors for the first edition, this has been indicated by Jansen in his commentary and apparatus on the trilogy, which comprises volume two of his critical edition.

This text is now accepted by van de Woestijne scholars as the definitive text for this collection and was reproduced in the 2007 edition of the collected poetry of van de Woestijne.¹³⁷

The translation of the text itself has proven to be a rewarding but challenging undertaking. Two particular challenges have presented themselves during this project. The first is that van de Woestijne uses a good number of words which are not commonly used in modern Dutch, but which belong rather to Middle Dutch, and here the poet is no doubt harking back to the age of his beloved Flemish Primitives when there was a phenomenal cultural flourishing in Flanders and the surrounding areas. Also in this regard, we should note that he was not averse to using archaic grammatical constructions, which again provide a further challenge to the translator.

Secondly, there is something of the hermetic in the style of van de Woestijne's later poetry and this is certainly the case with some of the poems in the present collection. This means that even native speakers would find it hard to unpick the meaning of certain passages in the Dutch.

Thankfully, I have been able to draw on the scholarship and kindness of the leading van de Woestijne scholar, Professor Anne Marie Musschoot, who has helped me to unravel some of these more challenging and even opaque passages, and I have no doubt that I would not have been able to complete this project

¹³⁷ See bibliography for full details of these editions.

satisfactorily without her help and support. Any errors in translation are my responsibility.

What we now have though is for the first time an edition which contains translations of an entire collection of van de Woestijne's work in English. Upto now, individual poems from the collection have been translated and published either in editions, which draw from his entire oeuvre, or in editions drawing from modern Belgian or Low Countries poetry more generally. This year, 2009, marks the eightieth anniversary of van de Woestijne's death. Let us hope that it is not another eighty years before another one of his collections is translated into English.