



**“CHRIST CONSUMES THE MARROW OUT OF OUR BONES”
– CORPOREALITY IN THE MYSTICAL DOCTRINE OF JOHN
OF RUUSBROEC (*1293 – †1381)**

*“Cristo consome a medula dos nossos ossos” – a corporeidade na doutrina mística de João de Ruusbroec (*1293 - †1381)*

Indeed, we continue to live after our bodily death, but it is only through the body that we will acquire the merits to reach the blessed life. St. Paul understood this, saying, “The invisible things of God are understood through things made.” [Rm 1,20] All the things He created, which have a body and are therefore visible, we can only understand them through the senses of our body. For that reason, we need a body. Without a body we could not acquire this understanding, which only elevates us to the contemplation of the truths, essential to our bliss.¹

Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones super Cantica Canticorum*, Sermo V

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ABSTRACT: In this article we pretend to explore the theme of corporeality in the mystical doctrine of the medieval author John of Ruusbroec. After explaining the radically different understanding of a body in medieval thinking we present a theoretical framework based on Patricia Dailey’s analysis of the inner and the outer body. After this, we make a first analysis of Ruusbroec’s approach to the body in his mystical experience. In Ruusbroec’s work the integration of the inner

¹ “Verum nos vivimus quidem post corpus; sed ad ea quibus beate vivitur, nullus nobis accessus patet, nisi per corpus. Senserat hoc qui dicebat: Invisibilia Dei, per ea quae facta sunt, intellecta conspiciuntur (Rom. I, 20). Ipsa siquidem quae facta sunt, id est corporalia et visibilia ista, non nisi per corporis instrumentum sensa, in nostram notitiam veniunt. Habet ergo necessarium corpus spiritualis creatura quae nos sumus, sine quo nimirum nequaquam illam scientiam assequitur, quam solam accepit gradum ad ea, de quorum fit cognitione beata.” (*Sermones super Cantica Canticorum*, Sermo V. De quatuor generibus spirituum, videlicet Dei, angeli, hominis et pecoris. *Sancti Bernardi Opera* 1,21-22) *apud* DAILEY, 2013, p. 59 and note 95.

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and outer body is more evident than in the previous tradition, that is, especially in the female spirituality of the 13th century. Corporeality is a theme with limited occurrence in Ruusbroec's mystical doctrine, and it is mainly linked to Eucharistic devotion, but not exclusively.

KEYWORDS: John of Ruusbroec. Corporeality. Medieval mysticism.

RESUMO: Neste artigo pretendemos explorar o tema da corporeidade na doutrina mística do escritor medieval João de Ruusbroec. Após explicar a compreensão radicalmente diferente de um corpo no pensamento medieval, apresentamos um quadro teórico baseado na análise de Patricia Dailey sobre o corpo interior e o corpo exterior. Depois disso, fazemos uma primeira análise da abordagem de Ruusbroec sobre o corpo na experiência mística. No trabalho de Ruusbroec, a integração do corpo interno e externo é mais evidente do que na tradição anterior, ou seja, especialmente na espiritualidade feminina do século XIII. A corporeidade é um tema com ocorrência limitada na doutrina mística de Ruusbroec e está principalmente ligada à devoção eucarística, mas não exclusivamente.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: João de Ruusbroec. Corporeidade. Mística medieval.

Introduction

The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there
L.P. Hartley (1895-1972), *The Go-Between*, Prologue

This statement of the English writer Harley has an important consequence: as soon as we enter this foreign country, *we* are the foreigners. It is always good to keep this in mind when dealing with the past.

First of all, we can say that the Middle Ages never happened. That era is, in fact, a construction that began in the Italian Renaissance. The first one ever to speak of a 'middle age' was Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444), in his treatise on the history of Florentine citizenship. The American historian and great expert on the Italian Renaissance, James Hankins of Harvard University, comments thus:

We can thus see in Bruni's *History*, for the first time in Western tradition, the outlines of a conceptual framework that has dominated European historiography ever since: the tripartite division of history into an *ancient* period; (...) a *medieval* period; (...) and a *modern* period (...) (BRUNI 2001, p. XVII-XVIII)

According to Bruni, the Middle Ages began with the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 and lasted until the end of the 12th century. Today, the end of the Middle Ages is traditionally positioned around the year 1500 and the beginning in the 5th century. For a long time, not to say until now, the Middle Ages were considered a time of stupidity, ignorance, darkness and obscurantism. A very recent example of contempt for the Middle

Ages 'proves' this. A journalist, speaking about the behavior of the current President of the Federal Republic of Brazil, expressed his indignation in the following way: "His crusade against scientific knowledge based on galloping ignorance spread by people like Olavo de Carvalho only finds precedent in the reigning *obscurantism of the Middle Ages*."³ It is a cliché without sense, as there were times in the Middle Ages when there was much less obscurantism than nowadays in many places.

Instead of having fixations with temporal limits, it would be better to regard the history of Europe as an endless series of changes and transitions, only slowly transforming itself from the Roman Empire to modern society as we know it today, and which definitely began with the era of industrialization, the beginning of which took place in England around 1750. "The new is the old transformed," as the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (1872-1945) stated at the beginning of the 20th century. In his last book, from 2014, the famous French historian Jacques Le Goff once again insisted on the importance of the continuities between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. In this article, to avoid confusion, we will respect the limits that most historians use for the Middle Ages, that is, from the 5th to the 15th centuries, a period of about a millennium.

Secondly: 'the' body did not exist in the Middle Ages either. We can, if anything, only speak of bodies, in plural, without definite or indefinite articles. The medieval people did not have a very specific concept of the body, and neither do we, by the way (BYNUM, 1995, p. 7). We should consider that a physician of the 13th century speaks completely differently about a body than a theologian of the same period, and not even think about comparing this physician with a theologian of the 8th century.

At this point, it must also be stressed that in Western Europe there were, in addition to Christianity, two other monotheistic religions, Islam and Judaism, an important fact that we cannot ignore.

On April 29, 711, the commander of the Islamic army, Tarik Ibn Zaji, entered Spanish territory. Only in 732 the Islamic troops were beaten, near Poitiers in France, which is about three hundred kilometers from Paris. After that battle, the Islamic reign only remained in the Iberian Peninsula, until 1492 when the Kingdom of Granada fell. The Islamic culture, in its beginnings undoubtedly superior and more refined than the Christian culture, had a profound influence on European culture in many areas, such as theology, philosophy, medicine, architecture and mathematics. This kind of cultural interference also occurred in the Jerusalem Kingship, which existed from

³ "A sua cruzada contra o conhecimento científico fundada na ignorância galopante disseminada por gente como Olavo de Carvalho só encontra precedentes no *obscurantismo reinante da idade média*." (*Diário do centro do mundo*, 22-7-2019; italics are ours).

1099 to 1291, and covered at its peak today's Israel, Palestine, and the southern part of Lebanon.

Judaism, to speak of the third monotheistic religion, was already present in Western Europe from the 6th century B.C. onwards, and even more so after the destruction by the Romans of the Temple in Jerusalem in 1970 and the war between Jews and Romans in the years 66-135.⁴

Fortunately for our subject, during the Middle Ages, the three monotheistic religions, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, agreed on what defines the physical body, independent of time and geographical location. This understanding of the physical body, which incorporates elements of philosophy as well as medicine, will be very important to our subject, that is: to correctly understand the position of the physical body in the mystical experience.

Nowadays, for most people in the West the physical body is thought of as a closed system. For us modern people, the skin represents the clear limit of our body, the limit between what is inside and what is outside the body. In the Middle Ages, as in Greek and Roman times, no one thought that way.

1 The body in the Middle Ages: some general characteristics⁵

In the medieval (and ancient) view the human form was considered as a set of organs and systems much more open and porous than we are accustomed to think in our days. From the natural philosophy of the ancient Greeks and Romans, the Middle Ages adopted the concept that nature, the planets, so to say the entire universe consists of four elements: fire, earth, water and air. Each element is aligned with two further fundamentals: moisture and heat. The four elements with their degrees are the following:

- fire: dry and hot;
- earth: humid and hot;
- water: humid and cold;
- air: dry and hot

The inversion of the elements mentioned is represented by the four fluids or 'moods' in the human body, i.e. blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile. In medieval understanding, the four fluids should be in a perfect balance,

⁴ About Islam, Judaism and Christianity see NIRENBERG, 2014 e STEINBERG, 2007.

⁵ What follows in this paragraph is mostly based on HARTNELL, 2019, p. 12-16.

otherwise the body would become seriously ill until death. This ancient and medieval concept of the balance of moods can still be found found in our modern language, for example when we say: “I am ill-humored” or “I feel unbalanced”.

But the medieval concept of fluids and elements did not stop here, it had a literally universal proportion. Each season of the year was connected to an element, for example summer to fire. The season could negatively influence human fluids. Equally important was the classification of human life in four periods: childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age, which individually brought changes in the constitution of fluids, until the arrival of the cold of old age and death. And the reasoning still does not stop: the planets, the stars and the zodiac also influenced the fluids.

There exists a famous manuscript of the beginning of the 12th century, known as the Thorney Computus, which contains a detailed diagram showing “the macroscopic medieval conception of the world as fundamentally intertwined, outlining the correspondences of the four elements (*Terra, Aqua, Aer, Ignis*) with the months, the zodiac the winds, the lunar cycles and the ages of man”.⁶ We will explain some important features of this miniature:

In the centre there is a completely abstracted image, in which human being is only being indicated by the letters ADAM, being the first letters of the Greek names for the four cardinal directions. In the external circle of the diagram we can observe the four elements, called in Latin: *terra, ignis, aer* and *aqua*. We also see in the same circle the twelve signs of the zodiac, which were divided, again, into four. The four seasons are mentioned, for example: *Estas calida et sicca*, which means: “hot and dry summer”. In the outer lozenge we can still observe the four elements, e.g. *ignis calidus et siccus*, “the hot and dry fire”. In the inner lozenge the cardinal points are mentioned. In the purest sense of the word, this image is totally anthropocentric. This means lately, that in order to understand the human body it is necessary to observe and interpret the cosmos that is around it. It is a holistic vision of man in which everything is interconnected. The physical body of man is understood as a mini-cosmos, which is part of and at the same time reflects the entire cosmos.

Armed with this knowledge of the body in the Middle Ages we can understand much better that the integration of the body into the mystical experience represented evidence for medieval authors and mystical authors. Quite simply: without a body, there is no mystical experience possible.

⁶ HARTNELL, 2019, p. 14. The manuscript is Oxford, St. John’s College, MS 17, and the diagram is on folio 7v; this picture can also be easily accessed through the following link: <http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/ms-17/folio.php?p=7v> ,which shows a high definition facsimile (accessed on 21/08/2020).

2 Life and works of John of Ruusbroec

In the history of the spiritual adventures of man, we find at intervals certain great mystics, who appear to gather up and fuse together in the crucible of the heart the diverse tendencies of those who have preceded them, and, adding to these elements the tincture of their own rich experience, given to us an intensely personal, yet universal, vision of God and man. These are constructive spirits, whose creations in the spiritual sphere sum up and represent the best achievement of a whole epoch; as in other spheres the great artist, musician, or poet – always the child of tradition as well as of inspiration – may do. John Ruysbroeck is such a mystic as this. (UNDERHILL, 1915, p. 1-2)

Despite his worldwide reputation, John of Ruusbroec is so far little known in Brazil. Perhaps this will change soon, because as part of my post-doctoral project for the PNPd of CAPES PNPd, two treatises by this author will be translated from Middle Dutch into modern Portuguese.⁷

We will begin, first, with a brief introduction to the life and works of Ruusbroec.⁸ Then we will explain the theoretical framework and next analyze some of Ruusbroec's texts in order to position corporeality in his mystical doctrine.

Blessed John of Ruusbroec was born in Ruisbroeck, near Brussels, in 1293. At the age of eleven he moved to Brussels, where he lived for almost four decades. At about 24 years of age, he was ordained a priest and, among others, was linked as a 'vicarius' to the Brussels high school church of St. Gudula. In 1343, he moved to the neighbouring forests of Groenendaal, literally meaning 'Green Valley', ten kilometers outside the medieval center of Brussels, together with two like-minded canons in order to live as hermits and lead a deeper spiritual life. After criticism of their 'unattached' way, that is, living together as secular priests, they finally adopted the rule of St. Augustine's canons in 1350 and founded the monastery of Groenendaal. On December 2, 1381, Ruusbroec, the prior of this monastery, died at the age of eighty-eight.

Ruusbroec proved to be a mystical author in a limited circle, already during the time he still lived in Brussels, but his wider reputation, also on the international level, developed from 1350 onwards, when he was ordained the first prior of the monastery of Groenendaal. Ruusbroec wrote eleven works in total, very unequal in volume, and some letters:

1. *The realm of lovers*
2. *The spiritual espousals*
3. *The sparkling stone*

⁷ The book appears in the second semester of 2021 at Edições Loyola, São Paulo.

⁸ About the life of Ruusbroec see KORS, 2016 (complete edition of all the primary texts in Latin and Middle Dutch) and WARNAR, 2007.

4. *The four temptations*
5. *The christian faith*
6. *The spiritual Tabernacle*
7. *The seven enclosures*
8. *A mirror of eternal blessedness*
9. *Seven rungs in the ladder of spiritual love*
10. *Little book of explanation*
11. *The twelve beguines*

In his treatises, Ruusbroec only used the vernacular dialect of his home city, Brussels. Of his works, today the treatise *The spiritual espousals* is the best known and considered the most important as well. To get an idea of the size of his work: the most recent edition has almost 800 pages (see COMPLETE RUUSBROEC, 2014).

Ruusbroec's mystical doctrine, rather complicated, refuses a simple classification, but it is possible to point out at least some main characteristics. In Ruusbroec's case, it is a dynamic theology of the Trinity, as we find it in the following text. Keywords are in bold:

Nevertheless, every lover is one with God and at | **rest**, and Godlike in the **activity** of **love**; for God, in His sublime **nature**, of |1720 which we bear a **likeness**, dwells with enjoyment in eternal rest, with respect to | the **essential oneness**, and with working, in eternal **activity**, with respect to **threeness**; and each is the perfection of the other, for **rest** resides in **oneness**, and **activity** in **threeness**. And thus, both remain for eternity. And therefore, if a person is to **relish** God, he must **love**; and if he is willing to **love**, then he can **taste**. (*The spiritual espousals* b1718-1725; *apud* MCGINN, 2014, p. 130)⁹

The famous researcher on Christian mysticism, Bernard McGinn, has already commented on this text in 2014, and we will lend here some of his analysis:¹⁰

In this passage, there is much terminology that is essential in Ruusbroec's mystical language: love, to relish, rest, activity, nature, likeness, to taste, unity, essential oneness, threeness. The final unity that Ruusbroec shows to his readers is essentially trinitarian: "for rest resides in oneness, and activity in threeness" precisely because "each is the perfection of the other". According to Ruusbroec, it is the power of love that allows us to enter into the interaction of the three Persons who are one God.

Ruusbroec's trinitarian mysticism owes much to Christian neoplatonism, especially to the paradigm "inner rest – outer flow – inner reflux". Spe-

⁹ All English translations are from COMPLETE RUUSBROEC, which are revised versions of the texts as published in OPERA OMNIA. We are always referring to the *line numbers*!

¹⁰ MCGINN, 2014, p. 130, and following.

aking of the Trinity, this means that, according to Ruusbroec, this Trinity can be characterized as a constant and simultaneous dynamism: between the enjoyment of unfathomable love, the outer flow and the inner reflux, and the return to the unfathomable abys, which is the essence of God. This dynamic model, full of dialectics, is an invention of Ruusbroec. The objective of mystical life, if we can speak of an objective, is then to obtain ever more participation in this trinitarian dynamic, which we normally, if at all, experience in a distinct and successive manner. Essence, activity and rest are the three dialectic key moments in Ruusbroec's trinitarian theology. However, Ruusbroec's mystical theology is primarily a 'theology of love' in its dynamism, and not an abstract and metaphysical examination of the nature of God's essence.

3 *Ruusbroec as an 'inspired' author*

Around 1365, the confrères of Ruusbroec made a large-format manuscript consisting of one volume, bringing together the complete works as they were known up to that date. Around 1400, well after Ruusbroec's death, they split up this codex and added the last, voluminous text written by Ruusbroec, *The twelve beguines*. One of the two volumes of this manuscript still exists and is preserved in the Royal Library in Brussels.¹¹ This volume contains a famous miniature of Ruusbroec which was made around the year 1400, shortly after his death.¹² If it is a faithful portrait, we do not know and it also matters little because what this painting tells us about Ruusbroec as an author is much more relevant. In the foreground on the left we see Ruusbroec sitting under a tree, in the habit of an Augustinian canon regular and with a wax tablet in his left hand on which he is writing with a stylus. A dove floats above his head. At his feet lies a closed, completed manuscript and a small square masonry from which water gushes. On the right, in a much smaller format than Ruusbroec, we see a monk at a lectern writing on a sheet of parchment. The background consists of terracotta-coloured wall, on which a double line and a dotted line have been used to create a pattern of lozenges. A four-leafed flower is drawn in each lozenge.

Since the times of the Egyptians, Romans and Greeks, wax tablets have been used for writing and noting. The wax tablet in Ruusbroec's hands,

¹¹ About this manuscript see KIENHORST; KORS, 2003. The manuscript is Brussels, Royal Library, ms. 19.295-97; the miniature can be accessed through <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ruusbroec_miniatuur.jpg> (it only shows part of the miniature concerned but contains all the features analyzed here; accessed on 21/08/2020).

¹² We would like to thank Prof. Dominique Van Wijnsberghe (Koninklijk Instituut voor het Kunstpatrimonium, Brussel) for the dating of this miniature.

which he uses to write down the words inspired by the Holy Spirit, we see it back to the right, where someone stands in front of a desk, using the wax tablet with notes to compose the definitive text on a parchment. The final product, the manuscript, is in the middle, on the floor; it may even symbolize the manuscript containing the miniature we are now studying. This miniature reveals an important aspect about Ruusbroec as an author: his writings were, according to this miniature, primarily directly inspired by the Holy Spirit. Only then a text is composed that corresponds to the demands of rhetoric. This means that, for the medieval reader, Ruusbroec speaks first as a man inspired by God and only then as a writer. Everything that Ruusbroec says as an inspired author about the body in his mystical experience was thus considered normal and orthodox, and this is essential when we analyze the corporeality in Ruusbroec's speech.¹³

4 Corporeality in Ruusbroec's works: a theoretical framework

We observed in the introduction, in paragraph 1, how, in the Middle Ages, the physical body was interconnected with its environment and the entire cosmos. The body was not considered as a closed system, but as a more or less permeable whole. So the human body was also more involved in the medieval mystical experience than we would usually expect. One has to add, perhaps contrary to the thought or intuition of many, that during the Middle Ages there was generally no dualism between the soul and the physical body, nor was there a devaluation of the latter. This is more typical of platonism and neoplatonism than of medieval thought in general. When we next analyze the body in Ruusbroec's writings, it will become clear that we do this analysis within the boundaries of Christian theology and philosophy, but always with our perspective as a philologist and historian. Let us now look in more detail at the theoretical framework:

Until the 1980s, there was little interest in the theme of corporeality in the Middle Ages, let alone the body in medieval spiritual literature. This changed a lot thanks to feminist studies and so-called 'gender studies'. As expected, the focus was on female authors, and almost never male, so that, until now, corporeality in Ruusbroec's work was never before the subject of systematic research.

We would like to mention a book that is very important for the understanding of theme of corporeality in the Middle Ages in general, and more specifically for our theoretical framework. In *Promised bodies*, Patricia Dailey

¹³ We are preparing an article about this Ruusbroec miniature within a broader, European context.

(DAILEY, 2013) develops in the first 90 pages a theoretical framework to analyze the medieval body in mystical literature. She then illustrates her theory with an analysis of several works by Hadewijch, a Belgian mystic author who was active around the year 1240. Dailey's book is by far the most important contribution to understanding the corporeality in Hadewijch's works. Hadewijch, influenced Ruusbroec deeply and for this reason we will also adopt the general lines of Dailey's theoretical framework.¹⁴

In fact, argues Dailey, in Christianity, the term body means in fact two bodies: the external body and the internal body. This external body is more or less the same as this physical body as understood in medieval culture and, which we have just analysed. In human life, the two bodies are interconnected in a reciprocal dynamic. Dailey comments on the role of the external body like this:

The body is therefore not conceptualized as a fixed entity, but as a potentially transformative vehicle; not as a biologically discrete organism, but as a dynamic mirror that can reflect the work of the divine within and substantially alter its own materiality if receptive to divine grace.

(DAILEY, 2013, p. 2).

The understanding of this 'duplicity' of the body has a long history, which began with Paul, who wrote in the Second Letter to the Corinthians about the *homo exterior* and *interior* (that is, the *exo anthropos* and the *eso anthropos*, in the original formulation; 2 Cor 4:16). In this life, the two bodies, the outer and the inner, will never be completely united, this will only happen after death, in a future moment, when the whole body will be renewed in a glorified body. The vision of God and the union with Him will take place only in the remote future; in Paul's famous words, in the First Letter to the Corinthians: For now, we see through a glass, darkly; now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known [1 Cor 13,12]. It cannot surprise us that these words of Paul were often quoted in mystical literature. Union with God begins here on earth in part, as mystics describe it, but it is a process that has no end, and only reaches its final goal after death; that is, in the complete understanding of God.

The concept of exterior and interior man also means that the body of the mystic or the mystic is material and spiritual, interior and exterior at the same time (DAILEY, 2013, p. 10). In our understanding, this means that, consequently, when a mystic speaks of his body, he can refer to the inner body together with the outer. Thus the clear distinctions between the two bodies, inner and outer, become more and more 'obscure'.

In the Apostle Paul's thinking, there is an intimate connection between text and body, as he writes in the Second Letter to the Corinthians:

¹⁴ Besides this book, there are two more studies of great interest: BYNUM 2017; BYNUM 1987, which became classics in the field of medieval studies.

Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men. Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stones, but in the fleshy tables of the heart. [2 Cor 3,2-3]

In this regard, Dailey comments in her book *Promised bodies*, as follows: "This written letter is destined to become a writing that manifests itself through the life and works of the outer body and is read like a text." (DAILEY, 2013, p. 10). This is the process of 'embodiment', which is closely related to the interpretation and mediating properties of language. This process is behind Ruusbroec's work, as well as that of Hadewijch and many other mystical authors. For this reason, mystical texts cannot be simply read in terms of purely bodily external events, but always in relationship with the 'inner man'.

Origen and Augustine were the theologians who developed most profoundly the Apostle's concept of the exterior and interior man. The greatest and most influential contribution was that of Augustine. Essential in his theology is that he was able to build a bridge between the body and the promised vision of God (DAILEY, p. 33). Only love is capable of overcoming the gap between God and man (idem, p. 33), and love is the decisive factor for Trinitarian salvation in St. Augustine's theology (idem, p. 56). He emphasizes the dynamism between the interior and exterior man, and the exterior and interior (idem, p. 59; Dailey deepens in great detail the concepts of Augustine, p. 27-61). Hadewijch and Ruusbroec were both influenced by Augustine's thought on this aspect of corporeality.

Ruusbroec adopted and developed two crucial concepts of Belgian women's spirituality of the 13th century: devotion to the humanity of Christ and Eucharistic devotion, which we find for example in the work of Hadewijch (BYNUM, 1987, p. 105). We must not forget that devotion to the *Corpus Christi* arose in the first half of the XIIIth century in Belgium, more specifically in the diocese of Liège, in the first place thanks to the initiative of Julienne de Mont-Cornillon (1193-1258), who developed a particular devotion to the Sacrament, as soon as she received visions on this subject, at the age of 13. The Day of Corpus Christi was recognized as such by the Bishop of Liege in 1246, and then in 1258 by Pope Urban IV. It seems that Julienne wrote the office for this feast, which was later revised by no one less than Thomas Aquinas. An important detail: like Ruusbroec, she was a member of the Order of St. Augustine.¹⁵

What would be the best way to address corporeality in the treaties of Ruusbroec, whose complete work has almost 800 pages in the most recent edition (see COMPLETE RUUSBROEC, 2014)? In fact, Ruusbroec is not a

¹⁵ About Julienne and the feast of Corpus Christi see HAQUIN, 1999.

mystical author who talks a lot about his body, on the contrary, he hardly ever talks about himself, we even rarely find the word "I" in his works. So the role of corporeality is more or less diminished in Ruusbroec's treatises, but it does exist, and it can be explained, among other things, by his Eucharistic theology, in which we will find the two elements already mentioned, that is: devotion to the humanity of Christ and devotion to the Sacrament of the altar.

5 The bodies of Christ, in the context of the Eucharist, as a 'model' for the mystical experience

Following a long tradition, Ruusbroec distinguishes in the outer body the minor faculties. These are the five senses, like feeling, affection. They have as center the heart, which is basically the center of the external body. The minor faculties always play an important role in the mystical experience.

In the inner man, Ruusbroec distinguishes the three so-called higher faculties. These are: memory (*memoria*), intelligence (*ratio*) and will (*voluntas*), whose center is called spirit or ground, which is the essence of the inner body. In this ground of our soul we are a living mirror of the image of God, or in Ruusbroec's own words:

And to this eternal image we are all made; for according to the noblest part of our soul, that is the ground of our higher faculties, there we are made as a living eternal mirror of God, whereupon God has impressed His eternal image, and wherein no other image can ever come. The mirror always remains before the countenance of God. (*A mirror of eternal blessedness*, 850-854)

This description by Ruusbroec represents the structural, natural, ontological and permanent level in the relationship between man and God.

Faced with this discourse of man as the mirror of God, as image and likeness, it is understandable that Ruusbroec never affirms that mystical union would be a preferable or even unique form of spiritual life; simply because mysticism does not have an ethical dimension. In this regard Ruusbroec, after speaking of the mystical union with God, gives the following opinion:

All good persons have this [=this union with God, MMK], but how this happens remains hidden from them all their lives, unless they are inner and empty of all creatures. In the same instant in which a person turns away from sin, he is received by God in the essential unity of his very self, in the highest (part) of his spirit, so that he may rest in God now and evermore. (*The spiritual espousals*, b1482-1486)

If one wants to experience the encounter and union with God, one only needs to participate in the Eucharist, as Ruusbroec shows in many of his

works. So let's see what Ruusbroec says about the role of the body in the Eucharist, in his masterpiece, *The spiritual espousals*:

Now Christ wishes us to commemorate Him as often as we consecrate, offer, and receive His body. Now observe how we should commemorate Him. We should consider and behold how Christ inclines towards us with loving affection and with great desire and with bodily lust, with heartfelt flowing-away into our bodily nature. For He gives us what He has received from our humanity, that is, flesh and blood, and His bodily nature. We should also consider and behold this precious body, tortured, transpierced and wounded through and through for very love and fidelity, for our sake. Herewith we are enriched and fed in the lower part of our humanity with Christ's glorious humanity. In the sublime gift of the Sacrament, He also gives us His spirit, full of glory and of rich gifts, and of virtues and of the ineffable marvels of charity and of nobility. And herewith we are fed and enriched and enlightened in the unity of our spirit and in the higher faculties, through the indwelling of Christ with all His riches. Furthermore, in the Sacrament of the Altar, He gives us His exalted personality in incomprehensible brightness. And herewith we are united and transported to the Father. And the Father receives His chosen sons along with His natural Son. And thus we come into our inheritance of the Godhead in eternal blessedness.

When a person has recalled and considered these things as he ought, then he will meet Christ in every way that Christ comes to him. He should raise himself up to receive Christ with (his) heart, with desire, with felt affection, with all his faculties, and with longing lust. And thus Christ received Himself. And this lust cannot be too great, (...). Therefore, in this receiving, I want a person to melt and flow away, for desire, for joy and for bliss. For he receives and is united to Him who is the most beautiful and the most gracious and the most lovable of all the sons of mankind. (*The spiritual espousals*, b1156-1181)

For Ruusbroec, as we have just read, in the Eucharist there is a true encounter and a real union with God. His perspective is clearly Trinitarian: we come, through Christ and with the Holy Spirit to the Father, and thus we remain in union with the Divinity. What matters to our subject of corporeality is the passage in which Ruusbroec explains how Christ comes to us with His corporeality. In general, Ruusbroec's discourse represents the decisive importance of desire and love, and these two elements are present in Christ as well, as we see in the text we have just read: "(...) Christ inclines towards us with loving affection and with great desire and with bodily lust, with heartfelt flowing-away into our bodily nature". For bodily lust Ruusbroec uses, in the original text, the word "ghelust", which comes close to modern English "lust" or German "die Lust". For us moderners there will almost always be a sexual connotation, and even Ruusbroec does not deny that a sexual feeling ('animal lust') can occur, as he comments like this: Now these people are mostly of weak complexion and by nature subject to inclinations. And therefore, when they pray or want to devote themselves to the humanity of our Lord with desire and with affection, then some of them are easily touched and moved to animal lust against their will (...). (*A mirror of eternal blessedness*, 1098-1101)

We cannot be surprised that Ruusbroec rejects such a phenomenon, and he gives a hint as how to overcome this sexual feeling: “they must forget themselves and turn their sight entirely to Him whom they love: thus they are imaged with Him in soul and in body, in heart and in senses” (*A mirror*, 1106-1108). In Ruusbroec’s text, which we have just analyzed, we see that the outer body has a very important role but it must always adapt and refer to the inner body, i.e. the spirit or soul of man. The example to be followed is obviously Christ, who had a perfect harmony between the inner and the outer body. The corporeality of Christ is included in the mystical experience, that is: He leans towards us as the Incarnate Word.

We can also observe that the outer body, as Ruusbroec describes it, is permeable and open to the outside world. For this reason, the Christ can effectively enter the body, as Ruusbroec says “with heartfelt flowing-away into our bodily nature”. This coming of Christ in us can be more or less radical and violent – let us therefor briefly analyze this metaphor of food and drink in the liturgical context, as in the following passage:

Christ’s love is voracious and generous: even though He gives us all that He has and all that He is, He also takes back all that we have and all that we are. And He demands of us more than we can accomplish. His hunger is great without measure: He consumes us thoroughly, for He is a voracious glutton and has bulimia: He consumes the marrow out of our bones. (...) Even though my words sound wondrous, those who love understand me well. (*A mirror of eternal salvation*, 682-687; 698-699)

It is not only Christ who consumes us, the soul has an equal hunger for God: “thus we shall always eat and be eaten” (*A mirror*, 733). In this sense, it represents a perfectly reciprocal process, in another Ruusbroec’s formulation: “Whether Thou dost eat me, or I eat Thee, it is unknown to me” (*The seven rungs*, 534). The strong metaphor of “the marrow out of our bones” must be understood in medieval language as “the essence/the best of our body.” As Caroline Bynum had already observed, the metaphor of food and drink is found in Ruusbroec’s works almost exclusively within a liturgical context (BYNUM, 1987, p. 110, 186). Let us now examine how Ruusbroec describes corporeality in mystical experience outside of a liturgical context.

6 Corporeality in the mystical experience (outside a liturgical context)

“In devotional writing, as in medieval love poetry, body and desire are connected (...) we also discover in the mystics that passionate and ever unfolding love of God lodges fully in souls when they get their bodies back” (BYNUM, 2017, p. 374). This close relationship between desire

and body in the mystical experience is present in Ruusbroec's work. He borrowed a concept from Hadewijch to describe this relationship as "impetuosity/frenzy of love" in medieval Dutch called "orewoet". Ruusbroec describes it this way:

When one can neither obtain God nor forgo Him: out of these two arise impetuosity and inquietude in some persons, without and within. In the moments when one is impetuous, no creature, either in heaven or on earth, can be of help to him as far as rest or anything else is concerned. (...) The impetuosity of love is an inward unquietness that is scarcely willing to satisfy or to follow reason unless one obtains what one loves. Inner impetuosity eats a person's heart and drinks his blood. Here the felt heat within is at its maximum in a person's entire life; and one's bodily nature is mysteriously lacerated and consumed without external labor, and the fruit of virtues ripens very swiftly (...) (*The spiritual espousals*, b440-444; 447-452)

As we can see, there exists an intimate connection between inner and outer man when he writes: "arise impetuosity and inquietude in some persons, without and within." As Ruusbroec says elsewhere about this interconnection:

(...) the simple going-up of the spirit draws after itself the inward senses and the bodily faculties, and everything in nature that is living and sensible. (...) And therefore, our bodily nature must be united to our spirit in all our practices. (*The spiritual tabernacle*, 4:1958-1960; 4:1966-1967)

Ruusbroec therefore emphasizes the corporeal pleasure that the mystic experiences:

At times those who live in tempestuousness of love have another manner: for at times a certain light shines in them, and this God produces by intermediary. In this light, their heart and their appetitive faculty rise up towards the light. And in the meeting with the light, lust and delight are so great that the heart cannot bear it, but bursts forth for joy, through the voice; and this is called jubilating or jubilation, that is, a joy which cannot be expressed in words. (*The spiritual espousals*, b490-496)

This tempestuousness goes beyond any intellectual approach ("scarcely willing to satisfy or to follow reason"; as quoted above), and Ruusbroec uses the metaphor of food/drink to better describe this violent experience: "Inner impetuosity eats a person's heart and drinks his blood. Here the felt heat within is at its maximum in a person's entire life; and one's bodily nature is mysteriously lacerated and consumed without external labor." We find here the same idea that Ruusbroec expresses about the Eucharist, which in its essence presupposes a reciprocal 'being' eaten and drunk by Jesus and us. The consequences of this tempestuousness taken to its utmost are definitely harsh:

(...) when one enters into this unquiet state (...) and the shining of the divine rays burns so keenly and so hotly from above, and the loving, wounded heart is so enkindled from within when the heat of its affection and (the) unquiet-

tness of desire are enkindled to such a pitch that one falls into unquietness and into restlessness, just like a woman in labor with child, and who cannot be delivered. (...) The affliction increases for such a long (time) that he withers and dries up in his bodily nature like the trees in a hot land; and he dies in the impetuosity of love and passes without purgatory into heaven. Although one who dies of love dies well, as long as the tree can bear good fruit, one may not destroy it. (*The spiritual espousals*, b516-527)

This text obviously refers to Phil. 1:23-24: "For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you" For Ruusbroec, to die of love is a good thing, but as long as the body still "can bear good fruit", it is far better to stay alive in the earthly body, thus resolving Paul's classical dilemma in his own way.

Conclusion

The corporeality in Ruusbroec's works is here, for the first time, studied as a theme in itself. This theme can be described in terms of Dailey's theory, but we must emphasize that in Ruusbroec's work the integration of the inner and outer body seems more evident than in the previous tradition, that is, especially in the female spirituality of the 13th century. Corporeality is a theme with limited occurrence in Ruusbroec's mystical doctrine, and it is mainly linked to Eucharistic devotion, but, as we have seen, not exclusively.

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