



# **'I shudder that I exist'. Hadewijch's Mystical Writings as a Wayward Precursor of Autotheoretical Life- Writing**

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## **Abstract**

The work of Hadewijch, a thirteenth-century Beguine, explores the reflective potential of intimate affective experiences by making deliberate use of literary and religious intertexts. The writings of women mystics like Hadewijch present an understudied current in the genealogy of life-writing, yet they resonate strongly with contemporary autotheoretical practices that combine theory and art with autobiography. At the same time, the fact that Hadewijch is not a contemporary author can offer a critical perspective on the genre of autotheory itself.

*Keywords:* affectivity, autotheory, Hadewijch, mysticism

## Samenvatting

Het werk van Hadewijch, een begijn uit de dertiende eeuw, verkent de mogelijkheden tot reflectie die affectieve ervaringen kunnen bieden door een doordacht gebruik van literaire en religieuze interteksten. Teksten van vrouwelijke mystici zoals Hadewijch vertegenwoordigen een onderbelichte stroming binnen de genealogie van het autobiografisch schrijven, hoewel ze sterk resoneren met hedendaagse autotheoretische praktijken die theorie en kunst combineren met autobiografie. Tegelijkertijd kan het feit dat Hadewijch geen hedendaagse auteur is, een kritisch perspectief bieden op het genre van autotheorie zelf.

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## Autotheory as a hybrid critical genre

Autotheory is a specific form of contemporary life-writing that uses artistic and theoretical intertexts to make sense of biographical events and personal stories, and vice versa. It is a hybrid genre, where theory and art are used to engage with personal experiences, while at the same time these experiences make it possible to critically examine specific theoretical and artistic frameworks.<sup>1</sup> An oft-quoted example of this hybrid approach is Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* (2015), dealing with theory in relation to queer family life, sexuality, and pregnancy. Nelson borrowed the term ‘autotheory’ from Paul B. Preciado, who in *Testo-Junkie* (originally published in Spanish in 2008) used the term to describe a personal experiment with taking testosterone as part of a theoretical reflection on contemporary subjectivity, gender, and sexuality.

Despite the different topics and forms of these and other autotheoretical life-writings, they all have in common the exploration and expression of modes of subjectivity and bodily experiences that are often overlooked, marginalised, or even oppressed. Actual situations and experiences act as a touchstone for the relevance and truth of specific theories, challenging their implicit normative assumptions and their apparent disembodied detachment from everyday life. In ‘Under the Skin: An Exploration of Autotheory’ (2019) Arianne Zwartjes states that ‘[a]utotheory steps in and intentionally contaminates all that theoretical purity with the messy, the wet, the dank of the hidden: of sex and of body’.<sup>2</sup>

But this quote from Zwartjes also reveals one of autotheory’s own implicit assumptions when it comes to subjectivity, which Michel Foucault already criticised

in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality, The Will to Knowledge* (1976): the belief that there exists a hidden, dark and repressed truth about the self. This truth has to do with sexuality and has to be carefully examined, and then shared in order to liberate oneself and the culture in which this truth was repressed. The impact of this specific view of the self can be seen both in modern literature and in philosophy. According to Foucault, literature shifted from stories of heroes and saints facing external trials and adventures 'to the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between the words, a truth which the very form of the confession holds out like a shimmering mirage'.<sup>3</sup> Foucault argues that this modern urge to reveal our inner self 'is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, "demands" only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place, the violence of a power weighs it down, and it can finally be articulated only at the price of a kind of liberation'.<sup>4</sup> For Foucault, such a scenario was far less revolutionary and liberating than generally assumed: It simply continued the Christian confessional practice, mixed with the Victorian medical discourse on sex, and turned the contemporary western subject into what Foucault sarcastically called 'a confessing animal'.<sup>5</sup> From a Foucauldian perspective, autotheory could thus easily be considered as a contemporary version of this confessional mode.

In *Immediacy, or The Style of Too Late Capitalism* (2024) Anna Kornbluh indeed dismisses the genre as hopelessly embedded in a therapeutical, affective discourse of self-disclosure that fits nicely with the publishing market and the boom of autobiographical and autofictional writing in the age of social media.<sup>6</sup> But simply lumping together autotheory with other forms of 'first personalism' that dominate contemporary literary production does not take into account the critical potential of autotheory. In fact, what is at stake in autotheory as a genre is very much in line with the stance Foucault defended in 'What is Enlightenment?' (1983). Foucault envisioned an intellectual endeavour that questioned the genealogy of our subjectivity and explored the limits of the dominant, normative modes of subjectivation in contemporary culture. For Foucault, this required a detour to the past to evaluate the way our subjectivity is discursively framed in the present: 'I mean that this work done at the limits of ourselves must, on the one hand, open up a realm of historical inquiry and, on the other, put itself to the test of reality, of contemporary reality, both to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take'.<sup>7</sup> Autotheory's 'test of reality' would thus benefit from a more historical perspective that could challenge a view on subjectivity that is too easily

taken for granted and often remains unchallenged, even in autotheoretical writing itself.

In Foucault's case, his 'historical inquiry' focused on the construction of the 'self' in antiquity. In 'Self-Writing' (1983) Foucault discusses the practice of keeping personal notebooks, or *hypomnemata*, as an alternative way of relating one's personal existence to the truth. These notebooks were meant 'to capture the already-said to collect what one has managed to hear or read, and for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self'.<sup>8</sup> The personal *hypomnemata* were also used as a source for philosophical correspondence, as in Seneca's letters to Lucilius. These letters were meant both to offer advice and to present one's life as an example to others: 'we should live as we lived in plain sight of all men'.<sup>9</sup> As such, this practice of writing shows quite some similarities with the combination of theoretical reflection and 'self-representation' that defines contemporary autotheory.<sup>10</sup> Just as autotheory considers the daily routines of work, love, and family as worthy of serious theoretical scrutiny, Seneca presents his own daily life practices in relation to his philosophy. Foucault mentions a letter in which Seneca gives an account of what such a perfectly balanced daily life looks like: 'A little physical training, a bit of running with a pet slave, a bath in water that is barely lukewarm, a simple snack of bread, a very short nap', followed by a long philosophical meditation session.<sup>11</sup> Foucault found in this classical 'care of the self' a 'practice of freedom': By working on the self, a sense of freedom was achieved that could resist the kind of technologies of institutional domination he had analysed in his previous work. Yet this self was not 'freed' by the discovery and confession of an intimate truth, deeply hidden in oneself, but shaped by ascetic practices and philosophical techniques: Liberation was a question of disciplined training, not of painful soul-searching.

But in his analysis of this alternative 'care of the self' offered by classical authors like Seneca, Foucault pays little attention to the more problematic aspects of these practices. As the quote from Seneca makes clear, these self-techniques were strongly based on the command and control of bodies: a body of knowledge, one's own physical body, but also those of (enslaved, or otherwise dominated) others (for instance the 'pet slave' who is forced to join Seneca's exercise). It is precisely this very 'masculine' gendered ideal of the strong ego, in full command of itself and its environment, that many contemporary autotheoretical texts want to challenge. They do that by presenting an 'I' that is not in control but is often overwhelmed by strong affects and sensations, an 'I' that speaks from a minority position, silenced and marginalised, and which thus has to forge a new kind of subject position from which to speak by appropriating and transforming existing literary and theoretical genres.

These aspects are absent in the kind of philosophical treatises Foucault discusses. Surely the stoic tradition also implied speaking truth to power, but we should not forget Seneca himself wrote from a position of power. As a political adviser for the young Emperor Nero, he was a key figure in the Roman Empire and became extremely rich. That he eventually fell out of grace with the increasingly paranoid emperor and was forced to commit suicide was not because he challenged social norms or wanted to experiment with new subject positions. On the contrary, his stoic lifestyle and self-possessed way of writing was very much in line with the old Roman virtues and the classical image of the philosopher.

In the manuscript of the fourth volume of *The History of Sexuality, The Confessions of the Flesh*, unfinished because of Foucault's untimely death from AIDS and unpublished until 2018, Foucault describes the historical shift to the Christian self, constructed by pastoral care and confessional practices.<sup>12</sup> But there was another Christian discourse Foucault did not take into account, namely that of female medieval mysticism. This discourse offers a different view on subjectivity than antiquity's 'care of the self', but also diverges quite substantially from the pastoral discourse Foucault interpreted as the origin of the contemporary confessional mode. And it is precisely this mystical discourse that can be interpreted as a more interesting historical precursor of autotheory, with a view of selfhood that resonates better with contemporary autotheoretical texts, while at the same time remaining different enough to offer a critical perspective.

### Self-writing in the mystical mode

The writings of Hadewijch of Brabant, a thirteenth-century mystic, present a very interesting example of this female mysticism. In her lifetime, the Low Countries were a very urbanised and prosperous region, where women had more freedom than in other parts of Europe, much to the astonishment of male travellers.<sup>13</sup> The region was also known for its movements of religious reform and even dissent, challenging a corrupt clergy, and looking for a more authentic form of spiritual life based on the ascetic example of the first apostles. This context made it possible for groups of independent women to refuse the obedience expected of them both in marriage and monastic life: they joined small communities, leading a chaste and modest life as *mulieres religiosae*, earning their own living and doing works of charity for the community. Hadewijch was most likely the spiritual leader of a such a small group of (proto-)Beguines, providing them with spiritual advice and guidance. Later these communities would be more regularised and supervised by a suspicious male clergy,

but in the early days of the movement, the time in which Hadewijch wrote her work, it must have been quite a revolutionary form of living together that greatly contributed to Christian culture and female religious life in particular.<sup>14</sup>

What also helped to fuel this form of mysticism were the changes in the religious and spiritual discourse of the day, which was in a process of democratisation and secularisation: 'God could be found in the secular realm and in the midst of everyday experience', by every Christian, not only clerics.<sup>15</sup> Theology increasingly focused on the embodied, experienced aspect of spiritual life, exemplified in Bernard of Clairvaux's famous revaluation of the 'the book of experience' as a source of spiritual knowledge.<sup>16</sup> And the most crucial experience of all was love, as expressed by Gregory the Great: 'Love is a kind of knowledge'.<sup>17</sup> This kind of theological discourse, often based on the sensuous language of the biblical *Song of Songs*; the amorous dialogue of a Bride (the soul) and her Bridegroom (Christ) had a profound impact on women's spirituality.<sup>18</sup> And this sensuous language was more than just metaphorical; it expressed the intense, very physical nature of these mystical experiences, as Hadewijch describes them in her *Visions*: 'After that he came himself to me, took me entirely in his arms, and pressed me to him; and all my members felt his in full felicity, in accordance with the desire of my heart and my humanity'.<sup>19</sup>

Hadewijch's texts show that she must have been well read in theology and courtly literature, so most likely came from nobility. Her letters and poems also suggest that she might have been forced into exile, perhaps because of internal conflicts within her group of Beguines, or because she was suspected of heresy, or both.<sup>20</sup> Hadewijch instructed her pupils through different genres: visions, poems (some most likely sung), and letters. Just like Seneca's, Hadewijch's letters were written as a form of self-presentation, based on a set of practices that gave her access to a truth she then shared with her pupils. And just as with Seneca, the 'already-said' plays an important role in shaping and interpreting her life experiences.

In her *Visions*, Hadewijch explicitly positions herself as a figure of authority to legitimise her pedagogical role: She claims her visionary revelation exceeded that of Saint John, and she has a divine Other proclaim her 'the highest way' and the 'strongest of all warriors'.<sup>21</sup> This kind of self-assured affirmation was simply necessary: Lacking clerical (and male) authority, women mystics like Hadewijch had to use their visionary experiences as a sign of divine grace that allowed them to assume a pedagogical and mystagogical role in their community.<sup>22</sup>

The crucial difference with Seneca is that Hadewijch's authority is also based on a strong affectivity. Her love for her pupils is much more passionate and explicit than the more detached friendship expressed in Seneca's correspondence. This becomes

especially clear when she addresses a woman named Sara, whom Hadewijch calls 'the dearest person alive' and with whom the letters suggest a turbulent relation: 'Greet Sara also on my behalf, whether I am anything to her or nothing'.<sup>23</sup> And in her final vision, Hadewijch addresses a pupil in very affective, amorous terms: 'I love you so greatly, and neither could nor can forget you in any hour'.<sup>24</sup> The same passionate affection also defines her relation to Christ, the Beloved, who makes her suffer a violent kind of passion: 'My heart and my veins and all my limbs trembled and quivered with eager desire and, as often occurred with me, such madness and fear beset my mind that it seemed to me that I did not content my Beloved, and that my Beloved did not fulfil my desire, so that dying I must go mad, and going mad I must die'.<sup>25</sup>

For Hadewijch, the access to truth implied an ecstatic loss of control and mastery, which would have been simply unthinkable for Seneca: 'and I came out of the spirit and remained lying until late in the day, inebriated with unspeakable wonders'.<sup>26</sup> Only in this surrender of the self to overwhelming erotic affects can knowledge be found. And this outspoken affectivity also includes very negative affects and emotions, like madness, lovesickness, despair. As Foucault mentions, some of the stoic philosophical correspondence belongs to the consolation genre: 'it offers the correspondent the "logical" arms with which to fight sorrow'.<sup>27</sup> But Hadewijch offers no such consolation to her audience. On the contrary, she makes very explicit that the mystical path demands overwhelming experiences of profound sorrow and despair: 'Love makes the heart taste a violent death and causes it to die without being able to die'.<sup>28</sup> *Minne* (mystical Love), the most crucial signifier in her textual universe, refers not only to the bliss of mystical rapture but also, and perhaps more importantly, to 'sacrifice, suffering and service' as John Giles Milhaven summarises it.<sup>29</sup> The experience of divine *Minne* was thus extremely demanding and often even fiercely maddening and desperate. Her suffering for *Minne* made Hadewijch exclaim, quoting from the book of Job, 'I shudder that I exist'.<sup>30</sup> Remarkably, this very strong affectivity does not exclude a more intellectual, reflective approach—quite the contrary. Hadewijch emphasises that the service of *Minne* demands a very loyal servitude to 'Queen Reason'.<sup>31</sup>

It is precisely this unique combination of affectivity, experience, and intellectual reflection that makes Hadewijch's writing resonate more with contemporary autotheoretical practices than Seneca's stoic philosophy of resignation and (self-) control. We could for instance think of Chris Kraus's 'lonely girl phenomenology' in *I Love Dick* (1997), the lovesickness Maggie Nelson explores in *Bluets* (2009), the depressive affects examined in *A Dialogue on Love* (2000) by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,

or the general revaluation of mental and physical suffering as a form of cultural criticism in Johanna Hedva's Sick Woman theory, or Audrey Wollen's Sad Girl theory.<sup>32</sup> But at the same time, such a comparison also reveals an important difference: Nowadays, affectivity is primarily understood within a medical-therapeutic framework, which Foucault saw emerge with the 'birth of the clinic' in the eighteenth century and the emergence of psychiatry in the nineteenth century. The dominance of this psychological interpretation also becomes clear when we look at female medieval mysticism. Many of the extreme experiences of these mystics as described in their hagiographies almost automatically evoke concepts of modern psychopathology—with symptoms ranging from anorexia, and self-mutilation to psychotic delusions caused by post-traumatic stress. But Amy Hollywood warns against such a contemporary view on mystical experiences: An 'ethical mode of listening' requires one 'to suspend judgement, at least temporarily'.<sup>33</sup> We should keep in mind the specific cultural and religious context in which women like Hadewijch were able to reflect upon and express their own affects and afflictions. Hadewijch's framework was after all theological, not psychological. The 'hellish' experience of *Minne*, a life devoid of any hope and consolation, was for her in fact an *imitatio* of Christ's perfect example of suffering at the Cross, and her mystical narratives are firmly embedded in a Christian cosmology.

So while Hollywood rightly argues 'that women's mystical texts are one of the places in which the interiority of the modern subject constitutes itself',<sup>34</sup> we should not forget that the way writers like Hadewijch understood this interiority was radically different. And it is precisely this difference which makes Hadewijch's self-writing so interesting. On the one hand, the way she takes her emotional suffering seriously resembles the contemporary emphasis on affectivity as a valuable tool for knowledge. But on the other hand, her writings also show how at first sight very recognisable affects can be interpreted within a completely different framework, challenging the self-evidence of our contemporary psychological vocabulary and making clear that other discursive ways are possible for relating to one's own affectivity and interiority.

### *Hybrity and audacity: Forging a subject position*

Hadewijch's texts challenge the contemporary view on selfhood not only because of her mystical theological background, that has become alien to modern readers, but also because she rejects any single discourse—including theology—as adequate for understanding and expressing these intimate inner experiences: 'Although I can express everything insofar as this is possible for a human being, no Dutch can be



found for all I have said to you, since none exists to express these things, so far as I know'.<sup>35</sup> And because the discourses available to her were insufficient for rendering these intimate experiences comprehensibly, Hadewijch searched for the expression of this interiority in a unique, performative combination of different intertexts and genres. She was extremely gifted in reworking a wide range of registers and skilfully combining biblical texts and theological treatises of her religious milieu with the secular literature of courtly and epic poetry of her aristocratic or patrician background. Her work indeed shows that she was well acquainted with the secular love songs composed by *trouvères* (the northern counterparts of the more famous Occitan troubadours) from which she borrowed the melodies and poetic techniques for her own poetry.<sup>36</sup> And she used precisely this musicality of language to express these ineffable inner experiences, adding to the affective, meditative impact of her texts. What is impossible to *say* in Dutch, can at least partially be *heard* in it, in the rhythms and the sounds of language itself. Inevitably, some of this lyrical musicality gets lost in translation: to give just one example, 'Minne es altoos der minnen mede./Minne kent met minnen der minnen sede'.<sup>37</sup> In translation, the rhymes and alliterations, just as the alternation in the original text of the 'i' and the 'e', inevitably get lost, turning these verses into more prosaic sentences: 'Love is always the reward of love. Love knows with love the courtly manners of Love'.<sup>38</sup>

Here it is also important to point out that Hadewijch uses the musicality of her maternal language not only for its meditative effect, but also as a way to express her thinking. Paul Mommaers mentions for instance how Hadewijch plays with the almost homonymous words *ghebruken* and *ghebreken*—bliss and lack—a sound effect that is used to accentuate their conceptual interrelatedness: 'the incomplection [ghebreken] of this blissful fruition [ghebrukene] is yet the sweetest fruition [ghebruken]'.<sup>39</sup>

To understand how Hadewijch's lyricism is used to convey her thinking, Emily Holmes refers to Julia Kristeva's opposition between the symbolic (the meaning and grammar of language) and the semiotic (everything in language that expresses the pulsional body, like rhythms, repetitions, musicality, but also transgressions of grammatical rules and discursive codes, ambiguities, paradoxes, and so on): 'Hadewijch's repetition of words and sounds through assonance and alliteration, her use of paradox and wordplay to convey additional levels of meaning, and her understanding of the interplay between what she calls "song and melody" all reveal an awareness of the semiotic modality of language, which is often suppressed in the scholastic and didactic theology of her thirteenth-century contemporaries'.<sup>40</sup> In other words, the embodied, sensuous experience is expressed and evoked not only by the

content of her work but also by its formal qualities. Women mystics like Hadewijch understood that a new, more evocative and sensory, lyrical language was needed to express mystical knowledge, a language which as Bernard McGinn argues, was 'more direct, more excessive, more bodily in nature than older forms'.<sup>41</sup> And here too, Hadewijch seems to be a precursor of modern autotheory in her focus on literary form and style as necessary tools to accompany a reflective process.

Zwartjes' definition of autotheory as a genre could be equally used to define Hadewijch's work: it 'offers us a thought-provoking, multivalent kind of hybridity, one unafraid to mix theory with creativity and lyricism, and with the graphic details of one's very specific physical experience'.<sup>42</sup> Hadewijch too mixes theory with lyricism, combines intellectual contemplation with the detailed expression of very strong affects and physical sensations. But Hadewijch not only borrowed the musicality of courtly songs, she also appropriated the narrative schemes and scenarios of courtly literature. As Barbara Newman remarks, this allowed mystical writers like her to create 'a more complicated, less stereotypical way that allowed them a wider emotional range'.<sup>43</sup> By injecting the mystical discourse with the codes of courtly literature, Hadewijch was able to fundamentally change the character of the mystical speaking subject itself. Her lyrical 'I' is not a maiden passively waiting for her beloved husband, using the bridal metaphors of the *Song of Songs*, but a knight who valiantly fights for his beloved lady and bravely suffers hardship and rejection in honourable service to her. The 'greatest heroine', as Hadewijch calls herself, is an outgoing and strong warrior who experiences an unstable yet passionate love, rather than the rosy, sugar-sweet love of the mystical bride.<sup>44</sup> As Hollywood points out, Hadewijch's adaptation of the courtly narrative schemes allowed her to claim an active subject position normally reserved for male characters, challenging specific gender roles.<sup>45</sup>

By assuming the role of the poet-knight, Hadewijch thus not only bends genre, but also gender. Hadewijch's playing with gender roles becomes even more complex and ambiguous if we consider that *Minne* is personified as an adored and desired Lady.<sup>46</sup> Such a 'queering' of the Beguines, as Hollywood calls it,<sup>47</sup> makes clear again how Hadewijch can be seen as an inspiring precursor to autotheory. She was very confident in speaking out, in claiming and defending a specific subject position that defied the cultural norms of her day, and she challenged the strict binarism of gender distinctions. As McGinn remarks, Hadewijch never uses the 'topos of female weakness', this kind of interiorised self-deprecation quite common in other medieval writings by women.<sup>48</sup> Hadewijch's fearless audacity is even more remarkable if we take into account the risks involved in writing about her experiences. Already during Hadewijch's lifetime, some mystics were persecuted and put to death by the

Inquisition. In her work, she mentions a Beguine 'killed by Master Robert because of her true love'.<sup>49</sup> This 'master Robert' was probably Robert le Bougre, a relentless papal inquisitor, whose reign of terror only ended after it was revealed that he had falsely accused a woman of heresy because she had refused his sexual advances after a sermon.<sup>50</sup>

Furthermore, the way in which Hadewijch not only expressed her mystical experiences, but also intellectually discussed them, framed them within a theological context, was also extraordinary in a time when scholarship was the almost exclusive privilege of men. The biblical quotes in her work make it plausible that she had access to biblical texts and was able to study them, and not merely remembered these passages from sermons. In a time when the Bible was normally not allowed to be studied by the laity, let alone by lay women, this can count as another example of Hadewijch's unique and bold position.<sup>51</sup> It is precisely this audacity that allows us not only to appreciate Hadewijch's work in the context of Christian mysticism, but also to regard her work as an early form of theoretical (in her case, theological) life-writing that is used to forge a specific position within society. It is a powerful and inspiring testimony of how a medieval woman was able to use, challenge, and transform the discourses available to her. Many contemporary autotheorists share the same ambition. They playfully use existing genres and texts, from scholarly to literary, to create a hybrid discourse that allow them to experiment with other subject positions within a dominant discourse. Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) combines personal narrative and poetry with reflections on sexuality, ethnicity, and cultural history; Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House* (2019) describes a toxic relationship through different genres and discursive modes; Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick* (1997) deliberately alludes to the epistolary novel, and Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* was inspired by Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse* (originally published in 1977) in the way Barthes used the margins of the text to include references.

But there are also important differences between these writers and Hadewijch. She was of course not a modern feminist and/or queer writer lost in the thirteenth century, looking for an expression of unique life experiences. Testifying about one's experiences was not understood in the contemporary, individualist sense of singular, private sentiments and sensations that fundamentally separate us from each other. On the contrary, experience was something collective, 'shared' by those belonging to the same religious community.<sup>52</sup> Hadewijch's lyrical 'I' was in fact a carefully constructed persona, based on literary and biblical intertexts. Her work was very much in line with the poetics of medieval aesthetics, which did not value radical originality and self-

expression, but rather admired the subtle and clever varieties within an existing register, including narrative schemes that were used to structure (auto)biographical texts. As a teacher, she was primarily setting a textual example for her pupils. The account of her own life and experiences had a didactic rather than an autobiographical function, and she did not conflate this function with this 'I' of her writings. As Gordon Rudy puts it, 'no narrative "self" is identical with the author. Medieval people knew this perfectly well'.<sup>53</sup> So rather than a very personal, intimate expression, Hadewijch's poetry should be regarded, as Patricia Dailey defines it, as 'a hermeneutic means for understanding affect and performing *imitation*'.<sup>54</sup> In the same way she imitated biblical or courtly examples, her pupils should try to imitate and perform the lyrical 'I' of Hadewijch's texts, in order to transform themselves into better servants of *Minne*.

No doubt Hadewijch's audacious position in her texts, claiming authority as a woman in a male-dominated culture, might have inspired her pupils to have the same courage to speak out. In a similar way, the writings of Anzaldúa, Kraus, Nelson, and Preciado inspire their readers to affirm their own voice and to explore personal experiences, even if they differ from a specific normative framework. But this kind of affirmation of an identity and of resistance to an oppressive culture was never the main goal of Hadewijch's teaching. Rather than affirming a specific identity, the whole mystical experience was precisely focused on going beyond one's individuality, erasing it, losing it in the deep abyss of *Minne*.

### Hadewijch: A critical ethology

A 'historical inquiry', as Foucault suggested, allows us to read Hadewijch anachronistically and to let her work resonate with the contemporary genre of autotheory, liberating her work from a too-strict medievistic or theological point of view. But such an anachronistic reading is not the same as an ahistorical one, where Hadewijch is just turned into 'one of us', as if we are merely looking into a mirror. However provocative Hadewijch's gender position might have been in a medieval context, it was not unique, nor was it an end in itself.<sup>55</sup> For her, this discursive reworking of the courtly codes and the literary imaginary were just necessary means to do justice to the radical transgressive and transformative nature of mystical experience itself. And while these women mystics were able to free themselves from patriarchal structures, escaping both marriage and the church, other aspects of their mode of existence are far less liberating. No *vita* of Hadewijch exists, but hagiographies and accounts of other mystics reveal how extreme their way of life often was, frequently mentioning forms of intense bodily trials and self-inflicted pain, what

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McGinn aptly calls a 'spiritual masochism'.<sup>56</sup> It is difficult not to be repelled by such practices, and the same goes for the ideology of some of these mystics, like Bernardus of Clairvaux. As Julia Kristeva argues, Bernardus de Clairvaux has played a crucial role in shaping the discourse of modern affectivity,<sup>57</sup> but we should not forget that this same person also rallied for the second crusade, and fiercely preached against both pagans and heretics.<sup>58</sup>

The encounter with previous expressions of interiority is thus always an encounter with fundamentally different modes of subjectivation and life practices, and the acceptance of an inevitable sense of alienation and othering that such an encounter generates. As Hollywood puts it, 'our reception of tradition is always also a critical engagement with it'.<sup>59</sup> This 'critical engagement' reminds us not to ignore what has become fundamentally strange and reprehensible from past traditions. Just as Hadewijch herself teaches, a quest for the truth also includes negative affects of repulsion and abjection. Nicholas Watson remarks that Hadewijch's description of mystical experiences can be used to understand how contemporary scholars could engage with the past in an affective way.<sup>60</sup> A historical text can become an object of desire, a moment of (mild) rapture when we get inspired by what was written centuries ago. Yet, just as in Hadewijch's mystical path, this joy is necessarily followed by disappointment in this object of desire that always stays out of reach, resists recuperation and analysis, and remains other, strange, and sometimes even repulsive when we learn more about it.

Dealing with historical literature requires what Isabelle Stengers calls a 'critical ethology', a kind of criticism that is 'not about what would be good or bad *per se*, but about learning how what we encounter affects us, how it empowers, or separates us from, our capacity to act (that is also to think and feel)'.<sup>61</sup> A 'critical ethology' of Hadewijch would thus be an interpretation that combines, to use Sedgwick's famous distinction, the critical force of a 'paranoid reading' (revealing for instance the interiorised misogyny, the incorporated violence, the xenophobia in much of these medieval texts and practices) with the creative aspect of a 'reparative reading': the search in these past traditions for those forces that empower the creation and exploration of alternative modes of existence<sup>62</sup>—to find out, as Foucault suggests (above), 'where change is possible and desirable'.

Hadewijch's work specifically offers a possible revaluation of embodied subjectivity in relation to a specific mode of knowledge that is often downplayed in academic scholarship. But it also reveals the one-sidedness of some authors in the Humanities who do take the body seriously. A good example is Richard Shusterman's notion of 'somaesthetics'. Shusterman argues for a renewed interest in the

embodied experience of cultural artefacts and practices, yet limits his analysis to a normal body, focused on a physical and mental equilibrium. He fiercely criticises the kind of 'limit-experiences' philosophers like Foucault were interested in, denouncing their 'somatic extremism', their 'need to engage in violently irrational, transgressively "rabid Dionysiac excess"'.<sup>63</sup> A 'critical ethology' of Hadewijch would thus allow us to go beyond such a normative view of the body and consider this excessive side as part and parcel of human experience. At the same time, her work can inspire a search for other ways of expressing these experiences than using the psychological vocabulary of the 'confessional mode'.

Hadewijch can motivate contemporary readers to take the force of these passionate, even negative affects seriously, and to use them to gain knowledge about life: 'The profound whirlpool, which is so frightfully dark, is divine fruition in its hidden storms'.<sup>64</sup> This interest in this 'whirlpool' of negative or transgressive affects is not to embellish or glorify it, or to ignore what can in fact turn out to be destructive and harmful, but simply to see how, to quote Stengers again, it 'empowers, or separates us from, our capacity to act'. And here we should of course not forget that these 'forces' are always embedded in a specific and unique discursive context. As Stengers puts it, 'To tell about a force, or to feel it, to be affected by it, always means that an assemblage has been produced, or fabricated—a matter of art, or artificiality, never a testimony of wild authenticity'.<sup>65</sup> That is also precisely what Newman says about female mystics like Hadewijch: 'their new brand of eroticism was far from being a spontaneous manifestation of female desire. Rather it grew out of a unique and specialised literary culture'.<sup>66</sup> The 'I' we encounter in Hadewijch's texts is thus the result of such a specific historical 'assemblage', produced within the framework of the Christian mystical tradition.

This tradition is no longer ours: Obviously, contemporary autotheorists are unlikely to consider their exploration as mystical, defined by McGinn as 'a special consciousness of the presence of God that by definition exceeds description and results in a transformation of the subject who receives it'.<sup>67</sup> Nonetheless, autotheory can be considered a secular continuation of this mystical inquiry. It is the expression of a transformational exploration of existence, one that is hard to describe in the codes of conventional autobiographical discourse and therefore needs a hybrid, experimental way of combining artistic and theoretical reflection with lived experiences. From that perspective, Hadewijch of Brabant can indeed be studied as an inspiring trailblazer.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Fournier, Lauren, 'Sick Women, Sad Girls, and Selfie Theory: Autotheory as Contemporary Feminist Practice', in: *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 33:3 (2018), 641. For a more elaborate discussion on autotheory, see also Cavitch, Max, 'Everybody's Autotheory', in: *Modern Language Quarterly* 83:1 (2022), 81–116, Fournier, Lauren *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021 and the special issues on autotheory of *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 76:1 (2020) and *ASAP/Journal* 6:3 (2021).

<sup>2</sup> Zwartjes, Arianne, 'Under the Skin: An Exploration of Autotheory', in: *Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies* 6:1 (2019), 8.

- <sup>3</sup> Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*, translated by Robert Hurley, Pantheon Books: New York, 1978, 59.
- <sup>4</sup> Idem, page 60.
- <sup>5</sup> Idem, page 59.
- <sup>6</sup> Kornbluh, Anna, *Immediacy, or The Style of Too Late Capitalism*, London: Verso, 2024, 65ff.
- <sup>7</sup> Foucault, Michel, 'What is Enlightenment?', in: *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, edited by Paul Rabinow, translated by Robert Hurley e.a., New York: The New Press, 1997, 316.
- <sup>8</sup> Foucault, Michel, 'Self Writing', in: *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, edited by Paul Rabinow, translated by Robert Hurley e.a., New York: The New Press, 1997, 211.
- <sup>9</sup> Seneca, as quoted in idem, page 217.
- <sup>10</sup> See Fournier, Lauren, 2018, 649ff.
- <sup>11</sup> Foucault, Michel, 1997, 'Self Writing', 219.
- <sup>12</sup> Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 4: Confessions of the Flesh*, edited by Frederic Gros, translated by Robert Hurley, New York: Vintage, 2022.
- <sup>13</sup> Simons, Walter, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200–1565*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003, 8ff.
- <sup>14</sup> Walker Bynum, Caroline, 'The Mysticism and Asceticism of Medieval Women: Some Comments on the Typologies of Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch' in: *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, New York: Zone Books, 1991, 53–78, and Simons, Walter, 2003, 36ff.
- <sup>15</sup> McGinn, Bernard, *The Flowering of Mysticism. Men and Women in the New Mysticism 1200–1350*, New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1998, 13.
- <sup>16</sup> Idem, page 80.
- <sup>17</sup> Gregory the Great, as quoted in idem, page 82.
- <sup>18</sup> For an overview of this erotic imaginary in medieval mysticism, see Nelstrop Louise, Kevin Magill, and Bradley Onishi, *Christian Mysticism: An Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Approaches*, London: Routledge, 2016, 85–106.
- <sup>19</sup> Hadewijch, *Complete Works*, translated by Mother Columba Hart, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980, 281.
- <sup>20</sup> Paul Mommaers, as quoted in Hadewijch, 1980, 4.
- <sup>21</sup> Hadewijch, 1980, 276, 284, 305.
- <sup>22</sup> See Fraeters, Veerle, 'Visio/Vision', in Amy Hollywood and Patricia Beckman (eds.), *The Cambridge companion to Christian mysticism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 178–178.
- <sup>23</sup> Hadewijch, 1980, 114, 105.
- <sup>24</sup> Idem, page 303.
- <sup>25</sup> Idem, page 280.
- <sup>26</sup> Idem, page 286.
- <sup>27</sup> Foucault, Michel, 1997, 215.
- <sup>28</sup> Hadewijch, 1980, 91.
- <sup>29</sup> Milhaven, John Giles, *Hadewijch and Her Sisters: Other Ways of Loving and Knowing*, New York: SUNY Press, 1993, 8.
- <sup>30</sup> Idem, page 172.
- <sup>31</sup> Idem, page 285.
- <sup>32</sup> See Fournier, Lauren, 2018, 646ff.
- <sup>33</sup> Hollywood, Amy, *Acute Melancholia and Other Essays. Mysticism, History and the Study of Religion*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2016, 6.
- <sup>34</sup> Idem, page 210.
- <sup>35</sup> Hadewijch, 1980, 84.

- <sup>36</sup> Something that was relatively recently discovered; see Grijp, Louis Peter, 'De zingende Hadewijch. Op zoek naar de melodieën van haar Strofische Gedichten', in: Frank Willaert e.a. (eds.), *Een zoet akkoord. Middeleeuwse lyriek in de Lage Landen*, Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1992, 72–92.
- <sup>37</sup> Hadewijch, 2009, 258.
- <sup>38</sup> Hadewijch, 1980, 225.
- <sup>39</sup> Hadewijch, 1980, 80; see also Mommaers, Paul, and Elisabeth Dutton, *Hadewijch: Writer, Beguine, Love Mystic*, Leuven: Peeters, 2004, 4.
- <sup>40</sup> Holmes, Emily, *Flesh Made Word: Medieval Women Mystics, Writing, and the Incarnation*, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013, 52.
- <sup>41</sup> McGinn, Bernard, 1998, 25.
- <sup>42</sup> Zwartjes, Arianne, 2019, 8.
- <sup>43</sup> Newman, Barbara, 'La mystique courtoise: Thirteenth-Century Beguines and the Art of Love' in: *Ibid., From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995, 138.
- <sup>44</sup> Rudy, Gordon, *The Mystical Language of Sensation in the Later Middle Ages*, London: Routledge, 2002, 72.
- <sup>45</sup> Hollywood, Amy, 2016, 169.
- <sup>46</sup> Newman, Barbara, 1995, 150ff.
- <sup>47</sup> Hollywood, Amy, 2016, 149ff.
- <sup>48</sup> McGinn, Bernard, 1998, 247.
- <sup>49</sup> Hadewijch, as quoted in Elliott, Dyan, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell: Metaphor and Embodiment in the Lives of Pious Women 1200–1500*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011, 200.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*.
- <sup>51</sup> See Reynaert, Joris, 'Hadewijch en de Bijbel', in: Elly Cockx-Indestege and Frans Hendrickx (eds.), *Miscellanea neerlandica. Opstellen voor dr. Jan Deschamps ter gelegenheid van zijn zeventigste verjaardag*, Leuven: Peeters, 1987, 41–55.
- <sup>52</sup> Rudy, Gordon, 2002, 76.
- <sup>53</sup> *Idem*, page 72.
- <sup>54</sup> Dailey, Patricia, *Promised Bodies. Time, Language, and Corporeality in Medieval Women's Mystical Texts*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2013, 26.
- <sup>55</sup> This playing with gender roles was also present in the work of women troubadours, but it is unclear if Hadewijch was familiar with their work. See Mir, Anita, 'Fluidity in Stillness A Reading of Hadewijch's Strofische Gedichten/Poems in Stanzas' in: *Traditio* 73 (2018), 180.
- <sup>56</sup> McGinn, Bernard, 1998, 196.
- <sup>57</sup> Kristeva, Julia, *Tales of Love*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1987, 151ff.
- <sup>58</sup> Nieuwenhove, Rik van, *An Introduction to Medieval Theology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 112.
- <sup>59</sup> Hollywood, Amy, 2016, 17.
- <sup>60</sup> Watson, Nicholas, 'Desire for the Past', in: *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 21 (1999), 85ff.
- <sup>61</sup> Stengers, Isabelle, 'Experimenting with Refrains: Subjectivity and the Challenge of Escaping Modern Dualism' in: *Subjectivity* 22:1 (2008), 44.
- <sup>62</sup> Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, *Touching Feeling. Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003, 123–151.
- <sup>63</sup> Shusterman, Richard, *Thinking through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 192.
- <sup>64</sup> Hadewijch, 1980, 267.
- <sup>65</sup> Stengers, Isabelle, 2008, 43.

<sup>66</sup> Newman, Barbara, 1995, 143.

<sup>67</sup> McGinn, Bernard, 1998, 26.