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LINGUISTIC COMMENTS IN GHERAERT'S PROLOGUE TO RUUSBROEC'S WORKS

Johan Seynnaeve

0. Introduction

In 1895, and so just one hundred years ago, the Flemish linguist Willem de Vreese called *Die prologe van her gherardus* of the highest importance for the study of the Middle Dutch language.¹ In the preface to his critical edition of this prologue De Vreese points out that its author, the Carthusian monk Gheraert, not only provides valuable information on the life of the 14th Century Flemish mystic Jan van Ruusbroec, his works and their reception,² but also turns out to be a linguistically sophisticated commentator on Ruusbroec's language. Brother Gheraert's observations range from issues such as language purism and the distinction between written and spoken language to problems surrounding the verbalization of mystical experiences. My purpose in this paper is to take a closer look at a semantic interpretation the Carthusian monk proposes for a well known passage in Ruusbroec's first work *The Realm of Lovers* (*Dat rijcke der ghelieven*). In addition, I would like to briefly discuss Gheraert's remarks on some differences between the 'unadulterated Brussels Flemish'³ in which the Augustinian Canon wrote and the Brussels Flemish commonly spoken in that area at that time.

1. Background

First, it will be helpful to situate the prologue and its author. The original prologue, which is no longer extant, was written to serve as a preface to five of Ruusbroec's works, the above mentioned *The Realm of Lovers*, *The Spiritual Espousals* (*Die geestelike brulocht*), *The Spiritual Tabernacle* (*Van den geesteliken tabernakel*), *The Sparkling Stone* (*Vanden blinkenden steen*), and *Little Book of Enlightenment* (*Boecksken der verclaringhe*). Two copies of the prologue have survived in the two biggest Ruusbroec-manuscripts: D (ms.3416-24, Brussels, Royal Library), written in 1461, and G (ms.693, Gent, University Library), written in 1480. In these manuscripts, however, the prologue appears as an introduction to all of the known works of Ruusbroec.

The proper identification of the author of the lost original was thwarted for a long time by the fact that the copyists have added the following heading to the

¹ 'Het geschrift van her Gerardus ... geeft over de taal der middeleeuwen enkele inlichtingen van het grootste gewicht.' (De Vreese 1895:6-7)

² For a recent treatment of these aspects of the prologue see Verdeyen 1981 & 1984.

³ These are Gheraert's words: 'onvenningheden brueselschen dietsche' (De Vreese:19)

prologue: 'Dit is die prologe her gherardus dier wilen priorer was inder oerden van tsartroysen van onser vrouwen huus ter kapelle bi harn' (De Vreese 1895:7), even though in the body of the text the author identifies himself only as 'broeder Gheraert, vander sartroysen oerden van onser vrouwen huys ter capellen bi Herne' (ibid.:11). Ever since Reypens 1914⁴ it is now generally accepted that Gerardus de Sanctis was the author and that he was procurator, not prior of that Charterhouse. The *Chronique de la Chartreuse à Hérinnes-lez-Enghien* (Lamalle 1932:26) provides us with the little we know about Brother Gheraert's religious life: that he entered Herne in 1338, became procurator there in 1343, transferred to the Charterhouse of Zelem and finally did a second profession at the Charterhouse of Liège where he died on the 15 of March 1377; furthermore that he was an excellent copyist, bible corrector and expert in Flemish, French, and Latin.⁵ Gheraert himself tells us in his prologue that the last of the five works of Ruusbroec he copied, the *Little Book of Enlightenment*, was a treatise Ruusbroec wrote in response to questions raised by his friends, the Carthusians of Herne, who, Gheraert goes on to recount, had invited Ruusbroec to answer some of those questions in person at their charterhouse.⁶ As to the date of this encounter Dom Huijben suggests the year 1362.⁷

This is what Brother Gheraert tells us about the reason for the visit and the questions he and his confreres had for Ruusbroec:

"And so I and some of our brothers were bold enough to send for Dom Jan, so that he could explain to us in person certain high words found in his books, especially the many things he says in the first book, when he speaks

⁴ That same year O'Sheridan (1914:122) - apparently independently of Reypens - came to the same conclusion: 'La chronique d'Hérinnes ne mentionne, parmi les membres de la communauté contemporains de Ruysbroeck, qu'un seul religieux ayant porté le prénom de Gérard: le moine Gérard de Saintes [...] Voilà l'auteur de la préface!'. See also Dhoeve 1979:172.

⁵ Anno millesimo tercentesimo trigesimo octavo, fuit in hac domo receptus ad ordinem tempore prioratus domini Ioannis Bochoute quidam clericus dictus Gerardus de Sanctis. Hic tempore noviciatus sui legavit huic domui suas hereditates ut patet in quodam instrumento de hoc facto. Hic ergo dominus Gerardus fuit procurator huius domus circa annum D.1343, nescio quot annis. Hic scripsit etiam originales libros de redditibus quos haec domus possidebat tunc temporis. Correxit etiam biblia et fuit egregius scriptor. Multos pulchros libros scripsit et etiam cantuales infirmarius huius domus habet duos libros eius manu conscriptos. Fuit etiam notabilis clericus, sicut apparet ex diversis eius scriptis. Hic habitavit postea in domo prope Diest, demum in domo Leodii. Credo quod ibi obierit. An tamen in aliqua illarum domorum etiam fecerit professionem ignoro. Fuit in ordine plus quam 30 annis, quia anno 1371 vixit adhuc in domo Leodii, ut scripsit manu propria in libro infirmorum. Credo quod hoc fuerit circa finem vitae suae. Ipse erat expertus in tribus linguis. Obiit idibus martii' (Lamalle 1932:26-7). See also Hendrickx 1984:86-7 and De Grauwe 1976:116, #795.

⁶ 6 This is one of the two visits Ruusbroec is recorded to have made outside his own monastery. The other one was made to Sister Margareta van Meerbeke at the Monastery of the Order of St Clare in Brussels.

⁷ Huijben 1931:109. See also Mertens 1993:58.

at length about the gift of counsel and at which we had taken offence. So we asked him to come to us."⁸

2. Union without distinction

As to the passage which very likely upset the Carthusians, Mommaers in his introduction to the 1981 edition of the *Little Book of Enlightenment* suggests the following lines from *The Realm of Lovers*. Contemplatives who have reached the highest form of mystical unity with the Creator, Ruusbroec writes,

"... possess God being enjoyably suspended in the superessence of God, and they are possessed by God as His own throne and His repose. For in the simple enjoyment of the essence they are one without distinction. In this plain simplicity of the divine essence there is neither knowledge nor desire nor activity, for this is an abyss without modes which is never understood by the active understanding. Therefore, Christ prayed that we should become one as He and His Father are one, through the enjoying love and the being-absorbed into the darkness without modes wherein the activity of God and of all creatures is lost and flooded away"⁹ (De Baere 1981:25)

For a good understanding of this passage it is necessary to situate it in the total description Ruusbroec gives of the different aspects of the mystical union between the human soul and God. The "oneness without distinction" ('eninghe sonder differentie ochte onderscheet') mentioned is the third and highest moment of the unitive experience, and presupposes the first and second moments which Ruusbroec calls respectively 'union with intermediary' ('eninghe overmidts middel') and 'union without intermediary' ('eninghe sonder middel'). Since the Christian mystical tradition has employed various distinct concepts of union with God and no agreement exists in the mystical literature concerning the sort of union one or another mystic described, we must take brief note of Ruusbroec's

⁸ My translation of 'Doch soe verboudic mi ende enighe van onsen broeders, ende wi senden tot desen her Jan om verclaert te werden bi sijns selfs spreken van enighen hogen woerden die wi vonden in desen boeken, ende sonderlinghe van vele dat hi seit in dat ierste boec, daer hi spreect vander gave des raets al doer, daer wi ons aen stieten; ende baden hem dat hi wilde to ons comen.' (De Vreese 1895:12).

⁹ "... dat si Gode besitten met ghebrukelijcken in-hanghene in dat overwesen Gods, ende van Gode beseten werden alsoe sijn eygen throen ende sin raste; want sij sijn inder eenvuldigher ghebrukelijcheyt des wesens één sonder differentie. In deser simpelre eenvuldicheyt godlijcs wesens en es noch kinnen, noch begheren, noch werken; want dit es een wiseloes abis die nummermeer vervolcht en werdet van werkelijkcken begripe. Daeromme badt Christus dat wi een werden souden, alsoe Hi en sijn Vader een sijn overmidts ghebrukelijcke mirme ende onsonkenheit in die wiselose demsterheit, daer es verloren ende ontvloten Gods ende alder creatueren werkelijkcheyt.' (Poukens and Reypens 1944: 73-4). This and subsequent English translations from the *Little Book of Enlightenment* are by Crowley and Rolfson.

teaching on *unio mystica*. The intermediary or medium of the first level is 'the grace of God together with the sacraments of the Holy Church and the divine virtues of faith and hope and love and a virtuous life led according to God's commandments'.¹⁰ Union without intermediary literally im-mediate union,¹¹ is achieved 'when the interior man, whom God has adorned with virtues and raised above them to a contemplative life, has, in his supreme turning inwards no other intermediary between him and God than his enlightened reason and his active love'.¹² The third aspect of the unitive experience happens when 'all spirits thus raised up melt away and are annihilated by reason of enjoyment in God's essence which is the superessence of all essence'.¹³ When Ruusbroec speaks of the soul being united with God without difference, however, the only restriction he places upon this union is that a contingent and finite substance can never become one nature and substance with the infinite and absolute being of God. Ruusbroec goes on to show in the clearest language that God and the soul remain existentially distinct beings. For brother Gheraert, however, Ruusbroec's use of 'eninghe sonder differentie ochte onderscheet' comes dangerously close to a kind of pantheistic union of man with the divine being. In this most intimate state of mystical union man would lose his own created being and become like the divine being. This is how he puts it in the Prologue:

"The first impression which the expression 'without distinction' makes is such that we were shocked by what he wrote. 'Without distinction' means something like: without any dissimilarity, without any alterity, entirely the same without distinction. Nonetheless it cannot be that the soul should be united with God in such a way that together they should become *one* essence; he himself denies that, too. One must than indeed wonder why he called the third union, union 'without distinction'. Concerning this I thought as follows: the first union he called 'with intermediary', and the second 'without intermediary'. In the third place, he wanted to treat of a union which is still more intimate, but he could not do it with just one word, without circumlocution. He then spoke of 'without distinction', even though he found that its meaning went a bit farther than the thought he wanted to express and verbalize. Therefore, the extent to which this expression appeared exaggerated to him, he elucidated on the basis of the words of Christ, where He prayed His Father that all His beloved should be brought to perfect union, as He is one with the Father. For although Christ prayed

¹⁰ 'die gratie gods, ende die sacramente der heiligher kerken, ende godleke doeghede: ghelove, hope ende minne, ende een doechtsam leven na die ghebode gods.' (De Baere 1981:110-111)

¹¹ Ruusbroec here refers explicitly to St. Bernard and with McGinn 'we can say that for Ruusbroec this is the level of the Bernardine *unitas spiritus*' (McGinn 1989:79)

¹² 'die inneghe mensche dien god ghesiert hevet met dogheden, ende daer boven verhaven in een scouwende leven, in sinen hoechsten inkere en es anders en gheen middel tusschen hem ende gode dan sine verlichte redene ende sine werkeleke minne.' (De Baere 1981:132-133)

¹³ 'alle verhavene gheeste versmelten ende vernieuten overmidts ghebruken in gods wesen, dat alre wesene overwesene es.' (De Baere 1981:146-147)

in that manner, He did not mean as one as he has become with the Father one single substance of Divinity, which is impossible, but as one as He is, without distinction, one enjoyment and one beatitude with the Father.¹⁴

What can be observed in these comments?

First, that, even though it is clear that Gheraert was aware that Ruusbroec condemned pantheistic views of the mystical union, the Carthusian monk is pointing to the lack of appropriate terminology to name the highest unitive state as the most likely source for the misunderstanding. Since there was no single word available to express the most intimate union, Ruusbroec had to resort to circumlocution. For Brother Gheraert the root of the problem thus is the choice of an unfortunate formulation for what is otherwise an orthodox thought.

Second, that he attributes to Ruusbroec an acknowledgement of the discrepancy between the meaning of the expression 'without distinction' and the thought he wanted to express: 'he found that its meaning went a bit farther than the thought he wanted to express and verbalize'. Brother Gheraert is clearly wrong here, since he does not understand that Ruusbroec's wording is not too high too express the crowning moment when the soul is lifted up above itself in God and is one spirit with God. 'Unity without distinction' has all the marks of literal language. That it is a literal description is evident from the way in which the unity is reached, as Ruusbroec emphasizes in the *Little Book of Enlightenment*. Instructive in this connection is a passage on the Trinity, which the Augustinian Canon adduces here as the model for the mystical experience, and of which Mommaers gives the following eloquent summary:

"In order to be able to think of the one God in three Persons, one usually makes a distinction between the Essence and the Persons. But distinguishing is not enough; Essence and Persons must also be perfectly one. ... The Persons ... never stand in opposition to the Essence; they always stand facing each other. The Essence is only *in* the other Person and only *there* can Father, Son and Spirit be one. In this way, then, the

¹⁴ 'Inden iersten lude des woerts sonder differencie soe stoten wi ons aen die reden, want sonder differencie ludet alsoe vele als sonder enighe onghelijcheit, sonder enighe anderheit, al dat selve sonder ondersceit. Nochtan en mach dat niet sijn dat die siele alsoe gheneghet werde met Gode, dat si te gader werden een wesen, ghelijc dat hi oec selve daer seit. Nu is te vraghen waer om dat hi dan die derde enighe noemt: sonder differencie? Hier toe peinsic aldus: Die ierste enighe hadde hi genoemt: overmits middel; ende die ander: sonder middel; ende ten derden mael woude hi setten noch een nare eninghe, mer die en conste hi niet tenen woerde, sonder circumlocucie, niet ghenomen hi en nam dit woert: sonder differencie, al waest hem een luttel te hoghe om te utene ende te wordene sine meininghe. Ende daer om, hoe vele dat hem te hoghe was dat verclaert hi met Cristus woirden, dair hi bad sinen vader dat alle sijn gheminden volbracht wonten in een, alsoe hi een is metten vader; want al bat Cristus aldus, hi en meinde niet alsoe één als hi een worden is metten vader, een enighe substancie der godheit; want dat is onmoghelic; mer alsoe één als hi sonder differencie een gebruiken ende een salicheit is metten vader.' (De Vreese 1895:17-8)

Father and the Son take pleasure in each other (think, meanwhile, of the union with intermediary) and "embrace" each other (refer to the union without intermediary) and this "embrace" reveals itself as *bottomless*: where one Person entirely com-prehends the other. (De Baere 1981:41-42)

Third, that the semantic categories of Ruusbroec's mystical language have an obvious experiential dimension. Brother Gheraert, however, reads Ruusbroec's texts not as descriptions of a mystical experience, but as theological treatises in which the expressions are first and foremost understood in their theological sense.¹⁵ He is therefore quite disturbed, not only by expressions like 'unity without expression', but also by the presence of the terms 'essence' ('wesen'), 'essential' ('wesenlic'), and 'superessence' ('overwesen'). Just as its English cognate 'being', 'wesen' can be both a gerund meaning 'way of being' and a noun corresponding to the Latin noun *essens/essentia*. While this term and its derivatives can be found in Ruusbroec's writings in both senses, he uses them in his description of the mystical unification with God as signifying a manner of being and not a modification in the order of the *essentia*. The misunderstanding reveals itself as a conflict between the verbalization of this sublime moment of the mystical experience and a one-sided philosophical reading of it.

An additional difficulty undoubtedly was that Ruusbroec's *The Realm of Lovers* almost certainly was not written with a particular audience in mind. It is even likely that Ruusbroec never intended to distribute it, neither to the Carthusians of Herne nor to anyone else outside of the Groenendaal monastery. The Carthusians had gotten a hold of it when it was secretly passed on to them by Ruusbroec's secretary, something Ruusbroec found out during his visit in the Charterhouse. When they offered to return the text he refused to accept it because he probably knew that the text had been distributed to others as well. Again in Gheraert's words:

"He said that he did not know that the book had been passed on and that he regretted that it had been made public, because it was the first book he made. A priest who had been Dom Jan's secretary had secretly lent it to us so we could copy it, even though he had forbidden him to pass it on. When I understood this I wanted to return this first book, the Realm of Lovers, so he could do with what he saw fit. But he refused."¹⁶

¹⁵ Deblaere (1961:1346) writes this about Ruusbroec's works and their theologically oriented readers: 'lorsque ces traités seront lus, non plus comme des explications d'un état d'âme, d'une expérience, mais comme des exposés théologiques ou même des manuels de méthode d'oraison, et que leurs expressions seront assumées avec le sens qu'elles prennent dans une philosophie thomiste, on les trouvera suspects et dangereux.'

¹⁶ 'hi ... seide hat hi niet en wiste dat die boec voirt ghecomen waer ende dat hem leet was dat hi gheopenbaert was, (want het was dierste boec die hi maecte), ende het hadde ons heymelic gheleent uut te scriven een priester die her Jans notarius gheweest hadde, dien he nochtan verboden hadde dat hys niet voirtsetten en soude. Als ic dit verstont, soe woude ic hem desen

But this is not all. In *The Realm of Lovers* more than in any of his other works Ruusbroec does not proceed in a progressive and systematic way when writing about the meeting of the soul and God. Instead of first explaining what he means by 'union with intermediary', then explain what 'union without intermediary' is, and conclude with 'union without difference', his description is based on a complex series of parallel constructions, such that at only one specific juncture in the description of one individual stage the other elements come again and again into question. Several Ruusbroec scholars have remarked that this discourse organization is closely linked to the subject matter being presented.¹⁷

3. Undiluted Brussels Flemish

The concluding paragraph of Brother Gheraert's text reveals his interest in language purism and language prescriptivism. It reads as follows:

"One should also note that these books are made in undiluted Brussels Dutch, in that few Latin or Walloon words or words of any other language are sprinkled in them. And also this same Brussels Dutch is used here more perfectly than the people there commonly speak it, in that they often omit or slur their pronominal articles, for example, if they want to say 'dat ierste, dat anderde, dat derde, dat vierde' [the first, the second, the third, the fourth], they leave behind the two letters of the article 'dat' and say 'dierste, dandere, derde, tfierde', and they do the same in other syllables and words. But because this author wanted to teach perfectly the whole truth, he has written his syllables, his words, his phrases, and his books completely and has accomplished everything for the glory of God and for our salvation."¹⁸

iersten boec vanden rike der gelieven hebben ghegeven sinen wille mede te doene, ende en woude.' (De Vreese 1895:13-4)

¹⁷ Cf. Deblaere 1961: 1355: 'Le mouvement vers l'unité essentielle et celui vers la ressemblance active se recontrent à tous les degrés, même les plus élevés, complémentaires, simultanés et réciproquement nécessaires (à l'image de la vie trinitaire, exemplaire divin)'; and Mommaers (De Baere 1981:33): 'The coexistence of the various modes of union, this uninterrupted interweaving of the most sublime union with the other two, is doubtless the most original and important element of the unitive experience.'

¹⁸ 'Oec is te merken dat dese boeken ghemaect sijn in onvermingheden brueselchen and dietsche, soe datter luttel latijnscher ofte walscher woerden ofte van enighen anderen tale in sijn ghesaeit. Ende oec is dat selve brueselsche dietsche volcomenre hier in gheset dant daer die lieden ghemienlic spreken, in dien dat si dicwile in hare tale vernieuten ofte minderen haer pronominael artikelen, bi desen exempelen: Als si souden segghen *dat ierste, datanderde, datderde, dat vierde*, soe laten si ghemienlic after die twee letteren van dien artikele *dat*, ende segghen: *dierste, dandere, derde, tfierde*, ende des ghelijcs in noch anderen silleben ende woerden. Mer om dat dese auctoer meinde die volle waerheit volcomelic te leren, soe heeft hi volmaectelic sine artikelen ende sine woerden ende sine sentencien ende sine boeken volscreven ende volbrocht ter eren Gods ende (te) onse salicheit.' (De Vreese 1895:19-20)

While he uses a lot of French and Latin words himself (in the concluding paragraph, e.g., we find *pronominael, exemplen, artikele, silleben*, and *sentencien*) he praises Ruusbroec for his pure, unadulterated language. He expresses sorrow over the fact that so many readers whose native language is Flemish neglect their mother tongue when it comes to reading or writing religious literature, and turn to Latin even though they understand Flemish better than Latin.

A further consideration concerning the effectiveness of religious teaching for Gheraert is the clear separation between individual words in writing. He singles out the contraction of the definite article with the following noun in constructions like 'tfierde' for 'dat vierde' ('the fourth') as an example of language use that violates this principle. It is unfortunate that he leaves the matter at that and does not develop the argument further. Certainly, from a comparative point of view, languages like Latin, which do not have a definite article and so would not use one in these constructions, can not be said to be less clear than Flemish or any other language that use a combination of article and noun and write them as two separate words. Added to this is the fact that in many other instances in other syntactic structures Ruusbroec does not abide by this principle. Combinations like 'draecht' for 'draecht het' ('carries it') and 'tlicht' for 'dat licht' ('the light') do show the effect of contraction and are commonly found written as one word.

4. Conclusion

It should be clear by now that the author of the prologue was not just a compiler and copyist of Ruusbroec's work. He studied his originals carefully and tried to the best of his abilities to grasp the subject matter. It is worth noting that he did not believe that everything in these writings can always be understood by the reader. His comments on the different types of reading are worth quoting in full:

"Even though they contain many words and sentences that surpass my understanding, I still think that they have to be good. When the Holy Spirit inspires a limpid and clear doctrine, we understand it without difficulty. But a more elevated doctrine requires more efforts of our understanding. And if the doctrine is too high for us, we humble ourselves before God and the teachers that have written it down."¹⁹

¹⁹ 'Ende al eest datter veel woerden ende sinnen in staen die minen verstane onthoghen, nochtan peinsic dat die goet moeten sijn; want alsoe die heylighe gheest opene ende lichte leringhe doet scriven, soe werden wi daer in gheleert sonder onse pine; mer in hogher leringhen oefenen wij onse verstandnisse met nernste, ende is ons die leringhe te hoech, soe veroetmoedighen wi ons selven onder Gode ende onder die leraren diese ghescreven hebben.' (De Vreese 1895:11-12)

There is literature that is written open and light and that transmits learning without any difficulties. There are however also writings that contain more advanced knowledge and makes us really think. Finally there are those writings that surpass our understanding, and all we can do is humbly recognize that there is more in the heavens and on earth than we can grasp, and at the same time that there are others who understand more than we do.²⁰

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²⁰ These concluding lines are a paraphrase of Mertens 1993:58.