

John Van Ruusbroec (1293-1381): A Flemish Mystic¹

[also known as John of Ruysbroeck]

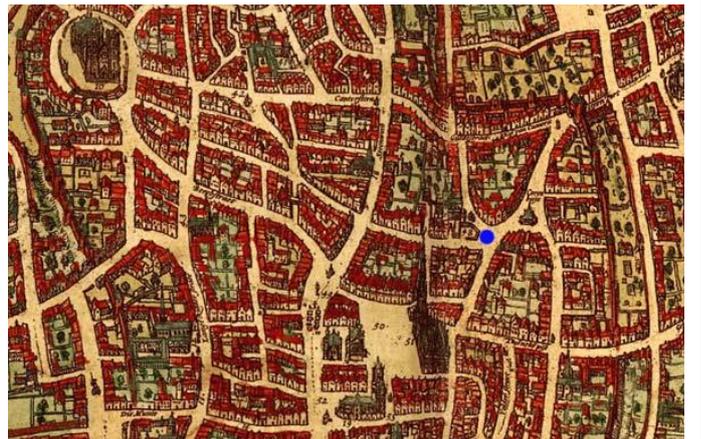
by Ignace Demaerel, Feb 2019

Does the name 'John of Ruysbroeck' [referred to after as 'Jan Van Ruusbroec'] mean anything to you or not? Does it ring a bell when you hear it? Apart from the school named after him in Brussels, he is relatively unknown, which is rather a pity. He had already gained international fame in his own day, and people would travel from afar to be able to speak to him. He was considered one of the great mystics of the southern Netherlands (along with Hadewijch), and is still **one of the most translated authors** in Dutch literature.



As his name might suggest, he was originally from Ruisbroek (south-west of Brussels). However, since the age of 9, he was brought up by his uncle Jan Hinckaert, a priest who was the chaplain of the church of Saint Gudule of Brussels (today the large cathedral of Saint Michael and Saint Gudule). Not an awful lot is known about his life; he went to school in Brussels, but probably did not continue to higher education. From

the year 1317 he was **chaplain of Saint Gudule for 25 years** – rather a humble position, since he was not allowed to preach himself. He was known for being pious, humble and devoted – a man of integrity. He was familiar with theological currents in Europe, but probably from the other priests he lived with. He also began writing at this time. Surprisingly, he did not write in Latin, but **in Middle Dutch** ('Brabantse Diets' or Brabantian dialect); but it was not long before his works were translated into Latin (1360).



Old print of Brussels; the cathedral is situated at the top left hand side

After these 25 years he had become dissatisfied with the rush of city life, and also with the low morals or the love of money to be found among other priests. Along with two fellow priests he decided to seek a life of seclusion and solitude **in the Sonian Forest**. In 1343 (thanks to Duke Jan) they were able to move into **a cloister** (a kind of farm) on the banks of the pond in Groenendaal (today Hoeilaart), first as a threesome, then later as eight men. They had to be self-sufficient. In 1345 a chapel was also inaugurated. For some years they lived in this manner without any formal rules. They did not want to attach themselves to other monastic orders due to the

1 This study on Ruusbroec is one of Gebedsnetwerk.be's current projects to become acquainted with the 'ancient wells' of spiritual life in our land and to re-open them. Mysticism concentrates on the most direct and intimate contact with God: 'seeking God's face' is certainly crucial for a christian living in our godless society where people are always running after things and yet spiritually impoverished. 'Mysticism' can be a not so positive word for some, due to the excesses practised in some mystical movements. It is precisely Jan van Ruusbroec who was seen by most people as a very balanced mystic.

worldliness they could see everywhere; from 1350 on however, they joined up with the Order of Saint Augustine (probably under pressure to do so); Ruusbroec was the first prior.

Ruusbroec would often retire **into the woods**, and take wax tablets with him to note down what was whispered to him by the Holy Spirit. Sometimes he would lose all sense of time in so doing: it was told, for instance, that his fellow brothers one day were going to look for him, because he stayed out for so long, and they would find him under a linden tree around which a heavenly light would shine (in 1604 a new chapel was built next to this tree). In his cell he would work on these notes until they became books. Ruusbroec left an unforgettable impression on those who were in his immediate vicinity. He **would experience God's presence in quite an extraordinary fashion** and could share his insights with others in an enthusiastic



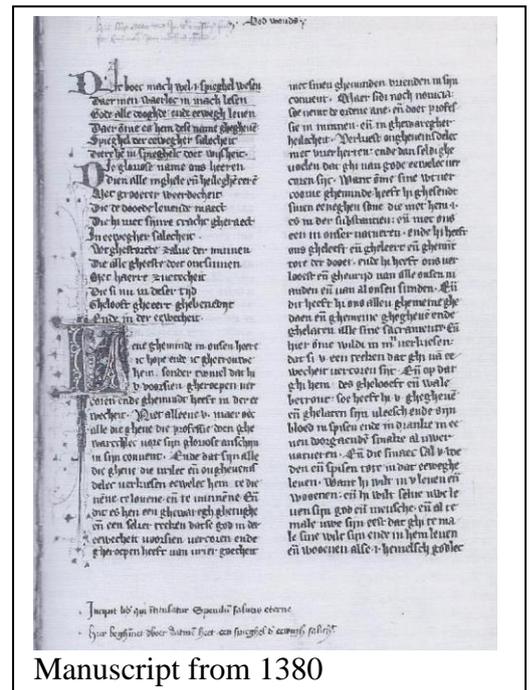
manner. One time he was leading the Eucharist, he would be so overwhelmed by God's presence and joy that he would be unable to carry on. He was acquainted with phenomena (both to himself and to others²) where the touch of God would overwhelm body and senses: the most powerful experiences of joy, love, unity, abundance, sometimes almost unbearably strong, more than anyone could imagine – which he described as **being 'spiritually inebriated'**. Some people then begin to sing and praise in a loud voice, others weep uncontrollably, or jump and dance, clap their hands and shout for joy, or enfold themselves in heavenly stillness for a long long time³. "On the level of physical sensitivity this is the most heavenly experience that a person can have on the earth. Sometimes this heavenly feeling is so intense that the person is afraid his heart will fail under the influence of God's gifts and what follows them". And yet Ruusbroec remained totally sober and balanced going through all these experiences, because they are secondary: a person must not be looking for the emotional 'high', but for God Himself. This extraordinary **mystical calling** was generally recognised and respected by the people around him. He knew Hadewych's writings, supported and defended her against critics, and adopted some of her ideas. He did, however, express criticism over some particularly heretical beguines (a certain Bloemardinne), and also over 'false mysticism' ('the free spirit'): these were people who, in his eyes, were so convinced of their unity with God that they became opinionated and totally incorrigible⁴. This was why he was also not in agreement with the German mystic Master Eckhart (who himself was condemned by the Church). Ruusbroec always remained humble, **free from vanity**, and submissive to the Church. Moreover, nowhere in his writings does it appear that he finds a mystic 'higher' or 'better' than other christians who are serving God faithfully according to their own calling.

2 Several descriptions are given by beguines at this time who had such extraordinary experiences; Hadewych was probably also a beguine. Ruusbroec never wrote about his personal experiences with God in the first person.

3 Such 'strange' phenomena were often to be seen in the Toronto-movement (1994-), but we also find them in the Bible itself (think of Saul in 1 Sam.19: 20-24)...

4 There were definitely excesses that gave mysticism a bad reputation: in some cases it seems that this passed over into pantheism (e.g. Eckhart), whereas in other instances, experiences were extremely emotional (almost erotic). This explains the sceptical attitude of many towards mysticism in general.

Ruusbroec wrote a total of **11 tracts and 7 letters**. He claimed that his books were directly inspired by God: "Be well aware of this: I never wrote down one word unless it was inspired by the H. Spirit." His best known work is 'Die gheestelike brulocht' ('The Spiritual Wedding')⁵. His central theme is 'minne' ('love – in the sense of 'cherishing'). He starts with Bible verses such as "My beloved is mine and I am His" (Song of Songs 2:16) and "See, the Bridegroom is coming, let us go out to meet him" (Matt 25:6). Among other things, he describes the various stages in the growth of the believer that lead towards unity with God: (1) working life (moral efforts), (2) life marked by a hunger for God (inward, in the heart), (3) life contemplating God (gazing directly into God's face). Elsewhere he describes the difference between (1) 'faithful servants' who obey their Lord diligently, (2) 'secret friends', who do from their heart more than what is required of them, and (3) 'hidden sons' who totally abandon themselves to God's love. "To meet God is to see God", he writes, among other things (think too of Psalm 27:4: "*One thing have I asked of the Lord, this thing have I sought after...: to behold the beauty of the Lord and to seek Him in His temple*").



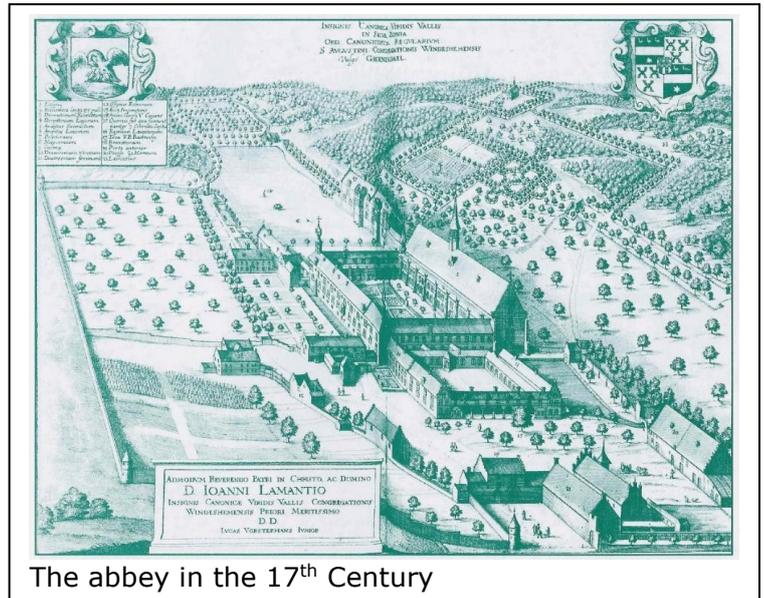
For Ruusbroec, 'minne' means first and foremost **the love that comes from God and returns to Him**, but this is not separate from human love. It does not take place in our feelings or in our head, but does have an effect on the whole of our body, soul and spirit. Through godly or divine love, a person is purified from their deepest inner being to the more external parts of their body (think of 1 John 3:2—"But we know that when He appears, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is"): by seeing God, we are transformed into His likeness. Love is man's 'being', his essence. That is why, in the very depths of our being, we are not 'individuals' left to ourselves, but relational beings. Love is belonging to another, more than belonging to oneself, the total abandoning of oneself to the other Person. In this unity with God a person can take part in the exchange of love between the Persons of the Trinity (think of John 17:21: "*that they might be one, even as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, that they too may be one in Us*"). Love lifts us up above our own ego and lets us sink, 'melt away' in God, wander in the 'love with no limits' and 'whirl in God's glory'. It is the most glorious experience that you can imagine on earth, as the most intense inner embrace, an endless enjoyment.⁶ And during these moments a heavenly clarity enlightens our human thinking, which is much stronger than any rational human insight. We see this purest form of worship in Revelation 4:8-11, where the angels and the 24 elders prostrate themselves before the throne of the Lamb, casting down their crowns and pouring out their worship, crying aloud, day and night: they forget themselves completely and are lost in the glory of the Lamb. Reaching this unity with God demands EVERYTHING from a person: totally dying to oneself, **being consumed** like a fire, 'falling to death in burning oil': letting go of all control and handing over one's initiative to God. At the same time, Ruusbroec is sober enough to grasp the fact

5 In another well known book, "The Spiritual Tabernacle", he sets down each element in the Jewish sacrifice in a spiritual way, with all the meanings as to how a person can draw near to God.

6 At times, a mystic can also "be sick with love", or "faint with love" (Song of Songs 2:5 and 5:6), and the pain that comes from separation with God is experienced as heart-rending, as the deepest loneliness possible.

that not everyone has such a calling, and that serving God faithfully in society is just as worthy, even necessary. Going inwards to God and outwards to the world are like breathing in and out.

Ruusbroec's influence spread quickly throughout Europe: many nobles and powerful people came to find him in Groenendaal, even doctors of theology, from France, The Netherlands and Germany. Geert Groote, for example, the founder of the Modern Devotion⁷, came to visit him from the Netherlands. He had great respect for Ruusbroec, took on many of his ideas (although he did not agree with everything). During his lifetime, various writings were already translated into Latin and High German, and shortly after his death into English as well. Later they were translated into other European languages, and even arrived in Peru, India and China⁸. When the Flemish priest and poet Guido Gezelle died (1830-1899) they found one of Ruusbroec's books lying open on his desk. In 1908 Ruusbroec was beatified by the Pope.



The abbey in the 17th Century

What happened to the **priory in Groenendaal**? After Ruusbroec four other brothers began writing there. The buildings were several times expanded, were later burned, then rebuilt and extended again, etc. In later centuries the cloister flourished, and became the leader of several other cloisters. Emperor Maximilian of Austria and Charles V were regular visitors, also to go hunting, as well as Philip the Fair and arch-duchess Isabella. However, later on, the cloister fell into disrepair, and in 1787 it was demolished on the order of the 'enlightened' emperor Joseph II (who regarded all monasteries of a contemplative kind as being 'useless'.) The demolishing of the church (see below left) was stopped halfway (that's why there are still some remains); but in 1795 it was closed for good. The 'castle' that stands there today (that now serves as a nature



The priory seen from the pond

7 The 'Modern Devotion' was a sort of revival movement in The Netherlands which laid the accent on a return to personal piety. Later the book 'The Imitation of Christ' by Thomas à Kempis became the standard work of this movement, and Ruusbroec's influence is clearly to be found here. Erasmus was also heavily influenced by the Modern Devotion.

8 Known translations up until now (partially) are into Latin, High German, Middle English, modern English, French, Middle Low German, contemporary Dutch, modern German, Spanish, Italian, Catalan, Portuguese (in preparation), Norwegian, Hungarian, Polish, Russian, Chinese, Japanese, Hindi. This is exceptional in Dutch literature.

centre, below on the right) was originally built as a coach house and as a staff residence of the Groenendaal priory in 1783. The actual 'wood museum' is the former farm belonging to the priory.



This article ends with a little **brain-teaser**: Is complete unity with God a very special and exceptional grace which He only gives to a very very small group of privileged people, or does God call all people and all His children to that level of intimate love?