

## “THE UNMEASURED FLAME OF GOD'S LOVE”

### JOHN OF RUUSBROEC ON BURNING AND BEING BURNED UP

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The reading room of the unique library of the Ruusbroec Society in Antwerp features a stained-glass window by Eugeen Yoors (1879-1975). It is a particularly interesting window. Above a seated Ruusbroec, burning flames from Heaven visualize what the following text endeavours to explain in some depth: a central concept in the mystical teaching of John of Ruusbroec, represented by this metaphor: “burning and being burnt up by fire of love”.



Eugeen Yoors: Stained-glass window, made in 1955 for the house chapel of the Ruusbroec Society, Prinsstraat 17, Antwerp. Now in the reading room of the library of the Ruusbroec Society in Grote Kauwenberg 32. The signature appears in the lower right side of the window.

### **John of Ruusbroec**

John of Ruusbroec was born in the year 1293, in Ruisbroek. Which Ruisbroek is concerned here is not entirely certain. It may be the village Ruisbroek, between Brussels and Halle, but it could also be an area in the city of Brussels, an area that also bore the name Ruisbroek, situated where the Central Station currently stands. In any case, at a fairly young age he was already living with his uncle Jan Hinckaert, who was a priest and connected to the church of Saint Michael and Saint Gudule, the church which is currently a cathedral, but was at that time still a collegiate church. John was educated at the Latin school. He desired to become a

priest and received the usual formation for candidates to the priesthood at that time. He was ordained at the age of twenty-four and for the following twenty-five years he was chaplain of Saint Michael's and Saint Gudule. A priest thus, who performed all the normal liturgical and pastoral duties expected of a chaplain in a fourteenth-century city such as Brussels; a priest who was also part of a small community that included his uncle and Franc of Coudenberg, a canon of the so-called "small chapter."

It is in this context that Ruusbroec wrote his first works, among them his masterpiece, *The Spiritual Espousals*. It seems, however, that over the course of time the small group of priests felt less and less at home with the rest of the clergy of Brussels. Ruusbroec's biographer is veiled and metaphorical when he speaks about this. It seems as though actually a very deep disparity in terms of spirituality lay at the foundation. Whatever the reason may have been, in 1343 these men withdrew to a hermitage in the Sonian Forest, called Groenendaal. In the meantime, Ruusbroec had not stopped his literary activity, a large part of which was inspired by his care to help mystically gifted people understand the depth of their lives.



Over the course of time, other people joined the group of hermits at Groenendaal, and it seemed sensible to request a more secure ecclesiastical statute and to adopt a rule for this purpose. They chose the rule of St. Augustine, and thus became Augustinian canons. Franc of Coudenberg became the provost and John of Ruusbroec became the prior, a task he would fulfil until his death in 1381. By the end of his life he had written eleven books, all of them in Middle Dutch. Some had already been translated into Latin. Ruusbroec had become famous far beyond the borders of the Duchy of Brabant, namely in the circles of the so-called "Friends of God" in Strasburg and even among students at the Sorbonne.

Modern studies have demonstrated that Ruusbroec's influence on the development of European spiritual life is far greater than one would suspect at first glance. The first and most obvious influence concerns the *Modern Devotion*, the spiritual movement in the north of the Low Countries, which was a fruitful preparation both for great humanists such as Erasmus as well as for painters of the interior life such as Rogier Van der Weyden, Dirc Bouts or Hugo Van der Goes. The *Modern Devotion*, which owed so much to the fundamental insights of Ruusbroec, later formed Ignatius of Loyola, the inspiration and co-founder of the Jesuit order. In the fifteenth century, the Franciscan Hendrik Herp (Harpius) systematised the spiritual teaching of Ruusbroec and these works had an unequalled success across the whole of Europe. Theresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Jean de Saint-Samson and Benedict of Canfield: all were influenced by the Brabander John of Ruusbroec. It is no exaggeration to state that Ruusbroec's works left an unmistakable mark on the Christian mystical literature of the following centuries.

## Mystical teachings on the encounter between God and man

Now we focus on the content of Ruusbroec's mysticism, and more specifically on the meaning of one theme from it, namely "burning and being burned up" – the phenomenon metaphorically rendered on the stained-glass window mentioned above.

To understand this theme well, it is necessary to see that in all his works, John of Ruusbroec speaks about the relationship between God and man. More even, the loving encounter between God and man. Of course, this does not mean that inter-human relationships are unimportant to him, on the contrary, but it does mean that Ruusbroec's primary intention is to describe the loving encounter between God and man, the complexity of which he wishes to analyse and the depth of which he wishes to gauge.

Now what, according to John of Ruusbroec, is the structure of the encounter between God and man? He distinguishes three 'layers,' three 'levels', in this encounter.

The first level is indirect. After all, God is the totally Other, who at no single moment coincides with anything in the world that surrounds us. What our senses perceive is never God, though it might contain a hidden reference to the Absolute, a trace that refers to the totally Other. Therefore, one may say that created reality can be the medium of an indirect encounter with God. In a mediated way, God makes one suspect his loving presence, and man answers this love in a mediated way as well, namely by actually striving for the good.

However, according to Ruusbroec, another more inward encounter is also possible. This occurs when the person feels inwardly attracted to the hidden presence of the transcendent God. Thanks to the traces of God in the world around us, the discrete signals of his presence, man will sometimes desire that hidden Presence itself. The person is then inflamed in love for God himself. On this level the encounter is inward and Ruusbroec describes how God sometimes lets his presence be felt in the person's core; how God touches the person directly at the innermost depths of his being. That deepest being of man is existence, the mere fact that I am. My sensory impressions change, my body changes, my inner thoughts and desires change, but throughout all these changes there is only one constant, namely that I am there. And there, on the level of my existence, my "being" — *wesen* in Middle Dutch — the immediate touch of God makes itself felt. And Ruusbroec then describes how all the dimensions of the human person are inwardly attracted and focused on that one thing, namely the immediate touch of God. Thoughts, desires, and consciousness: this multiplicity is made one, converging into a single movement towards the Other, who makes his presence felt inwardly. John of Ruusbroec describes this movement with the metaphor of burning: burning with love for the one God.

However, Ruusbroec is certainly not the only mystic to use this metaphor. It is already to be found in the twelfth century works of Hugo of Saint-Victor<sup>1</sup> — another master of mystical theology from the Low Countries — and much earlier in one of the three great Cappadocians of the fourth century, Gregory of Nyssa. In the sixteenth century, John of the Cross devoted one of his most beautiful works entirely to this metaphor (*Llama de amor viva*).

Now, according to Ruusbroec there is also a third level, which is only seldom experienced. On some rare occasions it happens that the person experiences something of the hidden origin

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<sup>1</sup> *Commentary on the book Ecclesiastes*, PL 175, c. 116-18

of the fire of love. When man burns in the love of God, everything in him is actively and yearningly directed towards the divine Other. But it sometimes happens that man discovers that this fire of love has its origin in God himself, which is “deeper” or “higher” than the *wesen* of man. This means that at that moment, man discovers something of the life of God himself, that God himself is a fire of love, and even more, a love-unity of the Father and the Son, which we call the Holy Spirit.

At that moment the contemplative person thus experiences something of the origin of his existence, experiences something of the Creating God, who gives him existence every second. The foundation of human existence is God himself, and God is a blaze of love. In other words, as opposed to what has been accepted in the modern age since René Descartes, according to Ruusbroec the deepest foundation of the human person is not the “I”: there is a deeper foundation upon which this “I” rests, namely an abyss of divine love.

Let us now listen to how Ruusbroec describes all this (in *Opera omnia* 10, pp. 110-113):

*[In dat innichste sijns gheests] vint hi gheoppenbaert een ewich licht, ende in dien lichte ghevoelt hi dat ewighe inmanen der eenicheit gods, ende hi ghevoelt hem selven also eenen ewighen brant der minnen dien boven al ghelust een te sine met gode. (...)*

*Dat ewighe inmanen der eenicheit gods dat maect inden gheeste een ewich berren van minnen. Maer daer de gheest sonder onderlaet die scout betaelt, dat maect in hem een ewich verberren. Want in die overforminghe der eenicheit falieren alle gheeste in haren werkene ende en ghevoelen anders niet dan al verberren in die eenvoldighe eenheit gods. Dese eenvoldighe eenicheit gods en mach niemen ghevoelen noch besitten, hi en si voerstaende in onghemetenre claerheit ende in minnen boven redene ende sonder wise. Inden vorestane ghevoelt die gheest in hem een ewich berren in minnen. Ende in desen brande der minnen en vint hi inde noch beghin, ende hi ghevoelt hem selven een met desen brande der minnen.*

*Altoes blijft die gheest berrende in hem selven, want sine minne es ewich. Ende altoes ghevoelt hi hem verberrende in minnen, want hi wert ghetrocken in die overforminghe der eenheit gods.*

*Daer die gheest berrent in minnen, eest dat hi hem selven merct, hi vint onderscheet ende*

[In the inmost part of his spirit] he shall find revealed a light eternal and in that light he shall feel the eternal summoning inward by God's unity and he shall feel himself like an eternal fire of love which desires to be one with God above all other things. (...)

The eternal summoning inward by God's unity creates an eternal burning of love in the spirit. But where the spirit pays that debt continuously it is consumed inside for ever. For in the transformation of that unity all souls fail in their activity and they only feel a total burning up in the single unity of God. And no man can experience or possess this single unity of God if he does not stand before (him) in brightness immeasurable and in love that is above reason and without manner. In this standing before the spirit feels within itself an eternal burning in love. And in that fire of love it finds neither beginning nor end and it feels itself one with that burning of love.

The spirit always burns in itself for its love is eternal. And it always feels that it is consumed by love, for it is drawn into the transformation of God's unity.

When the spirit burns in love it will find a distinction and an otherness between itself

*anderheit tuschen hem ende gode. Maer daer hi verberent, daer es hi eenvoldich ende en heeft gheen ondersceet. Ende daeromme en ghevoelt hi anders niet dan eenheit. Want die onghemetene vlamme der minnen gods, si verteert ende verslint al dat si bevaen mach in haers selfsheit.*

*Ende aldus moechdi merken dat die intreckende eenicheit gods anders niet en es dan grondelose minne die den vader ende den sone, ende al dat leeft in hem, met minnen intreckende es in een eewich ghebruken. Ende in deser minnen wille wij berren ende verberen sonder inde in eewicheit, want hierinne es gheleghen alre gheeste salicheit.*

*Ende hieromme soe moeten wij al onse leven fondeeren op een grondeloes abis, soe moghe wij ewelijc in minnen sincken ende ontsincken ons selven in die grondelose diepheit; ende metter selver minnen sele wij hoghen ende onthoghen ons selven in die ombegripelijcke hoocheit, ende in die minne sonder wise sele wij dolen. Ende si sal ons verleiden in die onghemetene wijtheit der minnen gods. Ende daer inne sele wij vlieten ende ons selven ontvlieten in die ombekinde welde der rijcheit ende der goetheit gods; ende daer inne selen wij smelten ende versmelten, wielen ende verwielen ewelijc in die glorie gods.*

*Siet, in yeghewelc ghelijckenisse van allen desen, soe toene ic eenen scouwenden mensche sijn wesen ende sine oefeninghe. Maer niemen anders en maecht verstaen, want scouwende leven en mach niemen anderen leeren.*

and God when it examines itself. But when it is consumed it is one-fold and there is no distinction left. And it will therefore experience nothing but unity, for the unmeasured flame of God's love consumes and devours all it can capture inside its own self.

And so you will see that God's unity, which draws all things into itself, is nothing other than the unfathomable love which lovingly draws in the Father and the Son, and all that lives in them in eternal enjoyment. And in that love we shall burn and be burnt up by it without end for all eternity, for in it lies the bliss of all spirits.

And for this reason we must lay the foundations of our life in an unfathomable abyss and so we shall be able to sink into love forever and sink away from ourselves in those unfathomable depths, and with the same love we shall raise and transcend ourselves onto those incomprehensible heights and in that love we shall wander without manner and it shall lead us and lose us in the measureless width of God's love. In it we shall flow, and flow beyond ourselves in that unknown luxury that is the wealth and goodness of God and in it we shall melt and be melted down, we shall whirl and be whirled away in the glory of God for ever.

Look, in each one of all these likenesses I show his own being and his own practice to a contemplative man. But no one else will be able to understand this, since no one can teach others the contemplative life.

Thus, Ruusbroec speaks about “burning” and “being burned up” or “consumed by fire”. “Burning” refers to the intense love of man for God: man is fascinated by God, feels completely attracted to God, who simultaneously always stays the totally Other – and it is precisely for that reason that the fascination and yearning love remains. “Consumed by fire” refers to the complete gift of the self, the surrender of man to the divine Other. Man does not only give a part of his time and attention, no, he gives himself. Totally, and the gift of love consumes like a fire everything that the person is. And thus the person becomes one with the fire of love that God is.

## The stained-glass window

It is now time to look more closely at the stained-glass window which Eugeen Yoors made in 1955 for the small house chapel of the Ruusbroec Society, Prinsstraat 17 in Antwerp. A number of years ago, when this house was completely rebuilt by the Flemish Jesuits, the window was moved to the reading room of the Ruusbroec Society, Grote Kauwenberg 32, where it can still be seen today.

We see John of Ruusbroec, praying whilst sitting in the Sonian Forest, which is suggested by the tree roots and the foliage. He is engulfed by a spiritual fire.

The composition of the metal structure within which the glass is mounted, is triangular, tapering to one point at the top, which is combined with circles that emit, as it were, from the one point at the top and gradually become wider towards the bottom. This structure gives the window an inner dynamic and is noticeably similar to the anthropological vision in Ruusbroec's works and his description of the mystical experience. The multiplicity of bodily and sensory impressions is pulled up towards one point, where the immediate touch of the person by God takes place. Yoors, understandably, did not depict this touch as such, but did suggest it by situating the glow that surrounds Ruusbroec's expression and the glow of the Holy Spirit just above it, in one and the same fire. Ruusbroec's expression seems to indicate an inward vision. In this way, the metaphor 'fire' not only makes it possible to us to see what happens, but Yoors shows the fact that God's fire of love exceeds and transcends the man Ruusbroec. Therefore – unlimited, as it were, by the figure of the mystic – the fire is *outside* him as well as inward and felt *within* him, in his *wesen*, the core of the person. Simultaneously the inward touch of God has an emitting effect in the person, from the most inward to the outside. The structure of the window suggests two movements that are typical for Ruusbroec's descriptions: the attraction to what is deepest and most inward – which is called the "highest" (*altus*) in the metaphors of the Middle Ages – and the outward movement, suggested by the gradually widening circles.

The fact that the figure of Ruusbroec is rendered with his eyes open is also remarkable in itself. This is very different, for example, to the way Bernini depicted the ecstasy of Theresa of Avila in the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome. Yoors' choice to depict Ruusbroec with his eyes open is entirely in accordance with Ruusbroec's descriptions: numerous times he describes the deepest mystical experience as the perception – or rather, the contemplation or vision – of an overwhelming light, which is God himself. It is a common feature in most medieval depictions of mystics or visions, that the saints have their eyes open wide.

Let us now look at the blaze of fire itself. It is clear that the flames emit from the highest, central point, where the Holy Spirit is depicted. The source of the fire is thus God himself, and more specifically the Holy Spirit, who is the reciprocal love between the Father and the Son. Neither the Father nor the Son is depicted. What we see on the window corresponds entirely with the first sentence of the quotation: *[In the inmost part of his spirit] he shall find revealed a light eternal and in that light he shall feel the eternal summoning inward by God's unity and he shall feel himself like an eternal fire of love which desires to be one with God above all other things.* The fire is depicted as wild flames that have spread fiercely, though the core, in the highest and smallest circle, is rather more like a quietly seething glow. Hereby, Yoors has suggested the complementarity of the fierce, active burning on the one hand and being burned up in the glow on the other.



It is noticeable that the same glow that can be seen at the top, of the Holy Spirit, can also be seen around Ruusbroec's head. Thus, the suggestion is raised that the contemplative visionary is transformed into the same light that he is contemplating: *In this standing before the spirit, he feels within itself an eternal burning in love. And in that fire of love it finds neither beginning nor end and it feels itself one with that burning of love.* Indeed, this is what Ruusbroec writes in various places in his works and the reason he had to go and justify himself before the Carthusians of Herne, who considered this to be a dubious assertion. They thought Ruusbroec was of the opinion that the person is so much taken up into the loving fire of God that he or she eventually becomes God. From this perspective, the final result would thus be that the distinction between God and human would disappear, and thus also, *ipso facto*, the relationship between God and man. And then there would no longer be any possibility to speak of love. In such a pantheistic perspective, the human is ultimately an entity that rests in itself. However, the Carthusians of Herne had misunderstood him - Ruusbroec went and explained this to them personally - because if there is one thing he would never have wanted to abandon, it would be the loving encounter between man as man and God as God. The protagonists in the encounter do not disappear in one another, they do not absorb one another, on the contrary, they become one community of love. In my opinion, Eugene Yoors rendered this delicate point, about which there has been a great deal of misunderstanding over the centuries, very correctly, by depicting the glow of the Holy Spirit and the glow around Ruusbroec's face in a similar way, without giving the impression that the glow is emanating from the figure of Ruusbroec himself.

For that matter, the artist has especially concentrated on the depiction of burning, i.e. receiving God's love initiation and the active giving of the self as an answer to it. The position of the hands on this window seems to depict a position of acceptance, while the expression seems to be one of surrender. This means that the innermost dimension, which John of Ruusbroec describes as consumption - using the metaphor of being 'burned up' - is not depicted by Yoors. This is probably not a coincidence. After all, being consumed means: being completely absorbed in God - whilst at the same time not ceasing to exist as a person. Being absorbed *in* the loving fire that is God immediately implies being withdrawn from sight. After all, nobody has ever seen God. The fact that Eugene Yoors did not depict this is evidence of his correct mystical-theological sense.

The stained-glass window shows us a crucial moment in the mystical experience. And this is something, according to Ruusbroec, which is not experienced like this by many people. Many good people experience God indirectly. Some among them also experience Him directly, experience an immediate contact with the Creator and begin to burn with love for Him. And very exceptionally, a contemplative also experiences something of the life of God itself, i.e. of the loving fire that is the origin of existence. It is from the point of view of the latter that Ruusbroec writes the curious sentence: *And this is why we can not do otherwise than to ground our lives on an unfathomable abyss.* In my opinion, Eugene Yoors has made this fundamental idea of Ruusbroec's felt by making him float, as it were, in the glow. Though we do indeed see Ruusbroec sitting down, he does not really seem to be sitting on the ground. He is resting on the fire itself. In other words, his life is grounded on the unfathomable abyss of Divine love, grounded *in that unknown luxury that is the wealth and goodness of God.*

One final thought. Considering the above, one might wonder whether this mystical depth has any relevance for contemporary thinking. Are such considerations not an exotic, but otherwise wholly unrestraining pastime? No, the consequences of this Christian-humanist vision are important, since Ruusbroec offers a critique - and it is precisely this element from his oeuvre

that Eugeen Yoors has revealed — of a basic premise of the ideology that props up our contemporary social order. His mysticism stands in complete opposition to a social order in which a human, in the last analysis, is nothing more than an individual, an interchangeable, replaceable item in a greater network. His view is critical of all forms of totalitarianism, which — in the line of nominalism — reduce the human person to simply an ‘individual’. True, that which the mystical visionary sees is not seen by everyone. But, in a Christian perspective, the reality of what he sees applies to everybody. Not every person experiences that his existence is grounded on an abyss of divine love. But nevertheless, this is very much the hidden depth of every human life, according to Ruusbroec. From this follows immediately, that every human is a unique and irreplaceable person, precisely because of that transcendent depth. Usually hidden, yet real, this divinely willed destiny of man, this gift or calling, invites every person to a relationship of love. The invitation to enter into such a relationship is extended to every person, and must be accepted personally – even if within the framework of the Church as a community. The relationship itself, then, is unique, even if it always consists in being consumed by Divine love, simply because call and answer are personal. Therefore, the consequences of this Christian-humanist vision do have relevance for contemporary thought.

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