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Including the Excluded

Strategies of Opening Up in Late Medieval Religious Writing

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ABSTRACT: Practices of rewriting and mouvance are central to medieval culture, but have been neglected by contemporary scholarship. This paper highlights how collaborative forms of writing such as religious song engage with complex theological thought, opening up a discourse from which the laity had previously been excluded. Using forms which defy conventional author-based aesthetic norms, these songs explore poetic practices which are both collective and inclusive.

KEYWORDS: aesthetics; courtly culture; inclusion; lyric; mouvance; mysticism; textuality

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OBSCURITY

The literary works which this essay considers have often been neglected. Before turning to the texts themselves, it may therefore be worth considering modern scholarly approaches to them, since those provide the lens through which we perceive medieval culture. In the case of literary works, there are a number of often unspoken assumptions which shape critical analysis and condition what is considered to be ‘inside’ the scholarly frame. Concepts of a canon presuppose a closed circle of authors or works who belong and are recognized, excluding those who do not fit the preconceptions. Often, these acts of exclusion may be based on non-literary criteria — works made by or for women, for example, can be invisible when the dominant model is male authorship. Nevertheless, exclusion is most commonly justified on aesthetic grounds. Because the works excluded do not conform to established aesthetic norms, they are considered to be of lower quality and therefore relegated to the margins. Assumptions about textual qualities can work in the same way: the norm is considered to be a stable text created by a single author — despite the fact that many

medieval texts are unstable, changed and adapted by every new generation of readers and copyists, brought into contact with new texts in compilations, abbreviated, or rewritten in a process of creative reading and rereading, but also writing and rewriting, in which there is no single stable hierarchy between a controlling single author and passive recipients of the authentic text, but instead a creative interaction.

Medieval religious songs have often been neglected by modern scholars because they do not fit the categories defined in the nineteenth century as markers of literary status: religious songs are mostly anonymous; their transmission is unstable, so that often, there are multiple variants instead of a single authorial and authorized version; finally, they defy normative poetics in using loose forms rather than the highly regulated strophic forms of the secular love lyric requiring pure rhyme and metrically identical repetitions.¹ As a result, these more open, less regulated forms were often marginalized by modern scholars, because they defy the desire for stable authoritative texts attributable to a single, known author to whom poetic greatness can be attributed. This also means that many of these texts have not been edited, and because they mostly lack author-attributions, even the ones edited are largely invisible to anyone searching for names of well-known authors.

In the context of this volume, religious songs are interesting, however, precisely because of their porousness, because they give evidence of the ways in which complex concepts from speculative theology, which were by many considered the prerogative of experts and best kept away from novices and laypeople, nevertheless found their way to audiences beyond the closed circles of university disputations or monastic discourse. The songs are evidence for the circulation of ideas beyond tightly controlled sites of knowledge, which in the period are also the seats of textual production — since monastic scriptoria as well as university circles are responsible for the larger part of manuscript production in Latin well into the late Middle Ages.

1 For details, see Almut Suerbaum, 'Es kommt ein schiff, geladen: Mouvanze in mystischen Liedern aus Straßburg', in *Schreiben und Lesen in der Stadt: Literaturbetrieb im spätmittelalterlichen Straßburg*, ed. by Stephen Mossmann, Nigel F. Palmer, and Felix Heinzer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), pp. 99–116.

An example will illustrate such differences in transmission as well as literary form. In 1841, Philipp Wackernagel, a nineteenth-century Swiss-German schoolteacher and elder brother of the philologist and editor Wilhelm Wackernagel, published a collection of 850 German hymns from Martin Luther to the seventeenth century, expanded into a five-volume collection between 1864 and 1877 in order to capture both Latin hymn traditions and vernacular religious song from the beginnings to the post-Reformation period.² The preface of the first volume paints a picture of familiar Protestant myth-making: Latin religious hymns flourished in the early Christian period of Ambrosius and Gregory the Great, spread across Europe, and sparked adaptations. Some of these are of great power and beauty, though Wackernagel considers most of the later, that is medieval, hymns to be of little aesthetic value and often bordering on the heretical ('von schwächlichem oder gar das Wort Gottes verläugnendem abgöttischem Wesen').³ Wackernagel sees this period of decline reversed during the Reformation, when the works of Luther and his followers Melancthon, Stigelius, and others return to the true origins of the early Latin hymns with texts of their own, characterized by simplicity and purity ('wie in unmittelbarem Anschluss an die Hymnen von Ambrosius und Gregorius zu ihrer ersten Einfachheit und Reinheit zurückgeführt').⁴ He highlights the methodological difficulties facing anyone attempting to collect material transmitted with a degree of textual licence and variance: while he considers it therefore methodologically desirable to go back to the manuscript tradition, he acknowledges the scale of the task were it to involve searching every monastic or cathedral library — and notes that it would by definition have to be an international enterprise.⁵ While he therefore considers a complete critical edition of all hymns and sequences (roughly 4000) an impossibility, he offers an anthology of 850, building on the work of two earlier collections by Mone and David, but abandoning their thematic ordering in favour of a chrono-

2 Philipp Wackernagel, *Das deutsche Kirchenlied von M. Luther bis auf N. Herman und A. Blaurer* (Stuttgart: Liesching, 1841) and *Das deutsche Kirchenlied von der ältesten Zeit bis zum Anfang des XVII. Jahrhunderts*, 5 vols (Leipzig: Teubner, 1864–77).

3 *Ibid.*, I (1864), p. vii.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*, p. viii

logical one. He highlights his own contribution in adding material from the fourteenth century and onwards, especially such vernacular songs which use strophic forms familiar from vernacular folk song, or using refrain forms:

Vom vierzehnten Jahrhundert an habe ich Vieles selbständig gesammelt, besonders auch in Beziehung auf die eigentümlichen Lieder, welche in der Form der Auffassung wie der Verse und der Melodien nicht den Hymnen, sondern dem deutschen Volksliede gleiche und auch wiederkehrende Zusätze an den Strophen lieben, welche jene nicht kennen.⁶

(Starting with the fourteenth century, I have added much which I had collected myself, especially with reference to those unique songs which in their form, themes, verse-structure, and tunes resemble German folk songs rather than Latin hymns, especially in their preference for refrains, unknown in the hymn repertoire.)

Amongst his selection of fourteenth-century hymns, he includes a group of eleven songs which he attributes to Johannes Tauler (nos. 457–68), the thirteenth-century preacher and pupil of Eckhart. These attributions rely either on the judgement of the sixteenth-century reformer Daniel Sudermann, who transcribed them from the manuscripts of the convent ‘St Nikolaus in undis’ in Strasbourg which had ended up in the Berlin library, or on the fact that they were included in the 1543 Cologne print of Tauler’s collected works. The second of the cantilenae from the Cologne print may serve as an example. It is prefaced by a rubric which sets out its place in the sequence of songs and the state of mind of its putative author:⁷

‘Ein ander lietlin.
Der das dichte, dem was also zu mut.’

Min geist hat sich ergangen
in eine wueste stil,
da noch wort noch wise in stet.
Din wesen hat mich vmbfangen,
das ist kein wunder inne.

6 Ibid., II (1867), p. ix.

7 Cf. Almut Suerbaum, ‘The Pseudo-Tauler *Cantilenae*’, *Ons Geestelijk Eerf*, 84 (2013), pp. 41–54.

Min geist hat sich ergangen,
 vernunft kan das nit erlangen
 es ist oben aller sinnen,
 und des wil ich mich suchen lan.

Min geist hat sich ergangen
 zu einer stunt:
 Sink in den grunt,
 Die ungeschaffenen selicheit die wirt dir kunt.

Scheid dich von nit,
 du finds das nit
 das die zunge leüget und blibt doch yet,
 das der geist aleine verstet
 der keines urteils pflegt.⁸

(‘Another song. He who composed it felt like this.’ || My spirit has found succour in a silent desert without word or tune. Your nature has embraced me; that is no wonder. || My spirit has found succour; reason may not attain that, it is beyond all senses, and therefore I will allow myself to be sought out. || My spirit has found succour at one time: sink into the abyss; you will find uncreated blessedness. || Separate yourself from nothing, you will not find that which the tongue denies and yet remains, that which only the spirit understands who does not judge.)

The song uses diction which is familiar from mystical theology as developed by Eckhart and transmitted in vernacular sermons by Eckhart’s pupils, including Johannes Tauler. In particular, it draws on images and conceits of negative theology such as the concept of approaching God not through a process of acquiring virtues, but rather through stripping the soul of everything which is earthly, so that the desert can become the place of closest proximity to God precisely because it lacks all attributes. Similarly, an approximation to God is achieved not by soaring to great heights but by sinking into an abyss (‘grunt’), and not through sophisticated reason but rather in the stripping away of sound and words as well as reason.

The song thus evokes complex and indeed contested religious concepts such as the union between the human soul and the divine. At the same time, it uses a literary form which is neither the artful

8 Wackernagel, *Das deutsche Kirchenlied*, II, pp. 306–07.

prose that was common for vernacular as well as Latin sermons, nor the highly regulated strophic forms of French-inspired secular love songs with their sophisticated use of literary technique and their aura of literary exclusivity. Instead, as the variants of this song demonstrate, it creates a ruminative process that circles the central concepts.⁹ At the same time, the Cologne print manifests the unease of early modern readers with such open forms of textual tradition, because it firmly reinserts the song into conventional structures by assigning it to an ordered sequence — it is ‘another’ song, preceded by a similar one — and an author who has experienced what the song articulates. By thus attributing the song to Johannes Tauler, the Cologne print exemplifies early modern unease with late medieval collaborative and collective modes of writing.¹⁰

COURTLY EXCLUSIVITY: THE NOBLE HEARTS

In order to understand how such processes of literary rather than social inclusion or exclusion work, it may be helpful to contrast the seemingly artless songs which baffled nineteenth-century collectors with some of the secular forms against which both contemporary audiences and nineteenth-century scholarly editors may have measured them.

Like the religious lyric moving between the spheres of liturgical and theological Latin on the one hand and the vernacular on the other, the courtly world is inherently multilingual. Throughout much of the high Middle Ages, the dominant relationship for texts in German is that between the two vernaculars, French and German, with French often providing the pre-text which a German poet adapts and appropriates. The choice of the vernacular, addressed at secular aristocratic audiences, is programmatic and differentiates these texts for lay readers from the sphere of theological Latin learning. Nevertheless, Latin and theological allusions are often present at one remove. As Gottfried’s *Tristan* highlights, this act of cultural appropriation is a complex one, in which Latin theological discourse is often alluded to, even if secular readers may be much less familiar with it than the learned author.

9 For a record of the transmission, see Judith Theben, *Die mystische Lyrik des 14. und 15. Jahrhunderts: Untersuchungen — Texte — Repertorium* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010).

10 Cf. Suerbaum, ‘Pseudo-Tauler *Cantilenae*’.

Within the prologue of Gottfried's *Tristan*, the author-persona situates himself within both traditions:

Tribe ich die zît vegebene hin,
so zitic ich ze lebene bin,
sô'n var ich in der werlt sus hin
niht sô gewerldet, also ich bin.

Ich hân mir ein unmüezekeit
Der werlt ze liebe für geleit
Und edelen herzen z'einer hage,
Den herzen, den ich herzen trage,
Der werlde, in die mîn herze siht,
Ine meine ir aller werlde niht
Als die, von der ich hoere sagen,
Die keine swaere enmüge getragen
Und niuwan in vröuden welle sweben:
Die lâze ouch got mit vröuden leben.¹¹

(Were I to waste my time while I am still alive, I would not move in this world in as worldly a manner as I actually do. || I have chosen a pastime — for the sake of the world, and to please noble hearts, those hearts who are dear to my heart, and that world which sees into my heart; I do not mean the world of those many who (as I hear it said) cannot bear hardship and only want to experience joy: may God let them live in that joy.)

As the prolific wordplay underlines, Gottfried's narrator plays a sophisticated game of exclusion and inclusion with his listeners: by drawing attention to the limited time on earth remaining to him, he sets himself apart from the youthfulness of his implied audience, yet in doing so, evokes the privilege of age and experience. The court, a sphere of love associated with youth, is both desirable and distant. In a stance familiar from other courtly writers, it is the desire to please his audience which motivates his writing, suggesting that writer and audience inhabit the same world. Yet at the same time, Gottfried's narrator draws sharp distinctions: the noble hearts to whom he wishes to appeal are not in fact identical with the courtly, aristocratic audience, because the narrator insinuates that most of those listeners are driven by the desire to attain joy without suffering — a desire which the narrator devalues as worldly

11 Gottfried von Straßburg, *Tristan und Isold*, ed. and trans. by Walter Haug and Manfred Scholz, 2 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2011), lines 41–54.

and ignoble. Like the truly noble hearts in his audience, he knows that true love cannot but involve suffering.

In addressing the so-called 'noble hearts', Gottfried revels in paradox, since the term is intended to denote exclusivity. Courtly society, composed of aristocratic ladies and gentlemen, was self-aware of the fact that only a small minority could belong to this circle. Yet in Gottfried's use, the term no longer refers to a social reality, because it dismisses many of the potential members of this exclusive circle as too worldly, in other words, too focused on pleasure. Nor is it used here as an aesthetic category, because it excludes only those who desire pleasure, insisting on the fact that true discernment knows that joy and suffering are inextricably linked, and that desire therefore needs to include the willingness to suffer.

The literary strategies employed by Gottfried's narrator are thus twofold: rhetorically, he employs forms of exclusion, separating those who truly discern the nature of love and joy from the mundane, who cannot accept true paradox. At the same time, this strategy of re-defining nobility as discernment is inclusive, because it allows every member of the audience to accept the position of the narrator. Potentially, it is thus open to all listeners, drawing them into the world and the aesthetic and ethical judgement of the narrator. Yet this seemingly open invitation deliberately retains an air of exclusivity through a mode of polarizing choices and a simultaneous rejection of those who make the wrong choice. It is this strategy of exclusive inclusion which generates the fascination and pull of Gottfried's narrative, requiring readers to suspend judgement and the value-systems of their everyday world, because that is the only way to for them be included in a world in which an adulterous relationship can be the only true form of love.

Gottfried's play with the rhetorical impact of a *captatio benevolentiae* is exceptional in its artifice, yet it draws on the paradoxical tension between exclusion and inclusion which underpins courtly literature, in that courtly culture is representative, based on figures who can be inhabited by all potential listeners and open to all, while at the same time developing that inclusiveness through strategies of exclusion, defining true courtliness through its exclusivity. This is overt where courtliness is still recognizable as a social category — we know that historically, both writers and audiences of secular courtly texts are aristocratic,

members of a relatively small and closed group. Yet Gottfried's text is an extreme example of allowing terms like *edel* (noble) to shade from being a simple marker of social class into an internalized category, where it is conceivable that those who are externally noble lack true nobility because they are incapable of discerning aesthetic quality. It is this sense of exclusivity which makes Gottfried appear modern to contemporary readers, because it is achieved through a strong sense of authorial presence behind an ironically unreliable narrator.

The sense of openness in Gottfried is thus ultimately dependent on an author who is in control of his material as much as his audience. Art and artificiality are a mark of exclusive expertise which, while flattering the audience into believing they can emulate the author's discrimination and taste, manipulates them into suspending value judgements in order to gain acceptance into an exclusive circle. As a result, this author persona comes closest to modern notions of authorship centred around intention and individuality. It represents an influential, though by no means universal model of thirteenth-century writing, and is the dominant frame of reference for contemporary pre-Foucauldian readings. It therefore serves as a useful contrast to the very different modes of reading and writing explored in religious writing which is more or less contemporary with Gottfried.

Gottfried's story of exclusive if destructive love draws on biblical imagery, though critics are divided over whether it does so in order to appropriate or to subvert Christian ideals. This is perhaps most evident in the spaces inhabited by the protagonists. Tristan and Isolde are each introduced with a royal backstory featuring their lineage, allowing us to see their ancestry, inserting them into a network of social ties and obligations: Tristan, orphaned at birth, is first publicly recognized in all his exceptional talents at the court of his maternal uncle Marke; Isolde, the beautiful princess, emulates the medical skills of her mother both in healing Tristan and in recognizing in him the killer of her own maternal uncle, for whose death she had sworn vengeance. Compared to his sources, Gottfried heightens the paradoxical parallels: both lovers are drawn to one another, because each excels within their own group; at the same time their familial obligations mean that each is loath to engage with the other. While both therefore establish an identity which relies on the respect of others around them, an identity

which therefore rests on being accepted as a member of a group, their love makes them outcasts. Again, Gottfried highlights this through the spaces in which they are able to live their identity as lovers: at sea, on the ship crossing to Ireland; in an orchard; finally, in exile from the court. All other versions frame this space of their exile from the court as a desert, because they are deprived of all courtly status, but also of all marks of civilization. Gottfried, by contrast, turns their exile into a form of paradise in which they are sustained by song, requiring no food. They are alone, in total seclusion — and yet this state is no exile, since nature allegorically turns into their court: the babbling brook is their cup-bearer, the birds provide music. What earlier versions had configured as a place of exclusion turns, in Gottfried's version, into a space in which the lovers are at the same time remote, removed from the prying eyes of the court, and yet reminded of the fact that their existence is inherently social, part of a network of social relations. This remote *locus amoenus*, like the liminal space of the ship conveying them towards Ireland, is the only place in which they can consummate their love without having to hide it from outside observers, the only place where they can openly be what the prologue had suggested was their nature and destiny: lovers whose devotion to one another is absolute. Nevertheless, this is no state of untroubled openness — their seclusion is broken when the court searches for them, and the moment at which they are exposed to the eyes of King Marke and the court is marked by a charade of separation, when Tristan places his sword between himself and Isolde before King Marke sets eyes on them. This is an act of dissimulation — Tristan and Isolde pretend to be chastely separated, but that open display of distance is in itself a deception. King Marke is only too willing to believe what he sees publicly, because it allows him to uphold the pretence that Isolde is his loyal wife. The scene is also an invitation to the reader to accept that what is out in the open and visible in plain sight may be more complex than it appears. Yet the scene also underlines the precariousness of the lovers: the spaces in which they consummate their love are remote, so that not everyone can reach them — yet none of them offer seclusion to the lovers, who are always surrounded by jealous watchers whom they have to deceive in order to avoid public shame. In Gottfried's version, this tension ultimately leads to the destruction of both lovers — not simply their death, but also

their loss of integrity and identity. Love, at least love as experienced by Tristan and Isolde in their particular setting, is destructive. Whether there can ever be a state where absolute love for a beloved is compatible with a social existence as one amongst a group is something the text leaves open.

RELIGIOUS EXCLUSIVITY: SPIRITUAL NAKEDNESS

While Gottfried's secular love story revels in aesthetic exclusivity in which the ideal of love is possible only in isolation, yet obtainable only for those who excel in the refinement by which courts define themselves, religious writing of the period usually invokes a concept of common humanity in which all human beings are equal. Eckhart, the fourteenth-century Dominican theologian and mystic, explores this notion:

Ez sprechent die meister gemeinlich, daz alle menschen sint glich edele in der nature. Aber ich spriche waerliche: alles das guot, das alle heiligen besezen hânt und Maria, gotes muoter, und Kristus nâch siner menscheit, daz ist mir eigen in dirre natûre.¹²

(The masters all agree that all human beings are equally noble in their nature. Yet I say, in truth all goodness which the saints and Mary, the mother of God, and Christ according to his humanity possess, is mine by nature.)

In a characteristic syntactic and intellectual structure, Eckhart refers to the received wisdom of the masters, which means Aquinas and the accepted theological teachings: they all hold that human beings are not distinguished from one another but are all noble by their nature. Their emphasis is on inclusive levelling of differences. Eckhart, by contrast, reconfigures this theological dogma not by questioning its validity, but by changing its rhetorical force: in his version, the emphasis is no longer on the indistinguishable equality of all human beings, but on the exceptional nature of the speaking 'I', who compares himself not to

12 Meister Eckhart, *Werke*, 2 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2008), I, ed. and trans. by Josef Quint, ed. by Niklaus Largier, Sermon QSb, 'In hoc apparuit caritas dei in nobis', p. 66, lines 23–27.

other non-descript human beings, but to an ascending triad of exceptional figures: the saints, who by common belief excel in their virtue; Mary, who as the mother of God is unique amongst human beings; finally Christ, who is both human and divine. By claiming the same virtue as Christ, the speaker thus undercuts the radical differentiation between God and man, focusing instead on the uniqueness of his own status as good by nature.

Nevertheless, this claim to exclusivity is not a social one, and it is in principle open to all those who listen to the sermons, because the speaker is both exceptional in his boldness and representative, in that he is human and shares human nature with all listeners who are discerning and courageous enough to accept these premises.

Such statements are at the heart of Eckhart's theology, which argues for the undifferentiated unity of the human soul and God, or, as in this sermon, the fact that God assumes human nature, even though not a human person: 'Disiu natüre ist ein und einvaltic' (This nature is one and undivided).¹³ The sermon is clear about the difficulties which accepting this can cause, and requires anyone who desires to attain this state of oneness with God to forego individuality:

alsô daz er dem menschen, der jensît mers ist, den er mit ougen nie gesach, daz er dem alsô wol, guotes günne als dem menschen, der bî im ist und sîn heimlich vriunt ist. Also die wîle dû dîner persônen mër guotes ganst dan dem menschen, den dû nie gesaeh, sô ist dir waerliche unreht noch dû gelougetest nie in desen einvaltigen grunt ein ougenblick.¹⁴

(such that he is as well disposed to someone who is across the sea and whom he has never set eyes on, as to someone who is close and an intimate friend. For as long as you are better disposed to your own person than to someone whom you have never seen, things are not right with you, and you have never for a single moment gazed into that undivided depth.)

As a result, the state of nakedness or being-without (*blôzheit*) requires those who want to achieve it to leave all aspects of their created humanity behind. Ultimately, therefore, this exclusive state of being at one

13 Ibid., Q5b, p. 68, lines 3–4.

14 Ibid., lines 7–14.

with God is achievable for all, in a strategy which mirrors Gottfried's paradoxical invitation to all listeners to become part of an exclusive group.

Like Gottfried, Eckhart uses paradox as the linguistic and philosophical form of expressing this invitation. Whereas in Gottfried's text, addressed to a social elite of listeners, this paradox of the noble hearts as exclusive yet potentially open to all members of the exclusive audience may be a form of literary play for the cognoscenti, its theological and political provocation is evident in Eckhart, against whom the archbishop of Cologne, Heinrich von Virneburg, opened an inquisitorial process in 1326. Concern focused on the vernacular sermons, though some of the Latin texts were also suspect, and in particular on statements which argued for the unmediated birth of God in the human soul, which would set aside the fundamental distinction between the uncreated creator in eternity and his creation living in time. After several rounds of hearings, claims, and counter-claims, Eckhart was interrogated by a papal commission in Avignon, which in 1328, after Eckhart's death, concluded that a series of twenty-eight statements from his sermons were either heretical or evil-sounding, rash, or suspect of heresy. The papal bull *In agro dominico* of 27 March 1329 confirmed fifteen statements as heretical and another eleven as evil-sounding or suspect.¹⁵ While this bull and its condemnation may only have circulated in Cologne, it affected the transmission of Eckhart's writings, even if it did not suppress them, and resulted in a transmission which was widespread, indicating that the sermons were known and read widely, but largely anonymous. Notably, it directed attention to the status of the vernacular, since the incriminated statements were largely those made in the vernacular sermons. The concern about vernacular heterodox statements or formulations indicates the anxiety around the more open status of the vernacular, in which terms are less clearly terminologically defined than in Latin, the language of the universities, and therefore open to a range of interpretations or readings. Such linguistic openness is therefore seen as a risk within a context of theological and doctrinal fixity; yet the use of the vernacular and the

15 Eckhart, *Werke*, 1, pp. 725–26 (commentary); cf. Bernard McGinn, 'Eckhart's Condemnation Revisited', *The Thomist*, 44 (1980), pp. 390–414.

proliferation of these sermons in the vernacular, albeit without Eckhart's name, also indicate that the opportunities which the vernacular opens up are welcomed by readers and drive the later transmission. While Gottfried's artful and artificial literary text is addressed to a social elite, Eckhart's vernacular sermons may have been delivered behind convent walls to the small groups of nuns whose pastoral care was in the hands of the Dominicans, and yet they circulated in much wider spheres. They are informed by Eckhart's training as a Dominican at the *studium generale* in Cologne, probably under Albertus Magnus, and the University of Paris, where he was granted the *licentia docendi* (licence to teach) in the academic year 1302–03. Yet they very clearly also draw on vernacular traditions of speaking about God as used by religious women in the second half of the thirteenth century, from Marguerite Porete in Paris to Mechthild of Magdeburg, whose *Flowing Light of the Godhead* he may have known. These vernacular texts by women reflect the greater openness of a language which, because it is not that of the universities or of doctrinal statements, is less terminologically fixed and therefore open towards new ways of thinking about God, even if these were then deemed heterodox in certain cases.¹⁶

OPENING UP: RELIGIOUS SONG

While Eckart's vernacular writings are the best-known example of heterodox thinking within the established world of the universities and convents, the thinking reflected in them proliferated beyond those initial audiences to much wider readerships, often through intermediary adaptations. Some of this reception can be traced through a series of authors and texts, most prominently in the next generation of Upper German Dominicans, Heinrich Seuse and Johannes Tauler, but also in the Low Countries in the works of Ruusbroec and Nicolaus Cusanus.

16 Mechthild of Magdeburg, *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit*, ed. by Gisela Vollmann-Profe (Frankfurt a.M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2003); the near-contemporary translation into Latin is available now in a new edition, *Lux Divinitatis*, ed. by Ernst Hellgardt, Balázs Nemes, and Elke Senne (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019). It reflects the fact that certain of the potentially heterodox statements from the vernacular version were redacted in the Latin version; cf. Gisela Vollmann-Profe, 'Mechthild von Magdeburg — deutsch und lateinisch', in *Deutsche Mystik im abendländischen Zusammenhang*, ed. by Walter Haug and Wolfram Schneider-Lastin (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2000), pp. 144–58.

But the indirect adaptation of Eckhart's thought, especially on the birth of God within the human soul, is tangible much more widely and includes Luther, whose thinking on the Trinity and the Eucharist was informed much more strongly by late medieval adaptations of Eckhart and Tauler than his self-staging of a radical break with the Middle Ages suggests.¹⁷

Eckhart's thoughts were developed in sermons and treatises directed at listeners in specific convents (albeit clearly disseminated more widely beyond these in later redactions, even reaching urban lay readers). Later generations, by contrast, adapted his theology in literary forms which are more open in their transmission. One of the most interesting of these formats is religious song, which may in some cases originate from the bilingual culture of south-west German Dominican convents, where Latin and the vernacular coexist, but also extends beyond that closed circle of convents. As discussed in the earlier sections of this paper, they represent a textuality and literary culture which is very different from the author-centred and tightly controlled textuality of the courtly love lyric and romance produced at and for the aristocratic courts. The Dominican convents are no less closely interconnected with one another than the secular courts, and as Eckhart's role in the spiritual care of the Dominican sisters demonstrates, they are very much part of emerging theological speculation. But within these convents, writing is a process seen as important in itself, as an act of worship, not the necessary route towards a fixed object.

The final section of this paper is devoted to one such example of religious song, the so-called *Granum sinapis* (Mustard Seed), attributed to Eckhart in the later tradition, though not necessarily by him. The song employs vocabulary and concepts which clearly resonate with Eckhart's vernacular sermons and may have been informed by them, even if Eckhart is not the author. In strophe 5, it develops a characteristically paradoxical space:¹⁸

17 Cf. Eckhart, *Werke*, 1, pp. 715–42 (commentary).

18 Edition in Kurt Ruh, "Textkritik zum Mystikerlied *Granum sinapis*", in *Festschrift Josef Quint*, ed. by Hugo Moser and others (Bonn: Bouvier, 1964), pp. 169–84; cf. Theben, *Die mystische Lyrik des 14. und 15. Jahrhunderts*, pp. 186–93.

Das wüste gût
 ni vûz durch wût,
 geschaffen sin
 quam nî dâ hin:
 us ist und weis doch niemant was,
 us hî, us dâ
 us tîf, us hô
 us ist alsô,
 das us ist weder diz noch daz.

(No foot has ever crossed this desert; created reason has never penetrated there. It is, and yet no one knows what; it here, it there, it far, it near, it low, it high, it is just so that it is neither this nor that.)

Unlike the pseudo-Tauler cantilena, the *Granum sinapis* uses pure rhyme and a fixed, if simple strophic form of couplet and embracing rhyme. The use of antithetical structures to construct paradoxes is equally striking. Yet whereas Gottfried's use of paradox highlighted the hermeneutic exclusivity of operations intelligible only to a small group of insiders, its function here is, I would like to argue, the opposite: where no one can know the nature of the desert which represents Divine nothingness and un-createdness, the paradoxical phrases open up the relationship to all who are willing to experience this tension, drawing listeners into the space opening up between the two polar opposites. The contradictions therefore point to a sphere beyond antithesis of the 'neither here nor there', 'neither low nor high'. Grammatically, the negations employed evoke the positive concept while abstracting from it: that which cannot be seen is invisible, yet of course the act of speaking about it in this form makes it visible to us conceptually. At the same time, the use of paradox is inclusive, in that the desert is both high and low, both here and there, which implies it cannot be captured by either of the antithetical attributes alone. Yet theologically, in the tradition of pseudo-Dionysian thought, this move beyond the antithetical oppositions is a path towards the Divine, who stands above and beyond creation in pure nothingness — or, as Eckhart had phrased it, *blozheit* (nakedness). Letting go of created categories is thus the only possible path towards the Divine. Yet this state of abstraction, which Eckhart calls *gelazenheit*, which has overtones of both 'abnegation' and 'being at peace', is not just the subject of a theological or

philosophical treatise but created through the language of the song. Its musical form of circular movement performs the movement of opening up to God in a world beyond that of the created oppositions. While drawing on exclusive, contested, and at times risky theological statements, the song moves away from conventional learned forms of lyric poetry addressed to an exclusive audience and returns Eckhart's speculative theology to the more loosely constituted and therefore more open circles of laypeople from whom he may have drawn some of his inspiration.

CONCLUSIONS

As has become clear, the spiritual movement amongst women in the fourteenth century played an important role in opening up forms of discourse which had been the exclusive prerogative of those within monastic communities. By appropriating concepts of speculative theology, especially those of abnegation of the world and union with the divine, they suspend the fundamental difference between creator God and creation, opening up a space in which the human participates in the divine. At the same time, they do so in forms which move away from the closely controlled metrical forms of courtly lyric poetry, preferring loosely strophic forms in formats which are textually unstable, because each new version of a song can add new strophes or rearrange existing ones, adapted by different users to their own spiritual needs and preferences. Finally, many of these lyric forms are open in their preference for an indeterminate first-person singular, which encourages the imaginative inhabiting of a lyric 'I', drawing on techniques of thirteenth-century aristocratic role poetry, but merging them with liturgical practices of inhabiting the first-person speaker of the Psalms.¹⁹

Such opening up to new audiences, new forms, and new ways of transmission is not a linear process, and it is notable how both the reform movement of the fifteenth century and the Protestant rediscovery of some of these texts in the fifteenth century reinsert forms of

19 Annie Sutherland, 'Performing the Penitential Psalms: Maidstone and Bampton', in *Aspects of the Performative in Medieval Culture*, ed. by Manuele Gagnolati and Almut Suerbaum (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), pp. 15–38.

control. Where the fifteenth-century observant reform highlights the role of obedience, especially for religious women, seventeenth-century collectors such as Daniel Sudermann reinsert conceptions of male authorship by attributing songs such as 'Min geist hat sich ergangen' to Johannes Tauler. By reinserting the anonymous song into an authorial *oeuvre*, Sudermann's collection closes down the open semi-liturgical form by incorporating it into a closed, proprietorial biography: the songs are no longer the fluid results of a process of engaging imaginatively with Eckhart's processes of abnegation, but attributed to a specific period in Johannes Tauler's life, when the rubric claims he composed the song while staying with his sister during his final illness. None of this is historically attested, but the individualized reading deliberately narrows the scope of the song. In contrast with these biographical readings, familiar to us from the nineteenth century, the actual and lived openness of the fourteenth-century versions becomes all the more striking, and they attest to a different, more collective form of premodern textuality.

While these songs have often been neglected because they do not conform to aesthetic norms informed by modern notions of individual authorship, closed textuality, and subjective experience, they present us with a culture of openness in which these irregular, obscure, aesthetically 'wild' songs allow us a glimpse of poetic practices which are both collective and inclusive.

Almut Suerbaum, 'Including the Excluded: Strategies of Opening Up in Late Medieval Religious Writing', in *Openness in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Manuele Gagnolati and Almut Suerbaum, *Cultural Inquiry*, 23 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 191–208 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-23_10>

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