

## CHAPTER 8

# Negative Theology and Love in Marguerite Porete's *The Mirror of Simple Souls*

Deirdre Carabine

Independent scholar, Uganda

**Abstract:** In this paper I examine Marguerite Porete's *The Mirror of Simple Souls* as an illustration of how the two concepts: love and negative theology can be brought together in an unusual spiritual journey. The thesis I develop is that both have the same impetus: a going out of oneself. Love is *extasis* because it is the going out into the heart of an other; *extasis* is the central moment in a negative theology when the soul no longer knows either the self or God but is in the same place as, or is united to, God. Following a brief exposition of negative theology, I explain how Porete portrays the soul become what she truly is by falling out of herself under the impetus of love. When the soul is liberated from will and reason her divine lover can be and love in her. In Porete's falling into the ocean of the Divine, she is made no thing so that her divine lover can be all. Her self-annihilation is the portal to her deification when she is finally changed into God. The continuous hominification of God and divinization of humanity is the eternal process of Love loving Love's self. Porete focuses on the self rather than on purifying God concepts; it is a relentless stripping the self of all that is creaturely to make the soul an empty dwelling place for Love to reside. Thus, Porete's is a radical negative theology: she never "knows" God even when she becomes Love's dwelling place.

**Keywords:** love, annihilation, self-purification, negative theology, mysticism

## Introduction

In this paper I examine the only extant work of the medieval mystic and poet Marguerite Porete (1250–1310): *The Mirror of Simple and Annihilated*

Citation of this chapter: Carabine, D. (2021). Negative theology and love in Marguerite Porete's *The mirror of simple souls*. In K. Grødum, H. F. Hågg, J. Kaufman & T. T. Tollefsen (Eds.), *Love – ancient perspectives* (Ch. 8, pp. 139–157). Cappelen Damm Akademisk. <https://doi.org/10.23865/noasp.133.cho8>  
License: CC-BY 4.0.

*Souls*, as an illustration of how the two concepts: love and negative theology – which at first sight appear to have little in common – can be brought together in one, most intriguing spiritual journey, a journey that has its ultimate grounding in the writings of the sixth-century theologian Pseudo-Dionysius. I chose Marguerite Porete as representative of the many women writers in the Middle Ages who were influenced to some degree by Dionysian apophaticism (negative theology which generally says what God is not because we cannot say what God is), which, combined with the love mysticism so deftly brought into the *Mystical Theology* by Thomas Gallus (the French theologian of the School of St Victor, b. 1200), formed an altogether new way of conceiving the love relationship between God and the soul.<sup>1</sup>

The fundamental idea I attempt to develop is that both love and negative theology have the same impetus if we understand negative theology as *praxis* (activity), not simply as a word game or an exercise of mental abstraction. Both (if we conceive of the ultimate goal of negative theology as unity with the Divine) entail a going out of oneself. Love is *extasis* (being moved out of oneself), because it is the going out of the self into the heart of another; *extasis* is the central moment in a negative theology when the soul no longer knows either the self or God but is in the same place as, or is united to God. The displacement of self as one's heart empties itself to make room for the other, is paradoxically a filling of the heart, not only with the Other, but also with the self.

I begin with a brief exposition of negative theology. I then turn to a discussion of how Porete begins from the perspective of negative theology in *The Mirror of Simple Souls* and tells a love story with a most unusual ending. Put simply, Porete's *Mirror* is the story of the soul becoming what she truly is by falling out of herself, by annihilating herself under the impetus of love. When the soul is liberated from will and reason, when the soul becomes nothing, she is empty so that her divine lover has space to be and to love in her. She becomes the river that no longer exists when it flows into the sea. In Porete's falling into the ocean of divine love, she is made no thing so that her divine lover can be all. In Porete's understanding,

---

<sup>1</sup> See Coolman, 2008, pp. 615–632 and McGinn, 1994, pp. 81–96.

self-annihilation is the portal to deification when soul is finally changed into God.

As we are aware, negative theology is a popular discourse in today's philosophical (and theological) circles. In my view, however, much of the contemporary interest in negative theology (such as we find it in the works of contemporary French philosopher Jacques Derrida and more recently Irish academic Richard Kearney) is better described as philosophical apophaticism (Boeve, 2002, pp. 443–459), in that it uses negative theology to assassinate the monster called ontotheology (the theology of being as referred to God). Negative theology as I understand it in this paper is rooted in theological discourse and spiritual *praxis*. Negative theology, like love, cannot only be said: it is done.

I would suggest that in going out of the self to make a home in the heart of a friend, a love, a lover, that very displacement becomes, in a sense, completion. At the deepest level, when my heart resides in the heart of another, when love has displaced me into the heart of my friend, my lover, I am no longer me but “me in my love, my lover”, a different me whom I cannot know because I am no longer “me”. This is an apophatic (as in negative theology) or aphairctic (as in abstraction or taking away from) moment as my self is neither me nor other. Just as in the *extasis* of the apophatic moment, love makes of two candles one light (or from many candles one light), love makes a duet that is different from each of the voices that sings alone, and this may not be fully comprehended by the singer who is part of a duet. As in the Pseudo Dionysius: “... the one who loves is drawn out of himself and centres his being on the object of his love. Love is ecstatic because it is unitive: the lover is united to the beloved ...” (Louth, 1989, p. 94).

Through the idea that love causes self-displacement, the apophatic plunge, the jump, the breakthrough, the annihilation can be understood as a love-inspired moment. While this is explicit in the works of Dionysius, love is not always a prominent feature of negative theology. It is, however, explicit in those mystical writers who took inspiration from the glosses of Thomas Gallus on the *Mystical Theology* of the Pseudo Dionysius. It is also explicit in the writing of one long-neglected spiritual writer whose fiery words unfortunately earned her a fiery end: Marguerite

Porete. In this paper on Porete I will make frequent reference to Meister Eckhart, the German mystical theologian (1260–1328), because I believe he was deeply influenced by *The Mirror of Simple and Annihilated Souls*.<sup>2</sup> As we shall see, in Porete’s writings, the apophatic plunge that is love fuelled involves an absolute relentless going out of oneself until the self can no longer even be found and only God remains.

## Negative Theology

I begin by contextualizing the paper with a brief outline of my understanding of negative theology. Unity with the One, the Good, God, is its ultimate aim. By reversing our way of thinking – as the great Neoplatonist Plotinus (204–270) would put it – we simply leave ourselves open to the vision and presence of the Good. A negative theology that is understood from within the context of that great two-fold journey of Christian theology, that is: *katabasis* (going down) and *anabasis* (going up) of *kenosis* (self-emptying) and *theosis* (deification), of God becoming human so that human can become God, is one of the central thematics I keep in mind as I examine Marguerite Porete’s mystical text.

According to the proponents of the *via negativa* (the way of negation), knowledge is an obstacle to be overcome in the path to God because it casts a veil of clouded particularity around the One/Good/God. But the subsequent stripping bare or unveiling (*aperikaluptos* as in Dionysius) paradoxically reveals nothing because the divine is no thing. The unveiling leads to an unknowing knowing, a plunge into God, or simply being in the same place as God. The end of the negative journey is not, therefore, an empty space reached through negative dogmas (Armstrong, 1990, pp. 137–138). This idea is given eloquent expression by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926):

But though my vigil constantly I keep  
My God is dark – like woven texture flowing.  
A hundred drinking roots, all intertwined;

---

2 Although Eckhart never directly quoted her, Bernard McGinn is convinced that he knew Porete’s *Mirror*; McGinn, 2001, p. 181.

I only know that from His warmth I'm growing.  
 More I know not: my roots lie hidden deep  
 My branches only are swayed by the wind.<sup>3</sup>

Turning now to a cosmic perspective, we could say that the no-thing-ness of God becomes some thing when, through creation, through love, God becomes other than God. God can be known then, when other than God or not-God. It is creation as theophany, the alterity of God, that enables the simultaneous knowing and unknowing of the divine. In this dialectical way of understanding the unfolding of God, the oxymorons of the apophatic theologians begin to make some kind of sense: silent music, bright darkness, unknowing knowing. In my view, the going out of God into otherness is more intriguing than the return of all things to their dark, unknowable source.<sup>4</sup> In creation, a being can say, "I am not God! I am God's otherness". "God *becomes* when all creatures say 'God' – then God comes to be", as Eckhart put it (Walshe, 1981, p. 81). Creation is itself the affirmation that it is not God because it is some thing (other than God). Thus Eckhart suggests that creation creates God (the Eckhartian distinction between God in God's self and God in creatures), just as the annihilation of the soul in Porete allows God to be.

Used as we are to trying to understand divine reality from either the perspective of transcendence or the perspective of immanence, formulations such as unmanifest manifest, invisible visible stretch the mind in both directions simultaneously for the one cannot be understood without the other: God both is all things and is not all things. The idea that God is manifest in creation is true, but the fact that God remains transcendentally unmanifest is also true. And yet, neither is true when understood singly. The "problem" is resolved by coupling both truths in a dialectical formulation that reveals the tension between, and the simultaneous truth of both. The veracity of the statement "God is all things" is constantly undermined by the basic distinction between God and creation, which is a forceful reminder that, as an apophatic understanding demonstrates, a comprehensive account of reality can never be attained. As contemporary

---

3 Excerpt from "The Book of a Monk's Life".

4 A central thematic in von Balthasar, 1979.

academic Michael Sells puts it: “the authentic subject of discourse slips constantly back beyond each effort to name it or even to deny its nameability” (Sells, 1994, p. 2). The ninth-century Irish philosopher John Scottus Eriugena’s central, and indeed most audacious truth, that all things are both eternal and made (*Periphyseon* 646C and 681B), is the ultimate apophatic truth at both the linguistic and the ontological levels.

This is what Eckhart says: “But if God is neither goodness nor being nor truth nor one, what then is He? He is pure nothing: He is neither this nor that. If you think of anything He might be, He is not that. So where will the soul find truth?” Good question. I think the answer could well be in the journey, as was the case with Marguerite Porete. Who knows how to say what it is when discourse comes to a halt under the impetus of *eros* (love in the Dionysian sense of *extasis*). But of course Eckhart has an answer for the soul who asks, “What then shall I do?” “You should wholly sink away from your youth and dissolve into His Hisness, and your ‘yours’ and His ‘His’ become so completely one ‘Mine’ that with Him you understand His Unbecome Isness and His nameless Nothingness” (Walshe, 1981, p. 333). Porete’s conception of the role of the soul is the same, although expressed in different words.

The unity that is the focus of the *via negativa* when taken to its limits can be described from the perspective of a Moses ascending the clouded mountain as in Cappadocian Church Father Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 330-ca. 395), or as a blinded Dionysian soul throwing itself relentlessly against the ray of the divine darkness, as in the cosmic *adunatio* of Eriugena (the final union or return of all created things to their source: to God), or as a standing naked and empty in the same place as God (Porete and Eckhart). But this is not the end of the otherness of God, but rather, its perpetual celebration. It has been argued that negative theology is the sword that will do away with the particularity of – in the Christian tradition – the Incarnation. It is not, in my view, because it is the eternal celebration of the “isness” of the divine. And yet, in another sense it is this sword because the work has been done, the *logos* (word) returns to *sige* (silence). Similarly, in the *Mirror*, a “Godhead” behind the God we have negated is never exposed. Using negative theology as a knife to cut away idolatry is a necessary part of all theology, but the cutting away does not *reveal*: rather,

it takes us some where, and that “where” is straight into God. Those who let go (achieving breakthrough or becoming annihilated) do not fall into the abyss or remain in the desert of no-thingness: they can, quite wonderfully, be changed into God. As the Victorian Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins concludes his poem “The Windhover”: “... blue-bleak embers, ah my dear, / Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold vermilion”.

## The Mirror of Simple and Annihilated Souls

But just as no two loves are the same (except in that all love is *praxis*), and no two lives are the same, no two spiritual journeys are the same. There can be elements of similarity but there will always be that which accounts for individual difference. So it is with the practitioners of the negative way, not least with Marguerite Porete and her contemporary the Dominican Meister Eckhart (Lichtman, 1994, pp. 65–86). In both cases, words are, at times, strained to their limits as they struggle to express that which is essentially expression-less in that place where you-ness and me-ness disappear.

I have already discussed the self-death of the lover through love that has an apophatic thrust. The remainder of the paper will illustrate this point using Porete's much-neglected work (Wright, 2009, p. 84). Sadly, but perhaps apt given her desire to be annihilated for her divine lover, she was burned to death on charges of heresy on 1 June 1310 in Paris. Her book had previously been burned in 1306 but she appears to have persisted in the dissemination of her ideas, for she was summoned in 1308 before the Inquisitor of Lorraine, excommunicated, and sent to Paris where she was imprisoned for one and a half years. According to accounts of the trial, she kept silence in the face of her inquisitor Guillaume de Paris. Interestingly, in chapter 67 of the *Mirror*, Porete says that she seals her lips and does not speak to those who follow the counsel of reason; unlike some others, she kept her promise and did not recant her supposed heresy.<sup>5</sup>

Little is known of Porete as an historical subject (as is the case with Pseudo Dionysius and the author of the fourteenth-century work, based

---

5 A good account of her trial can be found in Field, 2012.

on the *Mystical Theology* of Dionysius, *The Cloud of Unknowing*), what we do know of this “pseudo woman” – a title given to her by the inquisitors – has been gleaned from the trial documents and the text of her book itself. A surprising number of human hours has been spent on speculations about her life (a task somewhat akin to finding out about Umberto Eco by reading his novels). But we can say that she was obviously an educated woman with deep knowledge of the scriptures and the greats of the Christian spiritual tradition, notably St Paul and the Pseudo-Dionysius.

Her work is an allegory in the courtly love tradition, the main speaker being Dame Amour (Lady Love) who is the voice of God, while God is Loingpres (Far-Near, which is very similar to thirteenth-century Dutch visionary and poet Hadewijch’s *verre bi*); Reason and the Soul are among the other speakers, while Little Holy Church, Holy Church, the Holy Spirit, and Faith also make appearances. The work is written in the vernacular and consists of 139 chapters that are a mixture of verse, lyrical passages, and animated debate between the characters, especially Lady Love and Reason (who is constantly mocked and put down by Lady Love).<sup>6</sup> The *Mirror* deals specifically with love, and Porete’s weaving through the at times vaguely erotic and the apophatic, as the soul journeys out of itself and into divine love to be one sole being with God has many echoes of the women mystics who were her contemporaries or preceded her (especially Hadewijch of Antwerp and her contemporary German Beguine Mechthild of Magdeburg).<sup>7</sup>

Ever since Italian scholar Romana Guarnieri discovered the Chantilly manuscript of Porete’s *Mirror* in 1946,<sup>8</sup> a plethora of works has emerged from many and varied disciplines, a testimony to the fact that the *Mirror* can be read through many different lenses. Much, for example, has been written from the feminist and postmodern perspectives.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, Porete is often held up as a prime example of a woman disciplined and

---

6 The translation I have used in this chapter is that of Carolyn Behnke, chosen because it has been made from the French Chantilly manuscript rather than previous English manuscripts; the chapter number and page number are given in brackets after each citation.

7 For a good introduction, see Dronke, 1994 and Lerner, 2010.

8 Printed in “Osservatore Romano”, June 16, 1946, p. 3.

9 See Lichtman, 1998.

persecuted for her beliefs, beliefs that went against the patriarchal hegemony of the theology of her time.

Not surprisingly, in Porete's *Mirror* Divine Love (the voice of God) is feminine even though *amour* (love) is masculine in French. Much has been written about this subversion of gender categories. What is interesting in Porete is that master Reason finally gives up the battle in chapters 35–36 and subjects himself to Love. Porete also uses different relational terms: in chapter 121 the Holy Trinity speaks to the soul as daughter, sister, and beloved. She in turn addresses God as father, brother, and beloved (ch. 136). However, we should not be tempted to conclude that hers is an affective, female-centered mysticism; it is not.

And despite her very powerful use of love imagery, the *Mirror* is not bride mysticism nor is it written under the impetus of twelfth-century French Cistercian Bernard of Clairvaux's love mysticism; rather, it takes the basic themes of Dionysian negative theology and uses these to weave a new garment, albeit a garment that was transformed by ideas from contemporary theological ideas in circulation among the Beguines (lay religious orders/groups). Put simply, Porete's story in the *Mirror* is the story of the soul becoming what she truly is rather strangely, by falling out of herself under the impetus of love. When the soul is liberated from will and reason, when the soul "... has all and has nothing, knows all and knows nothing, wills all and wills nothing ..." (chs. 7 and 13), the soul is emptied so that her divine Lover has space to be in her.

## Annihilated by Love

Standing firmly in the tradition of the Pseudo-Dionysius, negative theology forms the foundation of Marguerite Porete's spirituality: "God, of whom no words can be spoken ..." (11,105). The unknowable God motif is fundamental to understanding Porete's spirituality as she carefully develops the notion of the descent into the abyss of her own nothingness: "[such] souls can no longer speak of God, for knowing no longer where God is, they can no longer say who God is" (18,114). "This soul can no longer speak of God for she is stripped naked of all her outward desires, of all her inner feelings and of any spiritual affection ... She desires nothing,

for her will ... is dead” (7,99–100). “For all that can be said, written, or even thought about God, who is beyond all words, is more like lying than any true description” (119, 201).

Broadly speaking, Porete conceives seven stages in the soul’s ascent/descent to/into Love, the final of which is the return to its origins – bodily death, and we cannot say anything about that (chs. 61 and 118). I will not enumerate these stages here except to say that the soul practices the most relentless *aphairesis* (taking away) as she takes her leave of everything, even the virtues (ch. 6 and following; she expands more fully on this idea in ch. 21) – a leave-taking that was ultimately destined to be her downfall. But in her view, freedom from being bound by the virtues is precisely what constitutes a “liberated” soul.<sup>10</sup> And while this taking leave of the virtues was deemed to be her heresy (the antimonian heresy, literally meaning “lawless”: the idea that Christians are exempt from obeying the moral law, of which she refused to recant), to my mind it is not dissimilar from late fourth – early fifth-century Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo’s “Love and do as you will” (Sermon on 1 John 4:4–12) whom Porete herself quotes in chapter 13. Having left the virtues behind, the soul then falls into love, or rather is drawn into love by Love (stage 4). After that, she is annihilated, becomes nothingness (*adnienti*) for Love’s sake.

Most of the *Mirror* is concerned with the fifth stage in which the soul becomes annihilated and God sees God’s self “through her in his divine majesty, so she sees nothing outside of God himself” (118, 200). It is through being loved by God that the soul falls into nothingness because she is not the one doing the loving: only Love loves. In my view, this is the heart of Porete’s apophaticism, a very Dionysian approach in that knowing nothing is the way to the unknowable God. In Porete’s dialectic, “God”, the bountiful outpouring of a manifest Love, belongs to an unmanifest nothingness, which can be reached only by “knowing nothing”, “willing nothing”, and “having space for God”, a motif that is repeated throughout the *Mirror*. I think we see here a very clear echo of Eckhart’s famous *Beati pauperes spiritu* (Blessed are the poor in spirit) sermon.

---

<sup>10</sup> See Marler, 2013.

A further interesting idea that Porete develops is that of namelessness, this time not in the usual sense of the unknowable, unnameable God, but the namelessness of the soul. "The soul ... has her right name from the nothingness in which she rests ... And if she is unencumbered in all aspects, she loses her name ... And therefore she loses her name in the One in whom she is melted and dissolved through Himself and in Himself" (Wright, 2009, p. 75). As an illustration of this idea, Porete uses the very potent image of a river flowing into the sea. As a river, it has its own name, but when it joins the sea, its name is unnecessary as it becomes part of the sea. So it is with the soul (ch. 82). This rather lovely image, which describes the process of deification, is used on more than one occasion. And in returning to the sea, she "takes nothing other than the name of the One, the Bridegroom, in whom she is perfectly transformed" through love (82, 167). And in taking Love's name, she herself becomes Love.

The intensity of the soul's love, which by its very nature is self-emptying and self-displacement, leads to the utter loss of self. In Porete's falling into God, her *kenosis* echoes the *kenosis* of Divine Love whereby God creates because God is beguiled by goodness, by love, as the Pseudo-Dionysius put it (*Divine Names*, 4, 13, 712a–b). The God who stands outside God's self to create awakens our own ecstatic longing for our source.<sup>11</sup> The Plotinian, Dionysian, and Augustinian concept of Love drawing all things to itself is a strong motif in the *Mirror*: "... for Love draws all matter into herself. Love and the Soul become one thing, not two, for that would be discord" (83,167), says Porete. About this soul who has, wants, and knows nothing, simply put: "she comes from love and wants to go back" (15,111).

In this sense Porete's spiritual journey is different from most journeys that depict the rise of the soul from creatureliness to the divine. Porete stands this idea on its head as time and time again she stresses the need for extreme purgation to enter the abyss of nothingness. In the soul becoming annihilated, becoming nothing and other than itself, it can no longer know, for it is fully liberated from all things, even knowledge. Lady Love says: "Such a soul swims in the sea of joy, in the delightful ebb and

---

11 Here Dionysius uses St Paul as the model lover in his *extasis*: 2 Cor 5:13 and Gal 2:20; see Stang, 2008, p. 547.

flow of the sea of the Godhead. But she does not feel joy since she is one with joy, ... for she dwells in Joy and Joy dwells in her ... for Love has changed this Soul into herself". To which soul responds: "How sweet it is that I am changed into the thing which I love better than myself! I am so changed I have lost my identity by loving ..." (28,121). In such a soul God alone works: "... on my own I can do nothing unless my Beloved does it in me" (36,128), an echo of St Paul in Phil 4:14. In this way, the abyss of nothingness becomes the portal through which the soul is transformed into Love.

This poverty of self, of soul, this annihilation, is paradoxically how the soul gains God by losing God, and in the gaining, in becoming Love, the soul becomes free. The portal of nothingness, then, is the only way to make space for Love to be. The nothingness that the soul becomes means that she is not with herself, she is naked, and has bid farewell to the world – a very similar concept can be found in Eckhart's depiction of *abgescheidenheit* ("detachment" or "letting go"). Love says:

And the best I can say is that if you know perfectly your nothingness, you will do nothing, and this nothingness will give you everything. If you cannot perfectly recognize your nothingness, which is what you really are, you will then have to do something ... If God has transformed you in himself, you must not forget your nothingness. This means that you must not forget who you were when he first created you ... and who you would be if he did not dwell in you. (34,126)

In the *Mirror*, it is through her own destruction, her falling into nothingness, that the soul becomes deified. Since she is dead to the world, "the Trinity will always dwell in her" (42,133). Lady Love says: "This Soul is God by the condition of Love, and I am God by divine nature ... That is why this precious beloved of mine is taught and brought by me, without herself, for she is changed into me ..." (21,117). Porete then simply announces: "... the Trinity has made her its home" (22,117). The Johannine echoes here are obvious (John 14:23). "This soul is completely melted, liquified and absorbed in the high Trinity, joined and united to it, and she has no will other than divine will ..." (68,153).

## Love, Nothingness, and Only God

So, despite Porete's use of the language of love, an apophatic moment always is present in the soul's annihilation: "Since she is nothing, nothing matters to her: not herself, not her neighbors, not even God himself. She is so small she cannot be found ... God is so great that he is incomprehensible to her. By this nothingness she has fallen into the certainty of knowing nothing and wanting nothing. This nothingness gives her everything. And it cannot be achieved in any other way" (81,165). God is, says Porete, known, loved and praised "... only by those creatures who cannot know, love, or praise him" (95,177-178). "Thus she has nothing to do with God, anymore than God had to do with her. Why? Because he is, while she is not; and in her nothingness she needs nothing, for it is enough that he is and she is not. Thus she is unburdened of all things, for she is again without being just as it was before she was ... she is what God is ..." (135,224). The image of the soul hidden in God, resting serenely in complete peace: "I am alone in him, myself excluded" (51,139) is a powerful one that demands rigorous purification so that God can *become* in the depths of the soul (here again, Porete draws on St Paul using Colossians 3). That is precisely why this soul "cannot be found" (52,140). "If she has properly fallen, this fall is so deep, the Soul cannot rise from this abyss, and this she mustn't do ..." (118,200).

Listen to Soul: "By God's grace I am what I am. Therefore I am only that, and nothing else, which God is in me. And God is also the same being that he is in me ... Therefore, if I am, I am nothing except what God is. There is nothing but God, so no matter where I go I find nothing except what God is. There is nothing but God, so no matter where I go I find nothing but God ..." (70,154). The performative act of being free from all locates the eternal everywhere and at once, in the same way that multiplicity in Plotinus is conceived as a One-everywhere (*Ennead* V, 3, 15, 20-22). In this way, Porete is following in the same tradition as other medieval women mystics: Mechthild of Magdeburg, thirteenth-century Italian mystic Angela de Foligno, and Hadewijch of Antwerp who stated: "god met god te sine" – to be God with God (and among the men, Eckhart and fourteenth-century Flemish mystic John of Ruysbroeck (Marin, 2010, p. 96). In a most Plotinian fashion Porete stresses the idea that this

love necessarily creates unity: “Love and the Souls become one thing, not two, for that would be discord. But they are one thing, and that is accord” (83,167).

Criticisms of this aspect of her thought zoom in on the idea that God and the soul become one in deification. I am not going to examine the thorny theological issues this idea has engendered throughout the centuries, but I do not find Porete’s spirituality problematic if read in the light of centuries of Patristic thought on the concept of God becoming human so that human could become God, and in the light of St Paul’s “I live, not not I, but Christ lives in me” (Phil 1:23) – in fact, there are very strong Pauline echoes throughout the *Mirror*. It is true that in the *Mirror* soul becomes God, but in so doing, is no longer soul: the “apophatic plunge into God is the expiration of the soul” (Turner, 2008, p. 658). There is no longer God and soul but God alone. Soul is annihilated. God is all.

And while the soul must do the work of becoming empty and naked, it is God who completes the process because the soul can no longer act and no longer needs to work (at becoming virtuous); the soul knows nothing, not even God. Here we can clearly see the subjective and objective poles of apophatic discourse and practice. The soul, the subject, becomes object, and God, the object, becomes subject. In this sense the concept of *theosis* (deification) is an interior rather than an exterior happening whereby God is no longer *telos* (end) but starting point: God continually goes out from God’s self and into the soul. The continuous hominification of God and divinization of humanity is the eternal process of Love loving Love’s self. As the mirror of the soul becomes emptied, only the gazer remains: Love.

Soul rather boldly declares: “God has no other place to put his goodness unless he places it in me . . . For this reason I can say that I am the salvation of all creatures and the glory of God” (117,194–195). Thus, through me going out of me, God becomes; God pours God’s self into me when I become not me. Meister Eckhart goes even further when he says that God can do nothing without me (Walshe, 1981, p. 46). “In all creatures there is something of God, but in the soul God is very God, for she is his resting place. That is why one master says God loves nothing but Himself: all His love is lavished on Himself” (Walshe, 1981, p. 73). This concept has

had many expressions in different traditions but it is, as previously noted, fundamentally Dionysian: that the love by which we love God is not our love but God's love. And this itself creates a unity between creator and created but it does not blur the distinction between the two – God is simply All while the soul is nothing.

Listen to Andalusian mystic Ibn 'Arabi's *hadith*: "When I [Allah] love my servant ... I become the hearing with which he hears, the seeing with which he sees, the hand with which he grasps, the feet with which he walks, the tongue with which he speaks"<sup>12</sup> And in Plotinus: "... seeing and the seen coincide, and the seen is like the seeing and the seeing is like the seen" (*Ennead* V, 3, 8, 16–17), for "there is no longer one thing outside and another outside which is looking in, but the keen sighted has what is seen within" (*Ennead* V, 8, 10, 35–36). Eckhart says: "The eye with which God sees me is the same eye with which I see God. My eye and God's eye are one eye and one vision or seeing and one knowledge and one love" (Théry, 1926, p. 224). And finally Porete: "And she is so taken up into him that she no longer sees him, nor herself; so he sees only God in his divine goodness" (91, 175). And again: "But God, who clarifies this Soul, sees himself through her in his divine majesty so she sees nothing outside of God himself, who is, and from whom all things come" (118, 200). Finally Soul declares:

I've said I will love Him:  
I'm lying for I do not,  
it is He alone who loves me:  
He is and I am naught ...  
He is fullness  
And I am filled. (122, 208)

In Porete (as also in Eckhart),<sup>13</sup> the annihilation of the self, the complete falling into God, is understood as a return to the soul's original, primal, "before" state. She becomes what she always was and is in the Godhead. This means that the soul is truly in herself when she is "nowhere

<sup>12</sup> As quoted in Sells, 1994, p. 69.

<sup>13</sup> In the sermon "Beati Pauperes Spiritu" Eckhart takes this thematic to the extreme: "Therefore let us pray to God that we may be free of God ..."; Walshe, 1981, p. 271.

in herself, not in God, not in herself, not in her neighbours, but in the annihilation which is the work of Lightening [Loingpres] ...” (59, 146). For the Meister, when the soul becomes virgin, that is, becomes naked and empty (disinterested), there is space for the Word. So, without the soul there would be no Word.<sup>14</sup> And for Eckhart, when the Word is born, the soul knows nothing, has nothing, and wants nothing – very strong echoes of Porete. Both Eckhart and Porete work a similar thematic: for the Dominican, the Word is birthed in the soul when the soul becomes “virgin” – in a sense, the soul becomes the womb for God – becomes wife (this is God’s “motherwork”). For Porete, the annihilated soul becomes an empty shell that is transformed into the residence of Love. In both Porete and Eckhart, deification is accomplished by the outgoing (descent) of God and the descent, not the ascent, of the soul. Thus we can say that God conceals God’s self in being birthed in the soul (a central idea in the thought of twentieth-century Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar – the *kenosis* of the incarnation is the very incomprehensibility of God) not only in historical time, but also eternally in the soul.

But this is not the end of the love story. Soul is not left bereft of herself in dark nothingness; paradoxically (and like all the great mystics) there are sudden moments of clarity and light. Although the soul remains annihilated, at times, “Dazzling Far-Near” flashes glory like the brightest of lightening (chs. 58 and 61), but as Porete notes, such flashes are necessarily brief because the soul cannot bear that “... ravishing, overwhelming union which suddenly seized me and joined me to the marrow of Divine Love, where I melted” (80, 164). More than this, she does not say. Her poetic description of the enflamed drunken soul soaring high like an eagle and seeing the sun in its full glory in chapters 22 and 23 are strong echoes of the Pseudo Dionysius, and describe the brief glimpses the soul can have of her divine Lover from a terrestrial perspective.

And the end of this journey is peace. In contrast to many of the practitioners of the apophatic way, Porete’s journey (and indeed Eckhart’s) is not presented as an arduous ascent up the cloud-wreathed mountain, but rather a being still in no-thingness – the very Plotinian notion of waiting

---

<sup>14</sup> See Hollywood, 1995.

quietly and then to be in the same place as the mighty Good (*Ennead* V, 5, 8, 3–5; V, 6, 6, 34–36; VI, 9, 8, 33–45). And although the annihilated soul remains outside of herself, she floats "... in a constant sea of contentment, where she wafts and wanes, drifts and drowns in divine peace, not moving within, not working without" (81, 165). "I rest in complete peace, alone, all and nothing in the courtesy of the unique kindness of God" (51, 139). "Thus the soul has within her the rays of divine knowledge, drawing her out of herself, into a wonderful divine peace ..." (71, 155). "... I cannot be in him unless he places me in him without myself, as it was when he, and not I, made me ..." (111, 191). "Without myself" – the loss of self, the displacement of self becomes the way to love Love and how Love becomes. This is my brief interpretation of how love and negative theology are brought together in *The Mirror of Simple and Annihilated Souls*.

## Conclusion

When I first read the *Mirror*, I found the language and style rather difficult. When I got used to the style and read the text more closely, I began to see how far-reaching Porete's spirituality really is. Through her radical practice of *aphairesis*, to the extent of self-annihilation, by becoming naked and empty, through falling out of herself, Porete answers the divine call to remove, as in Plotinus, everything that we took on in our journey from the One. In Porete's *Mirror*, the soul purges herself so completely that only God, only Love remains. And what this Love is cannot be said since there is no one to say it.

Negative theology usually practises an *aphairesis* that entails the taking away from God of all that is considered creaturely; in the *Mirror*, we have seen Porete's method focus on the self rather than on God. This reversal allows God to be God by making the soul a fit residence for Love. After that, soul's work is done: she has taken away all creatureliness. In this way, Porete manages to rework the concept of purification in a most radical fashion. But she does not, like many of the practitioners of the *via negativa*, "resolve", as it were, the problem of knowing God through unknowing knowing: right to the end, soul does not and cannot know God because only God is (soul has become no thing). She may see a flash

of Loingpres's glory, but for the most part, she remains still and alone, not knowing anything, even herself, while Love wills, acts, and loves in and through her. In this way God shall be all in all (1 Cor 15:28).

Knock,  
And He'll open the door  
Vanish,  
And He'll make you shine like the sun  
Fall,  
And He'll raise you to the heavens  
Become nothing,  
And He'll turn you into everything.<sup>15</sup>

## References

- Armstrong, A. H. (1990). On not knowing too much about God. In *Hellenic and Christian Studies* (pp. 129–145). Variorum Reprints.
- Behnke, C. (1996). *The mirror of simple and annihilated souls: A translation from the French*. PhD Thesis, University of Cincinnati.
- Boeve, L. (2002). The rediscovery of negative theology today. In M. M. Olivetti (Ed.), *Théologie négative* (pp. 443–459). Casa Editrice Dott. Antonio Milani.
- Coolman, B. T. (2008). The medieval affective Dionysian tradition. *Modern Theology*, 24(4), 615–632.
- Dronke, P. (1994). *Women writers of the Middle Ages: A critical study of texts from Perpetua to Marguerite Porete*. Cambridge University Press.
- Field, S. L. (2012). *The Beguine, the angel, and the inquisitor: The trials of Marguerite Porete and Guiard of Cressonessart*. University of Notre Dame Press.
- Hollywood, A. (1995). *The soul as virgin wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart*. Notre Dame University Press.
- Lerner, R. (2010). New light on *The mirror of simple souls*. *Speculum*, 85(1), 91–116.
- Lichtman, M. (1994). Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart: *The mirror of simple souls* mirrored. In B. McGinn (Ed.), *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine mystics*. Continuum.
- Lichtman, M. (1998). Negative theology in Marguerite Porete and Jacques Derrida. *Christianity and Literature*, 47(2), 213–227.
- Louth, A. (1989). *Denys the Areopagite*. Continuum.

---

15 Jalāl ad-Din Muhammad Rūmī; retrieved at <http://www.rumi.org.uk/poetry/>.

- Marin, J. (2010). Annihilation and deification in Beguine theology and Margaret Porete's *mirror of simple souls*. *Harvard Theological Review*, 103(1), 89–109.
- Marler, J. (2013). The ethics of Margaret Porete. In J. Hackett (Ed.), *A companion to Meister Eckhart* (pp. 445–472). Brill.
- McGinn, B. (1994). Thomas Gallus and Dionysian mysticism. *Studies in Spirituality*, 8, 81–96.
- McGinn, B. (2001). *The mystical thought of Meister Eckhart*. Crossroad.
- Rilke, R. M. (1918). *The book of a monk's life*. Retrieved from [https://archive.org/stream/cu31924026255822/cu31924026255822\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/cu31924026255822/cu31924026255822_djvu.txt)
- Sells, M. (1994). *Mystical languages of unsaying*. University of Chicago Press.
- Sells, M. (1994). The pseudo-woman and the meister: "Unsayings" and essentialism. In B. McGinn (Ed.), *Meister Eckhart and the Béguine mystics* (pp. 114–146). Continuum.
- Stang, C. M. (2008). Dionysius, Paul, and the significance of the pseudonym. *Modern Theology*, 24(4), 541–555.
- Théry, G. (1926). Edition critique des pièces relatives au procès d'Eckhart contenues dans le manuscrit 33b de la bibliothèque de Soest. In *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen-Age* (pp. 129–268).
- Turner, D. (2008). Dionysius and some late medieval theologians of northern Europe. *Modern Theology*, 24(4), 651–665.
- von Balthasar, H. U. (1979). *Heart of the world*. Ignatius Press.
- Walshe, M. O' C. (1981). *Meister Eckhart sermons and treatises II*. Watkins.
- Wright, P. (2009). Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of simple souls* and the subject of annihilation. *Mystics Quarterly*, 35(3), 63–98.

