DEFINING OREWOET [MADNESS OF LOVE] FROM HADEWIJCH TO TODAY

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The archaism orewoet [madness of love], a mystical term in the oeuvre of Hadewijch of Brabant (c. 1240) and briefly mentioned as well by Beatrice of Nazareth (†1268) and John of Ruusbroec (†1381), never crossed the boundaries of this limited Middle Dutch text corpus and, accordingly, this term never got a life as lemma in the Dutch thesaurus. Yet, the word has, in recent decades, made a striking come-back in the cultural sphere in the Dutch-speaking regions of the Low Countries. It is the title of a recent novel as well as of several works of art; it makes a regular appearance in contemporary poetry; and it is high on the list of ‘most beautiful word of the Dutch language’ of important players from the cultural field. Obviously, this obsolete Middle Dutch expression fills in a function for which the modern Dutch language lacks words. According to the blurb of Emy Koopman’s novel Orewoet (2016), the hiatus concerns ‘the fluid line between desire and madness’.

The contemporary fascination with orewoet specifically, rather than with other, more prominent terms in Hadewijch’s mystical lexicon, is at odds with the minor place the word holds in her work. It occurs quasi exclusively in her lyrical poetry, where it appears in just six songs out of 45, with one mention only in the Epistolary Poems, one in the Visions and none in her Letters. Hadewijch uses the word without presenting any definition. Up till now Hadewijch scholars have derived its connotation primarily from its courtly and monastic predecessors, resp. ire d’amour and insania amoris, of which Hadewijch’s Middle Dutch neologism most likely is a translation; or from the description Ruusbroec provides of the phenomenon. In this paper, I first investigate the meaning and mystical function of orewoet as used by Hadewijch by an analysis of the semantic field of the term in her lyrics. Second, using conceptual tools from Cultural Transfer Studies, I will explore the reuse of the term in the modern cultural repertoire, more specifically in Koopman’s novel. This comparative analyses will shed light on the transformations orewoet underwent on its transhistorical journey from Hadewijch to today.