

Literary Techniques and Devices in Select Poems of Ecomystics: St. Francis of Assisi & Hadewijch

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Abstract

Since ancient times poetry has been valued and appreciated by people of all walks of life. If ordinary language fails to express abstract phenomena and mystical experiences, a language capable of communicating intuitive experience directly must be created by the poet. This paper is an attempt to study the literary techniques and devices employed by the thirteenth century ecomystics St. Francis of Assisi from Italy & St. Hadewijch of Belgium in the select poems. This paper examines how the use of poetic techniques and devices brings out the ecological connectivity between human, nonhuman and divine. Some prominent features, techniques and devices discussed here are repetition, personification, allusions, imagery and excessive use of adjectives. These techniques help overcome the limitations that language imposes on expression; their use often transcends the rules of language itself.

Keywords: Ecomystics, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Hadewijch, literary devices and techniques.

Introduction

St. Francis of Assisi (c.1181/1182-1226) from Italy and Hadewijch of Brabant (c.1250-1310) from what is today Belgium can be considered as ecomystical poets of the thirteenth century. St. Francis's lyrical masterpiece "The Canticle of Brother Sun" also known as "The Canticle of Creatures" was the fruit of his personal ecomystical experience. This "Canticle" reinforces his position as the patron saint of Ecology in the modern world. St. Francis's "reflects on his personal relationship with God and experiences his awe-inspiring and relentless goodness in all created elements" (Rout 18-19). This Canticle, which has today become an iconic text for ecomysticism is constructed around the four conventional elements, earth, water, air and fire, carries an introduction about the sun, moon and stars and sections on peace and death added at the end.

Hadewijch is rightly called one of "the greatest names in Medieval Flemish and Dutch literature" (Smith 42). As a prose writer Hadewijch left her *Letters* and the *Visions*, as a poet, *Poems in Stanzas* and the *Poems in Couplets*. In this paper the focus is only on two poems of Hadewijch from *Poems in Stanzas* namely "To Bear the Yoke" (157-159) and "The Knights of Love" (149-152). Hadewijch's poetry employs rich love mysticism which is a literary genre common in devotional literature. Like her contemporary St. Francis of Assisi, she was clearly

inspired by and thoroughly mastered the courtly love poetry of the Troubadours (France, Italy and Germany). “Hadewijch wrote in the genre of love mysticism, or *minnemystiek*, which combined images from commentaries on the Song of Songs with the language of courtly love” (Diener 92).

St. Francis of Assisi and Hadewijch used a number of literary techniques and devices to express their ecomystical experience in its fullness. Among these devices are personification, allusions, imagery and excessive use of adjectives.

Personification

Personification is a figure of speech in which human traits and emotions are given to inanimate objects. Another manifestation of personification can be in giving relationship terms to supposedly inanimate objects. Both these can be seen in the poems selected for study. Phrases like ‘Brother Sun’, ‘Sister Moon and Stars’, ‘Sister Earth our mother’, ‘Sister Death’, ‘Brother Sun, who brings the day’, ‘How beautiful is he, how radiant in all his splendour!’, ‘Sister Earth, our mother, who feeds us in her sovereignty and produces various fruits with coloured flowers and herbs’, ‘Sister Death, from whose embrace no mortal can escape’ are notable examples. Examples from Hadewijch’s poetry include ‘Fidelity ever blossoms in their hands’, ‘sweet-tasting yoke’, ‘noble load of the spirit’, ‘Love drinks all that outpouring’, ‘in Love's face he learns fully’ etc. Ecocriticism has sometimes viewed personification as an anthropocentric technique, but we in the present context, we can consider how ecomystics use this technique to place themselves as part of the physical world. Their search for the divine in necessarily one that includes the humans and the non-humans. Personification therefore becomes a poetic manifestation of this inclusive non-anthropocentric worldview. Thus, we can say that this technique emphasizes the reality of God-Man-Nature bond.

Personification had its beginnings from the troubadours’ poetic tradition. A troubadour was originally a travelling musician. We have biographical evidence to the fact that a young Francis of Assisi used to play music and sing troubadour song during nights. This canticle, “The Canticle of Brother Sun” can also be placed within the troubadour poetic tradition. The very use of appellation from familial relationships reinforces the close bond between the human and the non-human world. This feature, characteristic of troubadour poetry becomes essential in reinforcing St. Francis’s inclusive worldview. The *Canticle* praises qualities of obedience, humility, bravery, loyalty, and courage in serving the ‘master’ who is here not the human beloved or knight, but ‘King God’.

Repetition or Refrain

Repetition or Refrain may serve in poetry to lay emphasis and create rhythm. When a line or phrase recurs in a poem it becomes noticeable to the readers. Refrain also functions as a mnemonic device, drawing the attention of readers to a certain important idea. In “The Canticle of Brother Sun”, the line ‘Praised be my God’, ‘Praise be Thou, my Lord, Praise to my Lord for...’ occurs ten times, inviting readers and the non-human world to join the poet in praising Lord. The word “most” occurs many times in the Canticle along with nouns such as ‘high’, ‘beautiful’, ‘useful’, ‘robust’, ‘holy’ etc. By using this word in its superlative form that is usually reserved for referring to God, the Canticle again reinforces its ecomysticism. Nature becomes a

means of approaching the divine and partakes in God's divinity. God is the Father who feeds his Creation with all that it needs.

The repetition of the words can be seen in Hadewijch's poems also. For instance, the word 'love' is used in this poem nearly for thirty-five times in different contexts, sometimes this word is used twice in the same line itself. It is interesting to note that the word is used mostly as an abstract noun and also serves as a personification for God. This can be seen in phrases such as 'Love touches the loving soul', 'Love summons love to pray', 'Love has heavily burdened him with love', 'With love they shall cleave in oneness to love' etc. By using for *God* a word that in troubadour poetry to refer to the human beloved, the poems make love the central defining feature of the divine. When used along with images from the natural world, we get the strong impression of a universe where the human and the non-human world join together in love for the divine who is Himself defined as love.

Use of imagery and Excessive Adjectives

The use of imagery and excessive adjectives is another device employed by both St. Francis of Assisi and Hadewijch. According to *The Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*, "imagery refers to images produced in the mind by language, whose words may refer either to experience which could produce physical perceptions were reader actually to have those experience or to sense impressions themselves" (560).

The division of images into visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and tactile is commonly discussed in literary studies. We can find examples of all these in the *Canticle* of St. Francis: 'passing bright', 'Radiant in splendour', 'clear and lovely stars of heaven', 'Clouds and weather—be it dark or fair', 'illuminate the night', 'most robust', 'who gives birth to all the many fruits and herbs', 'colours flowers in rich variety'. In Hadewijch's poetry, we come across 'bring flowers in the land', 'chains of Love', 'blossoms in their hands with flowers and fruits of nobleness', 'drawing through her secret veins', 'sweet-tasting yoke', 'sweet pain', etc.

The fact that the nouns and adjectives are drawn from the world of nature and refer to the connectivity. When analysed, it is made vivid that by using adjectives and imagery it just not only enhances exquisiteness and beauty to poem but by increasing the number of adjectives to nouns, that too nouns from nature, the natural item like flowers, fruits, storm etc., become more and more visible, audible, tactile to the readers' mind which can make them feel natural world and connect to it more easier and it is the feast for our mind sight too.

Allusion

Allusion is a direct or indirect reference to a familiar figure, place or event from history, literature, mythology or the Bible. It is not surprising that both St. Francis and Hadewijch both of who were deeply influenced by the Bible allude to it. The Psalms 145-150, 148:1-14, The Book of Daniel 3:35, sometimes Divine Office prayer's praise and worship etc. offer a rich source of allusions. A number of intertextual references can be seen in Hadewijch. The title of the poem "To bear the Yoke" and the opening line of the second stanza '*My yoke is sweet, my burden light,*' alludes to the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 11, verse 30. There are also other references made from

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the Bible, especially from Songs of Solomon 2:12, '*flowers in the land*' and reference from 2:16 'With flowers and fruits of nobleness 7:12 '*I am all Love's, and Love is all mine!*' and from Psalms 16:2 which has been asked to 'Read' by the poet in the midst of the poem. It is a modern technique employed by the poet of thirteenth century.

Rhyme scheme

A rhyme scheme is a pattern of end rhymes in poetry. These rhymes are based on sounds not spelling. In the 'Canticle of Brother Sun', we can see that words with similar sounds are placed together to emphasize the similarity of their sounds. For example, starting from the first line, we can recognise the pattern AA BB CC DD, AA EE FF GG, AA DD HH II, AA JJ KK LL, KK MM AA. 'Thee-be, same-mane, one-sun, light- bright, see- Thee, given-heaven, Air- fair, give-live, be-she, bright-night, beautiful-powerful, Earth-birth, be- variety, wrong-long, they-day, whom-doom, away- they, will-ill, fully-humility'. These rhyming sounds help to make a poem musical and so it is perhaps natural that this Canticle has been set to music and sung in churches even today.

Enjambment

Enjambment is applied very intentionally by accomplished poets. **Enjambment** can be defined as a thought or sense, phrase or clause, in a line of poetry that does not come to an end at the line break but moves over to the next line. For example, in the *Canticle*, the lines: "Praised be my Lord for Sister Death, from whom/No living soul escapes. She brings the doom/ Of endless woe to all who pass away/In guilt of mortal sin. But blessed they/ Who die in doing Thy most holy Will." (147) are evidence of enjambment. There is a flow of thought from one line to the next. The other example of enjambment from Hadewijch's poem "To Bear the Yoke" is "No heart or mind could ever guess/ How anyone looks with love on his Beloved /When Love has heavily burdened him with love; /He will not waste an instant's time/ Until he passes with love through all, /To gaze with fidelity on true Love; /For all his judgments must be/ Read in Love's countenance." (158)

This technique helps to link ideas beyond the end of the line into a subsequent line or lines. Modern criticism has related the technique of enjambment to the theme of continuity. In St. Francis and Hadewijch, enjambment reinforces the continuity between the human, non-human and divine worlds, a continuity that can be seen as the very essence of ecopoetry. This technique also encourages going beyond the comfort zone of 'self-centredness' to connect to Divine and Nature as well, again a central concept in ecopoetry.

God-Human-Nature bond

Hadewijch also an ecomystic, begins every poem in *Poems in Stanzas* with a mention of Nature, mentioning seasons winter, spring etc. Many of the images, (but not all) in the poems are borrowed from the troubadour poetry, says Tanis M. Guest (176). In the poem taken for analysis "To Bear the Yoke" there is no mentioning of seasons, but the poem says: 'the noble season/ That will bring us *flowers in the land*' (157). The noble season might indicate Spring and it is clear that "season chosen might either corresponds with the poet's mood or contrast with it.; then Spring might symbolise elation or contrast with dejection, winter could indicate sorrow, or though rarely, contrast with joy" (Guest 176). It is really surprising that in 45 poems in *Poems in Stanzas*, the opening lines imply organic change and the growth of the world of nature. For Hadewijch in her

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search of the love of God, the whole universe, with all of God's creatures, is necessarily made involved. In the closing line 'For under Love's power stand/ The sun, moon, and stars!' also she ends with the touch of Nature acknowledging the Creator and Creation.

Concept of Gender and Gender Difference

During the Middle Ages the concept of gender and gender difference was much more fluid than it is today. For mystics because of their mystical experience their understanding of God and the soul is not gender biased; for them God is above gender. So, we can identify words representing God sometimes as feminine and sometimes as masculine. Especially in Hadewijch, the terms are interchangeably used. She speaks of God as Minne (Love), as the distant lady, and herself as the faithful (male lover). In the *Poems on Stanzas* she expresses typical courtly love mystical experience between God as female love and soul as a knight (male lover). For example, in the poem "The Knight of Love" she writes:

A fine exterior, fine garments, /And fine language adorn the **knight**:/ To suffer everything for Love without turning hostile/ Is a fine exterior for **him** who has such ability; / **His** garments then are his acts, / Performed with new ardor, not with self-complacency, . . . (9:31-36)

Veracious words and great expenditures / In public, and fair splendor at home, /Most give the **knight** honor and luster; / By these signs can **he** best be recognized. / So, it is also with them who love, /If they are established in the truth /And if they arrange their inner life with fair splendor, /As best pleases Love, /And give their whole love for Love's sake: / This gift is best pleasing to Love. (9: 41-50)

Who would be ever singing the praises of Love, / Since **she** gives night in the daytime? /Those **she** ought to clothe, honor, and nourish, /**She** robs of all their strength:/Anyone who would gladly pay the tribute of love, / **She** ought to teach according to all justice, / . . . (9:61-66)

Through these above-mentioned lines, it is made clear that she reshapes traditional courtly love experience between a Knight (male lover) and his Beloved (female) to mystical experience between God and the soul. Here God takes the female role (she) by remaining at a distance, remaining sometime hidden, making the soul (Knight) go in search of her 'to suffer everything for Love'. "The relationship between God and the soul she describes is very far from the standard patriarchal relationship" says Sasika Murk Jansen (333).

Conclusion

As we consciously engage with nature, we definitely meet God. Ecomystics St. Francis of Assisi and Hadewijch perceive this connectedness with everything, and they no longer experience a sense of separateness as individuals. For at the heart of this universe, nothing exists in itself but exists interrelated to something else. Their writings and employed techniques displayed an outstanding mastery of language and knowledge of the courtly literature of the thirteenth century. The poetry selected for study proved the way in which the poets depicted the bond between God, Men and Nature. The techniques they applied encourage the readers to change their attitudes to

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nature and enter into more eco-friendly relationship with nature. Prayer and nature contemplation allows us to enter the heart of the universe and experience the Spirit, the incarnated Christ and Creator interrelated within nature.

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