**VIATOR**

*Medieval and Renaissance Studies*

VOLUME 48, No. 1

# VIATOR

MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE STUDIES

Volume 48, No. 1 (2017)

PUBLISHED UNDER THE AUSPICES OF

THE CENTER FOR MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE STUDIES

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

BREPOLS

# VIATOR

**MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE STUDIES**

Founded by Lynn White, jr. (1907–1987)




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BREPOLS PUBLISHERS, TURNHOUT, BELGIUM
ISSN: 0083-5897
ISBN: 978-2-503-57248-2
D/2017/0095/305





Library of Congress Card Number 71-111417

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# APOPHATIC MOUNTAINS: POETICS OF IMAGE IN MARGUERITE PORETE AND JOHN OF THE CROSS

Pablo Acosta-García – Anna Serra Zamora*

**Abstract:** This paper aims to develop a theory of image based on the *Mirror of Simple Souls* by the French beguine Marguerite Porete and the poems and commentaries of the Spanish Carmelite John of the Cross. It performs a comparative analysis of the way these writers think using images, the way they create their images, and how these images relate to their texts. In particular, we will analyze the inherently polarized structure of the mountain image and the alternative articulation of this polarity through the image of the ladder, which both authors use and through which they chart a spiritual topography. We will examine how Marguerite and John of the Cross construct negative theologies through an apophatic meditational practice, and we will highlight analogies by discussing historical differences between the two authors. This will persuade us of the possible existence of an underground tradition of transmission of metaphors and apophatic discourses.

**Keywords**: Marguerite Porete, John of the Cross, Text and Image, Visual Theology, Mysticism, Mountain, Ladder, Diagrams, Image, Heresy.

## 1. Introduction and sources

This paper aims to develop a theory of image based on the works of the French beguine Marguerite *dicta* Porete (ca. 1260–1310) and the Spanish Carmelite John of the Cross (1542–1591). In particular, it will perform a comparative analysis focused on the image of the spiritual mountain that both authors use, looking at the only work written by Marguerite, the *Mirror of Simple Souls* (before 1296), alongside various works by John: mainly the *Ascent to Mount Carmel* (ca. 1584), the *Dark night* (ca. 1585), and the drawing of the *Mount of Perfection* (ca. 1580). Other creations by the latter will also be mentioned, like the *Spiritual Canticle* and the *Living Flame of Love*.[1] A glance at these texts confirms that the image of the mountain served to articulate the doctrine and experience of both authors and makes it clear that both—albeit under distinct historical and biographical circumstances—used it to transmit and propose a spiritual experience to other people. Without losing sight of the many differences between Marguerite and John, the following piece of research aims to highlight such similarities, which are notable despite the differing contexts in which these images were created and employed.

We have divided this article into three parts. In the first, we draw up a historical and historiographical context in order to consider the possible existence of a tradition that could be said to unite the works of Marguerite and John. In the second section, we deal with the notion of image in general and the use of images in the texts we have chosen for consideration. Finally, we analyze the image of the mountain,

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[1] Abbreviations used: *Mirouer, chapter: page(s)* = M. Porete, *Le mirouer des simples ames - Speculum simplicium animarum*, ed. Romana Guarnieri and Paul Verdeyen (Turnhout 1986). *Mirror, chapter: page(s)* = M. Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, trans. E. L. Babinsky (New York 1993). J. de la Cruz, *Obras completas*, ed. E. Pacho (Burgos 2000): *AMC* book, chapter.section = *Ascent to Mount Carmel* [*Subida del Monte Carmelo*]; *DN*, song, book.chapter = *Dark Night* [*Noche oscura*]; *SC* song.section = *Spiritual Canticle* [*Cántico espiritual*]; *LF*, song, verse.section = *Living Flame of Love* [*Llama de amor viva*].

starting with the fact of its polarity (top and bottom) and finishing with an alternative version of this top and bottom image, which is the ladder. Here, the top and bottom polarity is graded into steps.

Let us start with the possible transmission of doctrines and images by looking at the biographical details of the authors' lives. It is certain that Marguerite Porete developed her work at the end of the 13th century in Hainaut in the north of France, a territory which was under the cultural influence of the surrounding northern European countries. Little else is known for sure, except that she was probably a literate beguine with noble origins,[2] and that she certainly wrote, rewrote, and predicated a book—the aforementioned *Mirror*—which was considered by an Inquisition court to be heretical and "pestiferous."[3] We know that some extracts from that book formed the basis for the creation of the so-called "heresy of the Free Spirit," which was later banned at the Council of Vienne.[4] John of the Cross, meanwhile, was a Discalced Carmelite who lived during the *Siglo de Oro* in Castile.[5] He was born and educated in Castile, and he played a major role in the Carmelite Reform, together with Teresa of Jesus, in the second half of the 16th century. This led to his being imprisoned by the Inquisition for nine months in 1577, although he was never charged or found guilty. From 1578, he moved between convents in Andalusia where he wrote his best-known books and poetry and practiced the *cura monialium* of the Carmelite nuns.

Such biographical highlights make it abundantly clear that the authors we are confronting represent different historical contexts and relationships with the Church. We do not intend to overlook these differences. Marguerite was considered a relapsed heretic and was burned at the stake together with copies of her book in 1310, while John was a friar who was ultimately canonized in 1726 and was proclaimed Doctor of the Church in 1926.[6] They can also be seen as representatives of distinct spiritual, literary traditions, even if these converge under the banner of mendicant spirituality. In Bernard McGinn's words, Marguerite was one of the "Four Female Evangelists" of the Low Middle Ages,[7] while John, on the other hand, formed part of a spirituality that was nourished by late medieval speculative theology and was strongly influenced

[2] For a discussion about Marguerite's geopolitical context, see J. van Egen, "Marguerite (Porete) of Hainaut and the Medieval Low Countries," *Marguerite Porete et le* Miroir des simples âmes. *Perspectives historiques, philosophiques et littéraires*, ed. S. L. Field, R. E. Lerner and S. Pyron (Paris 2013) 9–68.

[3] For a review of Marguerite's life and process which takes into account all the previous bibliography, see S. L. Field, *The beguine, the Angel and the Inquisitor* (Notre-Dame 2012).

[4] See R. Guarnieri, "Il movimento del Libero Spirito. Testi e documenti," *Archivio Italiano per la Storia della Pietá* IV (1965) 414–416, and R. Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Late Middle Ages* (Berkeley 1972).

[5] The most exhaustive study of the life and works of John of the Cross is still J. Baruzi, *San Juan de la Cruz y el problema de la experiencia mística* (Valladolid 2001 [1924]).

[6] However, on John's heterodoxy, see A. Serra Zamora, "Él para sí es ley. Heterodoxia de San Juan de la Cruz," *Religio in labyrntho. Encuentros y desencuentros de religiones en sociedades complejas. Actas del IX Congreso de la Sociedad Española de Ciencias de las Religiones*, ed. J. J. Caerols (Madrid 2013) 189–198.

[7] See B. McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism. Men and Women in the New Mysticism, 1200–1350* (New York 1998) 199, where he relates the spirituality of Marguerite with that of Hadewijch, Mechthild, and Angela da Foligno in the Low Medieval "flowering of mysticism."

by the affective tendency, especially by works coming from the *devotio moderna*.[8] Despite these differences, however, we can nevertheless identify certain elements of discourse that Marguerite and John hold in common. It will be possible to demonstrate that the traditions which they represent are neither isolated from one another nor diametrically opposed, but are in fact complementary.

Without a doubt, the main effort made to connect the works of the Rhineland-Flemish mystics with their southern counterparts in the Spanish *Siglo de Oro* is the instructive monograph by Jean Orcibal, *Saint Jean de la Croix et les mystiques rhéno-flamands* (1966).[9] Orcibal's work is extremely interesting for us, because he seeks to draw parallels between authors who lived at different times and in different places. Most of the links that he finds occur in relation to the images used by the authors, with a general emphasis on the verbal-visual representations found in the works of the male northern authors. He tends to avoid direct reference to the feminine tradition, but we may cite examples from Marguerite's book that would not be out of place in his analysis: the image of the soul-matter being burned by the fire of Love,[10] the mnemotechnic seraph,[11] the divine barrel[12] and the ray of divine light.[13] What seems an acceptable inference to take from these supposed coincidences is that all these images point to a shared devotional context, in which similar doctrinal and didactic needs are addressed. It is worth noting that one of the images examined by Orcibal—the particle of dust in the light—appears only in Marguerite and John's works,[14] suggesting a particular resonance between these two authors. We will take up the lines of enquiry raised in Orcibal's work, not by trying to find a source for John's imagery in that of Marguerite, but by comparing their images to find shared elements that could imply a wider tradition.

Taking into account the fact that John may never have read the texts of Marguerite, our comparison of the two authors instead hypothesizes that an underground tradition

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[8] As we will see, in John's case the works of Jan van Ruusbroec, Jean Gerson, and the compilations of Heinrich Herp are very important. For a discussion of the origins, development and spirituality of the *devotio moderna*, see J. van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life* (Philadelphia 2008).

[9] J. Orcibal, *Saint Jean de la Croix et les mystiques rhéno-flamands* (Bruges 1966).

[10] *Mirror*, 25: 107 and 83: 158 (*Mirouer*, 25: 90–92 and 83: 236–238, respectively). For the tradition of transformation by fire images in John, see Orcibal, *Saint Jean de la Croix* (n. 9 above) 82–83.

[11] See *AMC* II, 6.5 and *Mirror*, 5: 83 (*Mirouer*, 5: 20–22). For an analysis of the northern tradition of the mnemonic seraph related with Marguerite's work, see P. García-Acosta, "Come insegnare a non vedere Dio: Visibilitá e negazione della imagine nella opera di Marguerite dicta Porete (m. 1310)," *La Visione*, ed. F. Zambon (Milano 2012) 242–251.

[12] See *Mirror*, 23: 105–106 (*Mirouer*, 23: 86–88). For an analysis of this motive, see P. García-Acosta, "Images for Deification: Visual Literacy in Marguerite Porete's Mirror of Simple Souls," *Exploring Visual Literacies Inside, Outside and Through the Frame*, ed. A. Conner Farris and F. Pattenden (Oxford 2012) 123–132. On the "interior bodega," see *SC* 17, 18.

[13] See, for instance, *Mirror*, 58: 135–136 (*Mirouer*, 58: 168). *AMC* II, 2.1, 5.6, 8.6; *DN* song 1/decl. 2, II, 5.3, 8.4, 12.3, 13–14.16; *SC* 13 annotation, 14–15.16; *LF A* 3.17, 3.40.

[14] Reference given in M. Porete, *El espejo de las almas simples*, trans. B. Garí (Madrid 2005), 220, n. 179, where it is given erroneously the page 224 in the Spanish translation of Orcibal's book instead of the page 244. See *Mirror*, 78: 152–153 (*Mirouer*, 78: 220): "Because the true Sun shines in their illumination, they see the little specks in the rays of the Sun by means of the splendor of the Sun and of the rays." Orcibal, *Saint Jean de la Croix* (see n. 9 above) 217: "En revanche, on ne voit pas par quel cheminement imprévu l'allégorie des 'grains de poussière' dans un rayon de soleil' a pu passer de l'hérétique Marguerite Porete à l'auteur de la *Montée* et de la *Nuit*." On the stains and dust in the light, see *AMC* II, 5.6, 14.9, 16.11; *DN* song 1/decl. 2, II, 8.3.

of more than two centuries may indeed have existed between them. Although it has never been proven, Marguerite was probably read by Meister Eckhart and perhaps by his disciples: it is even possible that Jan van Ruusbroec was among those late readers and that he accomplished the role of an intermediary between the feminine mystic tradition and speculative theology.[15] This calls to mind a question that is preliminary to our study and that has interested a variety of scholars. Namely, how is it that a certain branch of the tradition of the speculative mysticism (which can be traced from Eckhart through to Seuse, Tauler, and Ruusbroec) could have reached Castile in the 16th century and been absorbed by John, by earlier Carmelites like Teresa of Jesus, and by other representatives of the mendicant orders. The first scholar to establish a connection was Menéndez y Pelayo, whose work was followed by others, such as Pierre Groult and the aforementioned Jean Orcibal.[16] According to Orcibal, John may have come into contact with Heinrich Herp's works via Teresa of Jesus,[17] who in turn would have received them from the Franciscans Bernardino de Laredo (*The Ascent of Mount Sion*) and Francisco de Osuna (*The Third Spiritual Alphabet*). On the other hand, it seems more plausible that the Carmelites read Ruusbroec than they did Eckhart.[18] Orcibal suggests that John could have read the Latin version of Ruusbroec's works, translated by Laurentius Surius and published in 1552 under the general title *Opera*.[19] This would explain some of the conceptual similitude between John and Ruusbroec, for instance, *tactus/toque, tempestad de amor*, or *soledad en el desierto*. Two crucial works for the absorption of German spiritual literature during the Spanish *Siglo de Oro* were the *Institutiones* (Coimbra, 1551), also translated by Surius (1522–1578); a book that compiled texts by Tauler, Seuse, and Ruusbroec;[20] and the *Opera Thauleri*, which may have been read in Salamanca where John studied from 1564 to 1567. If Marguerite was read by Eckhart and his disciples, this channel for the eventual transmission of her mysticism to Castile was certainly possible.

[15] About Meister Eckhart and Marguerite, see Field, *The Beguine, the Angel and the Inquisitor* (n. 3 above) 202, and quoted bibliography: "It has never quite been proven that Eckhart read the *Mirror* directly, but certainly his teachings were related to Marguerite's." See also J. L. Trombley, "The Master and the Mirror: The Influence of Margueite Porete on Meister Eckhart," *Magistra* 16 (2010) 60–102.

[16] The reference by Menéndez y Pelayo is in his *Historia de los heterodoxos españoles* (Madrid 1978) 658, where he asserts the influence of the northern mysticism in the *Siglo de oro*, against the old thesis by Pierre Rousselot: "Taulero, Suso, Ruysbroeck (a quien aquí llamaban Ruysbrochio), Henrico Herp y Dionisio Cartujano, por el cual e indirectamente, venía a influir el maestro Eckhart…" See also P. Groult, *Les mystiques des Pays-Bas et la littérature espagnola du seizième siècle* (Louvain 1927) and E. Pacho, "Simiente neerlandesa en la espiritualidad clásica Española," *Fuentes neerlandesas de la mística española*, ed. M. Norbert Ubarri and L. Behiels (Madrid 2005) 17–70.

[17] See Orcibal, *Saint Jean de la Croix* (n. 9 above) 57–58.

[18] See H. Hatzfeld, "The Influence of Ramon Lull and Jan van Ruysbroeck on the Language of the Spanish Mystics," *Traditio* 4 (1946) 337–397. About Ruusbroec reading the *Mirror*, see E. Colledge and J. C. Marler, "'Poverty of will': Ruusbroec, Eckhart and *The Mirror of Simple Souls*," *Jan van Ruusbroec. The sources, Content and Sequels of his Mysticism*, ed. P. Mommaers and N. de Paepe (Leuven 1984) 15 and L. Muraro, "Ruusbroec lettore di Margherita Porete," *Le amiche di Dio. Margherita e le altre* (Napoli 2014) 147–168. On the other side, M. Norbert Ubarri, *Jan van Ruusbroec y Juan de la Cruz. La mística en diálogo* (Madrid 2007) studies the influence of the Northern mystic in the Southern, including feminine authors and beguines, but he does not mention Marguerite Porete.

[19] Orcibal, *Saint Jean de la Croix* (n. 9 above) 79.

[20] For a comparative analysis of the different versions, see Orcibal, *Saint Jean de la Croix* (n. 9 above) 119–122.

Another way to connect the *Mirror* with 16th-century Iberian Peninsula is the *devotio moderna*, and in particular one of its main authors, Jean Gerson. It is almost certain that Gerson read Marguerite: in writing of the doctrinal errors of the beghards and beguines, he points to a book written by "Marie de Valenciennes," who is certainly her.[21] Laying to one side the negative appraisal that Gerson affords Marguerite's text, what is clear is that the *Mirror* remained in use not only in the secular communities of the Low Countries, but also in the more orthodox circles of Gerson's movement, where it created some discomfort. It is also certain that Gerson's works arrived in Castile, since they were warmly received by Francisco García de Cisneros.[22]

We also have to take into account that preaching, and orality in general, was a fundamental and implicit means of doctrinal transmission, and it is one which we are unable to account for meaningfully in our research. A further issue is that the critical tradition whose main exponents are Menéndez y Pelayo, Groult, and Orcibal examines the influence of the northern on the southern authors having in mind only the "orthodox" male-authored texts, hardly mentioning any woman writers, even though the evidence is sufficient to suspect that feminine spiritual literature may have nourished the masculine corpus. This paper tries to dislodge the reductive, male-focused tendency that characterizes the existing critical tradition, and sets up a dialogue between two worlds that have certain images in common. Despite the fact that we cannot definitively prove the textual transmission between Marguerite's book and the works of John of the Cross, we are indeed able to note both writers' observance of the same specific iconographic tradition: that of the mountain combined with the *heavenly ladder*.[23] The milestone appearance of this image was a diagram by John Climacus (c. 7th century) depicting the possible ascent of the Soul to God. Entitled the *Scala Paradisi,* representations of this image spread widely throughout Western Europe from the 11th century onwards. Its early depictions took a classic form (fig. 1).[24]

Each rung on the ladder in the *Scala Paradisi* represents a different chapter dedicated to a spiritual virtue or vice, so that the image reflects the graded layout of

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[21] See O. Boulnois, "Qu'est-ce que la Liberté de l'esprit? La parole de Marguerite et la raison du théologien," *Marguerite Porete et le* Miroir des simples âmes. *Perspectives historiques, philosophiques et littéraries*, ed. S. L. Field, R. E. Lerner and S. Piron (Paris 2013) 133–139.

[22] On the influence of Gerson in the *Ejercitatorio de la vida espiritual* by Cisneros, see Y. Mazour-Matusevich, "Gerson's Legacy," *A companion to Jean Gerson*, ed. B. Patrick McGuire (Leiden- Boston 2006) 375–382. Jean Gerson's use of the image of the mountain of three degrees ("degres," "schelons") in his French treatise *La mointagne de contemplation*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. VII/2 (Paris 1966) 16–55, seems to be related with Bernard's *Semones in* Cantica canticorum and not with any apophatic theologian, as Masour-Matusevich asserts on p. 26. However, a complete study of the relationship between the *devotio moderna* and Marguerite Porete is still to be done.

[23] This motive is defined by C. Heck, *L'échelle céleste. Une histoire de la quête du ciel* (Paris 1999) 14, as follows: "… est la représentation de la progresión dans les degrés de vertus pendant la vie terrestre […] est une ascensión symbolique et interieur, progressive et aleatoire."

[24] This icon is reproduced in Heck, *L'échelle céleste* (n. 23 above) as fig. 7. For the persistence of this representation, see J. Rupert Martin, *The Illustration of the* Heavenly Ladder *of John Climacus* (Princeton 1954) figs. 17, 21, 22, 133, 238, 293 and 296. For a complete catalogue of the manuscripts containing this work, see pp. 164–192. For a translation of the Greek text into the English, see J. Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. C. Luibhid (London 1982).

John Climacus's text. The rung-chapters concerned with virtues assist the monks in their spiritual progress, or ascent, while the rung-chapters about sins warn of the faults that cause descent, or falling. From a historical point of view, this schema fulfilled the needs of the mendicant orders in matching their new understanding of the progress of the individual Soul, and in providing a perfect tool for learning, meditation, and memory. In his book on the image of the heavenly ladder, Christian Heck gathers numerous examples of similarly graded images which also dealt with spiritual ascent during the Middle Ages. We are particularly interested in the images created by the feminine tradition from the 12th century onwards. A useful starting point from this tradition might be Hildegard von Bingen's *Scivias*, and the symbols of ascent used there (fig. 2).[25]

As a visionary writer, Hildegard includes both traditional graphic elements and entirely new motives in this image, the latter the fruits of her personal revelation. Here, a celestial winged being is seated ("sedentem in throno") at the top of a mountain ("montem magnum ferreum"). He spreads his light ("claritas") over everything below, until it reaches the base of the mountain ("ad radicem eiusdem montis"), where it is received by the head of an anthropomorphic figure described in the text as a child ("imago alia puerilis aetatis").[26] The mountain is conceived of as a cataphatic image which expresses the connection between two different realities, the divine and the human. It is thus in keeping with other symbols in Hildegard's work, such as the different visions of columns or the tower of the Church,[27] and with the anthropological use that other writers make of the mountain as symbol: in fact, both Marguerite and John use it following this interpretation. For instance, in Marguerite's case we read:[28]

> [*Love*:]… Now I will tell you who it is who is seated on the mountain above the winds and the rain [*qui se siet en la montaigne dessus les vens et les pluies*]. They are those who, on earth, have neither shame nor honor, nor fear on account of something which might happen […]. Such folk are seated on the mountain, and none other than these are seated there.

The parallels with Hildegard's iconography are obvious: both authors speak of the top of the mountain as a "place" where the divine "is seated," far from earthly things. In Marguerite's case "those who are seated on the mountain" ("ceulx qui se sieent en la haulte montaigne") have achieved union with God, having completed a journey towards perfection.

Yet despite these similarities, both Marguerite and John's images present us with something different: the mountain becomes not only an *axis mundi*, but a graduated and negative tool for meditation. Starting with Marguerite, the mountain in the

[25] The following vision is described and exegetically interpreted in H. Bingensis, *Scivias*, ed. A. Führkötter and A. Carlevaris (Turnhout 1978) vol. 1, 7–11. For a study of Hildergard visions with an updated bibliography, see V. Cirlot, *Hildegard von Bingen y la tradición visionaria de Occidente* (Barcelona 2005).

[26] Bingensis, *Scivias* (n. 25 above) 7.

[27] For the columns, see Hildegardis, *Scivias* (n. 25 above) 390, 462–463 and 478–479; for the tower, 516–517, and their respective illustrations and exegetical comments.

[28] *Mirror*, 65: 141 (*Mirouer*, 65: 186).

*Mirror* constitutes a major image which permits the author—and later, the recipient—to order the information which is spread apparently non-methodically throughout the book. The graded mountain allows her to construct a mental diagram in which all the "stages" which a Simple Soul must accomplish are systematized. In chapter 118 we read:

> [*Soul:*] I have promissed, says this Soul, ever ine Love has overpowerd me, to say something about the seven stages [*estaz*] we call states [*estrés*], for so they are. And these are the degrees [*degrez*] by which one ascends from the valley to the height of the mountain, which is so isolated that one sees nothing save God. Each degree of being has its own level [*checun degré a par estre son assise*].

Marguerite presents here the entire itinerary for the Soul's journey, which is announced at the beginning of the book and developed in the following pages of this chapter, the longest in the whole of the *Mirror*. All the fragmentary information which we find in the rest of the book is collated here diagrammatically: the recipient can visualize every single happening that occurs on the path of spiritual simplicity, including those stages in which the negation of language, image, or individual will are obligatory steps.[29]

Historians Bernard McGinn and Blanca Garí have observed that in the flowering of feminine mysticism from the 13th century, negative polarity became an essential expression of union with God. Words such as "valleys" were used, turning the focus away from the top of the mountain, and places like the "abyss of Love" and actions such as "falling" become essential elements for expressing the new experiences of godly union.[30] The concept of falling is fundamental in the vernacular theologies and in the imagery that Mechthild of Magdeburg—who probably inspired Meister Eckhart and his nihilist idea of the abyss—or Hadewijch of Antwerp use.[31] And as we will show, this negative dimension of the process is made visible in Marguerite Porete's *Mirror*. Not only is it made visible, but it is made systematic. We will also demonstrate that her conception of the image and the apophatism of the mystical path are very much in common with those of John. But before performing a comparative analysis, we should study what these authors understood by the idea of "image" and how they used it.

## 2. POETICS OF IMAGE

[29] On the implicit visuality, diagrams, and symbols of the *Mirror*, see P. García-Acosta, *Poética de la visibilidad en el* Mirouer des simples ames *de Marguerite Porete* (PhD thesis, Barcelona 2009), where specifically, we developed Marguerite's use on spatial imagery on pages 31–123.

[30] On the "Abyss of Love" as an essential *locus* in feminine mysticism from the 13th century onwards, see B. McGinn, who points to this negative polarity of the mystical union in "The Abyss of Love," *The Joy of Learning and the Love of God: Studies in Honour of J. Leclercq*, ed. E. Rozane Elder (Kalamazoo 1995) 95–120. On the descent in Marguerite Porete, see B. Garí, "Marguerite Porete y la Biblia. Imágenes de la kénosis en el *Espejo de las almas simples*" *Critica del testo* XV/1 (2012) 217–236.

[31] For a discussion of the descent in female mysticism, see V. Cirlot, "La mística femenina medieval, una tradición olvidada," *Oculto pero invisible: voces femeninas*, ed. V. Gómez i Oliver (Barcelona 2006) 85–96.

Although their books are ostensibly written with the objective of being comprehensible to any reader, both Marguerite and John bore in mind an ideal audience for their texts: the contemplatives, those who possessed a high degree of spiritual perfection and who desired closeness to God. Marguerite wrote for a wide audience, but in particular she was interested in the *marriz*,[32] the contemplatives of the fourth state that had strayed from the path leading to deification, and who had to correct their ways through apophatism. In the mendicant contexts in which Marguerite and John lived, the term "apophasis" had two complementary meanings: it first indicated a means of understanding divinity as something that could not be known through human action or media (word, art, or ritual), a supposition which led the authors to consider not what God *is*, but what God *is not*. Secondly, and as a logical development of this first belief, there sprang from this negative theology devotional practices which were not ends in themselves (they were not conceived of as idolatrous elements), but representations which could help the user to achieve a direct, mystical experience of the Divinity. In this sense, when we talk about Marguerite or John's apophatic mountains, we must understand that these mountains are images conceived of as visual tools or devices to be used during devotion or meditation in order to experience God, but then later to be rejected. While Marguerite uses an *exemplum* in her prologue to express this practice of the abandonment of the image,[33] John states that:

> Individuals should be certain that the more they are attached with a possessive spirit to the image or motive, the less will their prayer and devotion ascend to God. Indeed, since some statues are truer likenesses than others and excite more devotion, it is appropriate to be attached more to some than to others, but not with that attachment and possessiveness I mentioned, for to engulf the senses in the joy of the means would expend the good that the spirit should gain by soaring from the image to God in immediate forgetfulness of this thing or that. These means, which should be an aid in one's flight to God, now become through this imperfection a hindrance, and no less so than in the case of attachment or possessiveness relative to any other object.[34]

> Whenever God bestows these and other favors, he does so by inclining the movement of joy of the will toward the invisible, and he wishes us to do likewise by annihilating the strength and satisfaction of the faculties in regards to all sensory and visible objects.[35]

In keeping with its didactic function, whereby its visual representations were intended to enable others to progress spiritually, Marguerite's book was composed not only for private reading, but to be read aloud and, therefore, to be heard. Explicit references to the readers and oral recipients of the text are constant throughout the

[32] For the "marriz," see *Mirror*, 57: 133–134 (*Mirouer*, 164–166), which allows us to locate them in Marguerite's fourth state.

[33] See *Mirror*, "Prologue": 80–81 (*Mirouer*, "Le prologue": 10–14). We develop an analysis of this *exemplum* extracting conclusions for Marguerite's conception of the *imago* in García-Acosta, *Poética de la visibilidad* (n. 29 above) 31–53.

[34] AMC, III, 35.6.

[35] AMC, III, 37.2.

book,[36] and they permit access to a wide variety of readers or decoders: from Marguerite's point of view, it is not necessary to be a cleric to become simple. In fact, the *Mirror* was born in the age of predication, and it is not a coincidence that the author was a beguine immersed in the context of the mendicant religious orders of the north of Europe. We should not forget that it is considered one of the first medieval mystical treatises completely written in a vernacular language, which is to say that it was accessible to a public that was not necessarily literate or educated.[37]

For his part, John of the Cross wrote his treatises both for beginners (*principiantes*) and for the already-advanced (*aprovechados*) so as to help them to focus their minds and to refuse the sensual appetite and achieve a denuded meditation.[38] However, in reading the *Ascent to Mount Carmel*, we find he addresses in particular the contemplatives[39] (some passages state that John wrote the texts for monks and nuns,[40] although one book is dedicated to a feminine protector), and that he drew the *Mount of Perfection* (also known as *Montecillo* or the drawing of *Mount Carmel*)[41] for the nuns of the monastery of Beas de Segura (Jaén, Andalucía) and probably also for the nuns of Baeza in the context of the *cura monialium* he was carrying out in those communities (ca. 1580). In short, he is likely to have shared it with everyone whom he served as spiritual director. The drawing was made in a relatively free context, in which pedagogy and individual spirituality were not subject to external control, and this explains why John could write sentences that would have attracted risk in other contexts, like: "Here there is no longer any way because for the just man there is no law, he is a law unto himself."[42] Such a sentiment might have been used to connect him with the antinomian thesis of the Free Spirit that had been condemned at Vienne. We should not forget that Marguerite's text was at the core, doctrinally, of this condemnation.

From the point of view of the religious didactics, as J. F. Hamburger and others have stated,[43] the term "image" in late medieval religious frameworks is used to refer to the theological *imago*, a pictorial object, a verbal trope and a mental entity, often being the product of an interiorization of the visual image. What is clear in our case is that this variety of conceptions formed part of a normal process in the devotional contexts of the time. Here, "image" is understood as something that, for example in meditational processes, could be verbal or pictorial as well as psychological, and this perspective suggests that studying images must entail an interdisciplinary approach.

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[36] About the explicit references to an auditory in Marguerite, see García-Acosta, *Poética de la visibilidad* (n. 29 above) 5, n. 13.

[37] About Marguerite's reception, see B. Garí, "Mirarse en el espejo: Historia de la recepción de un texto," *DUODA* 9 (1995) 99–120; S. A. Kocher, *Allegories of Love in Marguerite Porete's* 'Mirror of Simple Souls' (Turnhout 2008) and J. Trombley, "The Latin manuscripts of *Mirror of Simple Souls*," *A Companion to Marguerite Porete and* The Mirror of Simple Souls, ed. by Robert Stauffer and Wendy Terry (Leiden, 2017) 186–217.

[38] *AMC*, prologue.

[39] *AMC* II, 7.13.

[40] *AMC*, prologue 9.

[41] John of the Cross, *Mount of Perfection* (ca.1580), ms. 6296, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Madrid, f. 7r.

[42] On the top circle of the drawing of the *Mount of Perfection*.

[43] J. F. Hamburger, *St. John the Divine. The Deified Evangelist in Medieval Art and Theology*, (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 2002) 186.

It may be better to speak specifically of "devotional imaginary," which would include every type of image: mental and material alike, communicating the invisible reality both to the physical eyes and the mind's eye. John of the Cross uses the terms *image*, *form*, and *figure* to refer at the same time to material images and images of the imagination or of the apprehension that are printed on the soul.

Specifically, in both Marguerite and John's culture, the image of the mountain presupposes a series of elements which form a sort of imaginary landscape: these elements include the path by which one ascends the mountain, the grades that one must accomplish, the meaning of the term "light" at each stage of the journey and what is found at the top of the mountain. *Ascent to Mount Carmel* is a good example of this mutuality between John and Marguerite's understandings of the traditional imaginary. We can isolate in John's treatise fragments of images that form part of a bigger picture: he talks about different parts of the mountain, connecting them with a coherent and overarching system of doctrinal meaning, as if they were only the tips of an iceberg, but all are directly related with the comprehensive image contained in the *Montecillo* drawing. These at-a-glance metaphors would be part of the culture shared by both John and his recipients, who were very familiar with the particular images to which he referred.[44]

With both writers, the use of diagrams (either narrative or graphic) must be seen in the context of the *ars memoriae*. The *dispositio* of the *Mount of Perfection* and the repetition of certain words in its text suggest that it was likely to have been used as a mnemotechnical instrument. The drawing was useful in the dissemination of spiritual doctrine and allowed the reader to recreate these received teachings through his or her own experience, an act of artificial memory that was based on certain mechanisms: repetition, the use of geometrical structures (circles and lines), and the dynamic reading which was able to re-imagine the text as a pilgrimage. The goal of the text was not only to conserve static knowledge, but to transmit and create an inner knowledge.[45] The use of images in Marguerite's case is similar: every mental diagram, rhetoric schema, or symbol that she inserts in the book implies a didactic function, which in most cases is related with aiding memory.[46] By using her "imagetexts," Marguerite organizes, clarifies, and exemplifies the doctrinal information for her book's recipients. The verbal aspect of the discourse, whether read or heard, becomes a mental image which the individual can memorize and later reflect upon or use to meditate. Since in the *Mirror* she organizes the entire experience of the Soul in a coherent mental diagram marked by seven steps rising to

[44] For the general use of the image of the ladder in medieval religious writers and beyond, see Heck, *L'échelle celeste* (n. 23 above).

[45] See the classical studies F. A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London 1996); M. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory. A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge 1990) and also M. Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric and the Making of Images*, 400–1200 (Cambridge 1998).

[46] On Marguerite's didacticism see R. A. O'Sullivan, "The School of Love: Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls*," *Journal of Medieval History* 32 (2006) 155–161; B. Garí, "Filosofía en vulgar y mistagogia en el 'Miroir' de Margarita Porete," *Filosofia in volgare nel medioevo*, ed. N. Bray and L. Sturlese (Louvain-la-Neuve 2003), 133-156 and García-Acosta, "Images for Deification" (n. 12 above) 123–132.

the top of a mountain, this mountain can be seen as a prime example of Marguerite's view of how imagery worked.

## 3. Comparative analysis

### 3.1. Preliminary questions: the polarity

As has been pointed out, no image drawn for Marguerite's text has survived to the present day, but there is one small drawing in the margins of the Chantilly manuscript which has implications for the understanding of the images in the book.[47] In fact, the *Mirror* is intended, in some passages at least, to help the reader to visualize specific theological doctrines. For Marguerite Porete, the mental image of the mountain, which she borrowed from her tradition and which she had in mind before writing her text, provides two spaces for spiritual development, both of which appear in the book: the theological topography of the valley, mountain and plain, and the graded Mountain of Love with its seven steps.

In both spatial schemata there are two polarities, positioned at the extreme points of the image and locating the beginning and end of the path of perfection which the Soul must follow. In the *Mirror,* we find a topographical representation of the Valley of Humility at the bottom, with the summit of the Mountain above. At the top of the schemata we find God, with the possibility of the Soul's deification just below, at the sixth step; both of these are located above Humility, the mother of virtues and, in keeping with the ideals of the mendicant orders, the necessary point of departure for any pilgrim on the journey towards spiritual perfection.[48] Bernard of Clairvaux, for example, appealed to Humility in *The Steps of Humility and Pride*, which was based on a previous graded schema in *Benedict's Rule*, defining it as the effort required on the twelve-graded way to the truth.[49] At the same time, alongside the seven degrees of perfection in the *Mirror*, an antithetical movement is developed in which the Soul falls four times towards God:[50] "Her will is ours, for she has fallen from grace into the perfection of the work of the Virtues, and from the Virtues into Love, and from Love into Nothingness, and from Nothingness into Clarification by God […]".

As we have said above, these falls are typical of the feminine mysticism that existed from the 13th century onwards. In Marguerite's theology in particular they are related, firstly, with the need to return to Humility as the root of perfection and, secondly, with bodily life.[51] Despite the existence of this well-designed underlying diagram, the author declares in different parts of the book that the seven degrees of

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[47]We talk here about the traditionally called "Chantilly manuscript" kept in the Musée Condé (Chantilly, France) with the signature: F XIV 26 (ancien 986), catalogue 157. The drawing of the "divine barrel of Love" is in folio 29v, left margin. For an analysis of the visual implications of this drawing, see García-Acosta, "Images for Deification" (n. 12 above).

[48] See H. Grundmann, "The religious Movements in the 12th century: 'Apostolic Life' and 'Christian Poverty'," *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages* (Indiana 1995 [1935]) 19ff.

[49] For the Seventh chapter of Saint Benedict Rule, see *De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae, Sancti Bernardi Opera*, III (Roma 1963) 1–59, in J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, LXVI, 371–376. For an iconographic example of this ladder, see Heck, *L'échelle celeste* (n. 23 above) il. 25.

[50] This four falls are systematized in *Mirouer*, 91: 256 (*Mirror*, 91: 166–167).

[51] For the "lower" position of Humility in Marguerite's work, see R. Aguadé i Benet, "Estudi lèxic a *L'Espill de les ànimes simples* de M. Porete: una aportació a la literatura religiosa medieval" (PhD thesis, Barcelona 2006) 278, s. v. "profondesse/ profundum/ profundi," and 291, s. v. "abysmer."

perfection (and, in general, all the language she uses) are simply a means (a *medium*) of representing what it is not possible to express with words.[52] In this sense, any classification is artificial and the beginning of the pilgrimage is the same as its very end. John seems to express the same idea when he says that the grades of the ladder have nothing to do with the end, because they are only the means.[53]

For his part, John of the Cross makes notable use of two ascendant images throughout his works: the mountain and the ladder. He talks about the mountain in *Ascent to Mount Carmel* although its most evident exposition is contained in the drawing of the *Mount of Perfection* (ca. 1580), of which a notarial copy from the original, made in the 18th century, is preserved.[54] It does not have the appearance of a mountain. It is drawn in an abstract style, rejecting any naturalistic pattern, and we know that it represents a mountain only because the words "Mount Carmel" appear at the top, relating the image to the prophet Elias (1Ki 18). John talks about this drawing at the beginning of *Ascent to Mount Carmel*, clearly connecting the contents of the book with the diagram (fig. 3).[55]

> To conclude these counsels and rules, it will be fitting to set down here those lines which are written in the *Ascent of the Mount*, which is the figure that is at the beginning of this book and whose lines are instructions for ascending to it, and thus reaching the summit of union.[56]

Here, John identifies the summit of the mountain with perfection and union with God.[57] He says that to reach that point you must cancel and mortify your appetites and human potencies, emptying the soul,[58] and that only the central path (of the spirit of perfection) will lead to the center, but not the lateral paths (the paths of the spirit of imperfection). As M. J. Mancho has stated,[59] there is a contradictory polarity in the use of the idea of an ascent and descent, because John of the Cross likens *subir* to *bajar*, whereby ascending is descending, and vice versa. In *Dark Night*, when he comments on the image of the secret ladder, descent is equated with humiliation,[60] which would be opposed to the flight (*el vuelo*). In *Ascent to Mount Carmel* we can find another variation, since Humility is related to an inclination or elevation of the spirit to God.[61]

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[52] See García-Acosta, *Poética de la visibilidad* (see n. 29 above) 10–14.

[53] *AMC* II, 12.5.

[54] Ms. 6296, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Madrid, folio 7r.

[55] *AMC* I, 13; III, 2.12, 15.1–2.

[56] *AMC* I, 13.10.

[57] *AMC*, prologue. In the center of the *Mount of perfection*: "Only the honor and Glory of God dwells on this mount."

[58] *AMC* I, 5.6.

[59] M. J. Mancho, *Palabras y símbolos en San Juan de la Cruz* (Madrid 1993). On dynamical antithesis with ascending dimension, see 117–127; on process symbols, see 161-169; on ascendant symbols, see 170–176.

[60] *DN* I, 14.5; II, 18.2 (*extol* related to *humiliate*). The same idea is found in one of his poems: "The higher up I went/ there, in this dizzy game,/ the lower I appeared,/ more humble, weak and lame" (J. of the Cross, *The poems of Saint John of the Cross*, trans. J. Frederick Nims (Chicago-London 1979).

[61] *AMC* II, 24.6. The "oración de recogimiento" of Francisco de Osuna's *Third alphabet* (1527) influenced Teresa and John as a way of ascension and interiorization (see F. de Osuna, *Third Spiritual*

However, in the text of the *Mount of Perfection*, Humility appears in the middle of the space of the soul: "In this nakedness the spirit finds its quietude and rest, for in coveting nothing, nothing tires it by pulling it up, and nothing oppresses it by pushing it down, because it is in the center of its humility."[62] The center has a relevant prominence in the drawing; a part of the lineal ascendant pattern features three concentric circles, where the inner circle says "Introduxit vos in terram Carmeli ut comederetis fructum eius et bona illius"; the intermittent circle reads, "peace, joy, happiness, delight, wisdom, justice, fortitude, charity, piety"; and the outer circle states, "Here there is no longer any way…"

A comparison of Marguerite and John reveals that both authors use a traditional spatial symbology in which the divinity is identified with the upper regions and the human being with the lower ones. Of course, that in itself would not be particular to Marguerite or John, or deserving of special comment, but the fact that both authors subvert those schematic positions is indeed remarkable. And the element which allows them to do so is Humility, which is understood as the virtue that will never abandon the Soul in its pilgrimage. As such, Humility is not only found at the bottom, but comes to possess the dynamic faculty of going up and down through the degrees of perfection: in Marguerite's case, the path of being deified and returning deified to bodily life. John does not describe the mystical experience as a *deificatio* but he uses the similar word *endiosamiento*,[63] which is understood as a union of love, an alienation, a rising up, an inebriation. This calls to mind another image that Marguerite and John both use: the *cellam vinariam*[64] (*la interior bodega*), as an image of the *unio mystica*. The paradox whereby going up is going down and vice versa is a way of finally rejecting an established itinerary for achieving the state of perfection, avoiding idolatry and putting emphasis on the devotional character of the image as merely a means and not an end.[65]

The vertical polarity inherent in the image of the mountain also develops a progressive anthropology of light, where the summit of mystical experience, defined since the time of Pseudo-Dionysius in the terms that writer used, as a "ray of divine darkness" (in John, *rayo de tiniebla*; in Marguerite, *Loingprés*), is used by both authors,[66] who adopt this oxymoron to express the ineffability of God. This ray is the

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*Alphabet* (New York 1981). In treatise XIX Osuna talks about Humility also in terms of growing and decreasing.

[62] Text of the fourth mode at the right inferior part of the drawing of the *Mount of Perfection*.

[63] *SC B* 26.14. For a comparison between the doctrine of deification in the northern mystics and John, with bibliography supporting both interpretations see Orcibal, *Saint Jean de la Croix* (n. 9 above) 181–204.

[64] On the *cellam vinariam* in John'sworks, see: *SC*, stanza 17/26, commented in *SC A*, 17; *SC B* 26, 16–21. For Marguerite's case and the image of the spiritual inebriation, see *Mirror*, 23: 105–106; 89: 165, and 121: 197 (*Mirouer*, 23: 86–88; 89: 252–253, and 121: 338).

[65] On John of the Cross against iconoclasm, see *AMC* III:15.2; against idolatry, *AMC* III, 35-37.

[66] In Marguerite's book the image of the divine light seems to have Cistercian sources (particularly Guillaume de Saint Thierry) and is identified with her Sixth state of perfection: see, for instance, *Mirror*, 58: 135 (*Mirouer*, 58: 168), where she defines it thus: "For it is an aperture, like a spark [*c'est une ouverture a maniere de esclar*], which quickly closes, in which one cannot remain…" From our point of view, Babinsky's translation is inaccurate here, since Old French "esclar" should be translated as "lightning," and not as a more moderate "spark." John of the Cross, on the other side, marks Pseudo-Dionysius as his explicit source: see *AMC* II: 8.6.

summit, the most radical event during the pilgrimage towards God. In fact, in both Marguerite and John there exists a cultural, theological conception of light as love and divine knowledge, which has an impact on the dynamic experiences of the Soul. In Marguerite's case, the grades of her ladder are implicitly illuminated with different types of light, and a special light (*lumen gloriae*)[67] emanates from the seventh degree, drawing the Soul towards divinization in the sixth degree. Marguerite identifies this *lumen* with the aforementioned ray of divine light. This illumination is a sort of direct *visio Dei* and implies the deification which occurs during bodily life.[68] As we know, it was one of the most provocative doctrines of the *Mirror* and also of the so-called Free Spirits.

For his part, John talks about this concept of *lumen gloriae,* as well, a notion which had been doctrinally controversial at least until the papacy of Benedict XII in the 14th century. *Lumen gloriae* is the divine light which represents the direct experience of God which the blessed and the angels enjoy in heaven. In *Ascent to Mount Carmel*, and in somewhat ambiguous terms, John describes a "divine light of the perfect union," which seems very similar to Marguerite's notion—the vision of God and the soul's deification—although John continues by declaring his willingness to obey the Catholic Church, which would not accept that, and later in the same book he states clearly that it cannot be seen in corporeal life.[69] In short, and in keeping with Orcibal's observations, we can conclude that some postmedieval contemplatives, like John of the Cross, tried to conceal that the vision of God is possible in this life.[70]

### 3.2. The mountain

Let us now focus on the mountain, the image that Marguerite and John deployed in order to express the possibility of connecting the two opposite poles to the reader, filling the empty space between Earth and Heaven with an apophatic *via*. As we have asserted, in certain fragments of her book, Marguerite imagined a Valley of Humility, a Plain of Truth, and a Mountain of Love, a spatial diagram which let her order a series of concepts for the recipients of her doctrine, locating these concepts in an

[67] The main work on the *visio beatifica* and the *lumen gloriae* in Middle Ages is C. Trottmann, *La vision béatifique des disputes scholastiques á sa définition par Benoît XII* (Roma 1995). He talks specifically about Marguerite on p. 325.

[68] For a complete overview of light in the *Mirror*, see P. García-Acosta, "Follow the Light: *Lumen gloriae* and *visio Dei* in the Works of Dante Alighieri Marguerite *dicta* Porete," *Eikón Imago* 6 (2014) 51–76.

[69] On *lumen gloriae* in John's work, see: *AMC*, II: 24.3; *SC A*, song 10.6; and *LFL A*, song 3.70, B, 3.80. On the *Lumen naturale* (*lumbre natural*), see: *SMC*, II: 24.7, 29.8, and 29.11; *DN*, II, 9.3; *LFL A*, song II, 30 and 34. On Marguerite's work, see *Mirror*, 103: 176 (*Mirouer*, 103: 108–110).

[70] See J. Maréchal quoted by Orcibal, *Saint Jean de la Croix* (n. 9 above) 172: "[C]'est peut-être l'époque où 'on voit se marquer, chez les auteurs orthodoxes, la défiance la plus instinctive envers la thèse, si répandue au Moyen Age, de la possibilité –exceptionnelle sans doute– d'une vision de Dieu dans cette vie. La préoccupation de ne pas confondre l'union mystique ave la vision béatifique s'intensifie chez les contemplatifs eux-mêmes et se trahit dans leurs textes." This fear to be condemned by the Inquisition by being compared with the declared heretics is asserted by Orcibal in other places, see by instance his id., 168: "…le souci d'authenticité et la hardiesse contagieuse de certaines lectures ayant à composer avec la volonté d'orthodoxie et la prudence: il fait éviter de fournir des aliments aux rêveries des bégards et *alumbrados*, et des chef d'accusation à des censeurs non moins prompts à juger scandaleuse tout expression insolite."

imaginary landscape.[71] In other passages, however, she talked about the clearly determined layout of a mountain, and as we have said above, this is the real organizer, the real structure of the book, which pulls together all the fragmentary notions found in the *Mirror*. It is a major image in Marguerite's work, in the sense that it lays open the book,[72] and we find it occurring frequently throughout the text.[73]

Marguerite's seven degrees represent a *via* opened through the mountain which allows the individual Soul to make direct contact with the Divinity. From a symbolic point of view it can be seen as reinforcing the possibility of a connection between the human and the divine. In the *Mirror*'s microcosm there is the possibility of being "lost" (*marriz*), and we may thus conclude that there are wrong spiritual paths to follow, but what remains true is that the whole book is focused on showing the souls the straight way, as John does in the *Mount of Perfection*. It is here where all the transformations must take place: the ascent through the stages, but also the three deaths and the four falls, all of which, taken together, depicts an evolution from contemplation through to apophatism and, finally, to deification.

These falls, or instances of apophatism, are not graphically reflected in John's original *Mount of Perfection*. However, in a later manuscript version from the 17th century,[74] the souls fall after taking the lateral paths of the imperfect spirit. It is not clear if they fall because of their irreparable imperfection—in a sinful fall like the one portrayed in, for instance, John Climacus's ladder—or if they fall as part of the natural process of the central path, which would be an apophatic fall like that of Marguerite. The primitive drawing points out an ascending-descending direction and a circular movement, as it says *ni eso* (neither this) and *ni esotro* (nor that) in different orientations of the reading (fig. 4a-b).

In the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, we find different allusions to a mountain or related elements that help the reader to visualize the reading as an ascension.[75]

> Of all these, with the Divine favour, we shall endeavor to say something, so that each soul who reads this may be able to see something of the road that he ought to follow, if he aspire to attain to the summit of this Mount.[76]

Two other relevant references to the mountain appear in the *Spiritual Canticle*, commenting on two verses of the poem, in which John translates the natural terms (mounts, hills, valleys, riverbanks) into moral and theological terms,[77] but the

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[71] García-Acosta, *Poetica de la visibilidad* (n. 29 above) 54.

[72] The seven degrees are mentioned in the first sentence of the book, see *Mirror*, "Prologue," 80 (*Mirouer*, "Le prologue": 10–14).

[73] See fragments and analysis in García-Acosta, "Poética de la visibilidad" (n. 29 above) 72ff.

[74] Ms 2201, Biblioteca Nacional de España (Madrid), folio 126.

[75] *AMC*, prologue: 3, 7, 9; I book, 5.6; II book, 11.9, 17.4.

[76] *AMC*, prologue: 7.

[77] Firstly, the commentary to the verse "Al monte o al collado" in which John establishes a difference between the mountain (morning announcement, essential, from the divine Verb) and the hill (lower mountain, vespertine, things). Secondly, his analysis of the verse "Montes, valles, riberas," where he makes reference to the vicious acts of the three potencies of the soul: memory, intellect, and will. Here, "mounts" and "valleys" represent the extreme height and lowness of the soul's spiritual landscape. According to him, the mountains symbolize also the extreme and very disordered acts that may include

orography he presents does not coincide with Marguerite's. On the other hand, we know that these comments are, maybe, forcing the theological interpretation of the profane verses of the *Spiritual Canticle*.

In both the *Mirror* and the *Mount of Perfection*, on the straight and narrow path, the Soul must negate itself in order to achieve perfection. In Marguerite's book, the Soul has to accomplish three deaths: death to sin, death to nature and death to the spirit.[78] These three deaths alongside the four falls represent a *via* which can be compared with the three possibilities depicted in the *Montecillo*. While Marguerite rejects the paths of Reason, Nature, and the self, John rejects the paths of the goods of heaven (*bienes del cielo*) and of the earthly goods (*bienes del suelo*) in the *Mount*, proposing the narrow, central path (*senda estrecha*), the apophatic one that represents the need to negate all other paths and, in fact, the whole image. In this sense, both John and Marguerite depend upon the image as a visual and mental device to explain a path towards perfection which, in the end, must be transcended as a way of being destroyed.

The image of the mountain, based on a vertical polarity, is not dual but progressive and that is why the mountain is commonly identified with the image of the ladder. Both the mountain and the ladder are ascendant structures but the ladder provides an even more clearly scaled process, which is very useful for establishing a method for meditation that opposes different spiritual states.

### 3.3 The ladder

John uses the symbol of the heavenly ladder in the *Ascent to Mount Carmel,* the *Living Flame of Love* (seven rungs), and in the *Dark night* (ten rungs). In relation to the verse from the *Dark night*, which states, "by the secret ladder, disguised", he refers to the ten stages of divine love on the mystical ladder according to Bernard of Clairvaux and Thomas Aquinus.[79] In the last of these stages, the Soul is totally assimilated with God, through a limpid vision of God that takes places outside the body, although it is not clear here if this "out of everything" experience is an image of radical spiritual freedom and unveiled love or a way of denoting that this state is only possible in death. The ten stages, although beginning with annihilation and purgation, are described using the image of a ladder of love and desire, and are full of affective verbs: search, act, suffer, feel like, covet, run, touch, dare, attach, squeeze, and burn.[80] This leads us to think of a positive, or theologically cataphatic, ladder, in contrast with the content of the *Mount of Perfection*, in which annihilation persists all the way up to the end of the journey.

In *Ascent to Mount Carmel* and *Living Flame of Love B*,[81] John talks about the seven-rung ladder, albeit without naming each level. In *Ascent*, he explains that God

mortal sins; the riverbanks should be read as partial disordered acts (venial sins and other imperfections) and, finally, the valley represents the extreme lowness, the extreme acts in a minority sense.

[78] *Mirror*, 54: 156–158 (*Mirouer*, 54: 156–158).

[79] *DN*, song II, book II, chapter 19.

[80] In the original: *Buscar, obrar, sufrir, apetecer, codiciar, correr, tocar, atrever, asir, apretar, arder*, *DN* II, II, 19.

[81] *AMC,* II: 11.9–10; *LFL B*, song 2.29; *AMC*, II, 11.9–10; *LFL* B, song 2.29.

lifts the Soul step by step up to union and transformation. In *Living Flame*, the seven rungs become seven stages, each one a sort of purgation, like steps in love and wisdom. According to John's *Mount of Perfection*, there are also seven "nothings" (*nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, and even on the Mount nothing*), which are apophatic grades of the path of perfection.

As we have mentioned, the seven-stage ladder is a structure that is also used by Marguerite. She thinks initially in terms of six steps, since the seventh grade is only fully accessible with the death of the body. In fact, the sixth degree (identified in the book with the *Loingprés*, the ray which deifies the Soul, and consequently, with the *lumen gloriae*) is the only possible means by which a Soul might be deified while alive. As we know, a major problem with Marguerite's theological model starts here, since this implies the existence of "simple" deified beings. John states that the faculty of reason cannot reach the Lord[82] and that the stages are all temporary and have to be left if one is to arrive at the summit.[83]

## 4. Conclusions

This article shows the absolute need of adopting an interdisciplinary approach to premodern mystic texts, which is here reflected through the wide conception of what we understand by the term "image." In both John and Marguerite's works, images take a variety of forms: narrative form (as in the case of the pilgrimage of the Soul in search of God), plastic form (as in the case of the *Montecillo*), theological form (both of these), and mental form (the interiorization of a diagram with a meditational or mnemotecnic objective, something which is crucial to understanding Marguerite's mental mountain). Following this idea, when we try to interpret a textual diagram, a verbal trope or an iconographic drawing, we must always start by asking ourselves what it was intended to be used for in its own historical context. Marguerite and John's apophatic mountains were communicative, didactic tools. They were designed to teach others, to guide them towards a direct experience of God.

The open hermeneutical approach that we have taken is complementary to our decision to link historical figures as strikingly different as Marguerite and John. The adoption of a comparative methodology has given us a new perspective on the relationships these authors had with orthodoxy and heterodoxy. In John's case it is very difficult to establish, for example, the exact degree of union with God that the Soul achieves at the end of its journey. On the one hand, he uses a series of images (for instance, the matter disappearing in the fire), a conceptual vocabulary (*lumen gloriae*, *endiosamiento*, etc.), and a narrative (the Soul climbs the mountain to experience God, attaining complete wisdom at the summit), all of which would seem to point to full union with God and, consequently, to deification and antinomianism. On the other hand, he tries to skirt the logical outcome of all of this, which is completely understandable, due to the inquisitorial fears of the period: these doctrines could have identified John as an *alumbrado* or related him with the forbidden teachings of the beguines and beghards condemned at Vienne. Meanwhile, the

[82] *AMC*, II: 8.7.
[83] *AMC*, II: 12.5.

*Montecillo* drawing and John's erotic poems, taken without further explanations, were widely read and used in the freer contexts of individual devotion, which the Inquisition could hardly invade. In our opinion, this understanding of John's contradictions and ambiguities is a means of better understanding his work.

Focusing on the comparative analysis of the two mountains, we have seen that both John and Marguerite share the notion of the diagram (whether mental or graphic) as a medium which helps the reader find the right way to God, but which in the end must be negated in order to experience Him. This anti-idolatric use of the image constitutes a theory of image for both authors and is in keeping with the Low Medieval devotional uses of "art," which in 16th-century Castile John still seemed to know, a knowledge which he thus shared with Marguerite. Both schemata attempt to represent a specific doctrine which the Soul has to follow to experience the divinity. Their spiritual topography is based on a polarity (upwards and downwards) that turns into a mountain and a connected landscape, creating a continuum of cosmic spaces (between Earth and Heaven) that allows us to speak of the notion of a spiritual path. Alongside the ascension and the path, there is an orography to which Marguerite and John add a seven-rung ladder to establish a gradual progression based on falling or the *via negativa*.

We cannot overlook the fact that John and Marguerite's expressions do not always coincide. Throughout his treatises, John uses two different ladder images (with ten and seven rungs respectively) and the spiritual landscape that he presents, to take that part in isolation, does not coincide with that of the *Mirror* at all. The differences are due to the doctrinal conceptions that the authors aim to represent through images, the ways in which they explain their own experiences and the occasional expressive needs of their texts. However, in terms of essential meaning, the apophatic dynamics they use are fully in line with one another: the deep sense of the negation of language (again, of any *media* whatsoever) that both models seek, is striking. Their portrayal of the ascent to God is strictly related with the virtue of Humility, which determines not only a positive, vertical movement, but an obligatory and continuous return to the lower spaces of the human being. John shared a view which is rooted, among other sources, in the works of medieval feminine mystics: the ascent to God always implies descent, and the starting point of the diagram has to be its very end. Thorough-going research into the influence of that feminine mysticism on John's—and on that of the Carmelites in general—is still needed.

Polarity, mountain, and ladder, which is to say, the notion of ascending and descending, the notion of a path to God and the notion of a gradation of that path, are useful and suitable terms for a spiritual pedagogy which intends to teach a process, a rhythm, an effort, and a transformation.

FIG. 1. Ioannes Climacus, *Scala Paradisi* (c. 12th), Saint Mary of the Sinai, Egypt.

FIG. 2. Hildegard von Bingen, *Scivias*, *Vision I, 1*, Wiesbaden, MS *Hess. Landesbibliothek, Hs. I* (lost in 1945), fol. 2r.

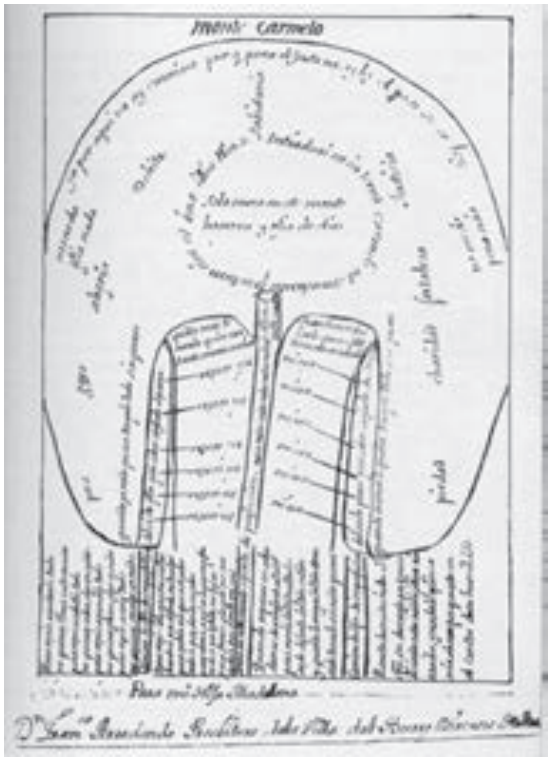


FIG. 3. John of the Cross, *Mount of Perfection* (ca.1580). Ms. 6296, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Madrid, f. 7r.

FIG. 4a. Ms 2201, Biblioteca Nacional de España (Madrid), f. 126.

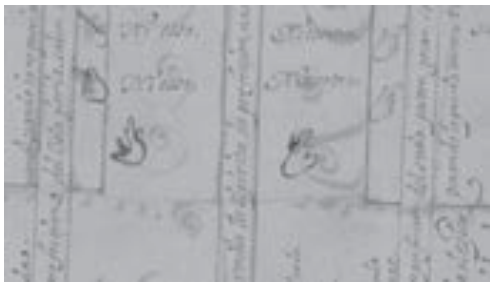

FIG. 4b. Detail of Ms 2201, Biblioteca Nacional de España (Madrid), f. 126.