

GERARD ZERBOLT OF ZUTPHEN, *Vanden gheesteliken opclimminghen* (Dutch translation of *De Spiritualibus ascensionibus* [On the Spiritual Ascents])

In Dutch, manuscript on parchment

Northern Netherlands, c. 1425–1475

i+151+i leaves, vellum, modern foliation in pencil on rectos in the lower right corner on the seventh, each tenth and the last leaf (7, 10, 20, 30 ... 130, 140, 150, 151), mostly in quires of eight leaves, collation: *i*⁶ (ff. 1–6), *ii*–*xviii*⁸ (ff. 7–142), *xix*⁶ (ff. 143–148), *xx*⁴ lacking 4 (ff. 149–151), loss of text at the end, no catchwords, no signatures, written in a *littera textualis* by one hand, ruled in pale brown ink for the boundary lines and all text lines, 1 column (justification 121–118 x 75–72 mm), 24 lines, interlinear and marginal corrections, one five-line lombards in red (f. 7r), several two-line lombards in red, many one-line lombards in red, majuscules in text stroked in red, rubrics in red, red paragraph signs, in fine condition. Bound in 18th-century binding, brown leather over pasteboard, five raised bands, gilt on the spine, edges painted blue, flyleaves and pastedowns of paper, some minor wear on both covers. Dimensions 176 x 113 mm.

Central to the life of the Modern Devotion, Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen's text "On the Spiritual Ascents" was composed by the author in both Latin and Dutch, and manuscripts of it were probably found in every house of the Modern Devout. Dutch versions are relatively rare (only twenty manuscripts are recorded, all but two in institutions), and the present copy, dating only a generation after Gerard's premature death, well illustrates the importance the Brethren of the Common Life gave to reading, writing, and a scrupulous transmission of spiritual texts.

PROVENANCE

1. Written in the northern Netherlands in the script used by circles of the Modern Devotion and within a generation of Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen's life (died 1398). The careful writing and correction suggests production within a house of the Brothers of the Common Life.
2. Belonged to Joost R. Ritman (b. 1941), Amsterdam, the Dutch businessman and distinguished collector of art and books, who acquired on June, 16-17, 2006 at The Romantic Agony (book auctions Devroe & Stubbe) in Brussels as lot 956; Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica MS 206 ("Philosophia Hermetica," bookplate inside front cover; pencil note inside back cover); briefly described in Medieval Manuscripts in Dutch Collections (Online Resources). [erroneously listed as MS 213 in the database Medieval Manuscripts in Dutch Collections, see below].
3. The only trace of earlier ownership is a ticket on the spine with the handwritten number "239."

TEXT

ff. 1r–6r, Table of contents, rubric: "Dits die tafle des na volghenden boekes", incipit: "I. Hier beghint een cleyn boeckijn van gheesteliken opclimmen ¶ Dat eerste capittel is van drien punten die den ghenen nooturtlich sijn die daer in voortgaan wil", explicit: "LXXI. Vanden derden nederdalen daer een overste van node in dalen moet om die bewaringhe ende om die sorchvoudicheit der gheenre die hem bevolen sijn" (f. 6v ruled, but not written).

ff. 7r–150v, Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen, *Vanden gheesteliken opclimminghen*, breaks off in the seventieth chapter (of seventy-one chapters when complete), no rubric, incipit: “Salich is die man wies hulpe van di heer is hi hevet die opclimminghe in sijnre herten ghescicket in dat dal der tranen in die stede die hi gheset hevet”, explicit: “Mer versume di daer op ende ghif dinen raet altoos op verbeteren van ander lude bevoelen op dattu niet een willich noch hertvochtich ghevonden en worste ende hebbe du liever ootmoedighe dinghen te concentieren dan datmen” (f. 151r–v ruled, but not written).

Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen, *De spiritualibus ascensionibus*, in Dutch: *Vanden gheesteliken opclimminghen* [ed. Van Dyck, 2011].

The Dutch mystical writer Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen, also known as Gerardus Zerbolt de Zutphania, was one of the first of the Brethren of the Common Life, who embodied the *Devotio Moderna* or Modern Devotion, the religious movement which revived spiritual life in the Low Countries during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Born in 1367 into a wealthy burgher family in Zutphen, Gerard Zerbolt got his first education in his hometown and eventually enrolled at the St. Lebuin school of the Brethren of the Common Life in nearby Deventer. This school had been founded by Gerard Grote (1340–1384) and in Zerbolt’s time was led by Floris Radewijns (1350–1400), both spiritual leaders of the Modern Devotion.

Gerard Zerbolt held the office of librarian and, in Floris Radewijns’s absence, he assumed his responsibilities as rector. His learning in moral theology and canon law did the brethren good service in helping them to meet the opposition which their manner of life at first aroused. But it was as an author of spiritual and mystical writings that he exercised his greatest influence. Although only thirty-one years of age when he died, Gerard Zerbolt was “the most fertile and the most successful writer the Brothers ever produced,” as R.R. Post wrote in his well-known study (1968). In 1398 Zerbolt fell victim of the plague and died during a journey at Windesheim, south of Zwolle.

Gerard Zerbolt’s two main works are *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* (composed in both Latin and Dutch, as in the present manuscript) and *De reformatione trium virium animae*. Intended to serve as handbooks for religious life, they read as manuals of instruction in mystical thought. *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* (“On the spiritual ascents”) is the best-known of Zerbolt’s writings. The text was recommended reading by Johannes Busch and Florens Radewijns, as well as in the *consuetudines* of the House of Brothers at Wesel, and it offered directions in how to work continually for moral and spiritual perfection. We can assume that it was found in nearly every house of the Modern Devotion, and copies were also found in many of the reformed contemplative orders of the later Middle Ages, including the Carthusians. Printed in at least ten pre-1500 editions, it was greatly influential in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It was known to Luther as an observant Augustinian, and influenced St. Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*.

The text aims at raising the spirit closer to God by a process of imitating, through thought, prayer, and action. It offers an account of the progress in virtue – the spiritual ascent – that was at the heart of the New Devotion, describing the path of turning back from sin through contrition, confession, and satisfaction, then restoring the original purity of heart – driving out

impurity through fear (i.e. meditating on death, judgment and hell), balanced by thoughts of the goodness and benefits of God, and systematic meditation of the life of Christ, with refreshment provided by holy reading, meditation and prayer. The third ascent strives to reform the fallen powers or faculties of the soul – i.e. those affected by original sin – with lengthy discussion of each of the vices (gluttony, lust, avarice, anger, envy, tedium, vainglory, and pride), and the text ends with the duty to “descend” and help others. It is a relatively brief and readable approach to spirituality, and was applicable to people living many different forms of religious life. In this work, Gerard successfully summarized the teachings of the first generation of the Modern Devotion, and transmitted these ideals to the succeeding generations.

Gerard Zerbolt should first and foremost be seen as a spokesman of a religious movement of lay people in Northwestern Europe on the brink of the Reformation, yearning for a restoration of early Christian values beyond the institutionalism of the Roman Catholic Church. Containing Zerbolt’s main text in the vernacular, unadorned but carefully written and corrected, the manuscript described here reflects the craving for inward devotion and a personal relationship with God, the aversion for gaudery, and the esteem for the written word, all characteristic of the Modern Devotion.

The online database of the Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta lists eighteen manuscripts with the Dutch translation of *De spiritualibus ascensionibus*, and fifteen with excerpts. The number of eighteen manuscripts can now be augmented with two more: a manuscript in a private collection, which was used by R.Th.M. van Dijk for his recent edition of the Dutch translation of *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* (see below), and the manuscript described here.

LITERATURE

Gerard Zerbolt de Zutphen. *La montée au ciel. De spiritualibus ascensionibus*, ed. F.-J. Legrand, Turnhout, Brepols, 2006. (= *Sous la règle de Saint Augustin*, 11. *Aux origines de la Devotio Moderna*).

Gerard Zerbolt van Zutphen. *Van geestelijke opklimmingen*. Een aloude vertaling opnieuw gedrukt en bezorgd door J. Mahieu. Bruges, 1941.

Gerard Zerbolt van Zutphen. *Geestelijke opklimmingen. Een gids voor de geestelijke weg uit de vroege Moderne Devotie*, tr., introduction and ed. R.Th.M. van Dijk. Amsterdam, 2011. (= *Bibliotheca Dissidentium Neerlandicorum*, 8). Also online: <http://www.titusbrandsmainstituut.nl/PDF/4 Uitgaven/gerard zerbolt van zutphen - geestelijke opklimmingen.pdf>.

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http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/post029mode01_01.

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ONLINE RESOURCES

Database of medieval manuscripts in Dutch collections:
<http://www.mmdc.nl>.

Database of Middle Dutch manuscripts, the Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta:
<http://www.library.leiden.edu/special-collections/manuscripts/subcollections-whs-bnm.html>.

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