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To cite this article: Rik Van Nieuwenhove (2022) Divine Nothingness, Ecstasy and Self-transcendence in the Evangelical Pearl, *Medieval Mystical Theology*, 31:1, 33-40, DOI: [10.1080/20465726.2022.2084840](https://doi.org/10.1080/20465726.2022.2084840)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/20465726.2022.2084840>



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Published online: 23 Jun 2022.



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Divine Nothingness, Ecstasy and Self-transcendence in the Evangelical Pearl

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ABSTRACT

This article considers a key topic from medieval theological anthropology by examining how ecstasy and self-transcendence relate to divine nothingness. It discusses this topic by examining a spiritual classic written by a female author and published in 1538 but largely forgotten, namely, *The Evangelical Pearl*, which encapsulates central themes from Jan van Ruusbroec and Meister Eckhart and passes them on to the modern age. This contribution argues that divine nothingness elicits a theological-anthropological response of ecstasy and self-transcendence, which is best understood as a disposition of radical recollection, dispossession and gratuitousness of one's memory, intellect and will. The final part of this paper considers the question whether our author's negative theology of nothingness is vulnerable to Luther's criticism of apophaticism and its alleged lack of Christocentric grounding.

KEYWORDS

Medieval Dutch mysticism; Evangelical Pearl; nothingness; ecstasy; self-transcendence; mystical theology

The characterization of God as nothingness occurs in the medieval Latin West in the writings of John Scotus Eriugena who himself was deeply influenced by the Pseudo-Dionysian corpus, which he translated into Latin. In Book III of the *Periphyseon* (*De Divisione Naturae*) Eriugena writes that God can be called properly 'nothing' (*nihilum*) by reason of his radical transcendence.¹ The divinity is called 'Nothing' because it is 'beyond all things that are and are not'.² Interestingly for the purposes of this paper, Eriugena also suggests that the transcendence of God is reflected in the human being, who is made in God's image and likeness.³ So deep calls unto deep (Ps. 41:8 *Abyssus abyssum invocat*). As God does not know what he is but only that he is, so too with the human soul, which is more honoured in ignorance than in knowledge.⁴ As is well-known, the theme of divine transcendence (often but not always expressed in terms of nothingness) runs throughout the medieval Latin West from Eriugena and the Victorines to Meister

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¹John Scotus Eriugena, *Periphyseon – The Division of Nature* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1987), 681A, p. 308. See D. Duclow, "Divine Nothingness and Self-Creation in John Scotus Eriugena" *Journal of Religion* 57 (1977): 109–23

²*Periphyseon*, 681C

³*Periphyseon*, 443B (p. 27): 'just as God as he is in himself beyond every creature is comprehended by no intellect, so he is equally incomprehensible when considered in the innermost depths of the creature which was made by him and which exists in him'.

⁴*Periphyseon*, 771B–C

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Eckhart and the mystics of the Low countries.⁵ It came to prominence in a book that was published in 1538, now largely forgotten but deeply influential throughout Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, namely *The Evangelical Pearl*, written by an anonymous woman author, whose influence may extend, at least indirectly, perhaps as far as Søren Kierkegaard.⁶

In this paper I would like to tease out the theological-anthropological implications of divine nothingness by arguing that there is an intimate connection between the characterisation of God as ‘nothingness’ and medieval understandings of the human person in terms of gratuitousness, ecstasy and (self-)transcendence.

Medieval theologians conceived of human beings as deeply ‘ecstatic,’ both in terms of knowledge and will or love, that is, with an inherent dynamic toward self-transcendence. By anchoring our lives in the nothingness of God as our ultimate concern, so medieval theologians claim, we refrain from either idolizing some finite thing in the world or from turning away from it with tedium. It instils in us a non-possessive, non-instrumentalist or gratuitous disposition in our dealings with the world.

While there is a natural dynamic toward self-transcendence, relating to divine nothingness occurs through the transformation of intellect and will by the theological virtues. Faith and love make us self-transcendent or ex-centric, as distinct from self-centric. I should add that ecstasy in the author I will be discussing, as I see it, refers to a disposition, a way of relating to God, self and world, rather than to a transient and supposedly immediate experience of the divine.⁷ This interpretation is not undisputed, but I will not try to argue for it within the constraints of this paper.

As Bernard McGinn and others have argued, the so-called mystical writings of the medieval period deserve also to be mined for their theological content, besides that of scholastic authors. I therefore will discuss a spiritual book, *The Evangelical Pearl*, that remains insufficiently known. Engaging with this work will also allow me to consider the Lutheran critique that apophatic theology may present its own temptation, supposedly of a Neoplatonic kind, thus allegedly failing to do justice to the revelation of God in the crucified Christ.

Introduction

In 1538 a large book, written in Dutch, was published in Antwerp that was to exert a deep influence upon spirituality throughout the West. A Latin translation followed in 1545, a French one (*La Perle Évangélique*) in 1602, and a German one by Angelus Silesius was published in 1676.⁸ In historical terms the book synthesizes and encapsulates the tradition of the medieval Flemish and Rhineland schools of mysticism and passes it on to the modern

⁵For a discussion of nothingness in Meister Eckhart and Martin Heidegger, see Elizabeth Parsons, ‘Exploring the Nothing in relation to Meister Eckhart’s God and Martin Heidegger’s Being’ in *Medieval Mystical Theology* 30 (2021): 37–46

⁶In what follows I will occasionally note the resemblance between themes from *The Evangelical Pearl* and Kierkegaard’s writings. This is a mere suggestion for further research. A stronger claim that convincingly demonstrates a direct or even indirect influence would require a different, more comparative textual analysis. The Dutch text of *The Evangelical Pearl* has been recently edited by Guido de Baere SJ as *Die Grote Evangelische Peerle*. 2 vols. *Miscellanea Neerlandica* 48 (Leuven: Peeters, 2021)

⁷For a magisterial survey of the topic of ecstasy, see Bernard McGinn, “Ecstasy in Classic Christian Mysticism” (forthcoming).

⁸Bernard McGinn, ‘A Forgotten Classic of Late Medieval Women’s Mysticism: The Evangelical Pearl’ *Archa Verbi: Yearbook for the Study of Medieval Theology* 5 (2008): 97–121

era. It runs to ca. 500 pages in most modern editions⁹, consisting of prayers, meditations, and exhortations, interwoven with doctrinal outlines. The anonymous author of *The Evangelical Pearl* revisits key themes from Ruusbroec and Meister Eckhart, including detachment, interiority, annihilation, union with God, suffering, birth of the Word in the soul, and identification with Christ's humanity and divinity. A strong 'existential' or 'interiorized' emphasis characterizes the book. Key liturgical events, or even prayers like the 'Our Father', are interpreted in light of our personal transformation. For instance, the heaven that our Father inhabits or the kingdom he desires to come are the graced soul itself (I, 23).¹⁰ It proved popular in the French school of spirituality, beloved by both Pierre de Bérulle and Francis de Sales, and in German spirituality, including German pietism.¹¹ Gerhard Tersteegen (d. 1769), for instance, compiled a German anthology (*Perlenschnur*) and through Tersteegen it may have influenced the writings of Kierkegaard.¹² In what follows I will focus on the themes of nothingness, ecstasy and identification with Christ.

Nothingness

Explicitly referring to the Pseudo-Dionysius,¹³ the theme of divine nothingness takes central place in the spirituality of the author of *The Evangelical Pearl*. In Book II, 40 we find an extended account of how we should relate to the nothingness of God. She mentions renunciation or letting-be, suffering for Christ's sake, and becoming nothingness itself. In regard to the latter theme she writes:

We must always remain in a nothingness, as someone who has nothing, can do nothing, knows nothing, and aspires to nothing. In this nothing our bliss resides. In order to become nothing again, as when we were when we were uncreated, we have to cast our will back unto God, a will that God has given us so freely that nothing can compel it – not even God himself. God can dispose of us how he sees fit, as when we were uncreated in him: then we could do nothing, desired nothing, needed nothing. If we cast our will unto God's will now, we can do nothing, need nothing, and become forgetful of our own will. (...) If I want to attain this noble nothingness and become nothing, then nothing – that is: my soul – should become annihilated with nothing, i.e. God. For God is nothing of those things we can express in words. Out of love for him we should make such progress that everything created is as nothing to us, and we should become so permeated by his Godhead that words fail us. In this manner, God becomes utterly nameless within us, and whatever we can say about God is totally nothing, yes, less than nothing. (...) There nothing, namely God, is found by nothing, namely the soul; and there nothing, namely the soul, is being permeated by nothing; and nothing is being consumed by nothing. Here I have chosen to dwell; this is my rest for ever and ever [Ps. 131:14], to sit down under the shadow [Sg 2:3], to enter within and to let God go out, to keep silent and to let God speak, to rest and to let God work ...¹⁴

⁹There is now a modern Dutch translation edited by Dirk Boone and Jos Alaerts, *De Evangelische Parel* (Averbode, 2020), totalling 506 pages.

¹⁰She writes in characteristic vein: 'I observed the feasts of the Church externally but I did not celebrate or observe them internally, where they come to fruition' (I, 23)

¹¹Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God. A History of Western Christian Mysticism. The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism. 1350–1550* (NY: Herder & Herder, 2012), 144

¹²See Christopher B. Barnett, *Kierkegaard, Pietism and Holiness* (London: Routledge, 2016), 92 for the broader sources of the devotional writings Kierkegaard published under his own name.

¹³Commenting on St Paul the apostle, she writes: 'About him Dionysius says: "God is nothingness, but for all the saints he is an insatiable desire, and he cannot be likened to anything".' (*Pearl*, II.52)

¹⁴*Pearl*, II.40.

Renunciation and annihilation of self involve a radical integration into the nothingness of God, and vice versa. As the quotation suggests, the nothingness of God elicits a transformation of the self, whereby it becomes as nothing, which I interpret in terms of radical dispossession of self, in utter renunciation.¹⁵ This is not a call to extinguish the will or flee from the world. Indeed, a movement of growing interiority in response to God, whereby we 'pass over from ourselves into God, in the innermost of our spirit'¹⁶ elicits engagement with the world. Thus, detachment and self-renunciation result in involvement. Therefore, when she writes that creation is like 'nothing' to us, our author nonetheless advocates our engaging with the world and others in a radically non-possessive, gratuitous manner. Similarly, she encourages us to love God purely in all things and others for God's sake, without setting them up as rival goods.¹⁷ Or again, we should view the misery of other people as our own, and assist others as best as we can, 'the way a mother has compassion with her only son, whose suffering she considers as her own.'¹⁸ In this last sentence there are Mariological and Christological hints, to which I will come back. I will first briefly discuss the topic of ecstasy.

Ecstasy¹⁹

Divine nothingness prompts a transformation of mind, intellect and will. In a break with the medieval Augustinian tradition, St Thomas Aquinas did not consider memory or mind a faculty besides intellect and will, which is why he construes our image-character in terms of a participation in the generation of the Word and the procession of the Holy Spirit as Love, that is, in terms of knowing and loving God.²⁰ The author of *The Evangelical Pearl* still accepts a more triadic Trinitarian anthropology, whereby memory or mind, intellect, and will reflect the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit, respectively.²¹ However, because only the Son and the Holy Spirit

¹⁵*Pearl* I, 50: si en hebben gheen eyghenthey, inwendich noch uutwendich, ende staen altijt ghelaten ende nemen waer dat inwercken Gods,

¹⁶*Pearl*, I, 31

¹⁷*Pearl*, II, 41: Ten achsten en sult ghi niemant lief hebben dan God oft om gods wille also dat in allen dingen God puerlic sonder geselle lief gehadt worde ende ghy sult dijn even kersten mensce lief hebben in God also dat u noch heylcheyt noch giften tot hem trecken mer met een gemeyn minne sult ghy alle menschen liefhebben ende alle menschen leyden ende trecken in God.

¹⁸*Pearl* II, 41

¹⁹Our author does not use the term 'ecstasy' but she does employ terms such as the '*overtogen*' of the soul [I, 18] which can best be translated as 'the transcending of the soul'. Using characteristically vivid metaphors she describes how God 'pours himself into the soul, as the sun radiates its light through the air—and nobody can distinguish the light from the air' (*Pearl*, I, 18). *The Evangelical Pearl* outlines a mysticism of indistinction and union, in which our spirit transcends itself.

²⁰*ST* I, q. 93, a. 7 ad 3

²¹Commenting on the elevation of St Paul into the third heaven, she writes (*Pearl* I, 50): 'The heavenly Father pulls the mind toward himself with the light of his Godhead and expands the memory and makes it overflow with heavenly and divine intentions. This is the first heaven. The Son illuminates the intellect with his wisdom of the Godhead. This is the second heaven. The Holy Spirit permeates the will with loving tenderness and the fire of love, and makes it melt and flow into God, whereby it becomes one spirit, in unity of love and peace [Eph. 4:3] with God. (Sij zijn getogen inden derden hemel met sinte Pauwels. Dat is, die hemelsche Vader trect die gedachten metten licht zijner godheyt ende doet die memorie seer wijde ontluiken ende overvloeyen van hemelschen ende godlicke gepeynsen. Ende die Soon verclaert dat verstant metter wijsheyt der godheyt. Ende dit is die ander hemel. Ende dye Heilige Geest doorvloeyt die wil met die minlike soeticheyt ende brant der minnen ende doet haer versmelten ende vloeyen in God, een geest, een bant der minnen ende des vrede te werden met God. Ende so en weet die mensce nyet of hi inden lichaem is of niet.)

proceed from the Father who himself does not proceed, only intellect and will are subject to a truly ecstatic dynamic.²²

Following Ruusbroec she argues that the Father dwells within memory, the Son transforms our intellect, and the Holy Spirit our will, thus rendering us one with God.²³ Our memory should become attentive to God without cease.²⁴ The best way to understand this is in terms of a refocussing or recollection of the mind away from distractions (*divertissements* in Pascal's terminology) which routinely scatter the soul.²⁵ Thus, the indwelling of the Father in the mind results in a recollection of the soul, whereby it turns away from the multiplicity of distractions and acquires true interiority.²⁶ As she writes, we should retain: 'an inner solitude so as to remain undisturbed by distractions'.²⁷

Similarly, our intellect becomes illuminated by the Son, enabling us to discern within ourselves our openness to the divine ('our own ground'), while the Holy Spirit instils an 'imageless love' within us, whereby 'we come to love all things in God with an eternal, uncreated love'.²⁸ She calls charity 'imageless' because it is a love that is undistracted by self-concern and thus utterly gratuitous. In short, through the theological virtues of faith, hope and love we come to dwell in the presence of God,²⁹ and are carried out of ourselves into God.³⁰

This self-transcendence also has implications for our sense of temporality (and this arguably anticipates themes in Kierkegaard).³¹ She writes that our created being is situated 'between time and eternity'.³² Eternity dwells within us; it is 'the life of our soul'. More specifically, echoing St Augustine and Deut. 31:15-20 and Jer. 21:8, she addresses God as follows:

You dwell within me and You are more intimate to me than I am to myself. Still, You have created me with freedom and placed me between time and eternity. If I turn towards time, that is, to transient things, I will be lost; but if I turn towards eternity, I will be saved. [I, 4]

Quoting 'a great Master' [Tauler] she continues: 'As soon as we return with our will and we incline our spirit toward the Spirit of God beyond time, all that was ever lost is being restored in one moment [*in enen ogenblik*]. And if we were to do this a thousand times

²²Her main source for her Trinitarian anthropology appears to be Ruusbroec. For a more in-depth discussion of Ruusbroec's views on ecstasy and theological anthropology, see Rik Van Nieuwenhove, 'Ruusbroec's notion of the contemplative life and his understanding of the human person,' in John Arblaster and Rob Faesen (eds.), *Mystical Anthropology. Authors from the Low Countries* (London: Routledge, 2017), 73–88.

²³*Pearl*, I.43; see also I.32.

²⁴*Pearl* II. 53: 'Dye wille sal in God verloren zijn met een vertijen ons selves. Onse verstant sal in God verslonden zijn met een claer bekennen gods. Onse memorie sal stadelijc op God dencken'.

²⁵*Pearl*, II.3 and II.14.

²⁶As happened to Mary [I. 31], whose powers of the soul were unified. So too our powers should be 'passing over from ourselves into God, into the interior of our spirit.' *Pearl*, I. 31; II. 1.

²⁷*Pearl*, II.5.

²⁸*Pearl*, I.24.

²⁹*Pearl*, III. 41.

³⁰*Pearl*, I.23.

³¹I am thinking of his views on temporality and eternity in *The Concept of Anxiety* [SKS4:388-95]. For an illuminating discussion, see Arne Grøn, 'Time and History' in John Lippitt and George Pattison (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), 272-91. Or in the words of Clare Carlisle in her essay 'Kierkegaard and Heidegger' in the same collection (p. 421-39): "'the moment' names a radically new conception of temporality, in which past and future—that is to say, the dimensions of time—are joined together in eternity.' (p. 428)

³²*Pearl*, I, 4; see also II, 22.

every day, renewal would invariably occur.³³ This renewal occurs through ‘sinking away in our interiority’, ‘melting away in the intimacy of God’, whereby we become reformed or ‘reimaged’.

I will conclude this section by quoting another passage in which she reiterates how divine transcendence impacts on our interiority. In this text [which illustrates how our author creatively appeals to the Scriptures in her writings] she paraphrases Job 3:23 (and Is. 53:2) but perhaps also the pseudo-Dionysian *The Divine Names*, ch. 5, 824B, writing:

As Job says: To a man who is surrounded by the darkness of God’s transcendence, the way is hidden. There he is above all that one can do to assist him, for there he is without name, form or image, beyond all determination and being. This is essential interiority, for which the time of nocturnal silence is most suitable.³⁴

In translating this passage I deliberately retained the gendered language of the original: it is clear that our author reads this text in light of both Job’s and Christ’s afflictions, as well as the soul’s union with God through radical renunciation. Indeed, our author anticipates some themes that came to major prominence in Catholic theology in the writings of Hans Urs von Balthasar in the twentieth century, such as the utter desolation and even abandonment of Christ by the Father [III, 15] or the descent into hell, and so forth. It is now time to examine this Christological aspect in more detail.

Christocentricism

Luther critiqued the tradition of apophatic theology, arguing that it was an alien intrusion of Greek thought that resulted in obscuring the revelation of God in the crucified Christ. This is an important critique. In my opinion, however, it does not apply to the major exponents of the Flemish school of mysticism, including Ruusbroec and *The Evangelical Pearl* for whom Christocentricism and apophaticism converge. Self-fugal ecstasy and radical theocentricity occur through radical surrender to, and identification with, Christ [III.15] in faith, hope and love [I. 23]. The house of our soul is narrow, she writes, and it needs to be expanded through Christ’s entry [I. 21]. We will become ‘will-less’ insofar as our will conforms to the divine will; our intellect becomes transformed into divine contemplation; and our mind becomes ‘a tasting wisdom’ [I. 53], teaching us the mysteries of the Scriptures.

Through the birth of the divine Word in our soul we become deified. This, however, can only occur through a radical identification with the humanity of Christ. In her homely style the author exhorts us to anchor our entire life, every move or activity, in Christ:

Wherever it happens, alone or amidst a crowd, in different times and places, keep your mirror before you and direct unto it the powers of your soul. Make your ways straight and speak all your words as if you stood before him. If you are eating, immerse every morsel of food in his precious blood. If you are drinking, remember that he gives you to

³³*Pearl*, I.18. The theme of the *oieblikket* was developed by Kierkegaard in a highly original manner. I neither claim nor deny that he drew immediate inspiration from this or similar texts from *The Evangelical Pearl*: further study would be required to determine the nature of the similarity.

³⁴*Pearl* I.18: Als Job seyt: ‘Den man is den wech verborghen ende is ombevanghen met duysternissen der onbekentheyte Gods, daer hi is boven al datmen hem toeleggen mach, ende is daer nameloos, formeloos, beeldeloos boven alle wijsen ende wesen. Dit is die weselike inkeer ende hyertoe is die tijt des nachts inder stilheit al te nutten dinc.

drink from his blessed wounds. [...] If you lay down to sleep, rest upon his bloody heart. If you speak, remember that he is present and listens to your words, and that he stands before your countenance and gazes at you and your intention. [I. 27]

Christ's mind, intellect, and will were themselves inhabited by the Father, the eternal Word, and the Holy Spirit [I. 40]. The beatific vision that Christ enjoyed was not in tension with his suffering and awareness of human sin but the latter was intensified by the former.³⁵ Interestingly, she suggests that this applies to us as well: the graver our suffering, the more joyful the mind, and the more joyful the mind, the heavier the cross: the one does not diminish the other.³⁶

The Christian, then, is called unto an intimate union with Christ, human and divine, that we can best characterize as 'reconciliation', whereby sadness over sin, dishonouring God and bodily suffering (that we should consider a participation in Christ's own suffering), on the one hand, co-exist in harmony with a joyful union with Christ, on the other. As a matter of fact, it is only through union with Christ that our afflictions can become 'fruitful'.³⁷ Our suffering, without reference to Christ, does not have any redeeming value;³⁸ indeed, it is utterly meaningless: 'My life and suffering are devoid of meaning, for they are nothing. May they be united and supplemented with your holy life and suffering, so as to become fruitful and pleasing to you; thus you will see the reflection of your works in me.'³⁹

In summary, through incorporation into the two natures of Christ we are called 'to wander in the life and passion of Christ' but we should simultaneously dwell in his divinity where we should rest from all exterior, earthly activities.⁴⁰ Just as Christ enjoyed the presence of God in the midst of his activity and suffering [II, 43], so we too need to retain a theocentric focus and interiority in everything that we do and suffer.⁴¹

The nothingness of God, therefore, finds supreme expression in the kenotic death of Christ on the Cross. In contemplating the Cross, the soul 'rises up with all her might and reaches out [Lit. 'stretches out'] and presses herself into the interior Cross. She desires to cleave to her bridegroom with all her strength and to follow him'.⁴² Ultimately, divine nothingness and the soul's ecstasy converge in the cross of Christ.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

³⁵*Pearl*, I. 40

³⁶*Pearl*, III.1

³⁷*Pearl*, II. 4 and II. 35

³⁸*Pearl*, II.40

³⁹*Pearl*, II.35. In this context an important qualification needs to be made. There appears to be an exception in the parallel between our joy in affliction, on the one hand, and Christ's suffering throughout his life while enjoying the beatific vision, on the other hand. Commenting on Christ's cry of dereliction [Mt. 27:46] she writes that the poverty and desolation of Christ's soul was so great that his soul had 'no support, no sustenance, no consolation from his Godhead. But he hung, naked and exposed, pitilessly abandoned by the Godhead and by all souls...' [III, 15]. This at least partly explains the uniqueness of Christ's saving death, and the stark dichotomy our author draws between our afflictions, which have no redeeming value, and those of Christ.

⁴⁰*Pearl*, II, 48: Aldus sullen wij wandelen inden leven ende inder passien Christi, mer in zijn godheyt sullen wij wonen ende rusten van alre uutwendiger ende aertscher onleden,

⁴¹II. 45. See also III.45: 'With a love that is active the soul seeks her beloved everywhere and runs through every place where her beloved has suffered [...] Even so, she often forgets herself, for she is still full of images in her activity. With an essential love, however, the soul possesses her beloved in all things, and changes all multiplicity to simple rest.'

⁴²*Pearl*, III, 15

Notes on contributor

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