

Self-Annihilation in Marguerite Porete

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Several years ago, I was fortunate enough to come under the influence of several of the core ideas in Christina Van Dyke's *A Hidden Wisdom* (2022) as they were being developed. Although I have never had much love for the work of the canonical scholastic philosophers (e.g., Anselm, Boethius, Aquinas, and others), I have had great interest for nearly a decade in the writings of medieval mystics. Initially, the interest was purely personal—I wasn't looking for philosophical insight; I was looking for spiritual guidance. But I found the texts to which I first turned—the anonymously authored *Cloud of Unknowing*, and the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius and John of the Cross—generally more baffling and disturbing than spiritually helpful. Misleadingly, these texts were also quite homogenous in their spiritual advice; and it wasn't until I learned from Van Dyke the distinction between apophatic and affective mysticism, and the fact that the latter brand of mysticism was much more associated with women writers than men, that I found texts that resonated more with me (even if I still found them baffling).

Unsurprisingly, texts philosophers read for personal reasons often give rise to professional projects; and I think it is no accident that my immersion in some of these texts has coincided with my growing research interests in the topics of self, love, and self-annihilation—topics that loom large in *A Hidden Wisdom* and all of the texts under discussion in it. I am no medievalist, so I come to Van Dyke's book much more as a learner than a critic; and there is indeed much to learn from it. The 13th – 15th centuries, the focal period for Van Dyke's discussion, were a particularly rich and exciting time in the history of Christian mysticism, and especially so for those interested in the work of women authors. (Bernard McGinn's landmark volume covering this timeframe is aptly entitled *The Flowering of Mysticism*.) *A Hidden Wisdom* provides a tremendously helpful and contextualizing topical survey of some of the most important figures in this period. It is a valuable resource not only for anyone interested in medieval mysticism, but also for those interested in the range of important philosophical topics the women mystics of the 13th – 15th centuries were addressing.

For purposes of this symposium, however, I need to wear the hat of critic; and so I will focus my attention on what Van Dyke has to say about Marguerite Porete, the late 13th/early 14th century author of *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. I have spent more time in Porete's text than just about any other mystical writer. There is a lot to love about the *Mirror*, not least the fact that Porete's vision of the end to which worshipful love for God naturally leads seems at once entirely alien (how could anyone *possibly* come to be, or even *want* to be like her "Soul in Love with God"?) and yet deeply correct and challenging (how could *worshipful* love for God *not* take us to this end, and what does it say about me that I find it so alien?). But Van Dyke's interpretation of the *Mirror*—well in accord with the consensus line among Porete scholars, despite a couple of notable and welcome differences—emphasizes its alienness and so, in a way, guts its challenge. If Porete is saying what Van Dyke takes her to be saying, it is no wonder that anyone would find her vision alien, her posited end of Christian life undesirable, and so the challenge to attain that end wholly inert.

I read the *Mirror* differently. So, in my role as critic, I want to briefly describe and defend my reading, and I want thereby to offer a challenge to Van Dyke (and others) to defend the consensus line against the considerations I raise here. In doing this, I will draw on ideas in Rea 2023; but I will also go beyond that discussion in important ways—particularly in my discussion of Porete’s “river analogy”. I will begin, however, with some brief remarks on the distinction between apophatic and affective mysticism.

Apophatic mysticism, Van Dyke tells us, is “typified in the works of Marguerite Porete, Meister Eckhart, and the anonymous English *Cloud of Unknowing*.” (12) Within the apophatic tradition, she tells us, the spiritual life tends to be understood as culminating in “unknowing union with the unknowable divine;” and this union is typically understood as somehow requiring or involving “self-abnegation, or radical self-loss.” (12) Furthermore, experience of God is construed in this tradition as “transcend[ing] physical and affective experience.” (14)

By contrast, the affective tradition “encourages us to delve more deeply into” our embodied affective states; and the paradigmatic figures in the tradition “viewed altered physical states such as mystic death or bodily ‘closure’, emotional states such as uncontrollable weeping or laughter, and parasensory states such as visions and auditions not as distracting from true mystic union but as important ways of experiencing a direct connection with the God who had become incarnate for us.” (15)

One might note the irony in my turning toward the writings of women mystics in search of a more affective mysticism only to wind up spending most of my time in the writings of a typical apophatic. But as I read Porete’s *Mirror*, one of the great attractions of the sort of “self-loss” that she posits as the *telos* of the spiritual life is precisely its affective character. As shall become clear, she would certainly insist that, en route to that *telos*, one must abandon desires that have that particular experience as their focus; and perhaps this is reason enough not to locate her squarely *within* the affective tradition. But because the affective coloring of union with God is splashed all over the *Mirror* in ways that are strikingly absent from (for example) *The Cloud of Unknowing*, I wonder if it is really apt to characterize her as a “typical” apophatic.

Porete’s *Mirror* is, in effect, an extended reflection on the superiority of *love for God* as a path to complete self-transformation and union with God over submission to *reason* in the cultivation of virtue. It is written as a dialogue between Love (which is identified with God in the text), Reason, the Soul, and a few lesser characters who chime in only occasionally. Reason spends most of the dialogue baffled and aghast—reactions that Porete surely knew would garner a great deal of empathy from most of her readers—and then finally *dies* about two thirds of the way through. The core idea, and the one which Lady Reason spends most of her time interrogating as the Soul articulates and defends it with approval from Love, is that the proper *telos* of the soul that is falling ever more in love with God is a sort of union with God that Porete describes as being “*brought to nothing*”, or *annihilated*.¹ In some passages, Porete characterizes the “state” of annihilation as one in which the soul has lost all desire for anything other than God—indeed, in this state, the soul does not even desire *that God’s will be done*, because desiring

¹ For discussion of the Poretian path from love for God to self-annihilation see Rea 2023. The term “brought to nothing” is from Marler’s (Porete 1999) translation; Babinsky (Porete 1993) uses “annihilation” and its cognates. Except where otherwise noted, quotations and page references are from Marler; though I will continue to use “annihilation” to refer to the Poretian *telos* of love for God.

even this would be to desire something other than God. (1999: 19, 60, 67 – 68) She also describes it as a state in which the soul simply “has no will at all” and “can have no will at all...except only the divine will”. (19; 106) Most strikingly, she describes it as a state in which “[God] is and she is not” and in which “she is without existence, where she was before she was created”. (Porete 1993: 218; quoted in Van Dyke 2022: 12, and see also p. 154.) The question, of course, is what sense can be made of all this.

The consensus line on Poretian annihilation is roughly this: Union with God is to be understood as involving one of two things—either a “union of [ontological] indistinction” (Robinson 2001: 67, 79) wherein the soul becomes literally indistinguishable from God even if there is some sense in which the soul still “exists”, or “ontological erasure” (Van Dyke 2022: 154), wherein the soul simply ceases to exist. An important point of non-textual support for this conclusion comes from the fact that Porete is likely to have been an important influence on Meister Eckhart, who famously endorsed a doctrine of (in Van Dyke’s words) “radical self-abnegation”. (See Hollywood 1985, esp. chs. 4 and 5.) As for the textual support, one might well ask: What further need have we of witnesses in light of the passages above?

Broadly speaking, Van Dyke falls right in with the consensus line, as follows:

Marguerite Porete explains that union with God requires the complete elimination of the conscious self. In the perfect state of such union, “All things are one for her, without an explanation...and she is nothing in a One of this sort.” All the individualizing activities of the soul—thought, will, emotion—cease: “The Soul has nothing more to do for God than God does for her. Why? Because He is and she is not. She retains nothing more of herself in nothingness, because He is sufficient of Himself, because He is and she is not.” In the ultimate expression of annihilative union, “She is stripped of all things because she is without existence, where she was before she was created.” This stress on self-abnegation runs throughout Porete’s work: annihilation of individuality is essential for the highest form of union with God...It is often unclear in such texts [as Eckhart’s and Porete’s] precisely how to understand this self-abnegation (is it meant to be understood literally or metaphorically, ontologically or phenomenologically?), but the stress on removing any sense of self that might impede complete union with God is consistent throughout the apophatic tradition. In extreme cases, apophatic mystics even portray self-abnegation as allowing for an identity of the mystic with God; when no egoistic self remains, one can be filled with God to the point where one *becomes* God. (12-13)

In this passage—no doubt in part because she is talking about multiple texts and a tradition rather than just one text and its individual author—Van Dyke seems to hover between the two understandings of annihilative union mentioned above: merger (my term for Robinson’s “union of indistinction”) vs. erasure. Notably, however, she adds two welcome qualifications to the consensus line: first, that talk of annihilation may be meant to be understood metaphorically or phenomenologically; and, second, that what is most crucial for mystics like Porete is the removal of a *sense of self*.

Both qualifications are important, and I will comment on them shortly. But first a bit more from Van Dyke. Despite the qualifications, Van Dyke leans heavily into the “erasure” interpretation of Porete. So, for example, a page after the quotation above, she tells us that in mystical union as the apophatics conceive of it, “neither human beings nor God exist in standard ways.” (14) Similarly, contrasting Porete’s understanding of union with God with Marguerite d’Oingt’s, she characterizes Porete’s “vision of complete self-abnegation” as “a state in which she is ‘nothing’.” (61) And finally:

The question of whether [apophatic-mystical] self-annihilation involves ontological as well as phenomenological and epistemological erasure is subject to debate; among medieval Christian contemplatives, Marguerite Porete appears to go the furthest toward advocating this possibility. In her *Mirror of Simple Souls*, for instance, Porete describes the goal of the spiritual life as one in which the human person so fully merges with God that ‘nothing is, except He who is, who sees Himself in such being.’ When the soul has so emptied herself that all that remains “is properly His own, and His own proper self,” then it is as though the soul is not merely “without existence” but as though she was never created as a separate being in the first place, simply held in God “where she was before she was created.” (154)

Thus, although Van Dyke does not come right out and *endorse* the erasure interpretation of Porete (and even, in the quotation from p. 154, gestures instead toward the notion of *merger*), she does seem to think that it is the one closest to capturing whatever Porete actually meant. Accordingly, within Van Dyke’s classificatory scheme, Porete’s conception of divine union is strongly apophatic, standing in stark contrast to paradigmatic affective mystics who maintain that, in union with God, human beings retain their distinction from God and perhaps even find themselves with an “enhance[d]...sense of self.”² (156)

For my part, however, none of the interpretive options Van Dyke offers is adequate to the text.

The merger interpretation attributes a manifestly incoherent doctrine to Porete. No creature can possibly *duplicate* God (which is how Robinson (2001: 79, 96 - 97) seems to understand the merger interpretation); nor can anything possibly become identical to anything distinct from it (as per Van Dyke’s gloss on that interpretation). Thus, an ontologically loaded merger interpretation seems deeply uncharitable to Porete.

Erasure, of course—i.e., literal metaphysical annihilation—is entirely possible; but this interpretation runs aground on the fact that, whatever Porete actually thinks “being brought to nothing” consists in, it is a *state of being* rather than mere nonexistence. Consider Babinsky’s translation (Porete 1993) of chapter 135 (partially quoted by Van Dyke in a passage cited earlier):

Thus the Soul has nothing more to do for God than God does for her. Why?
Because He is, and she is not. She retains nothing more of herself in nothingness,

² That said, I do not mean to suggest that Van Dyke offers a starkly binary conception of the distinction between apophatic and affective mystics. On her scheme, Porete and Eckhart are typical apophatics and emphasize self-loss; but Marguerite d’Oingt, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Richard Rolle, and Jan van Ruusbroec are typical affective mystics, and “employ a ‘personal distinction within unity’ model in their depictions of mystical union”; but Hadewijch and Angela of Foligno, also affective mystics, seem to occupy a position in between these extremes. (155 – 156)

because He is sufficient of Himself, that is, because He is and she is not. Thus she is stripped of all things because she is without existence, where she was before she was. Thus she has from God what he has, and she is what God is through the transformation of love, in that point in which she was, before she flowed from the Goodness of God. (218)

Although Porete does indeed say in this passage that the Soul is “without existence”, she also says a lot about what the Soul *is like*, what she *has*, and how she has been *transformed*.

Moreover, Porete speaks throughout the *Mirror* of the “Soul Brought to Nothing” in ways that manifestly presuppose its continued existence and seem also to emphasize certain kinds of affective experience that come along with divine union. She talks, for example, about Divine Love “taking its rest” in the annihilated soul (ch. 133), about the perfection and freedom this soul has attained (ch. 134), and about how this soul “takes what she receives from divine goodness” (ch. 136). Elsewhere she describes the Soul Brought to Nothing as wonderful, enlightened by knowledge, adorned by love, at peace in the divine being, the one upon whom the whole Church is founded, and filled wholly and replete and lacking no divine goodness. (21 - 22), and describes this soul as “the Soul Set Free” (see chs 12 and 16). Obviously none of these states is compatible with the *nonexistence* of the soul that inhabits them; and several of them—*rest* and *peace* in particular, but perhaps also states like being *free*, *filled*, and *adorned by love*—seem obviously to have an affective character as well. To be sure, experiences of rest, peace, and freedom are significantly qualitatively different from (say) ecstasy, uncontrollable weeping, and so on; but I think it would be a mistake to deny their affective character altogether, or to insist that they are somehow less “embodied” than the sorts of experiences that are more typically discussed in the affective tradition. And in light of the prevalence of language like this—and the manifest implication that, whatever annihilation is, it is something *good for us*—the literal version of the erasure interpretation seems wholly untenable.

This is where the first of Van Dyke’s qualifications on the consensus line—the explicit recognition of metaphorical or phenomenological interpretive options—is important. Once literal erasure and merger interpretations are off the table, metaphorical versions of the same might seem most promising. I do think that, in the end, we have to say that Porete is giving us metaphors. But it is unclear to me the range of metaphorical interpretations Van Dyke is willing to countenance. In her parenthetical comment in the first passage quoted above, she *seems* to equate a metaphorical interpretation with a phenomenological interpretation. Perhaps this is not what she intends; but, in any case, to do so, I think, is a mistake. The reason is simply that, although it seems clear that Porete is speaking in metaphors, interpreting her as construing divine union as involving *phenomenological merger* or *erasure* seems no more viable than the literal interpretations I have just set aside. There is nothing that it is like not to exist; so there is no such thing as the phenomenology of nonexistence. Nor is there anything it is like to accomplish the impossible task of becoming identical with or indistinguishable from God, just as there is nothing it is like to be a sharp-edged sphere or a furiously sleeping colorless green idea.

So how should we interpret Porete’s language of non-existence? In the passages that come closest to providing a positive characterization of the state of annihilation, Porete generally gravitates toward metaphors of dissolution or the mixing of liquids. By the end of the 13th

century, there was plenty precedent for this.³ For example, Bernard of Clairvaux had characterized union with God on analogy with a drop of wine dissolved in water, and Beatrice of Nazareth had employed the analogy of a drop of water sinking into the ocean.⁴ Apparently adapting these earlier metaphors, Porete likens the annihilated soul to a river that “loses its channel and its name” as it flows into the sea. (107) She also, following Hadewijch (a contemporary of Beatrice’s), talks about the annihilated soul as being “dissolved” or “melted” into God. (89, 107, 173) At first glance, these metaphors can be seen as lending support to either of the two dominant literal interpretations—erasure or merger. But a closer look at the river metaphor in particular, together with attention to the Soul’s role in the dialogue opens up other, and better interpretive possibilities.

The river metaphor is commonly understood as supporting the consensus line. Juan Marin (2010), for example, understands the river metaphor to support the idea that annihilative union involves “total deification”.⁵ He says that, in contrast to Bernard’s wine-water analogy, the river analogy involves two liquids (seawater and river water) of the same fundamental nature: “Just as a drop of water is of the same nature as the ocean and once dissolved in it cannot be separated again, so is the annihilated soul permanently one with God.” (95) But this reading seems overly reliant on modern conceptions of wine and seawater. From Aristotle’s point of view as reported by Aquinas,⁶ and so apparently from Aquinas’s point of view too, seawater, wine, and indeed *all liquids* are just mixtures of plain water and other elements. Perhaps Porete had a different view on this matter; but if so, there is no evidence in her text that she did. So, on the particular question of the natures of the liquids being mixed, I see no reason to read much into her use of a water-water analogy rather than a wine-water analogy.

Once that point is clear, I think the most plausible reading of her river analogy is one that treats the resulting mixtures as combinations of different “elements”—not what the medievals thought of as *genuine* material elements, like air, fire, and water, of course, but discrete compounds that behave in mixtures in roughly the same way that elements were thought to behave. And here again we can look to Aquinas for a bit of interpretive help.

Joseph Bobik (1998) sets the date for Aquinas’s *De Mixtione Elementorum* at 1273, just a few decades before Porete finished the *Mirror*. According to the view expressed in that text, when elements are mixed, they (in some sense) *continue to exist* within the mixture. They do not become literally indistinguishable from what they are mixed into; nor do they simply cease to exist.⁷ Rather, their forms exist in the mixture “virtually (by their power)” —that is, “what is preserved [of the elements in the mixture] is their power”. (122) Of course, just as I doubt that Porete intended her readers to think overly carefully about the natures of river-water and seawater, so too I doubt that she intended us to dwell at length on the metaphysics of mixtures, or to turn specifically to Aquinas for our views on such things. But I mention Aquinas’s view because it is very much in accord with Aristotle’s which, in turn, is very much in accord with seems to have been (and, I expect, still is) a chemically naïve “commonsense” understanding of mixtures. Ingredients in a cake don’t cease to exist when mixed; they continue in a way, and in a

³ See Lerner 1971; Marin 2010.

⁴ See *On Loving God*, in Clairvaux 1987, p. 196 and Marin 2010, 93 – 95..

⁵ Likewise, Robinson: see 2001: 97.

⁶ Aquinas 1964, Bk II.6.

⁷ Bobik 1998: 120 – 127;

way that we might reasonably describe as being present “by their power”. (Even though we can’t see and remove individual sugar particles from a piece of cake, the sugar is *there*, and its contribution to the cake seems, among other things, to be the power to cause experiences of sweetness.)

The idea that, in telling the story of mixtures, one wants to arrive at a view according to which the mixed elements don’t simply cease to exist but somehow persist at least by way of their powers is common and plausible enough to present at least a *viable* basis for reading Porete’s text, even if it cannot at this point be shown to be *the definitively correct* reading. And it is only this core idea that I want to pull from the Thomistic story about mixtures in trying to understand Porete’s river analogy.

But there are at least two more pieces to the interpretive puzzle that require attention before we can put them together. First, it is important to note that there is no reason to identify the Soul character in Porete’s dialogue with the *person* whose soul it is.⁸ Soul, like Reason, is the personification of a particular *aspect* of a person—not a *part* of the person, exactly, but something like a cluster of functions, capacities, dispositions, and so on.⁹ But if that is right, then what the river analogy gives us is not the dissolution or annihilation of a *person* in union with God, but only the dissolution or annihilation of a particular aspect of a person; and likewise for Porete’s other metaphors.

What exactly is the aspect of a person that is represented by Soul? Not anything like what Aquinas, much less Descartes, would have called a soul; for in that case Reason would best be represented as an aspect *of the soul* rather than as a character *alongside Soul*, as if both Soul and Reason are somehow on a part with one another as separate aspects of a person. Instead, the character Soul seems to be the personification of something like a cluster of loving, valuing, preference-forming, and willing dispositions and the deliverances thereof. It is, in other words, something like what Korsgaard (2009: 21 - 24) would call a “practical identity,” or maybe even something as robust as what I would call a “self”, in a sense of that term that is emphatically *not* synonymous with “person”. (Rea 2022)

This brings us to the final piece of the interpretive puzzle: Porete’s reference to the river’s “channel and name”. The channel and name of a river provide its identity. By this I do not mean that they are attributes that are both essential and essentially unique to the river; they are not haecceities of the river, and they do not determine *what entity* the river is. Rather, they constitute its identity in roughly the same sense in which a person’s core values, preferences and so on constitute (an important part of) their identity. The channel and name of a river constitute “who” the river is, as it were. A person who lost whatever values, memories, and so on constitute them as who they are se mind is wiped would not cease to exist; but in a perfectly standard manner of speaking, they would cease to be who they distinctively are. So too for a river that “loses its channel and name”.

This, then, is where Van Dyke’s reference to the lost sense of self becomes relevant. A river losing its channel and name *sounds* quite like a person losing their distinctive selfhood—not in some metaphysically bizarre sense involving erasure or merger with the divine, but in the much

⁸ On this, see Hollywood 1985: 92 – 96.

⁹ That said, though, one must be mindful of Hollywood’s warning to “avoid any reading of the *Mirror* that assumes a consistent allegorization in which all of the dialogical figures are static.” (95)

more intelligible sense of losing somehow their most central values, preferences, independence of will, and the like. And this, in turn, sounds exactly like what happens to the Soul in Love with God as she is annihilated: in love for God, all of her values and preferences, as well as her very will, become singly focused upon God. She wants, values, loves, and wills nothing but God; there is nothing *in that particular faculty of the person whose Soul she is* to give that person a distinctive practical identity apart from God's; nor does she any longer conceive of herself in any way that would give rise to what I would characterize as a robust, distinctive (narrative) self.¹⁰

Importantly, the idea here seems to be nothing more or less than what is conveyed by the Pauline claim to have been crucified with Christ, so that "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." (Gal 2:20, NRSV) But what is not captured in the Pauline claim but *is* tantalizingly suggested in Porete's river metaphor is the persistence (again, "by virtue of its power") of the core values, preferences, and so on that originally constituted Soul. Space will not permit detailed elaboration on this here; but, in short, I think it is quite reasonable to suppose that the basic idea is that the "power" of whatever is good about the values, preferences, etc. that are distinctively our own exert a kind of "pull" on God's will by virtue of God's love and concern for us as individuals, and the power of this pull persists even after we have otherwise wholly lost ourselves in God.¹¹

In sum, then, the interpretation of Poretian annihilation that I offer is just this: it is metaphorical in exactly the same way in which the Pauline remark just quoted is metaphorical; and the content of both metaphors is roughly the same, although the river analogy gives us the further, welcome suggestion that our own distinctive practical identity exerts a kind of pull on the divine will. The annihilated Soul is therefore not a *person* who has suffered ontological erasure or a (metaphysical) identity-destroying merger with God; nor is it a person who has undergone the metaphorical equivalents of these. Rather, the annihilated Soul is an annihilated practical identity, or even an annihilated self. It is the simultaneously rich and impoverished "self" that someone has when they can full-heartedly say with St. Paul that it is no longer they who live but Christ lives in them.

Although my interpretation of Porete is at odds with Van Dyke's, our disagreement on this point in a way only serves to emphasize what I see as the most valuable contribution (among many) of her book. As Van Dyke points out, the writings of women have long been neglected in contemporary discussions of medieval philosophy; and the contemporary analytic-philosophical literature on mystical and religious experience has skewed heavily toward the apophatic tradition *and* toward the writings of men in its treatment of medieval mysticism. Van Dyke offers a welcome corrective on both fronts. But, most importantly for a non-historian like me, she also offers a highly informative and tremendously valuable contextualizing guide to the range of philosophical and theological topics and views that one can find in the mystical texts of the 13th – 15th centuries. Apart from her work, I may never even have encountered Porete's text, much

¹⁰ Again, see Rea 2022 for discussion; and see also Van Dyke's own suggestive reference, in discussing Porete and others, to the extinguishing of a *narrative* sense of self. (188)

¹¹ See Rea 2023 for further elaboration. See also Helm 2009 for the idea that loving someone is at least partly a matter of investment in their practical identity, and Stump 2010: 443 – 8 on the "refolding" of one's desires of the heart, which is quite similar to the sort of "persistence by virtue of their power" that I am positing here. (I thank Laura Callahan for suggesting this particular connection with Stump's work. I draw other, similar connections with her work in Rea 2023.)

less read it. So, although I do indeed depart from her interpretation of Porete, it is her own work in this book and elsewhere that has put me, and will surely put others, in a position to do so; and for this we should all be grateful.¹²

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¹² Thanks to Jeff Brower and Laura Callahan for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.