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# *Aurora (Morgen Röte im auffgang, 1612) and Fundamental Report (Gründlicher Bericht, Mysterium Pansophicum, 1620)*

(Leiden: Brill, 2013)

by Jakob Boehme

With a Translation, Introduction and Commentary by Andrew Weeks and Günther Bonheim in Collaboration with Michael Spang as Editor of *Gründlicher Bericht*

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IN THE PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION of Charles Hotham's *Ad philosophiam teutonicam manuductio* (1650), the translator – the author's brother, Durand Hotham – wrote: "Sir, Translations are things very difficult, especially where the Notion is uncouth". Indeed, comments on the difficulty of translating Böhme, the 'Teutonic philosopher', are a common trait in the reception of his writings, from the seventeenth century onwards. Even Alexandre Koyré, author of a seminal study of Böhme's thought (*La philosophie de Jacob Behmen*, 1929), doubted whether it was possible at all to render such a complex vocabulary in any language other than the original German. Koyré himself chose to quote Böhme only in German, never attempting a translation into French. Alexander Whyte went even further, claiming that Böhme cannot be translated because he didn't write his works in German in the first place, but in his own peculiar language, which could be labelled "Behmenese". He warns potential "students" that "they will have to learn an absolutely new and an unheard-of language if they would speak with Behmen and have Behmen speak with them. For Behmen's books are written neither in German nor in English of any age or idiom, but in the most original and uncouth Behmenese" (*Jacob Behmen: An Appreciation*, 1895, 26). Over two hundred years after Durand Hotham's comment on Böhme's "uncouth notion", Whyte uses the very same adjective to explain why Böhme is in fact difficult to read and understand in any language, even in the original.

It is not only non-native readers of Böhme who have to face similar problems in interpreting the roughness of a unique mode of expression. The correspondence of Böhme shows that he often received requests for explanations regarding general theological points, as well as the meaning he attributed to specific words. Böhme himself refers to the Language of Nature (*Natursprache*), as spoken by Adam before the Babel fragmentation of languages occurred, as his true mother-tongue. Insight into the Language of Nature – he claims – allowed him to gain access to and express the true essence of things, bridging the gaps between words and meanings, which are the main characteristic of all spoken languages. This led him to recur to imaginative wordplay, and terminological inventions, which he uses as tools to overcome the limitations of expression typical of post-Babel languages. It is

such linguistic creativity which in the first instance makes the "notion uncouth", and as a consequence also untranslatable.

Yet, rarely have translations played such a key role in the reception of a thinker as they have done in the case of Böhme. Even before the publication of a complete edition of his writings in German, in the 1660s, less than fifty years after Böhme's death, English readers had access to translations of most of his writings, prepared by John Sparrow and John Ellistone. Durand and Charles Hotham also engaged in translating: the former adapted a famous biography of Böhme by Abraham von Franckenberg, while the latter contributed the translation of a short work, *Consolatory Treatise of the Four Complexions*. These early translations have proven remarkably successful, remaining the point of reference for many Anglophone scholars of Böhme even today. Thus what started in the seventeenth century as a project of making Böhme available and comprehensible to an English readership, led to a radical separation of the German, original Böhme from the English, translated one, to the point that the original writings are still now often unread and unknown outside Germany. While Koyré quoted Böhme exclusively in German to preserve the peculiarity of his expressions, it has meanwhile become common to use the seventeenth-century English translations as if they were Böhme's own texts, instead of recognizing them for what they are: English versions that in their choice of words are primarily of historical interest as revealing the milieu of the early English reception of Böhme, but are hopelessly far from the tone of Böhme's own works. Quite simply, Weeks is right in labelling them as "obsolete" (45). Given the peculiarity of Böhme's approach to language, it is clear that no translation can ever substitute his original words; yet, in the case of Böhme, translations have often become a hindrance rather than an instrument to mediate the encounter with the original writings.

Andrew Weeks's new translation of *Aurora* is a much-needed remedy for this state of affairs. One of his most famous works, Böhme's first book nevertheless remains understudied. *Aurora* is unique in many ways: Böhme's first attempt to put into words his 'intuition' regarding the deep intertwining of God and the creation is as linguistically powerful as it is experimental and asystematic in its structure. It is written in remarkably vivid language, especially with regard to the descriptions of nature's vitality in the opening chapters, and of the struggle between God and the Devil in the *Preface*, narrated by means of a striking metaphor of the growth and weathering of a tree. It remained unfinished, and a six-year gap divides it from any of his following books, which were all written within the space of a few years (1619-1624).

Weeks's edition provides the German original in the version of the so-called *Urschriften* (as edited by Werner Buddecke in 1963-66, stemming from Böhme's own manuscripts) and a facing English translation, which is faithful to the German while remaining readable and accessible. The volume also contains a sample of critical editing in the form of the short text *Ein gründlicher Bericht* from Böhme's *Mysterium pansophicum*. In the absence of

a critical edition, scholars must still rely on the 1730 edition for all those writings for which no original manuscript is extant, and which are thus not included in Buddecke's edition of the *Urschriften*. Despite its brevity, this edition of *Ein gründlicher Bericht* by Günther Bonheim is thus a step in the right direction, showing that it is by engaging with the textual state of Böhme's works that new scholarship on their philosophical content can emerge. What connects the new edition of *Ein gruendlicher Bericht* and the translation of *Aurora*, presented in the same volume, is the methodological attempt to encourage the study of Boehme by concentrating the attention on language and careful textual analysis. In other words, this is a volume which is intended as an instrument, and not a filter preventing the study of the 'original Böhme': the German text is always kept in open dialogue with the English version.

"The objective", as Weeks puts it, "is to render [Böhme's work] more accessible by respecting its untranslatable qualities" (2). Weeks's detailed Introduction plays a crucial role in achieving this aim. Here, he follows a dual strategy. On the one hand, he insists that Böhme's thought must be placed in historical context in order even to begin to make sense of it. Building on his previous work (especially *Jacob Boehme: An Intellectual Biography of the Seventeenth-Century Philosopher and Mystic*, 1991), Weeks is both concise and accurate in his historical reconstruction. On the other hand, he provides the reader with explanations of the most characteristic concepts and terminological creations, explaining also the reasons for his translations. Whether or not one agrees with all of Weeks's choices as a translator, every step is carefully justified, and is coherent with the overall translating strategy.

A particularly difficult instance is the repeated use of the word *Qualifizierung*. Weeks translates this as "manifestation" in some contexts (notably in the discussion of what a quality is in chapter 1 of *Aurora*, and of how cold, air and water 'manifest themselves', 118-121); but he employs the more literal "qualification" when Böhme refers to the action of the angels (191). Despite the fact that "manifestation" appeals as being at the same time more poetic, and also, at least superficially, more understandable than "qualification", what is lost through this dual choice is the striking fact that Böhme should use exactly the same word in contexts which readers might perceive as different from each other. In fact, the action of qualifying seems to irradiate throughout creation, and through *Aurora*, on different levels: from God, to the angels, to the movement of nature itself; so that sacrificing this uniformity might be problematic.

In other cases, the translation polishes rough expressions that may bear a deeper meaning than appears at first sight. For instance, Böhme repeatedly uses the Latin word *locum*, but always in what seems to be the accusative form, independently from the actual grammatical position of this word in the sentence. Böhme's use of Latin expressions has been at the centre of much scholarly debate, which has focused on the question about the extent of his knowledge of Latin. Yet, ignorance of Latin might not be the reason why he spells *locum* rather than *locus*, as the word appears in Weeks's translation (e.g.

177). Since *locum* is often followed by the word *Raum* (space), it is possible that Böhme meant to hint at the assonance of 'um', linking together the two words: assonance is often the guiding principle for Böhme's terminological and conceptual associations, as is the case with one of his most famous 'puns', centred on the word *Qualität* and its relation to *Qual* (torment) and *quellen* (to spring) (42-43). Indeed, Weeks is careful to maintain Böhme's spelling in other cases, as with *Marcurius*, which is not simply translated as *Mercury* (as in fact Sparrow had done in his 1656 edition of *Aurora*): the syllable *ma*, rather than *me*, might point to an underlining association of words following the rules of assonance that reveal the deeper level of the Language of Nature. "*Marcurius*, or the sound" is a divine *Musica*, and is coupled with "*Salitter*, or Divine Forces" (175): the vowel 'a' is a sound connecting these terms.

At other points in the translation, the coarse physicality of Böhme's vocabulary seems far from Weeks's certainly more elegant English prose: the word *Ausgang*, for instance, is rendered with "manifestation" in the case of God (171), but with the more literal and practical "to go out" (181) with reference to the creation of the angels. Or, again, the word *Scherffe*, which literally means sharpness, is brilliantly rendered with "charged potency" (20) and "penetrating acumen" (201) – yet one wonders whether these formulations still convey the rough simplicity of the German word.

But what Weeks masterfully conveys throughout is the sense that a translator of Böhme must be constantly prepared to adapt and revise his own choices, and often to proceed tentatively and by way of intuition. Regardless of individual terminological choices, this approach is not only respectful of the "untranslatable qualities" of the text, but even seems to echo Böhme's own constant struggle to grasp with words the content of his intuition, a process which he even compares to the fight of the patriarch Jacob with the angel (206).

Weeks has laid a solid foundation for developing the study of Böhme in new directions, starting from direct textual analysis. Some of the aspects mentioned in the Introduction, for instance, are certainly deserving of more attention. Weeks's brief discussion of Böhme's conceptions of sidereal and animal spirit (*siderischer Geist/animalischer Geist*) contains an intriguing reference to Renaissance and early modern debates on the nature of the material spirits, which were sometimes viewed as a missing link between the corporality of the body and the immateriality of the mind. The direct and indirect connections between specific philosophical points in Böhme's works and other philosophical currents of his time are too often left unmentioned by scholars, as if Böhme's thought originated from a timeless intuition. Even the better-known alchemical background of some of Böhme's terms, such as *Salitter*, appears still sketchy when trying to pin down possible specific sources (the only figure considered in some detail in Weeks's Introduction, apart from Paracelsus, is the French Paracelsian Joseph Du Chesne). These and further aspects await detailed consideration, and Weeks's insightful engagement with the immensely difficult task of translating Böhme provides a model for

developing such research: it is by following closely the creation and development of Böhme's language that these historical and philosophical questions can be clearly formulated and become compelling.

Using remarkably similar terms, Coleridge and Hegel – both attentive readers of Böhme – wrote that nineteenth–century readers should not be "ashamed" of reading Böhme. In Chapter 9 of *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge writes: "Why need I be afraid? Say rather how dare I be ashamed of the Teutonic theosophist, Jacob Behmen? Many, indeed, and gross were his delusions; and such as furnish frequent and ample occasion for the triumph of the learned over the poor ignorant *shoemaker*, who had dared think for himself". Similarly, Hegel opens the section on Böhme in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* with the programmatic and bold statement: "wir haben uns seiner nicht zu schämen" ("we should not be ashamed of him [Böhme]"). Both Coleridge and Hegel imply that the cultural embarrassment would seem to originate from being caught engaging with a philosophical thought expressed in such rough formulations, or rather "uncouth notions", as Durand Hotham and Alexander Whyte would put it. Weeks's greatest achievement is perhaps that of proving that today the situation is reversed: now that we have been provided with such a vital resource as Weeks's edition, we should be ashamed if we don't read Böhme.