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The First German Philosopher: The Mysticism of Jakob Böhme as Interpreted by Hegel

translated by Richard Dixon and Raphaëlle Burns

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by Cecilia Muratori

THE EXTENT OF JAKOB BÖHME'S INFLUENCE ON COLERIDGE is still little understood; thankfully, Cecilia Muratori's study of his influence on Hegel provides an illuminating account of a contemporaneous parallel. A similar book is needed for Böhme and Coleridge. Coleridge annotated *The Works of Jacob Behmen* more than any other set of books, including the Bible. Not an unreserved Behmenist, as William Blake more surely was,[2] Coleridge's thinking nonetheless evolved with continued reference to Böhme's Christian cosmology of light and love created in the self-manifestation of a dark, wrathful God from the primal Abyss.

The title, *The First German Philosopher*, is taken from an 1811 letter where Hegel declares Böhme's 'theosophy one of the most extraordinary attempts of a deep yet uneducated man to grasp the most inward nature of the absolute being … he is actually the first German philosopher'.[3] With a closer focus on Böhme, Muratori's book complements Glenn Magee's study of the influence on Hegel of Böhme among a number of hermeticists.[4] Muratori joins such scholarship in challenging a long-held view that Hegel, in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) and subsequent works, contrasted mysticism as irrational against his own rational philosophy, with its hallmark 'rigor of the concept' (xix).

This helpful book is organized into three chapters, each with three sections, each with three subdivisions.[5] Very Behmenist, very Hegelian (Coleridgean too). The Behmenist model of a God-manifesting universe and a correspondent logic based on a triplicity of triplicities was revived by Tieck, Schelling, Coleridge, Baader, and Hegel, among others, who also adapted parallel suggestions in Kant and developments by Fichte. Muratori's book is therefore relevant background reading for deeper research on Coleridge's

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[2] Elizabeth Jessen, 'Boehme and the early English Romantics', in Ariel Hessayon and Sarah Apetrei, eds, *Introduction to Jacob Boehme: Four Centuries of Thought and Reception* (London, 2014), 180–95.

[3] Hegel, *Briefe von und an Hegel*, ed. Karl Hegel (Berlin, 1887), 315.

[4] Glenn A. Magee, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition* (Ithaca, 2001). Though Muratori does not refer to them, I also recommend Cyril O'Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel* (Albany, 1994) and Ariel Hessayon and Sarah Apetrei, eds, *An Introduction to Jacob Boehme*, which includes an essay comparing Blake's and Coleridge's reception of Böhme.

[5] This plan is slightly interrupted by one chapter having an appendix, making a fourth section, and one section having a fourth subdivision.

Trinitarian thought and method.

As obscure as it is profound, Böhme's cosmic theogony had a greater impact on Western religion, philosophy, and culture than might first appear. Böhme's writings, illuminated by flashes of philosophical insight achieved through an inventive logic of quality and intension, starkly contrast with the measured logic of quantity and extension established by his slightly older contemporaries Francis Bacon and Galileo Galilei.[6] At the threshold of modernity, states Hegel, stand two complementary and utterly opposite thinkers, Lord Bacon, with his empiricist inquiry into exteriority, which 'is in England called Philosophy, and beyond which the English have not yet advanced', and Jakob Böhme, through whom 'Philosophy first appeared in Germany' in its own character of interiority, 'the inward, mystical, godly Christian life and existence'.[7] Hegel's lectures on Böhme thus contribute, in Muratori's reading, to returning philosophy to its conceptual interiority.

Böhme was born into a relatively well-to-do peasant family in Görlitz, Upper Lusatia, and apprenticed as a shoemaker.[8] His texts, banned in their native land, first influenced Protestant and dissenting Christianity, with an initially greater impact on Dutch and English readers. George Fox and William Law were deeply transformed by Böhme's cosmic view of God-in-and-through-everything, and congregations based on his Lutheran mysticism formed around Europe. Many of these arose in England, where the Böhme-influenced Society of Friends flourished, as well as the more full-blooded followers, the Philadelphian Society and a number of groups known collectively as the Behmenists.

This is the first book-length study of Hegel's interpretation of Böhme. It progresses from 'Böhme's comeback', around 1800 (chapter 1), then proposes two divergent conceptions of mysticism in Hegel—basically empty mystification versus philosophical, speculative mysticism (chapter 2)—before concluding with Hegel's interpretation of Böhme (chapter 3). Muratori takes pains to emphasize that Böhme's is indeed a *philosophy,* grappling to express the self-realizing absolute, rather than merely wallowing in the inexpressible.

Laying the groundwork, the first chapter covers Böhme's reception during the *Frühromantik*. This begins with Tieck's chance reading of him (*c.* 1797), passing him on to F. Schlegel, Novalis, Solger, Schelling and other Jena intellectuals, as well as provoking Fichte's disapproval of this 'enthusiast' and 'dreamer' (11). Though Tieck alternated hot and cold for Böhme, his enthusiasm returned by 1817, as evidenced in his correspondence with Coleridge (12). Readers of *The Coleridge Bulletin* will be familiar with Coleridge's recalling to Tieck his being held in the spell of 'Behmen's Aurora, which', he

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[6] Bacon (1561–1626), Galileo (1564–1642), Böhme (1575–1624).

[7] Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (1805–6), vol. 3, tr. Elizabeth S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson, (London, 1896), 172, 188, 170.

[8] Scholars, including Muratori, at least in this English translation, sometimes refer to Böhme as a cobbler, but he was in fact a shoemaker (*Schumacher*, *Schuster*), a member of a highly skilled and apprenticed trade, and not merely a shoe repairer (*Flickschuster*).

said, 'I had *conjured over* at School'.[9]

Much here will be suggestive to Coleridge scholars. Attention to details such as Schlegel's use of Böhme to model 'the absolutely central role of *imagination*' and the 'ideal union between poetry and philosophy' (26–27), making him 'a precursor of the Romantics', will give Coleridgeans plenty to conjure over. In Muratori's gloss, imagination is for Böhme a godlike, 'creative force that can destroy and recreate, forming (literally) new worlds' (44). The relevance of this to Coleridgean imagination as a 'repetition in the finite mind' of God's eternal creation, that, in its secondary degree, 'dissolves, diffuses … in order to re-create', hardly needs stressing (BL I 304). By 1818, however, Coleridge notes that Böhme 'approaches so perilously near to Pantheism' and that 'I myself have partaken of the same error' (CM I 600). Sometime after this realization, Coleridge struck out his 'repetition in the finite mind' clause (BL I 304n3). Perilous proximity to pantheism, however, does not a pantheist make, and Coleridge still reads Böhme's 'Heart trembling truthward' to 'the more glorious Antecedent, which … dazzle-dims the other [sc. immanent, mingled, near-pantheist] Contemplation, like cross lights' (CM I 600).

Connecting Böhme's incipient *Naturphilosophie* with his theosophy, Muratori tightens focus on the philosophical importance of his dynamic reunification of opposites (46). I add that the oft-noted consilience between Hegel and Coleridge on this matter could well be due to a common root in Böhme. These two thinkers grew deeper in their Behmenism in originally being followers, then opponents, of the thoroughly Behmenist Schelling, whose central concepts of identity, indifference, and the unity of opposites typify his identity philosophy, and whose use of Böhme's concept of the *Ungrund* characterizes his middle period, especially his *Freedom Essay* (1809).

The originality of Hegel's encounter with Böhme stems, Muratori argues, from his 'splitting Böhme's mysticism from the context of mesmerism and theosophy' (57). Böhme's *Frühromantik* revival was primed by the general interest in mesmerism and the phenomenon of *Hellsehen*, or visionary insight bordering on mystical experience, exhibited by mesmerized patients (41). Emerging from that obscure milieu, Hegel increasingly disparaged romanticism while keeping a candle for Böhme. In Muratori's compelling account, Hegel locates Böhme's philosophical value in his imaginative struggle to express in words and images his speculative intuitions rather than float in an empty, unarticulated mysticism (64). Yet because he always feels his representation to be inadequate to the intuition, Böhme constantly 'turns it upside down again',[10] as Hegel puts it, accounting for the mingling of great depth and great confusion in the Lusatian mystic. Muratori luminously distils Hegel's analysis:

> Böhme does not possess the form of the concept (*Begriffsform*), which Hegel regards as the only one capable of communicating speculative profundity. But in Böhme's case this is not translated into … apophatic

[9] CL IV 751, to Tieck (4 July 1817).

[10] Hegel, *Briefe von und an Hegel*, ed. Karl Hegel (Berlin, 1887), 316.

> silence, but rather into an extreme … expressive creativity … such a flurry of images that nothing in his writings remains still, fixed. (64)

Similarly, Coleridge saw how the 'Concretes of the Sense' insufficiently express how 'Behmen … *beheld* all things' while he eschewed 'the mere lines and surfaces of the Understanding' (CM I 595). Unlike Hegel, however, Coleridge held that while conceptual articulation facilitates, where possible, the communication of any intuition, mere abstraction easily ensues if one loses symbolic connection with the higher, self-evident idea.

The second chapter examines Hegel's shift from early criticism of 'soporific', 'cheerless', 'alienating' mysticism in Christianity from his Tübingen Seminary student days (89–95) to his more evolved interest, a few years later, in the mystical as 'the moment in which man … grasps the meaning of being reconciled with God' (96). Muratori's central argument is that Hegel opposes *speculative mysticism*, which is philosophical, against *pseudo-mysticism*, which is 'anti-philosophical' (87). Consequently, Hegel praises Böhme as a philosophical mystic (xix, 85, 202, et passim). The distinction that Muratori imputes to Hegel exactly parallels Coleridge's between the insights of the '*Mystic*', who sees into 'ideas, or truths of universal reason', and the 'pseudo-mystic, or phantast', who 'mistakes the anomalous misgrowths of his own individuality for [such] ideas, or truths' (C&S 165). With this distinction, Muratori insulates Böhme from Hegel's 'famous attack' on mysticism in his *Phenomenology* (85).[11]

As Muratori notes (134), it is not knowledge of the absolute that Hegel repudiates in his *Phenomenology*, but 'the rapturous enthusiasm which, like a shot from a pistol, begins straight away with absolute knowledge'.[12] Thus Platonic noesis, for example, is spared this criticism, for it includes or requires the famous dialectic, an essentially mediated, logical preliminary. Similarly, Coleridge's version of intellectual intuition, or the contemplation of ideas, differs from pistol-shot mysticism in requiring aesthetic or symbolic mediation and preliminary or subsequent conceptual, discursive reflection.

What makes Böhme deeply philosophical for Hegel, Muratori makes clear, is how he 'twists and forces' Trinitarian imagery to tackle what Hegel calls the great 'problems of reason', with all reality evolving through triads in 'the very structure of dialectical movement' (155). Thus, in Muratori's analysis, German philosophy emerges from a 'mythico-religious … substrate' before Hegel brings it to 'conceptual maturity' (156). By his 1817 *Encyclopedia*, five or six years since obtaining his own complete edition of Böhme, Hegel distinguishes a 'far more complex and versatile', philosophical form of mysticism from the

[11] A minor quibble: Muratori states that Hegel 'almost certainly did not' read Böhme 'prior to 1811–12' (84), i.e. until his former student, van Ghert, sent him Böhme's complete works, the *Theosophia Revelata*. Yet a number of scholars—e.g. Robert F. Brown, David Walsh, and Glenn Magee—find in the *Phenomenology* evidence of Hegel's reading Böhme. I suggest further evidence for this view in Cheyne, *Coleridge's Contemplative Philosophy* (Oxford, 2020), 151. Hegel himself, in a letter of thanks to van Ghert, says his own copy of the *Theosophia* means he 'can now study Jakob Böhme more closely than before', implying earlier study. Indeed, in chapter 3, Muratori acknowledges that the Jena years (1801–07) 'mark the beginning of Hegel's exploration' of Böhme (201), with the later acquirement of his own copy of *Theosophia Revelata* allowing him a deeper perusal and not just his first reading.

[12] Hegel, preface to *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (1807; Oxford, 1977), 16.

'mystical irrationalism' that he derided a decade earlier in his *Phenomenology* (157).

Here Muratori reaches the nub of Hegel's Behmenist insight, pushing beyond the 'arid opposition between the rationality of thought and the esoteric irrationality of mystery' to the impulse within the mystery itself, experience of which strives for its own understanding and 'progressive emancipation' through rational, philosophical form (158). The Coleridgean reader will find here important similarities and contrasts with the British poet-philosopher. Like Hegel, Coleridge sought the light of reason, without merely basking in it, to articulate principles and an understanding of reality via the joints and ligaments of concepts in the '*discourse of reason*'[13]—he is thus no adherent of mystical irrationalism. In contrast to Hegel, however, Coleridge holds that while positive reason, the source of principles, enlightens the conceptual understanding, it must nonetheless remain ungraspable by the negative reason, the shadow, as it were, of the positive form in the understanding. Thus, for Coleridge, the higher form of

> Knowledge by Ideas is a constant process of Involution and Evolution, different from the Conceptions of the Understanding in this respect only—that no reason can be brought for the Affirmation, because it *is* reason—ex. gr. that the Soul contemplate its Principle as the Universal in itself as a Particular, i.e. that this truth is *involved,* & vice versâ, evolves itself from its Principle/ are *facts* of consciousness. (CM V 756)

Muratori argues that philosophical mysticism, for Hegel, is a speculation whose 'continual and vital movement … can only be grasped by reason (*Vernunft*) and not by intellect (*Verstand*)' (167). Thus, rather than the lazy mysticism that reclines in mystery as 'lifeless immobility' (174), Muratori finds Hegel discovering speculative mysticism in the triune, mobile nature of the Neoplatonic One that at once remains, proceeds, and folds back (173). Nor, for Hegel, as Muratori makes clear, does Plotinus 'arbitrarily create the object of … contemplation through the imagination'; his noesis is speculative, 'a way of gaining access to the heights of thought' (174).

Hegel's philosophical, or speculative, mysticism comes to light, it seems to me, as a diffraction of the unity that sublates opposites. Whereas the *Verstand* (Coleridge's 'Understanding', Muratori's 'intellect') holds opposites apart as abstractions in a suspended motion, in *Vernunft* ('Reason') this apparent separation is in reality an interpenetrative, interdependent correlation. Despite many important differences between their positions, this is a remarkable point of similarity between Coleridge and Hegel. Interestingly, both thinkers mined W. G. Tennemann's *History of Philosophy* for facts, yet both also opposed his simplistic dismissal of mysticism in the Neoplatonists and medieval thinkers such as Jean Gerson (178).[14]

Finally, the third chapter charts Hegel's deepening interpretation of Böhme.

[13] F I 156, quoting Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1.2.150.

[14] For Coleridge's defence of such philosophical mystics, see his marginalia on Tennemann, CM V.

Increasingly, Muratori argues, Hegel sees in Böhme's dynamic between positive quality and negativity a prototype of his own dialectic. More than just a study of the influence of Böhme on Hegel, the longer aim of the book is disclosed: Muratori strives, after Hegel, to rediscover Böhme as the philosopher of an interiority that emerges in the struggle towards speculation. As Muratori says, 'This struggle is violent, painful, and compels the mystic to plunge into the depth of essence, with the aim of making [it] emerge into consciousness through the power of figurative language' (205). Unlike the emptiness that typifies, in Hegel's view, romantic mysticism or yogic meditation (204–7), as immobile as the yogi's posture itself, speculative profundity is achieved for him only through a struggling, conceptual motility or else, as in Böhme, its figurative, imagistic yet still dialectic preliminary. Muratori conveys all this clearly and with aplomb in her very informative book, blessedly unmarked by outward signs of the struggle through obscure depths that its research no doubt required.