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The Holy Cabala of Changes

Jacob Böhme and Jewish Esotericism

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Abstract

This study examines affinities between kabbalah and Böhme's theosophy. There are hints in Böhme's writings of an awareness of the esoteric dimension of Judaism, regarding the mystical-magical power of the name. For Böhme, the Tetragrammaton signifies the efflux of the Word, which through Wisdom, facilitates the transition from infinite unity to finite multiplicity. The aspect of Böhme's incarnational theosophy most indebted to the kabbalah concerns the role of the imagination as the faculty wherein the body of God is reflected as the anthropos in the sophianic mirror of nature. Böhme's speculation on the seven properties parallels what kabbalists aver regarding the ten sefirotic potencies that collectively disclose the hidden essence of the infinite in the attributes of lovingkindness on the right and judgment on the left of the Tree of Life. Finally, the study assesses the conceptual correspondence between the desire of the *Ungrund* in Böhme and the jouissance of the kabbalistic *Ein Sof*.

Keywords

Tetragrammaton – Ungrund – Ein Sof – sefirot – imagination – desire

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Being absent of desire
we see the essence of the mystery.
Being full of desire
we see the boundaries of the manifestations.

DAO DE JING

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Scholars have long noted the possibility of a vestige of kabbalistic ideas in the thought of Jacob Böhme (1575–1624),¹ although determining his sources more specifically, whether textual or personal, has proven to be difficult.² It has been suggested that Böhme may have learned kabbalistic doctrines from Judah Loew ben Bezalel, better known as the Maharal of Prague, during his visit to Görlitz,³ an hypothesis that I find highly improbable given the Maharal's reluctance to expose esoteric doctrines openly even to his fellow coreligionists. The most palpable conduits are works of Christian kabbalah,⁴ the writ-

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- 1 Martensen, *Jacob Boehme*, 28; Schulze, 'Jacob Boehme'; Scholem, *Major Trends*, 237–238; Llewellyn, 'Jacob Boehmes Kosmogonie'; Häussermann, 'Theologia Emblematica'; Huber, 'Die Kabbala'; Aubrey, 'The Influence of Jacob Boehme', 16, 30, 36–37, 44–45, 281 n. 40, 291 n. 29, 295–296 n. 28; Benz, *The Mystical Sources*, 47–58; Janz, 'Jacob Boehme's Theory of Knowledge', 77–79, 194–195; Schultiz, *Jakob Böhme*; Weeks, *Boehme*, 30, 43, 106, 116, 147, 200, 204–205; Edel, 'Kabbala'; idem, *Die individuelle Substanz*; idem, 'Métaphysique'; O'Regan, *Gnostic Apocalypse*, 193–209; Schmidt-Biggemann, 'Jakob Bohme'; Stoudt, *Jacob Boehme*, 22, 88, 89 n. 17, 96, 115; Rusterholz, 'Elemente der Kabbala'; Kaennel, 'Protestantisme et cabale', 193–195; O'Donnell, 'Böhme and Hegel', 30–31; Boehme, *Aurora*, 43–44. See my own modest contribution to this question in Wolfson, *Language*, 8, 197, 471 n. 435, 485–486 n. 180, and references to other scholars cited on 423 n. 259 and 468 n. 392.
 - 2 For a different portrait of Böhme's intellectual background, see Gentzke, 'Imagining', 105 n. 13: 'Many of Böhme's key terms are rooted in previous discourses, such as Paracelsianism, alchemical discourse, Hermeticism, and the German legacy of Christian mysticism'. This description reinforces the labelling of Böhme by Hegel as the "first German philosopher" because the content of his philosophizing is "genuinely German". See Hegel, *Vorlesungen*, 94; *Lectures*, 3:19. The intent of this classification is made clear in a second passage (*Vorlesungen*, 96; *Lectures*, 193) where Hegel describes Böhme as possessing a 'solid, deep, German mind which has intercourse with what is most inward', and thus 'exercises an immense power and force in order to make use of actuality as Notion'. From Hegel's standpoint, however, this is a liability, since Böhme could not find 'an adequate representation' to convey the 'speculative thought' latent in his writings (*Vorlesungen*, 97; *Lectures*, 195). The crudeness of his thinking relates to his utilization of concrete and tangible images to express the abstract, and it is for this reason that Hegel labels Böhme a "complete barbarian" (*Vorlesungen*, 92; *Lectures*, 189). See Muratori, *The First German Philosopher*, 248–250. See also Haldane, 'Jacob Böhme', 148–150; O'Donnell, 'Böhme and Hegel', 52–53; Dourley, *Jung*, 115. The omission of the kabbalah as an influence on Böhme is all the more disconcerting since Gentzke's main thesis regarding the textual and visual performance of the Böhmean notion of the image betrays a striking phenomenological affinity to what may be elicited from the Jewish esoteric material, as I have argued in many of my studies, beginning with Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*.
 - 3 Weeks, *Boehme*, 43.
 - 4 On the relationship between Böhme and Christian kabbalah, see Weeks, *Boehme*, 205; Schmidt-Biggemann, 'The Christian Kabbala'; idem, *Philosophia Perennis*, 117–128, 187–192;

ings of Paracelsus,⁵ and perhaps Jewish mystical teachings received orally from Balthasar Walter, an acquaintance of Böhme and fellow traveler.⁶ While one might object to Hegel's characterization of Böhme's philosophy as "barbarous", insofar as the presentation of the ideas he promulgated, notwithstanding their individual profundity, methodologically lacked systematic order or thematic cohesion,⁷ this criticism applies to the intermittent use he made of the kabbalah. Ironically, Hegel's further contention that Böhme did not possess the pertinent verbal means to express speculative truth, which led him to use sensuous or imagistic terms to describe abstract concepts,⁸ can be justly attributed to the kabbalists themselves; that is, one is struck by the preponderant use that kabbalists have made of corporeal images—and especially the imaginal constitution of the divine as a human form, the macroanthropos or the primal Adam, which is also identified as the Tetragrammaton, the mystical essence of the Torah—to depict the spiritual potencies that reveal the inherently concealed light of the infinite. In the visionary thinking of the kabbalist, attested in Böhme, words express the inexpressible and images disclose the imageless.⁹

Mystery of the Tetragrammaton and the Powers of God

I will commence my examination by taking stock of the occasional hints in Böhme's writings that suggest he was aware of the esoteric dimension of Judaism. I will begin with the preface to the *Clavis* (1624). In the context of discussing the difficulty to communicate natural things linguistically, Böhme remarks: 'Also the wise Heathens and Jews have hid the deep Ground of Nature under such Words, as having well understood that the Knowledge of Nature is not for every one, but it belongs to those only, whom God by Nature has chosen for it'.¹⁰ In the continuation, Böhme challenges the nexus between esotericism and apophaticism that he ascribes to the Heathen and the Jew, in their attempt

Penman, 'Boehme's Intellectual Networks', 66–71. For a dissenting view, see Faivre, *Theosophy*, 7.

5 This channel of influence was already noted by Hegel, *Vorlesungen*, 94; *Lectures*, 3:191. See Muratori, *The First German Philosopher*, 42–56, 222–228; Gilly, 'Das Bekenntnis', 404–409.

6 Bailey, *Milton and Jakob Boehme*, 96; Weeks, *Boehme*, 30; Penman, 'A Second Christian Rosenkreuz'.

7 Hegel, *Vorlesungen*, 94, 98; *Lectures*, 3:191–192, 195–196.

8 Hegel, *Vorlesungen*, 95; *Lectures*, 3:192–193.

9 Wolfson, *Language*, 190–260.

10 Boehme, *The Key*, 17; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 9:77.

to conceal the knowledge of nature, by noting that ‘when God reveals his Mysteries to any Man, he then also brings him into a Mind and Capacity how to express them, as God knows to be most necessary and profitable in every Age’.¹¹ This passage is somewhat inconsistent with other passages in Böhme’s oeuvre where he upholds the apophatic and draws a connection between humility and learned ignorance.¹² Be that as it may, what is most important for our purposes is to underscore that in the aforementioned passage Böhme displays awareness of the critical role of esoteric wisdom in the Jewish tradition, even though it is cast polemically.¹³

Significantly, in the same work, reference is made to the following rabbinic tradition concerning the Tetragrammaton:

The Ancient Rabins among the *Jews* have partly understood it, for they have said, that this Name is the Highest, and most Holy Name of God; by which they understand the working Deity in Sense: and it is true, for in this working sense lies the true life of all things in Time and Eternity, in the Ground [*Grund*] and Abyss [*Ungrund*]; and it is God himself, namely the Divine working Perceptibility [*Empfindlichkeit*], Sensation [*Findlichkeit*], Invention, Science [*Wissenschaft*],¹⁴ and Love [*Liebe*]; that is, the true understanding in the working unity, from which the five senses of the

11 Boehme, *The Key*, 17; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 9:77.

12 See, for example, *De Æquanimitate oder Von der wahren Gelassenheit* (1622), one of the texts included in the collection *Der Weg zu Christo*, in *Sämtliche Schriften*, 4:91; *The Way to Christ*, 119–120.

13 It behooves me to note that in spite of Böhme’s attraction to and appropriation of kabbalistic theosophy, one can discover scattered in his published work negative comments about Judaism. For example, see Boehme, *Aurora*, 131, 163, 263, 319, 321, 323, 325, 661, 663. In one notable passage, Böhme insists that Christian, Jew, Turk, and Heathen are all equally capable of overcoming the pernicious effect of the devil (*Aurora*, 383), but the ostensible egalitarianism does not alleviate the derogatory comments that distinguish the Christian from the other three types of human beings. Compare the ridicule of the Jewish dietary law in Jacob Boehme, *The High and Deep Searching*, 224–225; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 3:147. See *ibid.*, 239, where the Pharisees are labeled the ‘ministers of the dragon,’ who pretended deceitfully to be the ‘ministers of God.’ The example of Böhme proves that it is possible for a thinker to be influenced, directly or indirectly, by a tradition, while at the same time maligning the people who sociologically uphold that tradition.

14 In the 1647 translation of John Sparrow, *The Clavis or Key, or An Exposition of Some Principall Matters, and Words in the Writings of Jacob Behmen*, printed in *The Works of Jacob Behmen*, 2:7, there is a marginal note ‘finding knowledge’, which is added because the expression “invention, science” translates the one word *Wissenschaft*.

true Life spring. Each Letter in this Name intimates to us a peculiar virtue [Kraft] and working [Wirckung], that is, a Form in the working Power.¹⁵

Just as the kabbalists link the sefirotic potencies to the letters of the Tetragrammaton, Böhme postulates that each letter alludes to a different working power of the divine. Collectively, these powers relate to the attributes allied with the Ground or the Abyss—Perceptibility, Sensation, Science, and Love—which functionally parallel the role of the *sefirot* in relation to *Ein Sof*. In the continuation of the passage, Böhme identifies in more detail the characteristics correlated with the various letters of the name: J is the effluence of the Eternal indivisible unity; E is the threefold I, the Trinity comprised within the unity; H is the Word that comes forth from the breathing of the Trinity; O is the circumference or the Son of God, who speaks from the compressed Delight of the Power and Virtue; v is the joyful effluence of the breathing, the proceeding of the Spirit of God; and A is the Wisdom that issues from the power and virtue, the place wherein the Trinity is manifest.¹⁶ It is likely that Böhme began his explication by saying the Jews have only ‘partly understood it’ because the rabbis did not discern the trinitarian implications of the name. Summarizing his Christological interpretation, Böhme notes, ‘This Name is nothing else but a speaking forth [Aussprechen] ... of the Threefold working of the Holy Trinity in the unity of God. Read further of this in the Explanation of the Table of the three Principles of the Divine Manifestation.’¹⁷ The kabbalistic underpinning here is evident: the Tetragrammaton manifests the unmanifest in the form of the ten divine potencies arrayed in the triadic division of the right, left, and central columns of the Tree of Life. In Böhme’s appropriation, the name of the nameless is the speaking forth of the unity of God that assumes the form of the Trinity.

The bibliographical instruction offered to the reader at the end of the passage is a reference to *Tabulae principiorum* (1624). In that treatise, Böhme augments his Christian adaptation of the kabbalistic tradition in the description of the table marked by the Tetragrammaton:

In this Table is considered the Efflux [*der Ausfluss*] of the eternal divine WORD, how the WORD through Wisdom, brings itself from Unity [*Einheit*] into Separation [*Schiedlichkeit*] and Multiplicity [*Vielfältigung*], as well as in the eternal Nature and Creature, according to which, God calls himself

15 Boehme, *The Key*, 22; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 9:81–82.

16 Boehme, *The Key*, 22–23; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 9:82.

17 Boehme, *The Key*, 23; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 9:82.

an angry, jealous God, and a consuming Fire, as well as a merciful God, wherein is understood, the Foundation of Angels and Souls, and how they may receive Salvation or Damnation.¹⁸

I will return in the next section to the dual deportment of the divine as merciful and wrathful. What needs to be emphasized here is the kabbalistic resonance of Böhme's assertion that the Tetragrammaton signifies the efflux of the Word, which through Wisdom facilitates the transition from the indiscriminate unity of the infinite to the discriminate multiplicity of finite nature. Elucidating the implications of his Christological appropriation of the Jewish esoteric doctrine, Böhme writes in a second passage from this work:

In this Table is also manifested, how the holy Name of the eternal Power, with the Knowledge hereof, from Eternity to Eternity, brings itself into Properties in Nature, to eternal Light and Darkness, and how the Word of Breathing forth brings itself into a Subject, and how Self-will and Acceptation of Properties arise in the Subject, wherein two Essences are always understood as God's own Effluence, and then the Properties own Acceptation in the Free-Will, in which Acceptation, another external Kind of Subject is understood, whereby the Unity, in its Effluence, becomes more external, and thereby the eternal Love brings itself into a Sensibility, and like fiery Flame, as in the Working of divine Power.¹⁹

The more specific influence of the Christian kabbalistic understanding of the Tetragrammaton and its relationship to Jesus seems to be at play as well in the following passage from Böhme's *De electione gratiae* (1623): 'From eternity the name Jesus lay in man, viz. in the likeness [*Gleichnis*] of God, in an immovable love. ... Adam before his fall had the divine light from Jehovah, that is, from the one God in which the high name Jesus stood hidden. Not that it was concealed in God, but in the creature, that is to say, in the attraction to the creature.'²⁰ The

18 Jacob Böhme, *Four Tables of Divine Revelation*, in *The Works of Jacob Behmen*, 3:9; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 9:62. On the anthropomorphic characterization of the language of God as alluding to 'a Great Secret' (*ein Groß geheimnis*), see Boehme, *Aurora*, 536–537, and the summation on 538–539: 'But God's word, which he spoke then in terms of force, encompassed heavens and earth and the heaven of all heavens, indeed the entire divinity [*Gottheit*] itself.'

19 Böhme, *Four Tables*, 3:11; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 9:62.

20 Boehme, *De Electione Gratiae and Quaestiones Theosophicae*, 107–108; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 6:88. On Böhme and the Christian kabbalah, see references above, n. 4.

idea that the name of Jesus was secreted in the aspect of God marked as the attraction to the creature, that is, the potency of the infinite to become finite, corresponds to the kabbalistic doctrine of the name hidden in the nameless, the potential of the limitless to become limited, as the imageless is constellated into the image of the incarnate word.

The kabbalah is invoked overtly by Böhme in the *Quaestiones Theosophicae* (1624). The specific reference is to the magical power of the Tetragrammaton and the need to conceal it from the unworthy. In his description of the sixth property of the emanated will, which is identified, inter alia, with the qualities of sound (*Hall*), tone (*Schall*), understanding (*Verständnis*), speech (*Rede*), and distinction (*Unterscheiden*), or the true understanding (*der wahre Verstand*), Böhme writes:

In this sixth property [*Eigenschaft*] stand the holy names, that is, the Divine powers in the opening of the Unity, in the working and willing. And they stand in the two fires at the same time, viz. in the fire of natural motion and in the fire of the flame of love. And here we have the wonder-working Word in its operation. For the great name of God TETRAGRAMMATON (JeHoVaH) is here the centre of the wonders of God, and it works in both the central fires. This name the evil spirits, in their transmutation according to the centre of the fire's nature, do misuse. And the ground of all cabala and magic [*der Grund der ganzen Cabbala und Magie*] is contained in this principle, these being the active powers whereby the imperceptible co-works in the perceptible. And here the law of Moses forbids misusing this principle on pain of eternal punishment, as may be seen in the ten commandments. For our fellow allies enough has been said, and for the godless [*Gottlosen*] a strong bar lies before it.²¹

Once again, the influence of kabbalistic theosophy is readily apparent in the identification of the holy names as divine powers (*die Göttlichen Kräfte*) related to the opening of the unity (*Aufthun der Einheit*); that is, the proliferation of the one into the many through the incitement of the infinite will, or as Böhme puts it, the powers by which the imperceptible is activated in the perceptible (*das Unempfindliche in dem Empfindlichen mitwirkt*). The fragmentation of that unity into a plurality is connected both to the Word, which acts in the fire of love and in the fire of nature, and to the Tetragrammaton, the ground of all kab-

21 Boehme, *De Electione Gratiae and Quaestiones Theosophicae*, 286–287 (translation slightly modified); *Sämtliche Schriften*, 9:12–13.

balah and magic. From Böhme's perspective these are indistinguishable, and hence even the theosophical components, which he adopts from Jewish esotericism, are contextualized within a magical framework. This may also explain Böhme's embrace of the locution 'Deep hidden Magia of God' (*der tiefen verborgenen Magia Gottes*) to refer to the eternal wisdom.²² The *magia* of God is the *arcanum* or the *mysterium* that denotes knowledge of the supernatural but also the spiritual potency in virtue of which dreams are configured as the appearance that becomes as the reality that is apparent,²³ the 'mother of eternity' that is the 'great mystery' of the will that 'brings itself by the imagination of the desireful hunger into being. It is the original state of Nature. Its desire makes an imagination [*Einbildung*], and imagination ... is only the will of desire.'²⁴ I shall return to the matter of desire below, but suffice it here to note that, for Böhme, the apposition of kabbalah and magic underscores the imaginal potency of the former by means of which the immaterial is materialized.

Incarnation, Angelic Body, and the Sophianic Mirror of Imagination

Hegel already suggested that Böhme's speculation on the first man and Christ bears affinity with the kabbalistic doctrine of Adam Qadmon and the Neoplatonic Logos.²⁵ In my estimation, the aspect of Böhme's incarnational theosophy that is most indebted to the kabbalah concerns the role he assigns to the imagination as the faculty wherein and whereby the body of God—the divine flesh (*die Göttliche Fleisch*)²⁶—is reflected and refracted as the image of an anthropos in the speculum of divine wisdom, the sophianic mirror of nature.²⁷ Support for this conjecture may be culled from the following comment in the *Clavis*:

The Wisdom is the Great Mystery of the Divine Nature; for in her, the Powers, Colours, and Virtues are made manifest; in her is the variation of

22 Böhme, *The Treatise of the Incarnation*, in *The Works of Jacob Behmen*, 2:19; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 4:10. On the terms *magia* and *magus* in Böhme's writings, see the introduction of Weeks in Boehme, *Aurora*, 57–58.

23 Böhme, *Forty Questions*, in *The Works of Jacob Behmen*, 2:87; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 3:130.

24 Böhme, *Six Mystical Points*, in Boehme, *Six Theosophic Points*, 131; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 4:93.

25 Muratori, *The First German Philosopher*, 279.

26 Böhme, *Six Mystical Points*, 133; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 4:94.

27 Faivre, *Theosophy*, 138–143.

the power and virtue, namely the understanding; she is the Divine understanding, that is, the Divine vision [*Beschaulichkeit*], wherein the Unity is manifest. She is the true Divine Chaos, wherein all things lie, namely a Divine Imagination, in which the *Ideas* of Angels and Souls have been seen from Eternity, in a Divine Type and Resemblance [*Ebenbildniss*]; yet not then as Creatures, but in resemblance [*Gegenwurf*], as when a man beholds his face in a Glass [*Spiegel*]: therefore the Angelical and human *Idea* flowed from the wisdom, and was formed into an Image [*Bilde*], as *Moses* says, God created Man in his Image, that is, he created the body, and breathed into it the breath of the Divine Effluence, of Divine Knowledge, from all the Three Principles of the Divine Manifestation.²⁸

A similar theme is noted in the reference to the kabbalah in a second passage from the *Quaestiones Theosophicae*:

For what the angels will and desire is by their imagination brought into shape and forms [*das wird durch ihre Imaginirung in Bildung und Formen gebracht*], which forms are pure ideas [*eitel Ideen*]. In manner as the Divine powers have shaped themselves into such ideas before the creation of the angels, so is their after-modelling [*Nachmodellung*]. And herein lies the holy cabala of changes [*die heilige Cabbala der Veränderungen*], and the great kingdom of joy [*die grosse Freudenreich*], in which the Divine wisdom and knowledge is fashioned and shaped by the spirits of the central fire and light. And there is such a joy of cognition therein, that for great joy and knowledge they bow and humble themselves eternally before such majesty, that the No [*das Nein*] may not get the dominion in them, and they be deprived of such glory.²⁹

Through the imagination the angels bring their desires into the form of pure ideas. The process is called “after-modeling,”³⁰ since it mimics the personifi-

28 Boehme, *The Key*, 23–24 (emphasis in original); *Sämtliche Schriften*, 9:82–83. The word *Gegenwurf*, translated as “resemblance,” literally denotes opposition. To say that creation is the image in which God is beheld implies that, as the reflection in the mirror, it is a counter-force, the locus of alterity, and hence it is analogous to Böhme’s idea of the contra-will (*Wiederwille*).

29 Boehme, *De Electione Gratiae and Quaestiones Theosophicae*, 298–299; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 9:21.

30 On the Boehmian idea of the after-modeling of the angelic world, see Peip, *Jakob Böhme*, 45, and sources cited there in n. 2.

cation of the divine powers. Curiously, Böhme glosses this process with the declaration *herein lies the holy cabala of changes*. I am not familiar with any other source (Jewish or Christian) that utilizes this expression, but from the context it can be assumed that the intent is to demarcate the metamorphosis of the divine powers into angelic forms that collectively constitute the “great kingdom of joy” in which the divine wisdom and knowledge are molded into an image by the spirits of fire and light. As Böhme put it in an earlier treatise, *De Incarnatione Verbi* (1620):

And so the Image [*Bildniss*] of Angels and Men have been from Eternity discovered in the *Divine property* in God’s wisdom, as also, in the *property* of the *fierce wrath*, the Devil has been, but not in the holy Light-flaming property. But yet in *no Image* [*Bilde*], or Being [*Wesen*], but in the Way [*Art*], as in a deep sense, a thought darts up, and is brought before its own Looking-Glass of the *Mind* [*Spigel des Gemüths*], where in the Mind often a thing appears, that is not in Being. Thus have the two Genetrixes [*Gebärerin*], viz the *fierce wrath* in the Fire, and also the *Love* in the Meekness or Light, set their Model in the wisdom. Where then the Heart of God in the Love has longed to Create this Model into an Angelical Image, out of the Divine substantiality [*aus Göttlicher Wesenheit*], that it should be a Similitude and Image of the Deity [*Gleichniss und Bilde der Gottheit*], and should dwell in the wisdom of God, to *fulfill* the longing of the Deity, and to the Eternal rejoicing of the Divine Kingdom of Joy.³¹

Discernible in Böhme’s kingdom of joy is an echo of the kabbalistic symbol of *Malkhut*, which is also closely affiliated with the imaginal realm of surrounding angels, embodied in the form of the glorious angel, or the angel of glory, sometimes identified as Metatron, *sar ha-panim*, decoded hyperliterally as the archon of the faces, that is, the angel that displays the double countenance of judgment and mercy.³²

31 Böhme, *The Treatise of the Incarnation*, in *The Works of Jacob Behmen*, 2:19 (emphasis in original); *Sämtliche Schriften*, 4:10–11. I have slightly modified the translation.

32 Regarding the identification of *Shekhinah* as the glorious angel, or Metatron, see Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 184 n. 247, 223–226, 256, 258, 261–263, 313 n. 162, 334. On the attribution of the divine attributes of judgment and mercy to the twofold nature of *Shekhinah* and Metatron, see Wolfson, *op. cit.*, 310 n. 147. For the appropriation of this doctrine in Abulafia’s prophetic kabbalah, see Wolfson, ‘Kenotic Overflow’, 147–150; *idem*, ‘Textual Flesh’, 212–217.

Moreover, as the kabbalists universally applied to the *sefirot* the dictum of *Sefer Yeşirah* that ‘their end is fixed in their beginning and their beginning in their end’,³³ so Böhme writes in the *Aurora, Morgen Röte im auffgang* (1612) about the divine powers, which jointly constitute the kingdom of joy, that ‘the last gives birth to the first, as well as the first to the last’.³⁴ In the manner that the Godhead is without beginning or end, so the potencies must be seen *sub specie aeternitatis*.³⁵ As Böhme puts it in another passage from this treatise with respect to the idea of the seven spirits (*die Siben Geister*) or divine forces (*der Göttlichen krefften*), the seven properties (*Eigenschaften*) that make up the eternal nature of God’s body, also identified as the princes of angels (*die Fürsten der Engel*) that correspond to the seven planetary spheres,³⁶ ‘All seven spirits are born in one another, each perpetually giving birth to the other. None is the first nor is any the last, for the last generates the first, as the first the second, third, fourth, to the end. ... For all seven are equally eternal and none has a beginning or an end’.³⁷ Reiterating this crucial theosophic point in the *Clavis*, Böhme writes, ‘Now these are the seven properties in one only ground; and all seven are equally eternal without beginning; none of them can be accounted the first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, or last; for they are equally eternal without beginning, and have also one eternal beginning from the Unity of God’.³⁸ Analogously, the sefirotic gradations are generated in such a way that a linear or hierarchical order is disrupted; kabbalists would surely assent to Böhme’s allegation that each one of the seven properties is distinctive and yet part of an indivisible whole, exceptional and yet interchangeable.³⁹

In a description of the seven properties from the *Mysterium Magnum* (1623), the kabbalistic reverberation is even more pronounced:

All seven are but as one; and none is the first, second or last; for the last is again the first. As the first introduceth itself into a spiritual essence, even so the last introduceth itself into a corporeal essence; the last is the body of the first. We must speak thus in part, in order to write it down

33 Hayman, *Sefer Yeşira*, § 6, 74.

34 Boehme, *Aurora*, 690–691.

35 Gibbons, *Gender*, 91.

36 Boehme, *Aurora*, 152–153. See *ibid.*, 232–233, 236–237. Böhme’s seven spirits of God were compared to the kabbalistic *sefirot* by Aubrey, ‘The Influence’, 44–45.

37 Boehme, *Aurora*, 284–285.

38 Boehme, *The Key*, 31; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 9:96.

39 Boehme, *Aurora*, 692–693.

and present it to the sense for the consideration of the Reader: the seven forms are altogether only the manifestation of God, according to love and anger, eternity and time.⁴⁰

It is not uncommon for kabbalists to divide the divine realm into the upper three emanations and the lower seven. Böhme, I suggest, obfuscated this distinction and viewed divinity as being constituted by seven qualities that are also manifest in creation.⁴¹ What Böhme attributes to the seven properties is parallel to what kabbalists aver with regard to the ten sefirotic potencies that collectively disclose the hidden essence of the infinite in the two attributes of lovingkindness on the right and judgment on the left. Particularly relevant is Böhme's portrayal of the emanation of the seven source-spirits⁴² as moving from the spiritual essence of the first to the corporeal essence of the last to the point that the last is considered to be the embodiment of the spirit of the first. The kabbalistic pleroma similarly is depicted Neoplatonically as a gradual condensation of the light from the spiritual to the corporeal. However, like Böhme, the kabbalists reverse the order such that the first is the last and the last the first. In kabbalistic parlance, the tenth and lowest of the *sefirot*, *Malkhut*, is elevated to the status of the first and highest, *Keter*, and their ontological juxtaposition is captured in the grammatical construct *keter malkhut*, the crown of kingship, the former symbolic of and therefore subservient to the latter.

The two predominant geometric arrangements of the divine potencies in kabbalistic literature are the linear or hierarchical, the so-called tree of the emanations (*ilan ha-sefirot*), and the ten concentric circles whose nucleus is the light of the infinite. In a pattern strikingly similar to the second of these options, Böhme compares the seven spirits of God to seven wheels, which are

positioned within the other, so that in all seven there could be motion forward and backward and crosswise without any reversal. ... And the seven would perpetually give birth or impetus to the hub in the middle by their revolution so that the hub would always freely stand still without alteration, whether the wheels moved forward or backward or sideways, upward or downward. ... Now the wheel has seven wheels in one another,

40 Boehme, *Mysterium Magnum*, 33–34; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 7:34.

41 Boehme, *Mysterium Magnum*, 38; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 7:39. Compare Boehme, *Aurora*, 280–281. And see Martensen, *Jacob Boehme*, 74: 'Böhme agrees with the Kabbala, which asserts in God seven Natural Properties, the last of which is the Kingdom (*Malkuth*): See *ibid.*, 192.

42 Boehme, *Aurora*, 282–283.

and a single hub which attaches to all seven wheels. All seven move on the same axis. Thus God is a unitary God with seven spirits within one another, with one always generating the others; yet all are but a single God, just as all seven wheels are one wheel.⁴³

Correlating his kabbalistically-inflected theosophy with the Christian doctrine of the trinity of the divine, Böhme notes that the seven wheels symbolize the seven spirits of the Father, the hub, which is the heart or innermost corpus, signifies the Son, and the spokes that emanate from the hub represent the Holy Spirit.⁴⁴ Comparable to the gnosis of the kabbalah, there is no conflict in Böhme between the oneness of God and positing multiple sefirotic potencies—the unity is constituted by the manifold that is nature. As Böhme writes in the *Aurora*, ‘It is only in the Holy Spirit which is in God, and indeed only in the whole of nature from which all things have arisen, that you can search into the entire body of God which is nature, and indeed into the Holy Trinity itself. For the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Holy Trinity. It prevails in the entire body of God, that is, in All of Nature.’⁴⁵

Böhme’s view has been classified by scholars as a form of pantheism or panentheism, but it is not obvious to me that either of these words satisfactorily captures the import of his view that nature is the body of God. Closer to the cadence of his thought is the cosmological view that may be elicited from kabbalistic sources based on the supposition that all that exists in the world is a disclosure of the light of the infinite, but insofar as that light is hidden, in each and every disclosure there is an occlusion, an idea that conceptually is parallel to the Neoplatonic view that each stage in the procession from the originative monad is simultaneously a receding, and hence the whole of the emanation can be characterized by diminishing degrees of perfection and likeness to the One, that is, a devolution from similarity to dissimilarity.⁴⁶ Scholem,

43 Ibid., 394–399.

44 Ibid., 396–399. On the seven spirits in the wheel, see Martin, ‘Schöpfung’, 87–93. I am grateful to the author for drawing my attention to her essay.

45 Boehme, *Aurora*, 130–131.

46 Proclus, *The Elements*, 60–61 (prop. 64). In the technical language used by Proclus, op. cit., 62–63: ‘But all procession advances through similars [ὁμοίων] until it reaches the wholly dissimilar [ἀνομοίων]. The matter is elaborated in slightly different terminology in Proclus, *Commentary*, 34–35. See *ibid.*, 34 n. 22, where mention is made of the concept of the similarity of dissimilarity or the similitude of dissimilitude (ἀνόμοιος ὁμοιότης) in Proclus’s *Platonic Theology*, 1.12. See Proclus, *Théologie Platonicienne*, 1:57. On the oxymoron ἀνόμοιον ὁμοιότητα, see the supplementary notes in Proclus, *Théologie Platonicienne*, 1:144–

no doubt influenced by an articulation of this sort, emphasized that the inceptual *šimšum*, the withdrawal of the infinite from itself to create a space within itself devoid of itself, is not a one-time event but rather constantly repeats itself,⁴⁷ the dialectic of bestowing and withholding that corresponds to the ‘two tendencies of perpetual ebb and flow’, which ‘continue to act and react upon each other. Just as the human organism exists through the double process of inhaling and exhaling and the one cannot be conceived without the other, so also the whole of Creation constitutes a gigantic process of divine inhalation and exhalation.’⁴⁸ I would modify Scholem’s view by noting that it is not only that the “perpetual tension” of the cosmic process entails that every expansion (*hitpashshetut*) is preceded by withdrawal (*histallequt*), but rather, more paradoxically, that the expansion is itself a withdrawal in the same manner that every disclosure (*gilluy*) is a concealment (*he’lem*), since what is disclosed is the concealment and the concealment cannot be disclosed as concealment unless it is concealed. The concentration of the limitless to a delimited space is perforce an attenuation of the limitlessness. Every creative act of the infinite must be seen through the prism of this twofold process, although I must emphasize again that the two processes occur contemporaneously and not consecutively.

The same paradox should be applied to the relationship of the divine to nature: the constriction of infinity in the form of the finite is commensurate to the extension of the finite into the formlessness of infinity. Alternately expressed, the spatio-temporal world is the disclosure of the light of *Ein Sof* to the extent that the light is concealed therein, and hence the meontological nothingness of infinity becomes the ontic somethingness of finitude just as the ontic somethingness of finitude is restored to the meontological nothingness of infinity. The aforementioned terms—pantheism and panentheism, and I might add, acosmism—do not adequately express the depth of the secret enunciated by the kabbalistic masters: the cosmos both is and is not divinity, infinity both is and is not revealed by the finite, revealed as that which is not revealed and not revealed as that which is revealed. The transcendent, therefore, is present in the world to the degree that it is absent from the world; indeed, the transcendent is present precisely as that which is absent. My contention is that, for Böhme as

145. In the final analysis, we are justified to ask if anything can be meaningfully marked as wholly dissimilar in a system wherein all things proceed from an original monad and thus are conjoined with or participate in the imparticipable one.

47. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 261; idem, *On Jews and Judaism*, 283. Concerning Scholem’s approach to the doctrine of *šimšum*, see Wohlfarth, ‘Haarscharf’.

48. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 263. See Wolfson, ‘Divine Suffering’, 114–115.

well, the apophatic entanglement⁴⁹ of God and world generates the paradox of the identity and difference between the divine and nature: nature is God insofar as God is not nature.

Ungrund, Theopoetic Desire, and Autogenesis of the Other

A number of scholars have drawn attention to the similarity of the *Ungrund* in Böhme's theosophy and the kabbalistic *Ein Sof*.⁵⁰ For my purposes, I would like to assess that conceptual correspondence by focusing on the philosophical problem of alterity and the all-encompassing infinite ground. Simply put, how does one account for difference when the infinite comprises even its own opposite as the nonidentity of its selfsame identity? Expressed somewhat more technically, kabbalists conceive of infinity as the absolute negation of the negation of the absolute, the nondifferentiated indifference wherein all difference is annihilated, the pure void, neither nothing nor something, oscillating between the presence of absence and the absence of presence. The infinite, on this score, is the nothingness that cannot be constricted by either images of affirmation or negation, the inchoate essence that has no essence, the being that is otherwise to the otherwise than being.⁵¹ Appropriating the language that Derrida deployed to summarize the view of Levinas, we can refer to *Ein Sof* as the "infinitely-other", which 'cannot be bound by a concept, cannot be thought on the basis of a horizon; for a horizon is always a horizon of the same, the elementary unity within which eruptions and surprises are always welcomed by understanding and recognized'.⁵² However, inasmuch as *Ein Sof* is portrayed as the source in which all things are contained, it follows that it must comprehend the other as part of itself. Difference, accordingly, is incorporated in the sameness of the other that is differently the same, and hence the oneness of being would have to embrace the truth that being is not one.

49 The expression is used by Keller, *Cloud*, 333 n. 75, in her gloss on my comment that, for Nicholas of Cusa, God both is and is not identical with the world. See Wolfson, *Language*, 30–31.

50 Martensen, *Jacob Boehme*, 123; Paslick, 'The Ontological Context', 409–413; Schulitz, *Jakob Böhme*, 47–82; Deghaye, *De Paracelse à Thomas Mann*, 83–84, 120–121; Hessayon, 'Boehme's Life', 31; Aubrey, 'The Influence', 36–37; Schmidt-Biggemann, *Philosophia Perennis*, 119.

51 Wolfson, *Giving*, 78.

52 Derrida, *Writing*, 95.

In an alternate terminological register, the philosophical quandary relates to the problem of evil.⁵³ If we must say with respect to the infinite, as the thirteenth-century kabbalist, Azriel of Gerona, put it, there is nothing outside it (*ein huš mimmennu*),⁵⁴ then darkness itself is a facet of light, or in the language of the *Idra Rabba*, one of the most recondite sections of the zoharic compilation, the supreme aspect of the divine is “entirely right”,⁵⁵ which is to say, the left is not accorded autonomy because it is included within the right.⁵⁶ The eschatological implication of this orientation would necessitate the restoration of the unholy to the holy. At times, the ideal of restitution is affirmed by kabbalists, but at other times, and frequently by the same individuals, the messianic goal is depicted as the eradication of the demonic. Even the kabbalists, who deliberately sought to avoid the problem of dualism, and thus emphasized that the realm of impurity derives from the realm of purity rather than being coeval with it, are nonetheless challenged by the inference that evil is an inherent property of the Godhead.

We find a similar struggle between the monistic and dualistic approaches to evil in Böhme. Let me begin with the formulation offered by him in *Aurora*, after he presents a parable wherein the garden signifies the world, the field nature, the trunk of the tree the stars, the branches the elements, the fruits the human beings, and the sap the clear divinity (*die klare Gottheit*):

Yet nature possesses two qualities and will do so until the Judgment of God: a pleasing, good, celestial, and holy one and a fierce, hellish, and thirsty one. Now the good quality perpetually manifests, laboring as hard as it can to bring forth good fruit. In it the Holy Spirit prevails lending it sap and life. The evil quality likewise surges and drives as hard as it can to

53 Many scholars have discussed the role of evil in kabbalistic symbolism. I will mention here some representative studies: Tishby, *The Doctrine of Evil*; idem, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, 447–474; Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape*, 56–87; Idel, ‘The Evil Thought’; idem, *Il male primordiale*; Wolfson, ‘Left Contained’; and ‘Light Through Darkness’ (revised versions appear in Wolfson, *Luminal Darkness*, 1–55); Farber-Ginat, ‘The Shell’; Jacobson, ‘The Problem of Evil’; Har-Shefi, *The Myth of the Edomite Kings*; Berman, ‘Improper Twins’; Yisraeli, ‘Cain’.

54 Azriel of Gerona, *Be’ur Eser Sefirot*, 81.

55 *Zohar* 3:129a. Concerning this passage, see Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 218–219, and more recently, Hellner-Eshed, *Seekers of the Face*, 189.

56 The implication of the zoharic text is made explicit by Viṭal, *Eṣ Ḥayyim*, 13:13, 68c: ‘Thus it is known that in *Attiqa Qaddisha* there is no left for it is entirely right as is mentioned in the *Idra* of *Naso*, and the two aspects are considered as one’.

yield evil fruit. The devil lends it sap and hellish fire. Both these qualities are in the tree of nature, and human beings have been made out of the tree ... This means that if the human being lifts his spirit into the divinity, the Holy Spirit surges and qualifies in him; but if he allows his spirit to descend into this world, into the lust for evil, then what prevails in him is the devil and his hellish sap.⁵⁷

The antithetical properties are ascribed to nature, but the latter, as Böhme makes explicit, 'cannot be distinguished from the powers of God. It is all a single body. The divinity, which is the holy power of the heart of God, is born in nature'.⁵⁸ From the identification of nature and the body of God—in some contexts, *natura* is aligned more specifically with the seventh source spirit⁵⁹—we should assume that both forces are equally part of the divine economy. Reminiscent of the kabbalistic depiction of *Ein Sof*, Böhme writes: 'The father is everything and every force abides in the father: he is the beginning and the end of all things; and there is nothing outside of him [*vnd ausser ihm ist nichts*]. Moreover, everything that has come into being has arisen from the father. ... All things must have their cause or root. Otherwise there would be nothing'.⁶⁰ From this it logically follows that what is seemingly in conflict with the divine must be part of its essence. In another passage of this treatise, Böhme identifies the 'devil's eternal inflamed dwelling of anger' as God's wrath.⁶¹ The affinity between Böhme's identifying the origin of evil as God's rage and the kabbalistic symbolism concerning the divine quality of judgement on the left whence the demonic realm comes to be was duly noted by Scholem.⁶² I would bolster this comparison by noting that Böhme's view that the creative process is sparked by the dark core of divinity, insofar as the devouring fire evolves from the desire (*Begierde*) and hunger of the *Ungrund* to give itself a ground,⁶³ corresponds precisely to the kabbalistic presumption that the element of constraint in the Godhead fosters the munificence of love, that feminine judgment arouses masculine grace.

The eternal will of the abyss, as Böhme put it in *Sex puncta theosophica* (1620), 'desires to manifest itself from its own ground in the light of Majesty',

57 Boehme, *Aurora*, 78–79.

58 Ibid., 690–691.

59 Ibid., 384–385.

60 Ibid., 150–151.

61 Ibid., 538–539.

62 Scholem, *Major Trends*, 237.

63 Boehme, *Mysterium Magnum*, 9; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 7:12.

a desire that draws itself as there is nothing extrinsic that can be drawn,⁶⁴ the craving (*Sucht*) that stimulates the becoming of the other within the center of the will as the contra-will (*Widerwille*).⁶⁵ In his *Ein gründlicher Bericht* (1620) on the celestial and terrestrial mysteries, Böhme explicated the theme of the will of the *Ungrund* to give itself a ground—what Ray L. Hart felicitously has called the “abyssal indeterminate desire”⁶⁶—in more detail:

The abyss is an eternal nothing, which nonetheless fashions an eternal beginning that amounts to a craving. For the nothing is a craving after something [*eine Sucht nach etwas*]. Yet since there is nothing there that could give it something, the craving itself is the giving of that which is constituted as nothing but a mere covetous craving. This is the eternal precondition of the magic that creates within itself where there is nothing. Out of the nothing it makes something, doing so only in itself [*sie machet aus nichts etwas und das nur in sich selber*]. Since this craving is, however, nothing but a mere will, it has nothing. There is nothing to give it anything. Nor does it have any place to abide or repose. Now since there is a craving in the nothing, it constitutes for itself the will toward something. This will is a spirit [*ein Geist*] that proceeds as a thought [*ein Gedanken*] out of the craving. It is the craver in the craving. For what it finds is its mother which is the craving.⁶⁷

The eternal beginning, which issues timelessly from the eternal nothing, is branded as the craving for something. But since there is no something in the nothing, the craving is itself the giving of what is constituted as nothing but the craving. Implicitly, *creatio ex nihilo* is transposed into *creatio ex deo*: the nothing

64 Böhme, *Six Theosophic Points*, 12; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 4:9.

65 Böhme, *Six Theosophic Points*, 11; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 4:8. The roots for this mythopoeic notion are much older. Consider, for example, the characterization of noetic desire as the impulse for the mind to procreate in the Arabic paraphrase of Plotinus, *Enneads*, IV.7.1 in the *Theology of Aristotle*, 219: ‘When the mind acquires a desire, it proceeds because of that desire in a certain direction and does not abide in its original place, for it desires greatly to act and to adorn the things which it has seen in the mind. Like the woman who has conceived and to whom the birth-pangs have come, so that she may bring forth what is in her womb, so, when the mind is informed with the form of desire, it desires to bring out into actuality the form that is in it, and it longs greatly for that, and the birth-pangs seize it and it brings it (the form) forth into actuality because of its desire for the sensible world’ (emphasis in original).

66 Hart, *God Being Nothing*, 80.

67 The German text and English translation are printed in Böhme, *Aurora*, 796–797.

whence the world is created is the infinite nothingness, and the rapacious will toward something in that nothing comports as the spirit that proceeds as thought, the craver in the craving, which is gendered as the mother.

The notion of the will for the other in that which has no other—the other that is separate from and yet part of the all-inclusive self—resembles the kabbalistic conception of *sha'ashu'a*, the autoerotic stirrings of *Ein Sof* to extend phallically into the space of the other.⁶⁸ Hart's summary of Böhme's *theopoiesis of desire*⁶⁹ is astoundingly close to the idea of jouissance that kabbalists impute to the initial act of the infinite to emanate and to establish itself as the ground:

Desire is Böhme's most comprehensive term for the restless fermentation or effervescence that comprises the internal force field of the wholly internal life of God, as *turba* (from Greek τυρβα: confusion, disorder, chaos) is the term most often used by him to characterize the simultaneity of creativeness and destruction in the indeterminate abyss of Godhead (the *Ungrund*). We spoke of the determination process, the nonserial progression from indeterminate *Ungrund* through *Abgrund* to determinate *Grund*. ... For Böhme desire as a *concupi-scientia* is a totalizing preknowing of longing itself, insusceptible of compunction, and that because it is compact of both anticipation and remorse, a concupiscence not yet sufficiently determinate to be erotically sexual. What is yearned and longed for is what is lacked, what is wanted, what is not there. What desire in and out and of itself yields is, effectively, *nothing*.⁷⁰

The kabbalists are more emphatic in the use of sexual and erotic images to characterize the desire of *Ein Sof*, but for them as well that pleasure is noetic in nature, and thus it corresponds to Böhme's identification of the will as spirit that comes forth as thought. In the kabbalistic and Böhmean mythos, the object of contemplation is the lack within the fullness, the site of the recoil that yields that which both is and is not the infinite, or in Hart's terms, the determinateness of the indeterminate Godhead.⁷¹ Moreover, just as Böhme depicts the desire of the *Ungrund* as the simultaneity of the creativeness of love and the destructiveness of wrath, the *centrum naturae*, the hinge (*Angel*)

68 For translation and analysis of some of the relevant sources, see Wolfson, *Circle*, 69–72, 189–192 nn. 174–180; idem, *Language*, 271–287; idem, *Alef*, 135–136; and most recently, idem, 'Phallic Jewissance'.

69 Hart, *God Being Nothing*, 83.

70 Ibid., 81 (emphasis in original).

71 Ibid., 88–89.

between light and darkness,⁷² so the kabbalists characterize the *sha'ashu'a* of *Ein Sof* as the attribute of judgment, the capacity to constrict, that arouses the attribute of lovingkindness, the impulse to overflow.

I cannot establish with certainty the historical or textual intermediary by which one of the boldest mythologoumena propagated by the kabbalists made its way into Böhme's theosophic mysticism, but the resemblance is remarkable. Let me offer a few of numerous textual examples to illustrate the point. The affinity to the kabbalistic *sha'ashu'a*, which results in the compression of light into the darkness of the vessel, is conspicuous in Böhme's words in *Sex puncta theosophica*:

God, however, desires only light, viz. the lustre from his heart, that he may shine forth in wisdom, and the whole God thus be manifest in himself, and by the forth-going Spirit out of himself, in the virgin of his wisdom; and that there be an eternal perfect joy, delight and satisfaction in him. ... We now consider Desire, and find that it is a stringent removal [*ein strenges Unziehen*],⁷³ like an eternal elevation or motion. For it draws itself into itself, and makes itself pregnant, so that from the thin freedom where there is nothing a darkness is produced. For the desiring will becomes by the drawing-in [*Einziehen*] thick and full, although there is nothing but darkness. ... Thus the will draws more strongly into itself [*zeucht der Wille je mehr in sich*], and its pregnancy becomes the greater, and yet the darkness cannot comprehend the centre of the word or heart of the ternary; for this centre is a degree deeper in itself, and yet is a band. But the first will, in which the gestation of Nature takes place, is deeper still than the centre of the word, for it arises from the eternal Ungrund or Nothing; and thus the centre of the heart is shut up in the midst, the first will of the Father labouring in the birth of fire.⁷⁴

In an uncanny similarity to the *jouissance* that kabbalists attributed to the infinite, the yearning of the boundless will to expand, which is occasioned by the primordial withdrawal (*šimšum*), Böhme speaks of the desire of the *Ungrund* as a "stringent removal", a drawing into itself, a retreat to the center, which results in the pregnancy and the birthing of the fire.⁷⁵ Böhme's words from *Dreyfachen*

72 Böhme, *Six Mystical Points*, in Boehme, *Six Theosophic Points*, 119–120; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 4:85.

73 I have modified the translation (see following note for reference) from "a stern attraction".

74 Boehme, *Six Theosophic Points*, 13–15; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 4:9–10.

75 Paslick, 'The Ontological Context', 411–412, interprets Böhme's theosophy dialectically in

Leben des Menschen (1620) read like a perfect précis of the kabbalistic paradox of the appearance of the inapparent in the circumscription of infinity:

For the vast infinite space desireth narrowness and inclosure [or comprehension] [*Einfasslichkeit*] wherein it may manifest itself, for else in the wide stillness there would be no manifestation; therefore there must be an attraction [*Unziehen*] and inclosing [*Einschliessen*], out of which the manifestation appeareth; and therefore also there must be a contrary will [*Widerwille*]; for a transparent and quiet will is as nothing, and generateth nothing; but if a will must generate, then it must be in *somewhat* wherein it may form and may generate in that thing; for Nothing is nothing but a *stillness* without any stirring, where there is neither darkness nor light, neither life nor death.⁷⁶

As the kabbalists, who expounded Luria's teaching, Böhme maintained that expansion is consequent to contraction, that the explosion is precipitated by the kenotic retraction:

The will which is called Father, which has freedom in itself, so generates itself in Nature The terror of Nature is a kindler of fire. For when the dark anguish [*die finstere Angst*], as the very fervent, stern being, receives freedom in itself, it is transformed in the terror, in freedom, into a flash [*einen Blitz*], and the flash embraces freedom or gentleness. Then the sting of death is broken; and there rises in Nature the other will of the Father, which he drew prior to Nature in the mirror of wisdom [*Spiegel der Weisheit*], viz. his heart of love, the desire of love, the kingdom of joy. For in the Father's will fire is thus generated, to which the other will gives the power of gentleness and love.⁷⁷

Lurianic terms: the grounding of the *Ungrund* proceeds through an act of contraction or the clearing of a space—identified as nature or the dark world of the divine—within itself but not of itself. On the dialectic of contraction and attraction in the psychology of desire in Böhme and Oetinger, see Deghaye, 'La Philosophie sacrée', 261–263, 265–266. The resemblance of Böhme's account of the desire of the infinite space of the abyss for narrowness and enclosure to manifest itself and the kabbalistic doctrine of *šimšum* was also noted by Aubrey, 'The Influence', 112–113, and see the suggestion of Hart, *God Being Nothing*, 89.

76 Boehme, *The Threefold Life of Man*, 14 (emphasis in original); *Sämtliche Schriften*, 3:11.

77 Boehme, *Six Theosophic Points*, 18; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 4:13.

Light and dark, love and anguish, are differentiated in virtue of their identity in the will of the primordial nothing that is prior to all opposition, since it evinces the twofoldness of an irreducible duality, the quality, above all else, that justifies the characterization of the nonground as the absolute indifference beyond the dyad of being and nonbeing.⁷⁸ In Schelling's enunciation, likely provoked by his reading of Böhme, the infinite will exhibits the concurrence as opposed to the coincidence of opposites; the former entails a difference of identity ($A + B$), the latter an identity of difference ($A = B$).⁷⁹

The twofold nature of the abyss is described succinctly in *De electione gratiae*: 'For God knows the will of the Unground, how it has formed itself into a ground and manifested itself, whether it be a root out of the dark fire-life or a root out of the shining fire-life.'⁸⁰ Böhme elaborates on this theme in *Mysterium Magnum*:

The anguish-source is thus to be understood: The astringent desire conceiveth itself, and draweth itself into itself, and maketh itself full, hard and rough: now the attraction is an enemy of the hardness. The hardness is retentive, the attraction is fugitive: the one will into itself, and the other will out of itself; but since they cannot sever and part asunder one from the other they remain in each other as a rotating wheel: the one will ascend, the other descend. ... We acknowledge that God in his own essence is no essence [*das Gott in seinem eigenen Wesen kein Wesen ist*] but only the alone power or the understanding to the essence, viz. an unsearchable eternal will, wherein all things are couched; and the same is ALL, and yet is only ONE, but yet desireth to manifest itself, and introduce itself into a spiritual essence, which is effected in the power of the light, through the fire in the love-desire. ... The holy spiritual love-desire, where the holy will of God hath sharpened itself in the harsh impression, and manifested itself through the fire with the power of the omnipotence, that now brings itself forth through the fire in the light; and so in the powers it is introduced into life and motion, in the desire; and herein the holy

78 Boehme, *The Signature*, 13–14; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 6:9–10; and compare Boehme, *The Signature*, 22; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 6:18.

79 Schelling, *The Ages*, 15; *Die Weltalter*, 223. For a representative sampling of studies chronicling Böhme's impact on Schelling, see Benz, *Schellings theologische Geistesahnen*; Brown, *The Later Philosophy*; Schulte, 'F.W.J. Schellings Ausleihe', 267–277; Vieillard-Baron, 'Schelling et Jacob Böhme', 223–242; Mayer, *Jena Romanticism*, 179–221; Whistler, 'Silvering', 160–167.

80 Boehme, *De Electione Gratiae*, 173; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 6:145.

generation, and the triumphant kingdom of the great love of God, doth consist, and is manifest. ... The Father is first the will of the abyss: he is outside of all nature or beginnings: the will to something; which will doth conceive itself into a lubet [*Lust*] to its own manifestation. And the lubet is the conceived power of the will, or of the Father, and it is his Son, heart, and seat: the first eternal beginning in the will. And he is therefore called a Son, because he receiveth an eternal beginning in the will, with the will's self-conception.⁸¹

The austerity, astringency, and compunctive sharpness of the divine wrath coupled with the meekness, suppleness, and capaciousness of divine love enkindles “a great flagrat” (*ein grosser Schrack*), which is likened to a flash of lightning (*ein Blitz*).⁸² In one of the more daring passages in *Aurora*, Böhme proclaims the deep mystery of the unity of these two forces:

I am going to tell you a secret [*ein geheimnis*]. The time has come for the bridegroom to crown his bride. Guess, dear fellow, where is the crown to be found? *Toward midnight* [*Kegen Mitternacht*]. For in the midst of the stringent quality, it is growing light [*Den mitten in der Herben qualitet / wird das licht Helle*]. Whence issues the bridegroom? From the middle, where the heat gives birth to the light, shooting toward midnight into the stringent quality. That is where the light is growing bright.⁸³

In language that resonates with the myth of the *hieros gamos* central to kabbalistic symbolism, most typically related to the union of the sixth and the tenth emanations, *Tiferet* and *Malkhut*, Böhme associates the secret to the crowning of the bride by the bridegroom, a euphemism for the intercourse of Christ and Sophia, the reconstituted image of the androgynous Adam.⁸⁴ The crown, we are told, is to be found in proximity to midnight, the time when the light begins to grow. Symbolically, the middle of the night, the heart of darkness, is when the stringent quality—kabbalistically, the attribute of judgment—prevails, and the heat gives birth to the light. Notwithstanding Böhme's insistence that the will of the abyss is the one source for the heat and the light, he is unambiguous about the antipathy of the divine to the demonic. Hence, in the context of emphasizing that everything in heaven and on earth proceeds from God, he admonishes

81 Boehme, *Mysterium Magnum*, 12, 28–36; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 7:14–15, 29–37.

82 Boehme, *Mysterium Magnum*, 14; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 7:17.

83 Boehme, *Aurora*, 324–325.

84 On the role of gender in Böhme's theosophy, see Gibbons, *Gender*, 89–102, and esp. 96–97.

the reader, 'You should not conclude from this that evil and good surge or abide in God. Rather God is the good itself [*Gott ist Selber das Gutte*] and derives his name from the good'.⁸⁵ One might protest that if all comes from God, a case can be made that God should be considered the causal agent of evil as well. This would not necessarily mean, however, that God appropriates evil in the same manner that the good is appropriated: "Thus can one indeed know that God does not want evil but rather wants that his kingdom come and that his way hold sway, in heaven as on earth".⁸⁶ The theosophic axiom that gentleness is *the core of divinity* (der kern der Gottheit)⁸⁷ is the underpinning for Böhme's ethical directive that the knowledge that there is good and evil in nature should motivate individuals to flee from the latter and to abide in the former.⁸⁸ Human freedom is dependent on the possibility to choose between the paths of light and darkness, but that choice rests on the metaphysical discrimination that the light is antithetical to the darkness, even though at the most sublime level, one detects that darkness is a feature of light—diagrammed as the dot in the center of a circle—the ember that incites the conflagration of nature wherein the hidden God is manifest.⁸⁹

In subsequent works, Böhme returns to this theme and the two forces are attributed more directly to the divine. Consider the opening paragraphs of *De tribus principiis* (1619): God is identified as the "Essence of all Essences" (*das Wesen aller Wesen*), and hence 'all is generated or born, created and proceeded from him'.⁹⁰ This would imply that good and evil are both ascribable to God. Still, there is a discrepancy or asymmetry, inasmuch as 'Evil neither is, nor is called God; this is understood in the first Principle, where it is the earnest Fountain of the Wrathfulness, according to which, God calls himself an angry, wrathful, zealous God. For the original of Life, and of all Mobility, consists in the Wrathfulness; yet if the tartness be kindled with the Light of God, it is then no more Tartness, but the severe Wrathfulness is changed into great Joy'.⁹¹ Proverbially, Böhme wants to have his cake and eat it too. On the one hand, he demarcates God as the source of both good and evil, but, on the other hand, he does not identify or name the latter as divine. Nevertheless, the first principle is the fountain of wrathfulness in addition to being the source of beneficence,

85 Boehme, *Aurora*, 138–139.

86 Ibid., 80–81.

87 Ibid., 252–253.

88 Ibid., 84–85.

89 Boehme, *Mysterium Magnum*, 13; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 7:15.

90 Boehme, *The Three Principles*, 13; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 2:9.

91 Behmen, *The Three Principles*, 13; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 2:9.

and thus God is characterized as angry, wrathful, and zealous. The dualism is mitigated by the claim that when the fury is ignited by the light, it is transposed into joy. The tension between the two perspectives comes to the fore in Böhme's assertion:

Indeed there is no difference in God, only when it is enquired from whence Evil and Good proceed, it is to be known, what is the first and original fountain of Anger, and also of Love, since they both proceed from one and the same Original, out of one Mother, and are one Thing. ... Therefore the Source or Fountain of the Cause must be sought, *viz.* what is the *Prima Materia*, or first matter of Evil, and that in the Originality of God as well as in the Creatures; for it is all but one only Thing in the Origin: All is out of God, made out of his Essence, according to the Trinity, as he is one in Essence and threefold in Persons.⁹²

The friction is repeated in many of Böhme's writings including the following passage in the treatise "Von der Wahren Gelassenheit" (1622) included in *Der Weg zu Christo*:

God is all. He is darkness and light, love and wrath, fire and light. But He calls Himself only God according to the light of His love. There is an eternal *contrarium* between darkness and light. Neither grasps the other, and neither is the other. And yet there is only one being, but separated by the source and by the will. Yet it is not a divided being, but one *principium* divides it so that each is in the other as a nothing. But it is there, although not revealed in the characteristic of that which it is.⁹³

God is all and thus he is both dark and light, love and wrath, and yet, the godliness of God relates exclusively to the light of his love. As Böhme states unequivocally in another passage from this work, 'God, insofar as He is and is called God, can will no evil; for in God there is only one single will and that is eternal love, a desire for similarity [*Gleichheit*], as for power, beauty and virtue. God desires nothing but what is like His desire. His desire accepts nothing except that which itself is'.⁹⁴ In psychoanalytic terms, God's love is a narcissistic desire for the same, which leads to the tautological statement that God desires

92 Behmen, *The Three Principles*, 14; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 2:10.

93 Boehme, *The Way to Christ*, 126–127; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 4:98–99.

94 Boehme, *The Way to Christ*, 130; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 4:102.

nothing but that which is like his desire, and hence nature is the image of the imageless confabulated in the mirror of the imagination as the imagelessness of the image.

Mystery is nothing else than the magical will, which still lies caught in desire. It may fashion itself in the mirror of wisdom how it will. ... For the *Mysterium magnum* is nothing else than the hiddenness of the Deity [*die Verborgenheit der Gottheit*], together with the Being of all beings [*mit dem Wesen aller Wesen*], from which one mystery proceeds after another, and each mystery is the mirror and model of the other.⁹⁵

Again, we note the astonishing affinity to the kabbalists for whom the potential for otherness is enfolded in the undifferentiated sameness of infinity that unfolds with each being mirroring uniquely what has preceded it. Translated ontologically, there is only one will that divides into a polarity, but each term of that diversification is in its other *as a nothing*.

The more radical dualistic dimension in Böhme's thought leads him in some passages to classify the corporal creation as the expression of demonic wrath. Consider the following passage in *De triplici vita hominis* (1620): 'Before time [was], the world was in God, but *without* substance [*In Gott ist die Welt gewesen vor der Zeit, aber ohne Wesen*]: Now *Lucifer*, the great prince out of the centre of nature, awakened and kindled the wrath and fire, which was not known in the eternity; for he would domineer in the might of the fire, above God, and therefore the source of *fire* became his habitation.'⁹⁶ *Prima facie*, Böhme's language is perplexing: that time is dependent on the existence of the physical world is a well-known philosophical posture, but what does it mean to say that the world was in God without substance? Presumably, what is intended is that the concrete substantiality of the cosmos is dependent on its material nature, and this, in turn, is tied causally to the dark fire of Lucifer erupting from the center of nature. This marks a departure from the kabbalistic perspective. To be sure, on occasion, we do find negative assessments of the corporeal—a tendency that is reflective of the wider medieval milieu in which the kabbalah flourished historically—but we do not find a straightforward identification of the world as the habitation of the demonic. At best, we can say kabbalists forged a connection between the divine attribute of judgment and nature—an

95 Böhme, *Six Mystical Points*, 136; *Sämtliche Schriften*, 4:96.

96 Boehme, *The High and Deep Searching*, 149 (emphasis in original); *Sämtliche Schriften*, 3:99.

idea sometimes expressed by the numerical equivalence of the words *elohim* and *ha-ševa*, that is, both have the sum of 86—but this falls short of the view endorsed by Böhme.

Bracketing this crucial divergence, the convergences between Böhmean theosophy and kabbalistic symbolism are impressive. Like the masters of the kabbalah, Böhme sought to explain the eternal becoming of God by reference to the process by which the all-encompassing nonground of being, which is nothing, grounds itself through the activation of the dark core in the divinity that is and yet is not God. The darkness contracting into light engenders the expansion of that light into the constricted forms of the determinate beings that make up the world. Nature is thus the self-limitation of the infinite expanse and unconditional self-positing I, which divides into the I and not-I. The unconditioned I may posit the not-I out of its own covetousness, which is the quintessence of the freedom commensurate to the vacuity of the plenum, but the question that perseveres is whether this not-I can procure an authentic sense of alterity. Within an emanative-monistic scheme, is it possible for the other not to be reduced to an aspect of the same? How can we speak of a will that is genuinely contrary to the will when the latter comprehends the other as part of its not-otherness? Even if we acknowledge that the infinitivity of the *Ungrund* or the *Ein Sof* can be distilled only as transfinite or as an increasable actual-infinite—an unbounded succession of ordinal numbers whose unity is formed by an indefinite division beyond mathematical determination—it is still germane to say that the absolute minimum is the absolute maximum, that the magnitude of the infinitesimal comprehends everything incomprehensibly and therefore is incapable of increase or diminution.⁹⁷ The Böhmean and kabbalistic response would be that the otherness of the not-other implies that the infinite is identical with the finite precisely because the finite is not identical with the infinite. The shared paradox opens the way to envisage through the imagination—the temporal mirror of eternity—that difference is the property of the indifferent and multiplicity the instantiation of the singular.

97 My analysis is indebted to the discussion of Cantor's absolute infinity and the transfinite in Priest, *Beyond the Limits*, 113–127, esp. 115–117.

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