

# 5 Jacob Boehme's Writings During the English Revolution and Afterwards

## Their Publication, Dissemination, and Influence

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On August 4th, 1653, Samuel Herring of Swan Alley in Coleman Street, London petitioned Barebone's Parliament to consider thirty propositions for the good of the nation. The second was that two colleges at Oxford and Cambridge should be devoted to the study of "attaining and enjoying the spirit of our Lord Jesus." Few books would be needed besides the Bible and English translations of "Jacob Behmen, and such like, who had true revelation from the true spirit."<sup>1</sup> This proposal was not adopted, nor is there evidence for how much support it attracted among Herring's fellow parishioners or in Parliament. Though he may have acted alone, it is equally possible that Herring represented the public face of a group promoting the dissemination of English versions of the German mystic's writings. Indeed, it is significant that between 1645 and 1662 most of Boehme's treatises and the majority of his letters were printed in English translation at London. Moreover, two shorter pieces were rendered from English into Welsh in 1655.

This chapter begins by examining the processes through which translations of Boehme's works were made and circulated within the wider context of the breakdown of prepublication censorship during the English Revolution. Locating these translations within the broader framework of the dissemination of continental alchemical, astrological, millenarian, and mystical writings during a turbulent period of English history, I will also look at the question of what happens when texts are circulated within contexts for which they were not intended. Boehme's principal English translator, the barrister and linguist John Sparrow, had hoped his efforts would be rewarded with the settlement of religious controversies and the disappearance of sects and heresies. But instead of doctrinal unanimity, there was discord. Indeed, Boehme's readers responded in largely unforeseen ways: sometimes with enthusiasm, but on other occasions with exasperation, ambivalence, and even revulsion.<sup>2</sup> A handful were convicted of blasphemy, others formed spiritual communities, while others still fulminated against what they regarded as Boehme's incomprehensible nonsense and vile falsehoods. All the same, I will suggest that engagement with Boehme's teachings was not only more extensive at this crucial moment in English history than has usually been recognized, but also that his influence was neither straightforward nor

always easy to untangle from the wider tradition of continental mystical, prophetic, and visionary writing that he epitomized.

## I THE TRANSLATIONS

Between 1641 and 1660, an estimated 32,238 titles were published in the British Isles or by English speakers elsewhere in the world; that is roughly 26% of the total amount of such publications between 1475 and 1700.<sup>3</sup> Although the number of English translations of continental European writings printed or reissued during this period has yet to be established, this heterogeneous corpus of material consisted of writings by more than 220 nonnative authors, including texts by or attributed to Greeks, Romans, and Church Fathers, as well as alchemists, anti-Trinitarians, astrologers, astronomers, cardinals, geographers, grammarians, heralds, herbalists, heresiographers, historians, lawyers, librarians, linguists, magicians, millenarians, monarchs, mystics, novelists, occultists, philosophers, physicians, physiognomists, poets, politicians, popes, prophets, satirists, soldiers, theologians, and travelers. Added to this were several untranslated works that appeared predominantly in the original Latin, but also in other languages.

Despite Christopher Hill's claim that the English Revolution was a short-lived age of "freedom" when relatively cheap and portable printing equipment may have made it easier than ever before for new and sometimes radical ideas to see the light of day, the desire to censor—as is widely recognized—remained in many quarters.<sup>4</sup> There were three effective ways in which this could be achieved: through prepublication, postpublication, or self-censorship. Prepublication censorship, particularly of religious literature, which had been used to increasing effect during the 1630s, became a lost cause after 1641. For in that year, the secular court of Star Chamber and the ecclesiastical court of High Commission were abolished by act of Parliament, leading to a disintegration of the London Stationers' Company monopoly. With the collapse of prepublication censorship, the licensing system upon which it had been built became increasingly used to protect the publisher's copyright rather than to indicate official approbation. Despite initial Parliamentary attempts at reasserting control by examining those considered responsible for committing abuses in printing and licensing, and subsequently through legislation, without an equivalent to the Papal Index of prohibited books, prepublication censorship appears to have been almost entirely at the licenser's discretion. As such, it was utterly ineffective. Indeed, during the later 1640s and much of the 1650s, licensing was characterized by inconsistent practice and the absence of a universally agreed upon strategy. By contrast, postpublication censorship proved most effective when implemented by those with intimate knowledge of the printing trade. And in exceptional circumstances, its outcome could be dramatic. For although no one had been burned at the stake for heresy in England since 1612, the

published writings of blasphemers and seditious writers were still consigned to the flames in public book burning rituals that resembled Protestant *Autos da Fé* by proxy.<sup>5</sup>

Besides these upheavals in the publishing world, the dissemination and early reception of Boehme's writings must also largely be set against a background of devastating Civil War and rebellion in the three kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Ireland; widespread poverty, harvest failure, desperate food shortages, economic decay, and outbreaks of plague; the abolition of episcopacy and emasculation of the Church of England; petitioning campaigns to introduce religious toleration and initiate ecclesiastical, educational, electoral, legal, medical, and taxation reforms; the associated emergence of political movements with radical demands such as the Levelers; impassioned apocalyptic speculation sometimes allied with anticlericalism, including clamoring to abolish the maintenance of ministers by tithes; the dramatic act of regicide, regarded by Royalists as the sinful shedding of innocent blood akin to the Jews' cruel crucifixion of Christ; and a brief period of oligarchic republican rule afterwards supplanted by an uncrowned Lord Protector (Oliver Cromwell) presiding with the aid of his council and successive Parliaments over a perpetual Reformation implemented by an unsteady alliance of magistracy, ministry, and military power.

Elsewhere I have discussed at greater length why Boehme's writings were translated into English and showed the mechanisms behind this process.<sup>6</sup> Among his followers there circulated a garbled story that Charles I had been the main patron of the venture before his execution in January 1649. Some, like Francis Lee (a founder of the Philadelphian Society), also maintained, probably correctly, that after the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, the remaining works were brought out under the auspices of Philip Herbert, fifth Earl of Pembroke. In their eyes, this tradition of royal and aristocratic support gave the undertaking prestige; yet it simplified developments, obscuring the involvement of a number of people with common aims. Actually, there were three overlapping phases. Initially, several individuals with knowledge of Latin or German received abstracts of Boehme's teachings or selected treatises from their associates in Amsterdam. Then manuscript translations were made from German and Latin versions of works published in Amsterdam, as well as from copies of the original texts. These circulated privately in much the same way as had the writings of the sixteenth-century mystic Hendrik Niclaes and other conspicuous members of his heretical sect known as the Family of Love. Finally, there was an organized scheme for publishing the extant corpus. While some of the cost was met by the translators themselves, it is clear that Samuel Hartlib, a Prussian émigré resident in London since 1628, and members of his circle acted as go-betweens by using agents to purchase books, subsequently shipping them to England.

Hartlib's circle, as is well known, promoted reconciliation between the Protestant churches and planned to establish a University in London with a College for Oriental Studies to assist with the conversion of the Jews to

Christianity. They also advocated educational and medical reform and disseminated the Moravian exile Johannes Amos Comenius's theories concerning universal knowledge (pansophy) and the importance of translation as a first step towards establishing communication through a common tongue.<sup>7</sup> Although it had gone unheeded by many of his compatriots, Boehme's announcement of the dawn of a new reformation thus chimed with their vision of universal reformation. Similarly, fearing the consequences of making such things known in his native language to "*so many various minds, as are now sprung up,*" John Sparrow nonetheless contented himself with the knowledge that his public-spirited efforts might provide "*much comfort*" to "*troubled doubting*" souls, enabling them to attain that "*inward Peace which passeth all understanding.*" It was, however, to prove a vain hope. Instead of the promised "Day of Pentecost," when the "*true sence and meaning of all Languages*" would be united into one tongue, there was a new Babel.<sup>8</sup>

All the same, the contributions of various intermediaries, patrons, translators, biographers, printers, publishers, and booksellers were crucial in facilitating the project through which Boehme's texts were copied, rendered into English, issued, and transmitted. Furthermore, uncovering the translators' social networks disclosed their ties through kinship and friendship as well as shared professional and commercial interests. Indeed, these extensive connections, which included sympathetic publishers, largely explains why Boehme's works were acquired so readily in printed English translations and later selectively rendered into Welsh. Moreover, it should be remembered that this was at a time when legislation empowered civil and military officials to fine or imprison the authors, printers, publishers, and booksellers of unlicensed material. This repressive element of postpublication censorship doubtless prompted strategies to avoid punishment: spurious imprints, anonymity, pseudonymity, and varying degrees of self-censorship. While Boehme's writings were not suppressed—the copyright of seven books was entered in the Stationers' Register—it is worth emphasizing that a few of his readers were punished by authority.<sup>9</sup> The most notable, both of whom we shall encounter later, were TheaurauJohn Tany (imprisoned for blasphemy) and Dr. John Pordage (ejected out of the rectory of Bradfield, Berkshire).<sup>10</sup>

## II CRITICS AND ADMIRERS

Taken together, evidence from law suits, advertisements, auction catalogues, and commonplace books gives some indication of the sale price of Boehme's books, while marketability is indicated by their inclusion in *A Catalogue of The most vendible Books in England* (1658) under "Divinity."<sup>11</sup> Although it is not possible to determine every buyer, titles by Boehme are recorded in the libraries of a number of Englishmen. Among the most prominent were the antiquary Elias Ashmole; the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth; George Digby, second Earl of Bristol; Benjamin Furly, Quaker merchant of

Rotterdam; Samuel Jeake, nonconformist, lawyer, and political activist of Rye; Adam Littleton, chaplain to Charles II and headmaster of Westminster school; Henry Oldenburg, secretary of the Royal Society; John Owen, Cromwell's chaplain and afterwards Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University; the diarist Samuel Pepys; the English jurist and Oriental scholar John Selden; the Cambridge Platonist Peter Sterry; the educational reformer John Webster; the Irish alchemist and physician Benjamin Worsley; and John Worthington, Master of Jesus College, Cambridge. Moreover, correspondence, autograph inscriptions, and a variety of other sources enable us to add more names—including a handful of women such as Anne, Viscountess Conway and Elizabeth Foxcroft—to the list of people who owned printed works by Boehme in English. Ownership, of course, is not synonymous with readership, and in the case of some scholars and aristocrats who possessed thousands of books, having one or two Boehme titles listed in the auction catalogues of their libraries tells us very little. Nonetheless, more than one hundred seventeenth-century owners and readers have now been identified, ranging from the Civil War army officer John Lambert to the self-proclaimed High Priest of the Jews Theaurau John Tany and from the Cambridge Platonist Henry More to the Ranter Abiezer Coppe.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, according to a plausible story related after the Restoration by John Sparrow, it seems that Charles I was given an edition of *XL. Questions Concerning the Soule* during the period of his confinement by the army in 1647. When asked what he thought of it, the king supposedly replied

that the Publisher in English seemed to say of the Author, that he was no Scholar, and if he were not, he did believe that the Holy Ghost was now in Men, but if he were a Scholar, it was one of the best Inventions that ever he read.<sup>13</sup>

If true, this was just one of a variety of responses, for as noted earlier, Boehme's readers reacted in a range of ways: from passionate engagement to being in two minds and from frustration to aversion. On the continent, the doctrines of "Teutonic"—to borrow the code name used by some of Boehme's earliest followers—had been refuted by Gisbertius Voetius, professor at the University of Utrecht, and by the German Calvinist Christian Beckman in *Exercitationes theologicae* (Amsterdam, 1644). These foreign critics exerted a degree of influence on the initial reaction to Boehme's writings in England. Thus, Beckman's work was cited with approval by both Meric Casaubon and the minister Richard Baxter, the latter maintaining that Boehme took his doctrine neither from Scripture nor from angels, but from that "drunken conjurer" Paracelsus. Baxter developed this judgment, later condemning Boehme's admirers for being duped by the "cloudy nonsense" and "willful obscurity" of Boehme's "enigmatical expressions," likening his "ridiculous" language to the "hideous bombardical" words used by ancient Gnostic heretics.<sup>14</sup> This censorious characterization of Boehme

as a reincarnated Gnostic whose fanciful mysticism had, through Jesuitical cunning, spawned a hidden sect that helped prepare the way for the Quaker movement was adopted, at least in part, by several hostile commentators.

Another important association was the linkage between the “mysterious and divinely-inspired” Teutonic Philosopher’s notion of signatures—that “signal and wonderful secret” to quote John Webster—and the “highly-illuminated fraternity” of the Rosy Cross’s understanding of the “language of nature.”<sup>15</sup> Others, however, associated Boehme, that “Father of Nonsense,” with the Rosicrucians because, like the Quakers, he was perceived to conceal his unintelligible meaning behind newfangled barbarous expressions.<sup>16</sup> Significantly, Boehme was also studied by alchemists, such as Sir Kenelm Digby, and physicians eager to discover the secrets of nature and medicine. As the translator John Ellistone explained in his preface to *The Epistles of Jacob Behmen*, true knowledge of the “*Three Principles*” and the “*Threefold*” life in man

must needs *advance* all Arts and Sciences, and conduces to the attainment of the Universall Tincture, and signature; whereby the different secret qualities, and vertues, that are hid in all visible and corporeall things, as Mettals, Minerals, Plants, and Hearbes, & c. may be drawne forth and applied to their right naturall use for the curing, and healing of corrupt and decayed nature.<sup>17</sup>

Among medical practitioners, Boehme appealed to advocates of iatrochemistry—that is, physicians who favored cures manufactured in laboratories over those extracted from naturally occurring substances. They promoted the teachings of Paracelsus, often in conjunction with Hermetic philosophy and innovative modifications by Jean Baptiste van Helmont, as a challenge to traditional Galenic medicine. These readers included well-known Fellows of the College of Physicians like Luke Rugeley and Nathan Paget. Rugeley was regarded as a skillful, modest, and faithful man inclined to alchemy, while Paget was appointed physician to the Tower of London and afterwards delivered the Harveian oration as well as brokering the blind poet John Milton’s marriage by license to his young cousin.<sup>18</sup>

Though he claimed not to have studied astrology, Boehme asserted that the “*Starry Art*” had a “*true* foundation.”<sup>19</sup> So it is noteworthy that his publications were promoted in almanacs and read by the famous astrologer William Lilly, who was presented with a copy of Boehme’s *The High and Deepe Searching out of The Threefold Life of Man* (1650) by his publisher Humphrey Blunden.<sup>20</sup> This approbation in turn provoked a denunciation of the “*diabolicall practises*” of “those subtill *Engineirs of Satan* the ASTROLOGERS, whose religion is the same with *Jacob Behmens*, the *German-Conjurer*.” In the same vein, clergymen condemned the “*wild and ungodly studies of Jacob Boehme, Astrology*” and the like, one styling Boehme the “*Teutonick Wizard*.”<sup>21</sup>

### III THE CAMBRIDGE MEN AND THEIR ASSOCIATES

Turning to England's two universities, it was certain Cambridge-educated scholars rather than their Oxford counterparts who initially proved most willing to engage with Boehme's teachings.<sup>22</sup> Most of these readers can be considered as being part of a particular generation: they were largely born in the second decade of the seventeenth century and mainly admitted to Cambridge between 1625 and 1635. Some are also commonly regarded as having been Cambridge Platonists even though this anachronistic term is misleading: it came into usage during the nineteenth century, while those who read Plato alongside Plotinus and other ancient philosophers did not necessarily call themselves Platonists. Lacking formalized membership in the manner of Italian Academies, the so-called Cambridge Platonists formed a loosely configured intellectual circle in some measure because, as Sarah Hutton has pointed out, identification with this group was determined retrospectively.<sup>23</sup> Even so, there is a consensus as to who constituted the core—predominantly scholars connected with Emmanuel and Christ's Colleges—and who was on the periphery. The most familiar names are Benjamin Whichcote, Peter Sterry, John Worthington, Ralph Cudworth, Nathaniel Culverwell, and John Smith (all matriculated at Emmanuel) and Henry More (Christ's). Also included in recent studies are Nathaniel Ingelo (Queen's) and John Sadler (Emmanuel), while more attention has increasingly and rightly been paid to some of the Platonists' bluestocking family, friends, and patrons—notably Anne, Viscountess Conway and Elizabeth Foxcroft (Whichcote's sister).

We are not concerned here with the Cambridge Platonists as such, but with just a few of them together with their comparatively lesser-known friends and acquaintances. In several cases, the social networks formed when these young men entered University endured, occasionally even after profound disagreements, for the duration of a lifetime. Furthermore, it appears that the connections established during this period helped account for how Boehme's writings were disseminated and interpreted within these learned circles. Nor was there a uniform response to the Teutonic Philosopher's writings. While most of these readers bemoaned his lack of clarity, they were divided as to whether it was worth the effort attempting to discern Boehme's light shining within a sea of darkness. Some clearly had personal reasons for turning to Boehme. His translator Charles Hotham, for example, suffered a reversal of fortunes in academic politics and seems to have read him despondently for psychological comfort. Similarly, his biographer Durand Hotham witnessed the public decapitation of his half-brother and may have become attracted to Boehme because of the potential he perceived within his teachings for reforming and regenerating a divided, decaying society. At the same time, we must be careful not to examine Boehme's reception in isolation but to appreciate that he was read in conjunction with other works. These of course varied from reader to reader according to motive and taste. Nonetheless, it is clear that his writings can be located

within broader currents: alchemy and alchemical medicine; apocalypticism and prophecy; astrology; heterodox writings; utopian literature; mystical theology, with a particular emphasis on Neoplatonic authors; and spiritual contemplation.

It is noteworthy that the Hotham brothers were educated at Christ's, as was their associate Luke Rugeley who amassed a considerable collection of Boehme's writings by the time of his death. All three along with John Milton—and around ninety others for that matter—shared the same tutor. Charles Hotham and Rugeley were also friends with Henry More. So it comes as no surprise to learn that titles by Boehme are recorded in the libraries of the well-known Platonists Ralph Cudworth, Peter Sterry, and John Worthington. Cudworth liked the “practical” parts of Boehme “very well” but did not approve of his “Revelations” unless they were to be explained by way of reason.<sup>24</sup> Sterry, for his part, could not decide whether Jesus had appeared to Boehme in a glorious vision or if Boehme had been tricked by a dark satanic minion in the guise of an angel of light. Yet he confessed to his correspondent Morgan Llwyd of Wrexham that he had profited from reading Boehme, meeting with “rich Depths, Sweet Heights” in these writings, which seemed to him to have an “Authority & Glory” in them beyond that of the “scribes & Pharisees.” He therefore concluded:

1. The Lord gave him his Spirit by measure leaving much Darkeness mingled with his Light. 2. They y<sup>e</sup> reade him, had neede come to him well instructed in y<sup>e</sup> Mystery of Christ . . . Others will bee perverted by him.<sup>25</sup>

By contrast, Worthington believed that Boehme had been wrapped up in the “fooleries of enthusiasm” but still felt bound to praise his writings—along with those of his fellow mystics Thomas à Kempis and Johannes Tauler—for the “savory truths” he discerned amongst “the stubble and wood and hay.”<sup>26</sup>

It was Henry More, however, Fellow of Christ's College, who among the Cambridge Platonists engaged at greatest length with Boehme. Although it is not known when More began to read Boehme, he regarded him as a “holy and good” man whose imagination was so preoccupied with “*divine things*” that he could not (save for a miracle) avoid becoming an “*Enthusiast*” and receiving “divine truths.”<sup>27</sup> Returning to this theme in *The Two Last Dialogues* (1668), More acknowledged that, although Boehme was a “*pious*” and “*well-meaning*” writer who had engendered sentiments of “*sincere Piety*” in others, he remained an enthusiast. As one of More's characters explained, the “invincible Obscurity” of the Teutonic Philosopher's writings would prevent him being “over-popular,” while his “mistakes in his pretended Inspirations in matters of Philosophy ruin his Authority amongst the more knowing and sagacious sort of persons.”<sup>28</sup> Similarly, in a letter





dated September 15th, 1670, sent to Anne, Viscountess Conway at her country seat of Ragley, Warwickshire—where More had apparently had his “ears full of Behmenism”—he declared:

Honest Jacob [Boehme] is wholesome at the bottome though a philosopher but at randome.<sup>29</sup>

About 1670, possibly at Lady Conway’s behest, More wrote a lengthy private epistle, afterwards published in Latin translation as *Philosophiæ teutonicæ censura* (1679), in which he discussed questions such as whether Boehme was inspired, whether he was mad, and what his chief errors were. Despite reproving Boehme, like the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, for conceiving of God as corporeal, More admitted:

I was not a little averse to reading such an obscure author; but truly, the rich veins of morality and divinity contained in them so invigorated and enraptured me that the aversion which I feared was turned to pure pleasure and delight.<sup>30</sup>

#### IV DIGGERS, RANTERS, AND MUGGLETONIANS

##### a Diggers

Given the justifiable claims made by the editors of the complete works of the Digger leader Gerrard Winstanley, that he was not just the “foremost radical of the English Revolution” but also one of the “finest writers” of a “glorious age of English non-fictional prose,” his possible reading of Boehme deserves close attention.<sup>31</sup> For more than a century, various scholars encompassing a range of backgrounds and ideological commitments have, with varying degrees of caution, drawn a number of rarely convincing and, unfortunately, usually ill-informed parallels between the Teutonic Philosopher and Winstanley. Aspects of Winstanley’s thought exhibiting suggested Behmenist resonances include his belief in human beings as microcosms or epitomes of the macrocosm; understanding of the nature of evil; conception of an inner light in conflict with darkness; conviction that the risen Christ would save all humanity and restore the creation to its former prelapsarian condition; identification of flesh with the feminine part of human nature, which is subordinate to and corrupted by evil masculine powers; usage of the Virgin as a figure representing mankind’s plain heartedness; likening God the Father to a consuming fiery orb which burns up the dross within man and envisaging this spiritual purification as akin to an alchemical process; appeal to universally shared reason; preference for allegorical readings of Scripture; and the anticlericalism that imbued his reformist zeal.



All the same, it seems certain that Winstanley did not consult any of Boehme's works while writing his own. It also appears very probable that he never read Boehme. The disparities between them are far too great. Absent from Winstanley's writings is a vocabulary of technical alchemical, astrological, cosmological, and soteriological terms found in Boehme. Indeed, there is no analogue in the relevant texts by Boehme for a number of Winstanley's doctrines and exhortations. Furthermore, Winstanley never quotes, paraphrases, or alludes to Boehme. His prose style differs from the way in which Boehme's translators rendered him into English. Nor does Winstanley adopt any of the neologisms introduced by these translators. This is not surprising. Winstanley was not a university trained scholar or clergymen, nor a rich merchant, but rather a former bankrupt with a financially modest if settled existence when he began writing. So the likelihood is that, during the period of his literary activity from 1648 to 1652, he possessed only a handful of printed works, or at most a modest library intermittently supplemented with books borrowed from friends and relations. At the same time, in this particular case, greater consideration needs to be given to how ideas were transmitted not textually but orally since it is probable that some of the seeds that germinated into Winstanley's mature philosophy were sown in this manner. He heard Protestant clergymen preach sermons, for example, and seems to have discussed his doctrines privately in conversation and publicly during disputations.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, for all the inconsistencies and contradictions within his published writings, it must be recognized that Winstanley had a gift for original thought. Coupled with his undoubted literary achievement, this deserves our respect.

## **b Ranters**

Since there is extensive literature on the Ranters, it is curious that little has been said about Boehme's possible influence on their ideas.<sup>33</sup> Concentrating on the printed texts rather than manuscript letters and reported speech, several scholars have drawn attention to the Ranters' understanding of the nature of God; good and evil; the significance of dualism in their thought; their use of paradox and combination of opposing properties such as light and dark, flesh and spirit; as well as their pantheistic speculation cum nature mysticism. Literary experts, moreover, have followed those contemporaries who remarked on the Ranters' elevated language by focusing on typography, genre, imagery, mimicry, parody, vocabulary, and modes of address. Together with these generally acute observations, there have been several intriguing though seldom adequately documented assertions concerning certain Ranters' unacknowledged debts to Boehme. What these commentators have highlighted is a problem not restricted to the Ranters: can Boehme's unmediated influence be distinguished from the wider tradition of theosophic and prophetic writing that he epitomized?

There is no mention of Boehme in the extant writings of those individuals whom sensible historians agree to have been onetime Ranters: Jacob

Bothumley, Lawrence Clarkson, Abiezer Coppe, Joseph Salmon, Thomas Webbe, Andrew Wyke, and the anonymous author of *A Justification of the Mad Crew* (1650). Nor did contemporaries connect the Ranters with Boehme. Regularly demonized as a lustful, ungodly crew given to all manner of wickedness, they were frequently perceived as a horrible, monstrous sect. Some condemnations were modeled upon and positioned within a long line of anti-heretical writing that stretched from Paul, Epiphanius, and Augustine to Luther and Calvin. Intemperate, alarmist, and often inaccurate, their purpose was to represent doctrinal and behavioral errors as inversions of truths so as to facilitate their extirpation. Constantly alert to precedents, several polemicists also provided the Ranters with a distinctive identity and genealogies that variously linked their blasphemous doctrines and abominable, filthy practices to a range of ancient and near-contemporary heresies. Yet unlike the Quakers, with whom they would be lumped together, there is a significant silence concerning the Ranters' alleged descent from the teachings of Paracelsus, Valentin Weigel, and Boehme. And for good reason, since with one notable exception, Boehme's influence on the Ranters was negligible. That exception, however, was significant. For Abiezer Coppe's "An Additional and Preambular Hint," which was written as a preface to Richard Coppin's *Divine Teachings* (1649), demonstrates in the marginal annotations a familiarity with Behmenist terms. Nonetheless, Coppe's interest in Boehme appears to have been brief, perhaps only extending to the duration of his known involvement with John Pordage, rector of Bradfield, Berkshire. For nothing Coppe wrote after September 1649 can be said to indicate deliberate use of expressions and ideas particular to Boehme.

Despite contemporaries not associating Boehme with the Ranters, one would have expected the Teutonic Philosopher to have had a greater influence on their writings, especially since there are traces of other mystical influences. There are, for example, fascinating resonances of Sebastian Franck's *The Forbidden Fruit* (1642) in one of Joseph Salmon's texts and possible hints of Nicholas of Cusa in Lawrence Clarkson. All the same, Boehme's unmediated influence on the Ranters was unimportant. There are several possible explanations. First, by the time of the Ranters' demise, the bulk of Boehme's writings had still to be published in English translation, though it is noteworthy that among the hundreds of works issued or sold either individually or in partnership by the radical London bookseller Giles Calvert were some by Clarkson, Coppe, Coppin, Salmon, and Boehme. Second, besides Coppe, the Ranters were not university trained scholars, so perhaps they found Boehme's writings inscrutable or unsuitable for their purpose.

### c Muggletonians

It is not known when the heresiarch Lodowick Muggleton, an artisan who believed he was one of the two witnesses foretold in Revelation 11, first learned of Boehme. But there are no references to the Teutonic Philosopher

in the writings of his fellow commissioned prophet John Reeve, who died in July 1658. Even so, this has not stopped some modern commentators from discerning supposed Behmenist overtones in certain aspects of Reeve's thought: notably, his conviction that God created the universe out of preexisting matter; his understanding of eternity; his belief that heaven would be populated entirely by males; his concept of Hell; and the notion that Satan was responsible for sin, that Cain and his offspring were descended from Eve and the evil one's sexual union, and the presence of two conflicting seeds—of Adam (elect, faith) and of the Serpent (reprobate, reason)—within human nature. Equally importantly, A. L. Morton and then Christopher Hill maintained that Reeve's central doctrine of the three commissions could be traced back through Boehme and the sixteenth-century Spiritual Reformers to the teachings of the twelfth-century abbot Joachim of Fiore.<sup>34</sup> On closer examination, however, these ostensible parallels are without foundation. Unfortunately, as I will show in greater detail elsewhere, they stem from ill-judged assumptions and a misreading of the evidence, thus partly undermining E. P. Thompson's overstated claim that "Muggletonianism was grafted upon Behmenist or Ranting stock."<sup>35</sup>

As for Muggleton, following his trial in 1677 on the charge of having published blasphemous books and subsequent imprisonment at Newgate, he reportedly declared with characteristic lack of modesty that:

He knew *Behmen* and his works; but he was a fool, and talkt of things that he did not understand: and that in truth there had been no books printed these 1500 years worth reading but his own.<sup>36</sup>

The first mention of Boehme in Muggleton's writings comes after Reeve's death, in a letter dated March 29th, 1660, to Edward Fewterell, surgeon of Chesterfield.<sup>37</sup> In another letter of November 28th, 1661, responding to Ellen Sudbury of Nottingham, he claimed that Boehme was "utterly ignorant" of the doctrine of the six principles (the essential articles of Muggletonian faith). Boehme talked of God, the Devil, and angels but knew nothing of their true nature since he wrongly imagined them to be incorporeal beings. All the same, Muggleton conceded, perhaps in the spirit of conciliation to a prospective disciple, that Boehme's "philosophical light was above all men that doth profess religion, until this commission of the Spirit came forth."<sup>38</sup> Elsewhere, Muggleton indicated that the conception of God as an immortal, eternal being dwelling in spiritual form exercised a definitive influence in the formation of Quaker thought.<sup>39</sup> He even supposed that "*Jacob Behmont's* Books were the chief Books that the Quakers bought," insisting that the "Principle or Foundation of their Religion" was to be found there. Although Muggleton's abhorrence of formless "Spirits without Bodies," whether divine or angelic, impaired his ability to observe subtle doctrinal distinctions, and although he seems to have associated Behmenism with a conception of God as immanent in direct opposition to his own view of him as corporeal, he was still right to emphasize Boehme's Quaker readership.<sup>40</sup>

## V QUAKERS

The question of Boehme's influence on the early Quakers and the reasons why many Friends eventually repudiated his writings has been long debated. Thus on the one hand, it has been claimed that "the Quaker spirit and the spirit of Behmen were one," that no careful student could doubt that there were "so many" marks of the Teutonic Philosopher's influence apparent in George Fox's journal. On the other, however, it has been strongly argued by Geoffrey Nuttall in particular that Quakerism grew out of "the soil and climate of the time;" that while much in radical Puritanism was in sympathy with Quaker practice, there was something in Quakerism contrary even to the radical Puritans' beliefs. Quakerism, for Nuttall, was therefore explained as the product of English contexts—a "spiritual climate"—and studies of Quaker origins against a largely continental background of Anabaptism, spiritualism, and mysticism dismissed as primarily of academic interest. Consequently, within the framework of this greater debate, Boehme's influence upon the Quakers was pronounced specious.<sup>41</sup>

In reexamining the early Quakers' attitude towards Boehme, I have shown elsewhere how polemicists provided Quakers with a genealogy linking them to Paracelsians, Behmenists, and Familists and then outlined the manner in which Boehme's Quaker readers responded.<sup>42</sup> I suggested that both their engagement with his writings and their association in contemporaries' minds with his teachings was more extensive than has hitherto usually been acknowledged. Although it is clear that only a minority of early Quaker printed texts and extant manuscripts show familiarity with Boehme's terms or doctrines, nonetheless, among those that were influenced by Boehme were several important figures in the British Isles, Europe, the West Indies, and North America at a time when Quakerism was taking shape. It is also significant that some of Boehme's Quaker readers became schismatics: Rice Jones, John Perrot, Robert Rich, William Bradford, and Daniel Leeds. A few were also active outside England: Ralph Fretwell, Benjamin Furly, and John Crabb. Others were foreigners: Jan Claus, Jacob Claus, Hilary Prache, and Johann Georg Matern. Moreover, I have argued that we need to reopen the larger debate on the origins of Quakerism as well as reassess the extent to which several Quaker leaders were able to transform their followers into an organized, disciplined, doctrinally coherent group. Indeed, as with problematic sectarian labels such as Seeker and Ranter, there was an initial lack of consensus—whether through ignorance, confusion, misinformation, or deliberate distortion—as to what was understood by the pejorative name "Quaker" beyond the notion that adherents trembled before the presence of God. The early Quakers' relationship with Boehme's writings is therefore a crucial aspect in understanding the formation of their individual identities and that of the movement as a whole.

Doctrinal uniformity, silent meetings, and a preference for Friends' plain style over Boehme's abstruse notions accounts for why many who became convinced of Quakerism turned away from the Teutonic Philosopher—as

they did from other authors too. But the crucial sticking point in this instance was that, unlike the Behmenists, Quakers denied the validity of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper as well as the Lord's Prayer<sup>43</sup> — so much so that in a couple of undated treatises John Pordage attacked certain “errors of the Quakers” as a way of accentuating the doctrinal differences between Friends and Behmenists.<sup>44</sup> Accordingly, it is to Pordage and his spiritual community that we now turn.

## VI JOHN PORDAGE AND HIS “FAMILY”

John Pordage and his “family,” who lived together in “community,” were denounced by Richard Baxter as the “chiefest” Behmenists in England. Established at Bradfield, Berkshire before September 1650, they were said to have abhorred “flesh & carnal Relations” and appear to have objected to the lawfulness of marriage as well. Moreover, theirs was a Behmenist universe, consisting of a dark world (“Mundus tenebrosus”) and light world (“Mundus Luminosus”) and a cosmos populated by good and evil angels visible to the “inward eye.” Members adopted biblical names; thus Pordage was “Father *Abraham*,” his wife Mary, “*Deborah*,” while a follower named Mary Pocock was “*Rahab*.” This community was to be joined by Thomas Bromley and Edmund Brice, two members of Oxford University, who heard Pordage preach a sermon at St. Mary's, the University church. Another who became convinced of the “Extraordinary Power & operation of y<sup>e</sup> Spirit” and joined himself and waited with them was Philip Herbert, fifth Earl of Pembroke. In his last years, Pordage wrote a number of treatises influenced by Boehme. Though none of the original texts appear to have survived, manuscript copies of some of these works circulated both during and after his lifetime. Shortly after his death and apparently at his behest, an abbreviated version of Pordage's untitled work on “The Archetypal Globe” (no date) together with his treatise “Of Eternal Nature” (1671) were published under the title *Theologia Mystica* (1683). Pordage, moreover, appears to have collaborated with his son Samuel in writing the Behmenist “sacred” poem *Mundorum Explicatio* (1661).<sup>45</sup>

Thomas Bromley of Upton upon Severn, Worcestershire, favored communal ownership of property and possessions (community of goods) but not polygamy (community of women) since he advocated celibacy; indeed, he died unmarried and childless. In 1655, after Pordage was ejected, he published *The Way to the Sabbath of Rest*, a mystical treatise influenced by Boehme, which Baxter judged a “most clean and moderate piece” of doctrine. Bromley was also a correspondent of Anne, Viscountess Conway through whom he became acquainted with Henry More and Francis Mercurius van Helmont. His library contained works on the apocalypse, Socinianism, atheism, and heresy as well as the Latin version of Charles Hotham's introduction to the Teutonic philosophy.<sup>46</sup> For his part, Edmund Brice was

“a Lover of the *Hermetick Science*” and translated alchemical works. He owned a copy of Boehme’s *Aurora* (1656) that passed into the hands of a founding member of the Philadelphian Society.<sup>47</sup> As for Pembroke, he received Bromley and Pordage at Wilton, Wiltshire, his country seat. About 1661 John Sparrow loaned him English translations of four treatises by Boehme. Two were either manuscripts or printed copies taken from *The remainder of the books written by Jacob Behme* (1662) and two were printed copies from *Several Treatises: of Jacob Behme* (1661). According to the physician and non-juror Francis Lee, both publications were brought out “under the auspices” of the Earl of Pembroke.<sup>48</sup> Also noteworthy is that Edward Phillips, Milton’s “sober, silent” elder nephew and “industrious” multi-lingual biographer, was employed by Pembroke both as tutor to his son and—because of his “incredible patience”—to assist with interpreting “some of the Late Teutonic philosophers, to whose Mystic Theology his Lordship” was “not a little addicted.”<sup>49</sup>

As Pordage’s enemies charged, however, these were not the only visitors to Bradfield. One alleged guest was Richard Coppin, to whose “erroneous and blasphemous” book *Divine Teachings* (1649) Pordage “gave his approbation.” Another man Pordage was said to have “entertained” was Abiezer Coppe, notorious for “blasphemy, and *rantisme*,” whom we encountered earlier. Other callers at Bradfield included the prophetess Elizabeth Poole, the former Digger leader William Everard, and TheaurauJohn Tany, who allegedly styled himself King of the Jews. Tany’s debts to Boehme were numerous; most strikingly was his heterodox adaptation of Boehme’s teachings on cosmogony and soteriology. But as I have written on him extensively elsewhere, it is best now to conclude.<sup>50</sup>

## VII CONCLUSION

The essential narrative of the English Revolution would have been the same whether or not Boehme’s writings had been translated. His texts made no significant contribution to debates about the political and religious settlement, or to electoral and legal reform, liberty of conscience, the readmission and conversion of the Jews, even the timing of the anticipated apocalypse. More surprising was his muted impact among many religious radicals and heterodox thinkers: Diggers, all bar one of the Ranters, most Muggletonians, and the majority of—though by no means all—Quaker authors. Initially, he seems to have mainly been read by continental Protestant exiles, university-educated ministers, scholars, lawyers, physicians, alchemists, army officers, and a handful of artisans turned lay preachers. Even then their responses ranged, as we have seen, from condemnation, exasperation, and ambivalence to qualified approbation and unbridled enthusiasm. Consequently, one could be forgiven for asking the question why bother with Boehme?

The answer lies in the contribution his writings made to debates in several spheres and the ways in which particular individuals, learned circles, and spiritual communities appropriated and reworked his central teachings for their own ends. Thus Boehme's influence can be seen in alchemical experimentation and attempts to create universal medicines within the laboratory; in almanacs and astrological predictions; in mystical thought, notably speculation about the creation of the universe, the nature of angels, and the fall of Adam; in the literary expression of prophetic experience; in the development of heterodox doctrines about God's presence within all living things, the nature of the soul, and the denial of an external heaven and hell; in spiritual contemplation and psychological comfort from melancholic temptations such as suicide; in utopian literature through his vision of a new age; in the enrichment of the English language through neologisms; in the evolution of semiotics with his notion of signatures; and in attempts to regulate sexual conduct through the imposition of celibacy. Taken together, I would suggest this adds considerably to our knowledge of how potentially powerful albeit somewhat strange and incomprehensible ideas were disseminated, received, and adapted at this crucial moment in early modern English history.

## VIII EPILOGUE: JANE LEAD AND THE PHILADELPHIAN SOCIETY

*Sarah Apetrei*

The peculiar fascination with Boehme among seventeenth-century English readers persisted, and a vital link in the chain between the translations of 1644–62 and the mysticism of William Law can be found in the writings of Jane Lead (1624–1704) and her circle known as the “Philadelphian Society” at the turn of the eighteenth century. Lead's works were published in English between 1681 and 1702 and have enjoyed a remarkably wide and enduring circulation, disseminating his thought as successfully as any more learned assessment of Boehme. An elderly, impoverished widow with failing eyesight at the high point of her prophetic activity, Lead seems an unlikely conduit of Boehme's dense theosophy. Yet each generation of English-speaking readers has rediscovered Lead alongside Boehme. Jane Lead (*née* Ward) embodied in herself the paradoxes of Boehme's own intellectual profile. She was an example both of what Andrew Weeks characterizes as “folk piety” or popular spiritualism, but also of that distinctive species of omnivorous early modern autodidacticism.<sup>51</sup>

Ward experienced her earliest spiritual breakthrough in the early 1640s shortly before her marriage to William Lead, when she heard the controversial preacher Tobias Crisp on “the New Covenant of Free Grace.”<sup>52</sup> A later landmark in her biography was the association with John Pordage, which began in around 1673.<sup>53</sup> An almost monastic society directed by Lead,



Pordage and their friend Thomas Bromley eventually started “to wait together & Exercise ye Gifts of Prayer Exhortation Singing & under a Living P[owe]r & Operation of ye Holy Spirit.” Privately, members kept visionary journals, some of which were published in the 1690s. After Pordage’s death in 1681, Lead struggled to continue his work, publishing her first tract *A Heavenly Cloud Now Breaking* in that year, and Pordage’s *Theologia Mystica* together with her second book *Revelation of Revelations* shortly afterwards. *A Heavenly Cloud* eventually found an audience in Germany and by 1694 had won Lead a wealthy German patron.<sup>54</sup> From 1694 onwards, prophetic gatherings in London venues started to grow.<sup>55</sup> Based on a contemporary prophecy that a new spiritual epoch was to be inaugurated in August 1697, Lead’s group consciously sought a public platform and began a promotional campaign. They called themselves the “Philadelphian Society,” denoting both the sixth church of Revelation which would replace the “Sardic” age of institutional churches and an era of brotherly love bringing to a glorious end the confessional infighting of preceding decades.<sup>56</sup>

The Philadelphians elaborated on Boehme’s eschatological emphasis on a coming “age of the spirit.” The third age of the Spirit would be distinguished by the operation of Sophia in a generation of holy women: “constituting Female Representatives & commissioning them to Joyn in ye Preparation work of ye K[ing]dom of X[hrist] in Spirit.”<sup>57</sup> This female-centered vision of Sophia’s work in the last days would inspire feminist ecological and Jungian theorists.<sup>58</sup> In Lead’s visions, Virgin Wisdom appears as the mother of the second birth: through a sacrificial death to the body of sin, the spirit would break through to a new virgin life akin to that enjoyed by paradisiacal Adam (a clear development of Boehme’s anthropology). This process of regeneration was the preparation for bridal union with Christ in his heavenly flesh, for “he will match himself only to a Virgin Spirit, incorporating, and thereby changing into his own pure Humanity: and this is a Begetting into a Living Substance.”<sup>59</sup> In Lead’s visions, she describes this new incarnation of Christ through Sophia’s maternal agency in the flesh of the saints. Lead envisioned a regenerate existence “not in gross Corporality, but rather like a Seraphick, or as a flaming Body,” that “in nothing I might be inferior to the Glorified and Angelical Spirits, who have not such a gross Animal Nature to deal withal as I have.”<sup>60</sup> Lead herself was regarded as one of those who had attained a “Seraphick” body.

Her intellectual passivity aligned Lead with Boehme’s maternal Sophia, the divine mirror or image, the fertile ground in which the seed of divine life was sown. For the Philadelphians, rooted in the writings of Boehme, Wisdom understood as passive imagination was the precise converse of the critical, probing ratiocination that prevailed in scholastic approaches to theology. Revelation came through the *via negativa*, the shedding of all acquired knowledge. Though William Law might have described Boehme, memorably, as the “the mother of Pordage and Lead,” it was Boehme’s own dynamic conception of Sophianic revelation that liberated Lead from a

slavish dependence.<sup>61</sup> Her insights, like those of Boehme himself, had “not been taught me by men, or books, but by following the Lamb whethersoever he hath guided me.”<sup>62</sup> They were “discovered from the Central Light, and Original Copy, wherein the mind of God was made known unto me, in these things; which are now no longer to be concealed, or shut up, but are to have their use and service throughout the whole Creation.”<sup>63</sup> Indeed, her German translator Loth Fischer wrote tentatively to her in June of 1701 on the subject of eschatology, pointing out rather nervously that her views were “diametrically opposed” to those of the “the highly illuminated Jac. Behme.”<sup>64</sup>

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