The Indirect Jewish Sources of Jakob Boehme

Jakob Böhmes indirekte jüdische Quellen

Jaromír Hladík

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The Indirect Jewish Sources of Jakob Boehme

A philological inquiry into the channels by which the Kabbalah reached the shoemaker of Görlitz

Jaromír Hladík

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Preface

by the author, Prague, autumn 1934

In the present volume I take up again, to deepen and to document them, certain of the parallels that I had noted in passing in the chapter of the first volume of my *Defence of Eternity* devoted to Boehme and to the *Ungrund* (Prague, 1928). I there observed that the doctrine of the *Ungrund* (the groundless ground) in Jakob Boehme offered, "by a Lutheran detour," a structural parallel with the contractions and the shatterings of Lurianic kabbalah. The formula was a convenient one; it left in shadow what it ought to have illuminated, and it ran the risk of making an analogy of form pass for a filiation of fact. Six years spent in rereading the *German Theosophers* in their entirety, in frequenting the Latin shelves of Knorr and of Reuchlin, and in profiting from a few Viennese and Berlin friendships[1], have slowly persuaded me that the "detour" deserved, in itself, an inquiry of its own.

This inquiry is by its nature philological; it is neither theosophical nor apologetic. I shall not attempt to prove that Boehme was a kabbalist without knowing it, nor that his thought would be, in some manner, "Jewish." I shall hold to a fact far more modest:

[1] *I owe, in particular, to Professor Joseph Bernhart of Munich the loan of several typewritten leaves of his unpublished commentary on the Aurora, and to the patience of Madame Cécile Tormay, at Vienna, access to the copy of the Schiebler edition that her family had preserved since 1840.*

certain kabbalistic doctrines, the *sephiroth* of Spanish mysticism, the combinatory of the letters of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the exilic figure of the *Shekhinah*, the primordial *Adam Qadmon* of the Zoharic *Idroth*, were in circulation, at the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth, within the Christian-kabbalistic literature in Latin (Pico, Reuchlin, Khunrath) as well as within the traversable tangle of the Paracelsian writings. These printed channels transmitted, in the main, the kabbalah anterior to Luria; the Lurianic stratum properly so called, the contractions and the shatterings, is not to be met with in them, and it is only by a parallel of structure, not by a document, that I shall evoke it. It is materially possible that a cobbler of Görlitz, without Hebrew and without access to the Jewish books, may have received from these indirect channels enough for his own theosophy to bear the imprint of them. One may suppose as much, without philological assurance, and without claiming to demonstrate it. My ambition reduces to the charting of these ways, without prejudging how much they will bear.

The reader whom pure metaphysics alone interests may be referred to the chapter of my Volume I devoted to Boehme and to the *Ungrund*, which says, of the *Ungrund* and of the divine self-contraction, very nearly all that I had to say in 1928. The present volume addresses itself only to those whom philology finds along the road: to those who, having once read Boehme, have wished, as I did, to know whence came the figures that he assembles.

I have composed this book in the knowledge that the best recent works upon the matter, that of Alexandre Koyré, *La philosophie de Jacob Boehme* (Vrin, 1929), and that of Will-Erich Peuckert, *Das Leben Jakob Böhmes* (Diederichs, 1924), said upon this pre-

cise point only what it was permitted to say in the present state of the sources. Koyré, whose prudence I cannot praise too highly, granted that the analogies are real but rejected any direct filiation; Peuckert reconstituted with a Benedictine exactness the milieu of the *Görlitzer Kreis* (the Görlitz circle), without drawing from that reconstitution the philological conclusion which it suggested. In prudence I side with Koyré; in the matter itself, I believe I may carry Peuckert forward by half a step. That half-step is all that the present inquiry lays claim to.

The chapters that follow are brief, at times compressed to the utmost; I have wished them so because the philological argument, when it is just, must be able to stand without the succour of eloquence. Rigour has a length that is proper to it; beyond it, one pleads. To chapter VI I have given a fuller treatment than to the others: it bears upon the mysticism of the letters, where the concordance between the two theosophies appears to me the closest, without my being able, there too, to make of it an attested bridge rather than a parallel that weighs without constraining. The reader who should wish to form for himself a first idea of the result without reading the inquiry entire may begin with that chapter: he will there find the essentials of my thesis, and the wherewithal to contradict me in full clarity should he be so disposed.

I shall not pass over in silence, to conclude, that there is something melancholy in publishing, at Prague, in 1934, a book on the indirect ways by which Judaism may have, without anyone having willed it, written a Saxon cobbler. I write it with an urgency that I prefer not to name, and with the sobriety imposed upon me alike by the nature of the subject and the nature of the times.

, J. H.

Prague, September 1934.

CHAPTER I

Görlitz about 1600: a Paracelsian milieu without Jews

Before all else, the town must be painted. It is an exercise that has, I know, its limits: no topography can take the place of an intuition, and a book is never anything more than a distant reconstruction of the air breathed by the man who wrote it. But the problem with which this enquiry is concerned does not lend itself to abstract statement. One must begin by saying what Görlitz looked like about 1600: in what way this town was prepared, and in what way it was not, to receive that which it was to receive.

Görlitz, in Upper Lusatia, numbered at the birth of Jakob Boehme (1575) some nine thousand inhabitants. Bourgeois, mercantile, situated upon the great road that joins Breslau to Leipzig, it lived by the currier's trade, by the cloth trade, and by a traffic in spices and in books considerable enough to maintain, in its immediate neighbourhood, three active printing-houses. The town, like the whole of Upper Lusatia, then came under the crown of Bohemia; its population and its magistracy were Lutheran. The confessional quarrels, which nowhere spared the Empire of that day, were here tempered by the Bohemian dependency and by the necessity of continuing to buy Polish cloth. It was, in sum, a town of trade and of the book, rather than of pure theology.

An important characteristic of Görlitz at this date is that one found there *no* Jewish community. The Jews, driven from the town as early as the close of the fourteenth century, the expulsion

of 1389 was the last and the most lasting, had thereafter obtained, at best, only a limited right of access to the fairs; they would return to settle in Lusatia only at the end of the eighteenth century, and then in certain towns alone by special concession. In Görlitz proper, in 1600, there was neither synagogue, nor *cheder*, nor Hebrew printing-house, nor any passing rabbi whose presence any source allows us to attest. The garret of Boehme never heard a *kaddish*.

This absence is, for our enquiry, the first obstacle. When we come to wish to show, in the chapters that follow, that certain kabbalistic structures resound, sometimes very closely, in the writings of the shoemaker of Görlitz, we shall have to account for the fact, which will at first seem inexplicable, that he could have had knowledge of them. No Hebrew book figured in his library; the inventory drawn up by the executors of his estate in 1624 mentions, for the Semitic languages, only a *Lexicon Hebraicum* of Schindler in a partial edition, without annotation, and a few pages of a *Targum* edited with a Latin translation in the facing column[2]. It may be held as established that Boehme could not read a word of Hebrew in continuous reading, and that he had, in consequence, never had before his eyes the *Sefer Yetzirah* in the tongue that is its own, nor a single line of the *Zohar*, nor any of the Lurianic writings which, in 1600, were still being transmitted in manuscript form within the closed circles of Safed and their Ottoman correspondents.

[2] *On the library of Boehme and its poverty in Hebrew books, one may consult Will-Erich Peuckert,* Das Leben Jakob Böhmes *("The Life of Jakob Boehme"), Jena, Diederichs, 1924. The detail of the inventory drawn up by the executors of the estate is there discussed.*

And yet. If one reads the first pages of the *Aurora* (1612) or of *De Tribus Principiis* (1619) with the grammar of the *sephiroth* and the combinatory of the letters of the *Sefer Yetzirah* in mind, one has continually the impression that something one knows is passing through the text under other names. This "something," philological good sense attributes without hesitation to a common Christian stock: to the Neoplatonism christianised by Augustine, to Rhenish mysticism, to Tauler, to the *Theologia Deutsch*. This debt is real, and I shall not contest it; I maintain only that it does not suffice to account for all the motifs, in particular for the most precise, which are not easily deduced from Augustinianism and which, on the other hand, have close counterparts in Hebrew mysticism.

The central problem of this enquiry may therefore be formulated thus: *a town without Jews and a shoemaker without Hebrew; and yet, in the garret of this shoemaker, sentences that resemble kabbalah.* How? By what route?

It is here that one must paint, no longer the town, but the *milieu*. Görlitz, in 1600, is not an isolated town. It is traversed by letters, by merchandise, by men. Three sorts of men concern us: the Paracelsian physicians, the itinerant booksellers, and the travellers in the East. It is by these three conduits — and, incidentally, by a fourth: the Latin Christian-kabbalistic press that the physicians brought with them, that the kabbalah could have made its way into the shoemaker's house.

I. — The Paracelsian Physicians

The *Görlitzer Kreis* (the "Görlitz circle") that took shape around Boehme between 1610 and 1620 has been reconstructed by Peuckert with a thoroughness that leaves little room for doubt. The names to be retained, besides Boehme himself, are those of Tobias Kober (physician of Görlitz, died 1625), of Carl von Ender (a Silesian gentleman, friend and first patron), and above all of Balthasar Walther, to whom we shall return at length in chapter V.

All these men are, on various grounds, *Paracelsian*. I employ the word here with the prudence it calls for. Paracelsianism, at Görlitz about 1600, is no longer the living doctrine of Theophrastus von Hohenheim, dead in 1541; it is a medical, alchemical, and theosophical syncretism, already tolerably diffused, which had absorbed and redistributed a Hermetic inheritance going back in the last analysis to the *Hieroglyphica* of the Renaissance and to the cabalistic speculations of Pico della Mirandola. To read Paracelsus in 1600 is to read, almost in spite of oneself, Pico; and to read Pico is to read, in Latin transcriptions of variable fidelity, fragments of the *Sha'arei Orah* and the Abulafian florilegia which Flavius Mithridates had translated on the Italian's behalf; one is not permitted to add to these the *Esh Mezareph*, whose sole Western Latin witness is late and would not appear until the *Kabbala Denudata* of Knorr (1677)[3].

[3] *On the cabalistic translations of Flavius Mithridates for Pico, see J. Reuchlin,* De Arte Cabalistica, *Hagenau, 1517, which gathers and prolongs the matter of them for the use of the Latins.*

These channels are indirect to the third degree: the rabbi writes the Hebrew; the Italian copyist translates it into Latin; Pico cites it, deforms it, renders it assimilable to a Christian public; a century later, Paracelsus recovers it in scraps to feed his *Astronomia Magna*; half a century later, a physician of Görlitz expounds Paracelsus before his shoemaker friend. At each relay the doctrine loses its rabbinic precision and gains in speculative plasticity. What it loses in exactness it gains in availability for new uses. This is why we shall never find, from the pen of Boehme, a direct citation of the kabbalah that would be the proof of it; but we shall find, continually, structures of which it is permitted to suppose, without philological assurance, that they keep its imprint.

II. — The Itinerant Booksellers and the Christian-Kabbalistic Printing

Görlitz, I have said, lives by the trade in books. Three printers are active there about 1600; they bring out chiefly bibles, catechisms, and small Paracelsian manuals. But the town also receives, by the clerks who ply between Breslau, Prague, and Leipzig, the printed works of wider circulation. Among these, two matter to us: the *De Arte Cabalistica* of Reuchlin (Hagenau, 1517; taken up again in the compilation of Pistorius, Basle, 1587) and the *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Aeternae* of Heinrich Khunrath (Hamburg, 1595; enlarged edition, Hanau, 1609).

The work of Reuchlin, which is not the first to give in Latin the text of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the first printed Latin translation is due to Postel (1552), taken up again by Pistorius (1587), but which

presents, from its third book onward, the combinatory of the Hebrew letters in a manner intelligible to a reader without Hebrew, was present in most of the learned libraries of the Empire after 1530. The municipal library of Görlitz possessed, from 1593, a copy of the Pistorius edition, lent on request to the notables of the town[4]. Whether Boehme himself had this volume in his hands, we do not know. That his friends had it, in particular Kober and Walther, is likely, though it cannot be held as established.

The case of Khunrath is closer still. The *Amphitheatrum*, whose first partial edition appeared at Hamburg in 1595, and whose great posthumous edition with its engraved plates appeared at Hanau in 1609, is one of the first books printed in Europe to lay claim explicitly to a "Christian cabala." Khunrath, a physician trained at Basle, practised at Hamburg, at Magdeburg, and finally at Dresden, where he died in 1605. Here the geography is decisive: Dresden is but eighty leagues from Görlitz; the Paracelsian physicians of the two towns knew one another or, at the least, read one another. That the *Amphitheatrum* should have circulated at Görlitz by way of medical friendship, and that it should have been shared there with Boehme, is the most economical hypothesis for accounting, for example, for the Boehmian doctrine of the "signature of things," which appears in the *De Signatura Rerum* of 1622 in a form structurally very

[4] *The register of loans of the Ratsbibliothek for the years 1593–1612, preserved to this day in the Stadtarchiv Görlitz, mentions several loans of the* Artis cabalisticae tomus *("Volume of the cabalistic art") between 1597 and 1610. None of the loans is recorded in the name of Boehme; all are recorded in the names of physicians, of pastors, or of merchants. But it will be recalled that at this date a shoemaker does not appear under his own name in the registers of a patrician library: he borrows through the intermediary of his lettered friends.*

close to that of the Khunrathian plates: a concordance that weighs without compelling.

I shall add a fact which the editors of Boehme never emphasise because it seems to them anecdotal. A copy of the 1609 edition of the *Amphitheatrum*, preserved today in the Ducal Library of Wolfenbüttel, contains at the end of the volume, bound in separately, the *Vier Tafeln göttlicher Offenbarung* ("Four Tables of Divine Revelation") of Boehme, in a manuscript copy undated but which the hand brings near to the middle of the seventeenth century. This conjoint binding was decided upon, at a date undetermined but clearly earlier than 1700, by an owner who judged that the two works ought to stand side by side. This owner saw, as we do, that the *cabbala christiana* ("Christian cabala") of Khunrath and the theosophy of Boehme belong to the same order. The present book attempts, in its fashion, to bring this order once more into view.

III. — The Travellers in the East

The third way is more difficult to document, but it is also that which, if it played a part, would be the most direct. It concerns the physician-travellers who, in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, undertook in Syria, in Palestine, and in Egypt sojourns of study, nominally medical and botanical, in reality largely devoted to the collection of magico-mystical manuscripts of every provenance.

The exemplary case is that of Balthasar Walther, a Silesian physician, to whom I shall devote an entire chapter further on (chapter V). Walther travelled in the East at the close of the

sixteenth century; he brought back from it, it is said, magical and cabalistic manuscripts, of which the trace is today difficult to follow[5]. On his return to Silesia, Walther settled for a time at Görlitz, where he lived, according to the late testimony of Abraham von Frankenberg, "about three months" in Boehme's house, at a date placed in 1617 or 1618. During these three months, says Frankenberg, they discoursed of *cabbalistica*, of matters cabalistic.

It is, in all the documentation at our disposal, the sole moment at which a testimony, late, it is true, and to be handled with prudence, links Boehme to a kabbalistic matter transmitted otherwise than by the Latin book. The supposed channel is human, oral, intimate; by its nature it leaves no trace in libraries. Nothing proves that it played a part, but everything concurs to make it conceivable.

IV. — Provisional Synthesis

Three channels, then, by which the kabbalah could, without naming its name, have entered the house of Boehme: the Paracelsian physicians, who brought a Hermetic inheritance secondarily nourished by Jewish sources through Pico and the Italian printing of the fifteenth century; the itinerant booksellers, who brought the Latin Christian-kabbalistic works of Reuchlin and Khunrath; and the travellers like Walther, who could bring an oral memory. These three channels have not the same philological density. The first is massive and constant, but

[5] *One will see further on (chapter V) the documentation, slender, to which I allude. For the moment, it is enough to retain the principle.*

imprecise; the second is documentable but does not cover all the motifs; the third is brief, occasional, and difficult to measure, but it would be, if it played a part, the one that would transmit most directly.

It is from this threefold availability, and not from any direct influence which the sources do not allow us to document, that the chapters which follow will attempt to understand how certain kabbalistic doctrines may be traced in the writings of Boehme.

Before coming to that, and to close this first stage, I shall make an observation which, without belonging to the philological argument properly so called, seems to me to call for the reader's scruple: the town of Görlitz, void of Jews in 1600 by the political decision of an expulsion more than two centuries old, is to receive, by the indirect ways I have just sketched, the intellectual structures of a people it had driven out. This irony is not within the subject of this enquiry. But it traverses, in silence, its pages.

End of Chapter I.

Chapter II

The Christian-Kabbalistic Channel:
Pico, Reuchlin, Agrippa

In the preceding chapter I sketched the image of a town without Jews and of a cobbler without Hebrew. I enumerated three material conduits by which the kabbalah might nonetheless have entered it: the Paracelsian physicians, the itinerant booksellers, the travellers in the East. The second of these conduits requires more exact description: it did not carry just any books, but a clearly identifiable intellectual lineage, the tradition called *cabbala christiana*, whose three fathers are Pico della Mirandola, Johannes Reuchlin and Cornelius Agrippa. It is through these three authors, and through their successive reprintings down to about 1600, that the major kabbalistic concepts were naturalised into Latin and made accessible to a Christian reader without Hebrew. It is from them that Boehme was, indirectly, to inherit.

The present chapter will be more historiographical than doctrinal: it will seek to reconstruct the transmission, to show what each of the three translated, transformed, and sometimes betrayed. The reader who cares for the dryness of dates and editions may read it on its own; the reader whom doctrine summons may see in it the setting of the scene upon which the following chapters will build.

I. — Pico della Mirandola: the source-head

The history begins at Rome, in December 1486, when the young Pico della Mirandola, not yet four-and-twenty, caused to be printed by Eucharius Silber the *Conclusiones nongentae in omni genere scientiarum*, nine hundred theses which he declares himself ready to defend in public. Among these theses, two series at once draw attention: the forty-seven *Conclusiones cabalisticae secundum secretam doctrinam sapientum Hebraeorum* and the seventy-one *Conclusiones cabalisticae secundum opinionem propriam*. It is the first time that kabbalistic doctrines are set out in Latin, in a Christian academic context, with the claim of being there discussed on the same footing as the Thomist or Averroist theses.

Whence did Pico derive what he there advances? He had learned it, for a year or so past, from a convert of Jewish birth, Flavius Mithridates, who translated for him into Latin, in a manner now free, now faulty, but always intelligible, a considerable mass of texts: Recanati's commentary on the Pentateuch, the *Sha'arei Orah* of Joseph Gikatilla, several Abulafian writings on the combinatory of the letters, and certain fragments of the *Sefer ha-Bahir*. The manuscript of these translations is today preserved in part at the Vatican (cod. Vat. ebr. 189, and other adjacent shelf-marks); the Mithridates corpus has there begun to be identified in our own day[6].

[6] *The work of surveying the Mithridates corpus at the Vatican is in progress; I owe the communication of preliminary results to my friend M. Spitzer, who returns regularly from Rome with notes. For the older bibliography one will turn to Gershom Scholem, Bibliographia Kabbalistica, Leipzig, Drugulin, 1927, sub voce.*

What Pico retains of this teaching, and *transmits* to learned Christendom from 1486 onward, may be summed up in four intuitions:

- The idea that the divine names (and first of all the Tetragrammaton יהוה) are composed of letters whose combination generates the structures of being;

- The idea that the ten *sephiroth*, in Hebrew *eser sefirot*, are at once names of God and modes of the procession of being out of the En-Sof (*Ein Sof*);

- The idea that creation is not merely an act of divine will, but an *unfolding* (*atsiluth*) which passes through successive degrees before producing the material world;

- The idea, lastly, that the human soul is a "spark" capable, through the knowledge of the names and the combinations, of mounting back to its source.

None of these intuitions is, in 1486, original within Jewish kabbalah; all date from at least the thirteenth century, and some go back to the *Sefer Yetzirah* of which I have given the translation elsewhere[7]. But they are, in 1486, entirely unpublished in Latin and inaccessible to the Christian academic world. Pico deposits them there. He deposits them there while at once reformulating

[7] *Sefer Yetzirah, Le Livre de la Création* [*The Book of Creation*], *French translation with critical apparatus, Hermann Barsdorf, Berlin, 1928. See also the chapter of the first volume of my Défense de l'Éternité* [*Defence of Eternity*] *devoted to the kabbalah (Prague, 1928), where I discuss the conception of time that emerges from it.*

them — this is the great "Christian" novelty, as hidden prophecies of the Trinitarian and Christological doctrine. The Tetragrammaton, for example, becomes with him the pentagram יהשוה, where the insertion of a *shin* in the midst of the divine Name produces the name of Jesus, *Yeshua*; the sephiroth become mirrors of the three divine persons; the kabbalistic *tikkun* resolves itself into the Christian incarnation.

This Christianisation, which will lastingly scandalise the rabbis, is precisely what will make the kabbalah digestible to a Lutheran reader like Boehme a century later. Boehme would not read a rabbinic book; he could not read it, and the authority of his Church would probably not have tolerated it. But a "Christian" kabbalah, transmitted by physicians and theosophers, is another matter. Pico, in Christianising, opened a door that he could not see.

The editorial destiny of the *Conclusiones* was singular: the disputation foreseen did not take place (Innocent VIII condemned thirteen of the theses as early as 1487; Pico had to compose an *Apologia* to defend himself). But the theses circulated in manuscript from that very year, and were printed several times. Pico's *Opera omnia*, which appeared at Basle in 1572 and again in 1601, constituted the indispensable *vade mecum* of every cultivated reader who wished to approach, without Hebrew, the kabbalistic thought. It was this *Opera omnia* that a Paracelsian physician often possessed in his library; it was this that was, at Görlitz, to pass from hand to hand among Kober, Walther and their friends.

II. — Reuchlin: teaching through grammar

Thirty years after Pico's *Conclusiones*, a Swabian humanist named Johannes Reuchlin (1455–1522) had printed at Hagenau, at the press of Thomas Anshelm, a Latin dialogue entitled *De Arte Cabalistica* (1517). It is a dialogue in three voices: a Jewish sage (Simon ben Eliezer), a Peripatetic Mohammedan (Marranus) and a Christian (Philolaus), who discuss together the possibility of a universal kabbalistic science. Beneath the appearance of the philosophical dialogue, the work is in reality, and this is what makes its importance for our inquiry, a *manual*.

Reuchlin is a rare scholar. Where Pico improvised a youthful enthusiasm from the translations of Mithridates, Reuchlin had learnt Hebrew *himself*, at Tübingen, at Basle, at Linz, under the direction of a certain Jacob Loans, physician to the Emperor Frederick III. He knew Hebrew grammar; he had published, in 1506, a *De Rudimentis Hebraicis* which remained for a century the standard schoolbook for Christians who wished to be initiated. As early as 1494, in the *De Verbo Mirifico*, he had moreover broached the kabbalah by the avenue that lay nearest his heart: that of the Name, and of that pentagram יהשוה which Pico had already pointed out; *De Arte Cabalistica*, a quarter of a century later, was to be its matured development. It was he who, in his controversy with Pfefferkorn and the Faculty of Cologne between 1509 and 1520, saved the German Jewish books from wholesale destruction ordered by Maximilian I.

De Arte Cabalistica, his great kabbalistic work, has the cardinal virtue of *quoting* extensively, in Hebrew accompanied by a Latin translation, the texts to which it refers. Book III, in par-

ticular, contains substantial extracts from the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the opening pages, on the thirty-two paths of wisdom; the passages on the twenty-two fundamental letters, their "engraving," their combination; the pages on the three mother-letters — א, מ, ש, that is, air, water and fire, on the seven doubles and the twelve simples, and on their correspondence with the world, the year and the body. This Latin presentation made known to the reader without Hebrew the *existence* of this scheme and the vocabulary that bears it; it did not, for all that, furnish him with its term-by-term use, and one must not read into it, in advance, the correspondences that Boehme, a century later, was to draw in his own way from the three mothers and the seven doubles. It was nonetheless, on this point, one of the earliest and most accessible avenues of access to the combinatory teaching of the *Yetzirah*[8].

De Arte Cabalistica was reprinted in the great compilation *Artis Cabalisticae ... Tomus I*, published by Johann Pistorius at Basle, at the press of Sebastian Henricpetri, in 1587. It is that edition, substantial and widely circulated, that was to be found in German libraries at the end of the sixteenth century. The Town Library of Görlitz, as was noted in the preceding chapter, possessed a copy of it as early as 1593.

That Boehme read it, I should not dare to affirm; I do not believe it. But that he might have *heard cited* its passages on the combinatory of the letters, through the offices of Walther or of Kober, is what it is permitted to suppose, without philological

[8] *The* Yetzirah *was not printed in Hebrew before the Mantua edition of 1562. The first complete Latin translation, due to Guillaume Postel, appeared as early as 1552, in a very small print-run; a Latin version figures also in the compilation of Pistorius, 1587. Reuchlin's presentation, partial but accompanied by readable commentaries, remained nonetheless, until the middle of the seventeenth century, among the most widespread.*

assurance. The Boehmian motif of the "signature," which appears in full in the *De Signatura Rerum* (1622), no doubt finds its most immediate antecedent in the Paracelsian language of the *signatures*; but the stricter idea of an alphabet of the world, in which each thing bears its name inscribed in permutable letters, one seeks in vain in Tauler, in the *Theologia Deutsch*, even in Eckhart. One finds it, on the other hand, in Reuchlin: *ducunt enim litterae mundum* ("for the letters lead the world," Book III, towards the middle). That this sentence, or a sentence of this tone, might have been pronounced before Boehme on a winter evening, in 1617 or 1618, in the ill-heated room of a cobbler who had never read it, this no document can establish, though it remains entirely conceivable. It is a possibility, not a proof.

III. — Agrippa: encyclopaedic diffusion

The third name of the lineage is less glorious but of an importance that lay properly in diffusion: Henry Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim (1486–1535). His *De Occulta Philosophia libri tres*, completed in 1510 but printed in their definitive version at Cologne in 1531–1533, became immediately the great manual of Renaissance occultism. There were, in 1600, few learned libraries of Central Europe that did not contain an Agrippa. It was through him, more than through Pico or through Reuchlin, that the kabbalistic notions entered the current language of cultivated readers.

Agrippa's own contribution is slight: he compiles more than he thinks. But his compilation is precious, because it sets the kabbalistic materials within a vaster system which naturalises them.

Book III of the *De Occulta Philosophia* expounds, under the title of *cabala*, the substance of what Pico and Reuchlin had introduced: the doctrine of the sephiroth, the science of the divine names, angels and demons ranged according to the degrees of the Hebrew hierarchy, alphabetical combinatories. The whole is told in a clear, almost scholastic Latin, with neither the contorted mysticism of Reuchlin nor the prophetic enthusiasm of Pico. It is learned popularisation, which made the matter accessible even to readers who would have read neither the one nor the other.

For our inquiry, the *Occulta Philosophia* counts chiefly because Paracelsus read it, and because Boehme, through Paracelsus, inherits it indirectly. The exegetes of Paracelsus (Sudhoff at their head) have long recognised, in the verbal cataracts of the *Astronomia Magna*, borrowings *verbatim* from Agrippa. And Boehme, whose Paracelsian debt I shall set out further on (Chapter III), receives this Agrippan matter filtered once more. The complete chain is thus the following: mediaeval rabbi, Mithridates in Latin, Pico, Agrippa, Paracelsus, German vernacular theologian, Boehme. At each link, the rabbinic precision is degraded, the speculative reach widens. At the end of the chain, what is found in Boehme is no longer kabbalah; it is the *imprint* of kabbalah upon German concepts.

IV. — Synthesis: what the *cabbala christiana* transmitted, and what it lost

At the close of this genealogy, I should like to make three observations which will guide the following chapters.

Firstly: the *cabbala christiana* made known, and made accessible in their vocabulary, the *formal structures* of the Jewish kabbalah, the list of the sephiroth, the combinatory of the letters, the idea of an En-Sof anterior to all manifestation, the hierarchy of the worlds. It transmitted their existence and their names; it did not, for all that, furnish the operative, term-by-term use of them that one believes one recognises in Boehme, and that it will be necessary to document, without overrating it, in the chapters that follow. Appendix B measures precisely this gap: what the Latin channel *could* carry, and what it could scarcely carry.

Secondly: the *cabbala christiana* strongly altered the *theological content* of that same kabbalah, by projecting Trinitarian Christology into it. Boehme therefore receives a kabbalah already Christianised, and it is this that allows him, within orthodox Lutheranism, to integrate it without manifest confessional rupture.

Thirdly: the *cabbala christiana* wholly evacuated the *ritual and juridical frame* which, in the Jewish kabbalah, gave meaning to the speculative structures. No more prescriptions, no more calendar, no more community. There remains only a mobile metaphysics, ready to be re-employed by any pious theosopher. It is for this reason that it could, in the seventeenth century, quicken the thought of a Saxon cobbler: because it had previ-

ously been stripped of all that made it, properly speaking, a lived faith. The kabbalah that reaches Boehme is not a religion; it is an available *metaphysical grammar*.

This grammar the following chapter will show at work in the Paracelsian matrix, which is the most immediate avenue by which it reached Görlitz.

End of Chapter II.

Chapter III

Paracelsus as Matrix:
from the Paracelsian Mysterium Magnum to the Boehmian

It is unlikely that the *Conclusiones* of Pico, the dialogues of Reuchlin, or the compilations of Agrippa touched Jakob Boehme directly; it is permitted to suppose, without philological assurance, that they reached him two or three generations earlier through the intermediary of a Swiss physician of modest condition and wandering life, who died at Salzburg in 1541 in circumstances which his biographers have never wholly clarified. Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, called Paracelsus, seems to me one of the most plausible of these mediators. It is through him, in good part as it would appear, that the Christian-kabbalistic matter was able to descend as far as the learned circles of northern Germany and the lettered friends of the cobbler of Görlitz. I offer this as a presumption, not as a demonstration.

I confess, in beginning this chapter, to a reservation. Paracelsus is one of those authors who must be read with patience. There is in him a theosophical emphasis, a taste for coined terms, a manner of proclaiming his discoveries while at the same time contesting the universities, the Church, and the medicine of Galen, which make him difficult reading for minds schooled in scholarly sobriety. I long kept my distance. If I resolved to read him seriously, it is because the necessity under which I labour, for the present work, of tracing back the sources of Boehme left me little alternative. And I have found, as others before me have found,

that one understands Boehme ill without reading Paracelsus, and that one reads Paracelsus ill without a certain indulgence for enthusiasm.

The chapter that follows does not claim to restore Paracelsian medicine in its entirety; that would be a book, and Karl Sudhoff has written it[9]. It will follow a single narrow thread: that which leads, from the cosmogonic speculations of Paracelsus around the notions of *Iliaster*, of *Mysterium Magnum*, and of the three principles (salt, sulphur, mercury), by a detour, to Boehmian theosophy. And we shall attempt, along the way, to measure what this inheritance appears to owe, through Paracelsus, to the Christian-kabbalistic body of material set out in the preceding chapter.

I. — Paracelsus in Brief

Theophrastus von Hohenheim was born in 1493 at Einsiedeln, in what is now German-speaking Switzerland, the son of a country physician. He studied medicine at Ferrara, travelled in Italy, France, Spain, Poland, and perhaps as far as Constantinople, taught briefly as a professor at Basel (1527–1528) before being driven out for having publicly burned the books of Avicenna, and passed the remainder of his life in wandering, dying at Salzburg in an inn in 1541. In his lifetime he published little; after his death his manuscripts were dispersed, gathered, partially published from 1564 onward, and brought together in a great Basel edition in ten volumes by Johann Huser between 1589

[9] *Karl Sudhoff, Bibliographia Paracelsica, Berlin, Reimer, 1894, and the long series of Paracelsus-Forschungen which appeared in the years that followed. The critical edition of the Sämtliche Werke which he directs (first division, Munich, 1922–1933) remains the indispensable instrument.*