

## The Union of Worlds

### Biblical and Augustinian Sources of German Mysticism

A student unfamiliar with mystical writings, who approached them expecting to encounter reports of arcane experiences, might be dismayed to discover so many open secrets. Much of what is found in the writings of Hildegard, Eckhart, or Boehme could have been said or written in a nonmystical context—indeed was written elsewhere without pressing any claim to an immediate knowledge of divine things. Eckhart also expressed the themes of his mystical sermons in his discursive treatises. The many-faceted theosophy of Boehme can be traced in large measure to sources that are not *per se* mystical.

What makes the traditional theme into a mystical theme? In instance after instance, the German mystics were confronted with crises of authority. Either their own or their contemporaries' certainty of the received word of scriptural, ecclesiastical, or philosophical authority came under challenge. Under challenge, the received word was reborn as mysticism, taking on new life in the vision or audition, through prayer or contemplation, in the illuministic theory, or as the Pietistic awakening. If German mysticism possesses a secret, it should be sought in the world rather than in the word.

From our vantage, mysticism is not something that occurs or exists in and of itself. To debate whether there is mysticism in the Bible or Augustine is pointless. Even granting that the Fourth Gospel has given rise to a Johannine mysticism, and that Augustine's vision at Ostia was clearly a mystical experience, it is not the case that a self-perpetuating mysticity is rekindled by an isolated Johannine or Ostian spark which leapfrogs the remaining biblical and Patristic-Augustinian tradition. A study focusing only on the *unio mystica*, on Dionysian elements, on the mystic as heretic, or, in whatever mysterious way, as *Other*, would be like a mountain range charted to show only the peaks that extend above the cloud cover. We can gain a sounder view of the lay of things by reversing this perspective. It is misleading to characterize the mystic as an outsider devoted to the

path of Pseudo-Dionysius. Thomas Aquinas was hardly less devoted to him than was Eckhart; and Johann Wenck, who accused Cusanus of error, was probably at least as taken with the "Father of Western Mysticism" as the man whom he accused.<sup>1</sup> The mysticism of Eckhart, Cusanus, or Boehme originated in a more complex interaction with authority than the indictments of orthodox accusers or the idolizations of some modern admirers would lead us to suspect.

The theme of German mysticism to be delineated and studied here is derived from canonical passages of the Bible. As sources of mysticism, they do not require interpretation by means of the allegorical or anagogic modes of exegesis. Not Dionysius, but Augustine is the Patristic source whose interpretation of the seminal scriptural passages introduced them into the mainstream of Western thought in the form that is decisive for our theme.

The preeminent speculative theme of German mysticism is what might be called the "union of worlds." Its scriptural subtexts are two passages of the Bible that begin with the words, "In the beginning...": the first verse of Genesis and the Prolog to the Gospel of John. Behind the conflation of these "beginnings" lies a convergence of philosophical and religious traditions—Jewish, Hellenistic, Gnostic, and Christian—a convergence first represented by Philo Judaeus of Alexandria and then carried on by Origen, Clement of Alexandria, and many centuries of Platonizing Fathers of the Church. To the German mystics, the authors of the two seminal passages are Moses and John the Evangelist, as interpreted by Saint Augustine.

In addition to the two "beginnings," with their distinct paradigms for the relations of creation, creature, and Creator, other biblical motifs enter into the pattern. A constellation of texts establishes the structure of the divine knowledge recorded by the German mystics in their writings. Genesis 1:27 indicates that the human creature was created in the image of the divine Creator. This is also a source for the motif of creation as a form of imaging and of self-knowledge as mystical knowledge. The intertestamental Wisdom literature, as well as a number of Pauline dicta (especially Romans 1:20 and Acts 17:28), extend the concept of a creation in which the visible things in nature are symbols for the invisible qualities of God, or for his immanent presence in the creation. The Pauline term for God as *omnes in omnibus*, all in all,<sup>2</sup> not only sustains the view that God is in all things: it eventually yields the implication that all things are contained in all other things. Immanence and transcendence, creation and Creator, visible and invisible, part and whole—these are the parameters of distinct,

yet symbolically related spheres. The visible, external, finite, temporal, and natural world consists of an array of symbols and systems of symbols, expressing in time the eternal being of a transcendent deity.

Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart, and Jacob Boehme are the three outstanding representatives of the varieties of German mysticism: the visionary, the reflective, and the nature mystic. Though their works are characterized by considerable differences, they nonetheless approach the common theme of the relationship of transcendence and immanence by way of the same canonical texts; and they arrive at a similar solution: *the created world is to its Creator as an utterance to its speaker*. The world means God, and has been meant by God into being. Created through the Word, the world is wordlike for all who are open to discern its significance. This wordlike character of all things lends an authority to the German mystic, who characteristically appears in a period of crisis for traditional, institutional, and personal standards of authority.

Before we turn to the nonscriptural, philosophical sources of our theme, we should first consider the degree to which the biblical passages offered the requisite material of imagery and idea for the themes and authority of the mystic. Since we will repeatedly encounter the juxtaposition of the two "beginnings," we should consider what the pertinent passages are capable of contributing aside from their traditional reception. Both begin with the words, "In the beginning," but then proceed to recount the coming into being of the world in rather different terms. According to Genesis in the New International Version (NIV):

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening and there was morning—the first day. (Genesis 1:1–5)

On the second day, God created the expanse or firmament and separated the waters above it from the waters below it. On the third day, God gathered the waters below the firmament into one place; the dry ground became the land, and the waters the seas. God let the land produce vegetation, sprouting seeds and bearing fruit, and pronounced it

good. On the fourth day, God created the lights in the heavens, separating day from night and marking the seasons, days, and years with stars, sun, and moon. On the fifth day, God filled the seas with living creatures, and the sky with birds. And on the sixth day, God created animals, seeing to it that they would reproduce according to their kind.

Then last, but apparently most important of all, God created the human being as a twofold creature:

So God created man in his own image,  
in the image of God he created him;  
male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:28)

Upon them, God conferred *dominion* over all living things. Genesis goes on to survey the parameters of dominion by revealing the consequences of disobedience. The disobedience of the human creature plunges humankind into the state of nature in which laws and punishments become necessary. If the entire Bible commands obedience to God, the command in Genesis not to eat the forbidden fruit exalts obedience over understanding. The point is not to understand why; the point is to obey God. Genesis is in this sense patriarchal and hierarchical.

Until surprisingly recent times, the six days of creation in Genesis provided the cornerstone for philosophical and scientific theories of the natural world. These included free speculations, expanded beyond the literalism of a world brought into being in six calendar days. Precisely for those whose expectations were honed by absolute faith in the scriptural word, Genesis left many questions unanswered. How could there be “evening” and “morning” on the first day—before the heavenly bodies and the sun had been created on the fourth day? What sort of light shone prior to the creation of the sun? When were the angels created? (For created they must have been, since otherwise the absolute priority of God would have been challenged.) Out of what material was the world created? Was the stuff of the world coeternal with God, or was the material of the world made out of nothingness by God prior to the six days? And if God created everything, what was the source of evil in the world—prior to the fall of Adam? And above all, how were all the questions that had been left unresolved by the creation account in Genesis related to the paramount one of why a God who presumably didn’t need it should have chosen to bring the world into being at all?

What were the dark waters that were parted by the firmament on the second day? Could they be identical with the crystalline seas that

appear in the course of the world's destruction in the last book of the Bible? And, if so, might this be a secret hint that the end returns to its beginning, that creation is not only circular in space (as we see from the heavens) but also circular in time—circular in salvational history? And, if so, what does this circularity reveal to us about the still-hidden significance of the world? How does it relate to the Savior who is called the "light of the world," who is the Alpha and the Omega, who exalts the lowly and humbles the proud?

And why is "separation" so decisive—the separation of the waters, the separation of light from darkness? The faithful but polyvocal reading of the Bible discerns the voice of an "author" Moses, who wrote of things he could not have witnessed—but who also may have known far more than he was able to write. Peering behind the veil of Moses became a term for the mystic's quest.

Notwithstanding all the unanswered questions, one thing is certain: Genesis accounts for the origin of the world in terms of the coordinates of the *created world*, in accordance with *space* and *time*, of *above* and *below*, as *a sequence of events*, within an implicit *hierarchy*, in which what is above is higher, and what is below lower, and in which what comes last in order of creation is first in order of importance. If God is transcendent in Genesis, the perspective of his act of creation is nevertheless immanent.

The origin of the world appears in a different perspective of immanence and transcendence, when we attend to the voice of the fourth Evangelist recounting the "beginning":

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. (John 1:1–5)

Here the perspective of space, time, and nature has shifted to one of timeless immediacy and presence. No longer is there a sequence of distinct events. Here, event has aspect rather than sequence. The beginning is not a first followed by a second and a third. The "beginning" is an eternal present and ground of all that comes into being and lives. The Word or "Logos," according to Kittel's dictionary of the Greek New Testament, is unique in this usage. Clearly, the Word is Christ. But why this peculiar terminology? The reader may recall the translation challenge that Goethe's Faust labored over at the begin-

ning of his journey of discovery through the created world. As in Faust's interpretation of John 1:1, "the Word" can be interpreted as "sense" (*Sinn*), "force," (*Kraft*), and even as "action," (*Tat*), since the unfolding of the world is the same as the "action" of divine creation in Genesis. Cross-referenced with other passages, especially from the Wisdom books, "the Word" could also signify the divine "order" or divine "mind," and there are surely even more possibilities.

But beyond these valid interpretations, "the Word" can mean quite simply "word," that is, any spoken, written, or conceived utterance, sign, or command. It can be taken as the "Let there be" of Genesis, or taken as the hidden intention, the word within the word that Genesis does not reveal. If "the Word" is taken in its literal sense, as a word, then the world itself becomes figural—it is transfigured into a "Book of Nature": the world is an external revelation of the divine will, before it was recorded by Moses, or revealed in Christ. Books are after all collections of visible letters revealing the invisible meanings of an author. In its philosophical sense, "cosmos" signifies order. Pondering the natural, human, and scriptural orders, the mystic attempts to look from creation, from "macrocosm" and "microcosm," to a hidden divine intention, concealed in the Bible. To be sure, the Bible itself offers the precedents for this. The Apostle Paul, echoing motifs of the intertestamental sapiential literature, exhorts the idolatrous Romans that they should recognize the invisible things of the Creator from the visible things of creation (Romans 1:20): "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being clearly understood from what has been made..." With the same reasoning of natural theology, Paul tells the Athenians who have erected an altar "to the unknown god" that, as for the true deity: "in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring'" (Acts 17:28). The transcendent-immanent deity is invisible, yet omnipresent in the world. God is wholly above human beings, yet—so it appears here—*as* innate to them as their own human genesis and lifeblood.

In the Prolog of John, the Word is paradoxically immanent and transcendent. The Word acts in creation, yet remains unto itself, remains *with* God, and *is* God. The self-identity of the eternal Word is therefore dynamic: an identity that gives rise changelessly, which resides in eternity while entering into time. This duality is matched by the light that shines in the darkness, but cannot be comprehended by the darkness. Where the creation account in Genesis represented God through his actions, and his actions in terms of our world of time, space, matter, and number, John instead places transcendence and

immanence abruptly vis-à-vis one another. The becoming of the world is refracted through the eye of eternity. If we regard the created world as a riddle, implicit in Genesis, this riddle now moves into the forefront in John. To the darkness, the light is an incomprehensible and elusive mystery. Where Genesis left us with unanswered questions regarding the world, the language of the Fourth Gospel encourages us to see the world and life as an ever-present mystery. For the devout mystic the answer is, to be sure, never lacking. What is lacking is a full appreciation of the mystery itself.

The most original German mystics place this mystery at the creative center of their work. In *The Book of Divine Works*, Hildegard perfects her synthesis of Genesis and John by treating the creation in time as a symbolic formulation of the eternal Word. Eckhart emphasizes the Prolog in his Latin treatises and highlights its symbolic dualities in his sermons. One sermon subliminally inserts the mysterious imagery of the Prolog into the seventh day of Genesis, thereby equating the sabbath of divine creation with the Dionysian darkness of absolute divine transcendence:

“In principio”—this means in German as much as a beginning of all being, as I said in the school; I said this in addition: it is an end of all being, for the first beginning is only there for the sake of the final end. Indeed, God himself does not rest there where the first beginning is; he rests at the final end and resting place of all being.... What is the final end? It is the concealed darkness of the eternal deity, and is not known, and was never known, and will never be known. God remains there unknown in himself, and the light of the eternal Father has eternally shone into it, and the darkness does not comprehend the light.

*“In principio” daz sprichet als vil ze tiutsche als ein angenge alles wesens, als ich sprach in der schuole; ich sprach noch mê: ez ist ein ende alles wesens, wan der êrste begin ist durch des lesten endes willen. Jâ, got der ruowet selbe niht dâ, dâ er ist der êrste begin; er ruowet dâ, dâ er ist ein ende und ein raste alles wesens... Waz ist das leste ende? Ez ist diu verborgen vinsternisse der êwigen gotheit und ist unbekant und wart nie bekant und enwirt niemer bekant. Got blîbet dâ in im selber unbekant, und daz licht des êwigen vaters hât dâ êwiclîche îngeschinen, und diu vinsternisse enbegrîfet des liehtes niht.<sup>3</sup>*

Here, Eckhart the preacher superimposes onto the imagery of John the Dionysian motif of the superessentiality of God as a “darkness”

beyond all knowing, and then returns to the context of the Prolog, in which the light is eternally shining into the darkness. But notably the overriding message of this sermon to Dominican nuns in Cologne is that the believer should love rather than fear God (*Der mensche ensol got niht vürhten, wan der, der in vürhtet, der vliuhet in*<sup>4</sup>) and should therefore desist from striving for a knowledge of God in images and instead recognize that all created things are nothing in themselves, yet are God in God. In view of this purpose, it seems unlikely that Eckhart intended to confound his listeners by drawing them ill-prepared into an unwonted adventure in negative theology. The Dionysian mystery is assimilated to the authority of Scripture. The Johannine-Dionysian light and darkness reinforce the preacher's chiaroscuro symbolization of interpenetrating yet distinct aspects of being—as well as his consoling message that time is entirely overshadowed by eternity. Gnosis and agnosis are both absorbed in divinity.

Equally mysterious, but again incorporating the same scriptural materials, is the cosmogony in Boehme's *The Three Principles of Divine Being*: Before the world was born, writes Boehme, there was a dark matrix in the void, like a nothingness; then into it shone the eternal light, arousing a desire for the light within the darkness. But since the craving within this reified darkness (or "dryness") could find no object for its desire, and could not hold the eternal light, the desire contracted upon itself. This contraction gave birth to and became the material of the world—in which the forces of life are rejuvenated through the power of the divine light.<sup>5</sup> After recounting this strange cosmogony, the author deciphers it for the reader as an allegorical transcription of the Johannine Prolog—which he then praises above every book of the Bible.<sup>6</sup>

In Eckhart's sermon, we risked missing the message to love rather than fear God, risked overlooking the familiar references to John, interpreting the sermon as pure Dionysian negative theology aimed above the heads of the simple nuns of his flock. In Boehme's cosmogony, we could easily fail to notice the similar message that fear can be vanquished because the power of light pervades everything—a message that merges the two "beginnings" in the single moral: "Thus one truly understands how the light of God is a cause of all things" (*Also versteht man gar eigentlich, wie das Licht Gottes aller Dinge eine Ursache ist*).<sup>7</sup>

One might want to interpret Boehme's visionary cosmogony as a contamination with Gnostic influences of the kind represented by Basilides. Yet the birth of the world is an elaboration of the motifs of the Johannine Prolog. The light shines into the darkness: its inability to comprehend the light is what constitutes nature as forever in need of



redemption from its own congenital blindness. Eckhart's cryptic conclusions and Boehme's mysterious cosmogony aim at stimulating a sense of the wondrous depth of experience, an awareness of a profound riddle awaiting its solution. But we notice that the answer is encoded into the puzzle. Instead of referring back to some obscure psychological experience—and far from involving Gnosticism or pantheism—the solution lies in Scripture and in established articles of faith. The astute reader or listener can be expected to hear a familiar voice of authority.

The key is the eternal Word, embodied in time and spoken by the God become human in the Gospel of John: "no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (3:3); "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit" (3:6); "God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth" (4:24); "the Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life" (6:63); "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (8:12); "...become sons of light" (12:36); "A new command I give you: Love one another" (13:34); "Remain in me, and I will remain in you" (15:4); "Though I have been speaking figuratively, a time is coming when I will no longer use this kind of language but will tell you plainly about my Father" (16:25). Christ embodies the union of immanence and transcendence. As the Word, he is both in the Father and in the world, both historical and present, outer as well as inner. The believers are in him, and he in them. True to its mysterious Prolog, the Fourth Gospel elaborates the dichotomy of transcendence and immanence in its teachings. John generalizes in contrasting life, light, spirit, love, and truth with darkness and flesh, and hints that the figurative language of these teachings is to be supplanted in time by a more direct mode of expression. The meditative path that Eckhart's auditors or Boehme's readers could be expected to follow need never have lost sight of biblical authority in the play of association and interpretation.

Their mystagogical pronouncements invited misunderstandings and rendered them vulnerable to charges of heresy. However, no serious evidence has ever indicated that these mystics harbored the covert intention of subverting the canonical status of the Bible or overturning fundamental articles of faith—much as we might prefer to see them as radical outsiders. In some cases, the mystics indeed seem to have clashed with the authorities as in Dostoyevsky's parable of the Grand Inquisitor who threatened to have a returned Christ burned at the stake. But there is just as little reason to sanctify the mystic as such, as if every claimant to divine knowledge were a saint or martyr. Ultimately, it is pointless to argue over the charge of heterodoxy against Eckhart or

Boehme. Heresy is defined by the institution which holds the power of judgment and enforcement. Our claim is simply that the message of the German mystics—whether orthodox or heterodox, whether doctrinally admissible or deviant—found its point of departure in the scriptural word—in a word mediated, as Katz says, by tradition.

The German mystical tradition is not only scriptural but also Augustinian. It is Augustinian, not in reference to an Augustinianism of doctrine, but rather in reference to a writer and his dynamic and sometimes contradictory synthesis of themes. The difference cannot be emphasized enough. The *doctrine* of the creation *ex nihilo* may distinguish the orthodox thinker from the heterodox one. Yet the thought of *the continuity of the eternal being of the Creator with the temporal being of his creation*—the idea that in some sense *nature was in God before creation, and that God remains in nature after creation*—these are themes that are elaborated by the heterodox and the orthodox alike, even in similar terms.

Augustine viewed immanence and transcendence in light of the eternal Word and the created world, and at the same time in terms of Scripture and philosophy. His universal influence introduced our theme into the tradition in an enduring form. He embodies the theme of the union of worlds as if in person. His conversion was a bringing into focus of a Neoplatonic *Logos* in the revealed Word as Christ, a union that persists in the tradition founded upon his work. Here, we need to regard him not as the Father of the Church, nor even as the great philosopher, but as the author whose works were known directly or indirectly to nearly everyone. Not a doctrine, nor even a philosophy of Augustinianism, but rather the breadth of the man, replete with his many unresolved contradictions, makes him seminal for German mysticism.

The perennial importance of Augustine puts into a different perspective the theory of mysticism as an irrational subcurrent welling up periodically and inexplicably into the mainstream. Luther read him extensively in the decade before the *Ninety-Five Theses*. Descartes's *cogito ergo sum* looks back to Augustinian reflections even as it anticipates Kant. In addition to the weight of tradition, his work is of relevance to the *historical* environment of the seminal German mystics. Their representations of eternity and time were, like his, paralleled by institutional counterparts, by conflicting ecclesiastical and secular voices of authority.

Book eleven of *The City of God* lays a groundwork without which the tradition of German mysticism could scarcely have developed its

characteristic forms. In the previous ten books, the author has made various replies to the enemies of the City of God. Now he proposes to treat "the origin, and progress, and deserved destinies of the two cities (the earthly and the heavenly, to wit), which, as we have said, are in this present world commingled, and as it were entangled together." The author proposes to begin by showing "how the foundations of these two cities were originally laid, in the difference that arose among the angels" (CD 11.1).<sup>8</sup> The historical context evoked by Augustine is as if designed to resonate with the characteristic historical dilemma of the Germans who, from Hildegard to Boehme, likewise found themselves in a crisis-ridden world, a world in which two realms were vexingly entangled or at war: the Holy Roman Empire. At the beginning of the second chapter of book eleven, he writes in an exultant and visionary formulation that,

It is a great and rare thing for a man, after he has contemplated the whole creation, corporeal and incorporeal, and has discerned its mutability, to pass beyond it, and, by the continued soaring of his mind, to attain to the unchangeable substance of God, and, in that height of contemplation, to learn from God Himself that none but He has made all that is not of the divine essence. (CD 11.2)

This soaring trajectory of the contemplative mind that passes beyond the world of created mutability to merge in thought with the eternal being of God is akin to the salient project of several German mystics. Like him, they ascended above "cities" that were "commingled" and "entangled" in their own times—the secular city of the Empire and the spiritual city of the Church. Like him, they also endeavored to view the earthly world from the vantage of heaven. Again, as in book eleven, the German mystics were guided in their reflections by the two beginnings of Genesis and John, fixed poles between which their reflections developed with a surprising constancy and an equally surprising latitude of originality. Their Christology, like Augustine's, is set within a cosmic and philosophical perspective.

Of central importance for us are Augustine's many and varied reflections on eternity and time. Often in the background can be glimpsed the challenged principle of authority—personal, social, or doctrinal, whether in his conversion, in the controversies with the Donatists, Manicheans, and Pelagians, or in the dispute over the rival claims of pagan virtue and Christian faith. Pondering the union of eternity and time, he characterizes possible approaches to philosophical problems that he cannot claim to solve. He visualizes the created world

as contained in an infinite sea of divine being. The world is like a sponge: surrounded by, but also saturated with, the infinite being of God (Conf. 7.7). He considers the question posed by the philosophical critics of Christianity: Why should God have created the world at one particular moment in time and not at another? He reasons that time and the world were created together, so that although the world does have an origin, there was no time before it (CD 11.6). He notes that the presence of God within the world cannot be construed in the manner of part and whole. Like the divine presence, the incorruptibility of life in any living body is entirely present in every part of the body (CD 11.10). In his many reflections, Augustine repeatedly juxtaposes the first verses of Genesis with the Prolog of John, and cites Paul's injunction to the Romans to recognize the invisible things of God from the visible things of creation. He interprets this as an instruction to proceed from the sensible things to the supersensible ones, from the realm of nature to the intellectual sphere of God and the angels. He notes that God does not reveal himself in visions or voices to the outer human eye or ear, but rather speaks by means of truth itself to those who are prepared to perceive it (CD 11.2). He writes of a twilight knowledge of things when they are regarded in themselves, and of a noonday knowledge when they are regarded in God (CD 11.29). Rational, empirical, scriptural, and visionary-mystical arguments are all combined in his reflections. These were in turn formed by the historical context of conflict and dissolution, by the conflicting interests of the earthly and heavenly "cities." In the historical environments of the German mystics, these motifs will be adapted to new assertions of authority.

The Augustinian synthesis therefore presents a thread of continuity. This is not to deny all the earlier and later—all the Christian and non-Christian—sources that contribute to the tradition. But no other source, including Pseudo-Dionysius, is capable of reemerging in such distinct forms. Centered in the relations of Genesis and Word, there is an alternation between temporal and eternal poles: these are variously embodied in the visible and the invisible, the outer and the inner, the finite and the infinite, letter and spirit, part and whole.

1. For Hildegard, it is the visible world of nature that refers us to the invisible things of God. Involvements in time are counterposed with the contemplation of eternity. There are echoes of Augustine's struggles with the Donatist and Manichean heresies, of his City of God and its satanic enemy, and of the endtime battles that conclude with the triumph of the faithful, followed by a final restoration of the new heaven and new earth. Hildegard may have drawn on sources unknown to us. Certainly she reflects the intellectual climate of the

twelfth century with its revived Augustinianism and its symbolic interpretation of the visible world in the Scholastic mysticism of Hugo of St. Victor. (Though Hugh was by some accounts a German from Saxony, he is customarily assigned to the history of Scholasticism rather than to the annals of German mysticism.)<sup>9</sup>

2. For Meister Eckhart, the relationship of the visible to the invisible directs us no longer to Hildegard's close study of nature, but rather beyond all visible or imaginable "images," to the supersensible that lies within, in the "ground of the soul," contiguous with the ground of God. Eternity with its serene calm overshadows time with its harsh struggles. The balance therefore swings back to the Neoplatonism of Augustine—and beyond him to a speculation on unity represented by Dionysius, or later by Moses Maimonides.<sup>10</sup> Yet even as it swings, the pendulum is anchored in tradition: much of what seems radically mystical and heretical in Eckhart is an interpretation of Augustinian motifs.

Eckhart might seem to characterize himself for us as an introverted fugitive from the world by his assertion that the truth lies within; as a pantheist by his teaching that God did not create all things and then turn aside, but rather remained in things; and as a Free Spirit by his word that none other than the Son of God is born in the soul of the believer. Yet Eckhart cited the first two assertions from Augustine; the third is an attenuated variant of a Patristic motif with Pauline scriptural precedents.<sup>11</sup> Conceptual prerequisites for the motif of the birth of God in the soul can also be found in considerations concerning the mind in Augustine's *On the Trinity*. Eckhart's Dionysian mysticism of unity is a magnification of his biblical and Augustinian motifs, which recognize in God the true being of creation and associate knowledge of God with knowledge of the soul, drawing the final consequence from the common tenet that only like can know like.

3. For Nicholas of Cusa, Augustine is present in the paradigm of a finite world encompassed by the infinite being of God and in the philosophical essaying from the conceivable toward the inconceivable.

The reaction against Aristotle and Scholasticism in Renaissance mysticism revived the speculative fertility of Augustinian creation theory. Again, this was not a matter of an Augustinian doctrine, but of an inquiry that speculated between the options of creation *ex nihilo* and a creation from an eternal ground of nature in God (the Word before and within creation), or, put differently, between dichotomizing God and nature and recognizing the divine presence in nature.

4. Protestant Spiritualism interwove the relationships of time and eternity with the relations of letter and spirit. Again Augustine

provided precedents by interpreting letter and spirit as law and grace and by accepting (as a stepping-stone to his own conversion) Ambrose's teaching that what appears meaningless in the Bible taken literally can have an allegorical or spiritual sense (Conf. 6.6).

5. Boehme's synthesis of the mystical tradition takes its point of departure from the doctrine of a nonpantheistic divine omnipresence. According to views of ubiquity articulated by Augustine or Luther and recapitulated by Boehme, God is wholly present in every part of the world. The divine wisdom that enlightens the human spirit also guides the movement of every leaf. In this, Boehme not only confirms Lutheran doctrine but also recapitulates Augustinian motifs. Boehme broke with certain earlier mystical traditions by characterizing the eternal grounds of creation in animistic and alchemistic terms, by acknowledging the substantive existence of evil, and by seeking the root of evil in the divine being. Nevertheless, the context framing his theories is in numerous respects an Augustinian one. Though not doctrinally Augustinian, Boehme's writing carries on the thematic tradition rooted in a biblical approach to nature. Nearly all his seminal notions are enhanced variants of Augustinian themes: the instantaneous and continuous creation in which the seven days correspond to an ever-present pattern, Creation and Word, all the motifs of the Fall from grace, the idealization of a prelapsarian Adam, and the recovery of his angelic knowledge. Moreover, close textual scrutiny offers evidence of a minor but unmistakable paraphrasing of Augustine.<sup>12</sup> The recapitulation of Augustinian themes distances Boehme from his precursor Paracelsus, in whom the same influence is less distinguishable.

6. In the Pietistic turn inward toward a personal fervor and devotion, the voice of Augustine could still carry—as intimately as if he were not an African bishop of the Roman Church, dead for twelve hundred years, but seated, prayer book in hand, within the Protestant conventicle. A popular book of prayers was compiled by Martin Moller, the Lutheran pastor of Boehme's home city of Görlitz. A precursor of Pietism, Moller was placed by Johann Valentin Andreae in his Preface to *Christianopolis* (1619) on a par with Johann Arndt. Pastor Moller's German-language prayer book, *Meditationes Sanctorum Patrum* (1592), drew some fifty of its sixty-eight prayers from the writings of Augustine (with four each from Tauler and Saint Bernard and one from Dionysius).<sup>13</sup> The Augustinian *Meditations and Soliloquies* were among the most common translations printed in the late sixteenth century.

The distant Augustinian background looms as large behind the *Innerlichkeit* of Eckhart and German Pietism, as behind the divine

powers of creation envisaged by the Renaissance nature mystics, or even behind the cosmic attraction of love which the German Romantics recognized in nature. Augustine is considered to have inspired the medieval metaphysics of light, as well as the historical-eschatological schemes in the mysticism of South German Anabaptists. His mind could countenance a seemingly enlightened critique of ancient astrology, along with a superstitious acknowledgment of demons. Both sides of Augustine were echoed in the Renaissance. Always with references to an existential center and perpetually referring back to the two beginnings of Genesis and John, his inspirational fecundity ranged across most fields of science, philosophy, and theology.

The conjunction of Creation with the Word is at the root of the theme designated here as the union of worlds. Under thematic analysis, the union of worlds breaks down into several disparate, but conceptually interrelated motifs. Most of these motifs have a basis in Augustine, though in certain instances their classical articulation may lie elsewhere.

The mystical mind travelling like Augustine from this world toward the eternal one may pursue a variety of courses traced or intimated in his writings. Under closer scrutiny, the paths prove to be variants of a single conceptual theme. The pragmatic consequence of this is that—despite the absence of an experienced mystical union—the varieties of German mysticism can be appropriately studied as variants of a common theme of divine knowledge.

1. There is an *upward* path of ascent, which the mind pursues *gradatim*, “by degrees.” This path is spectacularly projected in book eleven of the *Confessions*. The path of hierarchical ascent is a frequent mystical motif, associated with the “affirmative” and “negative” theologies of Pseudo-Dionysius.

2. There is an *inward* path of the mind that goes into itself to seek God. This is the avenue described in *On True Religion* (39.72), cited by Eckhart: “Do not go out. Return into yourself. Truth dwells in the inner man.” Prior to his conversion, Augustine had been fascinated with a Plotinian philosophy familiar to him from the work of Marius Victorinus. This had encouraged the reflective tendencies of his thought. In remarkably abstract yet compelling reflections, Plotinus guided the philosophical enterprise from the outer world of the senses, inward to the soul and transcendent spirit, and to the unity of the superessential deity from which all being emanates: “to find ourselves is to know our source” (Ennead 6:9, 7). The soul that knows itself becomes like, indeed one with, the divine Spirit which has its

being in the thinking of its own being. In Augustine's understanding of his conversion to Christianity, the Platonic concept of truth as a supersensible reality rediscovers itself in Christ, as the Logos become flesh. Guided by revealed truth, the soul's self-knowledge therefore leads toward, indeed is, a knowledge of God.

3. There is also a speculative path of retrospective inquiry that looks back to the beginning of the world, as in Augustine's Genesis commentaries. Later, combining Augustine with Dionysius, Gregor of Nyssa and other sources, Erigena's *De Divisione Naturae* recognized a cosmic progression or return (*reditus*) of all things to God. According to Augustine, God could not have created the world without a plan or idea in the form of the eternal grounds or reasons: the *rationes aeternae* present in the divine Word and Wisdom. The creation in Genesis was instantaneous. Its continuation is perpetually implemented by the invisible "seeds" of the *rationes seminales*; these effect the orderly origination and growth of all things. Hence, order, permanence, and growth in nature are a profound mystery with sublime implications. The Augustinian concept of the eternal seeds of the creation in time is of Neoplatonic and perhaps Stoic origin (*logoi spermatikoi*).

After Augustine, Erigena's naturalistic mysticism posited *causae primordiales* at work in an ongoing creation. Among the German mystics, the same function (with or without the reference to Augustine or Erigena) is fulfilled by Hildegard's notion of a "greening" of things, as the work of the Word, or by the divine virtues or forces. In Eckhart's doctrine of ideas (*rationes*), these mediate between eternity and creation. So also do the "forces" (*krefte*) "poured into" all created things by God in the nature theories of Paracelsus. Boehme's seven "source-spirits" (*Quellgeister*) dwell in an eternal nature and are active in the ongoing creation and revitalization of the world.

Despite their many differences, all these concepts—from the Augustinian *rationes seminales* to Boehme's *Quellgeister in Gott*—serve to bridge the chasm between the eternal world in God and the created world in time. To some degree, all are construed in the sense of an objective agency or medium, intermediate between the absolute transcendence of the deity and the visible world of nature. German mysticism went far beyond Augustine by breaking with his teaching of the creation *ex nihilo*, but did so in order to implicate the life of the world and the life of God in one envisioned development.

For the ninth-century Irish theorist Erigena, as well as for Boehme, the Word, understood as a divine cause, helps to resolve the question whether God created nature from nothing or from some pre-existent material. As Gershom Scholem has observed, a *creatio ex nihilo*



was required by the idea of God's absolute omnipotence—yet philosophy dictates that nothing can arise from nothing.<sup>14</sup> Between these two options, Erigena recognized the dialectical synthesis of a creation of the world out of *nothing other than* God's own eternal being: comprised of divine primordial causes in the Word. A systematic thinker *par excellence*, Erigena surpassed Augustine's interpretation of creation with a theory of theophany in which knowledge plays a more dynamic role.

Through speculations of this kind, the Augustinian trajectory of a knowledge that soars up toward the City of God eventually merged with a vision of the completion of being, the perfection of the world in which God is understood as all in all. Knowledge is a divine self-creating process in nature, in which we with our imperfect knowing take part. All things are in all other things: to know this suggests that the beatific vision, or the completion of the world-process, is near at hand. As the Romantic poet Novalis still believed: mystical knowledge not only spans and unites worlds, it brings them into being and completes them.

4. The motifs of the ascending, ingoing, and returning paths to God are reinforced by further motifs concerning the nature of knowledge and its objects. The hierarchical path upward is also a path inward: the highest created thing is the soul. Thus for Eckhart, the motif of hierarchical ascent does not contradict the motif of an immediate "breakthrough" (*Durchbruch*): a spiritual event which occurs without degrees. Moreover, the immediacy of divine knowledge is emphasized as much by the nature mystics, Boehme or Paracelsus, as by the reflective mystic Eckhart. All characterize the knowledge of divine things as "immediate" (*ohne Mittel*). In seeing, the mind can pursue the outer path of the senses; the inner one of imagination or spirit; or the one that is both innermost and uppermost in the mystical scheme of routes—that of the illuminated intellect.

In his *De Genesi ad Litteram, Libri Duodecim*, Augustine divided the temporal and eternal perspectives on Creation into: (1) nature as we now experience it; (2) nature as it came into being during the six "days" of creation (which is interpreted as an instantaneous creation); and (3) nature as it existed prior to the creation, in the eternal Wisdom or eternal Word (Gen. ad litt. 5:28 ff.). These three aspects of creation match up with three modes of knowledge: the sensory, the imaginative, and the intellectual. The third is the supersensible divine knowledge—Augustine's interpretation of the "third heaven" into which the Apostle Paul was transported in the indescribable rapture recounted in 1 Corinthians 12:3-4. The ground of created nature—as laid out in the eternal Wisdom and Word of God—is known only through an

ecstatic transport of the kind experienced by the Apostle Paul. An entire concluding book of *De Genesi ad Litteram* is devoted to this mysterious ecstasy. To bolster the authority of their own interpretations of the created world, the German mystics defined Paul's rapture to conform to their own modes of knowledge. For Hildegard, Paul's incomprehensible words were an influx of wonders that conveyed the order of natural virtues and imparted prophetic knowledge<sup>15</sup>: that is, the kind of knowledge Hildegard claimed for herself.

In the sixth chapter of book twelve of *De Genesi ad Litteram*, the three kinds of knowledge are illustrated by means of Christ's commandment from Matthew 22:39, "Love thy neighbor as thyself." The eyes recognize the letters. The imagination recognizes the neighbor who is not present. Only the third, intellectual, mode of knowledge can discern those things which have no image at all: the love for one's neighbor. The third kind of knowledge is free of images, even as it recognizes the highest things of God (Gen. ad litt. 12:16 ff.).

The innermost and highest vision in Augustine's interpretive scheme coincides with love, making the divine love tantamount to the invisible spirit beneath the letter of the divine injunction. This is echoed in the mysticism of the Protestant Spiritualists, in Sebastian Franck's understanding of the "inner word." Boehme's mysticism dropped the three heavens of the Pauline-Augustinian tradition in favor of three "births" and "principles" of divine being, yet he still saw knowledge as a penetration and rebirth that strives for what is innermost and coincides with divine love. Whether or not Boehme and Franck were consciously alluding to Augustine in this motif, they were guided by the structures he had propagated.

5. Augustine declared that he wanted to know but two things: God and the soul. Knowledge of grace comes only from revelation; however, the measure of the certainty of truth is self-knowledge. Scriptural revelation is therefore balanced with the inner truth of a reflective self-certainty. While I can doubt all else, he concludes, I cannot doubt that I am. All truth is one, anchored in an inner certainty that is independent of sensory experience: "For we have another and far superior sense, belonging to the inner man, by which we perceive what things are just, and what unjust—just by means of an intelligible idea, unjust by the want of it.... By it I am assured both that I am and that I know this; and these two I love and in the same manner I am assured that I love them" (CD 11.27). The improbable German transition from Kantian rationalism to a new Romantic mysticism was in some sense anticipated by the Augustinian counterpoising of his own keen philosophical introspection with his passionate will to believe.

The inner trinity of being, self-certainty, and love enables the human mind to intuit an unconscious power pervading nature: "is it not obvious enough how nature shrinks from annihilation?" Love, the life of the soul, also acts without as a power causing all things in nature to rise, fall, or grow (CD 11.28). Though Augustine cannot, like Schelling, call this power the world-soul, only a small step would be needed to do so. A further step, and one might interpret the world-soul as a world-generating Will, as did Boehme and, long after him, the Romantic philosopher Schopenhauer (who still cited our pertinent themes from Augustine and the mystics).

6. If in German mysticism, there are more paths to God than the classical *purgatio*, *illuminatio*, and *unio*, there are indeed far more way-marks. The Book of the World is inscribed without and within. Everywhere there are analogies, signs, and symbols. Book thirteen of the *Confessions* provided a model for interpreting the Creation as a type of the Church. Augustine's theory of signs as words, or as things meaning other things, was expanded by those who came after him. Beyond the sign, the symbol can betoken that which is transcendent and infinitely distinct.<sup>16</sup> Taking issue with Augustine and at the same time citing Dionysius and Hugh of St. Victor, Saint Thomas Aquinas systematized the notion of created things as signs. God means not only in words, but also with things. When a word of Scripture refers to a thing which is also a divine sign, we are faced with the "spiritual" sense that is founded upon the literal sense of Holy Writ. The thing as sign is thereby integrated into the doctrine of the fourfold meaning of Scripture.<sup>17</sup>

A long tradition interprets the "unlike likeness" of Creator and creation by way of "analogy," as participation in the essence of the Creator. This encouraged a symbolism based on allegorical interpretations of nature and Scripture; this has been summarized by Armand Maurer:

Influenced by Philo, Clement of Alexandria makes frequent use of symbolism. For him, symbolism expresses the basic unity of all things, despite their multiplicity and diversity. Invisible harmonies, likenesses, and proportions bind the universe together, and these can be interpreted by symbols and allegories.... Augustine prefers the term 'sign' to 'analogy.' A sign is any word or thing that leads to a knowledge of something else. If it points to the divine, it is a *sacramentum*. The universe itself is holy (a sacrament, for it contains signs leading the mind above itself to God).<sup>18</sup>

Eckhart formulated a more radical variant of the medieval theory of analogy; in conformity with it, he made some of his most extreme sounding statements about the nothingness of all creatures *per se*.<sup>19</sup> Yet no less a medievalist than Josef Koch was unequivocal in concluding that the roots of Eckhart's theory of analogy lay in Augustine.<sup>20</sup>

Applied to the Book of Nature, the concept of analogy can reveal that forms correspond to things revealed in Scripture by the author of both these encoded works. Everywhere in nature, wrote Augustine, there are traces of the divine Trinity. The first vision in the second book of Hildegard's *Scivias* submits (in a divine pronouncement) that there are three forces in a stone, three in a flame, and three in a word; in each case, the three allude to the Trinity. The equivalent symbols for the three forms in one are inexhaustible in mystical literature. The nature mysticism of the Renaissance employed the trichotomies made famous by Paracelsus, thereby instituting a wider latitude for new hypotheses in chemistry and medical theory. But the Baroque mystic and poet Johannes Scheffler (Angelus Silesius) gives away the open secret of the Paracelsian *Tria Prima* in the *Cherubinischer Wandersmann* (book 1, no. 257):

That God is Triune any plant will show you,  
 Since Sulphur, Salt, and Mercury are seen in it as one.  
*Daß GOtt Dreyeinig ist | zeigt dir ein jedes Kraut |*  
*Da Schwefel | Saltz | Mercur | in einem wird geschaut.*

The triad of principles, Sulphur, Salt, Mercury, can be construed respectively as root, stem, and flower. But what made them seem so clearly visible to Silesius was his belief that the invisible things of God are revealed in the creation. In the mysticism of the Renaissance and Baroque periods, the mystical-philosophical trichotomy of body, soul, and spirit was revived. Accordingly, nature, anthropology, and divinity were all structured alike.

The principle of likeness can also be expressed in complex numerological symbols, as in Augustine's construal of the six days of creation as "the first perfect number" (an alternative to assuming that God was so slow that he required six calendar days to perform his work): "For the number six is the first which is made up of its own parts, i.e., of its sixth, third, and half, which are respectively one, two, and three and which make a total of six" (CD 11.30). To Augustine, this confirmed the biblical-apocryphal Book of Wisdom (2:20), that the divine Wisdom "ordered all things in number, and measure, and weight." The divine Wisdom is synonymous with the Creator Logos.

Order and number in nature therefore attest, as do the visible properties of things, to the transcendent being of God.

If it is permissible to think of this universal order and coherence of things as a grammar of the Book of the World, then its semantics also owes much to the obscure author of *The Divine Names*, Dionysius, called the Areopagite. (According to a legend universally accepted during the Middle Ages, the author Dionysius was the Athenian man converted when Paul preached in the Areopag at Athens.) Dionysius came to be considered the founder of Christian mysticism, the propagator of the *via negativa* and *via affirmativa*, and the *via triplex* (the above-mentioned stages of purgation, illumination, and union); as well as the sovereign mystic who recognized the divine superessential darkness. For this rhapsodist of absolute transcendence, the eternal outshines everything historical in Christianity. If Paul authorized the whole tradition of reading the visible things of nature in order to discover the invisible things of God, his legendary Athenian convert Dionysius enhanced the sign with an aura of the symbolic.

The human horizon is altogether too narrow and too low for conceiving God. In praising God beyond every conceivable thing and quality, *The Mystical Theology* of Dionysius in effect places God beyond the horizon of human thought and contemplation. What results from this is a kind of refraction of the supreme mystery back into certain things and qualities: "the divinest and highest of the things perceived by the eyes of the body or the mind are but the symbolic language of things subordinate to Him who Himself transcendeth them all."<sup>21</sup> Eventually, in Eckhart and in subsequent mystics it seems that the disappearance of God leaves behind a kind of afterglow of the divine insurpassability in the fullness of all things. Since, in *The Mystical Theology*, the two paths to God, positive and negative, are complementary, we can find prerequisites for the species of reverse pantheism, known, too blandly, as panentheism: all things are in God. In *The Divine Names*, the enormity of divine transcendence appears as if reflected back onto the created things, thereby highlighting in all names the unnamable One.<sup>22</sup>

The unutterable Creator contains all things prior to creation. This was a stimulus to ideas of creation as an unfolding of what is latent in the Creator, of the theophany of a developing God, and of the symbolic divine meaning that is revealed in all things as the end comes full circle to its beginning. The rhapsodic divine nomenclatures of Dionysius supplanted the scriptural and traditional symbolism of order and number with a distinctive geometrical symbolism of line, center, circle, and spiral, a symbolism adapted by Mechthild of Magdeburg, Nicholas of Cusa, and Angelus Silesius.<sup>23</sup>

The correspondences of macrocosm and microcosm and the many symbolic codes of the Book of Nature would engage Hildegard and her contemporaries.<sup>24</sup> Unscriptural as this kind of thinking may appear now, nothing suggests that Hildegard saw it as alien to the Bible or the Fathers of the Church. Since the authorities had had relatively little to say about natural science, Hildegard or Bernard Silvester probably thought of themselves as reconfirming the canon by applying it correctly. Even when the specifics of Hildegard's readings of things stand on no particular biblical foundation, the divine textuality of nature is always legitimized by the primacy of its Authorship, its creation through the Word.

In the course of this tradition, it came to appear evident that every symbol was rife with hidden meanings. Augustine, as well as Dionysius and Erigena, contributed to the interpretation of the Pauline motif of *omnes in omnibus*.<sup>25</sup> For Gertrud of Helfta or Tauler, God as "all in all" enhanced the authority of the individual. Moreover, since all things are in God and God is in all, all things are in all other things. For Cusanus, this would signify the presence of all numbers and figures in all other numbers and figures. In Renaissance mysticism, *omnes in omnibus* would prove compatible with the adept or symbolic project of alchemistic transformation. Like the castaway stone on which the Temple was founded, even the most extraneous object of contemplation could relate back to the omnipresent center of all meanings. Boehme thus stood squarely within this tradition in proclaiming that he could recognize the entire world in a stone or clump of earth.

All the motifs and correspondences merge in the coherences of Word and world—a common denominator of mystics who otherwise appear very dissimilar. German Logos speculation unites such distinct figures as Hildegard, Eckhart, Tauler, Seuse, Cusanus, Boehme, and Silesius. Alois Winklhofner has drawn attention to the extraordinarily wide dispersal of *Logosmystik* in Germany in the high Middle Ages<sup>26</sup>; it can be traced on down through Baroque mysticism and beyond the confines of Germany.

Our normative analogy for the German mystics and their tradition is the mountain range, not the archipelago. The Logos theme was by no means exclusive to the German mystics. Nor did they draw solely on the Word as Christ. Renaissance Kabbalah and naturalistic speculations converge in the tradition.<sup>27</sup> Nor were the German mystics inspired solely by Christ as the Word. It should suffice to consider the medieval bridal mysticism, or the Lutheran contemplation of the Passion. However, no mystical theme has proven more fertile in German

literature or in intellectual history as a whole. The world-creating Word ties the writings of the German mystics into the broadest conceivable context. From Hildegard to Novalis, and ultimately beyond the religious tradition (through Schopenhauer to Wittgenstein), the meditation on the unity and meaning of the world has inspired a remarkable variety of formulations.