

## Jacob Boehme's Influence in England

THE influence exerted or supposed to have been exerted by one writer over another is a fascinating subject for the *anima naturaliter critica*. But it has many pitfalls for the unwary. So much is inevitably guess work, though guess work often of a most suggestive kind. Dr. Wilhelm Struck of Rostock University has recently published, as a prize dissertation, an imposing volume of 260 pages tracing out the proved or suspected influence of Jacob Boehme, perhaps the greatest of Protestant mystics, upon English literature for the first hundred years and more after his death in 1624.<sup>1</sup> Hitherto we have only had much briefer treatments of this surprisingly big subject in a chapter of Rufus Jones's *Spiritual Reformers* (1914), more elaborately in Margaret L. Bailey's *Milton and Jakob Boehme* (1914), and in Howard Brinton's *Mystic Will* (1930). To the first two of these books the writer's debt in parts of the present work is apparent.

The plan of the book is an ambitious one, carried out with considerable success. (Dr. Struck's style will not, I think, be found particularly easy for the English reader.) After a long introduction dealing with the Silesian mystic's specific doctrines and his commanding influence in Germany, we have a systematic exposition of the known or probable impact of his writings upon the general theological and religious outlook of various groups of English writers. Two further parts deal with the treatment during the same period, so far as Boehme's ideas may have influenced them, of the problems of evil and free will and of the relationship of God and Nature.

In one of the most important sections the points of contact are set out at length between Boehme (and the English Behmenists) and the early Quakers. The few explicit references, whether favourable or hostile, in Friends' writings are duly recorded; the only new example, added to those cited by Rufus Jones and M. L. Bailey, being one in the Stephen Crisp correspondence.

<sup>1</sup> *Der Einfluss Jakob Böhmes auf die englische Literatur des 17 Jahrhunderts*. By Dr. Wilhelm Struck. Berlin, 1936.

Beyond the striking but not conclusive parallels quoted by Rufus Jones no further evidence is produced of George Fox being *directly* influenced by Boehme. What W. C. Braithwaite wrote in 1912, as to direct contact not having been proved here, still remains true.

Quotations cited from William Smith, George Keith, and Robert Barclay are assumed by Wilhelm Struck to show the influence of Boehme. But natural mystical metaphors, such as those of the inner light, the living seed, the holy birth, the divine pearl, have clearly a much older and wider history. Indeed in most cases their occurrence in different writers can be explained simply through the independent study by kindred minds of texts of the Bible which all Christians have in common.

Moreover it seems to be incontestable that different periods in the history of human thought are accompanied by distinct "zones of ideas", which form so to speak a spiritual climate or atmosphere, inhaled without the necessity of any direct contact in the form of one writer reading the works of another. It is no doubt most important, as Dr. Struck continually reminds us, to remember that many volumes of Boehme's works were published intermittently in Sparrow's and Ellistone's admirable translations between the years 1647 and 1663—years which were so formative to the Quaker movement, and it is quite likely that one or more of these fell into the hands of Fox and others. Nevertheless in the absence of direct quotations it is unwise to assume any borrowing from the printed page.

In the case of some writers for whom it has been elsewhere claimed, e.g. Peter Sterry, John Webster, and the poets Milton, Henry Vaughan and Traherne, Dr. Struck observes commendable caution in his estimate of the probabilities of direct contact with Boehme's works. In other cases, such as those of Henry Vane, Gerard Winstanley, Henry More, he seems to me to be rash in his inferences of a direct influence on their thought.

Apart from these minor criticisms there is a great deal of valuable and interesting material in the volume before us. The author's industry in reading has been immense. Quotations and references abound. Misprints and errors of detail appear to be few. (Work on the book was, I understand, chiefly done in London some five years ago.)

Dr. Struck is particularly good when on the firm ground of tracing out the interpretations of Boehme in the works of his English followers or admirers, such as the translators of his writings, the spiritual alchemists, and the Philadelphians. His able analysis of the Behmenist theology of John Pordage, for instance, is something which no critic, so far as I know, has attempted. In the course of his final chapter, which carries us on into the eighteenth century, he gives a suggestive and original sketch of the development of William Law's thought under Boehme's influence. One admirable feature of the treatment of Boehme's writings is that, in contrast to many critics who are more interested in him as a metaphysician, he often stresses the centrality to the Silesian mystic's thought of Jesus Christ and the redemption of the soul through union with Him.

Perhaps the chief value of a book of this kind is in its rich display by quotation and otherwise of the manifold ways in which the human mind has sought for a solution of the fundamental problems in the mysterious relationships of God, the soul, and nature, and has sought also to bring to itself and to others encouragement in climbing the steep path which leads to peace and wisdom and the power to choose the highest goods of life.

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