ECKHART'S GERMAN WORKS

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Although Eckhart employed two different registers with effortless ease—the Latin of scholars and his German mother tongue—and although he wrote his German texts at the same period as his Latin writings, the situation regarding the transmission and reception of Eckhart’s German works is fundamentally different from that of his Latin works. This special situation of transmission generates a number of specific problems when an editor seeks to hand them on in an assured form to the coming generations and to interpret their meaning.

This essay begins by presenting the specific problems of the German works, and then discusses the editorial endeavors of the Stuttgart collected edition from its beginnings in the 1930s down to the present state of affairs in the 21st century. Finally, on the basis of the critical collected edition, Eckhart’s German works—the Discourses of Instruction, the Liber Benedictus which consists of the Book of Divine Consolation and the sermon On the Noble Man, Eckhart’s German sermons, and (with reservations) the treatise Von Abgeschiedenheit (On Detachment)—are presented in terms of their chronology, the history of their transmission, and their contents.

1. The Texts of the German Works

Today, we know that there are around 310 manuscripts which contain parts of Eckhart’s German œuvre, but there is not one single manuscript

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that exclusively transmits Eckhart’s texts. The wide diffusion and fragmentation of the vernacular texts is an essential characteristic that is absent from the Latin transmission. This fragmentation of the textual material results in a far-reaching process leading to many anonymous texts, and this in turn leads to the main problem of the German works (i.e. the question of their authenticity).

“The authenticity of all the Latin works is assured… the situation with regard to the German works is different.” In addition to attributions in the manuscripts and entries in the catalogues of medieval libraries, Eckhart’s Latin œuvre is attested by the catalogue of ecclesiastical writers drawn up by Abbot Johannes Trithemius of Sponheim and by the bibliophile Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa; but the most important witnesses to his German œuvre are the records of the accusers at his trial, who constructed their list of charges primarily out of propositions from Eckhart’s vernacular production (naturally, in a Latin translation). This gives us an excellent instrument for the identification of Eckhart’s writings—but it is of course limited to heretical propositions; whatever did not sound heretical went unheeded. It is true that copyists attribute parts of the German œuvre to Eckhart, or that these are linked to his name in library catalogues, but in view of the high degree of fluctuation in the mass of manuscripts, scholars have been very skeptical about these ascriptions. Josef Quint was the first to recognize the function of the trial material. On the

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Steer, “Die Schriften Meister Eckharts” (note 1 above), 237.


For two lists of propositions which Hermann of Summo and William of Nidecke compiled from writings by Eckhart between 1 August 1325 and 26 September 1326, in order to accuse him of heresy (List 1 contains 48 [49] propositions, List 2 59 propositions), and Eckhart’s response to this accusation (the so-called Responso or Apologia, that is his Defense), see the critical edition by Loris Sturlese, *Acta Euchardiana. Secunda pars.*