MEISTER ECKHART AND VALENTIN WEIGEL

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Those with a rudimentary knowledge of Meister Eckhart know him as a mystic, much as those with a superficial knowledge of mysticism think of it as a knowledge that transcends time and space, or a subterranean current of *philosophia perennis* that defies the limits of history and confessional or ideological affiliation. We can evaluate these one-sided notions by considering an author who wrote about his “inner rebirth” and divine knowledge, and in doing so explicitly documented his debt to Meister Eckhart. Considering the life and writings of Valentin Weigel with respect to the circumstances that conditioned them allows us to appreciate that there can be no mystical content without a historical context. In Weigel’s relation to Eckhart, esoteric tradition and the mystical outsider take their place in a common world.

Valentin Weigel (1533–88) was born in the same year as Michel de Montaigne (1533–91). As a dissenting Lutheran pastor in an age of confessional conflict and consolidation, the German dissenter’s posthumously published theoretical treatises sanctioned the authority of the thoughtful private individual for whom his illustrious French contemporary was simultaneously creating an essayistic testimony. Weigel’s writings explicitly acknowledge Meister Eckhart. His sermons are cited based on the so-called “Basel Tauler” (*Basler Tauler-Druck*, 1521, 1522)¹ and attributed to “Eccardus” or “D. Eckhart.”² The recognition accorded by the 16th-century author to his medieval precursor, combined with the relative accessibility of Weigel’s own life, times, and writings, offers us a rare access to their tradition. Their works represent a current of texts and ideas rather than a recurrent self-generating phenomenon or esoteric cult of mysticism. Recent scholarship has reminded us that the noun or concept

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¹ *Joannis Tauleri des seligen lerers Predigt/ fast fruchbar zu eim recht christlichen leben* (Basel: 1522). Cited henceforth as BT.
of mysticism is relatively modern: to a considerable degree, it reflects the post-Enlightenment understanding of the antithesis of reason and religion.³ Weigel casts a fuller light on the partial truths of our image of mysticism.

Valentin Weigel is distant but not inaccessible.⁴ Despite gaps in our knowledge, we can trace circles of information. These begin with his humble origins in an era and region beset by confessional tensions during the third decade of the Protestant Reformation. Born to plebeian parents in the Saxon town of Großenhain three years after Melanchthon’s Confessio Augustana established an initial codification of Lutheranism, Weigel was nine years old when his homeland of Albertine Saxony converted to Lutheranism in consequence of a dynastic succession. He was a teenager when the defeat of the German Protestant territories in the Schmalkaldic War by the Catholic emperor plunged German Lutheranism into a crisis that smoldered for decades. Weigel was a student during the Gnesio-Lutheran controversies, as Lutheran theologians contended first over the options of resistance or accommodation to the emperor, and subsequently with each other over various related theological issues. Their disputes and positions might strike us now as an abstruse quarrel over the fine points of doctrine and exegesis, but they were motivated by the deeper issues of whether the state, church, or the individual should arbitrate beliefs.

If in many German cities and lands the advent of the Lutheran faith was heralded as a liberation and empowerment, Weigel’s experience was ambivalent. For the plebeian youth, it meant sponsorship to attend the Fürstenschule of St Afra in Meissen and later to study theology at the universities of Leipzig and Wittenberg, followed by a lifetime position as the town pastor of the Saxon city of Zschopau. But the Reformation also meant that doctrines were imposed by those in control. Whoever deviated from the serially reformulated standards of faith was harshly disciplined. This included Weigel’s esteemed teachers. Early in his pastoral career,


⁴ His life, times, and writings are summarized in Andrew Weeks, Valentin Weigel (1533–1588): German Religious Dissenter, Speculative Theorist, and Advocate of Tolerance (New York: 2000), and in briefer form in Valentin Weigel, Selected Spiritual Writings, trans. and intro. Andrew Weeks, with a preface by R. Emmet McGlaughlin (New York: 2003), 9–49.