CHAPTER 5

Imagining the Image of God: Corporeal Envisioning in the Theosophy of Jacob Böhme

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New hermeneutical strategies are being developed within a growing body of scholarship that treats the role the senses in the production of knowledge and culture.1 Drawing from phenomenology, aesthetics, art theory, anthropology and performance studies, this literature moves toward a more “embodied” approach to the human sciences.2 Its advocates challenge the notion that images are purely representational, and texts essentially propositional, by teasing out the experiential dimensions of both texts3 and artworks.4 Rather than delineating the fixed meaning of a textual or graphical image by way of an originary semiotic referent, focus is placed on the experience of an image or concept within its larger historical and hermeneutical horizons.5 While the gains made

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1 For a good introduction to this multi-disciplinary field, see: Empire of the Senses (edited by David Howes); for an excellent genealogical treatment of sensation, see: Heller-Roazen, Inner Touch; for a brilliant treatment of the post-Enlightenment discourse on reason and subjectivity through the lens of aurality, see: Reason and Resonance.

2 There is a burgeoning field of work on embodiment that cuts across disciplines and engages with such diverse fields as post/structuralism, gender theory, anthropology, French and German phenomenology, and, increasingly, cognitive science. Two good introductions are: Beyond the Body Proper (edited by Lock and Farquhar), and Un/Knowing Bodies (edited by Latimer and Schillmeier).

3 For exemplary works that approach the performative dimensions of language in mystical texts, see: Sells, Mystical Languages of Unsaying and Wolfson, Language, Eros, Being.

4 A particularly successful example of this is the phenomenologically-orientated, art historical work of Bisserra Pentcheva. In reference to her approach toward Byzantine ritual, text, and art, Pentcheva writes: ‘Within the sphere of the visual [...] “performative” bears the marks of the phenomenal [...] in focusing on the interaction between object and subject, between icon and viewer, between poetry seen and poetry pronounced, I uncover the power of the icon’s spectacle to transform the viewer from observer to participant, communing with the divine’. Pentcheva, The Sensual Icon, 3. Though Pentcheva is dealing primarily with concrete icons and only secondarily with textual images, I maintain that this approach, mutatis mutandis, can also be fruitful in dealing with such image-laden and performative texts as Böhme’s.

5 For a deft treatment of Persianate Sufi literature that draws on anthropological, literary, and historical approaches to place text back within an embodied context, see: Bashir, Sufi Bodies.
by such scholarship are numerous, I would like to keep two points in mind in the following chapter: (i) the growing awareness of the role that cultural—and thus historical—factors have in shaping sensory experience and indeed the senses themselves;6 (ii) the way in which taking nonpropositional content seriously helps complicate analysis that relies entirely on intellectualist or iconographic assumptions. The work of the Christian mystic Jacob Böhme (1575–1624) seems to me to be well suited to such an approach, as it revolves around the relationship between body, image, and imagination. With this in mind, the following chapter explores both the textual and visual performance of the notion of “image” (Bild) in the work of the Christian mystic, Jacob Böhme (1575–1624), throwing into relief both the “aesthetic” and “kinaesthetic” dimensions of Böhme’s theosophy.7

With Böhme, who is anything but a systematic writer, it is often difficult to extract the content of a linear narrative from the frequently phantasmagoric form that his expression takes.8 Due to this idiosyncratic style, there are countless instances of terminological inconsistency in Böhme works and many of his terms appear to be wildly polysemous in nature. For some, such as the German Romantics, who actively sought a counterpoint to classicism, this is part of the allure of Böhme.9 Other less enthusiastic readers, ranging from ambivalent to dismissive, have described the author’s style as that of a ‘complete barbarian’,10 as reliant upon ‘sensual imagery […] obscure analogies, and […]

6 A concise (and entertaining) argument for an extra-biological approach to the senses can be found in Bruno Latour’s discussion of *malettes à odeurs* (odor kits), in: Latour, ‘How to Talk About the Body?’ 205–229.
7 By employing the term “aesthetic,” I mean to point toward the way in which much of Böhme’s imagery discloses its content through emotive, rather than discursive strategies; with the term “kinaesthetic,” I mean to draw attention to the way in which this imagery often communicates proprioceptively, i.e., by referencing bodily sensation and spatial orientation.
8 That said, Böhme’s theological narrative is not so loose that it cannot be parsed; his theological system has been outlined in several monographs, e.g. Koyré, *La Philosophie de Jacob Boehme*; Deghaye, *Naissance de Dieu*; Stoudt, *Sunrise to Eternity*; Weeks, *Boehme: An Intellectual Biography*; and O’Regan, *Gnostic Apocalypse*.
9 At least as far back as the Romantics, many have professed to find a poet’s sensibility in Böhme’s work precisely because it flies in the face of classical standards of argumentation and expression. Novalis for one maintained: ‘Man sieht durchaus in ihm den gewaltigen Frühling mit seinen quellenden, treibenden, bildenden und mischenden Kräften, die von innen heraus die Welt gebären – ein ächtes Chaos voll dunkler Begier und wunderbaren Leben – einen wahren, auseinandergehenden Microcosmos.’ Novalis, *Schriften*, iv 322–323.