

The Mind's Eye: Images of Creation and Revelation in Mystical Theology and Theosophy

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Images of Creation in Weigel and Biedermann: 'Ego sum in arboribus et arbores in me'¹

The Reformation artists Albrecht Dürer, Hans Baldung Grien and Lucas Cranach the Elder repeatedly depicted the luscious paradisiacal Garden with the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the centre, as well as the visionary, dreamlike images of the Apocalypse. Not only their paintings and drawings, but also the expressive full-page woodcut series for the printed Books of Genesis and Revelation outgrew their function of Bible illustration, developing iconographical reflections of Lutheran salvation history both in a privately human and in a societal sense. Even though Luther – wary of the Book of Revelation – allowed some symbolical or biblical-typological reading of the Creation story, biblicist and literalist readings remained predominant. The Lutheran concepts *sola fide* and *sola scriptura* certainly enhanced a theology of the historical faith, a theology of the letter and the law rooted deeply in German Protestant culture, but typological exegesis also stimulated a biblical and anti-papist iconography for the Protestant cause. Among Lutheran explicators, artists and engravers, the historical and theological readings of the Creation and the Last Supper prevailed into the Enlightenment, while a gradual shift towards typology also became noticeable.²

The Reformation revealed friction between the *icon* and the *logos*. The fear of idolatry brought iconoclasm, the destruction of Catholic monastic collections of religious art, books and manuscripts. Distrust of the (Catholic) image also meant distrust of the human creative imagination. Nevertheless, through

1 [Biedermann] *Gnothi Seauton* 3, cap. 1, 14, 41. References throughout this article are to Weigel [ed. Biedermann], *Gnothi seauton* (vol. 1), 1615; Weigel [i.e. Biedermann] *Ander Theil Gnothi seauton ... Astrologia theologizata* (vol. 2), 1618; Ibid., *Dritter Theil deß Gnothi Seauton* (vol. 3), 1618.

2 On the cultural-historical impact of the creation story, cf. e.g. Almond, *Adam and Eve in Seventeenth-Century Thought*; Delumeau, *History of Paradise*; Crowther, *Adam and Eve in the Protestant Reformation*. For the gnostic context, see Pagels, *Adam, Eve and the Serpent*.

the 16th and 17th centuries, mystical theology and theosophy created new spiritual or spiritualist concepts and the lexical and visual imagery to express them. These new icons generated from a new logos formed a mystical symbolism or a conceptual language system expressive of religious experience. The symbols of the Tree of Life, the Book of Life, or the School of Knowledge (Wisdom) were incorporated in an iconography determined by a mystical theological and Christian theosophical epistemology fed in turn by chiliast, astrological, alchemical, Hermetic and Christian magical-kabbalist traditions. Whereas chiliasm was concerned with contemporary socio-political concerns of conflict and war as mirrored in the Book of the Apocalypse, the other disciplines sought to express private philosophical, religious and mystical experience. Ideas about the reformed school of universal wisdom and its teachings from the Book of Nature (astrology, alchemy, natural philosophy) as well as from the Book of Grace (mystical theology, Revelation of Christ) were associated with early modern Protestant Dissent. Valentin Weigel (1533–1588),³ besides Luther one of the most important reforming theologians, came to be regarded as a heretic because his speculative thought was seen to be based on heterodox biblical symbolism and conceptual imagery.

None of the theologians could easily conceive of an interpretation of the biblical creation story other than the historical one. The first Lutheran theologian to write about the story of creation combining theology, typology and Paracelsian natural philosophy was Valentin Weigel.⁴ While remaining true to the Lutheran orthodox interpretation, Weigel's epistemology concentrated on the process of reading, on the workings of the individual mind, and on the right motivation for the believer to read the Bible for his personal salvation. To Weigel, spiritual understanding essentially was a response to divine inspiration; the Bible should not be the theologian's or humanist philologist's object of textual study. Weigel's stance was nevertheless pedagogical: books still needed to be written because of the Fall: man is limited of necessity and no longer able to live his life at a purely spiritual level; if he were, he would know that the right Book is innermost in man and is God himself.⁵ Moving from the literalist to an increasingly symbolical approach, Weigel introduced (Paracelsian and Cusan) concepts such as the threefold world, the threefold man (body, soul, spirit),

3 Cf. Weeks, *Valentin Weigel (1533–1588)*; Lieb, *Valentin Weigels Kommentar zur Schöpfungsgeschichte und das Schrifttum seines Schülers Benedikt Biedermann*; Zeller, *Die Schriften Valentin Weigels*; Wollgast (ed.), *Valentin Weigel. Ausgewählte Werke*; Pfefferl, *Die Überlieferung der Schriften Valentin Weigels*; Idem. (ed.) *Valentin Weigel. Sämtliche Schriften*.

4 Lieb, *Valentin Weigels Kommentar*, 32.

5 Weigel, *Gnothi Seauton* 1, pt 1, cap. 11, 13, 14.