

UNDERSTANDING THE VISUALITY OF A MEDIEVAL VISIONARY:  
FOURTEENTH-CENTURY DOMINICAN HENRY SUSO'S INTERWOVEN CONCEPTS OF  
DIVINE IMAGE, GENDERED IDENTITY, AND EPISTEMOLOGY

J. Christian Straubhaar-Jones

A dissertation submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Duke University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the UNC Department of Germanic & Slavic Languages and Literatures in the College of Arts and Sciences and in the Duke German Department in the Trinity College of Arts and Sciences.

Chapel Hill  
2015

Approved by:

Ann Marie Rasmussen

Ruth von Bernuth

Jessica Boon

Eric Downing

Gabriel Trop

© 2015  
J. Christian Straubhaar-Jones  
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

## ABSTRACT

J. Christian Straubhaar-Jones: Understanding the Visuality of a Medieval Visionary: Fourteenth-Century Dominican Henry Suso's Interwoven Concepts of Divine Image, Gendered Identity, and Epistemology  
(Under the direction of Ann Marie Rasmussen)

This dissertation is a study of visuality in fourteenth-century Swabian Dominican Henry Suso's works. It explores the novel intersection of literary hagiographical discourses, scientific visuality discourses, and negative theological discourses, from late antique Greece to medieval Middle East, Spain, and Central Europe, culminating in Suso's Middle High German works. Suso was rare among monks in that he wrote quasi-autobiographically in addition to more standard theological tracts. Previous scholars discussing Suso productively analyzed his use of devotional images, but they have failed to note the impact of the scientific understanding of vision in his works. The scientific component came to the Central Europe through Paris, where Franciscan scholars like Roger Bacon were reading, synthesizing, and adapting then cutting-edge Middle Eastern physiology as part of their natural philosophy. The most revolutionary tract on vision was Ibn al-Haytham's *Optics*, who pioneered central tenets of the modern scientific method and unified three disparate schools of thought on vision into one revolutionary theory of vision, which is reflected in Suso's texts. Images emanate out of their originals and physically touch the eye. Suso believed that both the external eye and the internal mind's eye were malleable, taking the shape of the image they perceived. This influenced his concept of human identity, because he felt that the entire human body was spiritually malleable, and could be

literally reshaped by religious discipline. For Suso, when one views depictions of Christ and imitates Christ's Passion, the internal mental image of Christ can reshape their body and soul to be a mirror image of the suffering Jesus. This builds on the negative theological tradition—Christ, as *imago Dei*, is the medium by which one can “see” the infinite apophatic divine, which itself cannot be captured by any image or name. As the medium, Christ is in unmediated contact with the original divine from which he springs forth. Suso intends for his readers to become image of Christ, literally, and so he presents his works as an exemplar, a “true image” of how to do so, interweaving narrative, theological, and visual media to push the readers to grasp something unrepresentable.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>   | <b>1</b>   |
| ECKHART'S SERMON 69 AS A MICROCOSM OF SUSO'S VISUAL ALLEGORICAL FRAMEWORK .....  | 7          |
| METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS.....   | 12         |
| CHAPTER SUMMARIES .....  | 21         |
| <b>CHAPTER 1—<i>SCHEIN</i> UND <i>SEIN</i>: A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF VISUALITY AND ONTOLOGY FROM PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS TO MEISTER ECKHART .....</b>                                | <b>27</b>  |
| PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE'S MYSTICAL THEOLOGY AND HIS EARLY MEDIEVAL INTERPRETERS .....  | 29         |
| NON-CHRISTIAN INFLUENCES—AVICENNA, ALHAZEN, AVERROES, AND MAIMONIDES .....   | 41         |
| MEISTER ECKHART'S VISUALITY AND DIALECTICAL METHODOLOGY .....  | 52         |
| SUSO AND THE APOPHATICS .....  | 65         |
| <b>CHAPTER 2—NEGATIVE IMAGES: SUSO'S <i>GLICHNÚS</i> BETWEEN NEOPLATONIC THEOLOGY AND VISUAL THEORY .....</b>  | <b>69</b>  |
| THEORIES OF LIGHT AND VISION .....   | 70         |
| TRANSITION—ECKHART'S INTERNAL IMAGE.....   | 80         |
| THE <i>SPECIES</i> OF MEDIEVAL VISUAL THEORY AND THEOLOGY COMPARED WITH SUSO'S "GLICHNÚS" .....  | 82         |
| IMAGES IN THE NEGATIVE.....  | 96         |
| CONCLUSION .....   | 105        |
| <b>CHAPTER 3—MIRRORING IMAGES: CHRIST'S <i>PASSIO</i> AND MARY'S <i>COMPASSIO</i> AS VISUAL MODELS FOR SPIRITUAL SELF-IMAGE CONSTRUCTION IN THE <i>EXEMPLAR</i>.....</b> | <b>108</b> |

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY AND ISSUES OF IMAGE AGENCY .....  | 113        |
| VISUAL THEORY AND THE SUFFERING EYE.....  | 117        |
| THE SERVANT AS SEXUALIZED LIVING IMAGE .....  | 120        |
| BIERNOFF'S MODEL OF THE INTERPENETRATIVE GAZE OF BRIDAL MYSTICISM.....  | 124        |
| PASSION MEDITATION AND THE EMERGENT MARIAN THEOLOGY .....   | 133        |
| MEDIA DISJUNCTURE AND IMAGE PEDAGOGY .....  | 142        |
| CONCLUSIONS—INDIVIDUAL APOPHATIC AESTHETICS .....   | 146        |
| <b>CHAPTER 4—SEXING <i>SAPIENTIA</i>: AUGUSTINIAN SEX AND GENDERED<br/>EPISTEMOLOGY IN SUSO’S <i>LIFE OF THE SERVANT</i>.....</b> | <b>151</b> |
| WHAT IS CLERICAL GENDER?.....   | 153        |
| MALE/FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS IN THE <i>LIFE</i> .....  | 161        |
| THE AUGUSTINIAN THEOLOGY OF GENDER AND INTELLECT .....  | 166        |
| GENDERED INTELLECTUAL HIERARCHY IN <i>THE LIFE OF THE SERVANT</i> .....   | 174        |
| CONCLUSION .....  | 189        |
| <b>CONCLUSION .....</b>   | <b>192</b> |
| WHAT IS THE UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION OF THIS STUDY? .....  | 192        |
| REVIEW OF ARGUMENTS.....  | 193        |
| WHY NOW? .....  | 197        |
| CALLS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH .....  | 199        |
| <b>WORKS CITED.....</b>   | <b>207</b> |

## LIST OF FIGURES

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Figure 2.1—Suso and Anna, BNU MS 2.929 Folio 28R.....                                      | 90  |
| Figure 2.2—Mystic Path, BNU MS 2.929 Folio 82L.....  | 92  |
| Figure 3.1—Mystic Path, again, BNU MS 2.929 Folio 82L.....                                 | 110 |
| Figure 3.2—St. Francis’ Stigmata, by San Francesco Bardi, ca. 1240.....                    | 130 |
| Figure 3.3—St. Francis’ Stigmata, by Gentile da Fabriano, ca. 1410.....                    | 130 |
| Figure 3.4—Detail of St. Francis’ Stigmata, by Master of Lindau Lamentation, ca. 1420..... | 130 |
| Figure 3.5—Suso and the Stigmatic Seraph, BNU MS 2.929 Folio 65R.....                      | 131 |
| Figure 3.6— <i>Deposition of Christ</i> , by Roger Van der Weyden, ca.1435.....            | 136 |
| Figure 3.7—Mary and the Swords of Sorrow woodcut, ca. 1480.....                            | 137 |
| Figure 3.1.1—Detail of 3.1, Mater Dolorosa.....  | 139 |
| Figure 3.1.2—Detail of 3.1, Scorpion and Snake.....  | 139 |
| Figure 3.8—The Sufferer, BNU MS 2.929 Folio 57L.....                                       | 139 |
| Figure 3.8.1—Detail of 3.8, Scorpion and Snake.....  | 139 |
| Figure 3.1.3—Detail of 3.1—Soul’s Path through Holy Images.....                            | 147 |
| Figure 4.1—The Bleeding Christogram, BNU MS 2.929 Folio 71L.....                           | 181 |
| Figure 4.2— Passing the Christogram, BNU MS 2.929 Folio 68R.....                           | 187 |
| Figure 4.3— Ecclesia Medallion, Prüfening, Bavaria, 12th century.....                      | 188 |

## **Introduction**

Many scholars in the last decade have critiqued the "visual turn" of the academy and sought to return to the substance—the materiality of real, physical objects of study—that they feel visuality studies lack. This dissertation seeks to underline the very real fact that visuality is never divorced from the material, and certainly was not seen as such during the Middle Ages, when images were commonly described as having floated, walked, bled, cried, and lactated, interacting with their surroundings in very "real," material ways. To return the material to the visual, this dissertation focuses on the medieval science of sight, the way in which medieval writers understood the outward eye and the mind's eye to work. For medievals, vision was considered physical contact with the image of the object, literally impressing itself on the malleable mirror surface of the eye. This makes visual contact characterized not by distance, as it is widely perceived now, but by intimate connection. This not only means that scholars must rethink the way that we understand the rich language of vision across genres in medieval literature, but also helps us denaturalize modern concepts of vision and the subject-object power dynamics they often assume.

A fascinating example and unique figure in this regard is the fourteenth-century Dominican Henry Suso (ca. 1295-1366), also commonly referred to in German as Heinrich Seuse, a Swabian monk and prolific writer. He bridges a gendered literary gap by writing in both the traditionally male-only field of Latin scholastic theology and the rising tide of often female-authored vernacular texts that narrate the author's personal visionary experiences. To do so he



brings in many elements from numerous other genres and also various collaborators, such as his “spiritual daughter” and pupil Elsbeth Stigel, to whom authorial credit for the semi-autohagiographical *Life of the Servant* is ceded.<sup>1</sup> Suso claims only partial authorial and editorial credit for the *Life* himself. The wide array of influences and genres he draws on make Suso both a rich subject and a difficult figure to typify. But what his works also offer, particularly useful for a discussion of the function of visuality in mystic literature, is a cross-section of discussions of visuality in the terms of various genres—including but not limited to natural philosophy (Latin works expanding on the newly-translated ancient Greek natural philosophy and its Arabic

---

<sup>1</sup> The term "autohagiography" was coined by Richard Kieckhefer in *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and their Religious Milieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). It refers to the fourteenth-century phenomenon of spiritual authors writing of their own experience following the tropes of hagiography, or those who actively sought out spiritual leaders to record their experiences, as is the case with the *Book of Margery Kempe*. In this dissertation, the *Life* will be referred to as "semi-autohagiographical," because the autobiographical nature of the text is contested two-fold: first, because the historicity of many elements has been questioned, which would nevertheless fit the genre of hagiography; second, because the *Life* is putatively jointly written by the Servant, Suso's alter ego, and Elsbeth Stigel, to whom the author of the *Life* cedes full authorial credit. Scholarly debate continues regarding the degree to which elements of the *Life* should be seen as historical facts or literary tropes, most notably in Altrock and Ziegeler, "Vom diener der ewigen wisheit zum Autor Heinrich Seuse. Autorschaft und Medienwandel in den illustrierten Handschriften und Drucken von Heinrich Seuses 'Exemplar'" in *Text Und Kultur: Mittelalterliche Literatur 1150-1450*, ed. Ursula Peters, Germanistische Symposien, Berichtsbände; 23 (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2001). They argue that only later, far after Suso's death, was the protagonist of the *Life*, the Servant, collapsed with the figure of the compiler and partial author, Henry Suso. They offer a thorough examination of the historiographical shift over time in representation after Suso's death that increasingly identifies the figure of the Servant with the person of Henry Suso. Indeed, although many elements of the Servant as a figure would seem to be inspired by the posited author Suso's life experience, many also seem drawn from or inspired by other well known religious and literary texts like the Lives of the Desert Fathers, Minnesang, secular chivalric poetry, and so forth, as has been argued by Werner Williams-Krapp in "nucleus totius perfectionis. Die Altväterspiritualität in der 'Vita' Heinrich Seuses," in *Festschrift für Walter Haug und Burghart Wachinger*, Eds. J. Janota et al. Bd. I, (Tübingen, 1992), 405-421. Newer scholarship chooses to question the hardline differentiation of Suso and Servant, such as Steven Rozenski, Jr.'s—one of the foremost up-and-coming Suso scholars—dissertation, in which he argues that Suso's representation as both author and subject is core to his work. *Henry Suso and Richard Rolle: Devotional Mobility and Translation in Late-Medieval England and Germany*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2012. 12. His dissertation is currently embargoed to protect materials for potential publication.

commentaries),<sup>2</sup> scholastic theology (Latin tracts and treatises produced primarily at universities),<sup>3</sup> vernacular theology (such as the Middle High German works of Meister Eckhart and Johannes Tauler),<sup>4</sup> autohagiography,<sup>5</sup> visionary accounts (such as the visions of Hildegard of Bingen or Mechthild of Magdeburg), bridal mysticism accounts (often embedded in visionary

---

<sup>2</sup> For more on the influence of the Arab commentaries on the tradition of Scholasticism and mysticism, see Kurt Flasch, *Meister Eckhart: Die Geburt der „Deutschen Mystik“ aus dem Geist der arabischen Philosophie* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2006). Elements of Flasch's work have been heavily debated, but the core concept that these Arabic works were being cited by and thus must be seen as influential on Scholastic thought and Eckhartian mysticism is irrefutable. Part of the backlash against ideas like Flasch's must also be seen as the difficulty that the Western academy often has in provincializing the West, not seeing it as the center of the worldwide cultural nexus but instead one of many centers of culture that is no more or less influential than others. This concept is taken from Dipesh Chakrabarty's vital text, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N. J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008). Especially in the Middle Ages, where the Arab world was without doubt more scientifically and arguably more philosophically advanced than the European world, one must keep in mind that much of what is thought of as classical Western thought was saved from being totally lost by Arab scholarly work and filtered through many lenses of Arab interpretation when it returned to Europe. And medieval Europe was certainly not the center of apophatic theology, a core element of Eckhart and Suso's work, because these concepts have always been the most suited to and furthest developed by Islam and Judaism, which, without the complication of believing in the literal Incarnation of the divine in Christ as *imago Dei*, are much more easily able to contend that the divine is without all images and should never be depicted.

<sup>3</sup> It is difficult to draw the exact line between scholastic theology, scholastic natural philosophy, and mystic theology, for reason explained above and because especially mystic and scholastic theology were seen as complementary but opposite approaches to the same goal, how to discuss and understand the divine. As part of their university studies, for example, medieval students often completed a commentary of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, a foundational work of Scholastic theology, for the equivalent of their bachelor's thesis. For their masters, on the other hand, they would often write a commentary on Pseudo-Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*. Thus the terms refer here more to these styles as genres or disciplines of writing rather than fundamentally different types of philosophical work.

<sup>4</sup> This term is used by Bernard McGinn to differentiate the theology corpus of writers like Meister Eckhart and Henry Suso.

<sup>5</sup> See footnote 1.

accounts or hagiography),<sup>6</sup> Passion meditation,<sup>7</sup> and more. He even flagrantly steals and adapts tropes from courtly literature and a variety of other sources.<sup>8</sup> And because Suso provides us with detailed discussions of visuality in the unique terminologies and varied methodologies of each of these genres, his works allow us to draw clearer connections between the way that vision is talked about in the theoretical scientific and philosophical tracts and the way that it functions in narrative visionary or hagiographic accounts.

What emerges is a clear picture of the influence of this flood of translations, commentaries, and tracts from the Middle East up through Spain to Paris. Arab scientist Ibn Al-Haytham (c. 965 – c. 1040 CE; c.354 – c.432 AH) [Abū ‘Alī al-Ḥasan ibn al-Ḥasan ibn al-Ḥaytham, often Latinized Alhazen or Alhacen] found an elegant solution to ancient debates on visuality between Euclidean, Galenic, and Platonic schools, which he recorded in his *Optics*, titled *Kitāb Al-Manāẓir* in the original Arabic, later translated into Latin as *De Aspectibus*. His solution was taken up and adapted by Christian theologians working in Paris, like the Franciscan Roger Bacon, who placed it with a Neoplatonic Christian framework in which the physical properties of light and the epistemological properties of divine truth were parallel. Visuality had always been and remains a privileged metaphor for intellectual understanding, but in the high medieval context it was also more than a metaphor—the Scholastic assertion that natural laws

---

<sup>6</sup> One prominent example are depictions of the mystic marriage of St. Francis of Assisi and Lady Poverty. For more, see Barbara Newman, *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> A vast popular tradition that grew to have many varied expressions, including but not limited to Passion plays; Passion meditation texts or scripts (which often instructed the reader to act as though truly there at the Passion, even sometimes inserting actions for them to perform or dialogic lines for them to speak in the narrative); devotional images; and tracts that explain the proper method to meditate on the Passion.

<sup>8</sup> See footnote 1.

were a reflection of divine laws, which warranted the pursuit of natural philosophy by Christian theologians like Thomas Aquinas, meant that for these thinkers, physical light was in point of fact a lesser form of divine light, and shared similar properties in a very real, non-metaphorical sense.

The problematic differentiation between allegorical thinking and a natural philosophical belief in true corollaries between the theological and the “scientific” is difficult at best. This is especially true when one is dealing with terms like “light” or “image,” which can mean vastly different things in different contexts even just within the Scholastic discourse, not to mention the different ways they are taken up in the various genres in which Suso writes or draws from. Nevertheless, because for the Scholastics natural philosophy was a logical outgrowth of theology, scientific theories took on a deeper, more expansive meaning than they often do under the contemporary scientific method. One can look at it as similar to the use of object lessons common in religious discourse today, but instead of claiming to use a scientific truth to elucidate a difficult religious concept, they use scientific knowledge to allegorically speak to and underscore the mark of the Creator in all aspects of Creation. To use a common contemporary example: many Catholics today will say that the Trinity is like the three states of matter for water. Water can be solid as ice, liquid as water, and gaseous as vapor, but it remains chemically the same. So too the Trinity can be Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, but remains God. But in the logic of the Scholastics, the causal dynamic would reverse—a Scholastic would likely argue that the divine created water and all elements with three states of matter as a reflection of the truth of the Trinitarian nature of the divine.<sup>9</sup> A good example of this kind of thinking is Meister Eckart's

---

<sup>9</sup> The reader may notice that this dissertation uses the adjective and noun "divine" or "the divine" rather than the more common "God," except in quotations and in specific dogmatic contexts. This terminology is used because the word "God" in the contemporary vernacular is more tinged

German Sermon 69, which will be discussed more fully below. This means that new scientific truth was something that scholastic theologians would actively seek out as sources for new knowledge about the Creation, and through that new knowledge about the divine Creator.

As one can imagine, for philosophers for whom visionary experience is a privileged mode of experiencing the divine and gaining access to divine wisdom and truth, the science of how vision works would be very interesting and very important. Meister Eckhart refers to debates around optics repeatedly as a way of discussing the experience of the divine and relevant concerns. In doing so, he is not merely citing interesting scientific trivia that might help his audience conceptualize difficult theological ideas. He is instead using contemporary knowledge of the Creation to reflect on the truth of the Creator, whose image Creation reflects. As Suso's teacher, Meister Eckhart's discussions of image serve as the basis from which Suso draws his own theory of vision, and that theory influences every aspect of Suso's work, because it is core to how he understands the relationship between the human and the divine.

This dissertation is first and foremost a study of visuality in Suso's works, but it bears far-reaching implications for the visionary literature of the late Middle Ages, which would be fruitful ground for further studies. Suso's works exhibit an essentially Al-Haythamian visual theory and a belief in the corporeal plasticity of internal and external sight organs—the *ymagnatio* and the glacial humor of the eye, respectively. This is reflected in his depiction of the fluidity of human identity when pursuing unity with the divine. According to Suso's texts, one

---

with problematic visual imagery—such as the trope of the old white man with a beard—than it appears to have been in the late Middle Ages. When speaking of a specific form of the Trinity, such as the Father, medieval texts might use this kind of imagery, but the term "God" remained visually unmarked and thus fruitful for thinkers like Eckhart and Suso to express the apophatic divine, which as Eckhart contends remains without names or images. For more on this, see Chapter 1. Because "the divine" is not visually marked in contemporary discourse in the same way that "God" often is, it offers a better term to discuss the type of theology that the apophatic Christian tradition, from Pseudo-Dionysius to Suso, is aiming for.

should view images of Christ, imprint that image internally and shape oneself according to it externally, until individual identity becomes almost entirely subsumed into *unio mystica*, a union with the apophatic, imageless divine beyond Christ. To explicate this model of mystic experience, this dissertation discusses the intersection of apophatic theology and visual discourse up to Suso's time, in Chapter 1; then elucidates Suso's particular formation of *glichnús*, similitude, and *bild*, image, in Chapter 2; then views his participation in discourses of Passion meditation and bridal mysticism as particularly reflective of his visuality in Chapter 3; and finally explains how gender inflects Suso's visual epistemology, built on an Augustinian gendered model of mental function that undergirds Suso's pedagogical goals in bringing the reader to a visual and visionary relationship with Eternal Wisdom, in Chapter 4.

### **Eckhart's Sermon 69 as a Microcosm of Suso's Visual Allegorical Framework**

One must be clear: Suso is not an original theorist in the strictest sense. His theology clearly follows Eckhartian principles and his literary output is relatively straightforwardly an extension of that theology. His basic models in almost every level—theology, cosmology, physiology, even natural sciences—build out of his education through Eckhart, and the salient theories of visuality and identity that Suso bases his works in are used frequently as symbolic points in Meister Eckhart's sermons.

The following passage from Eckhart's Sermon 69, an extended meditation on visuality and mediation between the Soul and the apophatic divine, outlines the basic allegorical framework that Suso extends into his own life's work:

The other master says: If there were no medium, my eye would see nothing. If I put my hand over my eye, I cannot see my hand. If I raise it in front of me, I see it immediately.

This is caused by the coarse [material] nature of the hand; and it has to be purified of this and refined in air and light and carried as an image into my eye. Note the case of the mirror: If you raise it up in front of yourself, your image appears in the mirror. The eye and the soul are such a mirror in which everything appears that is held up to them. Thus I do not see the hand or the stone; rather, I see an image of the stone. But I do not see this image in another image or in a medium; rather, I see it [the image] without a medium and without an image, for the image itself is the medium and there is not some other medium. And this is why image is without image and motion is without motion, although it makes something move. And size does not have size; rather, it causes something to have size. So also image is without image; for it is not seen in another image. The eternal Word is the medium and the image itself that is without medium and without image, so that the soul may grasp and know God in the eternal Word without a medium and without an image.<sup>10</sup>

Der ander meister sprichet: "enwære kein mittel, mîn ouge ensæhe niht". Lege ich mîne hant ûf mîn ouge, sô ensihe ich der hant nicht. Hebe ich sie vür mich, alzehant sihe ich sie. Daz kumet von gropheit, diu an der hant ist; und dâ von muoz ez geliutert und kleinvüege werden in dem lufte und in dem liehte und als ein bilde getragen in mîn ouge. Daz merket an dem spiegel: hebest dû den vür dich, sô erschînet dîn bilde in dem spiegel. Daz ouge und diu sêle ist ein solch spiegel, daz allez daz dar inne erschînet, daz dar gegen gehabt wirt. Dar umbe ensihe ich niht die hant oder den stein, mêt: ich sihe ein bilde von dem steine. Aber daz selbe bild daz ensihe ich niht in einem andern bilde oder in einem mittel, mêt: ich sihe ez âne mittel und âne bilde, wan daz bild ist daz mittel und niht ein ander mittel, und her umbe ist daz: wan bilde ist âne bilde und loufen âne loufen; ez machet wol loufende; und grœze ist âne grœze, mêt: si machet grôz. Alsô ist ouch bilde âne bilde, wan ez enwirt niht gesehen in einem andern bilde. Daz êwic wort ist daz mittel und daz bilde selbe, daz dâ ist âne mittel und âne bilde, ûf daz diu sêle in dem êwigen worte got begrîfet und beknet âne mittel und âne bilde.<sup>11</sup>

The basic physical science of sight, as understood in the Middle Ages, is explicated as an object lesson: vision of objects happens through the mediation of images, which float through the air between viewer and viewed. The object lesson is then transformed by use of the mirror, which functions dually as extension of the object lesson and allegory for the Soul. The eye and the Soul are made equivalent as mirrors or mediating surfaces for images. The Word, implicitly Christ, is

---

<sup>10</sup> Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher*, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1986). 312-313. Bracketed portions original to this edition.

<sup>11</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Werke*, ed. Niklaus Largier, (Frankfurt am Main: Deutsche Klassiker Verlag, 2008). Middle High German quotations from Eckhart will be taken from this edition. All quotations notated volume, page, and line. Ex. This quotation, from volume 2, page 46, lines 12-30 will be cited as Eckhart, *Werke*, II, 46:12-30.

brought in as *the* image par excellence, which the Soul as mirror should desire to reflect. The Word, as image unto itself, requires no mediation, though it (or He, since Christ is the Logos) serves as mediation between the human and the apophatic divine. What began as an object lesson becomes an allegory for a Christian Neoplatonic cosmology that privileges visuality as its theoretical and epistemological frame: the Soul is synonymous with the eye, visual recognition is equivalent with intellectual understanding, and image is the medium of choice in discussing mediation between human and divine.<sup>12</sup>

Yet even as it uses the frame of visuality, it deconstructs it. The greater German Sermon 69 is set up as a dialectic between two "meister," arguing opposite views, both of which are right. The first, a here-anonymous Democritus, says: "If there were no medium, the eye would see an ant in the sky," "enwære kein mittel, daz ouge sæhe âmeizen oder eine mücken an dem himel."<sup>13</sup> The second, an also unnamed Aristotle, replies: "If there were no medium, my eye would see nothing," "enwære keine mittel, mîn ouge ensæhe niht."<sup>14</sup> Appropriately, the solution or synthesis of these opposing viewpoints is in the apophatic essence of the divine, which the Soul "sees" in its entirety when all mediation is removed, yet it is by means of the allegorically visual system of mediated recognition that the Soul can comprehend the eternal Word, and through the image that is the eternal Word reach the imageless divine beyond it. Thus visual mediation is required to eventually achieve the final unmediated experience.

---

<sup>12</sup> Eckhart makes this even more explicit in the German Sermon 70, in which he delineates the ways in which the eye, but not the ear or tongue, for example, are similar to heaven and thus the preferred sense for recognition of the divine.

<sup>13</sup> Eckhart. *Teacher and Preacher*. 312. *Werke*, 46. The original discussion is from Aristotle, *De Anima*. (Oxford: E Typographeo Clarendoniano, 1956). II, c.7 419:15ff.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*



Eckhart then finishes the sermon with an extended detailing of the following five attributes of *vernünffticheit*, or reason, which can be usefully correlated with the Neoplatonic *nous*, as will be further explored in Chapter 1. This is important for Suso because his mystic marriage is with *ewiges wísheit*, Eternal Wisdom, a gender-ambiguous allegorical figure and figuration of Christ who is more or less identical with *vernünffticheit*. The final attribute of Eckhartian *vernünffticheit* is that it is, itself, an image. He explains this by saying the image of a thing is indistinguishable from the thing itself, and thus *vernünffticheit*, as the image of the apophatic divine, reaches beyond abstract concepts like goodness and truth into the *grunt*, the ineffable core of the divine. As image it is separate, in that it mediates, but in properly mediating it breaks down the very separation that it itself represents. This is Suso's frame for understanding theology, for understanding Christology, and ultimately anthropology and his own identity. Christ is the *imago Dei* or divine image, and humanity *ad imaginem Dei*, made from the divine image.

Suso also saw Christ or Eternal Wisdom as the mediator of divine image. But instead of situating his discussion of this function in explanatory sermons as Eckhart does, the author of the *Life* writes it as a narrative with elements from several popular secular genres, placing his textual alter ego the Servant in a mystic marriage where he serves his liege Lady Eternal Wisdom.<sup>15</sup> This

---

<sup>15</sup> When this dissertation discusses the “author of the *Life*,” it is describing the editorial and authorial force responsible for the text of the *Life*. For any given portion of the text, this may or may not include the historical persons named Henry Suso or Elsbeth Stigel. Authorial credit is tricky, especially for the *Life*, because the male protagonist of the prologue, presumed to be Suso from the title before the prologue in most manuscripts that identifies the book with Suso, cedes authorial credit to his female counterpart, presumed contextually to be Stigel, even while claiming final editorial control, because “A bit of good instruction was added by him in her person after her death.” Tobin 63. Bihlmeyer 8:3. Some scholars have argued that this prologue is simply a humility trope, common in many visionary texts, which was employed by Suso in order to bypass accusations of pride in seeking to write of himself as a spiritually exemplary figure. Many of these scholars think that Stigel may have had no hand at all in writing the text.

reflects shifts in genre as vernacular religious literature increasingly came in dialogue with courtly literature, like the courtly romance and troubadour poetry or *Minnesang*.<sup>16</sup> Suso draws on tropes from other vernacular literature to enrich his account of his personal experiences of the divine, like many other visionary writers such as the thirteenth-century Dutch beguine Hadewijch or Mechthild von Magdeburg. But underneath the narrative frame is the same understanding of how the human Soul and the divine and the same concept of mediation between the two as image-based. In his other works, Suso explains this theoretical framework more explicitly in dialogic format, even drawing on other popular vernacular literary traditions, for example Passion meditation literature in *Book of Eternal Wisdom*. But even here, elements of visionary narrative based on Eckhartian visual theory will break in, such as the Disciple's

---

Others imagine a collaborative engagement in which she prepared source materials, but he wrote the majority of the extant text. For a full discussion of this debate, see Frank Tobin, "Henry Suso and Elsbeth Stigel: Was the *Vita* a Cooperative Effort?" in *Gendered Voices*. 118-135. Tobin ultimately comes down on the side of those who see Suso as the primary author. Also, more recently, Altröck and Ziegeler contest Stigel's involvement as well as the assumption that the *Servant* was intended originally as an alter ego for Suso, see footnote 1. This dissertation reserves judgment in this debate and uses the neutral "author of the *Life*," in order to avoid the pitfalls of simply referring to the author of the *Life* as Suso, eliding the work potentially done by Stigel. Suso is nevertheless referred to as the editorial force behind the *Exemplar* as a whole and the author of other books contained therein.

<sup>16</sup> As early as the 19th century, Suso became referred to as the *Minnesänger der Gottesminne* (Troubadour of divine [courtly] love), citing the ways in which his works reflect numerous common tropes of courtly love poetry, *Minnesang*. A prime example of this kind of scholarship can be found in J. A. Bizet's *Suso Et Le Minnesang: Ou, La Morale De L'amour Courtois* (Paris: Aubier, 1947). Other authors have contested the primacy of *Minnesang* as the prime secular literary influence and focus instead on the *Servant*'s depiction as knight of divine [courtly] love, *Minneritter*, such as Schwietering, "Zur Autorschaft von Seuses Vita" in *Mystik und Höfische Dichtung im Hochmittelalter* (Tübingen, M. Niemeyer 1960), 313-23. In this view, chivalric courtly romances are seen as the primary secular influence. More recently, in her notes on the recent critical edition of Frauenlob's *Marienleich* Barbara Newman puts forth the hypothesis that mendicant preachers were literally competing on the street for audiences with the professional *Minnesänger*, and both would borrow material and ideas from the other in an attempt to appeal to the widest audience, creating a fertile space for this kind of literary crossover, *Frauenlob's Song of Songs: A Medieval German Poet and His Masterpiece*, (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).

encounter with the *glichnús* in Chapter 5 of the *Little Book of Truth*, which will be more closely examined in Chapter 2 of this dissertation. By instantiating religious theory in narrative and dialogic form, Suso makes what might otherwise seem esoteric engaging and inviting, with clear character roles for the reader to emulate. The author is showing rather than telling, and by fashioning both the Servant and Stigel as true image or "war bild," the author of the *Life* performs the transformation from "anvahender mensch," or beginner, to "war bild" that the author desires to provoke in the reader.

### **Methodological Concerns**

An easy critique of this study would be to argue that it is simply not timely—the focus on visuality in medieval mysticism was overdone and overstated, and the conversation has moved on and need not return. One of the foremost critics of the “visual turn” is Caroline Walker Bynum, most notably in her recent book *Christian Materiality*.<sup>17</sup> Here she argues that, contrary to much recent work done under the auspices of visuality studies, the content of medieval visions as we have them are “textual in form and material in content.”<sup>18</sup> They use the written word to describe visions full of physical objects, despite their goal of mediating the theoretically apophatic, immaterial divine.<sup>19</sup> She argues that vision is less of a concern for mystics than the

---

<sup>17</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2011). 41.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> The reader may notice that this dissertation uses the adjective and noun "divine" or "the divine" rather than the more common "God." This terminology is used because the word "God" in the contemporary vernacular is more tinged with problematic visual imagery—specifically the trope of the old white man with a beard—than it appears to have been in the late Middle Ages.

issues that surround language and its failure to adequately express the divine, on the one hand, and the issues that surround materiality of devotional objects, on the other. Earlier movements of mysticism focused on the first, on problem of language and the necessity that the language of mysticism to “unsay” as much as it “said.”<sup>20</sup> But the visionary accounts of the high and late Middle Ages are rife with lush images, often of inanimate objects, which caused more concern.<sup>21</sup> Although some of that concern is aimed at the ancient worry that no image or object can fully convey the divine, Bynum claims that more of it is aimed at the materiality of the many devotional objects that both surrounded them physically—more than ever previously in Christian history—and that permeated even the space of incorporeal visions of the divine.

Bynum’s focus in *Christian Materiality* is on the dangerous potential that the materiality of devotional presented, because she sees them not as attempting to convey the divine as comprehensible meaning content, but instead to miraculously reveal the infinity of the divine:

The physicality that we encounter in devotional objects (often in their combination of colors, depth of relief, textures, and materials) reflects and results from the fact that they are not so much naturalistic (that is, mimetic) depictions as disclosures of the sacred through material substance.<sup>22</sup>

---

When speaking of a specific form of the Trinity, such as the Father, medieval texts might use this kind of imagery, but the term "God" remained visually unmarked and thus fruitful for thinkers like Eckhart and Suso to express the apophatic divine, which as Eckhart contends remains without names or images. For more on this, see Chapter 1. Because "the divine" is not visually marked in contemporary discourse in the same way that "God" often is, it offers a better term to discuss the type of theology that the apophatic Christian tradition, from Pseudo-Dionysius to Suso, is aiming for.

<sup>20</sup> This tradition will be explicated further in Chapter 1. For more on this mode of mystic language, see Michael Anthony Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

<sup>21</sup> Many late medieval theorists such as Thomas Aquinas felt the need to carefully distinguish between the devotion for images of the divine, *dulia*, and the devotion for the divine itself, *latria*. Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 51.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 41

Essentially, what these objects are doing is not artistically rendering the infinite divine, which is impossible, rather they are miraculously revealing the divine in a manner similar to a relic, such as a bleeding host.<sup>23</sup> In this figuration, it makes perfect sense that devotional images were so often hubs of miraculous happenings, as mentioned in the introductory paragraph. Whether a statue looks like the Virgin does not matter, it only matters that the Virgin is able to be miraculously manifest in the physical world by means of that statue. And the clearest signal that she is manifested is an actual miracle, such as making the statue cry or lactate.

This focus on the material elements of devotional objects as potential sites of revelatory or miraculous power is also extended to mystic texts by Christian Kiening in *Mystische Bücher*.<sup>24</sup> The materiality of the book itself is in productive dynamic tension with its textuality, or the content value of the book. Kiening sees mystic texts as defined and differentiated from other religious genres by rich tensions between secrecy and revelation, textuality and materiality, and temporal distinctions between past, present, and future. In his view, they often base some part of their imagery or structure on the biblical Revelations of John, which holds similar tensions. The book to be physically consumed in Revelations, for example, displays the connection between epistemological questions and materiality often at the core of mystic texts—to eat the book is to bodily incorporate it, like Christ in the Host, but also to understand its mysterious content.

Medieval thinkers take St. John's engagement with the materiality of the mystic book, and the

---

<sup>23</sup> This also addresses the common concern that dead, inanimate matter cannot represent the living divine or be in the divine image. Ibid, 48-49. When devotional images are animated by divine miracle, they become more able as quasi-living or at least lively objects to be, like humans, connected to the divine image. The type of connection remains up for debate, and there are careful distinctions for human and divine figures between being *imago Dei*, the image of God, as Christ is, versus *ad imaginem Dei*, according to the image of God, as human beings are. More on this distinction in chapters 1 and 4.

<sup>24</sup> Christian Kiening, *Mystische Bücher* (Zürich: Chronos, 2011).

archetype that Revelations itself presents, and build on it to explore countless other ways to interweave the somatic and the textual which are based in the rich materiality of medieval devotional objects that Bynum discusses. The emphasis is on the reader to digest the text and be transformed in order to gain access to the truth within. This pedagogical or transformative element distinguishes these texts both from scripture (which are entirely revelatory, with truth meant for all) and from magic texts (which are entirely secretive, with truth meant only for the one).

This definition is very useful for addressing a further methodological concern, namely how to define “mysticism.” By focusing on the materiality of the book itself rather than the sensory experience that may or may not be at the root of the account, Kiening bypasses the existentialist questions that have plagued mysticism studies for over a century.<sup>25</sup> In mystic texts,

---

<sup>25</sup> Since William James’ hotly contested definition over a century ago—that “personal religious experience has its root and center in mystical states of consciousness”—many debates have centered around existentialist questions of whether scholars can know and thus whether they can study the inner experience of another person, especially a medieval person, known only through extant texts. *Varieties of Religious Experience*, (New York: New American Library 1958). 292. James sees “mystical states of consciousness” as defined by ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity. For clarifications of these terms, see Lectures 16 and 17, *ibid.* While this approach can be useful for studying the rhetoric of mysticism cross-culturally, it focuses too much on elements of the equation that scholars cannot and will never be able to know. This kind of approach has been deemed “essentialist” by scholars like Steven Katz, because it is focused on seemingly universal elements of “mystic” experience, arguably common even across vast temporal, physical, and cultural distances. Steven Katz, *Mysticism and Sacred Scripture* (Oxford University Press, 2000). 3-4. Katz dismisses this in favor of a “contextualist” approach, which seeks to understand discourses of mysticism in the cultural framework in which they were produced, even arguing that the experience itself is shaped by the conceptual framework and expectations of the mystic. This focus on context and tradition is the track taken by most scholars of mysticism, who tend to focus on the historical tradition of mysticism as a kind of discourse that tended to cluster with certain kinds of communities, practices, and rhetoric. An exemplary figure for the historical approach would be Bernard McGinn, who traced a full history of Western Christian mysticism in his exhaustive “Presence of God” series. McGinn takes the approach of mysticism as a rhetorical tradition to its logical extreme and argues to include figures like St. Augustine of Hippo who might or might not otherwise fit various definitions of mysticism, (such as biographical or autobiographical accounts of divine experiences; writing

their embodied experience is described in language. Regardless of whether experiences described directly correlate to “true” biographical experiences of historical persons, the description of the experience and its sensory content is definitional to the genre and cannot be neatly or cleanly extricated from the style of writing. And even though the original person’s body or embodied experience is irretrievable for the reader, the book itself has a materiality which is both rich and problematic, especially for medieval thinkers, and it invites the reader to focus not on the unknowable validity of the writer’s inner state but instead seek out similar experiences of their own, sparked by the inspiring accounts of their forebears’ experiences.

Bynum’s and Kiening’s insights are key to understanding the way that medieval religious related to devotional books and images. Indeed, the materiality of object must remain central to any argument about the religious value of physical images in the later Middle Ages, which is where so much of recent medieval visibility studies went awry. But that does not mean that visual theory itself is useless as a lens for understanding medieval visionary accounts. When properly grounded in the materiality that medieval vision entails and the core theological conundrums that that materiality brings to bear, visual theory completes a necessary trilogy of foci to unlock the mysteries of medieval visions—visibility, materiality, and textuality. These

---

treatises on forms of prayer and contemplation; or writing explicit considerations of the nature of mystic theology) because of their effect on the later tradition of mysticism and mystic writing, regardless of whether they actually wrote in it themselves or could be argued to describe having had “mystical states of consciousness.” Bernard McGinn, "How Augustine Shaped Medieval Mysticism," *Augustinian Studies* 37.1 (2006): 1, 2-5. Similar arguments to Katz’ are made by Don Cupitt, who argues that there is no such thing as pre-linguistic experience, since it is through the tool of language that meaning and cognition emerge. Don Cupitt, *Mysticism After Modernity* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 11. As such, Cupitt argues that mysticism is a form of writing, which does not preclude it but instead is a necessary requirement for it to be a category of experience. This mode of analysis, combined with a historical discourse analysis approach with special focus on pedagogy, comes closest to the methodology being taken here.

roughly represent the three major elements in the title of this dissertation: visuality, gender identity, and epistemology. Sight, body, and text.

Specifically relating to Suso, Kiening argues that the title of Suso's collected works, the *Exemplar*, already blends the category of (textual) book and (physical) author, for it is both an exemplar of the uncorrupted text and an exemplary role model for mystic life and experience. This also blurs the temporal axis of the book: the past of Christ and Suso, the present of the current reader, and future of what the reader may become are all contemporaneous, similar to the Neoplatonic concept of creation or Effect always emanating out from, returning to, and remaining in the creator or Cause.<sup>26</sup> Kiening traces his axes of time, matter, and text further onto the incidents with the Servant's scar in the *Life*, the first book of the *Exemplar*. Early in the text, the Servant, Suso's alter ego in the *Life*, carves the Christogram IHS with a stylus into the skin above his heart, literally writing the name of Christ on his body and leaving a lifelong scar. Later on, his spiritual daughter embroiders the same IHS onto slips of silk, which the Servant holds to his chest scar and blesses, which serve as devotional objects that bless those who carry them. These incidents will be explicated much more thoroughly in later chapters, but clearly indicate the degree to which the physical body and the text are bound together. What this masterful explanation leaves out, however, is the image. Suso is serving as exemplar not only as text and as body, but also as image, and it is this element—inextricably interwoven with the other two—that is the focus here. The materiality and textuality of Suso's texts have been well and often discussed by other scholars, and certainly the visuality has received much scholarly attention, but the scientific core that links the material and visual elements of the text has yet to be discussed.

---

<sup>26</sup> This will be further explicated in Chapter 1.



Certainly Suso is concerned about the problematic role of image and language in discussing the divine. He discusses it often, and the last chapter of the *Life* is dedicated to addressing concerns about how to use images to speak of the divine. He also worries extensively about the effect of the book itself as an object, conflating it with himself in the Prologue:

One should also know that the manuscript of the first book, rich in insight as it is, lay for many years secretly locked away, awaiting the servant's death, because he was quite unwilling during his lifetime to reveal *himself* to anyone. Finally, his good sense made him realize that, given the downward path mankind is presently following, it would be better and safer with God's good grace to present the book to his religious superiors while he was still alive and could vouch for the genuineness of all the parts. After his death it could happen that some foolish people whose words should not be regarded seriously might judge the book falsely, not wanting to recognize his good intentions in it or not being able to understand something better themselves because of their lack of sophistication. It could easily have turned out that after his death the book might become the property of the lukewarm and those fallen from grace who would devote no effort to having it circulated to God's praise among eager people. Thus it would disappear without being of use. It could also happen that it might immediately fall into the hands of those blind in knowledge or those full of spite who would suppress it out of their vice of malice, as has also frequently happened.<sup>27</sup>

Es ist och ze wüssen: do die quaternen diss ersten sinnenrichen bu<sup>o</sup>ches heinlich beschlossen lagen vil jaren und dez dieners todes beiteten, wan er sich in rechter warheit ungeru dur mit bi sinem lebenne keinem menschen wolt offnen, ze jungst do seit im sin bescheidenheit, daz ze disen ziten nah dem gegenwürtigen lofe der abnemenden menscheit besserr und sicher weri, daz daz bu<sup>e</sup>chli mit gotes urlob wurdi geofnet sinen obren, die wil er lepti und er sich wol uf ellú stuk diser warheit versprechen ko<sup>e</sup>nde, denn na sinem tode, ob joch daz also gevieli, daz etlichú unverstandnú menschen, der rede nit ze ahten ist, daz dú hier umb in verkerlicher wise valsch urteil dar úber wurdin gebende, die sin gu<sup>o</sup>ten meinung dar inne nit wo<sup>e</sup>ltin an sehen, ald die von ir grobheit kein bessers in in selber kunnen verstan. Wan es mo<sup>e</sup>hti wol also sin ergangen, daz es na sinem tode den lawen und gnadlosen weri worden, die kein erbet dur mit hetin gehabt, daz es fúrbaz got ze lob begirigen menschen weri gemeinsamet, und mu<sup>e</sup>sti also unnuzberlich sin vergangen. Och mo<sup>e</sup>hti sin geschehen, daz ersten weri worden, die es von irem begrestlichen ungunst hetin under gedruket, als och me ist beschehen.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Tobin 58. Emphasis added by author.

<sup>28</sup> Bihlmeter 4:28-5:12. He goes on to specify that he sought the approval of the most questionable passages from the German prelate Master Bartholomew before publicizing it, see *ibid* 5:12-6:10.

He identifies publicizing the book with exposing himself. Part of this is of course his fear of ecclesiastical censure, but many scholars have noted that he identifies strongly with the book as an extension of himself.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the only direct correlation between Suso and the Servant is in the epigraph of the prologue of the *Life*, "Hie vahet an daz erste tail dizz bu<sup>o</sup>ches, daz da haisset der Suse."<sup>30</sup> This can be read to understand that he is the subject of the book, but most literally reads that the book itself, or perhaps just Part 1, is called "Suso."<sup>31</sup> But out of fear of multiple fully-explored potential bad legacies of the book, equated as his own legacy, he chooses to seek ecclesiastical approbation to go public with the book. This series of potential bad outcomes for the book parallels the Parable of the Sower, in which Christ speaks of the Word as a seed, spread by a sower, falling on various kinds of unfertile ground, which is equated with his words reaching unprepared audiences.<sup>32</sup> So the book (text) is himself (body) and the Word.

But it is also the image, the "war bild" that Suso hopes to offer his readers. For Suso, there is a hierarchy of images that roughly correlates images' spiritual and epistemological value with their immateriality, building on an Augustinian model of visionary experience.<sup>33</sup> Seen images and mental images, because they are physical impressions without material of their own—form without substance, like a footprint in mud—are halfway to the goal of the divine abyss, which is without matter *and* form. These ethereal images remain problematic but are

---

<sup>29</sup> For more on this, see Rozenski's dissertation, also see footnote 1 for the strong debate around this question.

<sup>30</sup> Bihlmeyer 7:1. Tobin's translation loses all potential ambiguity of the original, "Here begins the first part of the book on the Life of a Dominican named Suso." Tobin 63.

<sup>31</sup> There is more discussion of the possibility that only Part 1 is identified with Suso in Chapter 4.

<sup>32</sup> See Mark 4:3-20. Also found in the other Synoptic Gospels and the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas.

<sup>33</sup> This will be expanded on especially in Chapters 1 and 2.

better tools than physical images, though Suso certainly uses plenty of those, too. He references the accompanying illuminations to the manuscript several times through the text, including in the prologue, making it clear that they were seen as integral to the mystic purpose of the book:

The pictures of heavenly scenes, which precede or follow, serve the purpose of allowing a religiously minded person, when he leaves the world of the senses and enters into himself, always to have something to draw him away from this false world, which pulls him down, and upward toward our beloved God.<sup>34</sup>

Und dú himelschen bilde, dú hie vor und na stand, sind dar zu<sup>o</sup> núzz, daz ein go<sup>t</sup>licher mensch in sinem usgang der sinnen und ingang dez gemu<sup>e</sup>tes alle zit etwaz vinde, daz in von diser valschen niederziehenden welt wider uf zu<sup>o</sup> dem minneklichen got reizlich ziehe.<sup>35</sup>

Here Suso's complex relationship with image is on full display. The physical, simplistic goache illuminations are to be drawn on when the rightly-minded person sinks into the absence of the senses. Indeed they only depict his otherworldly encounters—no mortal scene is included. On the one hand this reflects an understanding of how memory and image work within the mind's eye, able to be recalled in the *ymagnatio vel formalis* and used for meditation and contemplation, despite the absence of external sight. The medieval understanding of this process will be further explicated in Chapter 2. But it also reflects the contradiction that a physical image from the created world is intended to pull the godly person away from the same created world and away from images themselves, toward the imageless divine. He cultivates this method that he learned from his teacher, Meister Eckhart, even further, pushing the boundaries of the contradiction that an image should lead to imageless *unio mystica*.

The manuscript illuminations that are used as frequent objects of study in this dissertation also present a methodological concern. The images used for this dissertation are taken from the

---

<sup>34</sup> Tobin 58.

<sup>35</sup> Bihlmeyer 4:24-28.

Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire de Strasbourg's MS 2.929.<sup>36</sup> This manuscript, referred to by Bihlmeyer as HS A, is the oldest extant manuscript of the full *Exemplar*, dating to the second half of the 14th century and potentially to Suso's lifetime. All other known manuscripts of the *Exemplar* date much later, and the majority of those manuscripts and even early prints, such as the 1482 Anton Sorg print, seem to take BNU's MS 2.929 as their clear model, even to the point of reproducing some apparent mistakes. Given the dating, it is not outside the realm of possibility that BNU's MS 2.929 is *the* original commissioned by Suso, and the images are the very ones he references throughout the text. Frank Tobin even speculates the images may have been originally made by Suso himself, though this cannot be taken as certain.<sup>37</sup> Whether or not he produced these exact images himself, since most of the manuscripts and printings that contain images clearly base their images on those from BNU's MS 2.929 or derivatives thereof, these images are the ones that are taken as object of study. For all these reasons, in this dissertation these images are taken as an integral part of the text.

## Chapter Summaries

This dissertation uses a variety of methodologies to ensure that each object of study is given the most appropriate and thorough analysis possible. Chapter 1, for example, is primarily an intellectual history, in order to do justice to the variety of intellectual traditions—philosophical, theological, and scientific—that interweave in the intersection of visual theory and

---

<sup>36</sup> The entire manuscript has been digitized and is currently available online at <http://www.bnu.fr/en/collections/digital-library/rhineland-mysticism> under MS 2929.

<sup>37</sup> Tobin 383, note 6.

Christian apophatic theology from Pseudo-Dionysius to Suso. Chapter 2 primarily uses literary textual analysis but through the lens of Al-Haytham's scientific theories. Chapter 3 also makes use Al-Haytham's scientific theories, but otherwise mostly uses tools from literary studies and art history, because the discourses in question (bridal mysticism and Passion meditation) are expressed and advanced materially by both written and visual artistic expression. Chapter 4 focuses on gender and epistemology, and thus takes its analytic frameworks from the ancient epistemological theories of St. Augustine and contemporary gender studies. Each of these chapters will be briefly outlined below.

The first chapter is an intellectual history of the intersection between visibility discourse and ontology in Christian apophatic theology from pseudo-Dionysius' formative work in the fifth century up until Suso in the fourteenth. For those readers less inclined to intellectual history, it might prove useful to jump forward to the final section, which provides a summary of the most salient elements that Suso takes from this tradition. The chapter considers the origins of negative Christian theology in the ancient Neoplatonic philosophical tradition, most specifically in Plotinus, whom pseudo-Dionysius both took as inspiration and even plagiarized extensively. Pseudo-Dionysius extended the concepts from Neoplatonics into a Christian negative theology, which he placed at its inception by taking the persona of a New Testament figure, Dionysius the Areopagite. He focused on problems of language in speaking of and naming the divine, but his Carolingian translators and commentators inserted the question of emotion and visibility, questioning the value of images perhaps in response to Byzantine iconoclastic debates. In the centuries thereafter, the rediscovery of many classical philosophical texts from Arabic translations prompted a rise in philosophical thought, Scholasticism, which began engaging in depth with classical philosophy and the works of the early Church Fathers, seeking systematic

theologies and natural philosophies. This work was aided not only by the translations of ancient philosophical texts, but by the Arab commentaries, together with vital Arab scientific and physiological work that became the basis for many elements of Scholastic natural philosophy. Specifically Ibn Al-Haytham's work on optics offered a workable solution to ancient debates on vision, which inform Meister Eckhart's concept of visuality and which he then draws on to explicate the relationship between the individual and the apophatic divine.

The second chapter explores Suso's concept of "bild," image, or "glichenús," similitude, extrapolating from an encounter in the fifth chapter of the *Little Book of Truth*, where Suso is led in his mind's eye to a meeting with a "glichenús," a human image charged with symbolic meaning, floating next to a cross. Groups of people are walking around the *glichenús* in an unsuccessful attempt to understand its meaning, when the *glichenús* descends to Suso and announces that all his questions will be answered, which initiates a dialogue between him and the allegorical figure of Truth, explaining that the image is a likeness of Christ. By connecting this anecdote and others with medieval theories of light and vision explicated in Chapter 1, one can see that the category of "image" or "likeness" in Suso's texts is conceived of an active agent that serves an almost angelic function of annunciation and approach. This angelic function also mirrors Pseudo-Dionysius' conception of angels as mediating knowledge (in the forms of light and truth) downward in a hierarchy: increasingly form-based knowledge the closer one gets to the earth, increasingly formless the closer one gets to heaven/the divine. Enlightened humans can serve a similar function, mediating their own enlightened knowledge down through limiting filters of increasing formed-ness. Form or image are thus restrictive tools that only help people at the lowest levels of enlightenment progress to the next, and cannot properly mediate between the lowest echelons of form-based creation and the highest levels of the formless divine. To serve

this function, images and symbolic figures—like the *glichnús*, or like enlightened humans serving as "true image" of the divine—work on a system of mirroring similar to the late medieval of the glacial humor of the eye, where they mirror divine light downwards while simultaneously making themselves recognizable to those below by mirroring shaped human forms, or even mirroring the image of the viewer back to themselves.

The third chapter draws on art historical concepts of image agency to explore how Suso draws on popular artistic and literary traditions from his time—most notably bridal mysticism, Passion meditation, and the related *imitatio Christi*—to establish Mary and Christ as visual role models for the burgeoning mystic to emulate in order to gain compassion and connection to the divine. Because of the plasticity of the body and the medieval science of visual contact, to Suso the act of looking at and meditating on an image of the suffering Christ or Virgin Mary had the potential to physically change the viewer. If engaged long and earnestly enough, the differentiation between viewer and viewed grew less, such that the viewer might even begin to take on physical marks of the visual object, like the stigmata of St. Francis of Assisi. This physical malleability reflected a mental and spiritual malleability, through which the Soul could grow similar to the image of Christ through extended prayer and meditation on the Passion. In becoming an image of Christ, himself the *imago Dei*, they gain access to the unmediated connection that Eckhart describes—the image has no image because the medium needs no medium to connect with its source—and thereby gain access the apophatic divine.

The fourth and final chapter engages questions of gender and epistemology, exploring the degree to which women were considered to be created in the divine image equally as men were, thus able to perform the kind of *imitatio Christi* that allows one to gain wisdom by oneself and follow the visual mystic path described in previous chapters. This chapter draws on the work of

St. Augustine, who argued that women were created in the divine image to the degree that they were human, but not in their specific embodiment as women. But he embeds this within a wider argument about the nature of the human mind, which he argues is similarly divided as were Adam and Eve: there is the original, masculine contemplative mind—which was created fully in the divine image—and the extrapolated, secondary, feminine active mind, which only participates in the divine image when considered as a whole, together with the contemplative mind. Each serves a different function and produces a different type of knowledge: the contemplative mind produces *sapientia* or wisdom, knowledge of eternal truths, and the active mind produces *scientia*, or practical knowledge of the created world. This gendered epistemological division parallels to the function of male and female figures in the *Life*, where the Servant gains access to Wisdom directly through personal experience, and women like Stigel process his insights into actionable knowledge. This knowledge is best represented by the book of the *Life* itself, which the author of the *Life* holds is written by Stigel, even while admitting that the author added portions after her death, but "in her person." This extends even to physical tokens, like the embroidered slips that Stigel produces to mimic the scar of Christ's monogram on the Servant's chest, which he produced as a young man by cutting the monogram into his own skin as an act of *imitatio Christi*. In this way, women are given a useful and necessary role in the production of spiritual knowledge, but one that nonetheless relegates them to secondary status, needing male ecclesiastical authority and approbation to mediate between them and divine wisdom.

The discourses that Suso draws on to frame the visual relationship between humans and divine are extensive—stretching from ancient philosophy to popular affective piety, from bridal mysticism to Scholastic theology, from Arab science to Augustinian epistemology. But each of



these discourses were, for Suso, speaking to similar questions and reaching for the same goal: the advancement of wisdom, so that human beings could better understand eternal truth. But that eternal truth remained nonetheless beyond the power of any words to describe or any image to depict, which also underlies Suso's interdisciplinary and multi-pronged approach. If no discourse could fully describe the divine, multiple discourses could each elucidate different aspects, such that one slowly approached a better understanding, similar to the many points making up the curve of a parabola in mathematics, which approaches, but never reaches, its asymptote, coming ever closer into infinitesimal distances. The key to overcoming that existential gap between the created and the divine was, for Suso, love—a deep affective bond with the figure of Wisdom or Christ. But that bond may have been more accessible for men than for women. Where the Servant can seek out and court Eternal Wisdom himself, his spiritual daughters have to learn their love of Wisdom from the Servant, their closest male ecclesiastical authority.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Chapter 45 of the *Life*, in which it is specified that Stigel learns her love of the holy name of Christ from the devotion and faith she sees the Servant has toward it.

## Chapter 1—*Schein und Sein: A Brief Overview of Visuality and Ontology from Pseudo-Dionysius to Meister Eckhart*

"[What God is in power, we are in image; what the Father is in power and the Son in wisdom and the Holy Ghost in goodness, that we are in image. 'Then we shall recognize, as we are recognized,' and love, as we are loved.]"  
-Meister Eckhart, German Sermon 67<sup>39</sup>

"Daz got in der kraft ist, daz sîn wir in der in dem bilde; daz der vater ist in der kraft und der sun in der wîsheit und der heilige geist in der gûeticheit, daz sîn wir in dem bilde. 'Dâ bekennen wir, als wir bekant sîn,' und minnen, als wir geminnet sîn."<sup>40</sup>

This chapter will focus on the questions of ontology and visuality in the negative theological tradition leading up to Suso, because in this tradition a language of visuality became a privileged rhetoric to discuss the recognition of true essence. Suso was trained in negative theology as a student of Meister Eckhart. Because Eckhart was the main, if not exclusive, mentor in this tradition for Suso, Eckhart remains in many senses the primary focus of this chapter—he is the penultimate figure considered and his readings of his predecessors are those that are the most salient to the present work. As such, many of the incredibly complex figures discussed here will be simplified not only to their influence on Eckhart, whom we know read all of their works, but further through him to their extended influence on Suso, who read the major figures, though not as extensively as Eckhart. Suso takes his theoretical frame in large swaths directly from Eckhart's thought, but focuses in on a few driving concepts, which he then develops into an

---

<sup>39</sup> Translation is the authors own, because of the difficulty of finding English translations of this particular German sermon.

<sup>40</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Werke*, ed. Niklaus Largier, (Frankfurt am Main: Deutsche Klassiker Verlag, 2008). Middle High German quotations from Eckhart will be taken from this edition. All quotations notated volume, page, and line. Ex. This quotation, from volume 2, page 24, lines 18-20 will be cited as Eckhart, *Werke*, II, 24.18-20.

intricate series of symbolic narratives and dialogues. To do this he draws on surrounding popular traditions, many of which Eckhart does not choose to engage with in his writings. These traditions will be discussed in the second chapter. Suso also brings back in elements from various strands of the negative tradition that Eckhart neglects, such as Pseudo-Dionysius' concept of celestial hierarchy, which will also be discussed further in that chapter. This chapter examines the theological and intellectual history of late antiquity and the Middle Ages, but does so through the lens of literary studies. Because the ultimate goal of this is a literary analysis, each particular idea or theoretical shift will be, as much as it is possible, elucidated by close readings of salient passages from the thinkers in question, to get a sense of the language and symbols used. Further, the thinkers' methods of reading his forebears will be examined. Because of the breadth that must be covered, usually only one or two quotes can be considered for most figures, except in regard to Meister Eckhart's thought, with which a more thorough engagement is necessary. Whole articles and even volumes can and have been written on the interplay of each of these figures, and as such this chapter undertakes only the briefest of overviews necessary to follow the common theme of ontology and image in negative theology.

The negative theological tradition that Suso learns from Eckhart began with ancient pagan classical philosophy and the work of interpreting Plato and Aristotle. It was then transposed into a Christian framework by the sixth century Pseudo-Dionysius, who implicitly placed it at the founding of Christianity by assuming the identity of the minor New Testament figure Dionysius the Areopagite. His Greek works were translated into Latin and interpreted by Carolingian scholars, which set the stage for their high medieval reception. These interpreters interpolated in elements of affect and visibility, which were lacking in Dionysius' original. In the other direction, coming to Europe from the Middle East via Spain, Aristotelean and Neoplatonic

philosophies were rediscovered and interpreted by thinkers like Avicenna, Alhazen, Averroes, and Maimonides. Medieval European scholastics like Thomas Aquinas, Albert the Great, Dietrich von Freiberg, and Meister Eckhart then mixed the negative theological tradition with the philosophical, scientific, and theological texts of these Arab and Jewish Aristotelians to create more fully-fleshed systems of theology that addressed issues of ontology and divine mediation by drawing on the symbolic language of visibility, the interior and exterior senses, and, to a lesser extent, affect.

The core thread of negative theology through all of this is the difficulty of discussing and creating knowledge of the divine, which this tradition holds as completely and utterly ineffable. Because the divine transcends all, no words nor images can possibly capture its essence—if it can even be said to have essence. And the question of essence in turn reflects back on the perceptible world, wondering whether the created world or the divine is best attributed with *being*. The core question of this chapter, then, can be stated thus: how does image or identity, that which one externally recognizes, relate to essence? How can one recognize essence?

### **Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite's Mystical Theology and his Early Medieval Interpreters**

Although concepts of the ineffability and transcendence of divine being exist in Christian scripture and in the work of the desert fathers, it was Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite who introduced the language of apophatic theology to the Christian tradition.<sup>41</sup> Claiming to be a first-

---

<sup>41</sup> Staale J. Kristiansen. "Iconic Approaches to the Other in Dionysius." in Filip Ivanovic, *Dionysius the Areopagite: Between Orthodoxy and Heresy*, (Cambridge Scholars, 2011). 93.

century Athenian who converted to Christianity after a rousing speech by the Apostle Paul,<sup>42</sup> Dionysius wrote a series of Christian theological books in the late fifth or early sixth century, no later than 532.<sup>43</sup> Dionysius claims to have written more books than exist attributed to that name.

*The Divine Names, The Mystical Theology, The Celestial Hierarchy, The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, and ten letters comprise his extant writings.<sup>44</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, the

---

<sup>42</sup> Acts 17:34.

<sup>43</sup> Hereafter in this chapter he will be simply referred to as Dionysius, despite the fact that the name is assumed. That his works were completed no later than 532 is evidenced by their use in a discussion in a conference by followers of Severus of Antioch at that date. Sarah Klitenic Wear and John M. Dillon, *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonist Tradition: Despoiling the Hellenes*, (Burlington, VT, 2007). 2. His real identity is unknown, but he was likely closely, perhaps personally, tied to Severus of Antioch, a controversial religious figure who was born in Sozopolis in 465 and died in approximately 538. Although Josef Stiglmayr, whose work showed Dionysius' doctrines on evil to be directly derivative of the Neoplatonist philosopher Proclus (who lived 412-485) and thus proved that Dionysius could not be who he claimed, asserted that Dionysius was none other than Severus himself, this has been effectively disproved by Joseph Lebon. Nevertheless, his monophysite convictions, asserting that Christ had but one nature, and his educational background are remarkably similar to Severus'. Temporally Dionysius could also not have been far removed from Severus. Stiglmayr J. "Der Neoplatoniker Proklus als Vorlage der sogenannten Dionysius Areopagita in der Lehre vom Übel," *Historische Jahrbuch des Gottesgesellschaften*, 16 (1895), 253-273, 721-748. For a more full formulation of this debate, see Wear and Dillon, *Neoplatonist Tradition*. 2-3. Yet Dionysius' corpus avoided the condemnation that Severus and his followers received in 536, when Patriarch Menas of Constantinople called a synod to stamp out monophysitism, which Dionysius arguably also advocates, and Severus' condemnation was thereafter ratified by the Byzantine Emperor Justinian I. Monophysitism is the doctrine that the Christian divine has only one nature, not three, and often carries with it the implication that Christ's mortal body was a tool used by the divine, but not itself truly dual—human and divine—in nature. The alleged Dionysius and his texts were never banned. After a few hiccups, in which early commentators like John of Scythopolis seek to prove Dionysius' veracity despite problematic anachronisms in the texts, Dionysius is undisputedly believed to be Paul's convert at least until the Renaissance. Certainly his medieval readers took him at his word that he was a first-century Athenian, and they thought him to have been first bishop of Athens and also to have founded the French monastery of Saint-Denys.

<sup>44</sup> Beyond these, he alludes to *The Symbolic Theology, The Theological Representations, The Properties and Ranks of Angels*, and *On the Soul*, which may have been lost, or he may be alluding to more books than he actually wrote, to imply that some were lost even in the sixth century and thus bolster the sense of his historical credibility as the New Testament figure. He may also have intended to write the books and never finished.

focus will remain on *The Mystical Theology*, a seminal work for later Christian apophatic mysticism, and *The Celestial Hierarchy*, both of which heavily influenced medieval Christian thought as a whole and specifically Suso's cosmology. Both of these books are representative of and build on Dionysius' corpus as a whole, especially *Mystical Theology*, which even summarizes the contributions of his previous works, both those we have and those we do not.

The remarkably short *Mystical Theology* raises questions of the linguistic expressibility of the divine, also dealt with in early chapters of *The Celestial Hierarchy*.<sup>45</sup> Both posit and problematize the existence of two forms of theology: the cataphatic or positive, which symbolically ascribes attributes of the created world to the divine, and the apophatic or negative, which asserts that no created thing bears true resemblance to its creator, thus all description or naming of the divine is impossible. The scholarly consensus holds that in claiming this, Dionysius projects a pagan Neoplatonic philosophical framework onto the Christian divine, implicitly saying that just as the Neoplatonics believed the One or the Monad to be outside the realm of the thinkable or the knowable, so too the Christian divine is beyond language and beyond thought. He frequently uses Neoplatonist terminology to refer to the divine, but he also creates his own terminology, going further with the Neoplatonic tradition of neologisms than any pagan Neoplatonic philosopher had done.<sup>46</sup> *Mystical Theology* is explicitly reframing the work

---

<sup>45</sup> Contemporary readers should be careful to understand Dionysius' very specific uses of the words "mystical" and "theology." The word "mystical" had not taken on its present connotations in his time, and mostly referred to secrecy, specifically the kind of secrecy and processes of initiation that so-called mystery cults employed with divine truth. Those who are ready for truth are initiated into it by authorized representatives or "angels," as will be further discussed in reference to the *Celestial Hierarchy*. "Theology" in turn refers not to theories of the nature of the divine and the universe, but rather specifically to the ways that the divine has been spoken of in holy scripture. Paul Rorem. Paul Rorem, "Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence," Oxford University Press.

<sup>46</sup> Wear and Dillon. *Neoplatonist Tradition*, 11-12.

that is done in Dionysius' *Divine Names*, un-naming the divine as different than all possible things it can be compared to, all of which it has created but none of which are equal to it.<sup>47</sup> But this does not mean that he is undoing or rescinding his former work. Rather, the two approaches to speaking about the divine are seen as complementary and bi-directional, part of a greater Neoplatonic tradition of remaining, procession, and return, which will be discussed below.

Dionysius' *The Celestial Hierarchy* was explicitly a counterpoint to his own *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, which is a fairly straightforward tract on local church organization and the symbolism of the sacraments.<sup>48</sup> *The Celestial Hierarchy*, on the other hand, is a work of

---

<sup>47</sup> Although *Mystical Theology* itself is quite short, the form in which it came to high medieval readers like Meister Eckhart and Henry Suso is likely much longer, with John Scottus Eriugena's Latin translation commonly being interrupted mid-text by Anastasius' translation of the Greek scholia, which are marginal annotations and elucidations made by a variety of authors from the sixth century to the ninth century, as well as being interrupted by selections from Eriugena's own official commentary, the *Periphyseon*. Paul Rorem calls the following the "semi-official corpus that circulated in the thirteenth century": the Eriugena and Saraccenus translations, the scholia, the commentaries by Eriugena and Hugh of St. Victor, and the paraphrase by Gallus. Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary*, 219. The copy used as a textbook in Paris in the thirteenth century, which Meister Eckhart might have studied during his times there as magister, intertwined the translated original, the scholia, and sections of the *Periphyseon* in different sizes of text, so that each short portion of Dionysius' text was accompanied by relevant portions of the *Periphyseon* in smaller print, taken as they applied thematically, and Anastasius' translation of the Greek scholia, in even smaller print. For an edition and translation which combines these as they would have been in the original, see *A Thirteenth-Century Textbook of Mystical Theology at the University of Paris: The Mystical Theology of Dionysius the Areopagite in Eriugena's Latin Translation, with the Scholia Translated by Anastasius the Librarian, and Excerpts from Eriugena's Periphyseon*, ed. L Michael Harrington (Paris; Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2004). This method of interspersed commentary is still common due to the *Mystical Theology's* incredible hermeneutic density: Paul Rorem, for example, takes the same approach in his commentary on the *Mystical Theology*. Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary*, 183.

<sup>48</sup> Notable is the fact that Dionysius appears to have invented the word "hierarchy." This is perhaps appropriate as it, like much of his work, takes classic philosophical Aristotelian and Neoplatonic cosmological structurings and concepts and translates them, as it were, out of the realm of pagan philosophy into the realm of the theology and organized religion.

angelology.<sup>49</sup> It follows remarkably closely the Neoplatonic tradition of establishing the levels between the One and the world as we experience it, merely reframed within a Christian context. Pagan Neoplatonics had posited various levels of *Nous*, or mind, and a whole host of demigods, all of which mediate between the multiplicity of the lived, created world, and the true singularity of the One. Dionysius takes this and reframes it with the One as the Christian divine, and the angels of the Bible as that which mediates between the divine and the created. This requires that the original meaning of the word "angel" as divine messenger be taken quite literally. At each level, the angels above serve as the distributors of divine knowledge downward, so that even within the ranks of angels there are hierarchies, depending on the fullness of divine truth each cadre of angels has received. Dionysius even goes so far as to explain how some human hierarchs or ecclesiastical leader can be called angels, because they take the divine knowledge they have received and disseminate it downwards to those who are worthy, but have not yet been raised up to their own level. What is also striking is that Dionysius uses the same negative linguistic model to discuss how to speak of angels: all descriptions of angels in the Bible, like descriptions or names of the divine, are more or less straightforwardly symbolic rather than actually denotative, and as such require the same work of negation to be properly understood. Indeed, to speak of any divine being one requires the dual tools of cataphatic and apophatic theology, which only in conjunction with each other can properly gesture to the truth that lies beyond words and beyond knowledge.

This discussion of Dionysius' theological frame will focus on a few key concepts that connect his work most directly to the later Rhineland mystic school of negative theology, and specifically the way in which they were interpreted in the early medieval period. To begin with

---

<sup>49</sup> Angelology is the discussion of the nature, hierarchy, and purpose of angels in Christian theology and cosmology.



Dionysius' own forebears, his most direct influence—the one from whom he borrows entire phrases in addressing the problem of evil—is the Neoplatonist Proclus. A central principle of Proclus' philosophy is the tripartite truth that all things simultaneously are part of, diverge from, and return to their Cause, which for Dionysius becomes synonymous with the highest form of the Christian divine. Proclus states this succinctly: "Every effect remains in its cause, proceeds from it, and returns to it."<sup>50</sup> This becomes a universal principle, at its widest describing the relationship of creation as a whole to the divine Cause, and in its most minuscule dictating the smallest interactions of cause and effect within the physical realm. It transcends space and time, since the divine is radically simultaneous, meaning both a spatial and a temporal omnipresence, with all effects, or creations, remaining in the Cause even as they proceed out from and return to the Cause. Dodds, in his commentary on Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, explicates this as "the three moments of the Neoplatonic world-process, immanence in the cause, procession from the cause, and reversion to the cause—or identity, difference, and the overcoming of difference by identity. This triad is one of the governing principles of Proclus' dialectic."<sup>51</sup> Thus we see that even in the pre-Christian Neoplatonics, the questions of identity with and difference from the ultimate divine are taken up, which become central for Suso, as discussed in the third chapter. And the seed of the idea, later taken up by Eckhart and Suso, that the divine exists simultaneously within the core of the created human, is already here in pagan Neoplatonic philosophy. Humans, as creations or "effects" of the divine, remain in their divine cause, proceed from it, and return to it simultaneously.

---

<sup>50</sup> Proclus and E. R. Dodds, *The Elements of Theology: A Revised Text* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). 39.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 220

The dual motions of procession and return are implicitly taken as the guiding principles of cataphatic and apophatic theology, respectively. In the third chapter of *Mystical Theology*, Dionysius explains this thus:

For the higher we soar in contemplation the more limited become our expressions of that which is purely intelligible; even as now, when plunging into the Darkness that is above the intellect, we pass not merely into brevity of speech, but even into absolute silence of thoughts and of words. Thus, in the former discourse, our contemplations descended from the highest to the lowest, embracing an ever-widening number of conceptions, which increased at each stage of the descent; but in the present discourse we mount upwards from below to that which is the highest, and, according to the degree of transcendence, so our speech is restrained until, the entire ascent being accomplished, we become wholly voiceless, inasmuch as we are absorbed in it that is totally ineffable. But why, you will ask, 'does the affirmative method begin from the highest attributions, and the negative method with the lowest abstractions?' The reason is because, when affirming the subsistence of That which transcends all affirmation, we necessarily start from the attributes most closely related to It and upon which the remaining affirmations depend; but when pursuing the negative method to reach That which is beyond all abstraction, we must begin by applying our negations to things which are most remote from It. For is it not more true to affirm that God is Life and Goodness than that God is air or stone; and must we not deny to God more emphatically the attributes of inebriation and wrath than the applications of human speech and thought?<sup>52</sup>

Dionysius sees the movement from the unity of the One to the multiplicity of the created world, or procession, as the natural course to take rhetorically in delineating cataphatic theologies. One begins with "God is one, God is good, etc.", and proceeds to things that are less close to the divine: "God has reason like a person; God has strength like a bear; God has [symbolic] arms that stretch the whole world." And the reverse is true in apophatic theology, beginning with the "lowest" ("God is not like matter; God is not like any creature; God is not like humans") and proceeding to the highest ("God is not reason; God is not light; God is not goodness"). Although not explicitly cited, this structuring process of increasing multiplicity in procession and increasing singularity and final ineffability in return is a clear outgrowth of Plotian Neoplatonic cosmology: procession and return. This also relates the type of speech possible directly to the

---

<sup>52</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987). 207-208.

place in a celestial hierarchy of divine names—and thus places the universe itself in a fluid hierarchy of things closer to and further from the divine, constantly further away or closer in.

As stated above, Dionysius also follows Neoplatonic linguistic and literary style trends in order to reach a point of reconciliation beyond these positive and negative descriptions of the divine. Dionysius is particularly fond of the prefix *hyper-* ("beyond," "above," "supra-"), which Eriugena explicates as a mode of synthesis between Dionysius' cataphatic and apophatic theologies. When Dionysius, for example, in the first lines of *Mystical Theology* characterizes the divine as *hyperousios* ("super-essential" or "beyond being") Eriugena responds in the *Periphyseon* with the following:

Those names that are predicated of God by the addition of the prefixes 'over' or 'more than' — as that he is 'over-being,' 'over-god,' 'over-ideal,' 'more than truth,' 'more than wisdom,' and the like — these fully grasp in themselves the two parts of theology — that is, the affirmative part and the negative part. As a result, they possess the form of the affirmative part in their articulation, but the power of the ban in their meaning. Let me close with this brief example: 'he is being:' affirmation; 'he is not being:' ban; 'he is over-being:' affirmation and ban at once. For when he says 'he is over-being,' he does not say what God is, but what God is not. For he says that God is not being, but more than being. Now he does not explain what that is which is more than being when he claims that God is not one of the things that are but is more than the things that are, and he does not in any way use his claim to define what God is.<sup>53</sup>

Haec nomina quae adiectione super vel plusquam particularum de deo praedicantur ut est superessentialis, superdeus, superoptimus, plusquam veritas, plusquam sapientia et similia, duarum theologiae patrium — id est affirmative et negative — in se plenissime sint comprehensiva, ita ut in pronuntiatione affirmativae formam. In intellectu vero virtutem abdicativae obtineant. Et hoc brevi concludamus exemplo: essentia ista, affirmatio. Essentia non est, abdicatio. Superessentialis est, affirmatio simul et abdicatio. In superficie etenim negatione caret, in intellectu negatione pollet. Nam quae dicit superessentialis est non quid est dicit sed quid non est. Dicit enim essentiam non esse sed plusquam essentiam. Quid autem illud est quod plusquam essentia est non exprimit, deum non esse quid sit nullo modo diffinit.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> *A Thirteenth-Century Textbook of Mystical Theology at the University of Paris: The Mystical Theology of Dionysius the Areopagite in Eriugena's Latin Translation, with the Scholia Translated by Anastasius the Librarian, and Excerpts from Eriugena's Periphyseon.* Ed. and Trans. L. Michael Harrington. Paris; Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2004. 53.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* 52. I.84:1-14.

This dually expressive theological mode, having the meaning of negative theology by saying what God is not but the form of positive theology by making a grammatically positive statement, is a relatively simple linguistic workaround, which of course does not hold up as an entire theology unto itself. One must also be careful to avoid seeing this interplay as a dialectic in the current sense, in which hypothesis and antithesis build a functional synthesis. It is because the "synthesis" in this sense is devoid of positive meaning—"he does not in any way claim to define what God is"—that it is seen as proper. Rather than building a positive synthesis, as in most understandings of dialectic today, it is a statement even more negative or open than the pure denials. This makes it limited, but useful, and Dionysius experiments with it extensively as a form of mystic wordplay. This wordplay is then expounded and theorized by his medieval interpreters, in a way that presents it as much more systematic than Dionysius' original may have intended.<sup>55</sup>

This is true of a number of Dionysius' theological maneuvers. Where Dionysius, for example, following his Neoplatonic forebears very clearly distinguishes the union with the Cause of all—"Cause of all" being a term shared between pagan Neoplatonics and early Christians—to be outside of the realm of the mental or intellectual, and thus outside of the realm of knowledge, his Carolingian and later high medieval interpreters rephrase several key passages so that "unknowing" the divine becomes a new, higher form of knowing, but still an intellectual process, still contained within an individual mind. As Sarah Klitenic Wear argues:

The interpreters of Dionysius did not preserve his Plotinian conception of the soul's union with its prior. The tension involved in articulating a possibility for the soul which is not an experience of the soul, undertaken by the mind yet not a mental act, and caused by the soul only when it ceases to be a soul, proves to be more than they wished to maintain.

---

<sup>55</sup> Meister Eckhart explicitly cites Dionysius for this mode of speech in Sermon 71, Eckhart, *Werke*, II, 72.8-11.

They generally resolve the tension either by reducing the union to an active intellect, or by enriching it with the language of experience.<sup>56</sup>

These two medieval resolutions, intellectual and experiential, are then typified into two branches of mysticism, referred to by scholars like Bernard McGinn as "speculative" and "affective," respectively.<sup>57</sup> These departures from Dionysius' work, although not necessarily true to his original words, became so standardized that medieval readers seem to have understood them as part of Dionysius' thought itself, especially where they are already present in the translations, rather than as re-interpretations from the original.<sup>58</sup>

This makes Dionysius' work as read in the high Middle Ages somewhat inextricable from the interpretations of his early translators. Although it is unknown if Eckhart was aware of

---

<sup>56</sup> Wear and Dillon, *Neoplatonist Tradition*, 15.

<sup>57</sup> Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200-1350)* (New York: Crossroad, 1998). 76.

<sup>58</sup> One good example is Eriugena's seemingly intentional mistranslation of one instance of "atechnos" in the following passage:

The Word of God makes use of poetic imagery when discussing these formless intelligences [the angels] but, as I have already said, it does so *not for the sake of art*, but as a concession to the nature of our mind. It uses scriptural passages in an uplifting fashion as a way, provided for us from the first, to uplift our mind in a manner suitable to our nature. (137B, 148)

As Paul Rorem explains:

The phrase 'not for the sake of art' translates the negative adverb 'atechnos.' It means, to put it crudely, 'inartfully' or 'unskillfully.' But Eriugena's emphasis on aesthetics led him to treat this prefix (*a-*) not as a negation, but as an intensifier, namely, '*most* artfully.' Thus the Eriugenian translation reads *valde artificialiter*: '*most* artfully does theology use poetic imagery.' This was not an accurate translation of Dionysius, but it was a natural evolution of Dionysian interpretive principles in terms of Eriugena's aesthetics. (Rorem, 80.)

This is further explored by Renè Roques, *Libres Sentiers Vers L'érigénisme* (Roma: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1975). 45-98.

Eriugena's own works,<sup>59</sup> the ways in which Eriugena refocused and liberally translated Dionysius' texts to fit his own aesthetic agenda may have influenced the rise of visuality as a central metaphor in later negative theology. But what does Dionysius himself have to say about visuality? The symbolic "images" that Dionysius discusses in *Divine Names* and in *Celestial Hierarchy* are primarily verbal, literary images. This follows logically from his focus on "theologies" in the specific sense of (mostly biblical) *words* used to describe the divine. Dionysius seems to have little to say regarding visuality or the visual depiction of the divine. This could possibly be because the idea seemed absurd to him. Many later Christian thinkers see Christ's incarnation or the language of the Trinity as a tacit approval to create depictions of the divine—to put it very shortly, because the divine appeared in physical form as the Son, there was at least at some point a physical, created form of the divine to represent. This sparks a number of debates, nonetheless, some of which will be addressed in the next chapter. Dionysius, in comparison to other Christian theologians, focuses remarkably little on the figure of Jesus Christ, mentioning him only a few times, which caused later negative theologians no small amount of worry. Dionysius' arguable monophysitism also makes him likely to have not seen Christ's mortal body as essentially divine—indeed, if one could perceive it and comprehend it, that makes it logically already *not* the ineffable divine. As he explains in his letter to Gaius:

"Someone beholding God and understanding what he saw has not actually seen God himself but rather something of his which has being and which is knowable."<sup>60</sup> For Dionysius, everything

---

<sup>59</sup> Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: The Man from Whom God Hid Nothing* (New York: Crossroad Pub., 2001). 92-93.

<sup>60</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *Complete Works*, 263. Eckhart echoes this in German Sermon 71: "Whoever sees anything or if anything comes to your attention, it is not God, because he is neither this nor that. If anyone says that God is here or there, do not believe him. The light that is God shines in the darkness." "Der iht sihet oder vellet iht in dîn bekennen, daz enist got niht; dâ von niht, wan er noch diz noch daz enist. Swer sprichet, daz got hie oder dâ sî, dem englobet

that could be seen and recognized was part of the world of being, and the One is by definition *hyperousios*, above being. Despite Dionysius' apparent disinterest in the physical and visible entirely, his later medieval readers like Maimonides, Eckhart, and Seuse all have vested interest in discussing the visuality of a potential image of the divine.

One further element introduced to the negative theological tradition is the insertion of love above intellect by post-Carolingian medieval readers, commentators, and translators of Dionysius. In Paris in the eleventh century, Hugh of St. Victor sees love as the final celestial bridge to the divine, as expressed in his comment on a section in *Celestial Hierarchy*: "Love surpasses knowledge and is greater than intelligence. ... One loves more than one understands, and love enters and approaches where knowledge stays outside."<sup>61</sup> This was Hugh's response to the Dionysian etymology of seraphim as "carriers of fire" and cherubim as "carriers of wisdom." Seeing this fire as the fire of love—which Dionysius did not—Hugh declares that love is above wisdom just as the seraphim are above the cherubim.<sup>62</sup> His successors Thomas Gallus and especially Richard of St. Victor developed this line of thought into a full affective school of mysticism, drawing heavily on Dionysius both as a holy figure and as a textual source. All of the above questions: the nature of angels, the limits of intellect, the role of love, the similarity of the created and the divine, and the edification of the human soul toward union with that divine—all

---

niht. Daz lieht, daz got ist, daz liuhtet in der vinsternisse." *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher*. 323. *Werke*. II, 72:11-15. Although Eckhart is basically quoting Dionysius, he builds on this system to find visuality useful as a mode of discussing how human beings can experience the divine.

<sup>61</sup> "Dilectio supereminet scientiae, et major est intelligentia. Plus enim diligitur, quam intelligitur, et entrat dilectio, et appropinquat, ubi scientia foris est." J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Omnium Ss. Patrum, Doctorum Scriptorumque Ecclesiasticorum* (Turnholti (Belgium): Brepols, 1960). 175:1038D.

<sup>62</sup> Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary*, 217

become caught up in each other in this Victorine affective tradition. If the earth is analogically formed in relation to the heavens, then the study of the earth's forms, but not its matter, can lead one to an intuition of heavenly forms. But this is not the dispassionate scientific pursuit that modern sciences have come to embrace: the goal of this study of natural philosophy is to move beyond the forms of things as they are and, with a self-negating love as the final bridging mechanism, to lose the self and the direct object of study, the created world, entirely. As will be discussed further in the following chapters, this "affective" focus on self-sacrifice in loving the divine develops further into a popular religious ascetic and aesthetic tradition, most notably the rise of bridal mysticism, which has as its goal relation by imitation, and from which Suso also heavily draws.

### **Non-Christian Influences—Avicenna, Alhazen, Averroes, and Maimonides**

To set up the context necessary to understand Eckhart's place in this genealogy, however, it is also necessary to discuss the numerous non-Christian sources that advanced the tradition of negative theology leading up to the high Middle Ages. Many works of Muslim and Jewish natural philosophy, which were newly translated into Latin and which built on the Aristotelian corpus that was rediscovered and translated in the same period, brought a form of proto-scientific rationalism (or philosophical theology) into some of the negative theological discussion of the high Middle Ages, while at the same time Jewish thinkers like Maimonides honed in on the iconoclastic element. To begin the slow transition into the section on Eckhart himself and to follow the current trend in Eckhart scholarship, these Muslim and Jewish authors will largely be quoted as they are referenced in Eckhart's works, thus via their Latin translations.



Recent scholarship has begun to examine more closely the vast influence that Muslim philosophers in Latin translation had on the development of high medieval Christian thought. In 2006, Kurt Flasch identified four primary areas in which Muslim philosopher and physician Avicenna influenced Meister Eckhart's thought, as evidenced by close readings of the passages where Eckhart cites Avicenna: *allgemeine Ontologie* (general ontology), *Kenntnisse der Naturdinge* (natural science), *Philosophie der Seele* (philosophy of the soul), and *philosophische Theologie* (philosophical theology).<sup>63</sup> Speaking broadly, these can be boiled down to questions of *being* and questions of *knowing*, two central themes to Eckhart's views on how the divine and the human relate.

In terms of ontology, one can see how Avicenna is himself adapting Neoplatonic sources, drawing especially on his extensive engagement with Aristotle and Aristotle's many commentators. Avicenna conceives of the divine as Necessary Existent, "deus est necesse esse,"<sup>64</sup> and it naturally follows that the first attribute of the divine is thus existence.<sup>65</sup> This is one of many concepts that Eckhart synthesizes together to form his philosophical-ontological core, summarized by Heinrich Denifle from Eckhart's assertion in his commentary on Genesis, "Esse est Deus," which will briefly be discussed later.<sup>66</sup> In terms of negative theology, for Avicenna, this means, according to Flasch: "Gott ist nicht definierbar. Daraus macht Eckhart: Gott ist bei uns, da ununterschieden, und nur Unterschiedenes und Bestimmtes kann definiert werden.

---

<sup>63</sup> Kurt Flasch, *Meister Eckhart: Die Geburt Der "Deutschen Mystik" Aus Dem Geist Der Arabischen Philosophie* (München: Beck, 2006). 129-36. Point of interest: he says there are five points, but lists only four.

<sup>64</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Die Lateinischen Werke* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1936). Hereafter *Lateinische Werke*. II, 27.10-11; 144.6-7; 620.4-5.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, II, 42, 6-7.

<sup>66</sup> Heinrich Seuse Denifle, *ibid*, II, 436. Original by Eckhart, *ibid*. I, 38.12.

Dasselbe, mit Avicenna anders ausgedrückt: Gott steht außerhalb von *genus* und *species*. [The divine is indefinable. From that Eckhart develops that the divine is with us, undifferentiated there, and only that which is differentiated and definite can be defined. The same, expressed differently with Avicenna: the divine exists outside of *genus* and *species*.]”<sup>67</sup> This connects by *necessity* the ineffability of the divine with its unity, because that which can be defined is that which can be called similar to other things, namely those things to which the same word can be applied. Because the divine is One, in a way that no created thing is, it cannot be compared. The latter concept—that the divine is differentiated from the world paradoxically in its own undifferentiated nature—is a core that one can connect straight through the tradition from Proclus down to Suso, which has wide ranging implications for configurations of identity, as will be explored more fully in Chapter 3.<sup>68</sup>

This Avicennan influence carries over into Eckhart's ontology of the soul, as Burkhard Hasebrink's comparison of Meister Eckhart's German and Latin works show. There is a telling connection, for example, between Eckhart's German concept of the *grunt der sêle* and the Latin *essentia* in two versions of a quote from Avicenna. In Latin sermon LV, Eckhart references Avicenna explicitly: "Nota: odire debet, quia *anima*, quia *sua*, quia *in hoc mundo*. Primum propter duo: primo, quia secundum Avicennam non est nomen essentiae in se." In German

---

<sup>67</sup> Flasch, *Geburt*. 130. Translation by author.

<sup>68</sup> Niklaus Largier connects, among others, the following three quotes in his commentary on Eckhart's Sermon 9, in *Werke*, I, 838-841, regarding the divine's unity, singularity, and its thus paradoxical immanence in the multiple and diffuse creation:

Proclus: omnis multitudino partipicat aliquo modo uno (Elements of Theology, Prop 1)

Eckhart: Deus indistinctum quoddam est quod sua indistinctione distinguitur (In Sap. N. 154)

Suso: Und sprichet über der wisheit büch: als nüt innigers ist denn got, also ist nüt underscheideners (Bihlmeyer 355,2-3)

Sermon 17, the quotation is paraphrased to "Ez sprichet ein meister: daz wort sêle daz enmeinet den grunt und die natûre der sêle enrüeret ez niht." That in his process of defining the term "Soul" he refers to Avicenna shows a clear influence on Eckhart's ontology, and the ontological connection—or disconnect—between the soul and the divine.

The influence of Neoplatonic noetics is clear in Avicenna's psychology and especially his epistemology, which carries over into Eckhart's views on prophecy and intellectual enlightenment, or *bekennen*. Eckhart reads into Avicenna's accounts of the psycho-physiological processes of prophecy a Neoplatonic divine hierarchy similar to Dionysius' angelology, in which superior beings communicate themselves and their understanding to lesser beings.<sup>69</sup> As will be further explored in the next chapter, this came to be understood using the language of visuality: angels allow lesser beings to *see* as the angels can *see*—beyond what mundane eyes perceive.

This symbolic discourse of intellectual "sight" was influenced by the actual scientific understanding of sight, itself processed via Aristotelian Muslim tradition, most notably the Latin translation of the *Book of Optics* by Alhazen, or Abū 'Alī al-Ḥasan ibn al-Haytham.<sup>70</sup> Although Alhazen's *Optics* is only cited explicitly twice in Eckhart's complete works,<sup>71</sup> it is clear that Eckhart's basic scientific views on visuality come from Alhazen and his medieval interpreters, such as Roger Bacon. Alhazen seems to have read and commented on every camp in the debates

---

<sup>69</sup> Eckhart, *Lateinsche Werke*, III, 217, 7-15; 218, 13-219.

<sup>70</sup> Alhazen, or Abū 'Alī al-Ḥasan ibn al-Ḥasan ibn al-Haytham, was born in Basra, Bayid caliphate (modern Iraq) in ca. 965, but lived most of his life in Egypt, dying ca. 1040. He was an experimental scientist, mathematician, and philosopher. His magnum opus, the *Book of Optics* or *Kitab al-Manazir*, was translated into Latin in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century as *De Aspectibus*.

<sup>71</sup> Alessandro Palazzo, "Eckhart's Isamic and Jewish Sources: Avicenna, Avicbron, and Averroes," in *A Companion to Meister Eckhart*, ed. Jeremiah Hackett (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2013). 253.

around vision from the Greek models, such as the atomists, Aristotle, and Euclid, to his immediate Arabic predecessors, like Al-Kindi and Hunain ibn Ishaq.<sup>72</sup> Alhazen managed to synthesize elements of these previously irreconcilable models of visuality, such as Euclid's mathematical extromission model, Aristotle's form-based intromission model, and Galen's physiological extromission model, as well as the derivations of their respective adherents through the centuries.<sup>73</sup> He thus advanced a novel model of visual intromission that, although still not utterly comprehensive, remained the best existing model for centuries. In Alhazen's model, each point of every surface reflects visual rays at the eye, but only perpendicular rays are perceived, which explains how a single comprehensive image is seen—all points of the seen object will be seen as they reflect at the same angle, namely that angle perpendicular to the eye.<sup>74</sup> This model was later adapted by thinkers like Roger Bacon to instead have "similitudes" or complete images radiating out from each object as a whole, which takes on symbolic importance in the visual cosmology of Eckhart and Suso. A fuller discussion of the intromission/extromission debate and the physics of intromission and forms as understood and symbolically adapted from Alhazen or his European adapters by Suso is found in Chapter 2.

These earlier sources were then interpreted and passed to central Europe by way of Spain; in Eckhart's case one sees the most influence from Moses Maimonides and Averroes, often referred to simply as "the Commentator." Flasch focuses his study on the intellectual line connecting Averroes to Albertus Magnus to Dietrich von Freiburg and finally to Eckhart, despite

---

<sup>72</sup> See David C. Lindberg, *Theories of Vision from Al-Kindi to Kepler*, University of Chicago History of Science and Medicine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976). Chapter 4. For a list of Alhazen's commentaries, see p. 60-61.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

the fact that Eckhart quotes Averroes less frequently and less directly than Avicenna.<sup>75</sup>

Nevertheless, Averroes is a clear influence on Eckhart's concept of intellect, the identity of the intellect, and the intellectual necessity of images or *phantasma*, among others.<sup>76</sup> Eckhart combines multiple passages from Averroes' *Commentary on De Anima* in the following quote regarding human intellect, which is placed at the bottom of the hierarchy of intellects:

"Intellectus autem in nobis se habet sicut tabula nuda et rasa, secundum philosophem, et est in ordine intellectualium sicut materia prima in ordine corporalium, ut ait commentator."<sup>77</sup> The

---

<sup>75</sup> See Palazzo, "Eckhart's Islamic and Jewish Sources," *A Companion to Meister Eckhart*. Avicenna is quoted by Eckhart 102 times explicitly and 21 times in the German works anonymously as a "meister." Averroes, on the other hand, is quoted 43 times explicitly, either using his own name or as *Commentator*, but is never quoted in the German works, as far as we know, because not all of the anonymous "meister" quotations have yet been attributed. Interestingly, none of the Averroes quotes are literal, but instead seem to be taken from secondary sources that frequently paraphrase, often by combining multiple passages into one.

<sup>76</sup> Flasch takes great strides to point out that this is not in the sense of the Averroesian heresy, as it is commonly understood, because his later detractors often failed to recognize the full complexity of his concept of intellect and agency, among other things. See Chapter 2, Flasch, *Geburt*.

<sup>77</sup> Liber parab. Gen. n.138, Eckhart, *Lateinische Werke*, I, 604.5-7. The originals which he is combining are 1) Averroes, *Corpus Commentariorum Averrois in Aristotelem 6,1*, ed. F. Stuart Crawford (Cambridge, Mass: The Mediaev. Acad. of America, 1953). 3, Comm 19, 442, 59-64: "proportio intellectus agentis ad intellectum patientem est sicut proportio principii moventis quoquo modo ad materiam motam; agens autem semper est nobilius patiente, et principium nobilius materia. Et ideo opinandum est secundum Aristotelem quod ultimus intellectus abstractorum in ordine est iste intellectus materialis" (In English: "the relation of the agent intellect to the patient intellect is just as the relation of the moving principle in some way to the moved matter. The agent, however, is more noble than the patient and the principle [more noble] than the matter. For this reason it should be held according to Aristotle that the last of the separate intellects in the hierarchy is that of material intellect." *Long Commentary on the De Anima of Aristotle*, trans. Richard C. Taylor (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). 354) and 2) *Corpus Commentariorum*, Comm. 5, 387, 27-388, 32: "Et cum ista est definitio intellectus materialis, manifestum est quod differt apud ipsum a prima materia in hoc quod iste est in potentia omnes intentiones formarum universalium materialium, prima autem materia est in potentia omnes istae formae sensibiles non cognoscens neque comprehendens." (In English: "Since it is the definition of the material intellect, it is evident that according to him it differs from prime matter in this respect: it is in potency all the intentions of the universal forms, while prime matter is in potency all those sensible forms [and is] not something which knows or

human intellect is bound to the soul, and thus bound to the body just like the soul. Being materially-enmeshed makes it also materially-oriented—it requires *phantasma* or sensuous images, meaning images provided to the intellect by the senses, in order to function. It is also a passive intellect, open and, as Anaxagoras argues, necessarily related to *nothingness*, such that it can conceive of and master anything.<sup>78</sup> It is free from the particular affinity to this or that, which would come of having this or that already within it, and which would bind and thus limit its ability to receive any imprint.

Although for Averroes and the rest of the Aristotelian tradition, the *intellectus possibilis*, passive and receptive, was contrasted with the *intellectus agens*, active intellect, the latter appears rarely in Eckhart's works.<sup>79</sup> Eckhart focuses on *intellectus possibilis*, as one can infer from his assertion that intellect contains all things: "Intellegentia continet omnes res."<sup>80</sup> In this he is arguably following Averroes, although not entirely, and not in the sense that Averroes is often typified. For Averroes, the individual is the active party, who by means of sensuous images in the *imaginatio* can partially connect with the infinite, impersonal, passive intellect, which in and of itself is completely unified and singular. The sensuous images from the *imaginatio* are then

---

apprehends [things.]" *Long Commentary*, 304.) Eckhart's combination of these two may stem from Thomas Aquinas, who combines the same two passages in Thomas Aquinas, *De Ente Et Essentia* (Romae: Editori di san Tommaso, 1976). Cap. 4, 377, 178-85: "anima humana, que tenet ultimum gradum in substantiis intellectualibus. Unde intellectus possibilis eius se habet ad formas intelligibiles sicut materia prima, que tenet ultimum gradum in esse sensibili, ad formas sensibiles, ut Commentator in III De anima dicit; et ideo Philosophus comparat eam tabulae in qua nichil est scriptum."

<sup>78</sup> Flasch, *Geburt*, 51.

<sup>79</sup> There is some debate regarding this issue, with Mojsisch as the primary dissenter, arguing that although Eckhart does not use the term it should still be understood as implicitly part of his framework.

<sup>80</sup> *Lateinische Werke*, I, 50.17.

basically translated into their universal truth-value.<sup>81</sup> The more thoroughly the individual connects with intellect, the more perfected and the less individual she or he becomes. This theory of connection, *coniuncto*, was taken up by Albert the Great and Dietrich of Freiburg but rejected eventually by Eckhart, who saw the human intellect, insofar as it is intellect, as already connected to the divine, which will be discussed later. The finer details of Aristotelian noetics were something Averroes himself struggled with and debated back and forth for decades—as such, there is not enough space to do them justice here.<sup>82</sup> But one sees how the philosophical concept of intellect becomes central to later Christian thoughts on ontology, and, because vision becomes preferred as the sense connected to intellectual recognition, as discussed below and in the next chapter, it also becomes tied to visuality. In Chapter 4, it also becomes tied to gender.

A contemporary of Averroes, twelfth-century Spanish Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides or Mosheh ben Maimon, brought these discourses back into explicit dialogue with Biblical scripture.<sup>83</sup> In his *Guide to the Perplexed*, Maimonides, following Dionysius, explicitly addresses the language of scripture as problematic and needing philosophical help to be properly understood—not understood in the literal sense, of course, but in a sense which gestures to the divine beyond. Maimonides introduces his text by saying that his work's:

aim is rather to stimulate the mind of the religious man who has arrived at deep-set belief in the truth of our faith and who is perfect in the religious and moral sense. If such a man has also made a study of the philosophical sciences and grasped their meaning, and feels attracted to rationalism and at home with it, he may be worried about the literal meaning of some scriptural passages as well as the sense of those homonymous, metaphorical, or ambiguous expressions, as he has always understood them, or as they are explained to him. He will thus fall into confusion and be faced by a dilemma: either he follows his

---

<sup>81</sup> Flasch, *Geburt*, 55.

<sup>82</sup> See Flasch, *Geburt*, 52.

<sup>83</sup> The earlier Arabic rationalists, mostly Muslim, had been careful to distinguish their religious beliefs from their philosophical inquiry.

reason and rejects those expressions as he understands them: then he will think that he is rejecting the dogmas of our religion. Or else he continues to accept them in the way he has been taught and refuses to be guided by reason, and yet he cannot help feeling that his faith has been gravely impaired.<sup>84</sup>

Intentio autem huius libri est expergefacerem mentem viri iusti in cuius animam intauit credulitas legis mostre:& colligata est in intellectu ipsius:& est perfectus in fide sua,& in moribus suis:& speculatus est in sapientia philosophica,& intellexit rationes ipsius,& traxit cum intellectus humanus vt faceret ipsum esse in gradu suo: sed impediunt ipsum acquirere gradum illum plana legis: & quia non potest intelligere vel scire de diuersitatibus eorum nominum equiuocorum vel transsumptorum vel ambiguum: & remansit in magna ambiguitate & corde dubio:& ignorat, vtrum sequatur intellectum suum habito post tergum quod intellexit de nominibus illis. Et opinabit tunc quia destruit fundamenta legis, & quia remaneat in eo quod intellexit de nominibus illis,& non sequatur intellectum suum:& tunc habebit suspectum intellectum suum,& declinabit ab eo/& cognoscet in oibus iis quia firmatum est sper ipso damnum & corruptio in lege sua & fide.<sup>85</sup>

Note that *philosophy* as a discipline is distinguished from *reason*, or *intellectus*, but it is seen as connected. We ought to see therefore Maimonides' *intellectus humanus* in its philosophical context, part of the Aristotelian discourse of divine and human intellect.<sup>86</sup> Maimonides imagines that well-educated religious scholars will see a conflict of interest between philosophy and religion, and that choosing one over the other will be to the detriment of both, especially to the detriment of one's reason. His text, however, stands as a testament to the possibility of a reconciliation, seeing the same truth behind both philosophy and scripture.

Compare Maimonides' introduction to Eckhart, who introduces his intent for his commentary on John by saying: "In cuius verbo expositione et aliorum quae sequuntur, intentio est auctoris, sicut et in omnibus suis editionibus, ea quae sacra asserit fides christiana et

---

<sup>84</sup> Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Pub. Co., 1995). 41.

<sup>85</sup> *Rabi Mossei Aegyptij Dux Seu Director Dubitatum Aut Perplexorum* (Frankfurt a.M.: Minerva, 1964). Folio 2-3.

<sup>86</sup> Not necessarily Averroes' concept of intellect, however, since Maimonides would likely not have read that until after writing the *Guide*.



utriusque testamenti scriptura, exponere per rationes naturales philosophorum."<sup>87</sup> This "exponere" leaves the relationship of the two somewhat open, and one could wonder which takes precedence—scripture or philosophy? Later in the same commentary, however, Eckhart goes further to explicitly say: "What Moses, Christ, and the Philosopher teach, is therefore the same truth, one that differs only in respect to of the way it is related to the believable, the probable, and the true."<sup>88</sup> But this does not mean that theology and philosophy are exactly equivalent, either. The *teaching* to which Eckhart refers is less a direct transmission of factual content, but rather a transformative revelation of internal truth through a process of removal of individual "image"—a negative theological trajectory. Thus teaching the same truth does not make philosophy and theology the same, merely that the process they each endorse leads to the same goal. *Truth* in this quote, then, is similar with *being*, elsewhere in Eckhart's writings, in that it is found outside the disciplines or methods used to approach it.

Maimonides also recontextualized Arabic rationalist image discourse within his own religious context. Maimonides continues the negative theological track of proclaiming the ineffability of the divine, for him based in the Mosaic commandment to make no graven image. Meister Eckhart read and quoted Maimonides extensively, such as to introduce and underscore Eckhart's assertion of divine imagelessness, here quoted as condemned by papal bull:<sup>89</sup>

---

<sup>87</sup> In Ioann. n.2. Eckhart, *Lateinische Werke*, III, 3-4.

<sup>88</sup> Translation from Schwartz, "Eckhart and Maimonides," in *A Companion to Meister Eckhart*. 397. Original: "Idem ergo est quod docet Moyses, Christus, et Philosophus, solum quantam ad modum differens, scilicet ut credible, probabile, sive versimile et veritas." Eckhart In Ioann. 185; *Lateinische Werke*, III, 155.5-7.

<sup>89</sup> Overall, Eckhart cites Maimonides in his *Opus Tripartitum* 119 times, in the *Commentary on Genesis* 39 times and in the *Commentary on Exodus* 55 times, following only Augustine (and Aristotle in the *Opus Tripartitum*) in number of quotations. All of these quotations are positive; remarkably, Eckhart seems to have found no point to disagree with Maimonides on. Schwartz, "Eckhart and Maimonides," in *A Companion to Meister Eckhart*, 392. Eckhart's study of

*Deus est unus omnibus modis et secundum omnem rationem, ita ut in ipso non sit invenire aliquam multitudinem in intellectu vel extra intellectum. Qui enim duo videt vel distinctionem videt, Deum non videt, Deus enim unus est extra numerum et supra numerum, nec ponit in unum [numerum] cum aliquo. Sequitur: nulla igitur distinctio in ipso Deo esse potest aut intelligi.*<sup>90</sup>

It should already be illuminating that Maimonides' Neoplatonic insistence on divine unity follows logically for Eckhart to the argument for divine unintelligibility and *invisibility*. The argument against image follows from the core truth that all images must contain differentiation in order to be recognizable or visible, and in the highest divine there is only unity. Eckhart's original is part of his commentary on Exodus 15:3, "Omnipotens nomen eius." The only way to truly know that unity is to enter into it—and to lay all form, all name, and all identity aside.

These concepts for Eckhart build on Maimonides' careful definition of the term "image" (Hebrew: tzelem) in the very first chapter of the *Guide*. He argues explicitly against the anthropomorphism that follows a literal interpretation of Genesis 1—that the external, visible shape of the divine is the model for the external shape of the human. The divine has no visible shape. Instead, for Maimonides, "image" comes to denote essence in the sense of identity:

The word "image," on the other hand, is applied to [natural] form, i.e. the essential feature of a thing by which it becomes what it is, which constitutes its true character in so far as it is that particular thing. In man this feature is the one from which springs human perception. It is because of this intellectual perception that the words "in the image of God He created him" (Genesis 1,27) are used.<sup>91</sup>

---

Maimonides was explored originally in Josef Koch, *Meister Eckhart Und Die Jüdische Religionsphilosophie Des Mittelalters* ([Breslau: [Marcus], 1928)., but has subsequently been the focus of extensive study.

<sup>90</sup> Latin from Denzinger 2001, 402, italicized portion corresponds to Moses Maimonides' "Dux Neutorum," Paris 1520 fol. 18v.

<sup>91</sup> Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*. 52. Latin: "Nomen autem quod est celem, conuenit formes naturali que est perfectio rei & essentia: sicut est in homine intellectus humanis. Et propter hoc dictum est ad imaginem Dei." *Dux Neutorum*. Folio 5.

Intellectual perception, that perception which happens in the soul but not as a direct result of sensory perception, is the core of the connection between the human and the divine. This becomes the bedrock of Eckhart's noetics and his focus on "image." But where for the Jewish Maimonides the divine never had and would never have a physical form, for Eckhart the "image" becomes caught up in Christology, with Christ as the perfect image of the Father, recognizing whom is the ultimate act of intellectual perception, or *bekennen*. It also becomes tied to ontology, because to recognize the divine is to recognize the only true and unified source of *essence*, as will be explicated below.

### **Meister Eckhart's Visuality and Dialectical Methodology**

This chapter will narrow its focus on Eckhart to the two most salient issues to his influence on Suso's discourses of visuality and identity: first, the visually-focused theology or cosmology that Eckhart derives from the variety of sources cited above, and, relatedly, his dialectical mode of reading and synthesizing those same sources as primarily expressed in the German sermons. Eckhart read almost all of the persons named above, mostly in Latin translation, and cited them freely throughout all of his works. Following his own mentor Albertus Magnus' lead,<sup>92</sup> Eckhart studied quite broadly, and partook in the widespread interest in classical philosophy which spanned approximately the hundred before he became active, mid-twelfth to mid-thirteenth century, following the sudden availability of Latin translations of thinkers such as Aristotle from the Arabic, as well as the multitude of texts that on natural

---

<sup>92</sup> Although we cannot be sure whether Eckhart studied directly under Albertus Magnus in Cologne, his direct influence is certainly palpable, enough that it seems appropriate to call him his mentor, whether or not their connection was personal or only textual.

science from numerous Arabic Aristotelians. He studied thoroughly and extensively in the Christian scholastic tradition, building on the work of contemporary scholastic greats like Thomas Aquinas and interfacing intensively with the Parisian school, where he held the position of Master of the Sentences (of Peter Lombard) in 1294, a bachelor's position, and returned in 1302 and again from 1311-13 as professor of theology.<sup>93</sup> He also read the full spectrum of earlier Christian philosophy and theology, all the way back to Dionysius and before. Eckhart navigates these vast and varied systems of thought masterfully. It is clear in reading his German and Latin works that Eckhart understood not only the thought of these authors themselves, but the vast system of influence they had on each other and the places in which their philosophies did and did not agree, which he actively plays off of one another in a flurry of quotations and citations. He takes and adapts such concepts as Neoplatonic ontology, Dionysius' divine hierarchy, the Victorines' holy love, and Maimonides' iconoclasm, along with many, many others, via a fusion of contemporary schools of thought, such as Aristotelian Muslim scientific rationalism, the Dominican school of Albertus Magnus, and Parisian scholasticism.<sup>94</sup>

When speaking of many of these concepts, such as Dionysian Neoplatonic hierarchy, in Eckhart's works, special care must be taken because he so consistently and carefully objects to all forms of *wîse* in regard to the apophatic divine, which one could translate at "method" or

---

<sup>93</sup> Loris Sturlese, "Origins of Opus Tripartum," in *A Companion to Meister Eckhart*.

<sup>94</sup> Despite these small biographical notes, little is known about Eckhart as a figure. His family background can only be guessed at from a single reference to Eckhard von Hochheim. For more, see Walter Senner OP, "Meister Eckhart's Life, Training, Career, and Trial," in *A Companion to Meister Eckhart*.

"manner."<sup>95</sup> He is novel in this philosophical lineage in his apparent desire to move the emphasis away from hierarchy.<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless, he uses clear spatial language and a sense of Neoplatonic cosmological structure to speak of the various levels at which the soul relates to the divine. In Sermon 67, for example, Eckhart distinguishes at length between divine *intellectus* and the divine *grund* or "foundation," and clarifies both as higher than the realm of the physical and the "exterior" person.<sup>97</sup> And, like earlier Neoplatonics, Eckhart populates the sphere of *intellectus*, between the world and the One, with divine figures—here the Christian Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, as well as the non-physical, "internal" Soul—which as in Dionysius are to be seen on some level as divided attributes of the unified divine. To return to the epigram of this chapter, taken from Sermon 67: "Daz got in der kraft ist, daz sîn wir in der in dem bilde; daz der vater ist

---

<sup>95</sup> For a similar anti-systematic objection in contemporary theory, one could look to Georges Bataille's objections to "project" in Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988). This will be further discussed in Chapter 4.

<sup>96</sup> Flasch, *Geburt*, 115.

<sup>97</sup> Elsewhere Eckhart connects *intellectus* as the root of the unity of the One, as in the quote "Deus [...] unus est intellectus, et intellectus est unus deus." *Lateinische Werke*, IV 269, 15-270. This can arguably be seen as a similar move to his seemingly self-contradicting statements on divine being and human being. In places, Eckhart asserts that creatures in and of themselves have no essence, as only the divine truly has essence, which means a creature is only existent insofar as the creature exists as effect simultaneously in the divine cause. In other places, Eckhart asserts that the divine is "nihtes niht," "nothing of nothing," implying that it has no being at all, at least not in the sense that humans as creatures might know "being." Both are true in the sense that they draw a clear distinction between the type of being had by creatures and that being had by the One, which are analogically connected. As Alain de Libera has suggested, in his focus on the One's divine unity, Eckhart can be said to negate the negation of Dionysius and instead say that, in their truest senses, one-ness, goodness, and even being can *only* be predicated of the divine. Essentially, created beings only exist to the degree that they exist within or in a subordinate analogous relationship to the essential unity of the divine—all created being is borrowed being. There is no true being for creations. For an overview of recent scholarship on ontology and analogy in Eckhart, see Hackett and Weed, "From Aquinas to Eckhart on Creation, Creature, and Analogy," in *A Companion to Meister Eckhart*. For more specifically on how analogy becomes a tool for Eckhart to overcome such paradoxes, see Frank J. Tobin, *Meister Eckhart, Thought and Language* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986). 34-77.

in der kraft und der sun in der wîsheit und der heilige geist in der güticheit, daz sîn wir in dem bilde. 'Dâ bekennen wir, als wir bekant sîn,' und minnen, als wir geminnet sîn. [What God is in power, we are in image; what the Father is in power and the Son in wisdom and the Holy Ghost in goodness, that we are in image. 'Then we shall recognize, as we are recognized,' and love, as we are loved.]<sup>98</sup> The Trinity is seen as abstract, each masculinized member paired to the feminized intellectual concepts of virtues,<sup>99</sup> which were themselves frequently personified and deified in the Middle Ages.<sup>100</sup> Because the parties of the Trinity and the Soul are distinguished, describable, and attributable, they are not at the utmost core of the apophatic divine, the *grunt*. The *grunt* is without attribute, imageless, inaccessible even to God insofar as God retains the attributes of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.<sup>101</sup>

These "intellectual" concepts have identity, relative relationships, core attributes, and even genderings, and all these forms of identity as such exist only at the level of the *intellectus*. Relationship can only exist between beings distinguished from one another, just as gendering as a group-forming function can only make sense within a multiplicity, among which differentiations can be made. Humanity as *bild* or "image" then follows in a Neoplatonic effect relationship to the divine Cause, paradoxically both remaining within the divine at all times, while simultaneously proceeding from and returning to the divine. There is also a remnant of hierarchy in his language around divine image. Christ is *the* image of God the Father, "imago

---

<sup>98</sup> Eckhart, *Werke*, II, 24.18-20. Translation is the authors own.

<sup>99</sup> These are organized after the Augustinian fashion, with Father as *potentia*, Son as *sapientia*, and Spirit as *bonitas*. See Largier's commentary in Eckhart, *Werke*, I, 655.

<sup>100</sup> For an extensive treatment of this subject, see Newman, *God and the Goddesses*.

<sup>101</sup> Eckhart, *Werke*, I, 34:15-36.

patris," and the Soul, in distinction, is "*ad imaginem*."<sup>102</sup> Further, angels are closer images than the Soul: "Ez ist wol wâr: diu sêle ist gebildet nâch gote an irme obersten teile; aber der engel ist ein nâher bilde gotes. [It is certainly true, the soul is made in the image of God in its highest part; but the angel is a closer image of God.]"<sup>103</sup> Only the topmost portion of the Soul, the human intellect, is that which is in the form of the divine, and that, at its core, because it is formless.

We also see how Eckhart extends the above reference to 1 Corinthians 13:12, "Dâ bekennen wir, als wir bekant sîn," "To know as we are known," regarding recognition and identifiability of mortal and divine image with a nod to the Victorine affective tradition, "und minnen, als wir geminnet sîn," "to love as we are loved."<sup>104</sup> For Eckhart, this holy epistemology takes on a hierarchical mode with numerous levels. At the level of *intellectus*, we know and are known as differentiated, individual, yet non-physical souls. But in the *grunt*, we know and are known not as ourselves, but undifferentiated within the One, as the One knows itself—which is so radically outside of the temporal epistemology that Eckhart even argues that the apophatic divine does not "know" the mortal world, except insofar as it exists within the divine itself.

But against the Victorine affective tradition, love does not extend beyond *intellectus* for Eckhart. Later, in Sermon 71, he argues that one cannot love, nor fear, that which one does not recognize. He takes this as proof that love only functions within the realm of intellect: "Minne

---

<sup>102</sup> "Filius enim imago est patris, et anima ad imaginem dei." Eckhart, *Lateinische Werke*, II, 615.11-12.

<sup>103</sup> Eckhart, *Werke*, I, 40:33-42.1. Translation the author's own.

<sup>104</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12 Latin Vulgate: "Videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate: tunc autem facie ad faciem. Nunc cognosco ex parte: tunc autem cognoscam sicut et cognitus sum."

English NIV: "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, as I am fully known."

enmac niht anders haften wan in bekantnisse," "Love cannot take hold except in recognition."<sup>105</sup> This subsumes the unifying or bridging function of love to the intellectual function of recognition. Love is, in a sense, the drive which fuels the Soul via *intellectus* toward dissolving into the *grunt*.<sup>106</sup> The *Soul* here is "image," drawing of course on Genesis 1:26-27, and in the Augustinian tradition of interpretation cited above, taken also by Maimonides, which sees the human an in divine image as a result of, and dependent on, its endowment with reason. For Eckhart this is hierarchically analogical, meaning that the more attuned to this endowment of reason the human is, the more truly "human," that is in the image of the divine, they are. This process of attunement is the same as that of the *unio mystica* described above—recognition and love, *bekennen* and *minnen*.

Images are of multiple kinds, divided between material or sensuous images (that which the eye takes in), conceptual images (images as held in the mind), and divine images, creations endowed with reason and the potential to become truly like the divine—most notably Christ, *the* divine image and a perfect image of the Father.<sup>107</sup> As Udo Kern so carefully traces in his essay "Eckhart's Anthropology," the process of *intellegere* by which this return is achieved requires conceptual images, drawn from sensuous images, as focus points of recognition:

Just as human beings cannot build anything without physical tools (*instrumenta corporalia*), so too *intellegere* is impossible for them without conceptual images (*intellegere sine phantasmate*). The conceptual image is a movement that goes forth from

---

<sup>105</sup> Eckhart, *Werke*, II: 76.15-16

<sup>106</sup> *Bekantnisse* is elsewhere described as that which precedes reason, preparing its path, as here: "Vernünfticheit diu vellet in daz lûter wesen, bekantnisse diu loufet vor, si vürloufet und durchbrichet, daz dâ geborn wirt gotes eingeborner sun." Ibid. I, 38.12-14

<sup>107</sup> Creations which have not been endowed with reason, like animals, can only become like similitudes. These distinctions between types of images as they are present in Suso's works will be explored more fully in Chapter 2.



the senses. Without the senses, it would be impossible for the human person to realize his *intellegere* and thereby become a complete human person.<sup>108</sup>

The human recognizes the world in images, in the first instance via sensual or sensory images, based on seen material phenomena. The image must "geliutert und kleinvüge werden" or "be lightened and refined," to use Eckhart's terms, in order to become visible to the eye, such that they are taken in and processed in the external senses.<sup>109</sup> After they are initially processed, they shift to the internal senses, abstracted further now as conceptual images, which, in their purest, most angelic form, Eckhart alternatively refers to as "bild âne bilde," "imageless image," or "niht wan ein bilde," "nothing but an image."<sup>110</sup> The recognition or shift of a material image as it is abstracted and then taken into the eye analogically parallels for Eckhart the process of becoming human—refinement of the Soul as image of the divine.

This is not the only instance in which Eckhart draws analogies between the form of the natural and the divine. Eckhart's supposedly Thomist thoughts on analogy frequently present examples that use the example of celestial and terrestrial relative correlation.<sup>111</sup> As Eckhart states in his commentaries on Genesis: "Heaven is understood as the existence that created things have in their original causes (think of color in light and heat in the sun), and 'earth' is taken as the formal existence things have in themselves."<sup>112</sup> Formal analogy is thus indeed a basis for

---

<sup>108</sup> Udo Kern, "Eckhart's Anthropology," in *A Companion to Meister Eckhart*. 238.

<sup>109</sup> In Sermon 69, explicated in the Introduction, see pages 9-12.

<sup>110</sup> Eckhart, *Werke*, II, 46.26 and II, 74.2-3, respectively.

<sup>111</sup> Eckhart claims his system is Thomist in his Defense Document or Rechtfertigungsschrift, produced as part of his heresy trial, in that Eckhart argues that if they reject his system they also reject Thomas Aquinas'. "Documents Relating to Eckhart's Condemnation," in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, ed. Edmund Colledge OSA and Bernard McGinn (Mahwah, N.J.: 1981), 73-75.

<sup>112</sup> McGinn and Colledge *Essential Sermons* 106.

connecting celestial hierarchy, and thus celestial understanding, with the form of created things. In building on Thomas Aquinas, however, Eckhart turns Dionysius' original thoughts on divine being backwards. For Aquinas, the analogical mode is a "mean between pure equivocation and simple univocation" in naming the divine.<sup>113</sup> Univocation would be that which sees the use of a descriptor like "good" as meaning the same thing when applied to a creature and to the divine, where equivocal would see them as using two different definitions of the word "good." The analogical use of a descriptor, on the other hand, "signifies different relations to some one thing, just as the word *healthy* said of urine signifies the sign of health in an animal and the same word said of medicine signifies that it is the cause of that same health."<sup>114</sup> There is one true descriptor or form in regard to goodness or health or any other attribute, and that is the signified connection

---

<sup>113</sup> Full quote in Latin: "Et sic quicquid dicitur de Deo et creaturis, dicitur secundum quod est aliquis ordo creaturae ad Deum, ut ad principium et causam, in qua praeexistunt excellenter omnes rerum perfectiones. Et iste modus communitatis medius est inter puram aequivocationem et simplicem univocationem. Neque enim in his quae analogice dicuntur, est una ratio, sicut est in univocis; nec totaliter diversa, sicut in aequivocis; sed nomen quod sic multipliciter dicitur significat diversas proportionales ad aliquid unum; sicut sanum, de urina dictum significat signum sanitatis animalis, de medicina vero dictum significat causam eiusdem sanitatis."

Original Latin in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: Latin Text and English Translation, Introductions, Notes, Appendices, and Glossaries* ([Cambridge, England]; New York: Blackfriars ; McGraw-Hill, 1964). Ia.13.5

English: "And so whatever is said of God and creatures is said according to some relation from the creature to God, as to a principle and cause, in whom all the perfections of things pre-exist excellently. And this mode of commonality is a mean between pure equivocation and simple univocation. For what is in these analogues is not one *ratio*, as it is in univocals, nor [are the *ratios*] completely different as in equivocals; but the name that is said with multiple senses signifies different relations to some one thing, just as the word *healthy* said of urine signifies the sign of health in an animal and the same word said of medicine signifies that it is the cause of that same health."

English from Hackett and Weed, "From Aquinas to Eckhart," in *A Companion to Meister Eckhart*. 209.

<sup>114</sup> See footnote 43.

between the celestial and the created when they are similarly named. Eckhart takes this very example of health in Aquinas and adapts it, moving toward a more univocal model.<sup>115</sup> Only the divine can truly be ascribed being—all creatures merely "borrow" being from the divine. In a parallel reversal of Dionysius' original thoughts, for Eckhart attributes can *only* be used to describe the divine, and all creatures only have them by analogy or symbolic speech.

Even this takes on a visual element. In German Sermon 9, Eckhart claims, "Got der erkennet ouch nütz usser im, sunder sin oug ist allein in sich selber gekert. [God also recognizes nothing outside of himself, rather his eye is solely turned on himself.]"<sup>116</sup> Elsewhere, however, in claiming that only the divine has being, Eckhart asserts that if the divine looked away from creation for one minute it would cease to be. This seems paradoxical, but makes sense if one takes in the view that all things in their essence are only in the divine, which in true unity contains everything that ever exists. "Alle créatûren hânt kein wesen, wan ir wesen swebet an der gegenwerticheit gotes. [All creatures have no being, for their being hovers on the presence of God.]"<sup>117</sup> And the language of sight becomes the language of recognition and similarity. Yet the telos of this recognition is not an enlightened individual. For Eckhart, to see is not to believe—to truly see is to become, which is a process of *un*-becoming, losing everything particular or individual to become dissolved into the *one*. Suso takes this concept and develops it into a way of life, in a manner that will be explored in coming chapters.

Not wanting to get too deeply into the contemporary scholarly debates surrounding Eckhart's views on the questions of analogy and being, it suffices for this chapter to see Eckhart

---

<sup>115</sup> Debate, Mojsisch et al.

<sup>116</sup> *Werke*, I, 58.30-60.1

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.* I, 52.18-19.

as indeed more epistemologically focused in his view of the path toward the divine.<sup>118</sup> He sees reason or *intellectus* as a means to approach the divine, if not the core of the divine itself. This *intellectus* combines *bekennen*, or intellectual elucidation, with *minnen*, love. This intellectual focus is likely at least in part a reaction to translation issues from Dionysius addressed above, but also simply common to his more scholastic milieu, having trained and worked extensively in the Parisian hub of scholasticism. It can also be seen an outgrowth of his commitment to classic philosophy and natural science as interwoven and valuable modes of epistemological inquiry, including and especially in pursuit of theological truth, following Maimonides' lead. Thus, Eckhart's engagement with the Aquinas' ontology in this manner is logical, yet also original. He moves beyond Aquinas' scholastic thought not only in the manner discussed in this quote above, but also in his shift to a more homiletic and indeed literary manner for his German works, which are his primary influence on Suso.<sup>119</sup>

To be clear, in Eckhart's Latin works he follows the scholastic style and tradition.<sup>120</sup> And this dissertation follows contemporary scholars like Kurt Flasch insofar as they take issue with the primarily nineteenth century intellectual tradition that has stuck Eckhart with the somewhat

---

<sup>118</sup> See footnote 31.

<sup>119</sup> Intellectual historians like Flasch and Mojsisch, both to be quoted in the paragraph following, tend to rightly focus on Eckhart's Latin works, because they, as Flasch argues, "grenzen seine intellektuelle Position gegenüber Vorgängern und Zeitgenossen schärfer ab; sie zitieren und interpretieren seine Autoritäten; sie benutzen eine ausgearbeitete Terminologie und Argumentationstechnik. Nur sie erlauben es, die authentischen Gesprächszusammenhänge Eckharts zu rekonstruieren, die erst seine deutsche Texte in ihren originalen Kontext setzen." *Geburt*, 15-16.

<sup>120</sup> The majority of his extant scholastic thought is found in his unfinished Latin work entitled the *Opus Tripartum*, which he intended to be a comprehensive theology and scriptural commentary, but never finished.

questionable label of "mystic"—depending in large part how one defines the term.<sup>121</sup> But Eckhart's strongest influence on his immediate followers, certainly on Suso, comes from his Middle High German vernacular sermons. In these, he makes use of symbols and images from his more scholastic thought, even the pseudo-scientific image of "image" itself, as a way to advance to something ineffable beyond. Classical logic itself as a form of *wise* is still incommensurate to accurately describe the apophatic *grunt* of the divine. So although Eckhart is certainly more epistemological than other thinkers and he chooses to argue the truth of Christian faith and scripture in relation to natural philosophy, scholars like Burkhard Mojsisch are still wrong to see his thought or "mysticism" as *entirely* "philosophical," which for Mojsisch seems to rule out anything outside of pure logic, including any consideration of materiality or experience that inflect much of the rest of scholarly discussion of mysticism.<sup>122</sup> Certainly, Eckhart sees natural philosophers as producers of and citable experts on truth in a way that extends far beyond the agreement of faith and reason expressed by many of his contemporaries. But natural philosophy, to the degree that it is—and was already in Eckhart's time—a discipline with its own norms and structures of academic pursuit, cannot effectively describe that which is fundamentally without method, *wiselos*. In sermons like Sermon 69, which present reason as the

---

<sup>121</sup> Kurt Flasch, *Meister Eckhart Und Die "Deutsche Mystik": Zur Kritik Eines Historiographischen Schemas* (Amsterdam: B.R. Grüner, 1988). See footnote 25 in Chapter 1 for more on the contested definition of mysticism.

<sup>122</sup> See footnote 25. Mojsisch, working with structuralist and early post-structuralist linguistic theories as well as the Frankfurt school, has many useful insights on the need to contextualize the use and limitations of language itself as used in Eckhart. He is fantastic in that he critiques the appropriation of Eckhart to a variety of often ill-suited purposes (Burkhard Mojsisch, "Meister Eckhart: Analogie, Univozität Und Einheit" (F. Meiner, 1983). 2-4, citing studies against and for such appropriation by I. Degenhardt, *Studien Zum Wandel Des Eckhartbildes* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1967). and Ernst von Bracken, *Meister Eckhart* (1972)., respectively), but in seeing methodological theorization as the legitimation to proper academic approach, he allows that methodology to take too much precedence, overshadowing Eckhart's approach itself at times. See Mojsisch, "Analogie," 6-20.

mode of breaking through into the divine *grunt*, reason's fifth fundamental attribute is that it is an image, a mediator, not the *grunt* itself. Although philosophical thought is a valuable tool, similar to the positive theology that Dionysius expounds in the *Divine Names*, Eckhart holds his negative theological ground that no human language can adequately express the apophatic divine. If anything, Eckhart extends the rift between human and divine even further.<sup>123</sup> This is not to say that scholastic theology and mystical theology are mutually exclusive—Eckhart wrote extensively on both, and most scholastics were trained in both traditions. But Eckhart's loyalty, even in his more scholastic works, lies clearly with the “mystic” tradition, and not the purely logical and intellectual mystic philosophy that scholars like Mojsisch want to limit him to.

Indeed, it was not his more scholastic Latin works but Eckhart's vernacular works that were his best preserved and likely most widely read. Suso follows Eckhart's vernacular mode in producing his own vernacular texts, even his tract that directly addresses apophatic theology, the *Büchlein der Wahrheit* or *Little Book of Truth*. The only text which Suso wrote in Latin, the *Horologium Sapientiae*, is an adaptation of his Middle High German *Büchlein der ewigen Weisheit* or *Little Book of Eternal Truth*. As such—although Suso was likely familiar with Eckhart's Latin works—Suso's line of intellectual influence through Eckhart seems best read as coming from the vernacular tradition.

In all of this, it is important to note the model of reading that Eckhart himself presents in the German texts. He is a careful reader, but also a polemical reader, and bases his whole concordance of natural science, classical philosophy—transmitted through the Arabic tradition—and Christian philosophy on the relative ease of transposition with which he willingly connects a scriptural symbol with a scientific observation or a pagan philosophical debate with a Christian

---

<sup>123</sup> See footnote 31.

theological principle. If contemporary readers attempt to systematize his theology too exactly, they lose something of the method of educated adaptation that he pursues, which is itself legitimated by the failure of *all* disciplines, methodologies, language, and so forth. This does not mean that he is not a meticulous reader, rather that he is willing to knowingly draw together dissimilar things in order to push the mind, often explicitly through paradox, into thoughts beyond either of the original objects. This is why so many have identified his method as dialectical: he integrates and adapts theologies, sciences, and philosophies, often playing them off of one another, but indeed finding all of them "meinent wâr," "mean or speak truly."<sup>124</sup> With sources from ancient philosophy to his own near-contemporaries, such as Thomas Aquinas, he frequently went beyond their original intentions, drawing analogies to prove his point that all truth-seeking disciplines or frameworks hint at the same One, the same Truth, but that none can speak it entirely.<sup>125</sup> Thus, "wâr meinen" for Eckhart is a flexible act relying on the truth not only of the original statement and its context, but also on the ways it is being interpreted. Core to Eckhart's mode of inquiry in all this is the avoidance of literalism, since language so utterly fails to evoke the essence of what it attempts to describe.

As such, contemporary scholars must be careful in using terms to describe Eckhart.

Disciplinary terms still in contemporary use today must be clarified: Eckhart is a theologian in a Dionysian sense (he speaks of God) but not necessarily in the most orthodox sense—parts of his

---

<sup>124</sup> Eckhart, *Werke*, II, 44.25. Sermon 69, from which this quote comes, is a perfect example of this kind of dialectical placement of the thought of multiple classical philosophical "meister," here Democritus and Aristotle from the latter's *De Anima*, whose positions Eckhart both approves and both of which he handily then appropriates to his own Christian theological end, discussing the issues of mediation and unity in the Soul and the apophatic divine.

<sup>125</sup> Much scholarship has debated the degree to which his system of analogy, discussed above, does or does not actually follow Aquinas', despite his own claim in the inquisitorial trial that it does.

thought was officially, papally banned, although more for the potential for misreading by untrained audiences than because it was, in itself, heretical. Eckhart was a philosopher in the sense that he applied the Neoplatonic tradition traced here to Christian scripture and thought, but his main goal was certainly not the advancement of that tradition per se, but as a lens to organize and justify Christian thought. And to the degree that this chapter has called him a "mystic," it is in reference to his many exhortations, usually at the end of his German sermons, that his listeners apply the principles of negative theology he delineates in their everyday lives. This is not the nineteenth century mysticism of ecstatic experience, but instead a mode of pedagogical literary engagement.<sup>126</sup> And it is specifically this "mysticism" that will be followed and thoroughly developed by Suso in the space of his own vernacular theological works, but especially in his autohagiographical work, the *Life of the Servant*.

### **Suso and the Apophatics**

In order to relate the end of this chapter back to its beginning, here are the most central notes in considering how Suso takes up the negative theological tradition from Eckhart: Eckhart's German sermons move in a negative direction, relative to Dionysius' sense of negative and positive theological directionality, where Suso's works almost unilaterally shift in a positive direction. That is to say, where Eckhart speaks very abstractly, rarely using concrete examples and mostly doing so in very loose allegorical terms. In his famous Sermon 2, for example, Eckhart extrapolates a specific scriptural woman's virginity and womanhood (here Martha)—

---

<sup>126</sup> For more on this definition of mysticism, see for example Christian Kiening, *Mystische Bücher* (Zürich: Chronos, 2011).



even the "little castle" where she lived—into allegorical attributes of the Soul. This is typical of his exegetical manner: he takes a scriptural example, often quite concrete, and extrapolates its concepts into a much more abstract and general theological schema, which, because it is more abstract, is much closer to the apophatic divine in the Dionysian theological continuum.

Suso, on the other hand, often takes more abstract concepts and fits them with numerous literary and physical images, attributes, even identities and personalities—thus making them more positive, and more distant than originally from the imageless divine. The most striking example is his depiction of Eternal Wisdom. Wisdom or *intellectus* in the Neoplatonic sense is one of the closest concepts to the divine.<sup>127</sup> In Chapter 3 of the *Life*, he describes Eternal Wisdom using the descriptors and characteristics of a lover; it is "as lovable as an agreeable beloved," "als minneklich als ein lútselígu minnerin."<sup>128</sup> Indeed, where Eckhart's reason was without all manner, *wíse*, Suso's Eternal Wisdom has a "charming manner [...] often and [a lovely attraction to her spiritual love]," "dis reizlich wise [...] gar dik und ein minnekliches lúderen zü ir geischlichen minne."<sup>129</sup> Thus, just as Eckhart synthesizes numerous sources to form his own negative dialectic, so Suso takes Eckhart and others' concepts and retools them to create a view of a life, depicted in language and thus, in a sense, positively, toward a negative or self-negating end. Suso's description of Eternal Wisdom will be examined much more closely in the coming chapters, which pay special attention to Suso's conception of visuality in Chapter 2; concepts of bridal mysticism in Chapter 3; as well as gender and epistemology in Chapter 4.

---

<sup>127</sup> Although various elements of wisdom or intellect might be closer to or further from the divine, human intellect being of course lower and divine intellect higher, intellect as a whole is quite close.

<sup>128</sup> Bihlmeyer 11:28-12:1. Tobin 67.

<sup>129</sup> Bihlmeyer 12:7-8. Tobin 67.

As should be clear from the example of Eternal Wisdom, Suso also focuses much more than Eckhart on the Victorine affective vein in the negative or apophatic tradition. For Suso, love is the bond to Wisdom that invites Wisdom to be a permanent presence in a person's life. And through consistent contact with Wisdom—through scripture, through mentorship, through ascetic practices, and through personal ecstatic experiences—the person learns proper suffering, which is the primary means of self-annihilation and advancement in the goal of returning to the apophatic divine. But for Suso one must begin with desire, with love, or else the motivation to self-annihilate seems lacking. This is ultimately Suso's goal, and one of his primary differences with Eckhart. While Eckhart often assumes that his audience will want to pursue the divine, Suso seems to focus much more on nurturing the emotional investment in Wisdom that will bring about and facilitate that pursuit of the apophatic divine through trials and tribulations and much, much suffering.

In conclusion, for Eckhart, the divine is *essence*, and essence fundamentally cannot be recognized without a complete loss of self. The eye that wants to see being must cease to be an eye at all. To see *essence*, one must become *being*—one must become One, become God. To reach that space of essence, the *grunt*, all names, all attributes are lost. For Dionysius, the visible is dismissed as part of the world of being, and the divine was beyond being. For Eckhart, the divine *is* being. All visible things only have being insofar as they are lent it by the divine, which is that which must truly be seen. Suso reverses this. Changing *grunt* to *abgrunt*, Suso reverses Eckhart's original reversal of Dionysius. The divine is the absolute non-being, the abyss. This opens more space for the created to be real, to have *essence*.

Christine Büchner speaks to this in a book which explores the ways in which Suso adapts Eckhart's theological concepts, which adaptations one can generally typify as more careful and

reserved that Eckhart's bold theology. One of the most telling examples is that while Eckhart chooses a diffuse, objective voice to speak in, closer to either an academic voice or arguably the voice of the divine. This is supported by Eckhart's assertion that only the divine has being, and his extension thereof that only the divine can properly speak in the first person.<sup>130</sup> Suso, on the other hand, always situates the voices he is speaking through—there is no omniscient narrator or objective voice.<sup>131</sup> The character will be named, even though the *Life* still uses the third person to refer to a figure likely at least based on Suso himself. The overall narrative voice is a human one, which takes human experience as primary. Similarly, his interlocutors are characters, with attributes and personality, even divine figures like Eternal Wisdom or Truth. Although Eternal Wisdom's attributes are constantly shifting, the persistent presence of attributes is remarkable and telling of a fundamental shift in point of view. Eckhart speaks of the abstract and Suso speaks of the specific, which is to say Eckhart speaks negative theology and Suso speaks positive theology. This makes his desire to use image, both in the abstract sense of symbolic or cultural "image" to be elucidated further in Chapters 2 and 3, but also specific pictures and art object as devotional objects, all the more clear. In Suso's choice throughout to use positive theology toward a negative theological goal, he is always hoping that the tools he is using—pictures and words—will eventually self-annihilate to show the true divine meaning beneath, just as the Soul must self-annihilate, losing all name and attribute, to return to the divine abyss which is its Neoplatonic Cause.

---

<sup>130</sup> Eckhart, *Lateinische Werke*, II, 20, 31.

<sup>131</sup> See Büchner, *Die Transformation des Einheitsdenkens Meister Eckharts bei Heinrich Seuse und Johannes Tauler*, (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2007).

## Chapter 2—Negative Images: Suso's *glichnús* between Neoplatonic Theology and Visual Theory

"In our manner of speaking man cannot be creature and God. Still, God is three and one. So also can man be one (with God) in a certain sense when he loses himself in God, in losing himself while outwardly seeing, enjoying, and the like. I shall give an analogy of this. The eye loses itself while seeing because in the act of seeing it becomes one with its object, yet each remains what it is."

-Henry Suso's *Little Book of Truth*<sup>132</sup>

"Der mensch mag nüt kreature und got sin nach únsere rede, mer got is drivalt und eins; also mag der mensch in etlicher wise, so er sich in got vergat, eins sin in dem verlierenne und nach usserlicher wise schöwende niessende sin, und des glich. Und des gib ich ein glichnúst. Daz öge verlúret sich in sinem gegenwúrtigen sehenne, wan es wirt eins an dem werke der gesichte mit sinem gegenwurfe, und blibet doch ietweders, daz es ist."<sup>133</sup>

This chapter will briefly retrace the same period as the last, but with a furthered new focus. Where before the focus was on ontology and visuality, here, the focus will be on the philosophies of light and the study of vision itself in natural philosophy and theology. The previous chapter can in some sense be seen as the investigation of the ontology of negative theology as such, this one focuses on a related symbolic within that discourse—the metaphysics of light and image, which were examined often as a justification and crossing-point between optics in natural philosophy and divine light in theology. Suso's encounter with a divine "glichnús" in the *Little Book of Truth* mirrors descriptions of "form" by Arabic visual theorist Alhazen and "species" by Alhazen's later European interpreters like Roger Bacon, which provides key insights into the discourses influencing Suso's entire paradigm of imagistic mystic

---

<sup>132</sup> Tobin 321.

<sup>133</sup> Bihlmeyer 345:10-16.

self-transformation, which will be explored even further in Chapter 3. Discourses from contemporary Art History and from byzantine iconoclastic debates will be applied to theoretically and historically frame the distinction between *picture* and *image*, which undergirds much of Suso's work with terms like *glichnús* [similitude] and *bild* [image]. Divine images—including angelic appearances, holy persons, and allegorical figures—serve a mediatory function between the individual and the divine, providing knowledge of the divine in a mode adapted from Pseudo-Dionysius' *Celestial Hierarchy*, but with the knowledge imparted being implicitly visual rather than verbal or purely formless. The epistemological discourse among Suso and his contemporaries thus shifts from knowing God to seeing God, or, to see God is to know God.

### **Theories of Light and Vision**

David C. Lindberg, in his *Theories of Vision from Al-Kindi to Kepler*, identifies four primary modes of discussing light in high medieval scholasticism.<sup>134</sup> His discussion is specifically surrounding the early thirteenth-century Franciscan Robert Grosseteste, but the distinctions are useful in showing the different ways in which light is functioning within the disciplines of theology and natural philosophy in the thirteenth century more broadly, especially since elements of all of these modes, or reactions to them, can be found in the works of both Eckhart and Suso. These modes are: "(1) the epistemology of light, in which the process of acquiring knowledge of unchanging Platonic forms is considered analogous to corporeal vision through the eye; (2) the metaphysics or cosmogony of light, in which light is regarded as the first

---

<sup>134</sup> See David C. Lindberg, *Theories of Vision from Al-Kindi to Kepler*, University of Chicago History of Science and Medicine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976). Chapter 5.

corporeal form and the material world as the product of the self-propagation of a primeval point of light; (3) the etiology or physics of light, according to which all causation in the material world operates on the analogy of the radiation of light; and (4) the theology of light, which employs light metaphors to elucidate theological truths."<sup>135</sup> These areas are mutually imbricated and often bleed into one another, but the clear classification allows one to see the different functions of high medieval visuality discourse as it flowed between treatises that were more concerned with the physical side of visuality, and those more theological. Important to remember is, of course, that these disciplines—medicine, natural philosophy, and theology—often met in this field of study as in the center portion of a Venn diagram. Because Neoplatonic Christian symbols of light as divine emanation became tied with theological and epistemological apparatus for gaining knowledge of the divine, the understanding of how light works physically was seen as analogous or even prerequisite for understanding how one comes to know the divine. Each of these four aspects—epistemology, metaphysics, etiology, and theology—were developed more or less by various ancient influences and only in the twelfth and thirteenth century scholastic discourses do we begin to see them brought together in this grander synthesis. This synthesis parallels the synthesis within the narrower field of the physics of optics, in which thirteenth-century theorists like Roger Bacon, John Peacham, and Witelo brought together Alhazen's intromission into a functional if limited harmony with its various competitors.

Beginning already with Plotinus, one sees the central Neoplatonic theme of emanation, discussed briefly in the previous chapter, which forms the core of late medieval models of light and visuality. Plotinus argues in his *Enneads* that not only the divine, but every substance emanates a force from its essence outward into its surroundings:

---

<sup>135</sup> Ibid. 95.

All existences, as long as they retain their character, produce—about themselves, from their essence, in virtue of the power which must be in them—some necessary, outward-facing hypostasis continuously attached to them and representing in image the engendering archetypes: thus fire gives out its heat; snow is cold not merely to itself; fragrant substances are a notable instance; for, as long as they last, something is diffused from them and perceived wherever they are present.<sup>136</sup>

All things radiate attributes—which are ontologically secondary—out from their ontologically primary essence in a causal manner. These tiny causal transactions of attribute are all part of the greater causal cycle of Neoplatonic emanation and return. This model of emanation was also perceived by the Neoplatonics as the basic model by which light functions, radiating out from a light source. Similar to the way in which all creation simultaneously persists in, proceeds from, and returns to the ultimate Cause, so all light can be seen as coming ultimately from the One.<sup>137</sup>

Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, although he does not engage with image discourse directly, does engage with a secondarily related field to visuality, namely the use of light as seen in a Neoplatonic frame as an appropriate way to understand the divine. Building off of divine light symbolism in both the Old and New Testaments,<sup>138</sup> and also likely the work of numerous earlier church fathers like St. Augustine,<sup>139</sup> Dionysius expounds "light" as one of the divine names, tied to principles of spiritual and intellectual enlightenment:

---

<sup>136</sup> Original 5.1.6. English from Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen Mackenna (Lond.: Faber, 1956). 374.

<sup>137</sup> See previous chapter.

<sup>138</sup> From the Old Testament, early church fathers often built on Genesis' creation account. Divine light symbolism is also common in the books of the prophets like Isaiah, cf. Isa. 9:2. We also see in Isaiah the theme that Israel will serve as mediating light to the rest of the world, in a similar sense to a Dionysian human hierarch, cf. Isa. 49:6. In the New Testament, light symbolism is seen mostly within the Gospel of John, cf. John 1:9, 3:19, 8:12, 9:1-7, 12:34-36, 12:44-46, and the first epistle of John, see 1 John 1-2, though also elsewhere, ex. 2 Corinthians 4:6.

<sup>139</sup> He could naturally not cite the early church fathers, since he was claiming to have written before they did.

And so that Good which is above all light is called a Spiritual Light because It is an Originating Beam and an Overflowing Radiance, illuminating with its fullness every Mind above the world, around it, or within it, and renewing all their spiritual powers, embracing them all by Its transcendent compass and exceeding them all by Its transcendent elevation.<sup>140</sup>

Light emanates from the divine and is a primary vehicle through which the created can come to approach that which is higher. The reference to minds both *in* and *above* the world indicates that this holds for mortal souls as well as intermediaries, such as angels, and light can thus be seen as a mode of transmission for the uplift to higher consciousness that is the task of human hierarchs, angels, and eventually the divine itself. Nevertheless, as a symbolic name *Light* also does not reach entirely to the apophatic divine, and the final leap to the ineffable, which reaches beyond knowing, is also dark, beyond light. Later theologians and a number of students of optics take this Christian Neoplatonic framing of light even further, using the divine nature of light as a justification for the study of vision and visuality as the beginning of a Christian philosophical education, as will be discussed below.

But first this chapter will introduce those thirteenth-century theories of light and vision by way of their most innovative new influence, the Arab natural philosopher Alhazen (965-1040). Up until Alhazen's time the schools of thought on optics had more or less been divided in two or three camps: the Galenic or physiological school, which focused on the physical makeup of the eye and methods of healing; the Euclidean or mathematical school, which focused on the mathematical properties of light as a way of understanding vision; and the Aristotelian or intromission school, which focused on the manner in which the forms of objects were thought to enter the eye.<sup>141</sup> The first two schools are considered to be adherents to the extramission model

---

<sup>140</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius. *Dionysius, the Areopagite, on the Divine Names and Mystical Theology*. Ed. C. E. Rolt (London; New York, The Macmillan Company, 1940). 94.

<sup>141</sup> For more on each of these schools and their various contributors up to Alhazen, see Lindberg.



of visuality, namely that visual rays or visual humors proceed forth from the eye to make contact with the seen object and thus allow vision to take place. This was opposed to Aristotelian intromission, in which non-material (but physical) color from a seen object was thought to act upon the surrounding transparent media, such as air, which carried the color to the eye such that it could be perceived. Each of these theories had merit and each focused on different areas of optics, but each was also arguably incomplete, which allowed a rich debate to continue for millennia between various iterations of these theories.<sup>142</sup> Up until the work of Alhazen there was no major synthesis that brought together the various foci—mathematics, physiology, and intromission. Alhazen's major contribution was to create an exhaustive intromission-based theory that addressed all the problems of previous Aristotelian intromission theories, in part by bringing in elements from their competitors in the Galenic physiological camp and in the Euclidean mathematical camp. And this theory, either in Alhazen's own *Optics* or through its European adaptations, clearly inflects the language used by Suso to describe the radiation of similitudes, or *glichnüsse*, of the divine.

In addition to Aristotelian color, Alhazen sees light as the medium of vision—as it is seen today. His understanding of light, however, is inflected by the Neoplatonic tradition, as displayed in this quote from the Arabic:

All this being so, the light shining from the self-luminous body into the transparent air therefore radiates from every part of the luminous body facing that air; and the light in the illuminated air is continuous and coherent; and it issues from every point on the luminous body in every straight line that can be imagined to extend in the air from that point.<sup>143</sup>

---

<sup>142</sup> For more, see *ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> English quoted from Lindberg, 241. This translation is by Prof. A. I. Sabra, English translation of Arabic from chap 3 of *Kitāb al-Manāẓir* (Istanbul, MS Fatih 3212, fols.25v-26r). For the Latin, see Alhazen. *Alhacen's Theory of Visual Perception : A Critical Edition, with English Translation and Commentary, of the First Three Books of Alhacen's De Aspectibus, the Medieval Latin Version of Ibn Al-Haytham's Kitāb Al-Manāẓir*. Ed. A. Mark Smith (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2001). Bk 1, Chap 5, Sec 19.

Self-luminous bodies are defined as those who produce light as an ontological accident or Neoplatonic effect. A self-luminous body, such as fire or the sun, sends forth its light in all directions, allowing both itself to be seen and also illuminating other, non-self-luminous objects, which are seen as the light from self-luminous bodies is reflected to the eye. The Neoplatonic influence is also seen elsewhere, for example in that he frequently refers to that which objects radiate as *forms*—the "forms of light and color"—as in other explanations of his theory. Similar to the radiation of light from self-luminous objects:

In the same object there can be various colors, and from each part of the object issue light and color along all straight lines extending through the continuous air. Therefore when the parts of one visible object are of various colors, the forms of light and color will come to the whole surface of the eye from each of them, and consequently the colors of those parts will be mixed on the surface of the eye.<sup>144</sup>

This cacophony of forms, however, presents a problem for Alhazen—if each point from the visual field were to be seen at each point on the eye, there would be no coherence of vision. Every point of light from every object would be seen in every portion of the visual field, and no form would be distinguishable from the many others. Alhazen's answer to this problem, not without its own issues, is to argue that only those forms that hit the eye perpendicularly are perceived.<sup>145</sup> Those forms are the strongest and are not refracted at all by the glacial humor. Although he arguably gives no satisfactory answer as to why the refracted forms are not simply perceived more weakly,<sup>146</sup> this rectilinear model allows for the Euclidean mathematics of reflection to work in this theory and for the visual field to be clear and distinguished, with each

---

<sup>144</sup> Ibid. Bk. 1, Chap. 5, Sec. 14. English from Lindberg, 73.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid. Sec. 18.

<sup>146</sup> Lindberg. 74-75.

object seen in proper perspective and arrangement. Alhazen's ability to fashion a functional model of visuality that took the physiological and the mathematical aspects into account while working within a Neoplatonic framework and avoiding the pitfalls of extromission made his *Optics* the most compelling, though by no means the only, theory of vision until Johannes Kepler's theory of the retinal image in the early seventeenth century.

By the time Alhazen's ideas were being engaged by the Western students of optics, the justification for doing so was established by a resurgence of the Dionysian or Augustinian symbolic of divine light. Extending a very Neoplatonic line of thought, thinkers like the early thirteenth-century English Franciscan Robert Grosseteste justified their study of optics as an introduction into the greater realm of philosophy and a cosmology of Neoplatonic cause and effect: "it is necessary for all things to be known through this science, since all actions of things occur according to the multiplication of species and powers from the agents of this world into material recipients; and the laws of these multiplications are known only through perspective."<sup>147</sup> Essentially, he is arguing that in order to understand the functioning of cause and effect in the sense of Plotinus—in which every minor physical interaction mirrors the simultaneous system of procession, return, and remaining between the grand Cause, God, and its full Effect, the whole of Creation—one must understand optics. Why optics? Because for Grosseteste, and for many of his colleagues, light is the core of creation:

The first corporeal form which some call corporeality is in my opinion light. For light of its very nature diffuses itself in every direction in such a way that a point of light will produce instantaneously a sphere of light of any size whatsoever, unless some opaque object stands in the way. Now the extension of matter in three dimensions is a necessary concomitant of corporeity, and this despite the fact that both corporeity and matter are in themselves simple substances lacking all dimension. But a form that is in itself simple and without dimension could not introduce dimension in every direction into matter, which is

---

<sup>147</sup> Grosseteste, "Opus tertium," in *Opera quaedam hactenus inedita*, ed. Brewer. London: 1859. 37.

likewise simple and without dimension, except by multiplying itself and diffusing itself instantaneously in every direction and thus extending matter in its own dimension.<sup>148</sup>

Light underlies the entire of corporeal creation, giving matter dimension within space.

Grosseteste goes on to apply this model to the creation account of Genesis: "Let there be light" is a necessary first step to allow the expansive dimensionality necessary to then create a firmament, celestial spheres, and the terrestrial world.<sup>149</sup> Further, light becomes seen as the medium by which species extend influence from all objects to all other objects, thus the platform on which the micro- and macro-interactions of Cause and Effect play out. As cited in the introduction to this chapter, this etiology of light brings Grosseteste to see light as core not only to cosmogony (and thus cosmology), but also epistemology, philosophy, and theology. Following St. Augustine and Plato, for Grosseteste the divine *is* the primeval, spiritual light, of which the light that we perceive is but a byproduct.<sup>150</sup>

Grosseteste used the term "species" to discuss the emanations of objects (and by extension light), functionally a combination of Neoplatonic *effect* and Platonic *form*.

Grosseteste's understanding of vision is essentially Platonic, which theory was a predecessor to the Galenic physiological extromission school and argued for a visual fire or humor coming from the eye to allow sight. The term *species* did not truly take on the connection to Alhazen's visual *form* until the works of Grosseteste's close successor, English Franciscan Roger Bacon. Bacon is

---

<sup>148</sup> Grosseteste, Robert. *Robert Grosseteste on Light (De Luce)*. Ed. Clare C. Riedl. Milwaukee, Wis., Marquette University Press, 1942. 10. See also Crombie, *Robert Grosseteste and the Origins of Experimental Science, 1100-1700* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1961), 106-9; Baur, *Die Philosophie Des Robert Grosseteste, Bischofs Von Lincoln (1253)*, (Münster i. W., Aschendorff, 1917), 85-93; McKeon, *Study of the Summa Philosophiae*, 160-63; Lynch, *The Doctrine of Divine Ideas and Illumination in Robert Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln*, (Toronto: 1941) 164-66.

<sup>149</sup> Lindberg, 97.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.* 96.

intentionally loose with terminology—in his attempts to create a unified philosophy by superficially harmonizing previous theories, Bacon basically claims all terms used to denote effect of an agent are synonyms used in particular contexts: *species*, *lumen*, *idolum*, *phantasma*, *simulacrum*, *forma*, *intentio*, *similitudo*, *umbra*, *virtus*, *impressio*, and *passio*.<sup>151</sup> Essentially, light *is* similitude, similitude *is* image, and image *is* form. To oversimplify, it is *light* in emanating from self-luminous bodies, *similitudo* or *image* in passing through external transparent media, and *form* or *species* as it is understood in the higher faculties of the soul, such as the intellect.<sup>152</sup> Each term previous theorists used denotes not a variety of objects, but the same effect seen in different contexts.

Art historian Michael Camille has reconstructed the psychological model that Bacon and his followers were using to understand how perception worked inside the mind. Although individual perception begins with the eyes, a larger amount of work takes place in the five mental faculties posited by the eleventh-century Persian philosopher Avicenna, regarded as a medical authority throughout Europe in the late medieval period.<sup>153</sup> This interior visuality is especially important to understand how perception was understood in visions or mystic experiences. Basically, a seen image taken from the outside was imprinted on one of the mental

---

<sup>151</sup> Bacon. *Roger Bacon's Philosophy of Nature: A Critical Edition, with English Translation, Introduction, and Notes, of De Multiplicatione Specierum and De Speculis Comburentibus*. Ed. David C. Lindberg. New York: Clarendon Press, 1983. Pt. 1 Chap. 1. For more on this subject, see Lindberg, "Theories of Vision." Chapter 6.

<sup>152</sup> Michael Camille. "Before the Gaze: The Internal Senses and Late Medieval Practices of Seeing." In *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance: Seeing as Others Saw*, ed. Robert S. Nelson, Cambridge Studies in New Art History and Criticism (Cambridge, U.K. ; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2000). 208.

<sup>153</sup> He was known in medieval Europe as Avicenna, the Latinized form of the Persian Ibn Sīnā. His work *The Canon of Medicine*, based on the principles of Galen and Hippocrates, was a medical textbook across Europe in the late Middle Ages and the beginning of the Early Modern period.

faculties and could be transferred internally between them and imaginatively reconstructed at will. For example, the image of Heaven's "pearly gates," even if the viewer had never seen gates made of pearl, could be constructed out of previously seen images of gates and of pearls in the imagination. Building on Alhazen's work, Roger Bacon explicates this rising theory of intromission by explaining that *similitudes* radiated out from objects to meet the eye, allowing sight of the object.<sup>154</sup> As above, this *similitude* takes different forms in different parts of the visual process. This *similitude* replicates itself into any and all transparent media nearby, until it meets an eye, which takes it in as a *species*. In the medieval understanding, the mental faculty of *sensus communis vel sensatio*, or common sense, then briefly took the negative form of the image, like water or wax taking the form of an object pressed into it.<sup>155</sup> Common sense itself, then, could also be seen as a semi-transparent medium, because it, too, briefly replicates the species, before passing it on to the further faculties, such as the imagination. This theory has four important corollaries that pertain to the argument of this dissertation: firstly, that *species* extend from an object outward through all transparent media; secondly, that in intromission theory images were considered more real and more active, approaching the viewer; thirdly, that vision is primarily internal, processed inside the mental faculties; and fourth, that the *species* as it exists in the mind is an immaterial imprint of the actual object perceived.

---

<sup>154</sup> Camille, 208. It is important to note that Bacon's ideas about the internal functioning of vision depart widely from Alhazen, who saw light as essentially being reflected and refracted inside of the mind much as it is outside. Bacon did not see himself directly as a disciple of Alhazen, but as an interpreter and harmonizer of all previous traditions. He believed strongly in one universalizable truth, which all the previous theorists were addressing, only getting it minorly wrong and thus disagreeing in small particulars. For more on this, see Lindberg chapter 6.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid. 200.

## Transition—Eckhart's Internal Image

These concepts presumably found foothold in the Rhineland mystic tradition due to Meister Eckhart's multiple engagements at the University of Paris, where both Grosseteste and Bacon were active in the decades before Eckhart's time there.<sup>156</sup> Eckhart follows the Neoplatonic school of light philosophy discussed above, seeing the divine as the true, self-illuminating light, from which all else, including visible light, emanates out.<sup>157</sup> He connects this divine light with the light of the *grunt*, that part of the Soul that is uncreated and ontologically primary, or essentially *real*. Eckhart figures the *ymagina* as part of what allows the Soul to approach the uncreated divine, because the *ymagina* is active in non-being, presumably in the non-being of the Soul's *grunt*:

There is another power in the soul with which it thinks. This power forms things within itself which are not present, so that I know things as well as if I were seeing them with my own eyes; even better. I can to mind a rose just as well in winter. And with this power the soul works in nonbeing and so follows God who works in nonbeing.

Ein ander kraft ist in der sêle, dâ mite si gedenket. Disiu kraft bildet in sich diu dinc, diu niht gegenwertic ensint, daz ich diu dinc als wol bekenne, als ob ich sie sæhe mit den ougen, und noch baz—ich gedenke wol eine rôsen in dem winter—und mit dirre kraft wûrket diu sêle in unwesene und volget gote, der in unwesene wûrket.<sup>158</sup>

---

<sup>156</sup> Eckhart cites both Avicenna and Alhazen, so it is sure that he was familiar with their works, as well as the major players of the visual tradition up to that point, even if it is not sure whether he read the Western syntheses of Bacon and his immediate successors, John Peacham and Witelo.

<sup>157</sup> Bracken, *Meister Eckhart* (1972). 111.

<sup>158</sup> Eckhart, *Werke*. 1, 110:16-21.

In his commentary on this and surrounding passages, Largier argues that the ontology Eckhart presents here is inverted from Eckhart's own standard axiom *Esse est Deus*.<sup>159</sup> Here Eckhart says that God does *not* have being, and he focuses on God's intellectual nature as primary. The connection of the *grunt* to God is here in intellectual capacity and purity—freedom from image or form.

This conception both reflects and reformulates traditions of visionary hierarchy dating back to St. Augustine. Augustine held that visions that were imagistic, presenting sensible or recognizable forms, were less holy than "intellectual visions," which were imageless.<sup>160</sup> Eckhart is creating a middle space here: through the *ymagina*'s use of internal images, the soul "works in nonbeing." Although the images here are necessarily still less pure or naked, "blöz," than the imageless *grunt*, they are closer to the apophatic divine in that they lack *created* being.<sup>161</sup> In examining Suso's theorization of images, it becomes clear that he takes Eckhart's framing of interior images and uses it as a primary narrative and symbolic model in his texts.

---

<sup>159</sup> See *Werke*, 1, 844-54. This power is discussed as part of the *vernunft* [reason], which Niklaus Largier, the editor of this edition and a preeminent Eckhart scholar, clarifies is here split into two related meanings: (1) the *vernunft* as an ability of the soul to naturally recognize and relate to truth via image. Largier clarifies "In dieser Form geht die Vernunft als der Aspekt des Erkennens auf im Seelenternar *memoria—intellectus—voluntas*, der sich bildhaft verhält zum trinitarischen Leben der Gottheit. [In this form reason rises as the aspect of recognition into the soul's faculties *memoria—intellectus—voluntas*, which relate imagistically to the Trinitarian life of the divine.]" Ibid. 850. (2) the *vernunft* as the highest portion of the Soul, the *essentia animae*, which coincides with the imageless *grunt*.

<sup>160</sup> Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim*, XII, 6.15–37.70, in *On Genesis: The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, "The Works of Saint Augustine," Pt.1, Vol.13, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P., ed. John Rotelle, O.S.A. (New York: New City Press, 2002). 470–506.

<sup>161</sup> It is important distinguish here *created* being, as Largier holds Eckhart is asserting in Sermon 9 opposite an intellectualized divinity, from *divine* being, the ontological primacy given to the divine elsewhere in Eckhart, summarized as *Esse est Deus*.



## The *species* of medieval visual theory and theology compared with Suso's "glichnús"

The way in which the visual concept of *species* is mirrored in a mystic experience described by Henry Suso in the fifth chapter of the *Little Book of Truth* is a clear example. The Disciple (Suso's alter ego in this text) "retreated within himself and, as his senses faded, it seemed to him as though he were being led into a land of intellect" ("do wart er sinkende in sich selb und in der vergangenheit siner sinnen duchte in, er wurde gefúret in ein vernúnftiges land"), where he has a strange encounter.<sup>162</sup> He sees a figure, referred to as a "glichnús," which is situated by or on a cross. The "glichnús" descends from the cross and invites the Disciple to ask any questions, promising they will be answered. The Disciple then begins a dialogue with the allegorical figure of Truth, the spiritual guide throughout the *Little Book of Truth*. In Middle High German, the word "glichnús" can mean "similitude" or "copy/impression/after-image/model," mirroring the term *species*. But "glichnús" also means "figure," "being," "parable/comparison/riddle," or "equalization/payback."<sup>163</sup> Tobin translates it in this passage as "symbolic figure."<sup>164</sup> When used with images, "glichnús" can be contrasted with "wârheit" (truth) to make an image-referent pair: "der glíchnusse wârheit" is "the original on which the image is based," an example from the *Life of Saint Elisabeth* around 1300.<sup>165</sup>

This makes the fact that it is a "glichnús" that approaches the Disciple, but Truth that speaks to him, particularly telling. Indeed, in response to his questions, the Disciple is told by

---

<sup>162</sup> Bihlmeyer 338: 17-20. Tobin 316.

<sup>163</sup> It is the word, for example, used for Christ's parables in German translations of the Bible. See Lexer online, entry "glichnús."

<sup>164</sup> Tobin 316.

<sup>165</sup> See Lexer online, entry "glichnús."

Truth that this "glichnús" represents "the only-begotten Son of God in the manner in which he assumed human nature."<sup>166</sup> Yet Truth makes clear that the Disciple has seen only "ein bild" [one image.]<sup>167</sup> This "image" is "[innumerably manifold]" ("unzallich manigvaltig"), which signifies:

all the people who are his members who have also become sons or Son through him and in him, as the number of many physical parts of one body. However, that his head appeared above all signifies that he is the first and only-begotten Son by his being preeminently taken up into the [substance/selfhood] of the divine Person, while the others are changed only by taking on the form of the same image.<sup>168</sup>

ellú dú menschen, dú sinú gelider sint, die ôch sune oder sun worden sint dur in und in ime, als dú zale vil liplicher gelider an eime libe. Aber daz daz höpt úbertrefflich schein, daz meinde, daz er der erste und eingeborne sun ist nach der úbertreffenden annemunge in die selbsheit der götlichen persone, und aber die andern in die innemunge überförmiger einikeit des selben bildes.<sup>169</sup>

Each "member" radiating out from the divine "glichnús" functions as "image" as well, having taken on the formal nature of the "image" but not taken up into the "selbsheit der götlichen persone," "[the substance of the divine person.]" This "glichnús" is a bridge, a representation of an object, here the divine, which extends out beyond the original but is also tactilely connected to it. It can also directly influence and shape people into its own *image* through direct contact, though contact is much more difficult, even impossible, to establish with the actual divine itself.<sup>170</sup>

This concept of *glichnús* here connects traditional Christian rhetoric of the members of the Church as body of Christ with Bacon's or Alhazen's rhetoric of intromission and the concept

---

<sup>166</sup> Tobin 316. "Disú glichnúst, die du hast gesehen, betútet den einbornen sun gottes nah der wise, als er menschlich nature hat an sich genomen." Bihlmeyer 339: 4-5.

<sup>167</sup> Differentiating the Middle High German word "bild" (image) from "glichnús."

<sup>168</sup> Tobin 316.

<sup>169</sup> Bihlmeyer 339: 6-13.

<sup>170</sup> See, for example, the numerous Biblical passages in which it is asserted that no human can see the divine, or not in the entirety of the divine, for example Exodus 33:20-23.

of *species* or *form*. It serves both as extension of the object, here Christ, and also its translation into a different medium. For Bacon, the medium through which species travel must be transparent. This parallels the primary goal of Suso's mysticism—annihilation of the self in divinity. Through annihilation the Soul becomes "transparent" enough to take on the divine form. Thus Suso's desire in writing works of negative theology is to bring the reader to deny their "self" by mimicking the divine in the process of *imitatio Christi*. This is often achieved in that the reader is invited to ponder either the image of Christ himself or the after-images of Christ—his "servants" or "spiritual children," as will be discussed more fully in the following chapter.<sup>171</sup> The fully annihilated disciple serves as spiritual "image" of the divine, transforming itself into a transparent medium by becoming a "member" of the body of Christ off of the heavenly "glichenús." Yet, for Suso true, permanent *unio mystica*—actual, full incorporation into the divine—is impossible in mortality.<sup>172</sup> Thus *glichenús*, like *species*, is a derived image, but it is not possible for it to be materially the same as its original object.

And as Camille argues that images in intromission gain greater reality and individual identity, so Suso's *glichenús* has a "presence" or physicality of its own. It takes up symbolic space, floating between heaven and earth with a cross. Two groups of people are able to move around it, to negotiate its presence spatially as they attempt to negotiate its meaning hermeneutically. For Aristotle and his followers, *species* in the mind are immaterial, but still behave like the things we sense externally: "When the mind is actively aware of anything it is necessarily aware of it along with its image; for images are like sensuous concepts except that they contain no

---

<sup>171</sup> See Suso's *Life of the Servant*—which examines the figure of the Servant, Suso's textual alter ego—or the *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom*, which contains his hundred meditations on Christ's Passion.

<sup>172</sup> McGinn, *Harvest of Mysticism*. 211.

matter."<sup>173</sup> While they have no substance and do not occupy physical space, being "like sensuous concepts" they nevertheless have shape and a kind of immaterial spatiality—exhibited in the way the people in Suso's vision navigate around the *glichnús*.

Suso's "glichnús" also has an individual form, albeit in the likeness of the original. It is physically distinct from and irreducible to the original of which it is a similitude. The image itself is now part of "the world of things" rather than "part of a [Neoplatonic] noncorporeal realm of signification."<sup>174</sup> If *image* is able to be immaterially embodied, separate from the original which it mimics—like Eckhart's impossible rose in winter—we begin to see why Suso found it such a compelling metaphor for the mystic practicing *imitatio Christi*: it is a mode of relationship which allows for similarity and connection between the mystic and the divine without having to negotiate the problems of material unity that often plague the rhetoric of *unio mystica*. If the mystic is a separately embodied *image* of the divine, formed according to its *glichnús*, they can be unified in form, but not the same material.<sup>175</sup> Those mystics who argued that *unio mystica* could be complete in mortality, such that the mystic could be completely and utterly "annihilated" or lost in the divine, generally garnered accusations of heresy.<sup>176</sup> But Suso creates a

---

<sup>173</sup> Maureen Flynn, "The Spiritual Uses of Pain in Spanish Mysticism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 2 (1996). 262.

<sup>174</sup> Camille. "Before the Gaze." 207.

<sup>175</sup> These dilemmas were discussed beyond just the Christian mystic sphere: twelfth century Jewish rabbi and philosopher Moses Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed* contains an extended reconciliation of Aristotelian metaphysics with Jewish tradition and doctrines of *ex nihilo* creation. One of the primary disagreements was that the divine being of completely different substance than the created should allow there to be no causal relationship between the two in the Aristotelian system.

<sup>176</sup> Two notable examples are Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart. As a student of Eckhart who defended him before and after the accusations of heresy, Suso would have been very aware of the dangers of this line of argument. He even dedicates a chapter of the *Little Book of Truth* to a dialogue in which he refutes and reformulates the arguments of a "wild man" who is constantly

framework in which the mystic becomes "cristförmklich"—literally "in the form of Christ"—which bypasses the problems of full material union in mortality.<sup>177</sup> By being "in the form of Christ" the mystic becomes an image of Christ. That Suso constructs his literary persona as "true image" of the divine has been argued by many scholars, but only recently have they examined what this means for Suso's conception of *image*.<sup>178</sup> Usually constructed as a process of learning to suffer properly, becoming "cristförmklich" is central to Suso's project of mystic development, and will be explored more fully in the following chapter.

For the moment, however, it is important to note that learning to suffer "cristförmklich" is a path that mixes activity and passivity: it is an active learning process that usually begins with ascetic suffering, but passive in that it progresses beyond the ascetic to a passive ideal of "gelassenheit"—best translated as "releasement." Learning "releasement" is a procedure of "becom[ing] utterly nothing"/"[unbecoming]" ("entwordenheit") or "going away from his 'self [releasement/divestiture of the self]" ("gelassenheit sin selbs"), which involves a type of spiritual "inactivity [laziness]" ("müssekeit"), where "the less one does, the more one has really accomplished" ("so man ie minr hie tüt, so man in der warheit ie me hat getan")—referring to "activity ... which in doing a person becomes an obstacle to his own progress [transmits one's

---

quoting Eckhart. The "wild man" presumably represents the adherents of the Heresy of the Free Spirit, which Eckhart was accused of promoting. The Heresy of the Free Spirit holds that the soul requires no ecclesiastical mediation in order to be unified with the divine. The primary doctrinal danger that it presented for medieval Catholicism was the challenge it presented to the doctrine that the Sacraments are necessary for salvation.

<sup>177</sup> Usually specific to suffering in the form of Christ—"cristförmklich liden"—as in the image of Christ as seraph in Chapter 43 of the *Life of the Servant*, where one set of wings bear the mantra "learn suffering in the form of Christ," "lern liden cristförmklich." "cristförmklich liden" is also mentioned earlier in Chapter 40. Bihlmeyer 134, 145, 147. Discussed further later in this chapter.

<sup>178</sup> Michael Egerding, *Die Metaphorik Der Spätmittelalterlichen Mystik* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1997). 1:154-158. Also explored by McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism*, and Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary*, among others.

self] and does not carry out purely in praise of God" ("ein söllich tün, indem der mensch sich selb vermitelt und nit luter gotes lob meinet").<sup>179</sup> The phrase "sich selb vermitelt" is particularly interesting here, because the Middle High German word "vermit(t)eln" is synonymous with the contemporary German "vermitteln," which most literally translates as "give a medium to/be a medium for" but can mean "to communicate," "to act as broker/agent for," "to connect," "to convey," or "to mediate for": a tidy list of the types of activity that *image* and *glichnús* take on in Suso's texts, and which clearly connect it to the Neoplatonic tradition of emanation and angelic mediation.<sup>180</sup> *Gelassenheit* is thus a form of passivity of the self and cessation of self-oriented action in favor of action that serves the purpose of announcement ("being a medium for") or aggrandizement ("praise") of the original.

This is the core of Suso's concept of activity in *glichnús*—it is an activity limited to expression of the original, but active nonetheless. This same active/passive split is operative with intromission's *similitude*. In intromission *similitude* radiates out to meet the viewer—it is active, powerful, lively—just as, for Suso, the "glichnús" has the power to come to the viewer and interact directly with the Disciple. *Similitude* similarly impacts and impresses itself on the eye, without the original coming into direct contact with the eye. Although limited, its action seems independent of the original of which it is a similitude. Yet despite acting independently of the original materiality of the object, *similitude* issues forth from the original in a given direction,

---

<sup>179</sup> Bihlmeyer 54. Tobin 98. Taken from Chapter 19, "How he was directed to the school of the spirit and instructed in the art of true detachment," MHG "Wie er ward gewiset in die vernúnftigen schüle zü der kunst rechter gelassenheit."

<sup>180</sup> See Lexer online. The main context in which the Middle High German "vermitteln" was used in the medieval period seems to have been in mystic writings, such as those of Eckhart and Suso. This could mean that it does not quite share the variety of meanings with the contemporary German "vermitteln," but there is no clear indicator that this is the case. For more on Neoplatonic angelology, see Chapter 1.

following a straight path from object to viewer. It is active, but arguably has no "agency" in the sense of "free will." It does not determine or alter its own path. Although *image* functions independently, it is only as "agent," intermediary, or medium of the source ("vermitteln"), extending the presence or influence of the original beyond its own material limits.

The activity of *glichnús* is for Suso limited to two major functions: approach and annunciation. It is not the "glichnús" itself that clarifies what it means, rather the voice of Truth who clarifies the baffling scene for the Disciple. The image serves as intermediary or introduction to the experience of the divine itself, which takes the form of a dialogue between the Disciple and Truth. This angelic function of approach and annunciation is paralleled in the pedagogical function that Suso appears to see for his alter egos the Disciple and the Servant. Indeed, an illumination depicting the Servant receiving or becoming an image of Christ has been argued to take its structure according to Annunciation motifs, see Figure 2.1. He "not only adopts the pudic pose and swaying S-curve stance customarily reserved for figures of female saints, above all the Virgin Mary, he also, like her, sways in response to an angelic salutation, as in an Annunciation," identifying the Servant with Mary.<sup>181</sup> The reception of a floral form of stigmata and a halo of roses endowed by the angels in this vision make the Servant closer to a physical image of Christ, with a full complement of stigmatic markings.<sup>182</sup> In a later image, the Servant passes the name and halo of roses on to his spiritual daughter Elsbeth Stagel, completing the cycle of receiving the image of the divine and radiating it further. Just as the "glichnús" in the *Little Book of Truth* can come down and approach the Disciple, so too are the figures of Servant

---

<sup>181</sup> Hamburger, *Visual and the Visionary*, 243.

<sup>182</sup> If one includes the divine name engraved on his chest as a parallel to Christ's side wound. The manner of display of the Servant's chest here mirrors depictions of Christ proffering the side wound common in medieval art.

and Disciple able to approach the reader, as *bild* (image) or *glichnús* (similitude), as modeled by the Servant's relationship with Stigel, or Anna in Figure 2.1. This angelic function is of course based on epistemology in the Dionysian model, in which angels and human hierarchs mediate the transfer of divine knowledge or divine light downwards to lower echelons of the celestial and terrestrial hierarchies, explored more fully in Chapter 1. What is interesting to note is that where Dionysius' engagement with knowledge of the divine was with words, Suso's engagement is with image. This represents an epistemology that sees images, not words, as the core to true understanding.

All divine apparitions seem to occupy the mediating role like that of the *glichnús* in Suso's works. Steven Rozenski, Jr., argues that heavenly messengers serve an angelic function in the works of Suso.<sup>183</sup> Even persons who are supposedly completely dissolved in eternal union with the divine still appear to the Servant in the similitude of their mortal selves, proclaiming their own admittance into heaven, which was often rewarded on account of the Servant's suffering on their behalf. Rozenski sees this as idiosyncrasy, that now divine beings would appear in seemingly mortal mien—and indeed, it seems that they are often proclaiming their own salvation for the comfort of the Servant, rather than acting solely as agents of divine praise or Dionysian enlightenment. One can see from the examples that Rozenski discusses that beyond the basic functions of approach and annunciation, there is a third function of divine manifestations, that of comfort—the image can bolster the recipient in their spiritual course. But even this comfort is frequently framed in terms of mirroring—the viewers see the *image* as

---

<sup>183</sup> Rozenski, Steven Jr., "*Von Aller Bilden Bildlosigkeit: The Trouble with Images of Heaven in the Works of Henry Suso*," in *Envisaging Heaven in the Middle Ages*, ed. Carolyn Muessig and Ad Putter, Routledge Studies in Medieval Religion and Culture; 6 (London; New York: Routledge, 2007).





Figure 2.1: The Exemplar, Bibliothèque Nationale et Universitaire de Strasbourg, MS 2.929, fol. 28v. (Photo: BNU).

*mirror* both in that it mirrors the original, the divine, and in that it mirrors the viewers themselves. This would provide a potential answer to Rozenski's final dilemma: why do the holy dead, although some are explicitly described as fully "vergoetet" (dissolved into the divine), appear in mortal mien to the Servant? If divine messengers are dual mirrors—emanating out from the divine formlessness but manifesting as visible or recognizable in human form—they appear to take a mediatory or middle role, as do the angels on Suso's mystic path (see Figure 2.2).

To further explain why they mirror their human similitudes in appearing to the Servant as divine beings, one could argue that for Suso the human is *already* the image of the divine. There are multiple ways in which this could be understood. One is, of course, the Christianized Aristotelian tradition, which sees the human as endowed with reason, specifically *intellectus possibilis*, and thus intellectually receptive like the divine, formless and thus able to recognize all forms. Another related way is to follow the model of apophatic anthropology articulated by contemporary theologian Kathryn Tanner.<sup>184</sup> That is to say: the human is not in the image of the divine in that the human has a similar form to the divine. If one takes seriously the idea that the divine is formless, this makes no sense. Instead, the human is created in the divine image insofar as the human cannot fully be grasped or captured (circumscribed, to use a term that will be explored later in this chapter)—that there is, at the core of the human, some kernel of the divine abyss that defies name, form, and manner just as the divine does. To be in the image of the imageless is to be, in some sense, ineffable. Both of these are supported by Suso's image of the mystic way, here Figure 2.2. A red line follows the image of the three circles that represents the

---

<sup>184</sup> Tanner, Kathryn. "In the Image of the Imageless" in *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality*, ed. Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller, Transdisciplinary Theological Colloquia (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).





Figure 2.2. The final image of the *Life*, marking the end of the life and the beginning of the *Little Book of Truth*. Strasbourg MS 2929. Note the angelic form, winged, above a winged demon, which mediates between the Trinity and the human.

divine abyss to each created manifestation: first the Trinity, then the angelic, and then the human Soul, following the mystic path from right to left along the bottom and up the left side. The mirroring can thus progress in both directions, because there is some kind of continuity of form—or formlessness—between viewer and divine object.

Suso naturally derives this way of thinking about the Soul from Eckhart and his concept of the *grunt*. But Suso takes Eckhart's theoretical concept and instantiates it visually in images, as the one above, as well as narratively, in his textual alter egos. In his writings, Suso's alter egos the Servant and the Disciple also serve as this kind of *mirror* for their own "spiritual children." Indeed, this mirroring function is seen not only in the Servant's relationship with his spiritual daughter Elsbeth Stigel, but others as well. An unnamed woman, described as a "[beginner]" or "[sufferer]"<sup>185</sup> at the end of chapter 44 of the *Life*, is inspired to see the Servant as a mirror of her own experience:

When this suffering woman looked at him intently, she saw with her inner eyes that his face began to take on a pleasing brilliance. Three times it became like the dazzling sun when it shines its brightest. His face became thereby so limpid that she saw herself in it. This [sight] comforted her very much in her suffering and confirmed her in her holy way of life.

Do sin der lidender mensch mit flisse war nam, do sah si mit den inren ögen, daz sin antlút sich begond verwandlen in ein wúnneklich klarheit, und ward ze drin malen glich der liechten sunnen nah ire höchsten widerglaste, und ward im dar inne sin antlút als luter, daz si sich selber dar inne showete. Und von diser gesiht ward si in ire lidene gar wol getröstet und gevestnet in einem heiligen lebene.<sup>186</sup>

This mirroring is dual—in brightness the Servant mirrors the divine, symbolized by the sun as a self-luminous body, but in doing this he becomes so clear that the woman can see herself

---

<sup>185</sup> MHG: "anvahender mensch" and "lidender mensch". Bihlmeyer 152-153. Although both "anvahender mensch" and "lidender mensch" are both gender-neutral terms, the person is clearly female as female pronouns are used several times to refer to her.

<sup>186</sup> Bihlmeyer 152-153. Tobin 173.

mirrored in him. The Servant is serving as "image" for the woman. Note also that she sees this "with her inner eyes." While it might be easy to interpret these "inner eyes" as a specialized type of spiritual sight, in the medieval view this could just as well refer to the image as *species* held inside her cognitive faculties. Interestingly, although the Servant is physically present, she perceives him better spiritually with her "inner eye" than her physical eyes. This parallels a controversy in medieval thought, related to Augustine's hierarchy of visionary experience mentioned above, that contrasted the sight of mortal creation in the mortal soul (i.e. the mental faculties) and the image of the divine as seated in the immortal soul, which according to Augustine housed the higher faculties of will, reason, and memory.<sup>187</sup>

The woman's inner eye in this instance, if seated in the mental faculties, could be the *ymagnatio vel formalis*, "form imagination", or the *estimativa*, "estimation." The *ymagnatio vel formalis* held the forms of "species" even in absence of the perceived object. The *estimativa* consciously, but pre-rationally, formed estimations or understandings of the perceived object.<sup>188</sup> This estimative faculty is the highest function shared between humans and animals, and the only one of the mental faculties that connects directly with the immortal soul and its higher, more "rational" faculties. By means of the *ymagnatio vel formalis* and the *estimativa*, visuality is possible in the absence of external senses. Indeed, it appears that certain types of visuality were enhanced by the withdrawal of external sight. Suso frequently prefaces the Servant's or the Disciple's visions as happening "in the absence of his senses."<sup>189</sup>

---

<sup>187</sup> Flynn. "Spiritual Uses of Pain in Spanish Mysticism." 263.

<sup>188</sup> Camille. "Before the Gaze." 200-201.

<sup>189</sup> MHG "in der vergangenheit siner sinnen". Seuse. *Das Buch der Wahrheit*. 26.

In the *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom*, the encounter with the "glichnús" also begins "in the absence of his senses." Just as medieval theorists like Bacon and Avicenna held that *species*, once seen, can transmit between the faculties of the brain at will, so "it can appear to" the Disciple that he sees and interacts with the "glichnús," despite him being cut off from external perception. Following Augustine's treatises on the subject, this type of "intellectual vision" was seen as ideal and the most trustworthy of all types of visions in the medieval hierarchy of visionary experience, especially when such intellectual visions are guided and interpreted by divine assistance. This assistance extends even to divine or angelic intervention into the mental processes of visibility, as explicated in *De spiritu et anima*, a popular twelfth-century Pseudo-Augustinian work often attributed to the French Cistercian monk Alcher of Clairvaux:

But in ecstasy, when the soul is alienated and withdrawn from all the bodily senses, more than in sleep but less than in death, it is not deceived. Rather, great revelation occurs while the mind is divinely assisted, or else someone expounds the vision, as in the Apocalypse of John. For when the soul is taken up by a good spirit, it cannot be deceived, since the holy angels in marvelous ways make what they themselves see visible to us, through an easy and extremely powerful kind of union or commingling. In an ineffable manner they create the form of their own vision within our spirit. For they indeed have authority over bodily things for the sake of judgment and service; in spirit they can discern significant images of bodies, and they can act so powerfully as to join those images to human spirit by some means in revelation.

In ecstasi vero quando ab omnibus corporis sensibus alienatur et avertitur anima, amplius quam in somno solet, sed minus quam in morte, non fallitur. Sed ipsa mente divinitus adjuta, vel aliquo ipsa visa exponente, sicut in Apocalypsi Joanni exponebatur magna revelatio est. Cum enim bono spiritu assumitur anima, falli non potest; quia sancti Angeli miris modis, visa sua facili quadam ac praepotenti unitione vel commixtione nostra esse faciunt, et visionem suam quodam ineffibili modo in spiritu nostro informant. Ipsi siquidem his corporalibus judicandis atque ministrandis praesunt, et eorum significativas similitudines in spiritu ita discerunt, et tanta potentia quodam modo tractant, ut etiam eas possint hominum spiritibus revelando miscere.<sup>190</sup>

---

<sup>190</sup> Alcher of Clairvaux, *Liber de spiritu et anima* 24, PL 40:797. Translation by Barbara Newman, "What did it Mean to Say "I Saw"? The Clash between Theory and Practice in Medieval Visionary Culture." *Speculum* 80.1 (2005): 10-11.

This description closely mirrors Suso's "glichenús" anecdote from the *Little Book of Truth*, especially that it is "withdrawn from all bodily senses" and "the mind is divinely assisted, or else someone expounds the vision," as with Truth explaining the vision to the Disciple. But beyond framing his vision as thus legitimate and trustworthy, this quotation also explains the process of visuality that allows the Disciple to see the "glichenús"—by divine intervention, "creating the form of their own vision within our spirit." It even explains the divine origin of the significant images, or "significativas similitudines," which are infused into the soul "by some means in revelation." The fact that it is angels who infuse the mystic with their vision by "union or commingling" furthers the connection between vision, both as mystic experience and as visual perception, and mystic epistemological union. Images fuse themselves into you, sometimes by means of divine or angelic assistance, which actively intervenes into your mental processes to make similitudes perceptible in the absence of the physical senses. This allows the core of divine reason within each human to recognize the unity that is the divine, in its essence—but only once the external form of the person is completely lost.

### **Images in the Negative**

And so one sees, when this is placed in the context of negative theology, the concept of *glichenús* takes on new meanings, beyond the more or less physiological ones discussed above. Just as negative theology takes as axiomatic the assertion that the infinite divine cannot be captured by words, so too do images, forms, and any other temporal method of conceiving fail to

perceive the divine.<sup>191</sup> No mode of thinking, and thus, by extension, no mental faculty, can "hold" the form of the ineffable divine as the mind can "hold" the form of created things. The divine *has no form*—all physical dimensions and even dimensionality itself are improper or inappropriate to attribute to the divine. As in Eckhart's works, it is *bildlos*, imageless, and without *weise*, or manner.

This Neoplatonically-derived negativity toward form is clearly not at all in line with Plato's original thoughts, which venerated form as the highest ideal. This Neoplatonic view could be more easily reconciled with Aristotle, who held that the "types" recognized by humans in the world around them are created by human reasoning and extrapolation, not an echo of a divine form.<sup>192</sup> It is helpful here to distinguish the ambiguous term "image," as used in this argument, from the more common term "picture." An *image* is something that is beyond the physical *picture*, a kind of type or mode rather than instantiated individual object. Art historian W. J. T. Mitchell uses "species" in a biological metaphor—different than Bacon's visual "species"—to explain the Aristotelean understanding of *image*: "Images, then, are like species, and pictures are like organisms whose kind are given by the species."<sup>193</sup> Mitchell goes on to argue that while a

---

<sup>191</sup> The logical inverse of this, that if one can recognize it, it is *not* God, is found frequently in the negative theological tradition. Already Augustine argues, "Si comprehendis, non est Deus." *Sermones* CXVII, caput 3, 5, PL 38, 662f. See also LII, caput 6, 16, PL 38, p.366. Dionysius writes the same in his letter to Gaius, see *The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), Letter I. And Eckhart echoes this in German Sermon 71: "Whoever sees anything or if anything comes to your attention, it is not God, because he is neither this nor that. If anyone says that God is here or there, do not believe him. The light that is God shines in the darkness." *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher*. 323. "Der iht sihet oder vellet iht in dîn bekennen, daz enist got niht; dâ von niht, wan er noch diz noch daz enist. Swer sprichet, daz got hie oder dâ sî, dem engloubet niht. Daz licht, daz got ist, daz liuhtet in der vinsternisse." *Werke*. 2, 72:11-15.

<sup>192</sup> Plato's original works were also still lost to Europe at this point, where most of Aristotle's works had been recovered through translations from the Arabic.

<sup>193</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, "The Surplus Value of Images," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Comparative Study of Literature* 35, no. 3 (2002). 5-6.



particular picture can be a good or bad instance of an image, images themselves are neither good nor bad, except perhaps in their endurance. Like biological species, some images thrive where others are marginalized or disappear, go extinct, as it were. The image of Christ is a good example: although individual pictures of Christ can be assessed according to cultural, aesthetic, historical, and other criteria, the aggregate category of "image of Christ" is difficult to describe by anything other than its incredibly long-lasting vitality. An image can endure in a wide variety of individual forms and expressions, just as the "members," or specific pictures in this framework, that radiate out as images from Suso's "glichnús."

For Suso and other negative theologians, like his Dutch contemporary John of Ruysbroeck, who tentatively embrace the value of *image*, this distinction between the terms *picture* and *image* is vital. Compared with *picture*, *image* as a concept is closer to the divine ideal. Because it is somewhat broader, *image* lacks a degree of specificity or historicity that makes most pictures more in the realm of the created and less in the realm of the divine. Again, this is *not* Platonism, in which the hyper-real is understood to be a plane of perfect or ideal forms—indeed it is quite the opposite. For negative theologians, all form is created, thus no longer divine. The less form something achieves, the closer it returns in a Dionysian trajectory to the divine that created it. So an image is valuable only in that it is proximate—closer to the formless divine than our temporally instantiated pictures. And there is a distinct danger that if the image begins to take precedence over the divine, the result will be idolatry, by which Suso understood the worship of anything created.

To understand some of the iconoclastic elements within negative theology, it may be useful to examine earlier iconoclastic debates. Although these debates are from a very different period—eighth- and ninth-century Byzantium, when the term *iconoclasm* was coined—they

grapple with the same Christian theological quandaries as Suso. These Byzantine iconoclasts discussed the danger of idolatry in terms of the "circumscribability" of the subject of an image.

As comparatist Miguel Tamen explains:

According to what gradually became the standard Christian theological doctrine in major Eastern and Western churches, both the Father and all creatures have only one nature. The former's nature is "uncircumscribable [aperigraptos]" and, therefore, not susceptible to being used as a model and hence to being depicted. The latter's nature is "circumscribable [perigraptos]" and, therefore, consensually reproducible although not, of course, venerable.<sup>194</sup>

A created thing can be depicted with accuracy—the picture can visually and indexically connect well to its referent. It can circumscribe the referent, because a created object has physical limits or "proper dimension" and can be contained. The divine is infinite. It cannot be contained or circumscribed. Thus, in its purest mode it cannot be depicted, and no attempt can or should be made to do so, or else one worships a false god, a "created" god. The problem comes, unsurprisingly, in the dual nature of Christ as both totally human and totally divine. Tamen continues:

Yet Christ, as God incarnate, has a double nature, making Him both circumscribable and uncircumscribable. Produced icons can therefore present the circumscribable nature of Christ. More important, moreover, they cannot possibly do justice to the object portrayed, given that they cannot present the other, uncircumscribable, nature of Christ.<sup>195</sup>

Christ is both divine and human, and all pictures will inevitably fail to capture the essence of Christ's divinity, even if they can depict Christ's humanity. This further means that no true images can be extrapolated from the original ("der glichnüsse wârheit"), with no accurate pictures to extrapolate from.

---

<sup>194</sup> Miguel Tamen, *Friends of Interpretable Objects* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001). 36.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.* 36.

But pictures and images of Christ persist nonetheless, and Suso seems to take an arguably Aristotelean stance regarding their value, building off of Eckhart's formulation of internal image as "working in non-being." Suso argues that although always and necessarily imperfect, these pictures and images are useful insofar as they are initial steps away from the instantiated—historically specific—into a more abstract realm. They are pedagogical tools to be used skeptically, always acknowledging their inadequacy to the eventual task, but necessary nonetheless.

This tentative stance was common to other writers in the vernacular apophatic tradition after Eckhart. One such author, the fourteenth-century Flemish priest Jan van Ruusbroec, is clearly working in a similar intellectual tradition as Suso. Like Suso, Ruusbroec draws on the language of "image," "likeness," and "mirror" as ways of talking about human relationship to the divine, based in a system of vision similarly derived, however remotely, from Plato.<sup>196</sup> In his Middle Dutch *Spiritual Espousals*, which were popular through the Rhineland during Suso's period,<sup>197</sup> Ruusbroec discusses understanding the divine in terms of names but then in terms of visuality:

Though the names which we attribute to God are many, the sublime nature of God is a simply unity, unnamed by creatures. But because of His incomprehensible nobility and sublimity, we give Him all these names, since we can neither name Him nor fully express Him in words. This is the manner and the science of how we should have God present in our intention. For to be intent on God means to see God spiritually. To this intention also belong love and affection. For to know and to see God without affection has no savor, nor does it help nor profit.<sup>198</sup>

---

<sup>196</sup> Ruusbroec. *De Ornatv Spiritvalivm Nyptiarvm*, trans. Willem Jordaens (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 23-24.

<sup>197</sup> In his 1363 prologue to the *Spiritual Espousals*, the Carthusian Brother Gerard remarks that it had been well received and "copied several times, even as far as the mountains." Ibid 13.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid. 266:774-781.

Al es der namen vele, die wie gode toe eyghenen, die hoghe natuere gods es een eenvuldlich een, onghenaemt van creatueren. Maer om sine ombegripelijcke edelheit ende hoocheit gheven wij hem alle dese namen, om dat wine niet ghenomen noch volspreken en connen. Dit es die maniere ende dat kinnisse hoe wij gode jeghenwoordlich hebben selen inder meyninghen. Want gode meynen, dat es gheestelijcke gode sien. Tot deser meyninghen behoret oec minne ende liefde. Want gode bekinnen ende sien zonder liefde, dat en smaect niet noch en hulpet noch en vordert.<sup>199</sup>

Names for the divine are the traditional first struggle of negative theology—tracing back to Pseudo-Dionysius, as discussed previous chapter. But it is key to see that in Suso's period, among vernacular mystic writers, more and more this gets shifted to a discussion of the seeing, rather than the naming, of the divine. The high medieval mystic discourse escalates the desire of the mystic to the lofty goal of *unio mystica* rather than simply the problematized prayer with which Pseudo-Dionysius was dealing. Thus Ruusbroec focuses in this quote on "knowing and seeing God."

Ruusbroec's choice of framing, from names to knowing to seeing, reflects a rough historical trajectory of apophatic mysticism's goals. As this dissertation has been arguing, post-Eckhartian negative mysticism shifts to a focus on visuality and visual epistemology, which has been vastly understudied. The way in which Ruusbroec argues that "to be intent on God means to see God spiritually," can be related back to this chapter's earlier discussion of interior visuality. This type of seeing removes itself from the exterior senses—it is directing one's mind to the divine, not one's physical eyes, though the interior senses may be engaged. This divide—mind and senses but *not* physical eyes—connects to debates in medieval theology about the value of imaged (cataphatic) versus imageless (apophatic) visionary experiences.

---

<sup>199</sup> Ibid. 267:913-921.

As briefly noted above, mystic visions have been slotted into a hierarchy by many commentators, contemporary and medieval, following Augustine:<sup>200</sup> on top are intellectual, formless visions that scholars presume to be what is described in the apophatic or negative tradition, often referred to using phrases such as "contentless."<sup>201</sup> These visions are out-of-body experiences where one approaches the divine in all its formlessness by losing all sense of form, self, or time—losing the sense of all things created. They were intellectual and without images.<sup>202</sup> Below these apophatic visions are more image- or form-based visions such as (in approximate order from highest to lowest valued): miraculous visible manifestations, the appearance of divine persons, allegorical visions, prophetic dreams, imaginative visions of specific events such as the Passion, and so forth. The last few are sometimes argued to not even count as true visions, instead being seen as more or less inspired, but not true "visions" in the Biblical sense. Religion scholar Barbara Newman shows that where Biblical visions appear to have been spontaneously sent by the divine, without any initiative on the part of the recipient, many medieval visions were "cultivated."<sup>203</sup> These "cultivated" visions were seen as suspect by many ecclesiastical authorities, who held that "true" visions must be based on the Biblical model—passively received without any initiative on the part of the visionary. As such, many visionaries who arguably cultivated their visions or were inspired by an active practice—prayer, liturgical exercises, Passion meditation, etc.—frequently had to downplay or deny the role that

---

<sup>200</sup> See note 29.

<sup>201</sup> Robert Forman refers to mystic experiences of this type as "PCE"s, "Pure Consciousness Events." *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*, ed. Robert K. C. Forman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). See introduction.

<sup>202</sup> Newman, Barbara. "What does it mean to say 'I saw'?" 11.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.* 14.

those active exercises clearly played. Aspiring mystics like Suso's intended audience tread a careful line between actively seeking to follow Christ in *imitatio* but only receiving divine favor or manifestation passively.

It is important to note that the Servant's first recorded mystic experience in the *Life* is utterly apophatic, in that it is inexpressible, imageless, formless, and outside the temporal. It is described thus:

And as he was standing there sadly with no one around him, his soul was caught up, in the body or out of the body. There he saw and heard what all tongues cannot express. It was without form or definite manner of being, yet it contained within itself the joyous, delightful wealth of all forms and manners. His heart was full of desire, yet sated. His mind was cheerful and pleased. He had no further wishes and his desires faded away. He did nothing but stare into the bright refulgence, which made him forget himself and all else. Was it day or night? He did not know. It was a bursting forth of the delight of eternal life, present in his awareness, motionless, calm. Then he said, "If this is not heaven, I do not know what heaven is. Enduring all the suffering that one can put into words is not rightly enough to justify one's possessing this eternally." This overpowering transport lasted perhaps an hour, perhaps only a half hour. Whether the soul remained in the body or had been separated from the body, he did not know. When he had come to himself again, he felt in every respect like a person who has come from a different world.<sup>204</sup>

Und so er also stat trostlos und nieman bi im noh umb in waz, do ward sin sel verzuket in dem libe neiss uss de libe. Da sah er und horte, daz allen zungen unsprechlich ist: es waz formlos und wiselos und hate doch aller formen und wisen frödenrichen lust in ime. Das herz waz girig und doch gesatet, der müt lustig und wol gefüret; im waz wünschen gelegen und begeren engangen. Es tet núwen ein steren in den glanzenrichen widerglast, in dem er gewan sin selbs und aller dingen ein vergessen. Waz ez tag oder naht, dez enwust er nit. Es waz dez ewigen lebens ein usbrechendú süssekeit nach gegenwürtiger, stillestender, rüwigen enpfintlicheit. Er sprach dur na: "ist dis nit himelrich, so enweis ich nit, waz himelrich ist; wan alles daz liden, daz man kan gewörten, enmag die fröde nit von billich verdienen, der si eweklich sol besizzen." Dise überswenke zug werte wol ein stunde neiss ein halbe; ob dú sel in dem lip belibi oder von dem lip geschieden weri, des enwüst er nit. Do er wider zü im selb kom, do waz im in aller wise als einem menschen, der von einer andren welt ist komen.<sup>205</sup>

---

<sup>204</sup> Translation by Tobin. *Henry Suso*. 66.

<sup>205</sup> Bihlmeyer. 10:15-11:2.

Not only does he go out of his way repeatedly to describe how it was formless, mannerless, and inexpressible, he emphasizes his own lack of conscious knowledge or sense of self. This is utterly typical, even textbook, for the type of apophatic mystic experience that scholars have argued was or should be valued above the other, imagistic forms that the Servant also actively pursues. In a certain way, one can argue that this establishes the Servant's credibility as an apophatic mystic first and foremost. If the other instances in which Suso likely borrows anecdotes to populate the Servant's *Life* are any indicator, one could make a good argument that this vision—like the humility trope story of how the *Life* was written from its foreword or some of the public scandals which plague the Servant—is placed in the text not to reflect biographical reality but to establish the main figure's credibility as holy figure.<sup>206</sup>

Yet despite the negative theological foundation this and other incidents establish, Suso advocates strongly for the use of images in devotional practice. Hamburger asserts that images are central to an understanding of Suso's work and Suso's conception of his project, and that they help to frame his work as part of the tradition of *cura monialium*, the pastoral care of nuns.<sup>207</sup> For Hamburger, this work is dual: "In addition to authorizing images as vehicles of mystical ascent no less legitimate than the texts with which they are associated, the drawings identify the viewing and reproduction of images as a model for the process of imitation central to the

---

<sup>206</sup> See Introduction, footnote 1.

<sup>207</sup> An argument could be made that, although much of his pastoral duties were over women, that his writings clearly reflect the intention to reach a wider audience of both male and female religious. Hamburger's argument that *cura monialium* shapes Suso's project and how he conceives of it is compelling, but does not mean that for the *cura monialium* to have been an influential factor means that the work is purely directed toward female religious. Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary*. 197-232.

spiritual life itself."<sup>208</sup> Suso sees images as just as useful, albeit just as problematic, as texts in the project of approaching the divine. But beyond this, Hamburger argues, the use of images underscores a conceptualization of mysticism as fundamentally imitative. Imitation is integral to Passion meditative practices and provides a gateway into forming oneself into an *image* of the divine, as Suso advocates. How this imitation looked and the relationship of visual discourses to modes of imitation will be explored in the following chapter.

## Conclusion

This dual focus on the active and the passive helps provide the key between the hardline apophatic, iconoclastic thought of the negative theological tradition—which see hold all image and form in suspicion, ultimately unable to represent the divine they desire to invoke—and the rich imagistic world of medieval visionary texts.<sup>209</sup> Suso's process of visionary enlightenment is a two-step process. In the first step, on which Suso devotes the most focus, the devout must be raised above the level of the individual to the level of the abstracted *image*. This process requires visual stimuli and bases itself on a fundamentally imagistic epistemology, in which knowledge of the divine is imparted by infusion with divine image.

It is in only the second step, the final plunge into the dark, in which all image is lost. This step is naturally the main focus of most authors in the negative theological tradition. But for

---

<sup>208</sup> Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary* (New York; Zone Books, 1998); *Henry Suso: The Exemplar, with Two German Sermons*, ed. Frank J. Tobin, (New York: Paulist Press, 1989). 236.

<sup>209</sup> Newman explores the politics of this active/passive divide in late medieval visionary experience in her article, "What Does It Mean to Say, 'I Saw'?"



Suso, the latter will not likely be reached without the former. Like many theorists of visionary experience in this period who emphasized active preparation, Suso demonstrates that the individual should prepare themselves to receive divine inspiration. This preparation is similar to Eckhart's "entblossen," and falls into visual parameters, becoming a mirror or a *bild*. Richard of St. Victor argues in his treatise "Benjamin major" that divine light is reflected from the prepared mind like visual light off of a calm pool of water, which he then explicates:

What does water mean, except human thinking that always flows to a lower place unless it is confined by a barrier of great strength? Water that has been collected in a container represents thinking that is directed towards meditation and fixed by intention. The gathering together of water represents meditation of the heart. A ray of the sun directs itself onto such water when a divine showing meets with meditation. But when the water receives in itself the ray of light from above, it sends a flash to the very heights. [... B]y trembling it makes the light tremble; by being quiet, quiet; by being purer, purer; by being wider, wider. [... T]he more fully and tenaciously it will adhere to this raising up to the supreme light by means of contemplation.

Quid est aqua, nisi cognatio humana, quae semper ad inferiora labitur, nisi sub districtiois magnae moderamine cohibeatur? Aqua in vase collecta, cogitatio meditationi intenta, et per intentionem defixa. Aquae collectio, cordis meditatio. Ejusmodi aquae solis radius se infundit, quando divina revelatio meditationi occurrit. Sed cum aqua radium in se superni luminis accipit, fulgorem quoque luminis et ipsa, ut dictum est, ad superiora emittit. [... I]ta ut tremula tremulum, quieta quietum, purior puriorem, diffusior diffusioem. [... Q]uanto plenius atque perfectius ad intimam animus pacem et tranquillitatem componere se praevaluerit, tanto firmitus, tanto tenacius in hac sublevatione summae luci per contemplationem inhaerebit.<sup>210</sup>

Mirroring is the core mystic ascent, first mirroring divine mediators like Christ, then finally mirroring the imageless divine beyond all mediation. But the ability to mirror is achieved by strict monastic discipline, a spiritual-visual focus. For Suso, this discipline or focus is achieved primarily through suffering, as the next chapter will explore.

Divine mediation, which in Suso's texts takes recognizable albeit abstracted form, is the threshold between the active preparation and the passive reception of divine vision. A *glichnus*

---

<sup>210</sup> Benjamin major 5.11, PL 196:180. Translation by Zinn in *Richard of St. Victor: The Book of the Patriarchs, The Mystical Ark, Book Three of the Trinity*. 325-26 (punctuation altered).

of the divine, which mirrors both the divine in formlessness and the human in form, dual and diffuse—this is the core of what it means to be *image*, and the core of the mediating function of Christ, angels, and holy persons like the saints. The mediation of the apophatic divine to the created via imaged form is thus not entirely alien to God, as in the stricter iconoclastic traditions of the other Abrahamic religions, but through the figure of Christ imagistic mediation is viewed as a sacrifice by the apophatic divine, allowing itself to be confined to a created body. The imperative word here is sacrifice—just as the formless divine suffers by being limited to a single image, so the human suffers in opening itself beyond the single created form to the infinity of the divine.

### Chapter 3—Mirroring Images: Christ's *Passio* and Mary's *Compassio* as Visual Models for Spiritual Self-Image Construction in the *Exemplar*

In the final chapter of the *Life*, Elsbeth Stigel asks for a summary of her mentor's teaching using "image-giving similitude," "bildgebender glichnus," so that she understands it better.<sup>211</sup> The Servant, Suso's alter ego in the text, responds at first by complaining that any image of divine truth must fall short—holding to the central tenet of apophatic theology, that no image or word can truly describe the infinite divine. But after he has said this, he nonetheless goes on to speak in several allegorical descriptions of the nature of the divine, and the path that the human soul must take to be reunited with the divine in *unio mystica*. He describes three *images*, each of which represent a step on the mystic path:

Nim och nu eben war, wie der widerfluss dez geistes nah biltlicher wise in rechter ordenhafti geschafen ist. Daz erst bilde ist ein lidiger vonker von der welt lústen und von súntlichen gebresten, sich vermúgentlich ze keren uf ze gote mit emzigem gebete, mit abgescheidenheit und mit tugentlichen bescheiden úbungen, uf ein undertenig machen den lip dem geiste. Daz ander bild daz ist: sich willeklich und gedulteklich dar biten ze lidene die unzallichen mengi aller der widerwertikeit, so im von got ald von von creatur mag zuo gevallen. Daz drit bilde daz ist, daz er daz liden dez gekrúzgeten Cristus sol in sich bilden und sin süssen lere und volgen, und also dur in fúrbas hin in tringen; dar na mit einem enpfallene dez ussern gewerbes sich sezzen in ein stillheit sins gemútes mit einer kreftigen gelassenheit, als ob der mensch im selber tod sie, sich selb neine ze fúren noh ze meinen, denn allein Cristus und sins himelschen vaters lob und ere meinen[.]<sup>212</sup>

Now notice, too, how the return of the spirit, as it can be explained through image, takes place in its proper order. The first image is a liberating rejection of worldly pleasures and

---

<sup>211</sup> Bihlmeyer, 191:1-2. Suso's concepts of "bild" and "glichnus" are explicated more fully in the previous chapter.

<sup>212</sup> Bihlmeyer, 192: 15-30.

sinful weaknesses, enabling one to turn toward God in earnest prayer with detachment and prudent virtuous exercises in order to make the body subject to the spirit. The second image is: to offer oneself freely and patiently to suffer the countless amounts of adversity as they might befall one from God or creature. The third image is that one should form the suffering of Christ crucified within oneself, his sweet teachings, his gentle conduct, and his pure life, which he led as an example for us to follow, and thus through him press farther within. Afterward, as exterior preoccupations disappear, one should sit in the stillness of one's spirit in vigorous detachment, as though one is dead to oneself, never leading oneself or being one's own goal, but having Christ alone and the honor and glory of the heavenly Father as one's goal.<sup>213</sup>

Each of these "images" is an identity model for his pupils to emulate: first humbled, then unquestioningly accepting suffering, and finally truly "dead to oneself," completely devoid of any self-will. The last step is specifically achieved through meditation on Christ's Passion. If this description were not enough, an actual image in the form of a manuscript illumination is provided at the end of the chapter, see Figure 3.1. It serves as a step-by-step diagram for the entire largely Eckhartian apophatic cosmology that Suso is presenting in his works. As Meister Eckhart taught, for Suso the Soul's core is imageless and indescribable, just like the divine. One sees the parallel between the three rings in the top left corner that represent the divine abyss and the smaller three rings that appear at the core of each iteration of the Soul, following the red line outward from the abyss. The Soul flows out from the divine in creation, and must not be allowed to be diverted to love of the world, represented by the courtly love of the Knight and Lady in the bottom right, which is lorded over by none other than Death himself. If the Soul instead follows the true path, it "flows back," and follows the images described by the Servant in the quote above leftwards along the bottom of the illumination. Indeed, the "images" from the quote above are translated into depictions of central devotional images from popular devotional traditions in Suso's period: most notably the *Mater Dolorosa*, or suffering Virgin Mary, and the *Man of Sorrows*, or suffering Christ.

---

<sup>213</sup> Tobin 202.



Figure 3.1. The final image of the *Life*, depicting the mystic path of the Soul and Suso's overarching cosmology. Strasbourg MS 2929, Folio 82L. The Soul's divine, imageless core flows out from the divine abyss (Three rings, top left) following the red line through the Trinity (top right), down through an angel and the penitent human soul, leftwards through the *Mater Dolorosa* (bottom left with swords and arrows) and *Man of Sorrows* (crucified figure), back up along the left side through an on-going process of increasing union with the divine and loss of individual self.

Not only is he willing to bend his apophatic principles—that the divine is imageless—and use pictures of the divine as a pedagogical tool,<sup>214</sup> Suso chooses images from popular devotional movements of his period. In exploring suffering, he hones in on images of suffering that would be very familiar to his readers. These familiar figures gesture to larger theological and cultural movements. For example, medieval depictions of Mary's suffering cast her as the progenitor of a long tradition of Passion meditation. Suso actively participated in this movement by writing *100 Meditations on the Passion* as part of his *Büchlein der ewigen Weisheit*, or *Little Book of Eternal Truth*. In this tradition, Mary becomes symbolically connected to the feminized Church, *ecclesia*, and who is also the bride of Christ, a central metaphor for the tradition of bridal mysticism, especially popular in the centuries following the work of twelfth-century French theologian Bernard of Clairvaux.<sup>215</sup> By interweaving his work with these popular traditions, Suso can dovetail his politically risky choice to further develop an Eckhartian theology with more acceptable, safer material.<sup>216</sup> But there is more to why he focuses on images and artistic traditions. His decision to focus on popular images of suffering—and images that inspire compassionate suffering in the viewer—also stems from Suso's understanding of vision and the functioning of the eye, in this case that the process of vision inherently entails suffering on the part of the viewer.

---

<sup>214</sup> The reasons for this are explored more fully in the previous chapter.

<sup>215</sup> Bernard's uncompleted *Sermones super Cantica Conticorum* (*Sermons on the Song of Songs*) written from 1135 until his death in 1153, are often cited as the first spark inciting the proliferation of bridal mysticism across European Christianity, which describes the relationship of the Soul to the divine as an erotically charged marital relationship, with the Soul as bride and Christ as bridegroom.

<sup>216</sup> Eckhart's works were banned by papal bull in 1329, shortly after Eckhart's death. For more information, see the Introduction.

Indeed, medieval Arab scientist Ibn Al-Haytham, sometimes latinized as Alhazen, argues that the process of light hitting the eye always causes the eye to suffer by its very nature. As proven in previous chapters, Suso would have been aware of Al-Haytham's theories, if not directly, at least as they were interpreted and referenced by numerous masters in Paris, most notably Suso's own teacher Meister Eckhart and before him by Eckhart's own teacher, Albertus Magnus. Just as Al-Haytham argues that there is a physical pain associated with the process of vision, so too in late medieval bridal mysticism there is a pain associated with seeing and being seen. This way of viewing is explicated by art historian Suzanne Biernoff using the term "the interpenetrative gaze." By putting these two theories into conversation, we gain better understanding of what Suso is doing with his literary alter-egos throughout the *Exemplar*—the Servant in the *Life* and the *Book of Eternal Wisdom* as well as the Disciple in the *Little Book of Truth*—in that he puts them in subordinated relationships with divine figures. Although they are not always explicitly constructed in terms of viewing relationships, the religious traditions surrounding these dynamics—most notably bridal mysticism and Passion meditation—would have invoked a culture of visibility and visual relationship to iconographically-charged images, so that even in instances in which an image is not explicitly invoked, tropes and concepts core to Suso's understanding of visibility are at play.

Suso clearly intends that the reader see the Servant's path as their ideal path and Suso's alter egos as role models for the holy life. This sets up Suso's literary selves as models of emulation, situated similarly to the Virgin Mary in the Passion meditation tradition. But the model of imitation toward the Suso's personas is more defined in terms of process, whereas the relationship with the images of Christ and Mary is more properly mimetic. Whereas the reader is supposed to see the Servant's journey as parallel to the Soul's, the reader should truly suffer *as*

Christ and Mary. The preposition "as" must be understood as representing a mixture of both of its possible meanings in this context: the mystic is suffering more than just similarly to the Virgin Mary and Christ, they are indeed inhabiting the *living images* of Mary and Christ with the intention of erasure of their individual self-image. This inhabitation of image spreads ideally to every aspect of the individual *habitus*, to use Pierre Bourdieu's term:<sup>217</sup> repeated performed gestures, spoken phrases, remembered thoughts, and recalled images all serve together to take the supplicant out of their own individually-socialized and gendered *habitus* into the way of being, of feeling, of looking, and, most importantly, of suffering modeled by divine image.<sup>218</sup>

### **A Note on Methodology and Issues of Image Agency**

Because Passion meditation and bridal mysticism, as well as specific features of them such as the interpenetrative gaze and the stigmata, are popular traditions upon which Suso is drawing to further develop his own model of mystic transformation, this chapter will feature the most readily reproducible of these widespread traditions here in the form of numerous works of

---

<sup>217</sup> A basic definition of *habitus* from Bourdieu is "a socialized body. A structured body, a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world—a field—and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world." *Practical Reason*. Cambridge, Polity Press. 1998. 81. In essence, the *habitus* is the body as it is restructured by social systems and ideologies, through which process it is made into second nature to both think and move in certain ways more naturally than others. For a full discussion of how gender becomes socialized into *habitus*, see the section "The Social Construction of Bodies" in Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, Stanford University Press, 2001, 7-22.

<sup>218</sup> Because cross-gender identification is necessary for this process, the gendering of the roles is less central to understanding how this self-image construction functions, and thus the gender implications will largely be left to the final chapter, which explicitly addresses the question of sex and gender construction.



art. Popular religious movements of this time made extensive use of art and art objects in order to gain a wider audience. As such, artists were active participants and interpreters of in wider debates surrounding contemporary theology, translating and adapting popular scholastic debates into visual form which allowed these new theological developments to reach illiterate audiences, in addition to providing affective prompts for the literate clergy. Suso is intentionally drawing on, adding to, and theorizing these theological interchanges between visual and textual media in his work with images, most specifically his images of bridal mysticism and Passion meditation.

The kinds of images that Suso uses and creates, both actual *pictures* and symbolic *images*, function similarly to images as described by art historian W. J. T. Mitchell. Mitchell compares culturally prevalent symbolic *images* as akin to biological species, a loose visually distinguished grouping of types of depictions that evolves and develops over time, with each individual *picture* as equivalent to one organism within a species. This type of image/species has great symbolic potency and longevity, according to Mitchell:

Images are active players in the game of establishing and changing values. They are capable of introducing new values into the world and thus of threatening old ones. For better or for worse, human beings establish their collective, historical identity by composing around them a second nature composed of images that not only reflect back the values consciously intended by their makers but that radiate back new forms of value in the collective, political unconscious of their beholders.<sup>219</sup>

Seen this way, images—both individual pictures and cultural images—devised for one narrative or political end are not limited to influencing and reifying the exact intended ideology they were intended to support. They gain a kind of agency without consciousness, able to subtly shape the consciousness of those who view them. This makes them both very useful and quite dangerous, especially when their ideological function is a core part of their value. I would argue that this is a large part of why Suso is so careful and overwhelmingly skeptical of images and how he

---

<sup>219</sup> Mitchell. "The Surplus Value of Images." 21.

incorporates them into his texts: he understood pictures and images to have a kind of vital agency. To reiterate for clarity, *pictures* here are defined as one specific instantiation of a greater *image* grouping, for example one painting of the Virgin. The Virgin as an immediately recognizable cultural figure functions as an *image*, and all similarly identifiable pictures of the Virgin belong to the greater group of the Virgin as *image*.<sup>220</sup>

It helps for Suso's purposes that in late medieval Christian cosmology, devotional pictures and images frequently *were* alive and active in a real way. Pictures of holy figures throughout the medieval period reportedly performed miracles, moved of their own accord, spoke, bled, cried, lactated, and more. These manifestations of individual pictures were often the very criteria on which their value and holiness as devotional images were established. As the concept of *glichnús* delineated last chapter aptly demonstrates, even mental images were not purely static representations that people could straightforwardly project their own desires and fears onto. In intromission, the image of objects radiate out to meet the viewer, similarly to the manner in which the Soul radiates out from the divine abyss, as Suso displays in his illumination of the mystic path, seen in Figure 3.8 later in this chapter.<sup>221</sup> But to return to that formless, shapeless divine abyss, the Soul must suffer, first actively, then increasingly passively. This suffering, placed in the contexts of bridal mysticism and Passion meditation, is a vehicle for the

---

<sup>220</sup> For more on this distinction between *picture* and *image*, see the second chapter of this dissertation. For an examples of the evolution of culturally prevalent images, think of contemporary depictions of the figure of Santa Claus, evolved in the American tradition from Dutch depictions of Sinter Klaas, a shortened name for Saint Nicholas. Santa Claus and Saint Nicholas—as they are constructed as current culturally prevalent images—are obviously related, but can be seen as two distinct species separately evolved from the same root image, each with their own distinct mythos and iconography, whereas two individual depictions that were both clearly culturally recognizable as Santa Claus would be two organisms of the same species.

<sup>221</sup> More on the radiation of the Soul and the Neoplatonic tradition on which Suso is drawing in Chapter 1.

"anvahender mensch" [beginner] to annihilate the self—a created thing—in order to release the uncreated divine core underneath. Humanity is able to lay aside self-image and to take on the image of the divine in this way because it was created in that divine image—or divine imagelessness, as it were—from the beginning.

To be clear, this is not to suggest that contemporary art historians or medieval thinkers believed that these images magically become conscious beings able to exert intention or will in manipulating social discourses. The use of “agency” as a term here is restricted to a specific disciplinary context, which acknowledges that images are not entirely passive in transmitting meaning from image-crafter to the image’s varied audiences. Images themselves have some power in this process that resists straightforward diffusion of ideological content. The most important power for the purposes of this dissertation is seen as their power as models to subconsciously influence the viewer's concepts of proper forms. This includes visual form, or how it is proper to look; behavioral form, or how it is fit to act; relational form, or how one ought to relate to others and the divine—all of the elements that make up one's *habitus*. But in addition to being useful as a diverse beneficial teaching tool, implicitly and explicitly modeling good behavior on numerous levels, it also represents a serious danger that the wrong message might be taken or the wrong elements seen as instructive. Images have an insidious power to reify unstated biases and problematic assumptions, like the oft-bemoaned issue among Christians of color that so few representations of Christ, or other biblical characters like Adam and Eve, show them as persons of color, thus implicitly excluding people of color from Christianity or whitewashing Christian history, especially considering that the historical Jesus was born, lived, and died in the Middle East.

By wielding this power, symbolic images have a permanent and irrevocable excess of meaning beyond that which their fashioners or interpreters can control. They can fashion them intending a certain outcome, but that is never guaranteed. That excess is both dangerous and full of potential, because precisely that excess shows that images are inherently imbued with the self-contradictory or self-undermining quality valued by the apophatic theological tradition, which prized such paradoxical expressions as “God is shining darkness.” Each image clearly displays its own inadequacy to fully represent the divine, because in being visible and comprehensible it is clearly created and limited—not infinite like the divine. Yet images are still dangerous because they might be taken too literally or understood without the theological nuance they imply. This touches on the much larger debate around the value of allegory in medieval religious discourse, which of course is far too large to discuss in this brief space.

The excess of these images also provides access points for the recipient to engage with the images dynamically. The effect of devotional images are intended to be elaborated by the actions and affective investment of the viewer. In order to allow the image to affect the viewer, though, requires a symbolic violence to the present person of the viewer. One’s external self must be unsettled in order to be able to be acted upon by the images. This basic principle is already present in theories of vision such as Ibn al-Haytham’s, which form the basis of Suso’s understanding of sight, as explicated in the previous chapters.

### **Visual Theory and the Suffering Eye**

As in the previous chapter, we will first explore how the new visual physiological treatises coming from the Middle East influenced Suso's understanding of image and vision. In

Ibn al-Haytham's intromission theory there is a new formulation that sees suffering as an inherent part of the process of visual perception. He argues that the form of light:<sup>222</sup>

reaches the surface of the glacial humor [of the eye], it acts on it, and the glacial humor suffers because of the form, *since it is a property of light to act on the eye and a property of the eye to suffer because of the light*. And this effect, which light produces in the glacial humor, passes through the glacial body. [...] And the glacial humor perceives on account of this action and suffering, because of the forms of visible things that are on its surface and pass through its whole body; and it perceives through the ordering of the parts of the form on its surface and throughout its body.<sup>223</sup>

This idea is new in visual theory to Ibn al-Haytham's work, and its implications echo deeply into European theological and epistemological engagement with Arabic visual theory. To Ibn al-Haytham, light as a substance inherently inflicts pain upon perceptive organs—it is in its nature. Suffering is part of sight in all cases, and implicitly human beings simply adapt to stop noticing the small suffering of everyday perception. Only viewing larger quantities of light, especially looking directly at self-luminous bodies like the sun, produces enough pain that a viewer consciously notices it.

When this is viewed from Eckhart's and Suso's Neoplatonic Christian frame, in which the apophatic divine is the primeval light or self-luminous body, this implies a very different kind of relation between the human and the divine than most contemporary Christians would even recognize. All perceptions of the divine would be, by nature, incredibly painful, because—transposing the quote to this Neoplatonic Christian frame—it is in the nature of the divine, as original Cause, to act on the Soul and it is in the nature of the Soul, insofar as it is distinguished

---

<sup>222</sup> By “form of light” one can understand the pattern of perceptible colored light that reaches the eye and is able to be transmitted to the mind as a visible image.

<sup>223</sup> English from Lindberg, 71. Original from al-Haytham, *De aspectibus*, bk 1, chap 5 sec 25. Emphasis added by the author of this dissertation. The “glacial humor” was the primary physical instrument of sight as conceived of by Ibn al-Haytham. It functions basically like a mirror or a lens, which can take in the visual forms that meet its surface and reflect them further inward to the interior visual senses.

as individual and not fully unified in the One, to suffer because of the divine.<sup>224</sup> This is not only a natural extension of the visual theory of Ibn al-Haytham, but a natural extension of the ontological divide that Eckhart and Suso place between the created world and the uncreated divine. The divine, as the true source or essence of original light, is infinitely, self-annihilatingly painful to look upon with spiritual eyes. To look there is to lose the self. Indeed, as Eckhart asserts, quoted in the previous chapter, looking into the apophatic divine *grunt* costs even God his Trinitarian names.<sup>225</sup> As will be explored in this chapter, the pain inherent in Ibn al-Haytham's model of vision is built into its mystic permutations in the self-sacrificial suffering, *liden*, through which Suso conceives of the Soul's ability to pursue *gelassenheit*. The first major step in pursuing *gelassenheit* is to alienate the Soul from image and form. Where for Eckhart, this alienation is general, seeming to deny both internal and external form, Suso arguably focuses on self-image or identity as that which must be alienated, in that one perceives divine forms, usually as *glichnisse*, and eventually becomes an image, *bild*, after the model of Christ.

---

<sup>224</sup> See footnote 4.

<sup>225</sup> From Eckhart: "And therefore, if God were ever to look upon it, that must cost him all his divine names and the properties of his Persons," "sol got iemer dar in geluogen, ez muoz in kosten alle sine namen und sine persônliche eigenschaft." *Meister Eckhart: Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, Defense*. 181. Meister Eckhart, *Werke*. 34:30-32. The implications that this has for the bodily resurrection are never fully explored, but the implication would seem to be that the bodily resurrection would not follow in any sense that would be recognizable. For more on the debate around bodily resurrection in the late antique and high medieval period, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

## The Servant as sexualized Living Image

This is an important distinction to note: no human person is ever referred to as a *glichnús* in Suso's works. *Glichnús* is a representation of divine form emanated from above in a Dionysian hierarchy, as explored last chapter. In this mode and in his Dominican role as teacher and mentor, *Glichnús* is a thing that Suso "gives," in that he creates similitudes and pedagogical frames to better understand and approach the divine, fulfilling his own role as a human hierarch according to the Dionysian model.<sup>226</sup> Suso does, however, frequently refer to people he sees as exemplary as a *bild*, including his own mother.<sup>227</sup> The Servant himself is established in the Exemplar as exactly this kind of *bild* or *exemplar*.

But in speaking of the Servant as *bild*, one cannot fail to notice that the Servant is constructed as object for the reader's gaze in an intimate and implicitly sexualized manner, a move often ignored or underestimated by scholars. This is perhaps most clearly represented in the visual and textual treatment of the Servant's chest scar. When the scar is first introduced, it is clarified that he carried it secretly—"in der heinlich" [in secrecy]—his whole life, showing it only to one compatriot, to whom it was shown, again, "in götlicher heinlich" [in divine secrecy].<sup>228</sup> Yet nearly every illumination depicting the Servant shows him pulling open his robe to reveal the scar, similar to depictions of the resurrected Christ revealing his side wound.<sup>229</sup> This

---

<sup>226</sup> See chapter one of this dissertation.

<sup>227</sup> Hamburger. *The Visual and the Visionary*. 239.

<sup>228</sup> Bihlmeyer, 16:29-30.

<sup>229</sup> The side wound is itself sexualized and feminized as vaginal in much mystic literature of this period, particularly among female mystics, such as in the works of Angela of Foligno. For more information, see Hollywood, Amy. "'That glorious slit': Irigaray and the Medieval Devotion to Christ's Side Wound," in *Luce Irigaray and Premodern Culture: Thresholds of History*, ed.

brings the reader in as more intimate to him than almost all lifetime companions, witness to his most cherished devotions and divine secrets. This is demonstrated in the manner in which his companion reacts, caressing and kissing the "minnewunt" [love wound] or "mínneklich minnezeichen" [loving love sign]:

When he was young and was still in his studies, God provided him once with a dear, holy companion. Once, as they were talking heart to heart about spiritual matters, the companion asked for the sake of friendship to show him and let him see the beloved name of Jesus that he had engraved over his heart. He did not want to do this, but seeing the companion's serious [devotion], the request was enough for him. He opened his clothes over his heart and let him see the precious sign, as he had wished. But this was not enough for his companion. When he had seen it visibly present there on his body right over his heart, he ran his hand over it and then his face, touching it with his mouth. He wept from his heart with devotion, and the tears welled up and flowed over the servant's heart. After this he kept the name hidden and never wanted to let anyone see it except for the one chosen friend of God to whom God had allowed it. He gazed upon it with the same devotion that the other person had.<sup>230</sup>

In sinen jungen tagen, do er ze schül für, do beriet in got einest eins lieben götlichen gesellen. Eins males in einer heinlich, do sú von got vil haten gekoset, do bat in der geselle durch geselliklich trúwe, daz er im zogti und in liessi sehen den minneklichen namen Jesus uf sinem herzen gezeichneten. Daz tet er unger, und doch, do er sinen grossen andaht an sah, do waz er im der bet gnüg, und zerliess den rok ob dem herzen und liess in daz herzenkleinet sehen nah aller siner begirde. Dez begnügte den gesellen nit. Do er es wol gesah schinberlich stan an dem libe enmiten uf sinem herzen, do für er mit siner hand dar und mit sinem antlút, und streich es dar an und leit sinen mund dar uf. Er ward herzklich weinende von andaht, daz im die ab walenden trehen über daz herz ab runnen. Und der diener verbarg den namen dur na, daz er in nie keinen menschen wolt me lassen sehen, denn eht ein einigen userwelten gotesfründ, dem es von got erlobet waz; der geschowte in och mit glicher andaht als och dise.<sup>231</sup>

His companion's desire overcomes him and drives the Servant to vow to keep the scar hidden thereafter. Yet the reader is privy to this much desired, secret view—the consummate voyeur.

Further, he gives us a clear indicator as to how this voyeuristic view should be approached by the

---

Elizabeth D. Harvey and Theresa M. Krier, *Routledge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture*; 4 (London; New York: Routledge, 2004). 105-125.

<sup>230</sup> Tobin 167-8.

<sup>231</sup> Bihlmeyer, 143:19-144:2.



reader: with "andaht" [devotion]. The same devotion, in fact, as the special friend, which would allow the reader to similarly occupy that category, "userwelter gotesfründ" [chosen friend of God]. The ability to make himself an image in the first place, however, came only as a result of his own violent self-harm, reflective in turn of powerful affect and his overwhelming desire for the divine.

By making himself a sexualized image through violent self-harm, the Servant connects to Christ and to readers across boundaries of time—and even, on some level, boundaries of self versus other—via imitation. As germanist and medievalist Niklaus Largier argues specifically regarding self-flagellation, various forms of which the Servant also practiced:

The theatrical scene produced by the flagellant, in which he or she simultaneously imitates both Christ and all the ascetics who preceded him or her in imitating Christ, allows the flagellant to become a *tableau vivant* or living picture. Through suffering and through the gesture of flagellation, the flagellant is the mirror image of an original suffering that can no longer be grasped—one that has its place solely in a history of imitation that in its own right is nothing other than an exemplary mirror of imitation provoking further imitation.<sup>232</sup>

The Servant makes himself or is made into a theatrical, sexualized living image or *tableau vivant* in the act of being depicted in the *Life*, just as Largier claims is inherent in representations of flagellation. This is implicitly true of other forms of publicized (self-)harm, such as the Servant's diverse ascetic practices described in the *Life*. The individual mystic becomes a *picture* or specific instantiation, as discussed before, of the *image* of the suffering Christ. Disconnected from the "real" incarnation or original referent—here, the historical Jesus of Nazareth—the Servant is placed into contact with the *image* of the suffering Christ, as an atemporal form of the divine.

---

<sup>232</sup> Niklaus Largier, *In Praise of the Whip: A Cultural History of Arousal* (New York: Zone Books, 2007). 191.

This is arguably better than contact with the historical Jesus. Even though Jesus is, in Christian dogma, both created and uncreated, and even though Jesus' creation is privileged as perfect in regard to other creations, the historical Jesus in his human nature is still a creation, a "creature," and one that had to be sacrificed—even if he was reestablished via resurrection as the core of Christianity thereafter. To return the abyss that is the core of the divine, even the Trinity must give up its form and names—no longer Father, Son, or Holy Ghost, just a formless abyss. Meister Eckhart describes this repeatedly and Suso depicts it in the final illumination of the mystic way, which follows the *Life* (refer back to Figure 3.1).<sup>233</sup> Presumably this abandonment of Trinity also means giving up the singular historical form as living Jesus, stepping out of temporality, and even giving up the immortal form of resurrected Christ—who, though temporally infinite, is still bound within a spectrum of time, circumscribed by form and name.<sup>234</sup> Both the living Jesus and resurrected Christ are arguably distinct from the image of suffering Christ, especially the sub-form of this image referred to hereafter as the "Man of Sorrows," to which the Servant connects through *imitatio Christi*. This is the "exemplary mirror of imitation" to which Largier refers, and which we saw in the previous chapter with the woman who heard the Servant's sermon and was comforted as well. This imitative form of the divine as *living*

---

<sup>233</sup> See footnote 14.

<sup>234</sup> From a modern perspective and to use a mathematic metaphor, assuming time as a line—which is a very modern assumption—the resurrected Christ would be an infinite line starting at the time of resurrection and continuing forever thereafter. But although infinite, the line of the resurrected Christ is still bound to the line of time. From within Creation, the dimension of temporality cannot be escaped, even by the created form of the divine. There is only one dimension with regard to time, making it clearly a line—not a plane (two dimensions) or space (three dimensions), in which other forms of movement would be allowed. Suso, compared to prevalent modern conceptions, depicts time circularly, but still as a line, so the metaphor holds to some degree. Suso's circular line, however, has an escape hatch, into the divine abyss. This is perhaps comparable to Buddhist conceptions of Nirvana as breaking the cycle of time perpetuated in reincarnation.

*image* is arguably closer for Suso to the divine abyss than the historical Jesus or the resurrected Christ.<sup>235</sup>

### **Biernoff's Model of the Interpenetrative Gaze of Bridal Mysticism**

This mirroring effect can be traced to a particular model of visuality, which is most commonly seen in bridal mysticism, stemming from this image of the suffering Christ. Art historian Suzannah Biernoff discusses the image of the suffering Christ using the term "The Man of Sorrows."<sup>236</sup> She tracks this image historically as it gains strength with the increasing cult of the Eucharist, beginning in the twelfth century, and offers a compelling theorization of the interactivity assumed in this type of imagery. These types of devotional images depended on a framework of understanding in which the viewer and viewed were caught up in an interconnected affective network. She draws on German art historian Hans Belting's study of art of the Passion, where he argues:

The images were expected to reciprocate the believer's mood, and, if possible, even generate it. The viewer and the person depicted in the image were related to one another mimetically. The viewer tried to assimilate himself to the depicted person and demanded back from the latter the quality of aliveness which he himself possessed.<sup>237</sup>

---

<sup>235</sup> This ambivalence toward the historical or temporal figure of Jesus is a dangerous line that Neoplatonic negative theology walked from its inception. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite's arguable monophysitism and his lack of emphasis on Christ in his theology caused his commentators a good deal of worry. Even Meister Eckhart focuses significantly less on the historical Jesus and instead preaches the birth of the Son in each Soul through the process of *gelassenheit*, connecting via the *grunt* to the apophatic divine.

<sup>236</sup> Suzannah Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002). 144pp.

<sup>237</sup> Hans Belting, *The Image and Its Public in the Middle Ages: Form and Function of Early Paintings of the Passion*, (New Rochelle, N.Y.: A.D. Caratzas, 1990). 58.

In the context of Largier's argument, the liveliness of the image also becomes a more exaggerated point of contact. Not only is the image alive, like the viewer, but the viewer is also *made into an image* by mimetic devotional contact, in a cultural framework that understands the image to demand imitation from in its viewer. Being made into an image of an other is a radical rejection of self and thus falls into the category of apophatic mysticism's "self-annihilation."

The mechanisms Suso uses to do this are similar to those that Biernoff describes. She builds on Belting's foundation to construct a "model of spectatorial reciprocity" which she sees as commonly represented in medieval devotional texts. In brief, this model holds that the post-lapsarian body that all humans inherit is disjointed. As Augustine argues in regards to human nature, the body is internally divided along gendered lines, between "feminine (sensuous) and masculine (rational)."<sup>238</sup> The human body sees Christ's body as a being that is integrated in nature. Not only is Christ both human and divine, Christ is also "masculine (the second person of the Trinity and heavenly Bridegroom) *and* feminine (formed out of the immaculate flesh of his virginal mother and identified with her in his intercessory and nurturing role)."<sup>239</sup> The gender implications of this statement will be returned to in the final chapter. In Biernoff's model this perceived unity provides an incentive for communion with the divine, in order for the devotee to regain contact with a unity of nature they are presumed to have lost with the Fall. This also means that communion is a violent yet sexual interpenetrative vision, where Christ and devotee each penetrate the other with a desiring gaze.

For Biernoff, this redemptive, interpenetrative gaze is common to the genre of bridal mysticism. She follows this specialized gaze through a wide variety of bridal mysticism texts and

---

<sup>238</sup> Biernoff. *Sight and Embodiment*. 154-155.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.* 155.

catalogues a number of its qualities, which can be seen as accurately descriptive of Suso's model of visuality. This chapter will now outline the five most salient characteristics. Firstly, the interpenetrative gaze requires a special form of love, *Passio*, which is "born of the anticipated (desired) assimilation of subject to object."<sup>240</sup> The Servant frames his feelings for the Eternal Wisdom in these types of terms, both explicitly and implicitly.

As expressed earlier, the Servant's first vision in the *Life* is perfectly according to apophatic theological guidelines—imageless and formless. Yet directly thereafter he seeks to continue the union, switching codes to use the phrasing of bridal mysticism. In the following chapter, entitled "Wie er kam in die geistlichen gemahelschaft der ewigen wisheit, [How He Entered Into a Spiritual Marriage with Eternal Wisdom,]" he describes their budding romance:<sup>241</sup>

The course that his life took for a long time after this in its interior activity was a constant effort to achieve intense awareness of loving union with eternal Wisdom. How a start was made in this can be learned from his Little Book of Wisdom, both in German and in Latin, which God made through him.

From his youth he had a heart filled with love. Now eternal Wisdom presented itself in sacred scripture as lovable as an agreeable beloved who gets herself up in finery to please male inclinations, speaking softly, [in female image], so that she might attract all hearts to her. Sometimes she would say how deceiving other lovers are but how loving and constant she is. His youthful spirit was drawn by this and he was affected like the wild animals of the forest when a panther giving off its sweet fragrance draws them to itself. She displayed this charming manner often and attracted him lovingly to her spiritual love, especially through the Books of Wisdom. When these were read at community meals and he heard such expressions of love read from them, he felt great exhilaration. He would then begin to feel torment and would frame the thought in his love-crazed spirit: "You should really try your luck. Maybe you can win the love of this exalted lady beloved. I hear great marvels told of her. Your young untamed heart certainly cannot long remain without its own object to love." Often in looking at things he would become aware of her; he thought lovingly of her, and both his heart and his mind found her attractive.<sup>242</sup>

---

<sup>240</sup> Ibid. 139.

<sup>241</sup> Bihlmeyer 11:20.

<sup>242</sup> Tobin 67.

Der lof, uf den sin leben dur na vil zites gerihet was mit inrllicher übunge, waz ein steter flizz emziger gegenwürtikeit in minneklicher vereinung mit der ewigen wisheit. Aber wie daz des ersten gewunni einen anvang, daz mag man merken an sinem büchlin der wisheit in tútsch und in latin, dú got dur in hat gemacht.

Er hate von jugent uf ein minneriches herz. Nu erbútet sich dú ewig wisheit in der heiligen scrift als minneklich als ein lútselígu minnerin, dú sich finlich uf machet, dar umb daz si menlich wol gevalle, und redet zartlich in fröwlichem bilde, daz si ellú herzen gen ir geneigen muge. Underwilent seit si, wie betrogen ander minnerin sien und wie recht minneklich und stet aber si sie. Hie von wart sin junger müt gezogen, und geschah im von ir, als so ein pantier sinen süssen smak us lat und dú wilden tier dez waldes zü ime zúhet. Dis reizlich wise hate si gar dik und ein minnekliches lüderen zü ir geischlichen minne, sunderlich an den büchern, dú da heissent der wisheit bücher. Wenn man dú ze tisch laz, und er denne derley minnekosen horte dar ab lesen, so waz im vil wol ze müte. Hie von begond er ein elenden han und gedenken in sinem minnerichen müte also: "du soltest reht versüchen din gelúk, ob dir disú hohú minnerin möchti werden ze einem liebe, von der ich als grössú wunder hör sagen, wan doch din jungez wildes herz ane sunder liebi nit wol mag die lengi beliben." In den dingen nam er ir dik war, und viel im minneklichen in und geviel ime wol in herzen und in müte.<sup>243</sup>

Setting aside the interesting question of passive authorship ("his book ... which God made through him"), the direct referral to the *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom* as starting point for the development of this kind of intense affect clearly connects the love expressed in this passage with the *Passio* incited by the practice of Passion meditation and the *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom's* project of exploring divine union through these practices, most specifically in the *100 Meditations on the Passion*.

This connects to the second characteristic from Biernoff, namely that the interpenetrative gaze begins with Christ's Passion as object, often specifically focusing on the image of the "Man of Sorrows." Biernoff argues that mystics often conflate this image with the bridegroom of the Song of Songs, also connected in the medieval tradition with Christ and the love object of bridal mysticism.<sup>244</sup> This is clearly the case for Suso, as noted above with the direct reference to the

---

<sup>243</sup> Bihlmeyer 11:21-12:17.

<sup>244</sup> Biernoff. *Sight and Embodiment*. 157.

*Little Book of Eternal Wisdom* followed immediately by an invocation of Hebrew wisdom literature, including the Song of Songs.

Thirdly, the interpenetrative gaze is masochistic: "It entails a certain violence to the self, as one becomes 'like' one's object; and yet this decentring or partial dissolution of self is also a source of pleasure."<sup>245</sup> One must note the clear pleasure with which the Servant carves the name IHS into his chest,<sup>246</sup> in a way fabricating a "side wound" like Christ's—and it is similarly proffered to the viewer in almost every illumination, just as the Man of Sorrows offers his wound to the viewer. Further, the floral ring/halo and stigmata he receives, we are told in the superscript to the corresponding illumination, seen last chapter, "[represent various sufferings, in which a true friend of God must be tested.]"<sup>247</sup> By receiving markings that make him like Christ—albeit somewhat differentiated, since the Servant receives a unique floral stigmata and floral halo—and that demarcate his necessary sufferings, we see that those sufferings are things that reshape him into an *image* of the Man of Sorrows.

Fourthly, the interpenetrative gaze is intermediated by both Christ and the gaze itself.<sup>248</sup> The gaze itself is not marked in Suso's works as clearly as in other bridal mystic literature, but his references bring it in intertextually, especially his clear referencing of depictions of St.

---

<sup>245</sup> Ibid. 139.

<sup>246</sup> Chapter 4, "Wie er den minneklichen namen Jesus uf sîn herz zeichnete [How he engraved the lovely name of Christ on his heart]" For example, after he has performed the cut he says, "Daz waz ime als minneklich an ze sehent von der fûrinen minne, daz er dez smerzen nit vil ahtete." Bihlmeyer 16.13-14. He repeats forms of the word "Minne" [love] over and over in this chapter, almost to where it seems to lose all meaning.

<sup>247</sup> "betûtet mengerlai liden, in den ein warer gottesfründ müss beweret werden." Bihlmeyer 48\*. Tobin, whose edition does not include the images despite them being of central importance to the text, thus has no translation of the superscript. Translations of illumination texts by the author.

<sup>248</sup> Biernoff. *Sight and Embodiment*. 162.

Francis' stigmata. See Figures 3.2-3.5. Like with St. Francis, the Servant receives stigmata and sees Christ as crucified seraph. Although they are not simultaneous for the Servant, as they are for St. Francis, the connection between them is clear. Suso's vision of the Seraph is also explicitly tied to the practice of learning to properly suffer, "Diz naged bild lert den menschen, wie er nuzzberlich sol liden. [The following image teaches one how they should suffer usefully]", and written on the seraph's three sets of wings are three pedagogical slogans: "lern liden cristförmklich," "trag liden gedulteklich," and "enpfah liden willeklich"—"[learn suffering in the form of Christ]" (referenced before), "[bear suffering patiently]," and "[receive suffering willingly]."<sup>249</sup> The rising force of the Franciscan order at this time, with St. Francis' stigmata as core to its foundation narrative, would have made these formal similarities easily legible to any engaged religious reader. This would allow the reader to fill in what is explicitly missing in comparison between the images: the rays from the eyes of the seraph, striking and causing the stigmatic markings on St. Francis' flesh. Indeed, the only manner in which the interpenetrative gaze as described by Biernoff is not explicitly paralleled in the *Life* is the interpenetration itself, supplied implicitly by the intertextual connection of the Servant to St. Francis, and the striking visual rays that transmit Francis' stigmata from the seraph, itself an *image* of the suffering Christ.

Fifthly, and this is of central theological and political importance for Suso, the interpenetrative gaze results in a communion that does not entail a full union (which would be seen as blasphemous). Unlike the Heresy of the Free Spirit that Eckhart was implicitly accused of supporting, "Redemptive vision, conceived as a mutual assimilation and interpenetration, knits together the desires and perspectives of humanity and God into 'one flesh', without thereby

---

<sup>249</sup> Bihlmeyer 50\*.





Figures 3.2-3.4. Figure 3.2, top left, is dated to between 1240 and 1250, by the Florentine Master of San Francesco Bardi. Figure 3.3, top right, is dated to between 1400 and 1410, by north Italian Gentile da Fabriano. These two images demonstrate the consistency to which the rays, even the images in the whole, remain consistent in representation across Suso's period. One interesting difference: where the earlier piece has the rays coming specifically from the seraph's eyes, as a clear demarcation of the gaze, the later piece and the later tradition depict the rays as passing from wound to wound. Figure 3.4, bottom left, is a circa 1420 painting detail by the Master of the Lindau lamentation, which shows both that this style of depiction of St Francis' stigmata had spread into Suso's geographic area, Lindau being only 30 miles across Lake Constance from Suso's native city of Constance, and that the stigmatized Seraph (above the semi-recumbent Francis) was differentiated from the Man of Sorrows (left of Francis), here depicted separately.



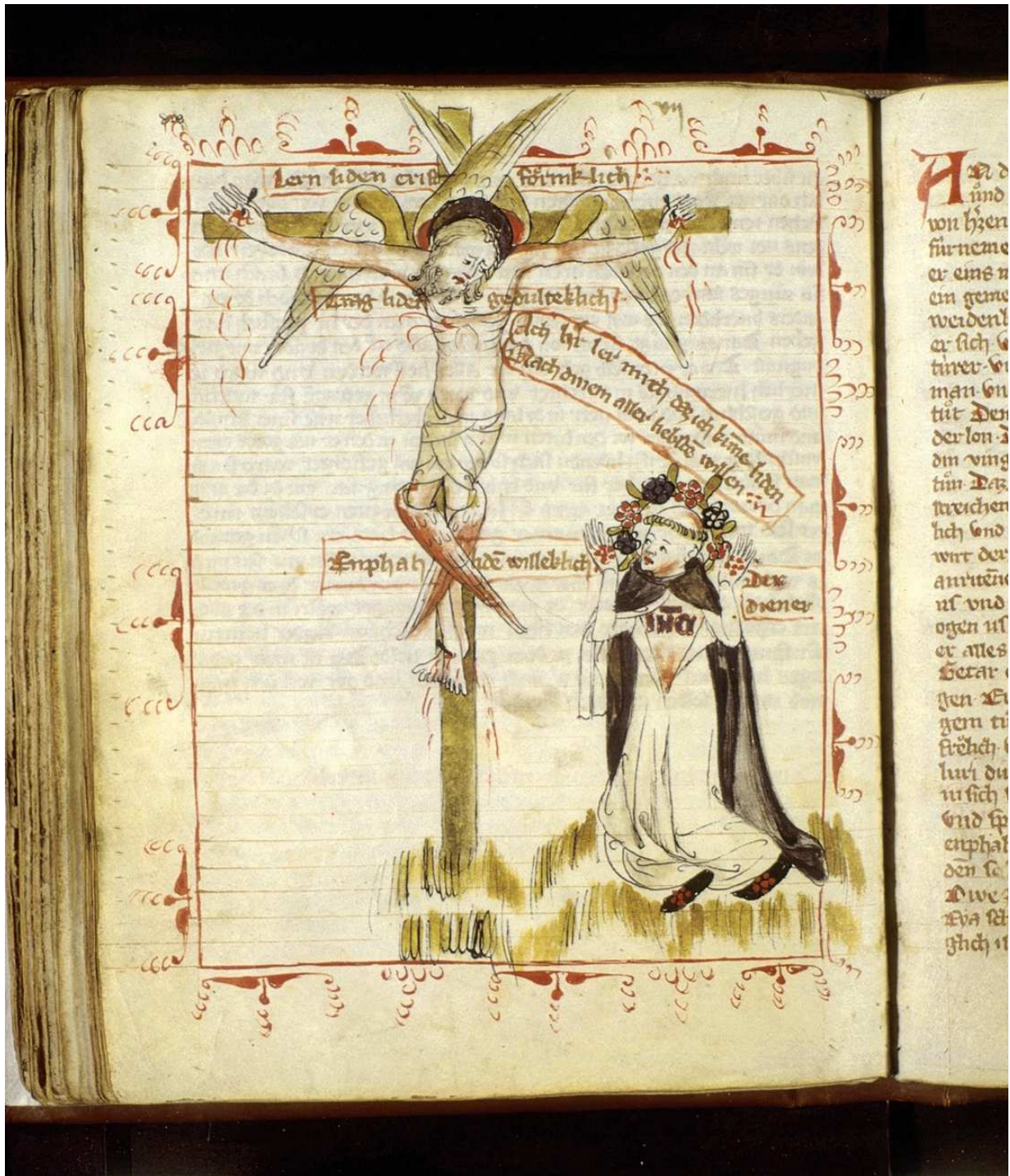


Figure 3.5. From the Strasbourg MS 2929. Folio 65R. Suso learns proper suffering from the crucified seraph, in a clear reference to St. Francis' stigmata. Here, although there are no rays drawn, the gazes connect and the scroll of words creates a connection between the figures, though not as directly as depictions of Francis' stigmata.

dissolving them into one being."<sup>250</sup> Indeed, because bridal mysticism invokes marriage as its central metaphor, it can tie into a symbolic tradition that traces for Christians back to Eden: two persons made "one flesh" in marriage, but still assumed to have two distinct essences. In Genesis 2:24 it reads, "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh," reiterated and reinforced by Christ in his condemnation of divorce in Mark 10:7-8. If one reads these verses, as many have, to refer specifically to the sex act as the most direct instance of "being one flesh," it maps even more fully onto mystic experience—a relationship with brief periods of communion marked by intense positive and negative affect (joy and suffering, or perhaps joy *in* suffering) as well as somatic pleasure, where lover and beloved are "one flesh," forming a greater marriage of two essences or persons, unified but not completely collapsed into each other.

Much work has been done on the concept of the *sponsa Christi* and this chapter can only touch on the barest minimum of it as it relates specifically to Suso's visuality. His stylization of the Servant as spouse to Eternal Wisdom allows a focus on being passive object of the divine gaze and divine action, ideal for the negative theological concept of *gelassenheit*, "releasement," which entails utter acceptance and passivity in suffering. By reframing himself, both implicitly in his own imagination and within the wider frame of the text, textually an *image* or visual erotic object the Servant is not only set in dialogue with the full range of holy persons preceding and following him, he is also opened up for the reader as a eroticized image similar to Christ. The reader, perceiving the Servant's identity as an *image* or an *exemplar* is introduced to a pedagogical model of transference, the imaginary removal of the self out of temporal reality of mundane existence into increasingly image-based, symbolic sphere. In that sphere, the self is

---

<sup>250</sup> Biernoff. *Sight and Embodiment*. 162.

reformed and reshaped into a series of holy images, ideally until there is little or no vestige of the original image of the self left. Just as the Servant becomes increasingly passive as an object of affection, annihilating self-image and thus becoming more like the beloved image of Christ, so the reader should strive for passivity and self-annihilation, in order to return to or reveal the divine abyss at the core of the Soul. Suso maps a clear path of self-erasure that the reader can imitate and appropriate, at least in part. This is one of Suso's major additions to negative theology, to give it a practical pedagogy and system of training, while still recognizing its striving against "manner" ("wîse"), because the divine is without manner, method, or structure.

### **Passion Meditation and the Emergent Marian Theology**

Seuse does not only draw upon the Passion as a visual stimulus and model for imagistic mimesis: he also participates in the long-standing tradition of Passion meditation, in which participants actively insert themselves into the narrative of the Passion. He does this explicitly with his *100 Meditations on the Passion*, "die hundert betrachtunge und begerunge,"<sup>251</sup> which Seuse claims is the core after which the rest of the *Büchlein der Ewigen Weisheit* came to being.<sup>252</sup> He also does it implicitly in the image of the mystic path displayed above, Figure 3.1, which follows the lead of the *100 Meditations* in presenting both the suffering of Christ, as crucified on the left, and the suffering of Mary, the tormented figure at the bottom. The swords piercing her reflect the common trope in Passion meditation that her compassion with the suffering Jesus and her pain at his death impacted her as though she were pierced by seven

---

<sup>251</sup> Part 3 of the *Büchlein der Ewigen Weisheit*, Bihlmeyer 314.

<sup>252</sup> Bihlmeyer 196-7. Tobin 207-8.

swords.<sup>253</sup> She is thus marked in a classic artistic manner as *Mater Dolorosa*, mirroring Christ's depiction as *Man of Sorrows*. The art depicting Mary shifts its mode of depicting Mary's suffering from the late medieval period to the early modern period: in the late medieval period, representations focus on Mary's swoon, but later we begin to see more that represent her being pierced by the sword(s) of sorrow. The *Mater Dolorosa* in Suso's final image, Figure 3.1, is earlier than most extant art depicting Mary being physically pierced by the swords, and thus may be at the forefront of this trend. To contextualize Suso's use of the *Mater Dolorosa*, this chapter will first look at this artistic tradition, then Suso's physical way to socialize one into a habitus that recreates the mirroring of Christ's Passion that Mary exemplifies, and finally examine the theological underpinnings of both as a way to connect this whole discussion back to Suso's model of mirroring images.

These artistic expressions used both swoon and sword(s) to represent Mary's suffering as a parallel with Christ's. As Donna Ellington says, "As the *Mater Dolorosa* of popular art and drama [of the late Middle Ages], Mary often appears as a co-sufferer with Christ, her soul's compassion echoing the physical passion which he endured."<sup>254</sup> Over time, this mirroring becomes more and more emphasized, perhaps best seen in Roger van der Weyden's *Deposition of Christ*, see Figure 3.6, painted in the century after Suso in Flanders. Here Mary, collapsing, provides a perfect echo of Christ's lifeless body, the bodily parallels marking the symmetry of

---

<sup>253</sup> These reference the sword of Simeon's prophecy, as symbolically connected by the Venerable Bede and numerous exegetes thereafter. Luigi Gambero, "Mary in the Middle Ages." 40. Discussed more fully below.

<sup>254</sup> Ellington, Donna Spivey. *From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul: Understanding Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001). 44.

their suffering.<sup>255</sup> In fact, looking closely one sees that the skull marking Golgotha is below her head, not at the foot of the Cross, as would be normal. This marks her suffering and “death” as metonymically connected to Christ’s, and potentially co-salvific with his. It is every bit as much, if not more so, her Golgotha as his.

Mary is depicted in almost every late medieval image, and especially in almost every late medieval text, as an important primary exemplar of compassion to those practicing Passion meditation. Ellington argues that, “Mary was seen as the perfect imitator of her son in his Passion and, as such, she herself could and should be imitated by Christians who sought, like her, to enter into and experience the suffering of Jesus.”<sup>256</sup> In the late medieval Christian tradition she was the first person to be so struck by compassion with Jesus’ Passion that it physically affected her body. Mary comes to be thought of as pierced through the heart with the Sword of Simeon, referring to a prophecy by Simeon at the Christ child’s blessing in the temple. This sword slowly shifts to being depicted as the seven swords to match the Virgin’s Seven Sorrows, see Figure 3.7.<sup>257</sup> Each sorrow was seen as causing intense physical distress to match Mary’s emotional and

---

<sup>255</sup> An earlier type of swoon had become common in artistic depictions of Mary’s suffering, which displayed her lower body as stiffly upright and her upper body and bent over—the former representing her unwavering acceptance of the necessity of Christ’s sacrifice and the latter her suffering as a result. This development is explored further in Amy Neff’s “The Pain of Compassio: Mary’s Labor at the Foot of the Cross,” in *Art Bulletin*. 1998.

<sup>256</sup> Ellington, *Sacred Body to Angelic Soul*. 78.

<sup>257</sup> Simeon prophecies at Jesus’ blessing in the temple as a baby, saying to Mary “Thy own soul a sword shall pierce . . .” (Luke 2:35). In his *Quaestiones super Evang.* (Qu. 43 and 149, 2; *Opera Omnia XXXVII*, Paris 1898, pp.81 and 214ff.), Albertus Magnus then interprets this as literally fulfilled in the Virgin’s compassionate suffering at Calvary, where she receives in her heart the very wounds Christ suffers in his body. She thus becomes “*co-adjutrix* in the work of Redemption” (von Simpson, *Art Bulletin*, 12). Since Albertus Magnus was Meister Eckhart’s own teacher, and Meister was Suso’s, we can assume that Suso was familiar with Albertus’ work. Eventually the single Sword of Simeon is replaced by the Seven Swords in both texts and images, matching the Seven Sufferings of Mary to parallel the Seven Stations of the Cross, delineating Christ’s Passion. Mary’s Seven Sorrows were first explicated in the anonymous 1324





Figure 3.6. Above. Roger Van der Weyden (1399-1464), *Deposition of Christ*, painted between 1435 and 1440, currently held in the Prado, Madrid. Note that Mary's skin is of an even more deathly pallor than Christ's and that their postures perfectly mirror, with only the tilt of the head toward one another making each different.



Figure 3.7. Left. A hand-colored German woodcut, dated to approximately 1480, depicting The Madonna with the Seven Swords. Bassenge auction House, 2006, Lot 5086.

*Speculum humanae salvationis*, which builds on and popularizes previous representations of Mary going back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Lutz-Pedrizet, *Speculum humanae salvationis*, Mulhouse, 1909). It became common for editions of the *Speculum humanae salvationis* to come affixed with miniature Marian offices for the seven sorrows/swords. Ellington, *From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul*, 80. Suso's *Mater Dolorosa* detail in the final illumination, created between 1360 and 1370, seems to be in transition, as she has clearly not yet incorporated the full seven swords, but has moved beyond the one.

spiritual turmoil. Following her example, the most devout Passion meditators should also be first affectively, but eventually physically affected by the pains of Christ's sufferings.

Indeed, as part of the *100 Meditations*, Suso prescribes a gender-specific prayer and a *venia*, or full body prostration, to accompany each meditation.<sup>258</sup> These *veniae* could, admittedly liberally, be interpreted as a gesture to Mary's swoon as well. At the very least, they are a bodily gesture of submission, requiring the meditator to take physically the spiritual posture of both Christ and Mary, submitting to the Father's will in humbly following the path to the Crucifixion. These genuflections are also implicitly connected to practices of ascetic self-harm the Servant is described as inflicting on himself. In the sixteenth chapter of the *Life*, Suso describes how the Servant performed prostrating meditations with a self-fashioned cross on his back, with nails that dug into his back with each kneeling. The cross, described earlier in the chapter, was a tool of bodily self-castigation similar to flagellation: in circumstances that required more than the ordinary daily penance, he would beat his fist against the cross to drive the nails into his back.<sup>259</sup> But even just the daily wearing of the cross and performing the hundred meditations caused him significant distress, which he describes in exact detail:

When matins had been sung, he went into the chapter room to his secret place and prostrated himself a hundred times and then genuflected a hundred times, each time [with a specific meditation]. These movements were very painful because of the cross since he had bound the cross to himself as tightly and was wearing it as snug against his body as when a cooper fits a hoop around a barrel. When he fell to the ground, as was his custom, and made his hundred prostrations, the movements caused the nails to stick in him. When he then stood up, he pulled them back out. At the next prostration they would make new wounds, which caused him great pain. If they remained sticking in one place, it was bearable.

---

<sup>258</sup> The Pater Noster was prescribed for Christ-centered meditations, the Salve Regina or Ave Maria for Marian meditations.

<sup>259</sup> The cross was developed when his previous practices of morning self-flagellation were by his fellow monks. Bihlmeyer 43:4-12. Presumably the cross was easier to hide from his brethren, because it was worn under the shirt.



So man meti hate gesungen, so gie er in daz capitel an sin heinlich, und nam da hundert gestrachter venje und hundert knúwender, ein ieklich venje mit sunderlich betrachtunge; und die taten im vil we von dez krúzes wegen, wan wenn er daz krúzalso strenklich an sich gespíen und naher an den lip getrieb, als der einen reif tribet, als er ze der zit pflag ze túne, so viel er nider uf die erde und nam die hundert venjen, und von dem nidervallene so gesteketen in ime die nagel, und so er denne uff stúnd, do zukt er si denn wider us, und aber von dem nidervallene stachen sú núwú löcher, und daz waz im gar pinlich; wenne sú núwan an einer stat beliben in im stekende, so waz es lidig.<sup>260</sup>

He is not necessarily implying that all his followers in *imitatio* need to fashion a spiked cross exactly like his, but he is setting up a model where the performance of the prostrations and meditations should be linked with extreme discomfort and even pain.<sup>261</sup> This physical distress tied up with the hundred meditations on the Passion is obviously similar in structure to the interpenetrative gaze of bridal mysticism discussed above, where compassionately gazing upon the suffering Christ causes one to be pierced in return.

But unlike the interpenetrative gaze of bridal mysticism, the meditative Mary's gaze toward Christ on the Cross is not always returned. In the final moments of their mutual Passion, his *Passio* and her *Compassio*, his gaze is turned away from creation toward the Heavens, where hers is fixed on him. This is seen in Figure 3.1—detail images here as Figures 3.1.1 and 3.1.2—as well as Figures 3.8 and 3.8.1. The *Mater Dolorosa* depicted in the final image is parallel to the “sufferer” as presented in an earlier chapter, seen clearly in side-by-side comparison in Figures 3.8 and 3.1.1 as well as 3.8.1 and 3.1.2.<sup>262</sup> They are connected by the diagonal attacks to the

---

<sup>260</sup> Tobin 90. Bihlmeyer 42:25-43:3.

<sup>261</sup> Although the meditations here are not explicitly labeled as the hundred meditations on the Passion from the *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom*, the similarities are striking enough that the connection would be clear to anyone who had read both.

<sup>262</sup> Scorpion and serpent likely represent the “sting” of death and poison of sin, respectively, as in 1 Cor. 15:55 “O Death, where is thy sting?” and the Serpent as tempter to original sin in the Genesis story. The placement of the serpent at the heel is thus importantly resonant with Genesis 3:15, spoken to the Serpent in the wake of Adam and Eve’s transgression, “And I will put enmity

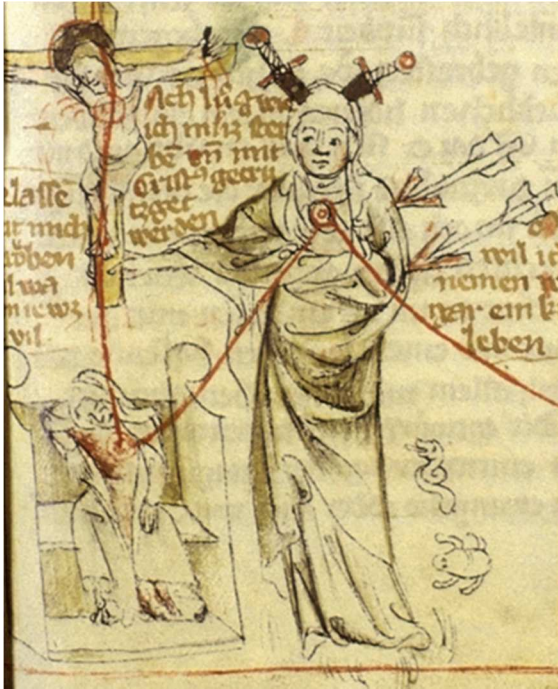


Figure 3.1.1. Detail of Figure 1. The Soul as *Mater Dolorosa*, pierced by two swords of Simeon, in addition to two arrows.



Figure 3.8. An illuminated rumination on the varied forms of suffering. It is the only illumination that does not name the figure. Strasbourg MS 2929. Folio 57L.



Figure 3.1.2. Further detail of Figure 1. The serpent and scorpion by the *Mater Dolorosa*'s left foot.



Figure 3.8.1. Detail of Figure 8. Details of the serpent and scorpion, by the left foot of the Sufferer.

between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” (NIV) Mary’s childbirth at the foot of the Cross is seen by late medieval theologians as the fulfillment of this prophecy and the reversal of Eve’s sin in the Fall, with Eve (or with many theologians, the goddess *Natura*) giving physical rebirth into the fallen world, and Mary giving spiritual rebirth into the world beyond.

head, the arrows, their placement at the foot of the cross, and the presence of the scorpion and snake at the heel, but they are noticeably distinguished as well. The *Mater Dolorosa* figure in the final image is clearly gendered female, where the “sufferer” is obscured and almost glaringly non-gendered and non-specified. This ambiguity becomes obviously intentional when one considers that in every other accompanying image of the *Life* or the *Exemplar* as a whole the primary figures are identified, usually by name as the Servant, Stigel, Anna, etc. The fact that this figure is only identifiable as Dominican, but not even explicitly male or female, designates it as an open figure for identification to all of Suso's intended readerships, most specifically his immediate followers in the Dominican order. This also reflects that the Servant is not the only one who is defined by suffering. Beyond the Christ figurations themselves (Divine Wisdom, the crucified seraph, and so forth), there are the unnamed sufferers within the text, as the woman from the end of Chapter 44, already discussed last chapter in terms of the mirroring function of the Servant. Later editions of the manuscript even move this image to be associated with that anecdote.

Yet this ambiguous figure of the “sufferer” becomes the *Mater Dolorosa* in the final image of the path of the Soul. This ties together a number of vital intertexts to the understanding of Suso's use of the Virgin Mary as an image that the Soul takes on: specifically it ties together Suso's theorization of the suffering necessary for an “*anvahenden mensch*” or beginning mystic, the Soul theology of Meister Eckhart's fifth German Sermon, and the rising Marian theology that saw her maternal suffering as *Compassio*, a necessary counterpart to Christ's *Passio*.

In the late Middle Ages, a growing number of theologians had begun to theorize Mary's pains of *Compassio* at the foot of the cross as a form of labor pain, becoming a mother to the world as part of her co-redemptive role with Christ. The first known figuration of Mary this way

was Rupert of Deutz, Abbot of a Benedictine monastery near Cologne in the early eleventh-century. He describes Mary's suffering thus:

Quid autem dico similem cum uere sit mulier et uere mater et ueros habeat in illa hora partus sui dolores. [...] Proinde quia uere ibi dolores ut parturientis et in passione unigeniti omnia nostrum salutem beata uirgo peperit plane omnium nostrum mater est.

But why do I say "like" a woman in labor, seeing that she is truly a woman and truly a mother and truly felt pangs in that hour [under the Cross] when she gave birth? [...] Just so, because [on Calvary] the Blessed Virgin truly suffered the pangs of a woman in childbirth, and because in her Son's Passion she gave birth to the salvation of all, she is clearly the Mother of us all.<sup>263</sup>

Her figuration as *Mater Dolorosa* thus relates not only to her suffering as mother of Christ, losing her child, but as a new mother through her co-redemptive suffering, giving spiritual rebirth to the entirety of all mankind, specifically then a rebirth to the souls of all mankind (as she is not their physical, but spiritual mother). In the following centuries, many theologians debated the exact meaning of Mary's spiritual birthing process at the foot of the Cross, but the vast majority of recorded commentators accepted it readily as a newly developed theological fact.<sup>264</sup> The most important to note here is Albertus Magnus, who here and there throughout his writings between 1240-1270 developed the concept of Mary's spiritual motherhood to mankind, beginning with her childbirth at the foot of the Cross.<sup>265</sup> This concept of Mary's spiritual childbirth was one of many new ways to theologially justify Mary's growing liturgical and devotional role in the church.

---

<sup>263</sup> Rupert of Deutz. *Ruperti Tuitiensis Commentaria in Evangelium Sancti Johannis*. Turnholt: Brepols Publishers, 2010. Lib. 13, pg. 744, line: 1274 & 1289. English from Gambero. *Mary in the Middle Ages: The Blessed Virgin Mary in the Thought of Medieval Latin Theologians*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005. 130. Original addition in brackets, this author's additions underlined and in brackets.

<sup>264</sup> For a brief discussion of the debate by scholastics like Bonaventure, St. Anthony of Padua, and others, see Neff. "The Pain of Compassio." 255-257.

<sup>265</sup> *ibid.* 257.

Meister Eckhart reformulated this soul-rebirthing metaphor in his fifth German Sermon, where the Soul itself becomes Virgin and Mother, a clear, albeit unstated, parallel to the Virgin Mary. This adaptation of Marian theology to fit the theology of the Soul, specifically the Soul seeking connection with the *grunt/abgrunt*, is then visually depicted in Suso's final image, Figure 3.1, making explicit Eckhart's implicit reference to contemporary Marian theology. The Soul becomes an image of the Mater Dolorosa, reborn spiritually as one of the first major steps on the mystic path, followed closely by Gelassenheit, cristförmlichkeit, and gradual dissolution into the divine.

### **Media Disjuncture and Image Pedagogy**

Some of the difficulty working with these representations—of Christ, of Mary, even of the Servant and the other figures of the *Exemplar*—is the intentional ambiguity of medium that Suso seems to work with. In discussing the completion of the *100 Meditations*, for example, Suso tells an allegorical visionary story in which finishing the meditations is magically enabled by watching heavenly musicians finish an embroidery of the Virgin. He describes it thus:

The friar was greatly astonished and enjoyed looking at it [the embroidery of Mary]. He noticed that they wanted to finish the picture. They began first to finish the background. They said, "Look how it is coming along!" And he saw how it was finished. Then one of them took a needle and thread and on the front of the mantle made some very clever stitches crosswise. They looked very fine, adorning our dear Lady charmingly. And with that his eyes opened and he understood that he should entertain no doubts. He was supposed to finish the background, namely, the empty space and the spiritual image that had for so long been closed off from him. For he was accustomed to the earlier sections all coming about well enough, one just like the other.<sup>266</sup>

Also waz der brüder in einem grozen wunder und hatte lust an der gesiht [dem Bild Marias] und nam war, daz sú es wolten volbringen; und vollewurkten des ersten daz velt.

---

<sup>266</sup> Tobin 302-303.

Do sprachen sú: „lûg, wie es wachset!“ Und do sah er es us wûrken, und do nam ir einer die nadlun mit dem vaden und machet vornan uf den mantel enzweres úber gar klûg stricke, und die stúnden als recht fínlich und zierten die lieben vröwen als wúnneklich. Und in dem giengen im dú ögen uf und do vertünt er daz, daz er nach enkeinen zwifel dar an wolte haben, ime were gegeben, daz er daz velt, daz lere spacium, daz geistlich bilde volbrechte, daz im so lange vor beschlossen waz; wan er waz dez gewennet, daz im daz vorder gnû nach alles sament wart in etlicher glicheit der selben wise.<sup>267</sup>

The unfinished set of Marian Passion meditations is made equivalent to “daz geistlich bilde,” or “the spiritual picture,” creating an equivalency between visual media and Passion meditation, which is itself a dual genre that often joins salvific narrative with instructions for personal semi-liturgical praxis. But this equivalency is not entirely straightforward. Indeed, throughout the episode, there is confusion or minor disjoint in the transition from one medium to another, equating them but also problematizing their comparability. “The background/the empty space/the spiritual image,” “daz velt/daz lere spacium/daz geistlich bilde,” are all made more or less equivalent, representing the final section of the *100 Meditations*, but the final section itself is not equivalent: it was withheld, while the others came along “one just like the other [in etlicher glicheit der selben wise].” Even earlier, as the musicians arrive, they play beautiful music only to then become incomprehensible in their allegorical shift to the visual medium, as the unnamed Dominican friar [implicitly Suso] do “neither saw nor heard any stringed music,” “ensah noch enhorte er kein seitenspil,” when they began to play, only the miraculously appearing image of the Virgin.<sup>268</sup>

---

<sup>267</sup> Bihlmeyer 323-324.

<sup>268</sup> Tobin. 302. Bihlmeyer 323.15. This is especially important, because of all media used to express divine truth, the auditory is given primacy as the most powerful and trustworthy in Suso’s texts. It is outside the realm of this dissertation, which focuses on visulity, to discuss Suso’s thoughts on auditory experience of the divine. For more on this, see Rozenski “The Visual, the Textual, and the Auditory in Henry Suso’s *Vita* or *Life of the Servant*,” in *Mystics Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 1/2, 2008, 35-72. Rozenski elucidates Suso’s skepticism toward the written word and the practice of silent reading, and even argues that the texts in the *Exemplar* are consistently framed dialogically at least in part in order to simulate spoken word and perhaps

Thus these images are important, but they are fluid. Indeed, one could argue that they exist outside of any given medium, but are given equally valid (though essentially invalid and insufficient) representation in any given medium. As such, they shift wondrously but jarringly between aural, visual, and textual representative modes to create meaning and connections beyond the confines of any one medium. As such, each medium both supports and supplants the other, as music becomes image, image becomes meditational text, and meditational text becomes embodied ascetic exercise. The transitions themselves both indicate the insufficiency of each individual medium to express the divine as well as the need for constant total transformation as part of the process of divine creation. The rupture that that total transformation requires, forcing total loss of that which came before, is what justifies and allows the use of images as a prelude. Like the self-exhausting casing of a bullet, the external representation is discarded and destroyed as it shoots the core of truth, the *grunt*, to its home far beyond.

Suso's choice to focus on *image* and *glichenús* as a primary pedagogical tool was a controversial one, and one that he himself felt ambivalent about. Even in the final chapter of the *Life* the Servant's existential angst regarding images breaks through, when Stigel asks him to summarize the work of the book as a whole. In response, he asks, "How can one form images of what entails no images or state the manner of something that has no manner (of being), that is

---

promote reading them aloud, in groups, rather than silently and singly. Rozenski clarifies heavenly music as particularly useful in attaining imageless visionary experience: "Although Suso strives toward an imageless perception of the divine he rarely achieves this in practice. The experience of heavenly music, however, often serves as a medium that can resolve this aporia of seeing the invisible God." Ibid. 41. Music, being a medium without distinct referents (unlike image and word), is a preferred medium for invoking divine presence. Thus it seems that to have the experience of the music be broken off in the passage above and exchanged for an incomplete image—this means that the friar is being denied the truest and purest experience of the divine, because the meditations are incomplete. First the image-construction process must be complete, then one can attain to the imageless *unio mystica* beyond—this is a core of Suso's pedagogical goal in creating the *100 Meditations*.

beyond all thinking and the human intellect? No matter what one compares it to [presents as a similitude to it], it is still a thousand times more unlike than like." ("wie kan man bildlos gebilden unde wiselos bewisen, daz úber alle sinne und úber menschlich vernunft ist? Wan waz man glichnust dem git, so ist es noh tusentvalt ungelicher, denn es glich sie.")<sup>269</sup> Yet he does not give up. He continues: "But still, so that one may drive out one image with [images], I shall now explain it to you through images and by making comparisons [similitudes], as far as this is possible, for these same meanings beyond images—how it is to be understood in truth" ("Aber doch, daz man bild mit bilden us tribe, so wil ich hie biltlich zögen mit glichnusgebender rede, als verr es denn móglich ist, von den selben bildlosen sinnen, wie es in der warheit zu nemen ist").<sup>270</sup> These utterances can be seen as both referring to the difficulty of putting into words and images the absolute negative that is the apophatic divine *and* also referring to Suso's determination to do so. He sets out to represent something beyond what words can possibly convey. This passage both describes Suso's project and humbly submits to its fundamental impossibility. Yet the manuscript record bears witness to the fact that his choice to focus on images, and the images that he devised, had immense power for many readers in the late medieval and early modern period.

---

<sup>269</sup> Bihlmeyer 190-91. Tobin 201. This sentence is particularly difficult to translate into English because it functions on several levels simultaneously. On one level "bildlos gebilden" and "wiselos bewisen" are clearly presented as antithetical pairs, but they also play on multiple meanings of the words "gebilden" and "bewisen". "gebilden" connects to the Middle High German word "bilde" (image), but also to the German concept of *Bildung*, which refers not only to education but also development and formation, often specifically in reference to the reception and production of art. "bewisen" connects not only to the Modern German "beweisen" (to prove) but also to the concept of "wisheit" (wisdom) and the figure of "ewiges wisheit", the Servant's spiritual spouse. Further, it has connotations that can mean "to reveal", "to show", "to teach", "to lead to", or even "to transfer ownership of something to".

<sup>270</sup> Bihlmeyer 191. Tobin 201.



It also explains why Suso takes images that had proven resonance to his medieval audience—primarily Eternal Wisdom, but also the Man of Sorrows, St. Francis' stigmatizing crucified seraph, the Virgin Mary as lactating mother and as *Mater Dolorosa*, the Desert Fathers, and others. These images had established contexts that tied them into clear and symbolically powerful referential frameworks. He then repeatedly inserts his alter egos into mostly passive relationships with these images. He takes images and makes himself their object, instead of the other way around. He uses images to *make himself into an image*, so that his image too can join the pantheon of divine images urging his readers away from the mundane, the temporal, the profane, and, ultimately, away from all image.

### **Conclusions—Individual Apophatic Aesthetics**

It could well be argued that the transition traced along the bottom right corner, detail in Figure 3.1.3, and up the right side of the illumination of the mystic way is actually a series of images for the Soul to take on as a kind of habitus, exactly like those described in the introductory paragraph to this chapter. The theological explanation glosses of the image describe the Soul's transformation from:

- a) its creation in the divine image, “Dis ist menschlichú geschaffenheit gebildet nach der gotheit [this is the human creation, formed in the image of the divine],”
- b) to its first submission, symbolized by the chains, “Minen ker wil ich zů got nemen, wan diz ist gar ein kurtzen leben [I turn myself to God for this is indeed a short life],”
- c) through the stages of self-sacrificial suffering, “Ach lůg, wie ich můz sterben vnd mit Cristus gecruzget warden! [Alas, behold, how I must die and be crucified with Christ],”



- d) *gelassenheit* “Gelassenheit mich beröben wil, wa min ie waz ze vil [Releasement wants to rob me of what I already had too much of anyway]”
- e) and more suffering (sharing the gloss with the suffering image),
- f) until one has an apophatic, imageless mystic experience, “Die sinne sint mir entwúrcket, die hohen kreft sint úberwúrket [Senses have withdrawn from me, high powers are left behind],”
- g) and achieves the initial loss of self in the divine, “[Here the spirit has flowed inward and is found in the Trinity of persons]” (“Hie ist der geist in geswungen vnd wirt in der driheit der personen funden”),
- h) and finally becomes totally annihilated, “[I am lost in god, no one can reach me here]” (“Ich bin in got vergangen, nieman kan mich hie erlangen”).

At the risk of over-systematizing the work, one should also examine in terms of the images that the pictures are invoking, and thus see it as a transformation from (following the inscriptions on the image upwards):

- a) initial self-image, parallel to the creation of the Soul,
- b) to submissive self-image, parallel to the submissive Soul, the “anvahender mensch” or “beginner,”
- c) to *Mater Dolorosa* as image to be taken on by the beginner through a rigorous system of habituated ritualized suffering, arguably modeled after the physical asceticism of the early chapters of Book 1 of the *Life*,
- d) then to *gelassenheit* as release of control over self-image, modeled after to the Servant’s transition into the “vernúnftigen schúle [...] der kunst rechter gelassenheit [the spiritual school of the art of proper releasement]” in Chapter 19 of the *Life*,

- e) then taking on the image and form of the suffering Christ, modeled by the Servant in the transition to social, externally-driven suffering in the following chapters,
- f) transitioning to imagelessness or non-image focus, symbolized in the image by the Soul closing her eyes and presumably related to the Servant's discussion of more classic apophatic theology with Stigel in the final chapters of the *Life*, specifically 46-53, which chapters precede the image in question in most manuscripts,
- g) to where one's own image is disappeared, yet is paradoxically found in the Trinity, which can be seen as having achieved exemplary status as "Bild Gottes,"<sup>271</sup> the goal that the pupil like Stigel or the reader should strive for in this life,
- h) and final total annihilation, which can be seen as having transcended the use of or need for image entirely, and thus as outside of the capacity for human description or model.

This corollary traces briefly the way in which the terms Suso uses for images and the manner he uses them fit into his greater cosmology. Visuality, this interplay between seeing an image and being an image, is at the core of Suso's worldview and one of the primary tools of his entire pedagogical endeavor.

This model of visuality elucidates greatly Suso's own understanding and use of concepts of identity and gender, which will be addressed in the final chapter of this dissertation. And, as we have already seen, it adds fundamentally to the corpus of negative theology by giving these symbolic categories the weight of both new and already well-established culturally significant images, without utterly sacrificing the iconoclastic drive of apophatic mysticism. But for that to work within the medieval system that both feared and found miraculous potential in the

---

<sup>271</sup> Note that in Suso's works these persons are seen most often as they radiate or return back from Paradise, as discussed in depth in Rozenski's article, "Von Aller Bilden Bildlosigkeit," in *Envisaging Heaven in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Carolyn Muessig and Ad Putter (New York: Routledge, 2007).

materiality of images, the images had to be living images, which meant that human beings had to step into the role of intermediary between human and divine.

But the access different people were perceived to have had to the divine image varied widely—men were largely considered to be more like Christ, being men, and also more intellectually related to the higher spiritual faculties of the Soul. This meant that women were often seen as unfit vessels to become spiritual living images, especially when they tried to exercise spiritual authority. This question—who can appropriately become a spiritual image, following Mary and then Christ, and what does it mean in terms of the gendering of the mental faculties and thus epistemology—is the subject of the final chapter.

#### Chapter 4—Sexing *sapientia*: Augustinian Sex and Gendered Epistemology in Suso’s *Life of the Servant*

“She was distant yet near, far above yet low, present yet hidden. She engaged in activities with others, but no one can claim her. She towered above the summit of heaven and touched the bottom of the abyss. She spread herself out sovereign from one end of the earth to the other and ordered all things sweetly. The minute he thought her to be a beautiful young lady, he immediately found a proud young man before him. Sometimes she acted like a wise teacher, sometimes like a pert young thing. She presented herself to him endearingly, greeted him smiling, saying kindly, ‘Prebe, fili, cor tuum mihi! Give me your heart, my child.’”  
Suso, regarding Eternal Wisdom<sup>272</sup>

"Si waz verr und nahe, hoh und nider, si waz gegenwürtig und doch verborgen; si liess mit ir umb gan, und moht si doch nieman begriffen. Si reichete über daz obrest dez hoehsten himels und ruorte daz tiefst des abgrundes; si zerspreite sich von ende ze ende gewalteklich und richte ellú ding us süsseklích. So er iez wande haben ein schoen jungfrowen, gewswind vand er einen stolzen jungherren. Si gebaret etwen ale ein wisú meisterin, etwen hielt si sich als ein vil weidenlichú minnerin. Sie bot sich zuo ime minneklich und gruozte in vil lechelich und sprach zuo ime gütlích, 'Prebe, fili, cor tuum mihi! Gib mir din herz, kind mins!'"<sup>273</sup>

One of the most difficult elements of identity and representation to discuss in Suso's works is the performance of gender. For divine figures, gender can be ambiguous or dual—Eternal Wisdom, for example, appears to the Servant as woman, as man, and as neither. Yet for mortals, gender restrictions are rigid and cruel. The Servant self-shames, drawing on seemingly timeless tropes of internalized gender shaming, in which an internal voice scolds him when he begins to cry:

You miserable creature! Are you going to weep like a woman? You are disgracing yourself at the court of heaven. Wipe your eyes and act cheerful so that neither God nor man notice that you have wept because of your suffering.<sup>274</sup>

---

<sup>272</sup> Tobin 69.

<sup>273</sup> Bihlmeyer 14:13-22.

<sup>274</sup> Tobin 172.

we dir, wilt du wainen als ein wip? Du geschendest dich selb in dem himelschen hove!  
Wûsch dinú ougen und gebar frölich, daz es weder got noch mensch innan werdet, daz du  
von lidens wegen habest geweinet!<sup>275</sup>

He also advises his pupil Elsbeth Stagel away from harsh physical asceticism because of her "womanly weakness."<sup>276</sup> How can one reconcile this seeming gender fluidity for divine figures on the one hand, and the strict gender policing of mortals on the other hand? One can well wonder whether this kind of divine gender fluidity might undermine the strict gender roles he seems elsewhere to espouse.

This may seem confusing, but it makes sense when we begin to understand what Suso teaches about human nature as compared with divine nature. Like his teacher, Meister Eckhart, Suso holds that at the core of the human soul there is a spark of the divine. And the divine at its core is utterly apophatic—no word, image, or other descriptor can ever truly capture it. Apophatic theologians like Eckhart even go so far as to argue that the Christian Trinitarian names for the divine—Father, Son, Holy Ghost—are too limiting to address the truth of a fully infinite and indescribable deity.<sup>277</sup> Every type of categorization, including gender, is inappropriate to attribute to the divine. But these types of categorization *are* appropriate for the created world, which is distinguished from the divine by its ability to be described, categorized, and depicted. Thus it follows that for their mortal tenure, mortal categorizations like gender would be binding and necessarily restrictive for Suso and his readers.

Further, the human intellect and the human soul is created in the divine image, which gives humans the ability to reason and gain divine wisdom, eventually to the point of becoming

---

<sup>275</sup> Bihlmeyer. 152: 21-24.

<sup>276</sup> Tobin 141.

<sup>277</sup> For more on the apophatic theological tradition, see Chapter 1.

lost once more in the infinite divine out of which they were created. But human intellect is divided into higher and lesser functions, which are gendered such that the masculine intellect reaches upwards toward divine wisdom and the feminine intellect perceives downward toward the pragmatics of the created world.

This chapter will elucidate how Suso adopts gender models from surrounding culture and from theology, but in such a way that the women's contribution is still valued, even if they are hierarchically lower both in body and intellect. First this chapter will briefly discuss the theories of medieval sex and gender as they have been discussed in scholarship over the last few decades, covering one-sex, two-sex, and third gender models that have been posited, as well as debates surrounding clerical misogyny. It will then briefly examine how gender relationships in the *Life* might be examined in light of the one- and two-sex models, as well as an arguably more female-friendly form of celibate masculinity modeled after Saint Augustine. Secondly, an Augustinian theological epistemology of gender will be discussed, which will transition into a discussion of how gender, image, and knowledge production are mutually imbricated in Suso's works.

### **What is clerical gender?**

There are numerous articles and monographs that speculate on the nature of how gender may or may not have been construed by religious, and especially monastic, men and women. Male religious discourse had a very powerful cultural capital in medieval Europe because they were the primary producers of written discourse. They literally wrote, by hand, the vast majority of texts produced, and they trained the writers who wrote anything that they themselves did not write. Within written texts, the influence of clerical discourse must be seen as omnipresent.



At the same time, many of these texts, and certainly those in the vernacular, were written in dialogue with the oral traditions of secular courtly literature and in conversation with courtly ideals and values. Many of the most powerful religious leaders of the European Middle Ages came from powerful families, and their influence as religious leaders both came from and flowed back to their families' secular power. As such, medieval religious figures had a stake in constructions of gender—and especially masculinity—that conveyed power and authority both theologically and secularly. This complex relationship has been theorized by many scholars in different ways.

One theory that has been largely rejected by the medievalist community was proposed by historian Thomas Laqueur, who argued that the medieval Europe, unlike the modern West, viewed gender as a flexible spectrum between the two poles of masculine and feminine, commonly referred to as the “one-sex model.”<sup>278</sup> Drawing on certain ancient and medieval medical discourses, most notably the works of Galen, Laqueur posits that before the 18<sup>th</sup> century the vast majority of learned people in Western civilization held that women were simply underdeveloped or malformed men, and that only men were considered fully human as a result. Late antique models of the womb, for example, depicted it as having multiple chambers: hotter chambers produce male offspring, cooler ones female. This follows the Galenic humoral theories, popular in the Middle Ages, which held that men were generally more sanguine and choleric, thus hotter and drier than women, who were temperamentally phlegmatic and melancholic, moist and cool. But because these temperaments were subject to change, for

---

<sup>278</sup> Thomas Laqueur. *Making Sex: Body and Gender From the Greeks to Freud*. Harvard University Press. 1990. 25-63. A better history that includes multiple competing medieval gender discourses is found in the work of Joan Cadden. See *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture*. Cambridge; New York, NY, USA, Cambridge University Press. 1993.

Laqueur so too pre-modern sexual identity was malleable and one's gender identity could thus differ over time from the sex assigned at birth.

Even though Laquer's work has been dismissed as painting the Middle Ages with too broad a brush, the term "one-sex model" can be a useful term describe models that emphasize the similarities, rather than differences, between women and men. In this dissertation, "one-sex" and "two-sex" are used not as firm and immutable theories that would have been understood and taught, fully articulated, by medieval people, but rather as shorthand for explanations of gender by a wide variety of sources and discourses—medical, ecclesiastical, scientific, literary, and political, among others—that tend either to focus more on sexual differentiation and the gap between the sexes, thus "two-sex models," versus the ultimate similarity of men and women and the flexibility with which gendered categories or discourse can be applied to people of both sexes, which would typify "one-sex models." Laquer's concept of pre-modern thinkers seeing women as men "inside out" is simply the most extreme of a number of discourses which emphasize similarity between the sexes and logically extend that to focus on the relative malleability of human gender. The main issue with Laqueur's work is not that these discourses did not exist or were not influential in the Middle Ages, but rather that he assumes that these discourses were the primary or indeed only view of gender identity for over a thousand years. Laquer maps one very specific set of medical discourses, which were present in certain realms but not even particularly popular, across all of pre-modern Western thought. This is somewhat stereotypical for authors who are primarily using the pre-modern as a foil for the modern, and his work is predictably most popular among modernist feminist scholars who seek easy proof that modern heterosexist models of gender are not universal.

Jo Ann McNamara's essay "An Unresolved Syllogism" takes Laqueur's terminology and more accurately depicts some of the many, many transitions from Late Antiquity to the early Middle Ages.<sup>279</sup> She traces a cultural history of the constructions of gender in the late Roman empire, and how those were both adapted and challenged by the rising Christian church. Because it covers so many models over such a broad period, it is necessarily very generalized, but helps depict some of the broader shifts and the most basic justifications why certain models were preferred in the period. She argues that the Romans successfully held the cognitive dissonance of both the one-sex and two-sex models—essentially that men and women were both more alike than different in their humanity, but that each of the two genders did have uniquenesses—but that over the centuries Christians shifted back and forth with less ease between the two-sex and one-sex models. One advantage within early Christianity to a two-sex model, emphasizing the fundamental differences between men and women, was that it served to justify male authority over women as an inherent and natural difference. This often followed from readings of the Eden myth. Focusing on sexual difference also left room to develop parallel but distinct concepts of male and female virtue, such as moral courage for men and purity for women. One-sex models, on the other hand, often served classist purposes by allowing higher-class families to establish their superiority over lower-class men and women and consolidate power, allowing female descendants to carry forward legacies of money and rank. Additionally, male and female ascetic communities sought to minimize their gendering both by taming their gendered natures and adjusting their appearances to be more androgynous, potentially making them classifiable as a third chaste gender in the middle of the flexible one-sex spectrum, which allowed them to claim

---

<sup>279</sup> Jo Ann McNamara, "An Unresolved Syllogism," in *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West*. Edited by Jacqueline Murray. New York: Garland, 1999. 1-25.

moral authority.<sup>280</sup> In the communities that rallied around this model, sometimes referred to as syneisactic, the moral ideal became equally attainable for both sexes and "natural" masculine dominance became less easy to rhetorically justify.

As time went on, however, chastity increasingly became a battleground for moral authority in the flexible frame of what is arguably a one-sex model. In the early centuries of Christianity moral authority was often ceded to "virile" women, whereas men were depicted as feminized and disempowered by their lack of control over their sexual appetites. But as male asceticism rose, more and more religious men were depicted as heroically overcoming their base natures, whereas women were increasingly seen as asexual and passive by nature, thus less virtuous in chastity—and the implication of “natural” differences of course suggesting a two-sex model. By the seventh century, McNamara argues, class status allowed many high born women to take on powerful, traditionally masculine roles including a great deal of de facto power in the clergy, and many monastic communities pushed increasingly toward the third gender as their ideal, both of which suggest the flexibility of a one-sex model where either class or holy status can allow an esteemed woman to be held as higher than a lower-class or lay man.<sup>281</sup> Seemingly in reaction to the potential loss of male control over ecclesiastical matters this might bring, many reformers like Gregory I began restricting women's engagement with the preparation for and celebration of the Sacraments and the maintenance of sacramental vessels, citing Levitical injunctions surrounding female impurity, marking women as more dissimilar from men than similar to them because of biological functions like menstruation. Further, suspicion grew that

---

<sup>280</sup> A useful analysis of the use of the category of "third gender" for chaste religious can be found in Jacqueline Murray's "One Flesh, Two Sexes, Three Genders?" in *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe: New Perspectives*. Edited by Lisa M. Bitel and Felice Lifshitz. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.

<sup>281</sup> McNamara, 10-11.

monasteries could not effectively maintain chastity when both genders were present, and spatial as well as ideological lines were drawn to increasingly separate male and female monastics. By the ninth century, women were seen as incapable of handling the strict rules like St. Benedict's that emerged to govern monastic communities.<sup>282</sup> Watered-down versions of the Benedictine Rule were adapted for use in nunneries, and clerical discourse honed in on the "natural" differences between men and women, making special note of women's inherent frailty and mental inferiority. Some women maintained various liturgical roles through these centuries, but increasingly monastic centers like the Cluniac network defined the purity of their spaces by the lack of women, more firmly establishing the dominance of the segregation of religious men and women that emerged in the eleventh century, based on two-sex model assumptions of immutable difference between men and women.<sup>283</sup>

According to McNamara, the two models nevertheless both remained as contradictory bases for the construction of gender in high and late medieval Christianity. Within the all-male ecclesiastical institutions of power now fully solidified in the Gregorian reforms, men did not need to struggle with women for moral authority:

By defining a womanless institutional space, chaste celibacy allowed men to enhance the feminine characteristics that gave them access to saintliness. Women are removed from the field of struggle, to rely passively on their bridegroom in castimony. Man confronted the enemy, lust, embodied as a woman and driven from the field.<sup>284</sup>

McNamara's use of battle imagery in discussing clerical celibacy is intentionally an homage to the many accounts of clerical masculinity that make use of this discourse. Essentially, by taking real women out the picture, male clergy were able to capitalize on both masculine and feminine

---

<sup>282</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid, 17.

spiritual and secular virtues—chastity and purity, but also aggressiveness and courage—in a derivative of the monastic third gender *and* the best of both divided genders. But for this model to work, women had to be excluded, disempowered, and cast as naturally inferior to men.

In a different essay, McNarmara does a more focused analysis of the shifts during period from 1050-1150 and argues that the brutal rhetoric condemning male clergy who focus their efforts on women emerges from this exact dilemma: if they engage directly with women as spiritual and intellectual beings, they lose the clear field to define their own masculinity without having to deal with the question of women as human.<sup>285</sup> A rise in syneisactic ideals, in which spiritual men and women lived together in chastity, fomented a huge backlash from spiritual leaders who held that men and women could never remain chaste in close proximity. Circa 1136, Bernard of Clairvaux declared these communities scandalous and essentially heretical.<sup>286</sup> Women were cloistered away for their own and for masculinity's safety, and religious men were freely able to dominate intellectual and spiritual discourse without the threat that women represented. In this context, the strictly all-male university system developed and flourished, which in turn trained Thomas Aquinas, Albertus Magnus, Meister Eckhart, and eventually Henry Suso in theology.

Another concept of the third gender is presented by R. N. Swanson, who argues that the Gregorian reform, approximately 1050-1080, created a space and demand for priests to occupy the celibate gendered category of "emasculinity."<sup>287</sup> This alternative to traditional masculinity is

---

<sup>285</sup> Jo Ann McNamara. "The Herrenfrage: The Reconstruction of the Gender System, 1050-1150" in *Medieval Masculinities*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994. 15-16.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

<sup>287</sup> R. N. Swanson, "Angels Incarnate: Clergy and Masculinity from Gregorian Reform to Reformation," in *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*. Ed. D.M. Hadley. London; New York: Longman, 1999.

tied to a hierarchical concept which is implicitly built on Pseudo-Dionysius' work in the *Celestial Hierarchy*, because in renouncing lives tied to this world, specifically in denying marriage and sexuality, priests were supposed to become "angels incarnate."<sup>288</sup> Instead of positing a view in which women and men both had equal access to a holier third gender, Swanson sees sexual renunciation as a shift that allowed men to effectively become angels, but women to effectively become men:

If the renunciation of gendered sexuality was a hierarchical shift, a step up the Ladder of Creation, the rungs may have differed for men and women. Jerome's assertion that when a woman 'wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman and will be called a man,' initiated a tradition of female 'virility' associated particularly (but not exclusively) with the adoption of a rigid regular life. Men might be similarly converted, but for them the progression was perhaps felt to be into the ranks of the angels.<sup>289</sup>

Instead of a third gender based on the malleability of the one-sex model's fluid spectrum, which proved dangerously close to the monstrous concept of the hermaphrodite, this concept creates a third gender placed neatly on top of the two-sex model, one step up for men but two steps up from women. Thus "emascularity" is a gender to which only men had access. Women could become men, but only in the context of strict monastic context which essentially cut them off from contact with men. And as has been demonstrated above, they may or may not have been considered equal to (lay)men in holiness, but when they attempted to exercise what was considered priestly authority, they were almost always struck down as insubordinate. Ever since the Gregorian Reform required celibacy of all ordained priests, divine authority was held only to be for celibate men, who were essentially upgraded to the rank of "angels."

---

<sup>288</sup> For more on Pseudo-Dionysius' cosmology, see Chapter 1.

<sup>289</sup> Swanson. 162-163.

Other scholars have contested Swanson's claim that clerics sought "emasculinity," or a loss of masculinity, instead focusing on the many ways in which the clergy often cast itself as hypermasculine in competition with secular masculinities. Like the battle motifs from the McNamara quote above, many priests appropriated the language of secular masculinities like the knight and the troubadour to establish their masculinity. Jacqueline Murray explores how these monks borrow rhetoric of spiritual and sexual battle in order to connect with secular knighthood and thus lend their monastic lifestyle a sense of true "masculinity."<sup>290</sup> Maureen Miller argues that this is particularly true in the genre of hagiography from the eleventh century onwards, which would make it especially central for discussion of the *Life*.<sup>291</sup> The specific modes in which the author of the *Life* employs these models of masculinity is explicated further by the author of this dissertation in the forthcoming volume "Beyond Heteronormativity," but elements of this hyper-masculinization will also be discussed below. For the purposes of this chapter, "emasculinity" and hypermasculinity are not seen as mutually exclusive, but rather as two mutually-reinforcing strategies that the author of the *Life* draws on to establish the Servant as authoritative in both this world and the next.

### **Male/Female Relationships in the *Life***

---

<sup>290</sup> See Murray, "Masculinizing Religious Life: Sexual Prowess, the Battle for Chastity and Monastic Identity" in *Holiness and Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, eds. P. H. Cullum and Katherine J. Lewis (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004).

<sup>291</sup> See Miller, "Masculinity, Reform, and Clerical Culture: Narratives of Episcopal Holiness in the Gregorian Era" in *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture* 72.1 (2003): 25-52.



All of this context on concepts of clerical gender is necessary backdrop for examining gender relations in Suso's writings, especially his vernacular work, which as many have argued aimed at a primarily female religious audience and focused on the pastoral care of women.<sup>292</sup> In the century or two immediately following the Gregorian reform, the dust had mostly settled, such that celibacy was more or less universally recognized as the ideal for clerics, which created the need to prove their masculinity through elaborate rhetorical devices. Intellectual discourse had been totally dominated by Scholasticism, which drew on the ideas of the early Church Fathers; the newly-translated ancient Greek philosophers; and the Arabic commentaries and sciences that were discussed in the Chapter 1. These thinkers provided intellectual and philosophical models, but especially the early Church Fathers also provided models of celibate masculinity for emulation.

Thinkers like St. Augustine of Hippo were thoroughly studied and used as models for celibate masculine identity. Medievalist Tracy Adams, for example, traces an Augustinian intellectual lineage that sought a better path to reconcile the contradictory demands of celibacy and masculine virility than the common resort to misogyny as an easy way to bolster clerical masculinity.<sup>293</sup> Rather than to fall into the easy trap of demonizing women and seeing sexual desire as inherently evil, this school of thought sought to see youthful passions toward women as something that enrich the more sedate mature quest for wisdom, based on Augustine's famous quote, "Make me continent and make me chaste, but not yet." But this thin line was always fraught, and Adams' argument betrays the difficulty for both authors and readers in this tradition

---

<sup>292</sup> For more on this, see the Introduction.

<sup>293</sup> Tracy Adams. "'Make me chaste and continent, but not yet': A Model for Clerical Masculinity?" in *Masculinities and Femininities in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*. Edited by Frederick Kiefer. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2009. 1-30.

in maintaining the proper amount of respect for sexual desire: neither too much, nor too little. Her two main texts—the letters of Heloise and Abelard (written 12<sup>th</sup> century, earliest manuscripts late 13<sup>th</sup> century), as well as the continuation of the *Roman de la Rose* by Jean de Meun (approx. 1275)—are both hotly contested for centuries thereafter, and many medieval writers argue that neither should be seen as good models for clerical masculinity. This Augustinian model of masculinity, Adams argues, eventually forsakes sexuality for the sake of male/female friendship, seeing the two as somehow mutually exclusive since the Fall of Adam (more specifically the curse on Eve), but nevertheless takes inspiration from early sexual feelings and even sexual activity as a source for an affective bond towards femininity in wiser old age.

Although this Augustinian model obviously differs significantly from the model of the Servant of Eternal Wisdom, there are key similarities that elucidate the tricky gendered dynamic between the Servant and the feminine figures presented in the text. Returning to a section of a passage examined in Chapter 3, it is clear that the Servant is presented as drawing on youthful passion to court Wisdom:

From his youth he had a heart filled with love. Now eternal Wisdom presented itself in sacred scripture as lovable as an agreeable beloved who gets herself up in finery to please male inclinations, speaking softly, [in female image], so that she might attract all hearts to her. Sometimes she would say how deceiving other lovers are but how loving and constant she is. His youthful spirit was drawn by this and he was affected like the wild animals of the forest when a panther giving off its sweet fragrance draws them to itself.<sup>294</sup>

Er hate von jugent uf ein minneriches herz. Nu erbútet sich dú ewig wisheit in der heiligen scrift als minneklich als ein lútselígu minnerin, dú sich finlich uf machet, dar umb daz si menlich wol gevalle, und redet zartlich in fröwlichem bilde, daz si ellú herzen gen ir geneigen muge. Underwilent seit si, wie betrogen ander minnerin sien und wie recht minneklich und stet aber si sie. Hie von wart sin junger müt gezogen, und geschah im von ir, als so ein pantier sinen süssen smak us lat und dú wilden tier dez waldes zú ime zúhet.<sup>295</sup>

---

<sup>294</sup> Tobin 67.

<sup>295</sup> Bihlmeyer 11:21-12:17.

Youth is repeatedly connected with passion and receptiveness to love, a common trope in both antique and high medieval poetry. But unlike Augustine, the Servant bypasses the need for actual youthful indiscretions by focusing his youthful sexual energy on an unattainable target: divine Wisdom. This shift toward forming romantic attachments with unattainable love objects is arguably influenced by tropes taken from Minnesang, in which the unattainable beloved is often seen as the ideal love object.<sup>296</sup> In this discourse unfulfilled yearning itself often seems to be the goal, rather than actual sexual encounters. This allows the author of the *Life* to draw on the discourse of romantic youth and attachment to the feminine similar to the Augustinian model of masculinity without having to compromise the Servant's highly prized virginal status, which as stated above became a vital requirement in bids for moral authority and claims to holiness after the Gregorian Reform.

Indeed, the author of the *Life* draws on similar battle discourses to those McNamara demonstrated above as part of the Servant's construction of masculinity: he is called to be a knight of God, serving Eternal Wisdom and suffering for her sake. But unlike misogynist clerical discourses which cast the allegorical female figure as lust, to be beaten on the battlefield, the Servant's main feminine figure in his chivalric self-styling is Eternal Wisdom as liege lady, whom he serves to receive her token, a little ring. The enemy is unspecified, or even unimportant: for the Servant, only oneself must be overcome, because it is the knight who suffers most without complaint who is worthy of the lady's token. As such, it could be easy to see the *Life's* model as ideal, because it casts the feminine allegorical counterpart as liege lady and love object, not as despicable enemy. And though it is certainly better than much clerical misogyny, a form of internalized misogyny persists, as the policing of affect required to be a worthy divine

---

<sup>296</sup> Barbara Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 13.

knight occurs along gendered lines. The quote from the first paragraph of this chapter, in which the Servant is told by an internal voice to essentially “man up,” portrays his disgraceful weeping as “like a woman.”<sup>297</sup>

Yet, despite this seeming misogyny, Eternal Wisdom is presented throughout Suso’s works as a very gender-ambiguous figure and could be argued to be dually sexed, as Biernoff holds of Christ’s body in bridal mysticism (discussed in Chapter 3). Indeed, the neutrally-gendered Middle High German *ewiges wisheit* [Eternal Wisdom] is a form of masculine Christ—yet in the late medieval liturgical tradition it connects to both the feminine Latin form, *Sapientia*, and the masculine Greek, *Logos* (connected to Christ in the beginning of John’s Gospel), as traced back into the Old Testament to connect to the feminine *Sophia* of the Greek Septuagint’s translation of Hebrew wisdom literature (the Books of Wisdom that the author of the *Life* specifically references as inciting his love for Eternal Wisdom).<sup>298</sup> In some symbolic contexts, Christ as *imago Dei* or *Logos* and thus as masculine divine model is preferred, but in others feminized virtues depicted as goddesses take his place. And the connection to Eternal Wisdom, both as allegorical Christ-figure *and* as feminized goddess, is the one that Suso aims to cultivate. As such, although the author of the *Life* certainly partakes of the gender concepts defined above to define the Servant’s masculinity and the femininity of his female counterparts, to get at the core of what work the text is doing with the category of gender, it seems like a theological

---

<sup>297</sup> “You miserable creature! Are you going to weep like a woman? You are disgracing yourself at the court of heaven. Wipe your eyes and act cheerful so that neither God nor man notice that you have wept because of your suffering.” Tobin 172.

„we dir, wilt du wainen als ein wip? Du geschendest dich selb in dem himelschen hove! Wüsch dinú ougen und gebar frölich, daz es weder got noch mensch innan werdet, daz du von lidens wegen habest geweinet!“ Bihlmeyer. 152: 21-24.

<sup>298</sup> For more on this, see Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, Chapter 5, *Sapientia*.

epistemology—explicating how knowledge or Wisdom is produced—is a better analytic tool. In a text in which Wisdom is repeatedly anthropomorphized and gendered both male and female, gender and human identity must be taken as also functioning as epistemological attributes, which exist in the text to help us understand different elements of the process of attaining Wisdom.

### **The Augustinian Theology of Gender and Intellect**

Augustine provides just such an epistemology, and he embeds in it a theory of gender and divine image that proved very influential in the Middle Ages. E. Ann Matter explicates this usually unarticulated but widely held medieval Christian theology of gender by examining the broadly accepted axiom from Augustine, who in *De trinitate* argues that:

Woman together with man is the image of God, so that the whole substance is one image. But when she has the role of helpmate, which pertains to her alone, she is not the image of God. But with regard to man alone, he is the image of God, just as fully and completely as he is joined with the woman into one.<sup>299</sup>

mulierem cum uiro suo esse imaginem dei ut una imago sit tota illa substantia; cum autem ad adiutorium distribuitur, quod ad eam ipsam solam attinet non est imago dei; quod autem ad uirum solum attinet imago dei est tam plena atque integra quam in unum coniuncta muliere?<sup>300</sup>

This is interpreted by most medieval theologians to mean that in her femininity, a woman is not in the image of the divine, but in her humanity, she is. Jesus' incarnation as man and common interpretations of the dual creation of man and woman in Genesis 1 and 2 solidified the

---

<sup>299</sup> E. Ann Matter. "The Undebated Debate: Gender and the Image of God in Medieval Theology" in *Gender in Debate from the Early Middle Ages to the Renaissance*. Edited by Thelma S. Fenster and Clare A. Lees. New York, N.Y.: Palgrave, 2002. 44.

<sup>300</sup> Augustine. *De trinitate* 12.7.10. Found in J.-P Migne. *Sancti Aurelii Augustini Hipponensis Episcopi Opera Omnia*. Parisiis: venit apud editorem, 1841. 1103.

standardized, divine image that humanity was created in to be masculine, and the female form was thus a deviation.<sup>301</sup> As Matter summarizes, “A woman as an embodied being (*femina, mulier*) does not participate in the image of God, but as part of the category ‘human being’ (*homo*) she does.” Every part of her being that is specifically feminine is a part that is excluded from the originary masculine creation of Adam, the true creation in divine image. Thus every specifically feminine attribute reflects Even and thus womankind's secondary creation, formed from Adam's rib.

---

<sup>301</sup> The verses in question are Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2:18, 21-22, here from the English NIV and the Latin Vulgate.

Genesis 1:27: "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." In the Vulgate: "Et creavit Deus hominem ad imaginem suam: ad imaginem Dei creavit illum, masculinum et feminam creavit eos."

Genesis 2:18: "The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.'" Vulgate: "Dixit quoque Dominus Deus: Non est bonum esse hominem solum: faciamus ei adiutorium simile sibi."

Genesis 2:21-22: "So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man." Vulgate: "Immisit ergo Dominus Deus soporem in Adam: cumque obdormisset, tulit unam de costis ejus, et replevit carnem pro ea. Et ædificavit Dominus Deus costam, quam tulerat de Adam, in mulierem: et adduxit eam ad Adam."

The first account emphasizes their similarity and common humanity, and the second their difference and women's auxiliary status. Because the woman, Eve, is created from material extracted from the man, Adam, as opposed to straight from the dust as was Adam, and she is seen as secondary. She is referred to explicitly as a help to Adam, without direct relationship or reason for her creation relative to the divine. For Augustine, this means that she is created functionally, to help and support Adam in navigating and sustaining Creation, but not with a direct orientation toward heaven or a direct correspondence to the divine image. Only insofar as she participates in the first Creation account, as a human being, does she qualify as being in the image of God. In her specific embodiment as extraction from man, in everything that makes her specifically woman, she is derivative and not reflective of the divine image. The implicit view of man as prototype and woman as deviation is especially cemented by the fact that Christ incarnated the divine as a man, which seems why it is a prevalent view in Christianity that the divine, although mysterious and infinite as the Trinity, is still decidedly masculine.

Connecting this to the one-sex and two-sex models discussed above, it is clear that Augustine's conception also relies on both a one-sex and two-sex model. To the degree that women's mutual humanity with men is emphasized it draws on a one-sex model, where both men and women can participate more or less in the idealized masculine image, Christ, who literally incarnates the divine. In this model women can just as easily be divinely virtuous and therefore masculinized, and men can just as easily be sinful and feminized. But whenever women's particular womanhood is in focus Augustine's model is solidly a two-sex one, in which men fully represent the divine image and women, in their capacity as women, fully fail to represent it.<sup>302</sup>

Augustine's model includes primary and secondary sex characteristics, but also mental quality. In Book 12, Chapter 3, a discussion of gender is implicitly embedded in a larger argument about the nature of the human mind, in which Augustine differentiates the function of the active mind (which produces *scientia* or practical knowledge) from the contemplative mind (which produces *sapientia* or wisdom) in direct analogy to the Genesis 2 account of the creation of woman from man: together they make up one mind, but the active mind is secondary, diverted from the contemplative mind as an "auxilium," or "aid," because no other help is found "among all the beasts:"<sup>303</sup>

But that of our own which thus has to do with the handling of corporeal and temporal things, is indeed rational, in that it is not common to us with the beasts; but it is drawn, as it were, out of that rational substance of our mind, by which we depend upon and cleave to the intelligible and unchangeable truth, and which is deputed to handle and direct the inferior things. For as among all the beasts there was not found for the man a help like

---

<sup>302</sup> For more on the ways in which women as women are seen as not included in the *imago Dei*, see Judith Chelius Stark, "Augustine on Women: In God's Image, but Less So," in *Feminist Interpretations of Augustine*. Edited by Judith Chelius Stark. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007.

<sup>303</sup> Although Augustine does use those specific terms, the active mind and contemplative mind are of course related to the *intellectus agens* and *intellectus possibilis*, respectively, that were discussed in Chapter 1.

him, unless one were taken from himself, and formed to be his consort: so for that mind, by which we consult the supernal and inward truth, there is no like help for such employment as man's nature requires among things corporeal out of those parts of the soul which we have in common with the beasts. And so a certain part of our reason, not separated so as to sever unity, but, as it were, diverted so as to be a help to fellowship, is parted off for the performing of its proper work. And as the two is one flesh in the case of male and female, so in the mind one nature embraces our intellect and action, or our counsel and performance, or our reason and rational appetite, or whatever other more significant terms there may be by which to express them; so that, as it was said of the former, And they two shall be in one flesh, it may be said of these, they two are in one mind.<sup>304</sup>

Illud uero nostrum quod in actione corporalium atque temporalium tractandorum ita uersatur ut non sit nobis commune cum pecore rationale est quidem, sed ex illa rationali nostrae mentis substantia qua subhaeremus intellegibili atque incommutabili ueritati tamquam ductum et inferioribus tractandis gubernandisque deputatum est. Sicut enim in omnibus pecoribus non inuentum est uiro adiutorium simile illi nisi de illo detractum in coniugium formaretur, ita menti nostrae qua supernam et internam consulimus ueritatem nullum est ad usum rerum corporalium quantum naturae hominis sat est simile adiutorium ex animae partibus quas communes cum pecoribus habemus. Et ideo quiddam rationale nostrum non ad unitatis diuortium separatum sed in auxilium societatis quasi deriuatum in sui operis dispertitur officio. Et sicut una caro est duorum in masculo et femina, sic intellectum nostrum et actionem, uel consilium et exsecutionem, uel rationem et appetitum rationalem, uel si quo alio modo significatius dici possunt, una mentis natura complectitur ut quemadmodum de illis dictum est: Erunt duo in carne una, sic his dici possit: 'Duo in mente una.'<sup>305</sup>

The two halves are unified, but one is original and one is derivative. Augustine connects by analogy the unity of the two parts of the intellect, being one mind, to the unity of man and woman, being one flesh. Throughout he uses snippets of quotes from the Vulgate Genesis 2, like “For among all the beasts there was not found for the man a help like him.” The rational mind is that which separates humanity from the beasts, but because the contemplative mind can only focus on the eternal, it could not function alone in the temporal world. As such, the active mind was extracted to help in practical engagement with the temporal Creation. The contemplative

---

<sup>304</sup> Translated by Arthur West Haddan. *From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 3. Edited by Philip Schaff. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887.

<sup>305</sup> *De trinitate* 12.3.3. Migne 999-1000.



mind allows humans to comprehend eternal truths and learn to be more than animals, but the active mind allows them to make practical use of that wisdom. Then, to syllogistically follow through on the analogy he is creating that the active mind is to the contemplative mind as man is to woman, Augustine explicitly states in Chapter 4 that image of the divine is found fully only within the contemplative mind, just as it is found fully in man. So just as women in their particularity as women are excluded from the divine image, so too the active mind in its specific function is excluded.

This creates a gendered understanding of the rational mind that clearly privileges the masculine, contemplative portion. Matter argues that “The category ‘woman,’ furthermore, is understood by Augustine to be a manifestation of the active mind (*scientia*), in contrast to the masculine part of the mind, the meditative wisdom of God (*sapientia*). Since the active mind always leads back to Creation, only the masculine principle (*sapientia*) can truly image God.”<sup>306</sup> Thus even in intellect, masculine principles are held as closer to the divine than feminine ones. And following Augustine's analogy of mental functions with the creation of women, it is clearly implicit that women, being created as a whole being to serve the same auxiliary role for men that the active mind serves for the contemplative mind, would be in all feminine mental faculties cut off from participating in the image of the divine. Thus also only insofar as a woman participates in the more masculine mental faculties can her intellect be seen as created in the image of the divine.

This distinction—that the feminine mental faculties lead further into distinction, categorization, and Creation where the masculine can mirror the universal, undifferentiated divine—is important to grasp in its contradictory complexity. Theoretically, if the divine is truly

---

<sup>306</sup> Matter. 44. She uses the terms "scientia" and "sapientia" for the parts of mind rather than the knowledge they produce, but her meaning is still clear.

understood in an apophatic, undivided sense, it would be just as much and just as little masculine as feminine. Both masculine and feminine would be equally present but not restrictively definitive within the infinity of the divine. Yet medieval theologians, even those deeply committed to a negative theology, nevertheless unquestioning followed Augustine's line of thought, that although technically each gender is equally non-representative of the ungendered/universally-gendered divine, the masculine was more in tune with that tuneless/infinately-tuned ultimate being. It is certainly a testament to the ability of narrative (here the Genesis account of the creation) and doctrinal ambiguity (the ambiguity around divine gender because of the [male] Incarnation) to inflect and shape theoretical concepts, even when it contradicts the central tenets of the theoretical framework. Seeming contradiction in divine nature—not gendered but still more masculine—could easily be dismissed as necessary mystery, because the divine is of course always beyond full human comprehension, but in this case it has specific and long-lasting impact on the view of human nature, essentially barring women from theological pursuits for millennia because their role as "helpmeets" did not match their bodies or their minds to the divine prototype or to the pursuit of divine wisdom, *sapientia*.

Matter goes on to discuss several cases of women whom she argues subvert this logic, using the arguably masculine language of *imitatio Christi* to describe their religious experiences, even while their confessors and hagiographers chose more classic feminine imagery like bridal mysticism to describe them. Matter sees Catherine of Siena's description of her personal stigmata (which was visible only to Catherine herself, at her request) as "a clear example of the sort of *imitatio Christi* that follows from an Augustinian understanding of the relationship between the creation of human beings in the image of God and the incarnation of God in human

form.”<sup>307</sup> Figures like Catherine and Hildegard of Bingen describe themselves using terms that carry ecclesiastical authority and weight, such as prophetess and *apostola*, but are described by their confessors as brides of Christ. Matter shows that there is an explicit connection for many ecclesiastical authorities between women’s participation in the divine image and their ability to wield holy authority, as in the following canon law gloss connecting two papal letters (dated 1210 and 1222), both of which banned abbesses from performing functions that would have been under the normal jurisdiction of an abbot: “A woman should not have such power, since she is not made in the image of God, but man is the image and glory of God, and the woman should be subject to the man and should be his handmaid.”<sup>308</sup> Because of her female embodiment, a woman could claim no authority to act in the divine name or with divine authority, except where it was sanctioned by a male ecclesiastical superior. Nevertheless, a certain spiritual elite of women could mobilize their humanity to give them the right to imitation of Christ and participation in divine image as humans, so long as their actions were likewise sanctioned. And quite frequently, in order to discourage other women from overstepping their bounds, their relationship with the divine was recast by their confessors and biographers as brides of Christ, undercutting the more authoritative titles the women gave themselves.

To put this in the context of some important insights from the previous chapters, remember from the introduction that Meister Eckhart, Suso's teacher, declares reason or *vernünfticheit* to be an image, specifically the divine image, drawing directly on the Augustinian line of thought. This image mediates between the Soul and the apophatic divine core or *grunt*. In

---

<sup>307</sup> Matter. 49. Matter could do more to explicate exactly how and why this kind of imitatio Christi requires and assumes a participation in the imago Dei, since there seem to be complex considerations for how *imitatio* works differently in each of these texts, but she is limited by the span of a relatively short chapter.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid.

Chapter 1 it became clear that there is a Neoplatonic chain in how this type of image is theologically construed. For Christ is the *imago patris*, the image of the Father, but the soul is *ad imaginem dei*, created according to the image of God, but not ontologically identical.<sup>309</sup> There is a degree of separation between the Soul and Christ in terms of how they function as images of the divine. Even the Soul only mirrors the divine in its uppermost part: "The soul is formed like God as to its highest part, but an angel is a closer image of God," "diu sêle ist gebildet nâch gote an irme obersten teile; aber der engel ist ein nâher bilde gotes."<sup>310</sup> In classic Neoplatonic style, following the Celestial Hierarchy of Pseudo-Dionysius, angels are the intermediaries and closer images of the divine. In this system, with women in their form and role as women analogically tied to the lower mental functions, they would also participate less directly in the image of the divine, and would implicitly be one step lower on the celestial hierarchy than men. Since the function of each level of the hierarchy is also to serve as messenger or a mode of transmission of wisdom downwards, men become the natural spiritual intermediaries for women, and women who claim too high an authority on their own are in danger of forgetting the nature of their creation or of flouting the ontological distance that separates them from men and thus from participating directly in the divine image.

This hierarchy is also reproduced in the trope of bridal mysticism, but reduced to a single dyad—the divine, masculine Christ who is the bridegroom and the mortal, feminine Soul who is the bride. As was mentioned in Chapter 3, Christ is complete in and of himself; he is both "masculine (the second person of the Trinity and heavenly Bridegroom) *and* feminine (formed

---

<sup>309</sup> "Filius enim imago est patris, et anima ad imaginem dei." Meister Eckhart. *Die Lateinischen Werke*. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1936. II, 615.11-12.

<sup>310</sup> *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher*. Ed. Bernard McGinn. 245. Eckhart, *Werke*. Edited by Niklaus Largier. Frankfurt am Main: Deutsche Klassiker Verlag, 2008. I, 40.33-42.1.

out of the immaculate flesh of his virginal mother and identified with her in his intercessory and nurturing role).<sup>311</sup> Here, too, Christ is the *imago Dei*, or "image of God," not simply *ad imaginem Dei*, "after the model of the image of God," as humans are. Thus Christ, like Adam, participates more fully in the divine image, because he literally *is* the divine image, and the Soul, like Eve, requires union with Christ to participate fully in that divinity.

The use of bridal imagery is not superfluous: also in Chapter 1 the Victorine affective branch of the apophatic theological tradition was introduced, which holds that it is love that bridges the final insurmountable gap between created, temporal human Soul and the uncreated, infinite divine. Although the Victorines like Hugh and Richard of St. Victor held that love was above wisdom in the divine hierarchy, for Suso it clearly love forms the affective bond to Wisdom, and Wisdom acts as ferryman or psychopomp to breach the divine, transforming and negating the Soul from the inside out until unity with the divine is achieved, and the Soul as such is annihilated. This is also why celibacy becomes so important, because in Suso's model love is to be saved for that one being that can actually bridge the gap. Loving the world by loving a created being like a woman or a man is spiritual death, because that love cannot spark the epistemological change, the realization of full divine truth, that Wisdom can.

### **Gendered Intellectual Hierarchy in *The Life of the Servant***

What makes the author's model of male/female relationship in the *Life* interesting is that it does not simply take the insistence of women's intellectual and bodily inferiority as grounds to limit contact with them, pursuing holiness alone. Instead, it takes Augustine's insistence that

---

<sup>311</sup> Suzannah Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. 155.

women are a necessary helpmeet at face value and sees the proper male/female relationship as one of mutualistic friendship and assistance in achieving the mutual epistemological goal of attaining wisdom. Men and women both have aspects of the work of knowledge production that they are better suited to. But hierarchy is nonetheless maintained, and the man remains the guide and priestly authority for the woman. The perfect dyad could be represented as the male confessor/female confessee dynamic, in which she wrestles with the trials of the world and he provides spiritual wisdom, guidance, and official sanction. And indeed, as described above, the variation on this dyad that female mystics participated in—describing their experiences of the divine in the world which were filtered, questioned, and written down by their confessors—produced massive amounts of mystic literature in the centuries surrounding Suso’s time, and this format was one of the few that gave any kind of public spiritual or intellectual work to women to do.

The Servant’s relationship with Elsbeth Stigel, as depicted in the *Life* inverts this common formula in a way that actually makes it truer to the Augustinian gender hierarchy. There is a role reversal in the frame narrative, in that a female acquaintance, almost universally presumed to be his spiritual daughter Elsbeth Stigel, is shown in the role of biographer and the Servant, Suso’s textual alter ego, is depicted as a servant and later spouse of Eternal Wisdom. The gendered power dynamic of confessor/confessee remains between the Servant and Stigel, however, as the Servant’s initial and final responses indicate:

There was a Friar Preacher in Germany, a Swabian by birth. May his name be written in the book of life. He had longed to become and be called a servant of eternal Wisdom. He had become acquainted with a holy enlightened person who was beset with hardship and suffering in this world. This person asked of him that he tell her from his own experience something about his sufferings so that her own stricken heart might take strength from it, and she kept after him a long time. When he would visit her, she would draw him out with personal questions about his beginning and progress, about some of his practices and the sufferings he had experienced. He told her about these things in spiritual confidence.

Because she found comfort and guidance in these things, she wrote it all down as a help for herself and for others as well; but she did this surreptitiously so that he would know nothing about it. Sometime later, when he became aware of this spiritual theft, he reproached her for it and she had to hand it over to him. He took and burned everything he got hold of at that time. When he got the rest of it and was about to do the same with it, this was hindered by a celestial message from God which prevented it. Thus what follows remained unburned, as she wrote most of it with her own hand. A bit of good instruction was added by him in her person after her death.<sup>312</sup>

Es waz ein brediger in tútschem lande, von geburt ein Swabe, dez nam geschriben sie an dem lebenden bu°ch. Der hat begird, daz er wurde und hiesse ein diner der ewigen wisheit. Er gewan kuntsami eins heiligen erlúhten menschen, der ein vil erbetseliger lidender mensch waz in diser welt. Der mensch begert von im, daz er ir etwaz seiti von lidene usser eigenr enpfíndunge, dar abe ir lidendes herz ein kraft mo°chti nemen; und daz treib si vil zites mit ime. Wenn er zu° ir kom, do zoch si im us mit heinlichen fragen die wise sines anvanges und fúrgangs und etlich u°bungen und liden, die er hat gehabt, dú seit er ir in go°tlicher heimlichí. Do si von den dingen trost und wisung bevand, do schreib si es alles an, ir selb und och andren ze einem behelfen, und tet daz verstoln vor ime, daz er nút dur von wúste. Dar na neiswen, do er diser geischlichen dúpstal innen ward, do straft er si dar umbe, und mu°ste im es her us geben. Er nam es und verbrand es alles, daz im do ward. Do ime daz ander teil ward und er im in glicher wise och also wolt han getan, do ward er understanden mit himelscher botschaft von got, dú im do geschah, dú daz wante. Und es bleib dis nagende unverbrennet, als si es den meren teil mit ir selbes handen hate geschriben. Etwaz gu°ter lere wart och na ir tode in ir person von im dur zu° geleit.<sup>313</sup>

The hierarchy is still clear, as it is *his* permission required for his spiritual property, which otherwise qualifies her biographical work as "spiritual theft," and *his* authoritative punishment is meted out for the infringement. The figure who must intervene in order to save the work is the hierarchally-superior God. Even then the Servant retains textual control, adding to the work and performing editorial work after Stagel's death, but he does so "in her person," ceding authorial credit even for the part he did write. Although she is referred to throughout as a "Mensch" or "person," emphasizing her humanity over her femininity, the power dynamic here is still

---

<sup>312</sup> Tobin 63.

<sup>313</sup> Bihlmeyer 7:2-8:3.

inflected by the gendered hierarchy discussed above and inherent to all late medieval male/female confessional relationships.

Despite the focus on her "personhood," this series of actions mirrors the gendered intellectual dynamic that Augustine laid out. Stigel acts essentially as the active mind and helpmeet to adapt practical guidance, *scientia*, from the eternal truth, *sapientia*, that the Servant as contemplative mind has gleaned. He is the one who receives the heavenly truth, both the original wisdom and the specific celestial message to retain the second part of the writings. The experience and truth belongs to him, and he is even explicitly named as the servant of Wisdom, which translates into Latin as *sapientia*, marking him quite clearly as the contemplative mind. But the actual text, as a product or representation of *scientia*, belongs to her, even those portions the Servant admits to producing. The hierarchy is clear: the guidance is passed from Wisdom, who as a figuration of Christ is the true and pure image of the divine, to the male servant, finally to the woman.

One of the important concepts to take away from this re-thinking of the prologue to the *Life* is to follow the argument that many scholars make to its logical conclusion, that the prologue cannot be taken entirely at face value for historical and textual veracity, but must also be seen as allegorical or at the very least adapting to accommodate common literary tropes. Hagiography was a literary genre, and one that always had a utilitarian relationship to what one might call objective historical truth. But more than just the humility trope that other scholars have frequently identified, which the presumed male single author might have used to justify producing an otherwise seemingly prideful autobiographical text, one must also consider this as part of the wider allegorical tradition of medieval religious literature. In producing a text that claims to provide access to wisdom by providing a way of connecting with Eternal Wisdom, the



author of the *Life* provides an explanation of how this text fits within the epistemological models of the medieval world, but in narrative rather than treatise or argumentative format, because he is writing a narrative text for an audience trained to understand these truths through religious narrative. Contemporary readers are not used to the idea of grasping theoretical ideas through allegorical narrative, but this would have been more intuitive way to most medieval thinkers to grasp abstract concepts than treatises or scientific formulae. Other texts in the Exemplar like the *Little Book of Truth* or the *Book of Eternal Truth* take dialogic formats to make more classic theological arguments, and in the case of the *Book of Eternal Wisdom* this is likely a function of audience and time of life, since Suso wrote that text just after his studies and in the context of a high-stakes theological debate, in which his and his mentor's reputations were at stake. But the *Life* presents itself as both a hagiographic text and practical manual for spiritual development, and thus it offers in its prologue the basic elements necessary for spiritual growth: personal experience, the experiences of other holy persons, mentorship, and the occasional direct approbation from the divine through the properly gendered channels of priesthood authority. Gender determines the role in the narrative and in the epistemological model—which are one and the same—that each figure gets to play.

Indeed, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the Servant advises Stigel away from certain more extreme ascetic practices which he performed on himself, which she sought to do in the name of *imitatio Christi* by following the Desert Fathers, because it is inappropriate to her sex and her nature:

The servant sent these models and teachings of the desert fathers to his spiritual daughter. She took this to heart and interpreted it to mean that he thought that she, too, should chastise her body in the severe manner of the desert fathers. And she began to subjugate herself and to torture herself with hair shirts, ropes and terrible bonds, with pointed iron nails and many other things.

When the Servant became aware of this, he sent her the following message: "Dear daughter, if you intend to order your spiritual life according to my teachings, as you had requested of me, then put aside such exaggerated severity because it is out of keeping with your weakness as a woman and your [well-ordered nature]. Dear Christ did not say, 'Take up my cross,' He said, 'Everyone should take up his own cross.'"<sup>314</sup>

Disú bild und lere der alten veter sante der diener siner geischlichen tochter, und si nam es in sich und kerte es uf den weg, daz er meinde da mite, daz si nah der alten veter wise iren lip oh mit grosser kestgung so<sup>e</sup>lti u<sup>e</sup>ben, und vie an, ir selben ab ze brechene und sich ze pingen mit herinen hemdern und mit seiln und grúlichen banden, mit scharpfen isninen nageln und dez gelich vil.

Do der diner dez innen ward, do enbot er ir also: "liebú tochter, wilt du din geischliches leben nah miner lere rihten, als du es an mich hast gevordret, so lasse so<sup>e</sup>lich úbrig strenkheit underwegen, wan es diner fro<sup>e</sup>wlichen krankheit und wol geordneten nature nit zu<sup>o</sup> geho<sup>e</sup>ret. Der lieb Cristus sprach nút: 'nement min krúz uf úch,' er sprach: 'ieder mensch neme sin krúz uf sich!'"<sup>315</sup>

His request that she refrain from direct imitation in the form of physically rigorous ascetic practice must be read in the context of this dissertation's work around Suso's concept of "image" and Matter's explication of how medieval religious women were and were not allowed to participate in the divine image. This is especially noticeable when the role model presented by the desert fathers is referred to in the first line as "bild," translated by Tobin as "models" but more directly meaning "images." Stagel is also distanced from direct *imitatio Christi*, in that the Servant shifts away from the common exhortation to follow Christ directly, as a mirror image, and focuses on the uniqueness of each individual's personal "cross."

The focus on the individual seems out of place in the midst of an otherwise Eckhartian model of mysticism, which would otherwise require that all individuality be stripped away in pursuit of the undifferentiated, universal *grunt*, or foundation, that is the essence of the divine. But here, because her femininity is in focus, the Servant either consciously or unconsciously invokes a gendered division that Matter discussed above: unlike the masculinized Augustinian

---

<sup>314</sup> Tobin 139-140.

<sup>315</sup> Bihlmeyer 107:1-12.

*sapientia* that naturally returns to the divine image, Stigel's feminized "wol geordneten nature"—originally translated as "physical well being" but better translated more directly as "well-ordered nature"—mirrors the *scientia* that returns to Creation, to the individual, rather than the universal. *Scientia* is the mental function which orders and catalogues, specifying and individualizing experience. Insofar as she is female-bodied she must submit to the requirements and restrictions that her body presents within the terrestrial hierarchy of post-lapsarian Creation, subject to men as Eve was to Adam. And it is through the Desert Fathers, the epitome of representations of the contemplative mind, that she is to gain her wisdom—but not by mimicking their actions. That route is closed to her, because it is too direct; her feminine body and feminine mind are not suited to receive that wisdom directly. Instead, she must learn through their passed down wisdom, accepting her place one rung down on the epistemological hierarchy.

This assembly line of *sapientia* production is reflected most directly in the way that physical iconography is handled in the *Life*. The Servant crafts his own iconography when he cuts the monogram IHC into his chest in the fourth chapter. He thus imprints his body with a multivalent symbol, the IHC representing the Word or *Logos* that is Christ, in a literal sense written on his heart through the scarring that follows his pious act of self-mutilation. The way that it is represented in the Strasbourg MS 2.929 manuscript, the IHC clearly functions as word and image, holy symbol and semi-transubstantiated body of Christ in a complex manner, likely meant to indicate its own insufficiency as a symbol in representing the figure of Christ/*Logos*, similar to the media disjuncture discussed in Chapter 3. The monogram is always written in red ink and on Folio 7L it is visibly bleeding off the margins, see Figure 4.1.<sup>316</sup> It is always

---

<sup>316</sup> This kind of book- or page-as-body imagery is common in mystic texts in this period. For more information on Suso and other contemporaries use of this kind of imagery, see Steven J.

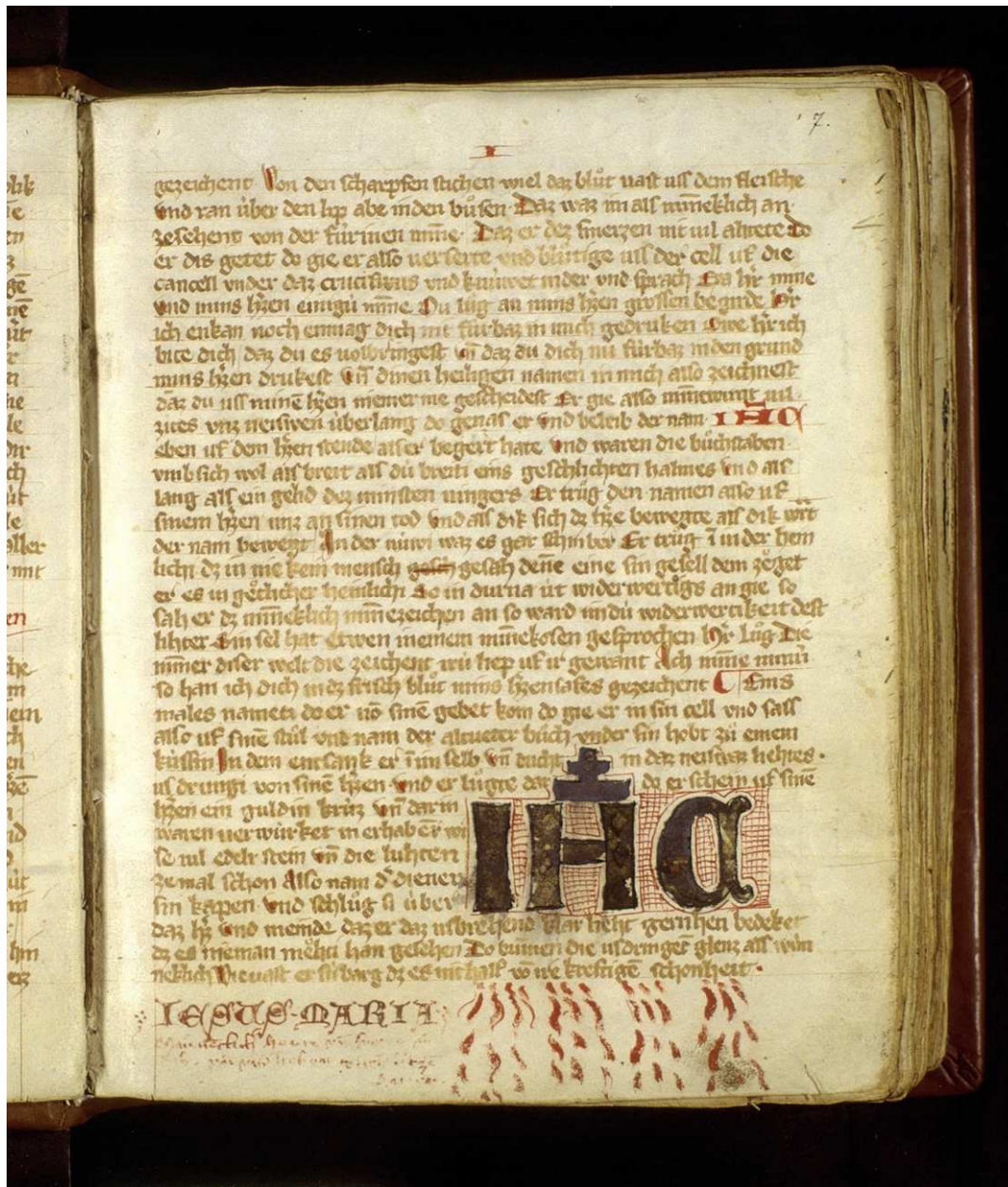


Figure 4.1. Strasbourg MS 2.929 Folio 71L. The monogram can be seen twice on this page, on the 11<sup>th</sup> line as it appears most often throughout the text, written in red ink, all capitals, with a horizontal line above the H. Toward the bottom it larger, in black on a red field, taking up a full 5 to 7 lines in height and bearing the mark above the H that could be one of three things: 1) the cross on top of the ground; 2) the cross embedded in a crown, worn by the monogram; or 3) the cross combined with the horizontal diacritical mark that accompanies the H throughout the rest of the text in order to make clear that the diacritical mark is shorthand for the cross.

Rozenski, "Henry Suso's Horologium Sapientiae in Fifteenth-Century France: Images of Reading and Writing in Brussels Royal Library Ms Iv 111." *Word & Image*. 26.4 (2010): 364-380.

diacritically marked by a cross-line above the H to demarcate the cross of Christ. In Chapter 22, the Servant is gifted a halo of white and red roses as well as rose stigmata on both hands and feet in visions that his spiritual daughter Anna and he himself received. These mark him as the Servant of Eternal Wisdom; indeed, Anna has trouble recognizing him among the many brothers in a crowd in her vision, but is told that he can be identified by the rose halo, which represent his sufferings.<sup>317</sup>

Later, in the 45<sup>th</sup> chapter, Stigel's role is to process and disseminate the monogram through embroidery, the most definitively feminine form of creative labor available:

When this aforementioned holy daughter noticed repeatedly that her spiritual father had such great devotion to and firm faith in the beloved name of Jesus, which he carried over his heart, she developed a special love for it; and she piously sewed this same name of Jesus in red silk onto a small piece of cloth in this form, IHS, which she herself intended to wear secretly. She repeated this countless times [lit. made from this name countless names] and brought it about that the servant put them all over his bare breast. She would then send them all over, with a religious blessing to his spiritual children. She was informed by God: Whoever thus wore this name and recited an Our Father daily for God's honor would be treated kindly by God, and God would give him his grace on his final journey.

Such austere practices and the divine example [lit. godly images] of Jesus Christ and his dear friends formed the beginning for this holy daughter.<sup>318</sup>

Do disú vor genantú heiliú tochter hat gemerket menigvalteklich, daz ire geischlich vater so grossen andaht und gu<sup>o</sup>ten globen hate zu<sup>o</sup> dem minneklichen namen Jesus, den er uf sinem herzen tru<sup>o</sup>g, do gewan sie ein sunder minne dur zu<sup>o</sup>, und in einem gu<sup>o</sup>ten andaht do nate si den selben namen Jesus mit roter siden uf ein kleines tu<sup>e</sup>chli in diser gestalt: IHS, den si ir selben wolte heinlich tragen. Und machete do dez selben namen glich unzallichen vil namen und schu<sup>o</sup>f, daz der diener die namen alle uf sin herz bloss leit und sú mit einem go<sup>t</sup>lichen segen sinen geischlichen kinden hin und her sante. Und ir ward kund getan von gote: wer den namen also bi im tru<sup>e</sup>ge und im teglich ze eren ein Pater noster sprech, dem wo<sup>e</sup>lte got hie gu<sup>t</sup>lich tu<sup>o</sup>n und wo<sup>e</sup>lti in begnaden an siner jungsten hinvert.

Mit so<sup>e</sup>lichen strengen u<sup>e</sup>bungen und mit go<sup>t</sup>lichen bilden Jesu Cristi und siner lieben frúnden waz der anvang diser heiligen tochter gebildet.<sup>319</sup>

---

<sup>317</sup> Bihlmeyer 64:5-11. Tobin 106-107.

<sup>318</sup> Tobin 173-174.

<sup>319</sup> Bihlmeyer 154:3-155:10.

Each scrap physically touches the Servant's scar, creating a physical link between the embodied mark of his intellectual and affective link to Wisdom. Stigel's role as intermediary between the the Servant as contemplative party, who receives the Wisdom, and the outside world mark her as the active mind. His special love for the holy name also transfers to her, as she, noting his devotion, develops her own. Together with the symbol of Wisdom, the divine monogram, a bundle including wisdom, divine favor, and an affective bond are transferred, if the person performs the necessary devotions—such as the sincere recitation of a daily Our Father. Further, where for Stigel the bodily asceticism of the Desert Fathers was “exaggerated severity,” this kind of women’s work represents her spiritual “beginning” and her gender-appropriate “austere practices.”

The illumination which accompanies chapter 45, see Figure 4.2, even more firmly cements this gendered hierarchy of spiritual wisdom dissemination. In this image, an androgynous Eternal Wisdom reigns over all as the Servant hands his icons, the rose halo and the IHS, laterally over to Stigel, seated and throned like the Virgin Mary. Stigel, in turn, disseminates slips with the name sideways and downwards to individuals reaching up. Each horizontal level represents a rung of the hierarchy. Eternal Wisdom is above, the highest peak of the hierarchy, and a figuration of Ecclesia, the allegorical figure of Holy Mother Church, bearing the cross staff and the crown which are her icons. For another example of Ecclesia’s iconography, see Figure 4.3. As the Church, Ecclesia, Christ would be Wisdom’s divine head and the members her mortal body, and in this image the mantel demarcates that difference.<sup>320</sup>

---

<sup>320</sup> This is building on a metaphor from 1 Corinthians 12, in which the varied members of the Christian faith are described as parts of one body, which have different functions but all serve the greater good of the whole.





Figure 4.2. BNU MS 2.929 Folio 68R. An allegorical depiction of the gendered process of wisdom production and distribution that the *Life* narratively instantiates. Eternal Wisdom as Ecclesia reigns over, with her mantel enveloping those below more or less fully according to their hierarchical status, established by holiness. The monogram HIS and the rose halo which the Servant, center left, have received throughout his experiences are passed to an enthroned Stagel, center, who is being crowned by an angel like Mary. Beside Stagel is a book, a representation of the *Life*, which she helped create based on the Servant's experiential wisdom. To her right are a Dominican nun and monk, below her various laypeople, all of whom reach toward her to receive the many monograms being distributed, one for each recipient.







The angel is just below Wisdom, but above Stigel, passing down the heavenly crown from on high. The angel is an intermediary, by straddling the border between the blank space above—in which only celestial figures are depicted—it serves as the medium of communication from the above portion, containing the head of Wisdom, and the lower portion, containing Wisdom's body and the various holy persons, all included in the body as members of the Church and thus the body of Christ/Wisdom. The Servant and Stigel are in the middle of the page, firmly in the mantel and thus firmly at the core of the ecclesiastical body. They are at the same horizontal level, perhaps signifying that like the two halves of the Augustinian mind they are one, despite being dual in purpose. Stigel bears the book, a reference back to her authorial credit from the prologue and the *scientia*-ific product of the active mind. There is another pair, a monk and a nun, who are at the same level, presumably because they also participate in spiritual knowledge production and the special holy status imparted by celibacy. They may even symbolize a further male/female contemplative/active mental pair. Those below are the other recipients, dressed as laypeople, who as Christians are half covered by the mantel of Wisdom but are also half excluded, presumably because they are not celibate and thus cannot maintain the proper and exclusive affective relationship to Wisdom. The figures at each level of the hierarchy tilt their heads upward to receive wisdom from above, following the Dionysian epistemological hierarchy.

This image captures much of the essence of what the author of the *Life* seems to doing in terms of gender: men are still the immediate recipients of divine wisdom, and women receive it from them. But inasmuch as they continue the dissemination of the love of wisdom to others, thus fulfilling their divinely-ordained role as spiritual helpmeets, they are praised and even exalted. They are depicted here at the same level as monks, not one rung down. They have a

function as women, and though it may be a secondary or "auxiliary" function, they receive arguably the same status for fulfilling it as men do for fulfilling theirs. But the question is where this image fits into the greater Neoplatonic cycle. If it shows Stigel at the end of her journey, being received in the final divine abyss, there would be no distinction between men and women, monks and nuns, contemplative or active mind. But if this image represents Stigel's status while still in the created world, it would seem to buck the gender hierarchy that is supported everywhere else.

One could, of course, argue that this is simply a function of the intended audience. Scholars like Jeffrey Hamburger have argued that text is aimed primarily at female religious, as part of Suso's lifelong commitment to *cura monialium*, the pastoral care of nuns. Under this line of argumentation, since the text focuses on the female religious path, it would seem unnecessary to focus on the male pathway from man to Swansonian emascularity—instead only the Jeromian female ascendance to masculinity would need to be depicted. The image certainly depicts a kind of spiritual ascension for Stigel, with the crowning by an angel clearly mirroring images of the coronation of the Virgin Mary, which was an especially popular theme in altar paintings and Gothic cathedral portals during this period, but also emerges frequently in mystic texts as imagery for female saints and holy figures. The connection to Mary has deep significance, since she is the one who bore the masculine divine Word/Wisdom into the world, incarnated as Jesus Christ. As such, she physically fulfilled the virginal birthing that the Soul should perform in order to develop its connection to the Eckhartian apophatic *grunt*.<sup>321</sup> This spiritual birthing of Wisdom into the world that Mary does with her physical body is corollary to the feminine intellectual work that the active mind is created to perform, to bring wisdom from the

---

<sup>321</sup> Meister Eckhart develops this metaphor in his famous Sermon 2. *Werke*, I, 24-37.

contemplative mind to bear in the outside world. It is the highest purpose of the Soul, because it leads the Soul to reunite with the source of both Eternal Wisdom and intellectual wisdom, the divine.

But if one looks at the structure of the *Life* as a whole book, a different audience concept may emerge. Frank Tobin holds that the *Life* is divided in two parts that focus in the first on the Servant and in the second on the Servant's spiritual daughters, most specifically Stigel.<sup>322</sup> Returning to the frame narrative of the prologue, one could easily argue that Part 1 is or is based most heavily on the material written by Stigel: it focuses on the Servant and his personal experiences, which is exactly what Stigel was secretively writing down. This is reinforced by the title before the prologue in most manuscripts, which could be read to identify just Part 1 of the *Life* as called "Suso."<sup>323</sup> But Part 2 shifts largely focus away from the Servant as a figure unto himself and focuses more on his relationship to his spiritual daughters, especially Stigel. It thus seems logical that the entirety of Part 2 is that portion supposedly added by the Servant, focusing on Stigel and thus writing "in her person" or on her behalf.<sup>324</sup> This would indicate a dual audience for the *Life*: the first portion aimed at a male audience and demonstrating how to receive wisdom directly through the example of the Servant; the second aimed at women and demonstrating how to handle the wisdom passed on by spiritual mentors. Or, arguably, the entire structure simply recreates the epistemological process that is introduced in the beginning: first

---

<sup>322</sup> Frank Tobin, "Henry Suso and Elsbeth Stigel," in *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and their Interpreters*, ed. Catherine M. Mooney (Philadelphia: University Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 134.

<sup>323</sup> The Tobin translation loses this potential nuance from the original Middle High German. "Hie vahet an daz erste tail dizz bu<sup>o</sup>ches, daz da haisset der Suse." Bihlmeyer 7:1.

<sup>324</sup> Tobin argues that this portion might refer only to final chapters, 46-53, but later that Stigel is his audience throughout Part 2. Tobin, "Henry Suso and Elsbeth Stigel." 121 and 134.

wisdom is gained through affective and intellectual experience, then put made practical through mentorship that passes the wisdom on. Which is as much as to say, first the contemplative mind receives the wisdom, and then the active mind makes use of it. The contemplative mind is engaged in the Part 1, and the active mind in Part 2. Part 1 depicts the production of *sapientia*, Part 2 *scientia*.

## Conclusion

As such, Suso ultimately seems to come down on the side of a two-sex model, but a less misogynist one than usual, in which women and men in their particular, differentiated functions equally have access to holy status. Women are encouraged to take on *imitatio Christi* practices, *u<sup>e</sup>bungen*, that befit their feminine body and feminine nature. They are not suited to harsh physical asceticism, but should instead hope that they are sent passive suffering such as sickness. Indeed, at the end of the chapter in which the Servant admonishes Stigel to cease her direct imitation of the Desert Fathers, she becomes almost deathly ill.<sup>325</sup> Though he is not happy to lose her skills as a scribe, he is told by angels not to complain because this is her personal cross to bear:

because God had ordained sickness for you for the best of reasons. This was to be your cross in time. With it you should gain great graces here and abundant reward in heaven.

wan got heti den siechtagen úber dich verhenget dur daz aller beste, und daz so<sup>e</sup>lti din krúz sin in diser zit, da mit du so<sup>e</sup>ltist erwerben gross gnad hie und manigvaltigen lon in dem himelrich.<sup>326</sup>

---

<sup>325</sup> Bihlmeyer 109:2-3.

<sup>326</sup> Bihlmeyer 109:22-25.

The focus on this, her individual cross to bear in time, i.e. the temporal created realm, rather than the masculine *imitatio* practiced by the Desert Fathers and other male clergy who participate fully in the divine image, reflects that she as a woman has individual limiting circumstances. He argues that this individuality should be true for all people, and that we should not judge others' ascetic practices because we do not know their personal cross nor their capacity for endurance, but it nonetheless remains that there is also a clear gendered aspect in his teachings about which persons might individually be called to practice active physical ascetic self-harm.

There are also certainly vestiges of the one-sex, third-gender hierarchy in his model, most noticeably in the gendered epistemological model that the Servant and Stigel embody within the narrative. The roles bring both into relationship with Eternal Wisdom, but the Servant is the initiator of his mystic marriage, seeking out Eternal Wisdom's love, where Stigel must learn it indirectly through her male spiritual mentor. He is allowed to take instructive suffering on himself, whereas Stigel is required to accept the passive suffering of being stuck sick, because she is reproached for seeking out her own. At every turn where she takes initiative for herself, she is criticized and punished, even when that initiative is ultimately useful, like the initial notes that become the *Life*, which essentially bars her from forging her own spiritual path, as the Servant so clearly does. Her role in the hierarchy is to accept what she receives from her mentor and pass it on, not to develop anything new.

But it is very important to keep in mind that these divisions only have relevance in the created world. The apophatic theologians of the medieval Christian church did not project any of the same similarities to the hereafter that modern Christians tend to. The afterlife was not a place in which gendered persons wandered around in resurrected bodies similar to their earthly counterparts. The goal was unification with the divine abyss, which required total and utter loss

of every attribute that makes one an individual, including gender. In this way, apophatic theology provided a more egalitarian (after)worldview than other dominant strains of Christian theology. This may be why there are no gendered hierarchical divisions in the depiction of Stigel's coronation as she distributes the divine name. Or it may be a radical interpretation of the necessity of all members within the greater ecclesiastical whole. In any case, Suso's theological system—although inflected by the cultural concepts of gender in both courtly and ecclesiastical circles and the theological underpinnings of how he understood the human mind and human Soul—nevertheless focuses on women's usefulness and power in the world. He takes the time and energy to do what so few other male theologians in his day do, to explicate the ways that women can help, to give praise and power, however limited, to women who want to seek spiritual progress, and not just on an individual, pastoral level, but through a narrative that plays it out on both a temporal and cosmic level.

## Conclusion

### What is the Unique Contribution of This Study?

Many scholars have tackled the question of Suso and visuality. But none up until now had engaged with the science behind his visuality, and how he draws on scientific discourse and debates to inform his wider cosmology, including his theology, his anthropology, and his epistemology—which for Suso is the core connection between the theological and the anthropological, between the divine and the human. The medieval science of sight, for which Suso owes so much to Ibn Al-Haytham and his European interpreters, is central to Suso's understanding of how to connect with the divine, the main pedagogical goal of his texts, and thus it must be seen as central to his entire project in the *Exemplar*.

This visuality influences every aspect of his works. It is palpable in his romantic exchanges with Eternal Wisdom, and thus in the way he engages with religious tropes like bridal mysticism and with secular literary genres like courtly love literature. It is central to his understanding of what it means to be human, seeking the divine, and thus it is central to every single figure in the text, as all of them are more or less engaged in the pursuit of spirituality. It is central to his theology and Christology, as all true knowledge of the divine passes through the visual epistemology facilitated by Christ as *imago Dei*. Thus it is also at the heart of his *imitatio Christi* and all the ascetic practices that follow from the desire to meditate on and imitate Christ's

Passion. Christ's Passion is the suffering after which proper human suffering is to be modeled, which also makes visibility central to Suso's various theological concepts, like *gelassenheit*. It appears impossible to find an aspect of Suso's writing that is not influenced by this concept of visibility.

## **Review of Arguments**

The first chapter followed the methods of intellectual history, mapping the intersection between visibility discourse and ontology in Christian apophatic theology and the medieval sciences, beginning with Pseudo-Dionysius' formative work in the fifth century and ended with Suso in the fourteenth. The chapter traced the origins of Christian apophatic theology to Plotinus and the influence of the ancient Neoplatonic philosophical tradition. Pseudo-Dionysius adapted the core concepts from Neoplatonic philosophy for Christianity crafting a novel Christian negative theology. Pseudo-Dionysius attempted to situate this theology at the beginning of Christian history by taking the name of Dionysius the Areopagite, a peripheral New Testament figure. Where Pseudo-Dionysius focused on problems of language in speaking of and naming the divine, his Carolingian translators and commentators inserted the dual questions of emotion and visibility, perhaps due to the intellectual influence of Byzantine iconoclastic debates and their wariness toward images of the divine. In the following centuries, many classical philosophical texts thought lost were recovered from Arabic translations and translated into Latin, which prompted a rise in Scholastic engagement with natural philosophy. Scholastics drew on the translations of ancient philosophical texts and on the Arab commentaries, together with vital Arab scientific and physiological work. All this became the basis for Scholastic natural



philosophy. Ibn Al-Haytham's work on optics essentially solved ancient debates on vision, and the resurgence of the question of vision and these ancient debates became central in the writings of Meister Eckhart. Eckhart saw visuality as a way to understand the relationship between the individual and the apophatic divine.

The second chapter laid the groundwork for understanding Suso's visuality by investigating his use of the terms "bild," image, and "glichenús," similitude. The basis for understanding *glichenús* came from an encounter in the fifth chapter of the *Little Book of Truth*, where the Disciple meets with a "glichenús" in his mind: it is humanoid but an allegory of the human nature of Christ, and serves to announce the advent of Truth, with whom the Disciple engages in Socratic dialogue. This anecdote and others make sense when seen in terms of the medieval theories of vision from Chapter 1, and it becomes clear that an "image" or "likeness" in Suso's texts is an active agent that serves an angelic annunciatory function. This extends from Pseudo-Dionysius' view of angels as mediators of knowledge downward in a hierarchy: the knowledge is increasingly form-based knowledge the closer one gets to the earth, but it becomes increasingly formless the closer one gets to heaven/the divine. Enlightened humans can serve a similar function to angels, sharing the wisdom they have gained to those less enlightened but with an increase in form or image-focus, thus making the wisdom less representative of the divine the further down it trickles. Images are problematic tools that help people progress, but only at the lower levels of celestial hierarchy. The same images cannot mediate between the lowest echelons of form-based creation and the highest levels of the formless divine—instead, different images reflect divine truth in more or less refined ways at different echelons. To do this, images and figures serving as images—such as a *glichenús* or a holy person—serve as mirrors like the glacial humor of the eye was believed to do. They mirror divine light they receive from

above while simultaneously translating that light to those below by mirroring created forms, for example mirroring the reflection of the viewer back to themselves.

The third chapter used the concept of image agency to explain Suso's method of engagement with bridal mysticism, Passion meditation, and the *imitatio Christi*. He uses these visual and literary discourses to establish Mary and Christ as role models for his readers to view and emulate. By doing so, the reader should gain compassion and wisdom, connecting them to the divine. Suso believed that the act of observing and contemplating an image of the Passion of Christ or the Compassion of the Virgin Mary could physically change the viewer. If this was repeated often enough, the ontological distance between visual subject and visual object grew smaller, to the point that holy persons like St. Francis even received Christ's wounds on their own bodies. This bodily pliability reflected a mental and spiritual pliability—just like the body, the Soul could grow closer to the image of Christ through prayer and meditation on the Passion, and thus become connected to the apophatic divine that Christ, as the truest image of the divine, is a mediator for.

The final chapter brought gender and epistemology into dialogue, asking whether women were considered to be created in the divine image as much as men were. Many women were barred from performing the kind of physical *imitatio Christi* that might allow them to gain wisdom for themselves and follow the path Suso advocates. This chapter drew St. Augustine's work. Augustine asserted that women participated in the divine image insofar as they were human, but not as *women*, per se. Augustine's views on gender are part of a wider argument about the nature of the human intellect, which he divides along gendered line: there is the original, masculine contemplative mind—which was created fully in the divine image, like Adam—and the extrapolated, secondary, feminine active mind, which only participates in the

divine image when considered as a whole, together with the contemplative mind, like Eve. Each mental capacity serves a different function and produces a different type of knowledge: the contemplative mind produces *sapientia* or wisdom, knowledge of eternal truths, and the active mind produces *scientia*, or practical knowledge of the created world. This gendering of epistemology casts light on the usage of male and female figures in the *Life*: the male Servant gains access to Wisdom directly, through personal experience, and Stigel processes his wisdom (*sapientia*) into actionable knowledge (*scientia*)—most notably the *Life* itself, which the author of the *Life* maintains Stigel wrote, even though some potions were added after her death, but "in her person." The same logic applies to physical tokens, like the silk scraps that Stigel embroiders to mimic the IHS scar on the Servant's chest, a remnant of when he as a young man cut the Christogram into his own skin as an act of *imitatio Christi*. The author of the *Life* gives women a useful and necessary role in the production of spiritual knowledge, but one that still relegates them to secondary status. They still require male ecclesiastical authority and approbation to mediate between them and divine wisdom.

Each of the discourses that Suso draws on to frame the relationship between humans and the divine—from ancient philosophy to popular affective piety, from bridal mysticism to Scholastic theology, from Arab science to Augustinian epistemology—were aimed for the same goal: the dispersal of wisdom from above to below, to allow human beings to understand eternal truth one step at a time. But that truth was always beyond words, beyond images. This is why Suso's takes such a manifold approach. If no single mode of expression adequately describes the divine, multiple visual and literary discourses could clarify different aspects. And the key to bridging the gap between the created and the divine was love. For the Servant, this is marriage with Eternal Wisdom. For Stigel, this is the affection for her mentor that engenders the same

love of Christ in herself. And this difference is telling—despite the view of bridal mysticism as a feminine pursuit, in the *Life* the link with divine wisdom was more direct for men than for women. Where the Servant can pursue Eternal Wisdom on his own, the female figures learn to love of Wisdom from the Servant, their closest male ecclesiastical authority.

### **Why now?**

The connection that Arab science heavily influenced medieval European views of optics is not new. Lindberg's fantastic work *Theories of Vision from Al-Kindi to Kepler* was written in 1976, and in the decades thereafter art historian Michael Camille explicated the influence that Arab-influenced theoreticians like Roger Bacon had on the arts.<sup>327</sup> That they had influenced literature, especially religious literature that drew so heavily on Scholastic philosophy, should be the next logical step. But it bespeaks two central issues that this question has not been properly addressed up to this point.

The first is the reluctance of medievalists, largely (if not exclusively) housed in the humanities to engage with historical scientific discourses, especially those perceived to be "hard sciences." The humanities by themselves do not train scholars to engage the hard sciences, which is problematic at best, unethical at worst. Ideally this would be mitigated by the training offered by a solid liberal arts education, which exposes undergraduates to the full gamut of disciplines through general education requirements. But these requirements, often fulfilled in the early years

---

<sup>327</sup> Lindberg, *Theories of Vision from Al-Kindi to Kepler*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976). Camille, "Before the Gaze: The Internal Senses and Late Medieval Practices of Seeing," in *Visuality before and after the Renaissance: Seeing As Others Saw*, ed. Robert S. Nelson, (Cambridge, U.K: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

of study, only do the bare minimum in preparing scholars to actually engage meaningfully with the sciences. Some amount of graduate or post-graduate training is becoming increasingly necessary for scholars to pull relevant aspects from the sciences into their own work, and to engage the sciences on their work. Indeed, as history has provided ample evidence of—most glaringly in the case of Nazi scientists working in concentration camps—the sciences can run amok when explored outside of the ethical frameworks that the humanities engage with. Interdisciplinary work between the sciences and humanities is not only good scholarship, it is an ethical imperative.

Secondly, the lack of recognition of Arab influence indicts the Western academy, who are the primary investigators of Christian spirituality and German literature, for their failure to look beyond Europe, beyond Christianity, and beyond Greco-Roman antiquity for answers to questions regarding medieval European writers. Only very recently has Eckhart scholarship begun to take up the question of Arab influences on Eckhart's work, but this work is often met with undue skepticism.<sup>328</sup> Europe is not nor ever has been an island—even in antiquity there was a never-ending series of intellectual and cultural exchanges across the Mediterranean that echoed throughout all three continents involved. Despite some long periods of relatively less movement, these exchanges did not cease during the Middle Ages. To assume that Europe only gave and never received cultural and intellectual material from these exchanges is to fall into a dangerous, cultural imperialist mindset.

---

<sup>328</sup> A certain careful skepticism is always due to new, groundbreaking work by virtue of its novelty, of course. But this does not forgive rejection or dismissal of valid new points due to prejudice and short-sightedness.

## Calls for Further Research

This dissertation reenacts many problematic shortcomings of pure discourse analysis, especially in discussions of gender, in which real human bodies are overwritten and overshadowed by theorizations and texts. Even in focusing on the materiality of texts scholars frequently elide the people who were instrumental in creating them, because they are simply less accessible. The medieval past is so distant and so few records available, the task of reconstructing real lives lived and real bodies reshaped by ascetic ideals is difficult at best, often seeming impossible.

Originally this dissertation aimed to focus on each of the senses as they pertain to Suso's mystic ideals, but as research and writing began, Suso's visuality became a full project unto itself. Good work has been done by other scholars on Suso's valorization of the auditory and especially the use of heavenly music as an especially apophatic mode of divine expression, because it can have aesthetic content while remaining without semantic content.<sup>329</sup> But the sense of touch and the physical ascetic pain—the flesh and body as so richly expressed in Suso's works—has remained understudied, except in certain studies by Niklaus Largier. The danger of psychoanalyzing or pathologizing medieval mystics has caused many scholars, especially Germanists, to shy away from attempting to reconstruct any discernible truths of historical

---

<sup>329</sup> See Rozenski. "The Visual, the Textual, and the Auditory in Henry Suso's *Vita* or *Life of the Servant*" in *Mystics Quarterly*. 2008; 34 (1-2). While contemporary abstract arguably shares this quality of aesthetic value with clear semantic value, and the visual arts of the Middle Ages had arguably not yet entered that stage, as most art remained representational.

human bodies and instead focus solely and exclusively on the text.<sup>330</sup> This dissertation is certainly guilty of the same.

If one were to pursue this kind of study, certain problems do emerge, such as the relationship between practice and theory. As far as scholars have been able to reconstruct, Suso's embodied mode of mysticism began in Cologne, both intellectually under the tutelage of Meister Eckhart and experientially with his first related spiritual experiences and his first ascetic practices, particularly his first self-definitive carving of the IHS into his chest. His bodily practices, then, have to be taken to be shaped by the greater cosmology of Christian negative theology, in approximately the following manner: the theological principle of the ineffable divine combined with the scriptural commandment to mirror the divine inasmuch as it is possible creates an imperative toward self-annihilation. "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."<sup>331</sup> If divine perfect is ineffable, one must become more ineffable, nameless, formless, as the divine is ineffable. This imperative inspires modes of behavior, one being physical asceticism, a logical, active extension of the principle of self-annihilation. Within physical asceticism, an obvious physical need that can be denied is the need to eat. And as spiritual seekers denied themselves food, they had extraordinary experiences that seemed as though they could come from the divine. To use Suso's words, they wondered, "If this is not heaven, I do not know what Heaven is."<sup>332</sup> They experimented more, and entire ascetic regimes were developed to cultivate similar experiences. Thus, from the intellectual tradition grows a physical practice.

---

<sup>330</sup> Tobin in "Henry Suso and Elsbeth Stigel: Was the Vita a Collaborative Effort?" *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and their Interpreters*, ed. Catherine M. Mooney, (Philadelphia: University Pennsylvania Press, 1999), especially finds Germanists, himself implicitly included, to be guilty of overlooking the persons in favor of the texts.

<sup>331</sup> NIV Matthew 5:48.

<sup>332</sup> Tobin, *Henry Suso*. 66.

Theorizing asceticism as a logical outgrowth of negative theology creates a hierarchy of the intellectual over the physical, replaying an ancient scholarly and Neoplatonic prejudice. One could just as easily reverse this syllogistic process, and argue that sensory ecstatic experiences related to starvation or pain intrigued early proto-mystics. In an attempt to explain this phenomenon, they proposed that this connects the self to something important and outside of normal experience. The divine would be an obvious choice. They begin to postulate that self-starvation could be desirable to attain this state of connection with the divine. Since denying oneself food achieves this, it seems logical that other physical self-denials might do the same. Asceticism as a mode of behavior develops out of this, and as it gains popularity, the practice develops sets of ideals and theologies around it. These eventually become codified into doctrine.

Finally, one could argue that both are true, as seems quite possible based on reading the accounts of Suso and many other mystics. Similar to Anne Fausto-Sterling's Developmental Systems Theory for explaining the interconnection of sex and gender, both mystic practice shapes mystic thought and mystic thought shapes mystic practice.<sup>333</sup> Either seeking explanation for some form of ecstatic experience in theology, or seeking the ecstatic experience promised by theology, the somatic experience of mystics informs the intellectual discourse and vice versa. Certainly many of the (anti-)linguistic methods and elaborate allegories that medieval Christian mystics use to describe their experience have to be learned and must be seen in context of the discourses of medieval Christianity. Just as certainly, they broke extensive ground in creating new language to describe their inexplicable experiences, creating new words often borrowing via literal translation out of the Latin which had a much longer and richer tradition of ascetic writings than Old and early Middle High German.

---

<sup>333</sup> Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2000).



But some attention must be given to the fact that mystic experiences and mystic expressions across cultures often retain such striking similarity, despite the seeming impossibility of cultural crossover between, for example, Meister Eckhart and Zen Buddhism. Nevertheless, an entire subfield of Eckhart studies emerged to explore this exact point of comparison. This baffling similarity was the question that inspired turn-of-the-century mysticism scholars like William James and which recur today, despite being methodologically problematic to the point of being unanswerable except in platitudes or useless generalizations.

Another methodological issue in addressing mysticism and the body are the questions of gender raised by feminist theory. This was highlighted as especially problematic but fruitful ground for study by the second wave French feminist engagement with mysticism, most notably Luce Irigaray. In the classic philosophical tradition that French feminists were responding to, the traditionally prized apophatic mysticism of Meister Eckhart is often referred to as intellectual, rational, and more refined than affective, "embodied" forms of mysticism such as bridal mysticism and passion mysticism. It is higher and more free, being unbound by temporal forms. For anyone familiar with Derridean or feminist arguments regarding privileged terms in conceptual binaries, it becomes easy to extrapolate from the descriptors above—it is more traditionally masculine. And this makes it popular even today: philosophers and critical theorists still turn to Eckhart's writings before those of his contemporaries. Eckhart is less concerned with the methodological mess of the body, and as such can be easily coopted to speak across periods without doing the necessary work of historicizing his intellectual milieu. In contrast, without proper historicization it is immensely difficult for contemporary readers to understand even the basics of what Suso is trying to express, much less the theoretical and artistic nuance.

Precisely because Suso was so embedded in the piety of his time and precisely because he focused so much on the physical and the bodily, even in his out-of-body visions, he presents a good subject for the historical scholar and the feminist scholar. It is tempting to many philosophers and theorists to read Eckhart, Tauler, and Ruuesbroec ahistorically—and thereby miss much of the context in which their work was being done. Suso, on the other hand, digs into the diverse mystic practices, artistic movements, and literary trends available at the time and adapts them, with varying levels of success, into a fairly unified system of mystic lifestyle. But this patchwork system can only be understood in the context of the many forebears whose work he is synthesizing, often without explicitly citing them or recognizing his debt. This is why so much more work must be done in Suso studies to tease out the many sources he draws on, and the nuance that those sources give his message.

It would be useful, in studying Suso's engagement with the body, to examine contemporary feminist discourses of the body, and bringing these into dialogue with the medieval discourses. To be clear, this does not mean one should straightforwardly approach mysticism from a feminist theoretical perspective. This has been done, and has been done quite well, but often retains an anachronistic element. Rather, future scholars might analyze each discourse from the perspective of the other, in order to first historicize the past, and then, in the words of Fredric Jameson, to alienate the present.<sup>334</sup> As such, this analysis would serve not only to historically inform the reader regarding fascinating religious concepts of the body from the Middle Ages, but also provide critical distance to our own discourses of embodiment. This critical distance will ideally help contemporary readers to think outside the often imperceptible boundaries of their own discourse around the body. Once one realizes that the body can be

---

<sup>334</sup> Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative As a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981).

thought of in fundamentally different manners than those to which one is accustomed, the lion's share of the preparations for new modes of discourse around embodiment has already been done.<sup>335</sup>

To provide an example, one could expand on the work of this dissertation in historicizing the medieval physiological and religious philosophies of visibility and the sexed body, by contrasting them with contemporary feminist discourses of visibility and the sexed gaze. A feminist perspective will help elucidate dynamics of visibility, sex, and gender in Suso's text that are anything but explicit or clear. In return, the medieval discourses of visibility can provide models of intersubjectivity and visual object agency that are remarkably difficult for contemporary scholars to wrestle with, who are often struggling with the fact that their own discourse is so caught up in the patriarchal problems they seek to address. Many feminist discourses of the gaze problematize their own inability to escape the essentializing trap that can reinscribe problematic binaries of viewed as passive object, implicitly feminized, and viewer as active subject, implicitly masculinized.

Two medieval concepts from this dissertation can provide some help in overcoming these issues. First, the medieval mystic view is that, if considered ardently enough, physical qualities transfer from object to subject—such as in the stigmata, where the devout who considers Christ's passion long enough develops the compassion ("com-passio") to physically be marked by the symbols of the passion. This concept of mutually constitutive exchange between subject and object opens up the dilemma of objectification to discuss how the voyeuristic (masculine) viewer

---

<sup>335</sup> There are, of course, problematic Orientalist overtones to this kind of project. Any attempt to use the lens of the "other" to view the "self" in a new light always involves a problematic projection onto the other. But by properly historicizing, ideally the contemporary reader is able to become as aware as possible of those projections and the distortions of the original object that they create.

is never fully master of the gazed upon (feminine) object, which speak to concepts of ego-production already present in Lacanian psychoanalysis, which undergird most feminist work on the gaze. Second, the visual shift in medieval discourse away from theories of extramission, in which rays out from the viewer's eyes are the primary medium of vision, to theories of intromission, in which objects themselves project their image into the eye of the viewer. Although technically contemporary discourses believe in a kind of intromission, with light rays bouncing off objects into our eyes, the feminist discourses of gendered visuality often fall into a model which is essentially extramission: the masculine viewer projects desire and/or identification outward onto the feminized object of the gaze. By bringing in the discourse of intromission and objects' ability to truly meet our gaze, future scholarship could discuss object agency in new vibrant terms, which do not reduce object agency to the projections of viewing subjects, as many discussions of object agency do.

One could certainly raise the problem of anachronism in both directions with this type of dialogic discourse analysis. Is it not ahistorical to apply contemporary feminist concepts and analytic tools to medieval sources, whose concepts of gender and sex are vastly different from those held today? Is it not inappropriate to bring medieval thinkers like Suso to "speak" to contemporary thought, when that was clearly not their project? Here, again, Jameson's concept of historicization and alienation is key. The goal of this kind of historicization is not to create a clean logic of analogy, in which the medieval discourse can be simply translated into modern terms, or vice versa. This can be compared, for example, to the results of computer translators when given a foreign text—mostly only linguistic garbage is produced. Rather, by teaching the discourses of medieval thought as a kind of foreign intellectual language, this new knowledge will then provide vital insight into the underlying structures of the "native intellectual language"

of contemporary discourse, just as any student in learning a foreign language understands the grammar of their own language anew.

In short, much work remains to be done in discussing the body, gender, and visibility in Suso's works, to name just a few potential topics that could be taken up following the work of this dissertation.

## Works Cited

- Aquinas, Thomas. *De Ente Et Essentia*. Romae: Ed. San Tommaso, 1976.
- . *Summa Theologiae: Latin Text and English Translation, Introductions, Notes, Appendices, and Glossaries*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964.
- Adams, Tracy. "Make me chaste and continent, but not yet': A Model for Clerical Masculinity?" *Masculinities and Femininities in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*. Edited by Frederick Kiefer. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2009.
- Altrock, Stephanie and Hans-Joachim Ziegeler, "Vom *diener der ewigen wisheit* zum Autor Heinrich Seuse. Autorschaft und Medienwandel in den illustrierten Handschriften und Drucken von Heinrich Seuses 'Exemplar.'" *Text und Kultur: Mittelalterliche Literatur 1150-1450*. Ed. Ursula Peters. Germanistische Symposien, Berichtsbände; 23. Stuttgart: Metzler, 2001.
- Aristotle, and W. D. Ross. *De Anima*. Oxford: E Typographeo Clarendoniano, 1956.
- Augustine of Hippo. *De trinitate*. Ed. J.-P Migne. Sancti Aurelii Augustini Hipponensis Episcopi Opera Omnia. Parisiis: venit apud editorem, 1841.
- . *On Genesis: The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, "The Works of Saint Augustine," Pt.1, Vol.13, Trans. Edmund Hill, O.P. Ed. John Rotelle, O.S.A. New York: New City Press, 2002.
- . *Diui Aug[ustini] Sermones*. Lugduni. France: Imp[re]ssa fuere in edib[us] Jacobi Mareschal, 1520.
- Averroes. *Corpvs Commentariorvm Averrois in Aristotelem* 6,1. Ed. F. Stuart Crawford Cambridge, Mass: The Mediaev. Acad. of America, 1953.
- . *Long Commentary on the De Anima of Aristotle*. Trans. Richard C. Taylor. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.
- Bacon, Roger. *Roger Bacon's Philosophy of Nature: A Critical Edition, with English Translation, Introduction, and Notes, of De Multiplicatione Specierum and De Speculis Comburentibus*. Ed. David C. Lindberg. New York: Clarendon Press, 1983.
- Bataille, Georges. *Inner Experience*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988.
- Baur, Ludwig. *Die Philosophie Des Robert Grosseteste, Bischofs von Lincoln (1253)*. Münster i. W., Aschendorff, 1917.
- Belting, Hans. *The Image and Its Public in the Middle Ages: Form and Function of Early Paintings of the Passion*. New Rochelle, N.Y.: A.D. Caratzas, 1990.

- Biernoff, Suzannah. *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.
- Bizet, J. A. *Suso Et Le Minnesang: Ou, La Morale De L'amour Courtois*. Paris: Aubier, 1947.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Masculine Domination*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998.
- Büchner, Christine. *Die Transformation des Einheitsdenkens Meister Eckharts bei Heinrich Seuse und Johannes Tauler*. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2007.
- Bracken, Ernst. *Meister Eckhart*. Meisenheim a. Glan: Hain. 1972.
- Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe*. New York; Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books; distributed by the MIT Press, 2011.
- Bynum, Caroline Walker. *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.
- Caciola, Nancy. *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003.
- Cadden, Joan. *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Camille, Michael. "Before the Gaze: The Internal Senses and Late Medieval Practices of Seeing." *Visuality before and after the Renaissance: Seeing As Others Saw*. Ed. Robert S. Nelson. Cambridge, U.K: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, N. J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008.
- A Companion to Meister Eckhart*. Ed. Jeremiah Hackett Leiden. Boston: Brill, 2013.
- Crombie, A. C. *Robert Grosseteste and the Origins of Experimental Science, 1100-1700*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1961.
- Cupitt, Don. *Mysticism After Modernity*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1998.
- Degenhardt, I. *Studien Zum Wandel Des Eckhartbildes*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1967.
- Eckhart, Meister. *Die Lateinischen Werke*. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1936.
- . *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*. Eds. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn. New York: Paulist Press, 1981.

- . *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher*. Eds. Elvira Borgstädt and Frank J. Tobin. New York: Paulist Press, 1986.
- . *Werke*. Deutscher Klassiker Verlag Im Taschenbuch. Ed. Niklaus Largier. Frankfurt am Main: Deutsche Klassiker Verlag, 2008.
- Egerding, Michael. *Die Metaphorik Der Spätmittelalterlichen Mystik*. Paderborn: Schöningh, 1997.
- Ellington, Donna Spivey. *From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul: Understanding Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001.
- Fausto-Sterling, Anne. *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2000.
- Flasch, Kurt. *Meister Eckhart und die "Deutsche Mystik": Zur Kritik eines Historiographischen Schemas*. Amsterdam: B.R. Grüner, 1988.
- . *Meister Eckhart: Die Geburt der "Deutschen Mystik" aus dem Geist der Arabischen Philosophie*. München: Beck, 2006.
- Flynn, Maureen. "The Spiritual Uses of Pain in Spanish Mysticism." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 2 (1996): 257-78.
- Frauenlob's Song of Songs: A Medieval German Poet and His Masterpiece*. Trans. Karl Stackman. Ed. Barbara Newman. University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006.
- Gambero, Luigi. *Mary in the Middle Ages: The Blessed Virgin Mary in the Thought of Medieval Latin Theologians*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005.
- Grosseteste, Robert. "Opus tertium." In *Opera quaedam hactenus inedita*. Ed. Brewer. London: 1859.
- Grosseteste, Robert. *Robert Grosseteste on Light (De Luce)*. Ed. Clare C. Riedl. Milwaukee, Wis., Marquette University Press, 1942.
- Hamburger, Jeffrey F. *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany*. New York; Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books; MIT Press, 1998.
- al-Haytham, Ibn. *Alhacen's Theory of Visual Perception: A Critical Edition, with English Translation and Commentary, of the First Three Books of Alhacen's De Aspectibus, the Medieval Latin Version of Ibn Al-Haytham's Kitāb Al-Manāẓir*. Ed. A. Mark Smith. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2001.



- Hollywood, Amy. "That glorious slit': Irigaray and the Medieval Devotion to Christ's Side Wound." In *Luce Irigaray and Premodern Culture: Thresholds of History*. Eds. Elizabeth D. Harvey and Theresa M. Krier, Routledge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture; 4. London; New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Ivanovic, Filip. *Dionysius the Areopagite: Between Orthodoxy and Heresy*. Cambridge Scholars, 2011.
- James, William. *Varieties of Religious Experience*. New York: New American Library 1958.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative As a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981.
- Katz, Steven. *Mysticism and Sacred Scripture*. Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Kieckhefer, Richard. *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and their Religious Milieu*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- Kiening, Christian. *Mystische Bücher*. Zürich: Chronos, 2011.
- Koch, Josef. *Meister Eckhart und die Jüdische Religionsphilosophie des Mittelalters*. Breslau: Marcus, 1928.
- Largier, Niklaus. *In Praise of the Whip: A Cultural History of Arousal*. New York: Zone Books, 2007.
- Laqueur, Thomas. *Making Sex: Body and Gender From the Greeks to Freud*. Harvard University Press, 1990.
- Lindberg David C., *Theories of Vision from Al-Kindi to Kepler*, University of Chicago History of Science and Medicine. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976.
- Lynch, Lawrence E. *The Doctrine of Divine Ideas and Illumination in Robert Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln*. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1941.
- Maimonides, Moses. *The Guide of the Perplexed*. Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Pub. Co., 1995.
- . *Rabi Mossei Aegyptij Dux Seu Director Dubitatum Aut Perplexorum*. Frankfurt a.M.: Minerva, 1964.
- Matter, E. Ann. "The Undebated Debate: Gender and the Image of God in Medieval Theology" in *Gender in Debate from the Early Middle Ages to the Renaissance*. Edited by Thelma S. Fenster and Clare A. Lees. New York, N.Y.: Palgrave, 2002.
- McGinn, Bernard. *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200-1350)*. New York: Crossroad, 1998.
- . "How Augustine Shaped Medieval Mysticism." *Augustinian Studies* 37.1 (2006): 1.

- . *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: The Man from Whom God Hid Nothing*. New York: Crossroad Pub., 2001.
- McNamara, Jo Ann. "The Herrenfrage: The Reconstruction of the Gender System, 1050-1150." *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*. Edited by Clare Lees. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.
- . "An Unresolved Syllogism." *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West*. Edited by Jacqueline Murray. New York: Garland, 1999.
- Migne, J. P. *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Omnium Ss. Patrum, Doctorum Scriptorumque Ecclesiasticorum*. Turnholti (Belgium): Brepols, 1960.
- Miller, Maureen C. "Masculinity, Reform, and Clerical Culture: Narratives of Episcopal Holiness in the Gregorian Era." *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture* 72.1 (2003): 25-52.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. "The Surplus Value of Images." *Mosaic: A Journal for the Comparative Study of Literature* 35, no. 3 (2002): 1.
- Mojsisch, Burkhard. *Meister Eckhart: Analogie, Univozität und Einheit*. F. Meiner, 1983.
- Murray, Jacqueline "One Flesh, Two Sexes, Three Genders?" *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe: New Perspectives*. Edited by Lisa M. Bitel and Felice Lifshitz. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.
- . "Masculinizing Religious Life: Sexual Prowess, the Battle for Chastity and Monastic Identity." In *Holiness and Masculinity in Medieval Europe*. Eds. P. H. Cullum and Katherine J. Lewis. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004.
- Neff, Amy. "The Pain of *Compassio*: Mary's Labor at the Foot of the Cross." *The Art Bulletin* 80.2 (1998): 254-73.
- Newman, Barbara. *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages*. The Middle Ages Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.
- . "What did it Mean to Say 'I Saw'? The Clash between Theory and Practice in Medieval Visionary Culture." *Speculum* 80.1 (2005): 1-43.
- Plotinus. *The Enneads*. Trans. Stephen Mackenna. Lond.: Faber, 1956.
- The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*. Ed. Robert K. C. Forman. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Proclus, and E. R. Dodds. *The Elements of Theology: A Revised Text*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.

- Pseudo-Dionysius. *Dionysius, the Areopagite, on the Divine Names and Mystical Theology*. Ed. C. E. Rolt. London; New York, The Macmillan Company, 1940.
- . *The Complete Works*. New York: Paulist Press, 1987.
- Richard of St Victor. *The Twelve Patriarchs; the Mystical Ark; Book Three of the Trinity*. New York: Paulist Press, 1979.
- Roques, Renè. *Libres Sentiers Vers L'èrigènisme*. Roma: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1975.
- Roem, Paul. *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence*. Oxford University Press.
- Rozenski, Steven J., "Henry Suso's Horologium Sapientiae in Fifteenth-Century France: Images of Reading and Writing in Brussels Royal Library Ms Iv 111." *Word & Image*. 26.4 (2010): 364-380.
- . "The Visual, the Textual, and the Auditory in Henry Suso's *Vita* or *Life of the Servant*." In *Mystics Quarterly*. Vol. 34, No. 1/2, Penn State University Press, 2008.
- . "Von Aller Bilden Bildlosigkeit: The Trouble with Images of Heaven in the Works of Henry Suso." In *Envisaging Heaven in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Carolyn Muessig and Ad Putter, Routledge Studies in Medieval Religion and Culture; 6. London; New York: Routledge, 2007.
- . *Henry Suso and Richard Rolle: Devotional Mobility and Translation in Late-Medieval England and Germany*. Dissertation. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2012.
- Rupert of Deutz. *Ruperti Tuitiensis Commentaria in Evangelium Sancti Johannis*. Turnholt: Brepols Publishers, 2010.
- Ruusbroec, Jan van. *Ioannis Rusbrochii De Ornatv Spiritvalivm Nyptiarvm*. Trans. Willem Jordaens. Turnhout: Brepols, 2004.
- Sells, Michael Anthony. *Mystical Languages of Unsayng*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Seuse, Heinrich. *Henry Suso: The Exemplar, with Two German Sermons*. The Classics of Western Spirituality. Ed. Frank J. Tobin New York: Paulist Press, 1989.
- . *Heinrich Seuse. Deutsche Schriften*. Ed. Karl Bihlmeyer. Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, 1961.
- Stark, Judith Chelius, "Augustine on Women: In God's Image, but Less So." *Feminist Interpretations of Augustine*. Edited by Judith Chelius Stark. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007.

- Swanson, R. N. "Angels Incarnate: Clergy and Masculinity from Gregorian Reform to Reformation." *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*. Edited by D.M. Hadley. London; New York: Longman, 1999.
- Schwietering, J. F. *Mystik und Höfische Dichtung im Hochmittelalter*. Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1960.
- Stiglmayr, Josef. "Der Neoplatoniker Proklus als Vorlage der sogenannten Dionysius Areopagita in der Lehre vom Übel," *Historische Jahrbuch des Gottesgesellschaften*, 16. 1895.
- Tamen, Miguel. *Friends of Interpretable Objects*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Tanner, Kathryn. "In the Image of the Imageless." In *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality*. Ed. Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller, Transdisciplinary Theological Colloquia. New York: Fordham University Press, 2010.
- A Thirteenth-Century Textbook of Mystical Theology at the University of Paris: The Mystical Theology of Dionysius the Areopagite in Eriugena's Latin Translation, with the Scholia Translated by Anastasius the Librarian, and Excerpts from Eriugena's Periphyseon*. Ed. L. Michael Harrington. Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2004.
- Tobin, Frank. "Henry Suso and Elsbeth Stagele." *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and their Interpreters*. Ed. Catherine M. Mooney. Philadelphia: University Pennsylvania Press, 1999.
- . *Meister Eckhart, Thought and Language*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986.
- Wear, Sarah Klitenic, and John M. Dillon. *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonist Tradition: Despoiling the Hellenes*. Burlington, VT, 2007.
- Williams-Krapp, Werner "nucleus totius perfectionis. Die Altväterspiritualität in der 'Vita' Heinrich Seuses." *Festschrift für Walter Haug und Burghart Wachinger*, Eds. J. Janota et al. Bd. I. Tübingen: 1992.