DIOGENES

*Diogenes* 208: 99–113
ISSN 0392-1921

# The Mystical Marriage of the Blessed Henry Suso

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'The twilight of the senses is the dawn of truth'
Henry Suso

Mystical marriage – or hierogamy – is without a doubt a significant aspect of the theme of the androgyne in medieval literature. In this paper we consider these themes, taking as a guide the last eight chapters of the *Life* by Henry Suso (1295–1366). Introduced by an epigraph in Latin: *Sicut aquila* (Like an eagle), these eight chapters are a literary work in their own right, which can therefore be labelled *Sicut aquila*.[1] Indeed this is no longer an autobiographical narrative by the Servant of the Eternal Wisdom, but a romantic metaphysical flight written in the form of a lovers' dialogue between Suso – sometimes called *Frater Amandus* – and his beloved spiritual daughter.

## Gender polarity: Elsbeth Stagel and Henry Suso

Suso must have been about 41 when he became friends with the woman who was henceforth to play a crucial part in his life, and also in writing his autobiography, which she is supposed to have started writing secretly in his stead by putting together what he confided to her.[2] Born around 1300 into an honoured family from the town of Zurich, Elsbeth Stagel (feminine: Staglin) is a literary personality well known to medievalists, in particular for having written an admirable chronicle of her Dominican convent on the banks of the Töss, near Winterthur in Switzerland.[3]

Before becoming the confidante of Suso, with whom she lived in a kind of spiritual symbiosis from 1336 till her death in 1360, the young Staglin says she was an avid reader of the writings of Meister Eckhart. Elsbeth may even have met Eckhart before he died on 28 January 1328.[4] We might even imagine the young Staglin was in Eckhart's audience during the last ten years of his life, and that we owe the transcription of some of his sermons to her. Indeed it is explicitly stated, in chapter


SAGE: London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, http://dio.sagepub.com
DOI: 10.1177/0392192105059475

33 of Suso's *Life*, that Elsbeth Staglin put together an anthology of sublime thoughts 'chosen from the sweet doctrine of the holy Meister Eckhart'.[5] The immense veneration with which Elsbeth and Suso regarded their 'holy Meister Eckhart' clearly did not cease after his posthumous condemnation in 1329.[6] The writing, or at least the final editing, of Suso's *Life*, in which Eckhart is mentioned, now as 'blessed', now as 'holy',[7] is much later than that event.

Though Suso's *Life* was born of a spiritual symbiosis between Staglin and 'the Servant' Henry Suso, the role she might have in the text's final composition is, however, hard to determine.[8] In fact it is thought that Suso himself composed and gave final form to the 'four good books' of his *Exemplar* or 'Model Book' – the first part of which is the *Life* – around 1362 or 1363, that is, three years before his death, which came on 25 January 1366 in Ulm, where he was buried in the church of the Friar Preachers. On 16 April 1861, nearly five centuries after his death, Suso was proclaimed 'blessed' by Pope Gregory XVI.[9] However, a transcendent spiritual contribution to the autobiography is the work of a man who was never formally proclaimed either saint or blessed, namely Meister Eckhart. Thus there is another polarity in the background to this mystical romance between a man and a women united under the spiritual canopy of 'the holy doctrine of Meister Eckhart': it is the division of medieval society between orthodoxy and heresy, which left a firm mark on the first three chapters of *Sicut aquila*. At the moment of the mystical marriage – we infer – all these polarities must be overcome in order to rediscover the primal unity.

## Doctrinal polarity: heresy and orthodoxy

Seen from outside, any dispute always takes on a vaguely sordid or even ridiculous appearance, and uninvolved spectators are somewhat embarrassed when they try to understand the issues in some burning controversy; in this respect Suso's situation was a little delicate, since he found himself caught in the crossfire. On one hand he was himself accused of heresy, in particular because he had defended Meister Eckhart (who never spoke out against heresy – or in other words, against other people's religion); on the other hand, among other writings, Suso devoted the first three chapters of *Sicut aquila* to arguing against heretics, sometimes rather laboriously and excessively.[10] Without naming them explicitly, Suso refers to marginal religious groups such as the Béguines and *a fortiori* the Béghards, or the indefinable Brotherhood of the Free Spirit. This is the sample sentence he criticizes them for: 'The just shall not fear any obstacle'.[11] But it is only by distorting the sense, replacing 'obstacle' with 'sin', that the sentence takes on a problematic meaning; the result is another meaning which makes any alert heresiologue prick up their ears: 'The perfect shall not fear any sin'.[12] The 'perfect' is a well-known name for the Cathars.[13] But in fact we also note, in relation to this scandalous doctrine of sin, that Meister Eckhart was condemned for somewhat similar reasons: 'If a man had committed a thousand mortal sins and was well disposed, he should not wish he had not committed them'.[14] Comparing this sentence with chapter 12 of Meister Eckhart's *Spiritual Counsel* (or *Discourse on discernment*), we realize that its content was con-



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siderably exaggerated and taken out of a more thoughtful context. In addition it is not always certain that heretics really preached the terrible things they are accused of.

Concerned – and rightly! – with discernment, Suso probably also argued against heresy to avoid himself and 'his spiritual daughters' being accused of it. Being aware that, even living according to the most scrupulous discernment, no one is protected from defamation and other unjust criticisms, Suso concludes by defending his own spiritual doctrine: 'That said, we must nevertheless not reject philosophical teachings or spiritual aphorisms chosen with attention, for they civilize human beings and lead them to spiritual awakening, even if few people understand them. Faced with a gross blindness and bestial ignorance, it is said that no one could make themselves understood.'[15] In short, Suso contests neither philosophy nor spirituality as such, but the lack of discernment in their use. That did not stop the 'Servant of the Eternal Wisdom' from being accused of heresy himself – but insofar as he found those accusations unjust, they could only be the work of uncivilized people.[16]

## Androgynous encounters

The androgynous encounters we shall be dealing with here are androgynous in two ways: from the point of view of sexual polarity and from the doctrinal point of view. Indeed it is never very clear whether a man or a woman, a saint or a heretic is appearing in this or that apparition.

The first encounter comes from a text from Suso's youth, *The Book of Truth*, of which the first three chapters of *Sicut aquila* are a continuation or a more finished version. Here is the exceptionally strange episode, which was not included in *Sicut aquila*, the famous encounter between Suso and 'the nameless wild thing':

> Once on a luminous Sunday he was sitting absorbed in his thoughts. Then in the silence of his soul there came an intelligible image, which was subtle in the use of its words, but unpractised in its works, and overflowing with a luxurious richness. He started to address it as follows: 'Where have you come from?' It said: 'I have come from nowhere.' He said: 'Tell me what you are.' It said: 'I am not.' He said: 'What do you want?' The thing answered and spoke: 'I do not want.' Then he said: 'This is a miracle; tell me what your name is.' It replied: 'I am called the nameless wild thing.'[17]

We are not sure whether this bizarre preacher of uncertain sex really appeared to Suso or whether he incorporated into his narrative stories of strange encounters read or heard elsewhere. Suso may take his inspiration from a tradition of legendary tales: in particular we might think this is a variant of the Arlequin myth. The similarity is not proven but, as we shall see with a few examples, there certainly does exist a number of other tales of strange encounters which are part of the corpus of legends in Rhineland mysticism. However, the heretical nature of this first apparition is clearly specified by Suso, who nonetheless does not run away or command a burning at the stake to be prepared. As a philosopher worthy of the name, Suso starts a dialogue with this 'nameless wild thing' with the aim of convincing it that his best doctrine is well founded.[18]

## Meister Eckhart's girl

The fact that Suso draws inspiration from a tradition of legendary tales is demonstrated in particular by the following encounter, entitled 'Meister Eckhart's girl':

> A girl came to the Friar Preachers' monastery and asked for Meister Eckhart. The porter said: 'Who should I say it is?' She replied: 'I don't know.' He said: 'How is it that you don't know your being?' She said: 'By the fact that I am neither maid, nor woman, nor man, nor wife, nor widow, nor lady, nor lord, nor maidservant, nor manservant.' The porter went to Meister Eckhart: 'Come and see the strangest creature I ever heard, and let me go with you, and stick out your head and say: "Who's asking for me?".' So that is what he did. She spoke to him as she had to the porter. He said: 'Dear child, your speech is true and reasonable: explain to me how you understand it.' She said: 'If I were a maid I would remain in my initial innocence; if I were a women I would constantly bring forth in my soul the eternal Word; if I were a man I would strongly resist all weaknesses; if I were a wife I would be faithful to my dear and only husband; if I were a widow I would constantly long for my only love; if I were a lady I would give honourable service; if I were a maidservant I would be humbly obedient to God and all creatures; and if I were a manservant I would apply myself to onerous tasks and serve my master with all my will and without any contradiction. I am none of those things and I am a thing like other things and so I go my way.' The master went away and told his followers: 'I have heard the purest human creature I have ever found, I think.'
>
> This example is called Meister Eckhart's girl.[19]

This time it is not an encounter with some personification of heresy, as was the case with 'the nameless wild thing', but a story that has elements of the prodigious and marvellous. However, the dialogue's syntax allows us to recognize a certain similarity to the previous encounter. The androgynous nature of 'Meister Eckhart's girl' is related to the fact that, rather as in Robert Musil's novel *The Man Without Qualities*, she says from the depths of her being that it is without qualities: 'I am neither maid, nor woman, nor man, nor wife, nor widow, nor lady, nor lord, nor maidservant, nor manservant.' This human creature's purity, which Meister Eckhart declares, might also indicate that this is a Cathar legend.

This impression is corroborated by another encounter entitled 'The twelve good men and the youth' in which the theme of the 'good men' appears associated with that of 'consolation' (see the heretics' *consolamentum*). The youth says in particular 'I am a father of the mother who bore me'.[20]

## The 'Cathar' sister

The same is true of the dialogue between Meister Eckhart and Sister Katrei (Catherine) – whose name is probably not accidental, since it derives once more from the Greek *katharos* meaning pure, without stain and without blemish. The dialogue's syntax is again very close to the previous encounters:

> He said: 'Where are you from?' She said: 'I come from a far-off land.' He said: 'What land is that?' She said: 'Lord, don't you recognize me?' He said: 'God knows I do not.' She said: 'That is a sign to me that you have never got to know yourself.' He said: 'It's true. I know

> that if I knew myself in truth, I would know all creatures perfectly.' . . . And he went to find his brothers and declared to them: 'I have heard a human being, whether person or angel I know not. If it is a person, I tell you all the soul's strength is with the angels in heaven and the soul has received an angelic being.'[21]

The whole of this dialogue is much more developed than the previous ones. It deals with various themes such as (in this passage) the angelic being and self-knowledge. The angelic being appears here as the most perfect idea we can conjure up of the androgyne. We do not know whether Katrei is a woman or more generally the human soul, which in any case is seen as 'female' with regard to God. In divine perfection Katrei rises to the highest point because she eventually exclaims, a little later: 'Lord, rejoice with me, I have become God'.

To conclude, it seems desirable to widen somewhat further the view of these strange encounters with their often androgynous character. Indeed this type of theophany goes beyond any specificity of genre or culture. For instance Jacob Grimm notes that they also exist in religions prior to Christianity, so-called nature religions where the divine manifests itself either through abstract signs or else in anthropomorphic theophanies: 'It is not sufficient for them to manifest their wishes by signs and messengers, they are determined to come down themselves to appear to humans. For this kind of apparition Hindu mythology has an apt expression: *avatâra*, which means *descensus*.'[22] We also find instances of this kind in Homer, since it is a fact that in the ancient imaginary such visits (or even visitations, as in the lovely Marian legend of Danae) were greeted with the greatest reverence: 'Like strangers come from afar, the gods assume various aspects and go from town to town to get to know the proud and the just among humans'.[23]

## The philosopher's stone

The androgynous, or even hermaphrodite encounters described above may also have been inspired by another tradition existing in the Middle Ages, though condemned in 1317: alchemy. Indeed a curious alchemical riddle suggests a similar declaration: 'I am neither man, nor woman, nor hermaphrodite, nor virgin, nor young girl, nor old woman. I am neither whore, nor virtuous woman, but all that together.'[24] We note that the hermaphrodite is explicitly mentioned in this riddle. It is a figure that is often used in alchemists' emblems. Generally the hermaphrodite is symbolized by the couple or the Sun superimposed on the Moon.

Speaking generally the physical union of man and woman is nothing but a hermaphrodite. The genuine hermaphrodite is scary but also fascinating because it represents in a single body and a single person a sort of walking copulation. The moment of sexual union – by definition fleeting – is made permanent and manifested in a lasting form. And the spiritual union of man and woman, that is, the meeting or even merging of male and female spiritual qualities is the same as the androgyne. Androgyne means literally 'man/woman'. In modern Greek too that is how the word is used day-to-day.

The religious dimension of the androgyne as a symbol of spiritual perfection is recognizable especially in the fact that in most religions priests and male religious

wear robes, or clothes which in secular use are worn by women. In alchemy the final aspect regarding the hermaphrodite and the androgyne is recognizing that the physical and/or spiritual union between man and woman has something to do with the philosopher's stone. More generally we are right to conclude that the reality transcending the ontological oppositions of existence is nothing less than the stone of the philosophers.

Relating these considerations to the mystical romance of *Sicut aquila*, we can say that the moment of revelation of the 'philosopher's stone' corresponds to the moment when Suso gives Elsbeth over a hundred aphorisms, after she has managed to rise 'like an eagle' beyond doctrinal polarities relating to a possible error in her spiritual practice: 'Having acquired that right discernment, you can now go forward and become acquainted with the spiritual aphorisms taught hereafter: they lead out of uncouthness and instruct with a view to the highest beatitude'.[25]

It is impossible to summarize these 96 spiritual aphorisms, also entitled 'wise introduction of the outer being into its inner part', since they are an anthology of the most varied teachings, which Suso assembled from his reading, invented or simply recast as his own experience dictated. In fact they could also include, at least in part, the collection of sublime thoughts that Elsbeth Stagel is supposed to have 'chosen from the sweet doctrine of Meister Eckhart', according to what Suso says in chapter 33 of his *Life*.[26] However that may be, there are in the aphorisms a number of formulations typical of Eckhart. For instance, aphorism 67 is especially characteristic both of Meister Eckhart and of the reformulation given to it by Suso: 'A person who has renounced the world should be detached from images of the creature (*entbildet*), formed (*gebildet*) with Christ and transformed (*überbildet*) in the Godhead'.[27] Talking about the highest powers of the soul, Meister Eckhart also says they should detach themselves (de-image themselves or de-imagine) from themselves in order to transform themselves (super-image themselves or super-imagine) in God alone.[28] However, Suso's aphorism is more Christ-centred since he adds as a second term that a person who has renounced the world should be 'formed with Christ' (*gebildet werden mit Cristo*). So there is no doubt that Jesus Christ is Suso's 'philosopher's stone': in the early part of his life he cut the name of Jesus (IHS) into his chest. And with this in mind we should remember that iconography relating to Christ contains very visible androgynous characteristics.

## God's troubadour

From there Suso approaches theological considerations in a style rather reminiscent of the *Minnesang* of a troubadour such as Walther von Vogelweide:

> Let us stop here a moment, and let our speculation be applied to the sublime and worthy Master in his works! . . . Ah! When in summer the lovely sun shines joyous and cloudless, how many fruits and benefits it brings the earth! How beautifully green the meadows are, how the foliage and grass grow, how smiling the lovely flowers are, how the sweet song of the nightingale and the little birds sounds through forest, plain and countryside, and all the animals that had gone into hiding during the evil winter rush out into the open, rejoice and pair up.



https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192105059475 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Following the lover's dialogue punctuated with sighs such as *ah! eya! owe!* comes a revelation about the ecstasy of a Friar Preacher, who is none other than Suso himself:

> He would often feel as if he was gliding through the air or swimming between time and eternity in the deep current of God's unfathomable marvels. His emotions were so overwhelmed that he would sometimes put his hand on his turbulent heart and say: 'Ay! My heart, what is happening to you today?'[29]

Even though Suso then says that he had not thought it very important, there is no doubt that his spiritual daughters were happy to have him confide to them such experiences of blissful ecstasy, which they themselves may have been blessed with.

The questions 'What is God?' (*Sicut aquila*, ch. 5) and 'Where is God and what is he like?' (ch. 6) are succeeded by a long chapter entitled 'The highest transcendence' (ch. 7). This chapter raises the question of Suso's possible borrowings, in particular from two apocrypha that Franz Pfeiffer attributes to Meister Eckhart. Already in chapter 6 we note a fairly long paraphrase of Saint Bonaventure: in that case Suso is undeniably the borrower. It is also certain that Suso took some sentences from the *Liber Positionum*.[30] On the other hand there remains uncertainty as to the similarities between this seventh chapter of Suso's *Life* and the poem followed by the gloss 'On the highest joy'.[31] Kurt Ruh thinks it 'highly probable' that Suso is the source here.[32] But high probability does not mean absolute certainty. If the author of the gloss or 'Commentary on the highest joy' is the borrower here, it is surprising that nowhere in his text do we find a borrowing of Suso's borrowing from the *Liber Positionum*. Which leads us to assume, on the contrary, that Suso took sometimes from one, sometimes from the other of the two apocryphal works. Neither can we rule out the possibility that the poem, followed by the gloss 'On the highest joy', may be an earlier work by Suso himself, which he may have incorporated into his *Life* when he was doing the final editing. However that may be, the poem's Dante-like beginning alone – 'If there were no hell nor kingdom of heaven' – merits our interest in this apocryphal text.

## From the 'wild thing' to the 'wild mountain'

The 'wild mountain' episode that appears at the end of chapter 7 of *Sicut aquila* is without any doubt the final objective of the flight 'Like an eagle' that Suso suggests to his spiritual daughter. Knowing there are similarities between *Sicut aquila* and the *Book of Truth*, we nonetheless are right to ask questions about a definite similarity between the 'wild mountain' (*daz wilde gebirge*) in *Sicut aquila* and 'the nameless wild thing' in the *Book of Truth*.

Indeed the 'wild mountain' refers to the highest experience of divine ineffability: 'In that wild mountain where the superdivine resides there is an abyss whose prelude can be sensed by all pure spirits: then they enter into an ineffable virtue that is wild and strange'.[33] However, we have previously seen that 'the nameless wild thing' was a personification of Heresy.

We have to conclude that, even if Suso applies the idea of 'wild' to heresy, it is nevertheless the case that the noun 'savage' does not necessarily correspond to a

category clearly identifiable as 'heretic'. *Wild* can also indicate 'the marvellous'. In modern English does it not also have a positive sense in certain contexts: 'excited, passionate, enthusiastic'? In the Prologue to the *Book of Truth* Suso suggests that his own spiritual certainties definitely come from that 'noble speech', which 'seemed to him wild, incomprehensible, though he felt a great love for it' – while pointing out that it is not always easy to know whether to resist or obey the call we hear within our soul.[34] In Suso *wild* certainly does mean what is incomprehensible, inconstant, changing and so spiritually unrestrained – that is, disturbing or charged with religious memories from before Christianity. However, other passages by the same author confirm that this term can also serve to evoke positively the marvellous occurrence of an original experience of the divine: 'in the wild desert and the profound abyss of the godhead without mode (*in die wilden wuesti und in daz tief abgrúnde der wiselosen gotheit*)'.[35]

The result is that, according to Suso, even heretics have an authentic experience of the divine. The problem stems rather from a certain difficulty in integrating that authentic spiritual experience 'here on earth' into the material and social life of the world around them. In other words, heretics are not wicked in themselves, but they are outsiders. But we could object that among the saints many also lived an outsider's life. However that may be, and taking into consideration the prejudices of his time, Suso here shows great lucidity and exceptional tolerance. Kurt Ruh corroborates this observation, pointing out that the use of the neuter article *daz* for the 'nameless wild thing' (*daz namelos wilde*) might imply the idea of a depersonalization of heresy, the important practical consequence of which would be that there were no longer any physical people to throw onto the flames.[36]

## The ring of the eternal Godhead

No image can adequately represent 'the simple pure being of the naked Godhead'. Faithful to this apophatic tradition, which medieval scholars attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite, Suso does remind us of it in the final chapter of *Sicut aquila* by way of conclusion:

> How can we tell in images what is without image and prove what has no mode, what exceeds all thoughts and all human intelligence? When we make a comparison it is a thousand times more dissimilar than similar. But to cast out images with images I will try to show you, with the help of images and by means of a comparison, how we should apprehend this knowledge without images.[37]

To respond to his spiritual daughter's request Suso uses images while reminding her that they are a dissimilar semblance of the naked Godhead's mysteries, that they are metaphors for an invisible reality that can only be understood in analogical mode. Suso characterizes his approach by announcing that he proposes to 'cast out images with images'. Knowing no image is perfect, he does not venerate them as idols either. Without being an iconoclast Suso knows quite well that images are not untouchable or retouchable. That is probably the reason why he does not hesitate to retouch a traditional image describing the very essence of the Godhead. In this case



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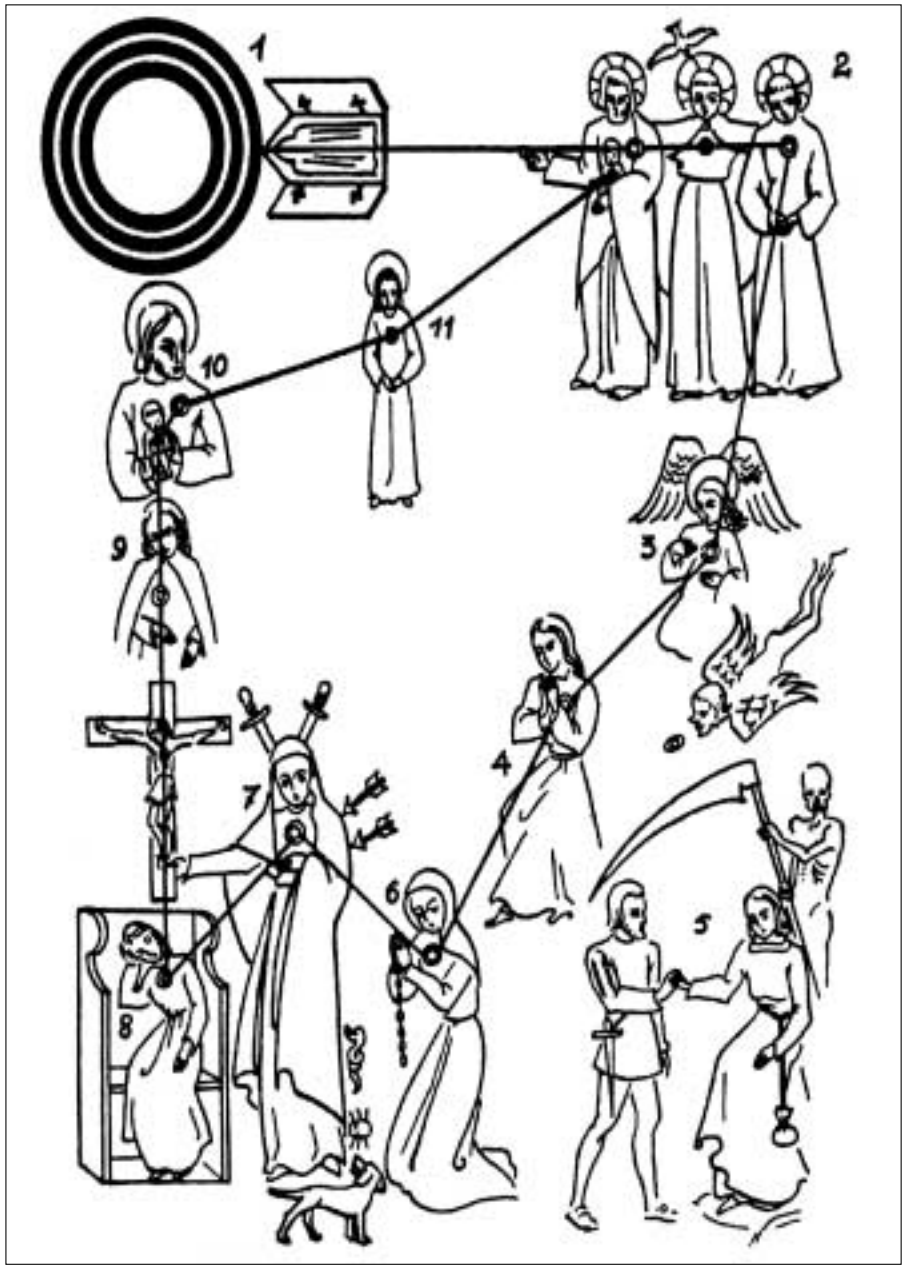
it is the image of the infinite sphere that Meister Eckhart often uses, explaining that he took it from the *Book of the 24 Philosophers*.[38] This is how Suso happens to retouch this image:

> Now listen: a wise master says that God, as the Godhead, is like an immense ring whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. To represent that for yourself imagine a person who forcefully throws a heavy stone into the middle of still water: a ring forms in the water and by the same force that ring produces another one, and that one in turn produces another. The size of the circles depends on the initial throw: its power might be so great that it would cover the whole surface of the water. The image of the first ring is comparable to the active power of divine nature in the Father, it is bottomless. The same force creates another ring similar to the first according to the Person, and it is the Son. These two Persons produce a third, and it is the Spirit of one and the other, coeternal and with the same power. That is what the three circles represent: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In that deep abyss the divine nature of the Father speaks and creates the Word, distinct according to the Person: remaining in himself in essence, he assumed human nature.[39]

Suso talks now of a ring (*ring*), now of a circle (*kreiss*), but in fact, according to the original quotation, sometimes attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, it is a sphere: 'God is an infinite sphere whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere'.[40] Suso's amendment results, on the one hand, in stressing the threefold character of the Godhead, and on the other, the triple circle[41] looks like a door through which the soul, detached from itself, may enter: 'Losing everything belonging to the creature, its spirit sinks deeper through the circular ring which represents the eternal Godhead and there it attains to spiritual perfection'.[42] Already, at the start of chapter 35 in his *Life*, Suso describes how, after purifying himself through confession, he then traces in his mind three circles (*drie kreiss*) around him. The episode of the wild mountain, where the pure spirits 'enter into an ineffable virtue wild and strange' (a bit like in a matrix), is also a similar metaphor. In his *Life* the nuptial character of certain metaphors is openly acknowledged, especially in the episode of the 'mystical marriage', which is echoed by the 'mystical breastfeeding' episode.[43] The two letters expressly dedicated to Elsbeth Stagel,[44] his favourite spiritual daughter, are both inspired by the Song of Songs. The second letter from Suso to Elsbeth begins thus: 'Tell my beloved that I am sick with love'.[45] But Suso, sometimes called *Frater Amandus*, is not only Elsbeth Staglin's spiritual lover.[46] Before all else, and just as nuns are called brides of Christ, there is no doubt that he is, in a purely spiritual sense, sometimes the baby of the Divine Mother.

As Alois Maria Haas suggests with well-judged delicacy, such considerations do not deserve the harsh verdict that modern psychology might tend to pronounce.[47] We can only accept the synchronicity of different possible readings for this ecstatic flight with its undeniably romantic qualities and which Suso proposes as a nuptial journey to the heart of the ultimate Wisdom, towards the symbiosophical stone,[48] which transcends all dogma and all representations (see Figures 1 and 2).

These pictures illustrating the soul's emanation and return to God are included in various manuscripts of Suso's *Sicut aquila*. The first (Figure 1) is a transcription of the manuscript A picture. Very worn and probably the oldest, it appears in particular on page 195 of Bihlmeyer's 1907 edition. It was redrawn, probably for Benoît Lavaud's




1. Illustration of the soul's journey according to Suso (manuscript A)



https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192105059475 Published online by Cambridge University Press


2. Illustration of the soul's journey according to Suso (Einsiedeln manuscript)



https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192105059475 Published online by Cambridge University Press

translation (1946). In Bihlmeyer (pp. *3–*5) this manuscript is called 'from Berlin'. But in the meantime it had been once again in Strasbourg, whence it was borrowed for an excessive length of time in 1843 (and on the subject of this long walkabout the author added: 'Books have their destinies').

The second picture (Figure 2), which is more recent, comes from the Einsiedeln manuscript. In this second variant the separation of the Angel–Demon (or Angel–Lucifer) pair seems to be sexual, which leads us to think that this is a variant of the androgyne myth.

*Commentary on the various stages of the soul's emanation and return to God*

In these illustrations of the spiritual life according to Suso, the following elements can be cross-referenced.

1. The three concentric circles in the top left of the picture represent the eternal Godhead. The Commentary written on the picture reads: 'This is the abyss without mode of the eternal Godhead (*gotheit*) without beginning or end'.

2. From the unity of essence emanate the three Persons. Between Father and Son is the Holy Spirit like a breath or intermediary. Commentary: 'This is the Trinity of Persons in the unity of essence that the Christian faith speaks of'.

3. Emanating in its turn from the three Persons, the winged figure represents the creation of the angels, with the rebellious angels' fall below. Commentary: 'This is the effusion of angelic nature'. In the Einsiedeln manuscript's variant we note the sexual nature of the Angel–Demon link, which leads us to think that this is a variant of the androgyne myth. Among the illustrations for *Sicut aquila* these are the only winged creatures. Should we conclude from this that, when mention is made of flying 'Like an eagle', it is either with angels or with demons?

4. A woman symbolizes the creation of human nature. Commentary: 'This is the human creature, formed according to the Godhead'.

5. At bottom right a knight takes his lady by the hand. The impermanence of earthly bonds is illustrated by death the reaper who stands behind the couple. Commentary: 'This is worldly love that ends in lamentation'. We note that earthly marriage and the nuptial ring are diametrically opposed.

6. A kneeling nun with her hands chained symbolizes penitence and return to a spiritual life. Commentary: 'I want to return to God, for life is very brief'.

7. Imitation of Christ's Passion: a nun, attacked by swords, arrows, a snake and a scorpion and facing a dog getting ready to bite her, touches with her right hand the feet of Christ crucified. Commentary: 'Ah! It is thus that I have to die and be crucified with Christ'.

8. The serenity of the contemplative life is symbolized by a woman sitting in a meditative pose. Commentary: 'I abandon myself to detachment, for there has always been too much of myself'.

9. Rise of the detached soul above the active life. Commentary: 'My senses are deactivated and the higher powers [of my soul] are superactivated'.

10. Birth of God in the soul, in the image of the Trinity: 'Here the spirit is absorbed into the trinity of Persons. Commentary: 'Nothing can harm me, for I am in God'.

11. Apotheosis of the spirit with the divine Persons. Commentary: 'All things are forgotten in ecstasy, for [the Godhead] is bottomless and without measure'.

In all the stages of this illustration of the spiritual life according to Suso, the characters have over their hearts a little ring representing the depths of the soul or the 'spark of the image of God in the soul', that is, in the image of the triple concentric ring symbolizing the Godhead. Cf. chapter 8 of *Sicut aquila*: 'The supreme and superessential spirit has ennobled human beings by illuminating them with his eternal Godhead, and this is the image of God in the spiritual soul which is eternal too. This is why, from the big circle that signifies the eternal Godhead, there come small circles: by comparison and similarity they can also represent the high nobility of his intelligence.'

To conclude, we should note that Suso stresses the inadequacy and the unsatisfactory nature of these illustrations. In chapter 8 of *Sicut aquila* he says on this topic: 'How can we tell in images what is imageless and prove what has no mode, and exceeds all thoughts and all human intelligence? When we make a comparison, it is a thousand times more dissimilar than similar. However, to cast out images with images, I shall try to show you with the help of images and by means of a comparison how we should apprehend this knowledge without images.'

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## Notes

1. See Suso (2005). Following a custom that was widespread in the Middle Ages the initial epigraph may serve as the title of a work. Here the Incipit '*Sicut aquila [etc.]*' (Deuteronomy 32, 11) may therefore serve as a title to indicate the eight non-biographical chapters of Suso's *Life*. In Karl Bihlmeyer's (1907) critical edition, which is my reference, this is chapters 46–53, whereas in the edition of Heinrich Suso Denifle (1876–80), it is chapters 49–56.
2. According to what Suso says at the beginning of the second part of his autobiography: *Life*, ch. 33 (see Bihlmeyer, 1907: 96).
3. See Vetter (1906); Ancelet-Hustache (1928).
4. According to Walter Senner, who refers to the 1691 Dominican calendar.
5. *Life*, ch. 33 (Bihlmeyer, 1907: 99: *uss der süssen lere dez heiligen maister Eghards*).
6. Papal bull *In agro dominico* 27 March 1329.
7. *Life*, chs 6, 11 and 33. The episode in the sixth chapter is nothing less than a vision of the blessed Master Eckhart in Paradise.
8. See Schwietering (1964: 309–99). On the situation of research on Suso see particularly: Haas (1995); Ruh (1996).
9. See Haas (1996: 157).
10. As in this possible addition by a copyist: 'They would even be capable of scorning Christ's suffering humanity' (2/47).
11. Suso (2005: ch. 1); *Life*, ch. 46.
12. *Ibid*.
13. According to Duvernoy (1976: 13), 'one of the great religions of humanity'.
14. John XXII's papal bull *In agro dominico* of 27 March 1329, article 15: 'Si homo commisisset mille

peccata mortalia, si talis homo esset recte dispositus, non deberet velle se ea non commisisse' (see DW V, p. 339, note 188).

15. Suso (2005: ch. 1); *Life*, ch. 46.
16. *Life*, ch. 23. We note that Meister Eckhart says much the same thing in chapter 19 of *Divine Consolation*. See also the *Apology* at the end of the same book. However, in chapter 23 of his *Life*, it says (but is this Suso?) that the uncouth people who persecuted the Servant did not fail to be caught by divine justice: 'I chose him so that, by such sufferings, he should be made like my only Son, and however my justice must avenge the great wrong he has been done, by the premature death of two of those who tormented him'.
17. *Ich heisse daz namelos wilde*. It is possible to translate as 'the nameless savage', but since *daz* is neuter it is better to say 'the nameless wild thing' (see *Book of Truth*, ch. 6). 'On the points where people sin who have a false freedom' (Bihlmeyer, 1907: 352).
18. For more details about this encounter see Wackernagel (1997).
19. Pfeiffer (1991/1857: 625, aphorism 69).
20. Adolf Spamer (1912: 145).
21. Pfeiffer (1991/1857: 463–5, *Traktat* VI); Meister Eckhart (1954: 51–2).
22. Grimm (1895: 280).
23. Homer, *Odyssey*, XVII, 485–7.
24. Quoted from Poisson (1986: 42).
25. *Sicut aquila*, ch. 3.
26. Bihlmeyer (1907: 99 *uss der süssen lere dez heiligen maister Eghards*).
27. Suso (2005: ch. 4); *Life*, ch. 49, aphorism 67.
28. *Divine consolation*, particularly DW V, p. 11, 9–14: *. . . sô müezen sie ir selbes entbildet werden und dans got aleine überbildet und dans gote und ûz gote geborn warden . . . .*
29. Suso (2005: ch. 5); *Life*, ch. 50.
30. *Liber Positionum*, in Pfeiffer (1857: 668–71).
31. *Traktat* XII, *Von dem überschalle* (On the highest joy) and *Diz ist diu glöse über dem überschal* (This is the gloss on the highest joy), in Pfeiffer (1857: 516–20).
32. Ruh (1996: 460).
33. Suso (2005: ch. 7); *Life*, ch. 52.
34. Bihlmeyer (1907: 326–7).
35. Bihlmeyer (1907: 352, 245 and 624: glossary). A positive meaning for *wild* and *namenlos* can also be found in Meister Eckhart, particularly sermon 80, DW III, pp. 386, 6–387, 5.
36. Kurt Ruh (1995: 72). In that article the author also shows that Suso recast the *Book of Truth* late on (*c*. 1360), and added in particular the episode of the 'conversion' of the 'wild thing' at the end of the text. In 1330 the possibility of such a conversion could not have been envisaged.
37. *Daz man bild mit bilden us tribe*. Bihlmeyer (1907: 191). This expression summarizes well the meaning that should be given to this paradoxical use of images. In relation to these themes I should indicate that an article by Monique Gruber on the relationship between text and image in Suso's writing is forthcoming shortly in Dierkens and Beyer de Ryke (2004).
38. The *Book of the 24 Philosophers* was for a long time attributed to Hermes Trismegistus. This attribution is said to have caused the mutilation of certain manuscripts reproducing the propositions of the 24 philosophers. On this subject see d'Alverny (1949: 223). See also Beierwaltes in *Die deutsche Litteratur des Mittelalters, Verfasserlexicon*. Band 5, Lief. 3/4, pp. 767–70. And in French *Le Livre des 24 philosophes*, trans. Françoise Hudry, Grenoble, Millon, 1989.
39. Suso (2005: ch. 8); *Life*, ch. 53,
40. 'Deus est sphaera infinita, cuius centrum est ubique, circumferentia nusquam.' Quoted from Clemens Baeumker (1928: 208). Suso probably got this aphorism from Meister Eckhart, who explains that it is an intelligible sphere (In Eccl., LW II, p. 248, n. 20). Alain de Lille comes before Eckhart in this sense. See Alanus ab Insulis, *Theologicae Regulae*, PL, vol. 210, n. 447, p. 627.
41. Suggesting, like Joachim de Fiore, the advent of a third alliance?
42. Suso (2005: ch. 8); *Life*, ch. 53.

43. See chapters 3 and 18 of Suso's *Life*.
44. Elsbeth is mentioned in Bihlmeyer (1907: 367, 384), that is, in Letters 3 and 8 in the *Little Book of Letters*, which correspond to Letters 12 and 20 in the *Grand Book of Letters*.
45. Song of Songs 5, 8.
46. In *hac vita et post mortem*. For after her death she appeared to him like his future bride in a vision: 'resplendent in a garment as white as snow, adorned with luminous light and overwhelmed with heavenly joys'.
47. Haas (1996: 166).
48. The symbiosophical stone is a poetical variation on the theme of the philosopher's stone. As stated in *Diogenes* 162 (April/June 1993), note 60, p. 104: 'symbiosophie' means the 'wisdom of living together', that is, transcending conflicting polarities. So the ideal of the mystical marriage corresponds to the discovery of the symbiosophical stone.

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