

## MacDonald and Jacob Boehme

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Scholarly readers of George MacDonald have remarked that he drew upon the writings of the German theosophist Jacob Boehme (1575-1624), but the point has not been discussed in detail.<sup>1</sup> This article will attempt to advance the discussion a little. An exhaustive treatment would be based upon a greater degree of conversancy with Boehme's works than my own, a search of all of MacDonald's publications, and consideration of his letters and other unpublished personal documents.

At some point his library contained the so-called William Law edition of Boehme's works translated by John Sparrow and others, and "a very early Dutch edition of the *Forty Questions*," according to MacDonald's son Greville. He says that MacDonald was interested in Boehme at the time *David Elginbrod* was published, and that he had returned to Boehme by the time of *Lilith*'s composition. However, [end of page 24] although MacDonald taught himself "Dutch" so that he could read Boehme in the original language, Greville says, he "was not deeply versed in his books."<sup>2</sup> We know that MacDonald had read Boehme, but which works, other than *Aurora* and one or two others, we do not know.

We may look beyond the very few acknowledged references to Boehme in MacDonald's writings for unacknowledged allusions, but should recognize that even if the notion at hand derives, ultimately, from the "Illuminated shoemaker," the influence may have been transmitted via one of several literary currents, rather than coming to MacDonald directly from the reading of Boehme. Romantic poetry or speculation may be MacDonald's immediate "source." Boehme was studied by at least three early Romantics important to MacDonald, namely Novalis, Blake, and Coleridge. In fact, his interest in Boehme may well have been sparked by theirs. "Touches of mystical thought deriving from Boehme and others are so deeply embedded in *Henry von Ofterdingen*," Novalis's romance to which *Phantastes* is indebted, "that they rise to engage the reader whether he will or no."<sup>3</sup> MacDonald's first published book was translations of Novalis's *Spiritual Songs*, so he presumably would have known "For Tieck" as well, in which Novalis hails his friend as Boehme's heir.<sup>4</sup> Boehme was one source for Blake's concept of correspondence between the visible order and

the spiritual, an idea central to MacDonald as well.<sup>5</sup> Coleridge's lifelong wrestling with Boehme's writings is evident in publications surely known to MacDonald, such as *Biographia Literaria* and *Aids to Reflection*; MacDonald would have taken note of Coleridge's defense of the "Teutonic philosopher" as no superstitious *fanatic* but rather a man subject to extreme vividness of ideas and obscure feelings, an *enthusiast*.<sup>6</sup> [25]

Another literary current in which Boehme's name and ideas were carried is the religio-philosophical one. Some of the Cambridge Platonists, including Henry More, knew of Boehme, and we know that MacDonald read More, anyway.<sup>7</sup> He read William Law, and of course Law is the outstanding English expositor of "Behmen," in *The Spirit of Prayer, The Way to Divine Knowledge*, etc.<sup>8</sup> I would not be surprised if Law were at least as important a source of Boehme's thought for MacDonald as Boehme's own writings.

A third current in MacDonald's reading is the esoteric, although the extent of his reading is unclear. Was it confined to Swedenborg<sup>9</sup> and Boehme himself? Even if so, MacDonald could encounter in Novalis the influence of Novalis's friend J. W. Ritter, a student of alchemy, and Ritter, in turn, could be drawing upon Boehme specifically as a figure in the alchemical tradition.<sup>10</sup>

By the time of MacDonald's birth, Boehme's ideas and life story had been absorbed by a considerable range of seekers and thinkers over the previous two centuries, and MacDonald read a number of them. While in our own time Boehme may be known, following the readings of Nicholas Berdyaev and others, as a "Christian gnostic" and an outstanding visionary of freedom, or for his importance to German philosophical modernism or even contemporary feminist and process theology,<sup>11</sup> he could be hailed by nineteenth-century evangelical writers sympathetic to MacDonald's outlook, such as Andrew Murray and Alexander Whyte, for his emphasis on the new birth, his opposition to nominal Christianity, and his call to live a life of prayer. (Such themes are prominent in the treatises collected as *The Way to Christ*, from which this paper will quote frequently.) Murray wrote, "Behmen taught [William] LAW what he had only faintly seen before, that God not only is All, and must have [26] All, but that He alone must do All."<sup>12</sup> The style and content of Whyte's "appreciation" of "Behmen," set next to MacDonald's devotional writings, will strongly suggest that the Boehme Whyte admired was also MacDonald's Boehme, the man of the Spirit at odds with a faithless orthodoxy.<sup>13</sup>

Consider Boehme's life-legend. A farmer's son, Boehme did not

have an extensive education and was apprenticed to a shoemaker, eventually setting up as a cobbler in Goerlitz, Saxony, in his mid-twenties. Following a melancholic period, he experienced a “breakthrough,” and, he wrote, “my spirit suddenly saw through all, and in all and by all the creatures, even in herbs and grass it knew God, who he is, and how he is, and what his will is” (*Aurora*, 19:11, 13).<sup>14</sup> He wrote the first part of his book, *Aurora* (1612), for himself, but sympathetic readers made copies, one of which came into the hands of the chief pastor of Goerlitz, Gregorius Richter. Richter denounced Boehme as a false prophet and compelled the town magistrates to expel him. “Since it cannot be otherwise, I am content,” Boehme is said to have replied. The magistrates recalled him, however, but cautioned him against further writing. Thereafter Boehme associated with students of the esoteric and mystical, and in a few years was producing further writings. Throughout his career he contrasted the true church of the regenerate with the “scuffling” clergy who were lords of “stone-churches.” Such men, for all their learning and controversies, “help to confirm and establish the devil’s lies,” Boehme asserted, and “make of the merciful, loving and friendly God, a murderer and furious destroyer.” An admirer’s publication of a book by Boehme was again forced to leave Goerlitz. However, he was invited to visit the court of the Elector of Saxony, and stayed two months with the court physician, he was visited by professors and [27] nobles. Becoming ill that autumn, he returned to his family in Goerlitz to die.<sup>15</sup>

George MacDonald may have felt that Boehme’s experiences were similar to his own. Both men antagonized certain guardians of orthodoxy and encouraged attempts to stifle their teaching; both exhibited meekness in the face of severe pressure—Boehme’s “Since it cannot be otherwise” and MacDonald’s response to the deacons who hoped cutting his salary would prompt him to resign: “I am sorry enough to hear it, but if it must be, why, I suppose we must contrive to live on less” (*GMDW*, p.178). Both, too, were vindicated in their lifetime, Boehme at the Elector’s court and MacDonald as a recognized literary figure and popular preacher.

However, whatever MacDonald may have known of Boehme’s life and works, the present writer has so far turned up only a few explicit references.

1. In *England’s Antiphon* MacDonald notes John Byron’s acquaintance with the writings of “the marvelous shoemaker” (p. 287).

2. Mr. Walton, in *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood*, tells us he “wanted the fourth plate in the third volume of Law’s ‘Behmen’” (ch. 3;

see also ch. 9). Walton is alluding to curious figures designed, evidently, by Dionysius Freher, In the eighteenth-century collection of translations of Boehme. The third volume of the “Law” edition contains Boehme’s huge commentary on Genesis, *Mysterious Magnum*, and *Four Tables of Divine Revelation*.<sup>16</sup>

3. Most interesting of MacDonald’s references to Boehme seen by me is in *David Elginbrod*. Not only does the humble David possess a first edition *Aurora*, he is probably a descendant of Boehme’s by blood (ch. 13). Like Boehme, David’s grandfather was a cobbler. David, though wise and saintly, is ill-educated—he reads a book’s title “with difficulty” [28] (ch-1); Boehme was regarded by some of his champions as illiterate, or at least an “uneducated man of genius.”<sup>17</sup> (Incidentally, MacDonald quotes from *Aurora* for his epigraph to ch. 9.)

Unless we are prepared to be ingenious and find sly allusions to Boehme in MacDonald’s use of words such as “aurora” (*Lilith*, ch. 8; *Marquis of Lossie*, ch. 66), the characterization of God’s will as an “abyss” (*Sir Gibbie*, ch. 14), etc., we must proceed to unacknowledged points of comparison. These are more interesting than the references just discussed.

1. MacDonald and Boehme believe God dwells in nature, and that nature proceeds from God, rather than being created out of nothing. Boehme: “God dwelleth through and through nature,” which is a “desirous receivingness” (*Clavis*, par. 56). The Deity is “in all places and parts . . . and in all things” (*Aurora*, 10:108). “The simple saith, God made all things out of nothing. But he knoweth not that God; neither doth he know what God is” (21:60). “Where nothing is, there nothing can come to be: all things must have a root” (19:68). MacDonald: “her [Clementina’s] will bowed itself to . . . the All-in-all” (*Marquis*, ch. 66). “I repent me of the ignorance wherein I ever said that God made man out of nothing: there is no nothing out of which to make anything; God is all in all” (*Weighed and Wanting*, ch. 35; q. in Hein, *World of George MacDonald*, p. 43). MacDonald’s “Christian pantheism” (his term) means that “This world is not merely a thing which God has made, subjecting it to laws . . . . God is in everything” (*A Dish of Orts*, “Wordsworth’s Poetry”).<sup>19</sup> [Note: endnote 18 missing in original] “The roots of the seen remain unseen” (*GMDW*, p.147).

2. Because of its origin in God, nature may disclose God’s character and purposes to the receptive man. Boehme: “We may very well [29] observe and consider the hidden spiritual world by the visible world,” which is being created by God “without ceasing” (*Clavis*, par. 111), the external

world allows us to “contemplate by it Your eternal, spiritual kingdom” (*Way to Christ*, p.95: *Holy Prayer*, par. 47). MacDonald: “The outermost husk of creation has correspondence with the deepest things of the Creator. He is not a God that hideth himself, but a God who made that he might reveal” (*Unspoken Sermons*, III, p. 31; see also p. 42). MacDonald dramatizes this in, for example, Wilfrid Cumbermede’s experiences in the Alps.

3. The visible world is part of man’s embodiment. Boehme: The “body of man” is “the visible world” (*Way* p. 185: *Supersensual Life*, par. 44). MacDonald: The world man inhabits is “but an extension of his body” (*Miracles of Our Lord*, ed. R. Hein, p.136). “Nature is an outer garment for man, or a living house, rather, for man to live in” (*Miracles*, p. 92). Man is a microcosm. Boehme: “All is in man, both heaven and earth, stars and elements. Nothing can be named that is not in man” (q. by Jones, cited in note 15, p.184). In *David Elginbrod* Hugh Sutherland experiences nature as “an extension of the body in which he [man] dwells. His spirit flashed in the lightning, raved in the thunder, roared in the wind, and wept in the rain,” though this widening “as it were, [of] his microcosm to the expanse of the macrocosm around him” could not last (ch. 28). The man in Christ exercises authority over nature, ruling, says Boehme, “over all creatures . . . and nothing on earth can harm [him], for [he is] like all things and nothing is unlike [him]” (*Way*, p.173: *Supersensual Life*, par. 8). MacDonald: “I think a true man should be able to rule winds and waters and loaves and fishes, for he comes of the Father who made the house for him” (*Miracles*, p.134).

4. But fallen man is subject to nature, and exchanges the image of **[30]** God for beastliness (cf. Romans 1:23), “like a hellish worm or abominable beast,” Boehme says (*Way*, p. 29: *True Repentance*, 1622, par. 6). Fallen man loves, not God and his neighbor, but “many hundreds of early beasts in him” (*Way*, p. 67: *True Repentance*, Feb. 9, 1623, par. 9). The sinner confesses: “In me, all evil beasts, with their passions, live” (*Way*, p. 103: *Holy Prayer*, par. 52). In *The Princess and Curdie*, the young miner learns that men may become beasts by living to themselves, and that he can sense the movement towards the beast-form or claw (ch. 8) (cf. the degraded servant Caley in *Marquis*, ch. 35, who has a “poor monkey-rudiment of a conscience”). Perhaps the story of Nebuchadnezzar in the fourth chapter of Daniel was a source for both Boehme and MacDonald.

5. To be saved, a man must repent and deny himself. God is merciful and will restore the sinner, who does not merely escape punishment, but is regenerated and set on the way to perfection in Christ. Boehme: “There is no

other way to God than a new mind that turns from evil . . . [and] wraps its will in Christ's death . . . There is no hypocritical forgiveness . . . we must not be externally accepted children, but children internally reborn out of God, in a new man, given over to God" (*Way*, 132-3: *True Resignation*, (Ch. 2, par. s 33, 36). MacDonald: The sinner "must keep turning to righteousness and abjuring iniquity" (*Unspoken Sermons* III, p. 218), and Christ will come in, "not by our thought only . . . but he comes himself, and of his own will . . . and as our spirit informs, gives shape to our bodies, in like manner his soul informs, gives shape to our souls" (pp. 52-3), so that "now" we "live with the life which alone is life" (p.158).

The doctrine of imputed righteousness, understood as meaning that God leaves the sinner in his sins, granting him a mere external **[31]** righteousness in His own eyes, is rejected, "no hypocrisy and external comfort helps in any way," says Boehme, "where man, while still remaining firm in self, wishes to cover with Christ's payment the rogue of sin . . . and remain in the self" (*Way*, p.132). MacDonald's campaign against imputed righteousness thus understood is well known; see, e.g., *Robert Falconer*, Bk. 3, ch. 5: *David Elginbrod*, ch. 8, "Righteousness" in *Unspoken Sermons* III, etc. Salvation means a new identity: the redeemed sinner receives the name of Jesus implanted in his soul (Boehme, *Way*, p.104: *Holy Prayer*, par. 52); he receives his true name from God (MacDonald, "The New Name," *US* II). Boehme and MacDonald agree, however, that the subjective beginning of salvation may be the soul's awakening to its own impurity and a sense that it cannot save itself: Boehme speaks of it as "frightened" and rejecting itself "as altogether unworthy" (*Way*, 56-7: *True Repentance*, 1622, par. 45), while Janet in *Sir Gibbie* says simply "'the grue (horror) maun mak w'y for the grace'" (ch. 29).

6. Does God hate the sinner? No, but the sinful man will experience God's wrath, the fire of God's nature as known by the one who rejects Him. Boehme: "The wrath of nature was . . . hidden in the first principle, till the fall of man; and then the divine working . . . fled" from him and "the wrath arose aloft, and got the predominancy" (*Clavis*, pars. 153-4). MacDonald: "the fire of God, which is his essential being . . . is a fire unlike its earthly symbol in this, and that it is only at a distance it burns—that the farther from him, it burns the worse, and that when we turn and begin to approach him, the burning begins to change to comfort" (*US* II, p.162). Boehme says that in the sinner, the fire shining from God causes a "painful, horrible hunger, and pricking desire" (*Clavis*, par. 93). Lilith's anguish will be recalled when "the

central [32] fire of the universe” radiates into her the “knowledge of what she is,” and “She knows that she is herself the fire in which she is burning, but . . . does not know that the Light of Life is the heart of that fire” (ch. 39).

7. Salvation is restoration, homecoming, the life of God within. The redeemed man, Boehme says, will find “his native country . . . within himself” (*Clavis*, pars. 178-9). “Thou needst not first to cast thine eyes up into heaven . . . Yea, but God is so near thee, that . . . all the three persons are generated in thy heart, even God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost” (*Aurora*, 10: 102-3). Robert Falconer says, “When we find Him in our hearts, we shall find him in everything” (Book 3, ch. 10). *Lilith* culminates in a vision of heaven as home (ch. 46), Mr. Raven having taught that “home is ever so far away as the palm of your hand” (ch.9). Lilith is promised that God “will not change you; he will only restore you to what you were” (ch. 39); compare Boehme: Christ works in us to “restore Paradise” (*Way*, p. 96: *Holy Prayer*, par. 54), giving again the “once-possessed majesty” (*Way*, p.96: *Holy Prayer*, para. 47).

8. A final parallel: Boehme and MacDonald suggest that a reader’s failure to accept their teaching indicates his lack of spiritual maturity and his need for grace. Boehme: “If thou overcomest not, then let my book alone . . . but stick to thy old matters . . . if he do not understand it, and yet longeth and would fain have the meaning or understanding thereof,” the reader should “pray to God for his holy Spirit . . . For without the illumination thereof you will not understand this Mystery” (*Aurora*, 13:27, 30, 31). MacDonald (e.g.): “In attempting to set forth what I find . . . I write with no desire to provoke controversy, which I loathe, but with some hope of presenting to the minds of such as have [33] become capable of seeing it, the glory of the truth of the Father and the Son . . . to the untrue, the truth itself must seem unsound, for the light that is in them is darkness” (*US III*, p. 3). “No man can see a true thing to be true but by the Lord, the spirit” (p.29).

This incomplete survey<sup>20</sup> of MacDonald’s books suggests that Greville MacDonald was correct in judging that his father was “not deeply versed” in Boehme. The areas wherein Boehme and MacDonald agree are not peculiar to Boehme, but may be found in other works of Christian spirituality, in Romanticism, and in Neoplatonism. More distinctively Bohemian ideas—that “all things consist in Yes and No,” that God “needs” nature in order to know Himself, that the Virgin Sophia is an entity within the Godhead, that the first man was an androgyne, woman appearing as a result of a “fall” prior to the fall consequent upon eating the prohibited fruit, his

cabalistic method of deriving meanings from the letters of certain words, and the alchemical vocabulary of his theodicy—do not appear in MacDonald's most noteworthy departure from the Christian consensus, his belief or hope that all creatures, even the devil, will be saved, does not appear in Boehme. Rather than being a follower of Boehme, MacDonald probably loved Boehme's piety and his imaginative reaching after the deepest truths of God, and sympathized with Boehme as a persecuted prophet.

#### Endnotes

1. Richard Reis, *George MacDonald* (1972); R. L. Wolff, *The Golden Key* (1961); Rolland Hein, *The Harmony Within* (1982). By "theosophist" is meant one "concerned with the knowledge of the hidden mysteries of divinity" and "the universe as related to God, as well as to man" (*Encyclopedia of Religion*, gen. ed. Mircea Eliade, Macmillan, 1987, s.v. "Theosophy"). See Rudolf Otto on Boehme, and theosophy as a pseudo-science of God, in *The Idea of the Holy*. By the term "esoteric" in this paper, I mean "occult philosophy," including [34] theosophy, alchemy, astrology, etc.—all of which appear in Boehme's writings, more prominently in some (e.g. *The Signature of All Things*) than in others.
2. Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife* (New York: Dial, 1924), p.557; hereafter, *GMDW*.
3. Palmer Hinty, Introduction to *Henry von Ofterdingen* by Novalis (G.F.P. von Hardenburg) (New York: Ungar, 1964), p. 4.
4. Translated by Vernon Watkins in *Temenos* 9 (1988), pp.122-3.
5. J. G. Davies, *The Theology of William Blake* (Oxford, 1948), p.40 n.2.
6. See *Biographia Literaria*, ch. 9, and the Conclusion to *Aids to Reflection*; for Coleridge's study of Boehme, see Thomas McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford, 1969).
7. Ronald MacDonald, "George MacDonald," in *From a Northern Window* (London: Nisbet, 1911), p.88; also Coleman Parsons, "George MacDonald and Henry More," *Notes and Queries* 5 May 1945, pp.180-3.
8. For Law's study of Boehme, see A. Keith Walker, *William Law* (London: SPCK, 1973) and Stephen Hobhouse, ed., *Selected Mystical Writings of William Law* (London: Rockliff, 1948). Ronald MacDonald notes his father's reading of Law (note 7 above), and in *Malcolm* (ch. 7) we read that wise Mr. Graham "had come under the influence of the writings of William Law" as a young man. The parallels between Law's thought and MacDonald's are many and important.
9. See Clarke Garrett, "Swedenborg and the Mystical Enlightenment in Late Eighteenth-Century England," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 45:1 (Jan.-Mar.1984), pp.67-81, on English interest in Swedenborg in the years after his death in 1772. MacDonald mentions Swedenborg in *Malcolm*, chaps. 7 and 64, *Marquis*, ch. 36, *Robert Falconer*, Book 3, ch.11, etc.



10. Ritter's occultism: *Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. "Androgynes." For figures in English literature who show some interest in the Cabala or other esoteric sources (several of whom are important to MacDonald), see Joseph Blau, "The Diffusion of the Christian Interpretation of the Cabala In English Literature," *Review of Religion* 6 (1941-2), pp.146-68.

11. See, e.g., Berdyaev, "Underground and Freedom," his introduction to *Six Theosophic Points* by Boehme (1958); David Walsh, *The Mysticism of Inner-worldly Fulfillment* (1983); Donald Bloesch, *The Battle for the Trinity* (1985).

12. Andrew Murray, Introduction to *Wholly for God* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1976; rpt. of London: Nisbet, 1894), p.xv. Murray's emphasis.

13. Alexander Whye, "Jacob Behmen," *Thirteen Appreciations* (Edinburgh [35] and London: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, 1913), pp.35-71.

14. For Boehme's works I have used: *The Way to Christ*, tr. Peter Erb (New York: Paulist, 1978), including the separate treatise titles with paragraph numbers; *The Clavis, or Key* (Edmonds, WA: Sure Fire, 1988); *Aurora* (London: Watkins). I don't know which works of Boehme's, other than *Aurora*, MacDonald read in whole or in part. This paper may quote from Boehme works not read by MacDonald. However, while Boehme's writings (and MacDonald's) are not all of a piece, there is much reiteration throughout them, and I doubt that any idea I've illustrated by quotation is unique to one work.

15. For Boehme's life see Rufus Jones, *Spiritual Reformers of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (London: MacMillan, 1914). Jones's chapters, and John Stoudt's *Sunrise to Eternity* (1957), are good introductions to Boehme.

16. The contents of the four volumes of the Law edition are listed on p.554 of Coleridge's *Marginalia*, vol. I, ed. George Whalley.

17. *Biographia Literaria*, ch.9.

18. Roland Hein has edited, by MacDonald (Wheaton, 111.: Shaw): *Life Essential* (1974), *The World of George MacDonald: Selections from His Works of Fiction* (1978), and *The Miracles of Our Lord* (1980). Citations from the three volumes of *Unspoken Sermons* are from facsimiles published by J. J. Flynn (South Pasadena, CA: 1987).

19. "The genuine pantheist . . . differs [in his doctrine of nature] from the orthodox Christian only in so far as he refuses to admit the essential category of contingent being. When the pantheist says he sees a stone as God, it is more than likely that he means little more than that the stone has its own humble perfection which it has derived from God: he sees the stone as God made it, and made it good" - R. C. Zehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane* (Oxford, 1961), p.132. MacDonald, I think, would agree with C. S. Lewis in *Letters to Malcolm*: "On the one hand, the man who does not regard God as other than himself cannot be said to have a religion at all. On the other hand, If I think God other than myself in the same way in which my fellow-men, and objects In general, are other than myself, I am beginning to make Him an idol. I am daring to treat His existence as somehow *parallel* to my own. But

He is the ground of our being. He is always both within us and over against us. Our reality is so much reality as He, moment by moment, projects into us. The deeper the level within ourselves from which our prayer, or any other act, wells up, the more it is his, but not at all the less ours. Rather, most ours when most His" (Letter 13). On Boehme's pantheism, see McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition*, pp.331-2.

20. *Annals*, *Wilfrid Cumbermede*, *The Portent*, *Robert Falconer*, *David Elginbrod*, *Sir Gibbie*, *Malcolm*, *Marquis*, *Phantastes*, *Lilith*, the devotional books and some of the literary essays were consulted. If readers of *North Wind* have spotted indications of Boehme other than those identified in this paper, please let me know. **[36]**