

## Sample Translation      English Version

I chose Professor Dr. Wolfgang Wackernagel's, article entitled *Der transimaginäre Blick*, published in the bilingual book *Ineffable Beauty, Mystical Paradox in 20th Art* as listed below maintained originally that his article on the ontology of Meister Eckhart's mystical philosophy was untranslatable. However, when he saw my final result, he said that the translation was a great success (*Wunderbar geklappt!*) and did not need any alteration. The original text and translation are enclosed in the webpage to act as a sample of my translation as is customary for any commercial translator

Wolfgang Wackernagel

### Transcending the Image

Abandonment and Re-adoption: the Image Theme in Meister Eckhart's *Spiritual Counsels* and other works

#### 1. Preliminary remarks

What, if anything, has Meister Eckhart who lived in Erfurt seven hundred years ago got to do with an exhibition on "The Mystical Paradox and Art in the 20th Century"? There are several answers to this question.

First Meister Eckhart can be regarded as a 'mystic', who has a lot to say with regard to our ephemeral age. Many researchers regard him today to be almost a central figure. Even when Eckhart discusses transcending time, he is being anything other than obscure. He understands that timelessness is the dynamic core of time itself and he knew how to reconcile the intellectual experience of God with everyday life. It has been said of him that he was both a "master teacher" ('Lesemeister') and "master of life" ('Lebemeister'). We can learn from him how to find a balance between activity and passivity. For Eckhart, seclusion and passivity were essential ideas for spiritual instruction. Only if you free yourself inwardly, can you think and act in a free and natural way. The second key concept is

'paradox': with regard to our almost daily dialogue in paradox, Eckhart's thoughts seem almost modern. More than this, Eckhart was concerned in an outstanding way to find a deeper and more harmonious meaning to these apparently chaotic contradictions. In a certain sense, he had always thought dialectically: by looking inwards he wanted to take the opposites to a higher plane without however cancelling them out or resolving them. With Eckhart, thesis and antithesis do not simply cancel each other out, but lead to a higher spiritual level. This form of exalting dialectic to a higher level touches upon the thoughts of Far Eastern philosophers.

Thirdly, there seems to be an almost legendary aura to the name of Eckhart which cannot be explained either by the more or less equal knowledge as ignorance about this Thuringian scholar. It is, however, significant that so much has remained unknown about this author, whose written legacy is very much involved with the ineffable.

Meister Eckhart's oeuvre illustrates, in an exemplary fashion, the human attempt to introduce the ineffable into language. As a gifted rhetorician, he had created many new and clear concepts in both his German and Latin writings which even today inspire not only thinkers but also artists.

It is believed that the concept 'Bildung' (education = Fr. formation) taken from the Eckhart lexicon has undergone an extraordinary development and extension in the history of the German language. The philosopher Gadamer himself did not hesitate to refer to this word as one of the key ideas of the 'Humanists'. However, the word 'entbilden' (divesting of the image, 'de-imaging', 'de-educating'), together with its derivation 'Entbildung' ('de-imagisation', 'de-education'), both of which were introduced by Eckhart have hardly entered the language. Tauler and Seuse, two scholars who had been taught by the 'Meister', together with Angelus Silesius who had also read Tauler, are amongst the few writers who have used this now unknown and forgotten word.<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that none of these authors understand 'entbilden' as the opposite of 'bilden'. If anyone wants to avoid being confused by this apparent contradictory use of language, it would be necessary to check once again the meaning of this concept of 'Bildung' in the works of Meister Eckhart himself.

In his work on the language of Meister Eckhart *Deutschen Begriffssprache Meister Eckharts*<sup>1</sup>, Benno Schmoltdt writes: "*Bilde* (image) is a term, that is used in the doctrines concerning the relationship between divine and creaturely existence." Even though Schmoltdt's analysis on the extremely wide-ranging, but often vague abundance of senses with regard to the word 'Bilde' in five parts, it is by no

means an exhaustive study; this concept can be reduced to three semantic levels, descending from the sacred to the profane: the meanings range from the *Imago* doctrine, which is an important part of the speculation concerning the Trinity via man as made in the image of God to the profoundly dissimilar phantasms (phantasmata) connected with both the inner and the 'ûzwendigen' outer world. The first level concerns the Trinity and the second level describes the human being, whereas the third describes the world of 'intelligibilia' and intuitive perception. The first and the second levels are related in the closest possible form of interplay when the second stage tries to adjust to the first stage (as in a mystical interpretation in II Corinthians III, 18: "in eandem imaginem transformamur"), (we are transformed in to the same image), whereas the third stage has an antithetical relationship to the first two (like a shadow or a passive form of resistance) to any conformity of the second stage to the first. Thus the first and the third stage represent the two extremes of "being in an intrinsic dialectical motion". If in the first stage the image itself is meant, then the third would characterise this as the 'non-image', whereas the second stage characterises the areas of both identity and difference that exist between the first and the third stage. If on the other hand the third stage refers to the first stage as 'Bild' (image) by means of a kind of semantic oscillation, then in this context, the third stage now becomes 'non-image', whereas the second stage now belongs to the area that includes difference and identity existing between the first and the third stages.

Thus the third stage contains the difference between the first and the second stage so that 'de-imaging' refers to this antithetic pole of the image. Whereas the word 'Bilden' (forming images) generally presupposes the first semantic stage as 'Bild' (image), thus emphasising the similarity between the second stage to the first. The word 'Entbilden' ('de-imaging') renders the third stage into a positive image idea, so that the dissimilarity between the second to the first is also demonstrated – and thus at the same time a certain similarity of the second to the third stage.

From this it can now be seen why the word 'Bilden' (forming images, education) is based on a positive evaluation of the image and of forming images as in 'Paideia', i.e. the 'bringing out' of what is divine in man. On the other hand 'Entbilden' arises from a negative assessment of the image because it denotes a denial of what is 'unlike', thus not like God and what is not the 'divine image'.<sup>1</sup> By means of this kind of semantic oscillation with regard to the concept of image, including both its positive **and** negative evaluation, the conclusion is reached that with Meister Eckhart, 'Bilden' (forming images and 'Entbilden' ('de-imaging', the divesting of images) are not two opposed concepts in language, but are just **one** and the same process from two opposite standpoints.

## 2. Abandonment of the Image as a Revelation from the Original

Using Eckhart's language of images, the experience of the ineffable involves an abandonment of all external images – thus, a certain 'Entbildetwerden' (process of divesting oneself of all images = 'de-imagining'). With this Meister Eckhart means that in the midst of all external images, the image of God in the soul of the human being will be released. Thus we can talk of a painted over image or a palimpsest image because the ground of the soul resembles an image that has been covered over or written over by other images. Even if the original image has been submerged, it is not distorted in any way. It continues to exist under the images that hide it. Thus it is possible at any moment to free the original image of God in the soul, just like a palaeographer or an art historian rediscovers an old text or picture – possibly even one painted by a great master that is hidden under a more recent layer of paint or under a new script. There may be many layers, but it is still one and the same base or, in this context, canvas or parchment.

This is confirmed by the expression "from the seven steps of the inner and new person" which Eckhart had borrowed from Saint Augustine in his treatise *Vom edlen Menschen* (On the Noble Man). However, Eckhart enriched the metaphorical form of this image. Thus the highest possible stage has now been reached, "when the human being has divested himself of all images and is overlaid by God's eternity and has attained to perfect oblivion of all transitory and time-bound life and is drawn towards and is transformed into a divine image." (cf. Saint Augustine: *Sextam omnimoda mutationis in aeternam vitam, et usque ad totam oblivionem vitae temporalis transeuntem in perfectam formam, quae facta est ad imaginem et similitudinem Dei*). In the same place, the 'Pagan Masters' Tullius (Cicero) and Seneca are quoted in connection with a very similar area concerning 'the seed of God' and finally Origenes 'the great master' is also quoted in this context: "As God himself has begotten and sown and planted this seed, it may well be covered and hidden, but never destroyed nor extinguished [...] God's image is in the ground of the soul like a living well."<sup>1</sup>

This idea is expressed in a similar way, even with these Latin authors: "Let us see how an image is made from either wood or stone in a case where the image has always been there; it must be purified from the surrounding material, or in other words hewn out and set free. If all this is done by the hand of an artist, the image appears radiant – thus the divine original image does not appear or

let us realise what we are when our soul is covered with layers of painting or writing. (I John III, 2):  
“We are the sons of God, but it has not yet been revealed”.<sup>1</sup>

From the perspective of the philosophical tradition, the concept of ‘de-imagining’ can be traced back to the neo-Platonic treatment of abstraction (*aphairesis*). This is most clearly evident in the third variation of the same idea: “When a master is making an image from wood or stone, he does not imprint the image into the wood, but instead he cuts away the shaving that had hidden and covered up the image.”<sup>1</sup> Although Meister Eckhart does not at this stage quote any names, it can be assumed that he had taken this metaphor from the second volume of Dionysius Aeropagita’s *Mystical Theology*, which had also been used by Michelangelo.

There are several passages where the name of the Areopagite is linked with Eckhart’s ‘mystical’ analysis of *theologia negativa*. This also applies, for example to his Latin works (in the commentary on Exodus XX, 21: “Moyses accessit ad caliginem, in qua erat deus”): “This is what Dionysius means in the first chapter of *Mystical Theology*: ‘the simple, hidden and unchangeable secrets of Theology are completely covered by a transcendently bright radiating darkness of a silence learnt in a hidden way that shines out ‘super’-bright as the clearest light of all issuing from the darkest depths possible’. And in his first letter to Gajus: ‘perfect non-knowledge is knowledge of that which is above all that is knowable.’ In his prologue to (his translation) of *Mystical Theology*, Johannes Sarracenus says: ‘If you ascend to the knowledge of God via negation, then what God is will still remain closed and hidden’. In this text, he has repeated that whoever wants to enter and see God has to be freed from and carried away from the waters, that is from everything changeable (*absumptus et abstractus ab aquis*).”<sup>1</sup>

As far as this image-based ‘de-imagining’ as ‘abstraction’ (*aphairesis*) is concerned, Plotinus (*Enneade I, 6, 9, 7*) has already referred to “poiètès agalmatos” that removes the shavings (*aphairei*), in order to bring out the beautiful lines of the marble statue. Thus at the end of the third book of the fifth *Enneade*, his aphaeretic cry is: “Aphele panta!”.

Alongside these unambiguously heathen sources, reference can be made to the particularly beautiful interpretation of the Song of Songs. “Take no notice of my swarthy skin, I am black but lovely, it is the sun that has burnt me. (I Song of Songs V, 6) ‘The sun’ is the light of this world and means that even though it is the highest and best that has been created, it still covers the image of God and removes its colouring.”

In his treatise *On the Noble Man* Eckhart summarises this whole area of 'de-imaging' with his highly original analysis of the Song of Songs. The sunburnt skin from long summer days is directly linked with Saint Augustine's theme of 'evening knowledge'. "If the creature is recognised in its own true essence, this is evening knowledge, in which creatures are seen in images displayed in manifold variety; if the creatures, however, are seen in God, then this is both called and is, 'morning knowledge' and, in this mode, the creatures are seen without any differences and are devoid of any images and divested of all similarity in the One that is God himself."<sup>1</sup> The evening that is already almost night in its darkening threshold of the creaturely nothingness leads from the earthly to the divine 'nothingness' over a narrow and steep road when the 'noble man' has come to the 'point of change' ("widerslac"). This path leads from the divesting of images to the "morgenbekantnisse" (morning knowledge) from dusk to dawn, from alienation of the soul to openness without concealment - in other words: the revelation of the original hidden picture in the ground of the soul.

### **3. The Seven Stages of Contemplative Life**

It is only during the new beginning, leading to the revelation of the Unconcealed Original Image that one can see the importance the concept of 'image' holds in Eckhart's philosophy, particularly with regard to the areas situated between human and divine existence. This new beginning, leading to the Source of Divine Being can be understood as a form of spiritual exercise that Eckhart calls "tugendliche schouwen" (virtuous beholding/contemplation). This form of contemplation – or meditation, as people might call it today – is best described in saying 53 in the Franz Pfeifer edition of Eckhart's works. As this saying is still not included in the critical edition, it has been overlooked for a very long time. This is why it should be translated here in full from the modern German version:

"Meister Eckhart said this: there are seven stages of contemplative life. Whoever wants to put the contemplative life into practice should seek out a secret place and first ponder how noble his soul is and that the soul has issued directly from God and this thought should be a cause of great joy to him.

Secondly, when he has considered all these things, he should then ponder how God has loved his soul that He has created it in the image of the Trinity and that, through grace, the soul can become everything that God is by nature.

The human being will necessarily experience an even greater joy because the thought that we have been created in the image of the Trinity is much nobler even than the idea of our issuing directly from God.

Thirdly, the human being should stay with the thought that he has been eternally loved by God because just as the Trinity has been in existence for all eternity, God has been loving the human being throughout eternity.

Fourthly, the human being should become aware that God has been eternally inviting him to enjoy the same things that God has been enjoying from all eternity together with what God will enjoy for ever more, that is: God Himself.

Fifthly, the human being should go into himself and recognise God within himself. That happens in this way: existence cannot be without existence. Existence is fed by existence. No being can be nourished by any food until the food has changed itself into the highly ordered nature of the being that is receiving nourishment. This can only happen from a being that in itself is existence. It has no existence from itself other than from God. Thus my soul can only be fed from God. If the human being goes into himself in this way, he will find God in himself. If God wants me to triumph, then he has to give me existence. No being can exist without God, so if He wants me to have existence, He has to give Himself to me.

Sixthly, the soul should recognise itself in God. That happens in this way: everything that is in God is God. As my image has been in God for all eternity, as it is now and ever must be, my soul has been eternally one with God and is God. And thus I find myself existing in God in such a high way that I have eternally been God in God. This thought brings the person who can practise such contemplation a joy that cannot be described.

Seventhly, the human being should recognise God in himself as the One without Beginning from which everything has issued. In this life, nobody can come to full knowledge of this insight. This will only take place in the vision of Divine Being, the Beatific Vision that cannot take place here.”

From an analytic perspective, these seven stages can be divided into two main groups. The first four stages are dedicated to 'Gedenken' (considerations): how noble the soul is; that it has been created in the image of the Trinity; that the human being has been eternally loved 'geminnet' and finally, that he is being eternally invited to enjoy God himself. After this invitation, in which the 'great and even greater joy' have been emphasised twice, the fifth stage follows with the phase of actual immersion: "Zuo dem fünften mâle sol ein mensche in sich selber gân und sol got in ime selber bekennen" (In the fifth stage, the human being should go into himself and should recognise God within himself).

The three last stages are dedicated to this 'Bekennen' (knowledge, recognition). In the fifth stage: God knows himself 'wesensgleich' (as akin to existence); in the sixth stage it is the other way round: God knows Himself as 'an eternal image' in God – at this point the joy attained by this knowledge is emphasised: "soliche froide, daz er nieman dâ von gesagen kann" (such a rapture that no-one can say anything about it). And finally, the sixth stage, which can never be attained completely in this life, there is the vision of Divine Being without beginning (timeless).

Even if the concept of image is explicitly referred to only in the second and sixth stages, it can be seen that it is implicitly contained in the other stages. If the soul is seen in the first stages as divine emanation, this is because, according to the well-known verse in Genesis (1, 26) it had been created in the image and likeness of God. The same idea is developed in the second stage but with regard to the Trinity. Because the Trinity describes the creative nature of God, by which the soul receives the gift of intelligence – it is aware of itself according to the image of the Trinity. This model of a Relationship (Holy Spirit), Image (Son) and Original Image (Father) had inspired Eckhart's concept of imagery.

In the fifth stage, this 'imagery' is used to describe the relationship between the Divine Being (Original Image) and creative existence (Image). This happens in the same way that the human being can become conscious of himself by turning inwardly into himself. If human beings have been created in God's image, then there must be a certain affinity of existence between human and divine being. By becoming conscious of the fact that the human being is one or another individual being, issuing from the divine existence, he can then recognise God in his own self. In the sixth stage, this insight is expressed explicitly with the same 'imagery': my image is eternally situated in God because God has created me from the eternity of His Spirit. It is only in the seventh stage that the duality



inherent in this 'imagery' is transcended by going beyond "that which is without beginning from which everything has issued."

From the perspective of the biblical tradition, this can be linked with the 'de-imagery' in the prohibition of the Old Testament in Exodus, 20,4: "Neque omnem similitudinem, quae est in caelo desuper et quae in terra deorsum". Eckhart writes the following in his commentary on Exodus: "How could a visible image be given to the Infinite One, Immeasurable One and Invisible One or a shape, to the Uncreated One? [...] And yet God says, 'Let us make man in the image of our own likeness' (Gen. 1, 26). And 'we shall be like Him and see Him as he really is.' (1. John. III, 2)" From this analysis of the Old Testament prohibition of imagery, the whole teaching with regard to the dual perspective or the paradox within the semantic polarity pertaining to the essence of image can be summarised in three lengthy quotations:

"It is also necessary to know that there is nothing as dissimilar as the Creator is to any creature. On the other hand there is nothing as similar as the Creator is to every creature." (Sciendum ergo quod nihil tam dissimile quam Creator et quaelibet creatura. Rursus secundo nihil tam simile quam Creator et creatura quaelibet. Adhuc autem tertio nihil tam dissimile pariter et simile alteri cuiquam, quam deus et creatura quaelibet sunt et dissimilia et similia pariter.).<sup>1</sup> This dialectic can be summarised in one sentence in the following synthesis: "Thirdly, there is nothing that is at the same time as dissimilar and as similar to anything else as God is as dissimilar from every creature and as similar to every creature." Eckhart illustrates this dialectical paradox with various examples: "As God is outside every possible category, there can be no similarity between Himself and His creatures. Just as there can be no similarity between the Infinite and the finite because 'God remains undifferentiated from everything that is in existence', His Existence is undifferentiated from everything that is in being. [...]. Everything that has been created, however, is undifferentiated, simply because of the fact that it has been created."

In another analysis, it is asserted that, "Everything that is undifferentiated is more different from the differentiated than any two other differences are from each other." Thus Eckhart justifies the absolute dissimilarity between the Creator and every creature. Yet, "when we talk about the art of a master painter we are talking about the picture that he has created; the picture reveals the art of the master."

Thus a certain similarity has now been argued between the absolute ontological dependency of the creation with regard to the Creator: “What is there that is as similar to something else as that which receives its existence absolutely from the position and relationship of that something to the other, whose whole existence has been derived from that other and made in the image of that other?”<sup>1</sup>

Thus the creature is now no longer different from the Creator and is, as it were, in its undifferentiation, no more different than a reproduction is from the original, art from the artist and grape from the vine. A “Poetic Compendium of *Timaeus*” by Josef Koch taken from the 3<sup>rd</sup> book of Boethius’s *Consolations of Philosophy* provides the clinching argument for this line of thought:

“The immaculate form of the Good: you derive everything from the Origin/In your spirit you bear the whole world/Creating it according to your image”.

In this analysis there is still however an infinite qualitative distance between God and creation, but at the same time there is a pantheistic affinity. Finally, these two opposites are summarised in one sentence:

“Because He is different by means of His lack of difference and yet is similar by means of His dissimilarity, they also become more similar, the more dissimilar they are. The more someone talks about the ineffable, the less they talk about Him in so far as He is ineffable, as Augustine says in book I of his Christian doctrine or just as claimed by the commentator (Averroes, Phys. IV com. 124), ‘whoever denies time, the more he asserts time because the denial of time takes place in time.’”

Two different perspectives stand opposed to each other. As the intellect cannot do without these two poles, the only way out of this contradiction is to create a form of knowledge, which will throw light on this dialogue with paradox by resorting to mystical and speculative modes of thought.

#### **4. The Ontological Paradox of the Existence of the Image**

It is now necessary to investigate the ontological approach with regard to the concept of image in Eckhart’s Latin works in order to clarify the relation between divine and creaturely being. Eckhart’s prologue to his theses (“Existence is God.”) can be used to gain a better appreciation of the theory of images. The relationship between existence and being together with the relationship between origin

and image, and the relationship between the semantic poles of the image concept can both be analysed in the same way, as well as in a reciprocal way (*convertibiliter*):<sup>1</sup> “‘being’ refers simply to ‘existence’” (*ens solum esse significat*).<sup>1</sup> The relationship between ‘being’ (*ens*) and ‘existence, (*esse*) is interpreted as the ‘beingness’ is only a symbol (or image) of existence, “just as the entwined vine sign (hanging in front of an inn) symbolises wine without having any wine in it” (*sicut circulus vinum, qui nihil vini in se habet*). “Being or existence, together with every perfection, particularly every universal quality, such as being, oneness, truth, goodness, light, justice and so forth can be explicated about God and the creatures in an analogous fashion.” This discrete reference to the theory of analogies leads us directly back to the paradox contained in the similar/dissimilar relationship between God and every creature.

In ontological terms, this means that with Meister Eckhart, we should use a different mode of assessment for being as such and for “Existence in itself and thus without any other determining factor” (*de esse absolute et simpliciter nullo addito*), from the way we would assess the “existence of this or that (being).” Four very thoroughly analysed theses taken from Meister Eckhart’s prologue to theses can be contrasted with the four ‘or more’ of the theses just mentioned concerning the theory of imagery with regard to the original:

“To begin with, we should make the following point: firstly, that only God is Being, One, True and Good in the actual sense of these words; secondly, that all being (oneness, truth and goodness) derives its existence from Him; thirdly, that everything has these qualities directly from Him, that it is and that it is One, True and Good. Fourthly, when I say the following: this being or this or that oneness or this or that truth and with our use of ‘this’ or ‘that’ we do not add anything of being, unity truth and goodness to the Being, the One, the True and the Good.”

Thus in this analysis, existence (*esse*) or being as being (*ens in quantum ens*) could take the place of the Original Image in which the similar/dissimilar Image (as Copy) is characterised as ‘this or that individual being’ (*ens hoc aut hoc*). Thus, the Copy is similar to the Original Image and equal in existence because it is ‘being’ and so takes part in the Original Being or Source of all Being. Yet at the same time, it is dissimilar and existentially alien to the Original Image because it is a case of difference, i.e. ‘this or that’ (*hoc aut hoc*). Whereas the first thesis supports the actual main theme (*Esse deus est*) of his analysis, amongst other things by quoting Exodus III, 14 (*ego sum qui sum*), the second and third theses are concerned with the fact that all things relate to the existence of God alone directly and “without any further mediation”: “how in fact could something have being outside

Being?” and “How could something exist if a third factor were to enter between it and the Existence with the result that it would stand outside, as it were set apart and outside Existence?”

The analysis of the fourth thesis is particularly important for our final comparison of the image theory and existential theory:

“We will once again explain what has been said, however, that in fact each and every being has its whole existence, its whole unity, truth and goodness from God Himself without any mediation: it is impossible for any particular being or any particular differentiated mode of existence to lack or deviate from existence itself. In so far as it lacks existence or deviates from being it does not exist and is nothing. God, however, is Existence. [...] Thus not one iota of the content of being can be denied to the Being itself or to the Existence itself. This is why from Being itself, i.e. from God, nothing can be denied except by negating the negation of all Being. [...] This or that existing being (*ens hoc aut hoc*), this or that unity, this or that truth or this or that good do not add or contribute anything of existential content, unity, truth and goodness, (to the Being, One, True and Good) in so far as they are merely this or that (*in quantum hoc vel hoc*). This is the fourth principle of the ones listed above. With this assertion, we do not take anything of existence from individual things, nor do we destroy their existence, but instead we give them their true individual justification. (*Hoc autem dicentes non tollimus rebus esse nec esse rerum destruimus sed statuimus*).” Denying existence to ‘this or that being’ (*ens hoc aut hoc*) as ‘this’ or ‘that’ (*in quantum hoc vel hoc*) is not the same as saying we are destroying ‘this or that being’ or rendering it null. On the contrary: it is much more a case of ascribing the Divine Being to this or that being as mere being (*ens in quantum ens*). Thus the manifold ‘this or that’ mode of existence of created things only acquires the Absolute and Divine Existence within its ‘this or that being’ mode of existence. Its existence as ‘this or that beingness’ is thus grounded in the immediate existence of Divine Being.

By recognising the immediate reciprocal character of the image theory and theory of existence, we can now understand why ‘de-imaging’ as the ‘negation of the denial’ of all images is really an eminently image-asserting ‘denial of images’: the rendering ‘null’ of the ‘imageability’ (the quality of existing as image) of the image leads directly to knowledge of the plenitude of existence in the Original Image by which the image as copy and similarly, as image within the ‘this or that’ mode of being can now truly exist at the metaphysical level. Thus from this it is clear that from the existence of the image as ‘this or that being’ is grounded in the Divine ‘I’ as “*ersten gotes isticheit*”.

In addition, this link between the theory of images and the theory of existence can be recognised in the principles behind this example of common sense wisdom:

“You often ask how you should live. You should recognise this with diligence, exactly in the same way as we have been talking about the image. Behold, this is exactly how you should live. You should be from Him and for Him not from yourself or for yourself and you should belong to no-one.”

To live in this way with regard to the Image first means freeing yourself from the world. However from the dual perspective mentioned above ‘the similar dissimilarity’ of all worldly things, by no means implies that everything worldly should simply be despised. Both aspects of this subtle and sophisticated attitude are supported in the following two sentences:

“The smallest thing that is seen as (being in God) even if it is seen in a (mere) flower because it has its existence in God, it is as if it were nobler than the whole world.” A little further on in the same sermon Eckhart adds: “I tell you this: human beings should understand and recognise that existence is so noble. No creature is so insignificant that it does not desire its own existence. When caterpillars fall from the trees, they climb back to the top of a wall to preserve their existence. Existence is so noble.”

Divine Existence is the Light of Creation and as such the basis of all knowledge.<sup>1</sup> But whoever tries to see this in ‘quantum esse’ sees ‘nothing’ and gropes in ‘darkness’. What is this darkness? Even here the answers and semantic systems seem to contradict one another. For the Invisible Essence of God is at the same time the invisible essence of things. On the one hand, the creature is defined as ‘pure nothingness’, depending absolutely on the Light of the Divine Being:

“Anything that we seek in creatures is night. This is really my opinion: anything we seek in any creature is shadow and night. The same is true of the light of the highest angel, however high it might be, it still does not touch anything of the soul. Anything which is not the First Light is pure darkness and night.”

On the other hand it can be said: “Whoever speaks of God using any kind of metaphor is speaking in an unclear way about Him. But whoever says nothing about God is speaking to the point about Him.” This is why Meister Eckhart takes the conversion of Saul (Acts of the Apostles IX, 8) literally in this connection: “By light he does not mean anything other than Saul had seen nothing when his eyes

could see. By that, he means that he saw nothing in seeing the divine nothingness.” For: “I cannot see what is the One. He saw nothingness and that was God. God is a Nothingness and God is a Something. Anything that is something is also nothing. Whatever God is, He is that utterly and absolutely. This is why the enlightened Dionysius whenever he writes about God asserts: “He is a Being-beyond-Being, a Light-beyond-Light, a Life-beyond Life; he does not attribute to him any of the ‘this’ or ‘that’ mode of being and so he implies that he is something he does not know and something that is situated far beyond anything.”

Human understanding of the will is to be found in the midst of this ‘dual darkness’ of metaphorical systems undermining one another and between the negative opacity of the creature and the ‘Divine Nothingness’ of the *abscondita dei*. They recall the eerie darkness that Peter and John felt when standing before the empty tomb (Joh. XX,8): “He saw (nothing) and he believed” Yet it is by crossing the threshold of the tomb and belief, beyond human will and understanding that the path to the spark in the soul is found - that spark which is sublime beyond every image and yet divested of all images. Mary who was the first eye witness of the Risen One was “pregnant with Nothingness like a woman with a child and it was in this Nothingness that God was born. *He* was the fruit of Nothingness.”

## 6. Transparent Metaphors of the Invisible

A lavish use of metaphors is a particularly important feature with regard to the ineffable vision of the Divine Being. This is particularly the case when it is a question of describing what is imageless. If the theme is the Ineffable in the ground of the soul, then one should be silent. And yet Meister Eckhart cannot resist from constantly speaking about the ineffabilia at the ground of the soul. Sometimes when borrowing from traditions, he uses metaphors such as “the temple of the noble soul” (DW I, 13,3), “bürgelîn” (little fortress) (42,2) – which at that time was also used as an erotic metaphor<sup>1</sup> –, “the highest part of the soul” (54,4), “the innermost part of the soul” (66,6), “the soul’s own image” (165,3), the “vüncelîn” (the tiny spark of the soul) (311,11) and “the light of the soul” (319,12) etc.

There had also been similar metaphors for the ground of the soul – such as the spark of the soul (*scintilla animae, apex mentis, synderesis*) – already in neo-Platonism and the Stoa. For the Stoics, the soul is like a spark (*apospasma*) issuing from the cosmic fire. And just as in the traditional view, the

image (representation) points to the mould (original image), the metaphorical image points to something other than what it is in itself. Because of this characteristic, it can be said that every metaphor provides information in three areas:

- 1) the *view* of what actually is visible from which the image is taken.
- 2) the *intention* with which the metaphor tries to go 'beyond' the concrete view (divesting itself of the concrete aspect of the image).
- 3) finally the *distance* between one and two and thus the *way* in which the relationship between view and intention can be understood.

Thus starting off from the 'view', the metaphor of the invisible is not necessarily "something, which cannot be photographed". [In actual fact, not only the process of 'de-imaging' (dynamic) can be seen as a metaphor for the Invisible, but any image (static) can be seen in this light. It is crucial how the image is used. Thus, even a photograph – for example of a colloquium that has metaphor as its theme – need not necessarily be excluded from this category. A photograph of this kind shows an event that is captured in a picture, yet with the deeper content remaining invisible: although the participants of a colloquium can be seen, what they are talking about remains unknown. The visible points to the invisible core that gives the whole event its meaning. Secondly, the developed picture captures a long forgotten moment for any viewer, whether it be five hundred years later or a week later. In this concrete context, a photograph could be valid as a metaphor of what is no (longer) visible.

The same applies to Meister Eckhart's most common metaphors of this kind in that they are particularly transparent as for example the "bürgelîn" (little fortress) from Sermon 2. Whereas an example of metaphor being used as 'intention', going beyond (= metaphor), can be found in Novalis's use of 'a thousand images' of which not a single image can be relied upon:

"I have sometimes said there is a power in the spirit that alone is free. I have also said there is a *guard* of the spirit; sometimes I have said there is a *light* of the spirit; sometimes I have said that it is a *little spark*. Now I say, however: it is neither this nor that, nevertheless it is a something that is more exalted than either this or that, than the heaven is higher than the earth. This is why I call it something that exists in a nobler way than I have ever called it before and yet it mocks both nobility of this kind and wisdom and is exalted above them. It is in fact free of all names, bare of all forms, absolutely alone and free in the way that God is alone and free in Himself. It is completely one and simple as God is One and Simple so that one cannot glimpse inside in any way at all. God exists,

*blossoming* and *burgeoning* with His entire Divinity within this very power I have been speaking about [...].”

Evidently, even in the transcendental use of metaphor with our Thuringian master, there is more than an element of immanence. The basic contradiction of this vivid transcendental language takes place in the area of tension that lies between ‘view’ and ‘intention’: paradoxical as it may seem, Meister Eckhart has recourse to metaphors, most of all when trying to transcend imagery. This is the key characteristic of this language which is aimed at describing the immediate experience ‘of the ground of the soul’.

This is illustrated in the following extract taken again from Sermon 2: “Within this power (little fortress, tiny spark), God is just as burgeoning and blossoming in His joy and in His glory as He is in Himself.” The whole lexicon to describe ‘morning knowledge’ that is part of this “grünenenden” (burgeoning) and “blüejenden” (blossoming) area of experience forms part of the area known as *significatio mystica*. Even its opposite ‘evening knowledge’ belongs to this area with its images of ‘manifold variety’. And not only does the *significatio mystica* with its static imagery play a crucial role in this area, but also that dynamic language of metaphor in ‘de-imagining’ is equally important as a metaphor par excellence for the Invisible: for the metaphoric ascent towards the imageless area points to an overcoming of the whole language of metaphor itself – because in the final analysis, we are not only concerned about the language, but more about the “ungesprochen inneblübende” (the unspoken residue that resides within): “What is this finality (final goal)? It is the hidden darkness of the eternal Godhead and it is unknown and it has always been unknown and will never be known.”

A similar remarkable line of thought is also pursued in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of the *Talks on Instruction* in the part which explains the difference between sensual and Divine repentance: “There are two kinds of repentance, one is temporal or sensual, whereas the other is divine and supernatural. Temporal repentance has the tendency to fall into ever increasing sorrow, sending the human being into such a state of grief that he could despair immediately, and thus with repentance persisting in sorrow and not progressing any further; nothing comes of this.”



This kind of temporal and sensual repentance – nowadays it would be called ‘depressive regretting’ – is at first unavoidable and necessary for anyone to accept that everything could have been different. However, to achieve a positive attitude to life, this state of depressive repentance has to be overcome:

“Divine repentance is, however, completely different. As soon as the human being becomes distraught in any way, he immediately turns towards God and forms an unshakable resolution to turn away from all sin for all eternity. And from this arises a spiritual joy that raises the soul above all sorrow and grief, binding it firmly to God. For the more fallible a person is and the more he has failed, he has then all the more cause to bind himself with undivided love to God, in Whom there is no sin or weakness. The best staircase to ascend when approaching God in a devotional state is the one that leads to God without sin by the power of the Divine. [...] The greater and more grievous the sins, all the more immeasurable is the willingness of God to forgive them and the greater His alacrity in doing so because they are abhorrent to Him. And when divine repentance turns toward God, all sins will disappear in the abyss of God with greater speed than that by which I can close my eyes and they will then become as completely null and void as if they had never happened as long there is nothing but perfect repentance.”

In the previous chapter, Eckhart states the following: “Truly, to have committed sin is not sin, if we are contrite.”<sup>1</sup> However, these kinds of statements can easily be misunderstood. So, it is not surprising that a similar sentence had been condemned in 15<sup>th</sup> article in the Papal Bull *In agro dominico*, dated 27<sup>th</sup> March 1329 – although this was quoted in a twisted version and without the context that would have toned the statement down in dialectical fashion: “If someone had committed a thousand mortal sins and yet were someone with the right attitude, then he should not wish that he had never committed them.”

However, it should not simply be concluded from this that for Eckhart there was no such thing as sin, because he goes on to assert: “The human being should not *want* to sin and not because of what could happen in time or in eternity”<sup>1</sup>, but “he whose will is truly fixed in the will of God should not wish that the sin into which he had fallen had not happened.”<sup>1</sup> Eckhart’s bold speculations concerning the deeply personal and ‘all too human’ experience of repentance reflect a deep psychological insight. Could not this very approach to repentance with its dramatic use of antithesis and yet with its delicacy of feeling lead to a greater sense of responsibility – firstly to heal this

‘persistence of repentance in a state of sorrow’ and secondly, to ascend from this state to possess a life-asserting ‘courage for a new beginning’?

In any case Meister Eckhart seems to be convinced of this. His ‘de-imaging’ is a sort of clearing up of rubbish from the soul. It is a renewed ‘unlearning’ process. The ascent is hidden in the descent and the divine *courage* (NHG: Mut) is also ‘De-Mut’ (NHG) ‘dis-courage’ i.e. humility: (OHG: *dio-muoti*), is seen as experience of the ground of the soul: according to Eckhart the soul’s heights and depths are one.

Thus Meister Eckhart’s originality essentially consists in an enrichment in metaphorical usage and reformulation with regard to the teachings of the Church Fathers, together with the “Pagan Masters of antiquity”. “Enwaere niht niuwes, sô enwürde niht altes” – for if there were no future, then there would not have been a past. It can be said that Meister Eckhart’s originality consists in giving ‘life’ back to what was originally there (*origo*), thus to what has been. The contrast between old and new results from the need for a constant renewal of life: ‘to renew’ which does not necessarily mean doing something ‘different’, but instead bringing something to ‘life’ in line with the inner need of this ‘master of life’.

However, it must be said that this is far more than a mere transposition of philosophical ideas taken from a dead language and adopted into a living language. Thus if reference is made to a new concept or coined word or to abstraction and Negative Theology or *aphairesis* and apophasis or if it is about crossing the various levels of meaning of a particular image, in order to reach Verbum-Imago by rendering the sensual pictures abstract, then what is at issue here is not just about the conceptual prehistory of ‘de-imaging’, but about ‘de-imaging’ itself at the heart of a philosophical theory, but it is also and most importantly a subjective experience that is directly linked with this new concept.

By means of this ‘de-imaging’ paradigm, abstraction, as the essence of spiritual exercises, together with Negative Theology attain a dynamic which has a real effect on life and human consciousness. Almost all the important themes running through Eckhart’s philosophical legacy can basically be classified in this way: they encircle this ‘singular and new’<sup>1</sup> word ‘de-imaging’, as if encircling a thematic centre-point with the result that the theories worked out in the areas of metaphysics, physics and Aristotelian epistemology are thus transformed into key ideas with both ethical and spiritual import.

## 7. Immersion and Recurrence with regard to the Inner and Outer Life

As already seen in Plato's cave metaphor, Eckhart too realises that the fulfilment of the virtuous contemplation is not possible without returning to active life. This is why in Sermon 86, he rehabilitates the despised role of Martha. The well-known episode taken from Luke X, 38-40 is usually interpreted as an example of the superiority of the contemplative life (Mary) to the active life (Martha). Without wanting to deny the 'better part' chosen by Mary, Eckhart was mainly interested in Martha's character and he highlights her greater existential maturity:

"Martha knew Mary better than Mary knew Martha because she had (already) lived for a long time and virtuously; because life gave her the noblest knowledge possible. Life knows better than desire or light (are able to) what can be achieved in this life underneath God's gaze and, to a certain extent, knows this in a purer way than the light of eternity is able to. The light of eternity (indeed) allows us to see (only) ourselves and God, but never ourselves without God: life, however can enable us to know ourselves without God (*abscondita dei*). Where it (life) however only has itself in view, then it becomes more keenly aware of the difference between like and unlike. This is attested to by Saint Paul on the one hand and the Pagan Masters on the other: in his ecstasy, Saint Paul saw God and himself in a (purely) spiritual way; "and yet he did not recognise a single virtue in Him in a visual or image-based way; and this was because (before his conversion) he had not been active in works; the (Pagan) Masters (on the other hand) attained such a high level of knowledge by practising the virtues that they recognised virtue in a clearer fashion than Paul or any of the saints would have done when experiencing their first ecstasy."

Martha's spiritual attitude is described in terms of attention 'to things' without the things being in her. Thus, she was not submerged by the active life. Although she lived in the external world 'in righteous concern', she is nevertheless rooted in being 'within the orbit of eternity'. And as she rested in this inner calm, she did not allow her activity to disturb her: "That is why He said to her: 'You worry about many things (= active in a concerned way)' and meant by this you stand next to things, but the things do not stand in you. Those who are worried (= in righteous concern) are those who remain in their activity without hindrance. (However) those who act without hindrance are those who carry out all their works in an orderly fashion according to the example of the Eternal Light; and these people stay next to things but not in things. They stand very close to things (next to

things), (but) because of this they do not lack for anything, just as if they were standing on high in the orbit of eternity.”<sup>1</sup>

Thus Eckhart is concerned about arguing against a one-sided contemplative life with all its ecstasies (Mary) by revaluing the works of an active life (Martha) without however at the same time lessening the value of the greater worth of virtuous contemplation. In another sermon Eckhart explains that there are two ways to knowledge that correspond to a pair of eyes as the ‘double gaze’ of the soul:

“The soul has two eyes, an inner and an outer eye. The inner eye of the soul sees into existence and receives its own existence directly from God: this is its true function. The outer eye of the soul is turned to all creatures and perceives them in an image-based way and as the effect of a force. The person, however, who is turned into himself so that he recognises God as God would wish and in God’s own grounding, such a person is freed from all created things and is sealed by the true lock of truth.”

Whereas as the open eye perceives the external world, the closed eye gazes inwardly into ‘immediate existence’, devoid of external images – even more so, it gazes both through and beyond its own inner images and ideas. Eckhart adds: “This is the true image of the soul where nothing goes into or out of the soul other than what God is in Himself.”

However, one should not equate the areas of inner and outer experience with either Mary or Martha. Even if the inner eye corresponds to the contemplative eye of life, i.e. that of Mary, this does not mean that Martha’s life is simply the opposite of Mary’s, as her life is not solely an active one, but incorporates both. As Martha lives according to both modes of existence, the ‘dual gaze’ mentioned above is completely reflected in her life.

This is a balanced view based on common sense and does not only appear in Eckhart’s extraordinary 86th Sermon.<sup>1</sup> Similar ideas can be found in the *Talks on Instruction* which Eckhart gave in Erfurt between 1294 and 1298:

“Given that you desire to withdraw within yourself with all your inner and outer strength, you reach a state devoid of image or any thought (“in dem kein bilde noch getwank enist”) or any inner or outer activity. You should take great care, lest something should bring you back to yourself. If it so happens that you do not feel drawn to any work or you do not feel like doing anything, then you should

vigorously force yourself to perform either an inner or outer work. Because you should not find any satisfaction in anything - however good it may seem or be. This is in order that, if you ever find yourself suffering great pressure or constrained by circumstances with the result that you have the impression of being acted upon, instead of acting yourself, you would then learn to act together with your God.”

## **8. The Path is Now Clear for Ineffable Beauty**

We have now analysed various aspects of the imagery in Meister Eckhart’s works. These include the essential meaning of ‘de-imaging’, in which “the image that lies hidden” is now set free and similarly, its role in “virtuous contemplation” and in the seven stages of contemplative life has also been analysed. We have also dealt with the questions linked with these themes, ranging from the Old Testament prohibition of images to an ontological image concept per se. Metaphorical language has been touched upon from a different perspective. Furthermore, we have referred to ‘depressive regret’ as a form of persistence in external images and ‘Divine repentance’ as a form of ‘de-imaging’. Finally, we have discussed the need to return to the images as a means of integrating the *Vita contemplativa* with the *Vita activa* with the help of the doctrine of the two eyes of the soul. In summary, we have seen that there is no lack of varied paradoxes with regard to this topic, concerning images - a topic which has by no means been exhausted.

The image concept should be seen as a stage in the awakening of spiritual life in Meister Eckhart’s work as a Christian, as well as being an inspiration to many other religions. Even in his attempt to reach an image beyond all images, Eckhart shows that it is not necessary to destroy one level of knowledge to reach another level. This would lead to the error of iconoclasm. Eckhart tries to reveal the wisdom of the Divine Image (Logos) in the soul by undergoing an inner ‘divesting oneself of images’. Although this ‘breakthrough to the Divinity’ involves being raised above the sphere of the whole of creation, thus of all images – it is by no means a denial of the many-layered nature of reality or a destruction of immanent existence in all secular things.

In the Middle Ages, just as today, the image continues to be a stage in the awakening to the life of the senses. This applies especially to art. There is a kind of friendship or love that links the medium to

the model; just like the copy, print or 'kiss' belongs to the original image, pattern or model. This awakening of the senses is not necessarily opposed to spiritual life "because every creature is full of God and is a book".<sup>1</sup> Yet there is always a yearning to go beyond any particular image - even into abstract art that embodies the image as its own form of 'beyond'. Here the artist is aiming to overcome any reference to the original image or model. With Eckhart it is the other way round, because he tries to transcend the copy and so conform the soul to the Divine Original Image.

Basically, these two extreme aims are very similar in so far as they attempt to overcome the duality that exists between copy and original (and thus with Eckhart the duality between Creator and creature). It can be said that basically every image by definition is striving towards something that is beyond its own essence in either a transcendental or immanent way or alternatively within secular reality.

There was an anonymous student (probably a contemporary of Meister Eckhart) who – even from the point of view of the senses – quite naturally preferred the reality of the 'living original' to the illusory character of the painted picture. This refers to the red mouth of his beloved: "Nimm, ô Blume die Blume!" (Oh, flower of mine, take this flower!) On this he made the following point:

"The flower in the painting is no flower, but mere resemblance; /The painter paints a flower but not her fragrance" (Flos in pictura non est flos, immo figura;/ Qui pingit florem, non pingit floris odorem.)  
(*Carmina Burana* 186)

On the other hand, it would not be right to ignore the spiritual sense of the pictures. Their charm and 'power' consist precisely in this ability to direct the reason and the emotions towards an invisible beyond. Owing to the divine spark in the eye of the beholder, something of a mysterious affinity of all existence can be recognised, although it would not be seen at first sight. Both for Eckhart and Angelus Silesius, the divine sense of the image of St. Mary revealed in the soul of the beholder, lies hidden:

"Was sinnest Du so tief?/ Das Weib im Sonnenschein/ Das auf dem Monde steht/ Muss deine Seele sein."  
(What ponderest thou so deep?/ The woman in the sun's rays/The woman

With this little poem, we can conclude by linking the sensual and the spiritual or mystical realm into one and the same theory of images. In fact, both fulfil themselves in the joy of beholding. The eyes turned either inwards or outwardly delight in what can be called attraction, charm, charisma or ineffable beauty, according to the circumstances and at many different levels. Within the scope of this essay, one question still remains: what is beauty? For Eckhart, women are beautiful, the bride in the Song of Songs, the sky in a special way and on the earth, the burgeoning and blossoming nature is beautiful. Yet most beautiful of all is silence and the temple of the soul freed from ignorance.