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David Elginbrod and Jacob Boehme’s Aurora

Deirdre Hayward

In George MacDonald’s novel David Elginbrod, the eponymous hero owns a first edition of Jacob Boehme’s first published text, The Aurora (71). David’s friend, Hugh Sutherland, who seems to know something of the writer, refers to Boehme as “a wonderful man . . . almost inspired” (76). His words seem to reflect MacDonald’s admiration of the German shoemaker, strongly evident when he describes Boehme as “the marvellous shoemaker of Gorlitz in Silesia” in his essays on religious poetry England’s Antiphon (287). The following discussion aims to explore MacDonald’s interest in Boehme by establishing and discussing some of the associations between David Elginbrod and Boehme’s Aurora.

Of the same mind as MacDonald, Paul Tillich, in his introduction to John Joseph Stoudt’s study of Boehme, considers that his is “one of the most profound and strangest systems of Western thought” (8). It is indeed true that Boehme’s speculations push religious thought to its most obscure and far-reaching limits, and that he deals not only with the birth of the universe and the source of good and evil, but with the mysterious birth and original ground of the Deity itself. Boehme’s doctrines grew from child-like, simplistic beginnings to a more mature and somewhat dark view of life, death and salvation, yet never became systematic nor rigorous. “They are always,” comments Tillich, “expressed in a language which mirrors speculative vision, mystical experience, psychological, insight, and alchemical traditions” (7). Concerned to describe “the Being of God” and to explain the deepest conceivable mysteries of the universe, Boehme found symbol and metaphor invaluable to his method, and alchemical, astrological and Cabalistic language therefore very congenial.

The Aurora, or Morgenroethe im Aufgang (Day Spring in the East), initially banned and circulated privately, was first printed in 1612. It is an eschatological text, typical of its author’s strange conceptual world. Boehme calls it “The Wonder of the World,” explaining that it is “a secret mystery, concealed from the wise and curious . . . but to those who only place their hope in God, it will not be a hidden secret, but manifest knowledge” (ch.31. par.6). The basis of material reality in Aurora is a divine all-embracing “substance” called Salliter, a threefold alchemical ground of Mercury, Sal (salt) and Sulphur, each “property” corresponding to an aspect of the nature
of God. Because everything is in God, there is a deep unity between all things, not only in physical life, or between visible and invisible, but between inter-weaving and inter-locking levels of experience, “real” and symbolic, which merge together in fluid and dynamic [end of page 33] ways. Stones, for example, are both symbol and result of a mystical compaction of divine energy in the making of the world; precious stones originate from the light which shone out of the darkness at the beginning of the universe (14.92: 18.19). Every aspect of experience, mental and physical, is imbued with meaning and secret correspondences, contextualised within the parameters of living, “springing” Nature. Moreover, permeating all levels of life is the principle of opposition: “There is nothing in Nature devoid of good and evil; everything works and lives within this two-fold impulse” (2.7). All Boehme’s works were concerned with this principle of opposition, and its necessary role in life: all things consist in “yes” and “no,” and without this principle, no life would exist; “all things would be a nothing, and would stand still and motionless” (Abrams 502 n.36). In some seven hundred pages, the Aurora ranges through “the divine being in Nature,” the creation of angels and devils, the birth of the stars, the “language of Nature,” the “water of Life,” the secret of life and eternity, and the “deep, hidden, secret mystery” of humanity, everything moving inexorably forward to a re-birth and a New Dawn.

From a study of this unique text, four particular themes emerge: the animistic divinity of the natural world, which, through opposition, physically and metaphorically drives all life towards revelation and resolution; the eschatology of a supernatural dawn and an awakening to a restored paradise; a spiritual union of the soul with the divine—a holy marriage or “hierosgamos”; and a simplistic conceptualisation of a blissful angelic realm as contrasted with the demonic world of Lucifer, the fallen prince, in whom lies the ground of evil. In subsequent works these features are gradually de-emphasised and re-shaped: the external role of Nature in the divine plan for salvation becomes internalised and focuses on the struggle between light and dark worlds within the individual; the eschatological “aurora” and hierosgamos becomes accessible only through ever more painful and bitter trial; and the joy of Paradise is re-formulated, not in terms of an angelic Utopia, but in terms of a oneness of all things with the Divine and the anguished death of self-will (we may note parallels with MacDonald’s later thought here). *Aurora,* by contrast, is a work permeated with the language of green life and driving natural forces. Boehme can find no better “similitude” for the infinite variety of God and his angels than “the verdant soil in May”
Heaven “is the heart in Nature, in which all the powers exist” (2.53). God is accessible only through Nature, in which he works to produce “all . . . forms, images, growing things, fruits, colours” (13.143); everything has “a rising, bubbling power . . . which is the thing’s own spirit, by which it grows and increases” (3.108). Boehme is acutely aware of the tensions between evil and good, devil and angel, but is optimistic, looking towards an auroral spiritual awakening and divine marriage feast. These themes are unique to his first work, [34] and any study of MacDonald’s David Elginbrod (also his first “realistic” text) approached with the intention of revealing convincing links with the Aurora, must seek for a generally clear sense of similar underlying themes within the narrative content. This discussion aims to establish those relations.

The Divinity of Nature

The theme of Nature as the garment of the Divine, or a goddess-like entity, or the “signature” of the Deity, runs constantly through mystical writing as it does through MacDonald’s works. The emphasis in Aurora, however, is new. Nature has two main qualities, good and evil, and is always in tension because of this:

considering this, we find two qualities, a good one and an evil one; they are in this world as one thing inside the other, in all the powers, in stars and in elements, and also in all creatures; and no fleshly creature in natural life can exist unless it has both qualities in it. (1.3)

This tension is inherent in all life, as in heat and cold, light and dark, wetness and dryness, and is necessary to drive life upwards from the soil, in strife and resolution. All tensions have positive and negative aspects, and work together to create life, the divine spirit in all things, which drives forward to completion, through birth and death, to new birth: everything contains a mystic, spiritual vitality. In chapter 8 of Aurora, Boehme explains how this vitality develops in a seed, from its initial “harsh rending,” into a stalk, through the stages of leaf and bud, blossom and flower, thence fading, and creating new seeds of life. This life-force is always purposeful, symbolising the divine, teleology of growth, fulfilment and regeneration: upon the earth, “everything continually generates itself afresh: as we can see in mineral ores, stones, trees, plants and in every kind of beast” (24.24).

MacDonald was very much aware of this particular “reading” of natural life, as we can see in his insistence that man is a “human plant,”
striving “with uplifted stem and forward-leaning bud” towards its new life, “the flower of his sonship” with God (“The Truth,” Unspoken Sermons 474, 477). Nature is not, for either Boehme or MacDonald, merely a symbol of the divine presence, or reflection of the Divinity; it is the “revelation of God” (U.S. 463), the physical demonstration of God, the only medium whereby God can be accessed.

There is in David Elginbrod a particularly strong emphasis upon the mystical face of Nature. In other texts of MacDonald, we can see, for example, that Alec Forbes is set in the natural surroundings of village and countryside, and that both Sir Gibbie and What’s Mine’s Mine refer to aspects of mysterious Nature: to Gibbie’s mystical experience on Glassgar (72-73), and, in What’s Mine’s Mine, to Ian’s view of Nature as, variously, a “living garment” of God, “a beautiful old grandmother,” and a temple for the worship of God (212, 215). However, the spirituality of Nature, at a profound level, wholly informs and encompasses David Elginbrod. Many chapter titles refer to green or natural things: “The Fir Wood” (ch. 1), “The Daisy and the Primrose” (ch.3), “The Secret of the Wood” (ch.7), “Nature” (ch.9), “Harvest” (ch.10), “Winter” (ch.14), and so on. Often titles are accompanied by “green” epigraphs: to the daisy (Chaucer) (ch.1), to “dear secret Greenness” (Henry Vaughan) (ch.3), to green May (Chaucer) (ch.20)—The final two chapters, where Hugh and Margaret declare their love, are entitled “Nature and her Lady” and “The Fir-Wood Again.”

Between the leaves of this green, light portfolio is a dark content, dealing with the relationship between Hugh Sutherland, Euphrasia Cameron, and Count von Funkelstein, during which time hints of nature and vitality are largely excluded. From “Nest Building” (ch.23) to the two final chapters there are no chapter titles or epigraphs of such a nature. The story is contextualised, therefore—indeed provided with its fundamental rationale—within vital, springing Nature, MacDonald grounding the progress of his protagonists Hugh and Margaret in the same potent medium for growth which is recognised by Boehme in Aurora.

The fir-wood is Margaret’s natural habitat: she has to be called out of it before she can enter the story: “As soon as she woke in the morning, the fir-wood drew her towards it, and she rose and went” (3-4). Such is Nature’s power, in positive and stark contrast to Euphra’s situation, a twisted imitation of Margaret’s, in which the power of Funkelstein acts like an evil magnet to draw Euphra towards him (399-400). Margaret herself is identified with the life of Nature: she is the daisy to which the first epigraph refers, and
she contains the morning which surrounds her in the fir-wood (5). She is the spring that meets Hugh in the wood (13), and can only truly pray in its environs (37). Hugh also is open to the “genial motions of Nature,” in which, additionally, he senses an eschatological purpose, a “goal of life, vague, but sure” (12); similar to that which has driven the surrounding firs and larches to their ancient growth, the necessary requirements, states MacDonald, for any tree’s “true condition” and “the perfection of its idea” (11). All things move, MacDonald is saying, towards their final end, their perfection in God’s idea. In the wood, Hugh sees a primrose, and wonders how “such leaves could pass into such a flower” (13): perhaps MacDonald’s reading of Aurora chapter 8 (see above) prompted this reflection. The descriptive language of the opening passage of MacDonald’s third chapter refers to a plethora of sense impressions and physical elements, and is vital with the energetic, exuberant power of life. Sunlight shines, “like the first sunrise of the world” on the “green fringes” of the larches, and there is “a delicious odor from the earth,” there is the touch of the wind, and the sound of the south westerly in the trees, “sweeping through them with the tune of running waters in its course” (12). In similar mood, Boehme writes: ‘Tor when the powers rise up in God, they stir each other up . . . so the divine kingdom of joy arises . . . like a pealing, sounding, generating, like a blossoming and a growing” (4.37; 5.67).

The two-fold impulse of good and evil, opposition and reconciliation, generates the divine, life of the world: “There is a good and evil will and source: in men, beasts . . . wood, plants . . . and all things have a mutual desire to increase, decrease, become fair, perish, love and hate” (2.65).

So David Elginbrod can say:

“I aye like to see a heap o’ things at ance, an’ tak’ them a’ in thegether, an’ see them playin’ into ane anither’s han’ like. I was jist thinkin’, as I came hame the nicht in the sinset, hoo it wad hae been naewise sae complete, wi’ a’ its red an’ gowd an’ green, gin it hadn’a been for the cauld blue east ahint it, wi’ the twa-three shiverin starnies leukin’ through t.” (52)

MacDonald also states that Nature is so profoundly influential that its power and energy can mould the individual into his or her own “likeness”: that is, their own divinity (46). Those who are open to Nature are open to the power of the Holy Ghost (the “out-birth” of God, according to Boehme, in his creative principle), and the spirit of life. With this in mind, MacDonald quotes from the Aurora: “When the Soul is kindled or enlightened by the Holy Ghost, then it beholds what God its Father does, as a Son beholds what
his Father does at Home in his own House” (45; *Aurora* 34.23). MacDonald is here referring to Margaret’s response to the life of the divine spirit in Nature: her reading of Wordsworth deepens her already strong relationship with the natural world, and this moulds her own nature “towards its own likeness.” Therefore she:

- grew taller and more graceful. The lasting quiet of her face began to look as if it were ever on the point of blossoming into an expression of lovely feeling. The principal change was in her mouth which became delicate and tender in its curves, the lips seeming to kiss each other for very sweetness. (46)

MacDonald shares Boehme’s sense of the vitality and sensuality of Nature. Margaret becomes the “playmate of nature,” in “secret understanding” and “communions” with it, taking in all its “resources” as the most “precious” store she could possibly garner (80). Like Boehme, she can say that her teacher is “the whole, complete Nature” (*Aurora* 22.11). Hugh, by contrast, needs a sterner lesson to grow than does Margaret—he must await “the friendly aid of a hard winter . . . to share in the loveliness of a new spring, and be perfected in the beauty of a new summer” (89).

Not until the penultimate chapter does Hugh experience the “truth” of Nature, enabling him to approach Margaret after the “grinding frosts” of his life [37] have done their work in allowing the seeds “which David had sown in his heart” to grow (452). Nature is “the Life of Life,” and to be at one with it, as Margaret is, is to be at one with the Divine. Such a profound exultation of Nature as the life of God (not, Boehme insists, of Nature as God) owes much to Boehme’s first text.

**Teleological Direction in David Elginbrod**

Hints of “awakening” and searching for something unknown are carefully placed in the text by MacDonald. They emphasise the teleological nature of the story, relating to the Boehmian expectation of a new spiritual dawn and the awakening of me soul. Boehme describes this as follows: “And the Deity will fully reveal itself in the Morning-Redness or Dawning, and the breaking forth of the great day of God, in which everything that is reborn out of death shall be restored and live again” (22.65).

While not aiming to fulfil Boehme’s ambitious eschatological scheme, MacDonald nevertheless writes a novel of “expectation,” which moves purposefully through the steps of natural and spiritual growth towards a restored Paradise and an auroral hierosgamic union. In the first chapter,
Margaret is searching, half consciously, in the wood for “a treasure she expected one day to find” (4): at the end MacDonald refers to her as that very thing, “a world’s treasure,” which she has discovered in herself (451). On Hugh’s second encounter with Margaret in the wood she tells him of her strong expectation of seeing something there, most likely, she feels, an angel (37). In the final chapter MacDonald reveals that: “Her childish dream of the angel haunting the wood had been true, only she was the angel herself (455). Winter snow in the wood is “the shroud of dead nature,” but it prefigures a “resurrection” (78); that resurrection takes place in the final chapter, when, in the “winter and fallen leaves” of the wood, Hugh’s soul turns to summer as he meets with Margaret again; the primrose, given to her in the third chapter, reappears as a harbinger of the spiritual spring to follow (455).

Hugh and Margaret are now led towards “rebirth” and a holy marriage, inevitable if their spiritual fulfilment is to be complete. Although MacDonald admits that Hugh may be a “poor little hero” (451), he does say that he is now capable of loving Margaret and is therefore ready for her (450). Their “restored Paradise” is emphasised by MacDonald’s choice of epigraph in chapter 71, which refers to Hyacinth’s rediscovery of Rosebud in Novalis’ Die Lehrlinge zu Saïs. Hugh and Margaret have been summoned to the holy wedding feast, which Boehme exuberantly describes as a “love-light-fire,” “reviving and enlightening” (8.159). Margaret, already a holy being, recognised as an angel by Hugh (455), Euphra (426) and Robert Falconer (431), walks into the fir-wood to receive the enlightened soul. Boehme writes on the hierosgamos: “this is the gracious bride, [38] who is ecstatic about her bridegroom; here is love, joy and delight, here is light and clarity . . . Oh, dear love and graciousness! Surely there is no end to it!” (9.70-71).

And further, a hint as to the possible source of the wounded foot which is the eventual cause of Euphra’s death:

The Fiddler has already tightened his strings, the bridegroom is coming: watch out that you do not have the fiendish lameness in your feet when they’re getting into position; that you’re not unfit for the angel’s dance and don’t get thrown out of the wedding, because you’re not wearing your angel’s clothes. (5.33)

The Dark World of David Elginbrod

MacDonald was interested in ghostly appearances, Gothic horror, intrigue, and the supernatural throughout his writing life, but David
Elginbrod is, as William Raeper remarks, his “purest attempt at the sensation novel” (198). While the sensation novel must not be equated with the supernatural novel, David Elginbrod shares elements of both, with its lurid depiction of events, guilty secrets, somnambulism, mesmerism and occult activities. Raeper notes that this “sensationalism” is a reflection of Victorian interests in the 1860’s, and as such, reflected by MacDonald, but he also observes that such aspects of MacDonald’s writing were subordinated to a theological purpose (198). As the mystical thought of the “inspired” Jacob Boehme (76) was clearly in MacDonald’s mind, it will be worthwhile to explore the “sensationalism” of the novel at a deeper level.

Given the strength of Victorian interest in occultism and spiritualism, it would be a gross overstatement to claim any major influence on MacDonald from Boehme, despite the fact that Aurora discusses several aspects of the supernatural. If, however, MacDonald thought that his reading of the “wonderful” Boehme gave him some justification (however tentative) for taking such activities seriously, then he may have found it possible to experiment with them without feeling that he was devaluing the quality of his novel. For example, in view of MacDonald’s reverence for David’s holiness and spirituality, it seems inappropriate to link him with the trappings of occultism; yet MacDonald would have found precedents in the Aurora. Boehme discusses “the ground of necromancy,” and the transitory forms and creatures which, he suggests, can be generated in Nature itself (16.4, 15). He writes of an “astral elementary quality” which can be transformed into inferior forms of life, when the spirits set their will into such occult activity (16.59-62). MacDonald does not openly give credence to such notions in his narrative, yet he does allow the sage-like Robert Falconer to consider them seriously, discussing in some depth with Hugh the world of “low miserable creatures,” “ghosts,” and “the canaille of the other [39] world” (360-61). Additionally, MacDonald never allows the reader to doubt the existence of David’s continuing holy power (as the epigraph to chapter 71 announces: “He being dead yet speaketh”), so we may reasonably assume some belief on MacDonald’s part in evil forces working in opposition to the “good” force of David: this may partially explain MacDonald’s position. Certainly, the timeless world of Boehme allowed for the reality of such concepts, and this may have given MacDonald a theological, if profoundly unorthodox, justification for including them in his novel—yet another example of the “dangerous doctrines” he was so fond of giving his unconventional individuals.
The focus of the central part of *David Elginbrod* is the evil power of Funkelstein, and we may here be less speculative about what MacDonald may have received from Boehme. The whole section is signposted as a dark and devilish episode. Chapters 25-38 employ a range of titles and epigraphs which refer to “damned” midnight (26), “the Nightmare” which calls “when it walks” (29), “Hell” (30), “darkened times” (32), “dead night” (39) and “a dead man” (42). Funkelstein is a creature of the dark who gradually takes on the character of the devil: he possesses a black, bifurcated beard, black flashing eyes, and a powerful attractiveness (203, 193). Euphra declares that there is a devil who “has got me in his power” (304); Hugh goes in search of “a devil”—Funkelstein (319); and MacDonald follows an epigraph from Marlowe’s Dr Faustus with a statement in the next chapter that Euphra has sold her will to this devil (396, 410). Funkelstein is the most “demonic” of MacDonald’s villains, and MacDonald seems to be performing a powerful experiment in the characterisation of a dark entity.

Now, in *Aurora*, Boehme spends more time than in any other work (chs 12-17) describing the character and fall of Lucifer, a princely and beautiful angel. The “brightest” of all the angels, Lucifer kindled his energies, deliberately elevating himself through them so that he could be “lord of the Deity.” He thus became a devil, whose sole desire was to take universal power, setting his will against God’s (ch. 16). MacDonald, who could have emphasised the “devilishness” of his villain in any number of different ways, chose to focus upon the power of his will, which, to show its full scope and terrifying potency, had to be sited in a “supernatural” context.

Additionally, Boehme’s fundamental division between light and dark is already well worked out in *Aurora*, both conceptually and structurally: the main account of Lucifer’s dark world lies sandwiched between the light-angelic world given in the first part (chs 1-11), and that of the natural world and the creation of “heaven and earth” in the third part (chs 18-26). *David Elginbrod* shows a clear distinction between dark, light and the natural worlds (the light being that of the angelic Margaret and the holy David), and a tri-part structure which places the [40] dark action at the centre. *Aurora* also has a detailed angelology: chapters refer to their creation, powers and corporeal substance; *David Elginbrod* has a large number of references to angels, real and metaphorical. David prays for communication with angels (21), Margaret talks of meeting one in a wood (37). Euphra is likened to an angel (418); Margaret has already been given angelic status at the seance (220), and Robert Falconer refers to her openly as “one of God’s angels”
Euphra talks of her “‘two angels,’” the “‘evil angel’” in Funkelstein, the “‘good angel’” in Margaret (426); and Margaret is the angel in the wood in the final chapter.

Oppositions between light and dark are frequently presented to the reader, the first epigraph contrasts the dark which the daisy “hateth” with the sun’s brightness, and light and dark alternate across Margaret as she passes through the fir-wood (5), anticipating her role in the struggle between Euphra and Funkelstein. Darkness in the first chapters is positively associated with light: Hugh goes home by starlight, and David, in the same scene, prays up to the stars and the God who gave them their light (20). Even the winter snow-storm, which comes as darkness begins to fall (77) causes Hugh’s heart to “dance with delight,” and although MacDonald calls it a “dreadful night,” its white embrace having almost killed Margaret, it serves a purpose in cementing the relationships between Hugh, Margaret, David and Janet, and is not portrayed negatively. By contrast, the middle part of the book focuses on the oppressive nature of darkness. The light is distorted and un-natural: after Euphra’s somnambulistic walk, the first light of the morning is “more dreadful than the deepest darkness of the past night,” and the ensuing “silence in light” is the abode of lost souls (176). By chapter 13 it grows dark in the afternoon (186). A storm approaches, very different from the white tempest of chapter 14. Thunder follows “like a pursuing wild beast, close on the traces of the vanishing night: as if the darkness were hunting the light from the earth [to] overtake and annihilate it” (186). This storm precedes the entrance of Funkelstein into the narrative, and MacDonald has Hugh demand ironically but prophetically of Mrs Elton: “‘do you think the devil makes the thunder?’” (187).

The entrance of the devil to the accompaniment of wild elements is a commonplace, but MacDonald may have noted the high profile Boehme gives to the wild raging of energies as Lucifer elevated himself. His wilful spirit strove against God as a “wild storming,” which “grew bigger and wilder” as if it would “rip all nature apart” (14.90-91; 15.80). One vivid flash, lasting for “one brilliant moment,” heralds the breaking out of the raging storm in MacDonald’s text (186), much as a “violent great flash” accompanies Lucifer’s rising in a “terrible clarity” (13.149; 14.8). [41]

MacDonald’s choice of his arch-villain’s name is interesting in the light of Boehme’s *Aurora.* “Funkel” the German word for “spark,” is the word used by Boehme to translate “scintilla” the mystical term denoting every created being’s relationship as a “spark” of God. When Lucifer kindled
his own divine spark into the brilliant light of his pridelful qualities, that spark was crushed, and it was impossible for the “flash” to sustain any “true” light. The corrupted spark “glowed darkly, like a piece of hot iron . . . as if you had thrown a very hard stone into the fire, and left it lying there” (13.152, my italics). Here is the second part of Funkelstein’s name: “Stein” meaning “stone.” When the harsh qualities of Lucifer’s dark energies were kindled, his original spark was distorted, and transformed him into “a black devil” (14.92-93; 15.70, 35).

MacDonald’s characterisation of Funkelstein and his dark persona shows an awareness of Boehme’s account of the dark world of Lucifer, whereas the contrasting “light” world of Nature and its setting as a background for the love between Hugh and Margaret reflects the vitality of Boehme’s _Aurora_. It is also possible that MacDonald had parallels in mind between David himself and Jacob Boehme.

**Jacob Boehme and David Elginbrod**

MacDonald suggests, via Hugh’s imaginative logic, that David is a descendant of Boehme, a man “who walked with God” (76; 452). MacDonald also takes great pains to show that David is a “peasant king,” a simple ploughman, and not a sophisticated thinker. “Ye see, Maister Sutherlan’,” declares David, “I’m no gleg at the uptak, an’ it jist taks me twise as lang as ither fowk to see to the outsides o’ a thing” (17). This is a fundamental attribute of Boehme himself, “whose simplicity of heart and child-like purity of soul” was admired by Nicholas Berdyaev in his introduction to Boehme’s _Six Theosophic Points_ (i). William Law also extols Boehme’s simplicity, his “truth” being the more prized “as he wrote without any art, and had no knowledge of regularity of composition” (qtd in Hobhouse 128). Boehme continually informs his reader of his intellectual ignorance, begging him not to “worry about the simplicity of the author” (9.19). Look at history, he exhorts his reader, and you will see the truth: “What was Abel? A shepherd. What were Enoch and Noah? Plain simple men. What were Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? Herdsmen” (9.5). David, like Boehme, is additionally doctrinally “unsound,” referring to the Bible as a “godly ballant” (8), likening God to a mother (20), and only being offered the post of church Elder (which he declines) because he “was not in the habit of openly expressing his opinion” (44). Like Boehme, David rejects the harsh Calvinist doctrines of pre-destination and eternal damnation (72; _Aurora_ 13.7-9), and declares that God, though he must punish, is “naething but love” (74). Similarly,
Boehme [42] writes: “there is nothing in God except a merciful, friendly love and brightness” (8.174). The idiosyncratic style of David’s prayers has much in common with Boehme’s somewhat eccentric style, full of colloquialisms, unsophisticated grammar, conversational debate, and lively, passionate sincerity. Both speak out against Calvinism, bigoted clergy, and harsh doctrines: Boehme declares indignantly: “As if hell, or evil, had been there from all eternity, and as if it were God’s decree that creatures were destined to exist like that . . . they don’t know the true god, or understand the scriptures . . . such scribblers are the master-builders of lies” (13.8-10). David says more mildly, but with feeling:

“Gin the clergy o’ thae times warna a gey hantle mair enlightened nor a fowth o’ the clergy hereabouts, he [auld’ Martin Elginbrodde] wad hae heard a heap aboot the glory o’ God, as the thing ‘at God himsel’ was maist anxious aboot uphaudin’, jist like a prood creatur o’ a king; an’ that he wad mak’ men, an’ feed them, an’ deed them, an’ gie them braw wives an’ toddlin’ bairnes, an’ syne damn them, a’ for’s ain glory. . . . hech, man! it’s an awesome deevilich way o’ sayin a holy thing.” (73)

Fervour is a key-note of both men’s style: “But his glory! consistin’ in his trowth an’ lovin’ kindness . . . an’ grand self-forgettin’ devotion to his creaters —lord! man, it’s unspeakable,” eulogises David (74). Again, thinks David, if a father can forgive his children’s wrong-doing, how much more can God love his children? “‘An’ shall mortal man be more just than God? Shall a man be more pure than his maker? O my God! my God!’” (75). Boehme extols God’s love and glory in equally passionate mood: “Oh, blessedness and great love! . . . who can measure your great beauty? . . . Oh!—and this is eternal! Who can express it? What am I writing—it sounds like a child’s stammering! What should I compare it to? Ah!—so great!” (8.161-62).

The experiences of the simple peasant, his roots set firmly in Nature, emerge in the choice of similes and conversation topics adopted by David and by Boehme (himself brought up in a village peasant family). David praises his father, “a puir auld shepherd, Mr Sutherlan’, wi’ hair as white as the sheep ‘at followed him’” (62), and, with gentle humour, muses that he would raise no objection to being “a horse i’ that pleuch’ or a pig in that stye . . . if it was his will . . . efter an’ a’, his blessed han’s made the pigs too”’ (73-74). Using another country simile, Boehme comments, with a certain wryness,
that weak souls wander about blindly, looking for the right path, “searching around like the country man for his horse, who, all the time he was looking, was riding on the back of that very horse he was searching for” (22.18).

The sense of “fair-play,” which is a unique hallmark of MacDonald’s God, is exemplified when David prays, in ordinary, conversational language: “we canna believe that thou wouldst gie us ony guid thing, to tak’ the same again; for that would be but bairns’ play” (63). Boehme also insists on God’s reasonable and fair treatment of his creatures: “If somebody is given something, for his own property, then he has a natural right to it, and it’s unjust for anybody to take it away again” (6.31).

David Elginbrod and the Aurora portray the joyful vitality of light, life and goodness overcoming the enemy of darkness and evil, and promise a new awakening for the protagonist in a union blessed by divine love. For both MacDonald and Boehme, this picture darkens in later works; but these two early texts demonstrate the optimism which, although subsequently tempered, never wholly deserted either writer.

Works Cited


