

**JOHANN CONRAD BEISSEL,
COLONIAL MYSTIC POET**

by

DENNIS McCORT
Syracuse University

Anyone who has read Thomas Mann's novel, *Doktor Faustus*, could not fail to be impressed by the austere but charismatic figure of Conrad Beissel, the eighteenth-century founder and patriarch of the Ephrata cloister in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. In the novel, the musicologist Kretzschmar mentions in one of his lectures that his father had often heard the entrancing church music at Snowhill, a sister community of Ephrata. Comparing it with European opera, Kretzschmar's father had said of the latter, "das sei Musik für das Ohr gewesen, die Beissels aber ein Klang tief in die Seele und nicht mehr noch minder als ein Vorgeschmack des Himmels."¹ If Conrad Beissel composed music for the soul, it can also be said that he never wrote a poem which did not in some way depict either the plight of the soul in this life or its beatified existence in the next.

Beissel has often drawn the interest of scholars as a mystic, a theosopher, a musician, and a religious organizer. As a poet he has received scant recognition. The few critics who have read Beissel's poetry have read it superficially and then have usually dismissed it as being too long and too much. However, if the sensitive reader allows himself to look beyond the common afflictions which Beissel's lyrics share with most Pietistic poetry — the occasional run-on hymn, the stock image, the banal rhyme — to the panoramic soul-scape spun out in his hundreds of hymns, each hymn another strand in a meticulously wrought spiritual tapestry, he will find himself in the presence of a mystic imagination rivalling that of Jakob Böhme and Meister Eckhart. It will be my

purpose here to survey the corpus of Beissel's religious poetry from three perspectives: first, to elucidate its general content and form; then, to flesh out this explication with a much-needed outline of some of Beissel's artistic and intellectual links with the past; finally, to consider his mystical-poetic vision of America, the New Zion.

Born in Ebersbach in the Palatine region of Germany in 1690, Beissel grew up in circumstances of extreme poverty, which proved to be excellent conditioning for the life of severe asceticism he was to pursue later on.² A baker by trade, he was largely self-taught and gained familiarity with the various separatistic religious movements from his wanderings through Germany. Shortly after 1715 he settled in Heidelberg where he rose to the position of treasurer of the Baker's Guild and moved with ease among Pietistic circles. His most notable acquaintance there was a Pietist by the name of Haller who was a friend of Johann Georg Gichtel, a zealous student of Böhme.³ Beissel's inflexible honesty as treasurer of the Baker's Guild moved the members to search for a pretext by which to dispose of him. Using his extremist Pietistic leanings to that end, they promptly succeeded in getting him banned from the city.⁴ He wandered through the areas of Wittgenstein, Berleburg, and Büdingen, all havens for separatistic sects at that time.⁵ However, his impoverished condition and his disillusionment with the organized churches soon led him to set his sights on America, the new land of religious toleration.

In 1720 Beissel arrived in Boston and immediately made his way to Germantown.⁶ His first association in the New World was with Johannes Kelpius' monastic community on the outskirts of Germantown. But the community was by that time in its dying stages and Beissel severed his connection with it after a short time.⁷ In 1725 he became pastor of a German Baptist congregation at Conestoga.⁸ Continually at odds with the headquarters congregation in Germantown, he resigned his pastorship in 1732 and retired in seclusion to the village of Ephrata on the banks of the Cocalico.⁹ Beissel's

reputation for piety and asceticism soon gained him many followers and the embryonic community rapidly developed into a thriving religious institution.

Under Beissel's spiritual inspiration and creative leadership Ephrata became and remained one of the most important colonial centers of artistic activity until well after its founder's death in 1768. The more gifted of the brothers and sisters excelled in the composition of hymns, the illumination of manuscripts, and the printing of important theological works. According to John F. Watson, the Ephrata press printed more original literary works than any other in the union at that time, and many families in the Philadelphia and Baltimore areas sent their children to Ephrata to be educated.¹⁰

Beissel himself was a prolific musician-poet who wrote, as nearly as I can estimate, about seven-hundred hymns. Perhaps the most consistent theme in the vast body of his poetry is that of renunciation of the world and its material allurements. Particularly in his early hymns, such as the collection *Jacobs Kampf-und Ritter-Platz* (1736), this theme is expressed in vigorous, robust metaphors portraying the heroic nature of the struggle to overcome one's involvement in the world. The believer is the knightly warrior on the battlefield of earthly existence whose mission it is to storm and conquer the fortress of self-will and worldly attractions:

Kommt ihr glaubenskämpffer,
Und ihr sünden-dämpffer,
Kommt und sehet eure kronen!
Es ist euch gelungen,
Weil der feind bezwungen,
Nun da habt ihr euren lohne.¹¹

The terse, staccato trochaic verses sonorously reflected the ferocity of the battle and highlight the boldness of the faithful warriors whom the poet summons to their reward. The poem is a typical example of Beissel's extensive use of martial images to express an inner spiritual process or activity. To Beissel the process of cutting oneself off from the world in order to achieve the proper receptive disposition for the in-

dwelling of the Divine Spirit is an inward-going one that entails entering into the self and ridding the consciousness of all material images and ties. In the above poem, as in many others of the *Jacobs Kampff- und Ritter-Platz*, Beissel employs the imagery of external social conflict — the battlefield, wrestling with the enemy, soldiers of the spirit, deeds of valor — in order to dramatize and make comprehensible to his charges at Ephrata this internal process of self-purification:

Wo die helden thaten
 Einmal sind gerahten,
 Da kan man es weiter wagen.
 In dem kampfpe ringen,
 Seine feind bezwingen,
 Biss sie alle sind geschlagen.¹²

When the believer has totally withdrawn into himself, he is in the state of *Eingekehrtheit*, a condition of perfect inner calm affording spiritual rejuvenation much akin to the yogi's meditative trance. Beissel often compares tranquil spiritual state to the satisfaction of a physiological need:

Dann wann mein Hertz ermüdet auf den Wegen,
 so führ mich Gott in meine Kammer ein:
 und speiset mich mit reichem Trost und Segen,
 und träncket mich mit seinem Guten Wein.¹³

At other times he uses the metaphor of the isolated garden:

Ich bin ein verschlossner Garten,
 Achte nicht, was ausser mir.¹⁴

But the poet does not always fall back on the external to represent the internal. Occasionally he attempts to describe this inward-going process directly, without the aid of concrete, mediating images:

Drum thu ich täglich in mir spüren,
 Dass er [God] mich thut hinein werts führen,
 Da ich genie verborgne krafft,
 Die meinem hertzen leben schafft.¹⁵

Although Beissel did not hold with the practice of self-inflicted bodily pain as a means of purging the flesh (a grim tactic of many mystics of the past) he did demand of himself and his charges at Ephrata the cultivation of an extremely severe asceticism. The world is an obstacle to the soul in its quest for God, and one must therefore strive to blot it out of one's awareness completely. The consciousness is always to be directed either inward or upward, never outward:

Mein Leben ist zwar ausgeleert
von Bildern und von Weisen;
doch ist mein Hertz zu Gott gekehrt,
lässt sich von nichts abreissen.¹⁶

The theme of renunciation finds its most compelling expression in the concept of the mystical death, a figurative dying to this world as a precondition for attaining the next:

O Wol! wer hier bey Zeit der eitlen Welt absaget,
der wird alldorten nicht vom andern Tod genaget.¹⁷

The poet sometimes imagines himself as existing in a state of frustrating transition between the earthly and the divine realms. He has forsaken the former but can only anticipate the latter:

Die alte Welt ist hin, die neu hat noch zu werden:
drum bleib in beyden arm, so lang ich leb auf Erden¹⁸

Beissel's poetry is replete with melancholic verse lamenting the inadequacy of earthly existence to fulfill man's deepest needs:

Die Tage gehen hin, die Zeit kan mir nicht geben,
Was mich vergnügen kan alldort in jener Welt.¹⁹

Particularly in the *Theosophische Gedichte* (1752) he lapses into a morose introspectiveness, wistfully brooding over the trials and tribulations of one who travels *die enge Bahn*. Only the hope of a higher and better existence can provide some measure of peace to the troubled soul:

Ich muss zwar stetig schweben
In vielem Weh und Leid;
Doch wird die Hoffnung geben
Den Frieden nach dem Streit.²⁰

It is this sustaining hope that enables the poet to perceive the salutary effects of suffering and to view human suffering as a positive good:

Meine Schmerzen, die ich leide,
Tragen mich zu Gott dahin:
Sind des Geistes süsste Weide,
Enden sich mit viel Gewinn.²¹

Viewed in this light, self-denial and suffering become a kind of spiritual currency. The more we can amass in this life, the higher will be our reward in the next:

Trage ich schon manche Lasten
Auf dem Weg zu Gott hinan:
Werd ich so viel süsser rasten,
Wann sich öffnet Canaan.²²

The opening hymn of the *Turtel-Taube* (1747), the first great hymnal of the Ephrata press, incorporates most of the themes and images discussed above. The progression of thought and feeling in this poem of ten stanzas points up the didactic tendency in much of the Ephrata-patriarch's religious poetry. The first four stanzas comprise a discouraged lament in which the poet bewails the ceaseless hardships and temptations that assail the soul as it gropes its way along the narrow path:

Ach Gott! wie mancher bitterer Schmerz
durchdringet meinen Geist und Hertz,
hier in dem Leib der Sterblichkeit,
auf meinem Weg zur Seligkeit.²³

The hopeful outlook and clarity of vision often become clouded as the spirit vacillates between peace and turmoil, confidence and doubt:

Der enge Weg ist zwar gebahnt,
worzu uns Jesus angemahnt:
doch ist so vieler Drang dabey,
als ob er zugeschlossen sey.²⁴

In the fifth stanza the emotional fluctuation begins to diminish as the tone becomes firm and positive. The poet marvels at the simultaneous dwindling of sensory attachments and expansion of spiritual awareness as the soul is purified:

Wie klein und niedrig wird der Sinn,
der auf demselben [engen Weg] gehet hin!
Wie rein und sauber wird der Geist,
der diesen Weg zu Gott hinreist.²⁵

Having described in stanza five how the senses and the soul are inversely affected in the process of purifying transformation, Beissel assumes the tone of the spiritual pedagog in the next four stanzas and tells us what we must do to effect this transformation:

Wo gantz ertödet die Natur,
da findet man erst diese Spuhr
zum Himmelsreich . . .²⁶

Here Beissel has named the second formidable enemy of man in his quest for God — *Natur*. If man's first great enemy is the world and its material seductions, his second is his own nature which, in Beissel's view, is essentially weak and corrupt. Unilluminated human nature is identical with self-interest and individual desire, which is the source of evil. A man who allows himself to be dominated by the self lives in *Finsternis*. Conversely, when the soul is filled with God's love, "so gehet . . . ein Licht in dem Menschen auf, da sein verfinstertter Verstand erleuchtet wird."²⁷ Just as even in this life man must die to the world in order to be saved, so too must he transcend his own depraved nature and his enslavement to self-interest. Beissel asserts this in stanza eight:

Ein Geist, der rein, wie Gold bewährt,
und lauterlich Gott zugekehrt,
erstorben allem Ich und Mein,
der geht zur engen Pforte ein.²⁸

It is in this sense that Beissel consistently uses expressions in his poetry like "meiner selbst entladen" and "mir selbst entwerden." The poem ends on a typically triumphant note, the poet asserting his own freedom from the self:

Drum freue dich mein müder Geist,
der du bist aus dir selbst gereist.²⁹

By undergoing the mystical death man attunes himself to the Divine. Those who are uninitiated in the mystical experience have extreme difficulty in grasping Beissel's conception of the Divinity. Experienced by the expanded mystical consciousness as a noumenal being, God is beyond the grasp even of metaphoric language. He is simply *das Unausprechliche*. Nevertheless, Beissel attempts to convey his experience of God and his longing for union with the Infinite Being in hymn number 298 of the *Paradisches Wunderspiel* (1766), the last and largest Ephrata hymnal. The sweeping continuity of rhythm and the internal rhyme contribute to a mood bordering on ecstatic anticipation of the poet's wish-fulfillment:

O Ungrund! der gewesen
von Ewigkeiten her
mach mich in dir genesen,
damit, was um mich her
mich ja nicht mehr entführe
von deiner Wesenheit,
noch anderwärts abirre
durch einig Ding der Zeit.³⁰

God is the *Ungrund*, the Abyss, the Infinity, defying all attempts at description or definition. Still, the poet feels compelled to share his vision and, as always, must resort to those material images which, by virtue of their sheer colossal breadth, bear the closest phenomenal resemblance to infinity.

In stanza four Beissel likens God to a boundless sea and expresses his longing for union in terms of complete submersion into its depths:

Drum lasse dich erbitten:
o bodenloses Meer!
bring mich in deine Mitte,
da du seyst um mich her.³¹

In stanza five the poet acknowledges God as the source of all material creation and implies in the maternal invocation that sexuality is a meaningless material distinction when applied to the Infinite Being:

O Mutter aller Dinge!
Kleid mich in dich hinein;
und in dein Wesen bringe,
es wird bald anders seyn.³²

Scholars such as Walter Klein³³ and E. Ernest Stoeffler³⁴ have well established the influence of Jakob Böhme on Beissel's theosophical writings. Undoubtedly, Beissel's mystico-poetic conception of God as the *Ungrund* and many of the images he uses in his poetry to represent this abstraction stem from Böhme's theosophy. In discussing Böhme's concept of the Being that exists outside of time, Rufus Jones says:

This infinite Mother of all births, this eternal Matrix, he [Böhme] calls the *Ungrund*, "Abyss," or the "Great Mystery," or the "Eternal Stillness." Here we are beyond beginnings, beyond time, beyond "nature," and we can say nothing in the language of reason that is true or adequate It is an absolute Peace, an indivisible Unity, an undifferentiated One — an Abysmal Deep, which no name can adequately name and which can be described in no words of time and space, of here and now.³⁵

Beissel must have realized that these highly rarefied verbal symbols of God were too cold and abstract to provide the less mystically inclined brothers and sisters of Ephrata with the necessary spiritual nourishment. For most of the

members there was little sense of communion to be gained from contemplating the vague, nebulous Abyss. It appealed to the intellect and the intuitive sense but not to the heart. A much more concrete and comprehensible being was needed, one that would have greater human appeal as an object of religious devotion. We find this being in Beissel's poetry in the figure of *die göttliche Sophia*, often referred to as *die himmlische Weisheit*.

A detailed account of Sophia's place in Beissel's theosophy would take us too far afield, since my primary concern here is with her dominant position in his poetry. Nevertheless, a brief word of explanation will help greatly to clarify her meaning. For Beissel Sophia is a virgin of divine stature who occupies a position equal in rank to the Persons of the Trinity. As Beissel explains in his theosophical treatise, *Urständliche und Erfahrungsvolle Hohe Zeugnisse...* (1745), Adam had been united with Sophia as long as the harmony of his androgynous nature remained undisturbed. But his Fall caused a breach in the male-female balance and a separation from Sophia which man has been trying to repair ever since. Sophia hovers near every human being, hoping to win him for herself, but man cannot effect the reunion by his own power. Only by mystically uniting himself to Christ, who is the perfect embodiment of the male-female principle and is both Son and Bridegroom of Sophia, does man become spiritually capable of reunion with Sophia, his original Bride.³⁶

Beissel composed innumerable hymns in which Sophia appears as the focus of all his longing for transcendence. His anticipation of reunion with his Bride sustains him in the midst of his earthly ordeal:

Mein Glück wird schon erscheinen
auf meinem Hochzeit-Tag,
muss ich schon oft jetzt weinen
bey so viel Ungemach:
nach vielem Schmertz und Quälen,
und so viel bittrem Leid,
wird sie sich mir vermählen
in jener Ewigkeit.³⁷

In Beissel's theosophy Sophia is a goddess and as such commands man's highest esteem and reverence. In many hymns the poet invokes her as a transcendental force capable of elevating his spirit above the material world to her own sphere of cosmic harmony:

O Sophia! du reines Licht
und Glantz der Ewigkeiten:
wer dir vermählt, kan ewig nicht
mehr fallen oder gleiten.
Dein Adel hat mich dir verwandt,
weil ich verliebet worden,
dass aller Welt wurd unbekant
durch deinen hohen Orden.³⁸

Just as often, however, the paradoxical relationship between the erotic and the spiritual in the mystical temperament is revealed as the poet describes his intimate communion with Sophia in erotic language befitting the most earthly of lovers. Devotion to her precludes natural marriage, and all the libidinal energy which the poet has learned to suppress in his cultivation of the celibate life becomes sublimated and directed toward Sophia, his Divine Beloved:

Der weisheit liebeström, erquicken meine sinnen
Tränckt mich an ihrer brust, zieht meinen geist von hinnen.³⁹

The figure of Sophia has a long history in the Western mystical tradition extending back to the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament. There she is called "Wisdom" and is the personification of justice, righteousness, and understanding, which men have forsaken. John Joseph Stoudt traces the history of Sophia in the Christian era from Philo and the Neo-Platonic tradition through such medieval mystics as Bernard of Clairvaux to Böhme and Gottfried Arnold.⁴⁰ Beissel's own concept of Sophia is probably derived from Böhme. According to Hans Lassen Martensen, Böhme regards Sophia as the Bride of Adam before the Fall to whom he became unfaithful.⁴¹ She is also indissolubly wedded to Christ, who is

the Second Adam and is to restore her to man.⁴² Theosophically, Beissel's concept of Sophia is identical with Böhme's so that it seems not out of place to regard Beissel's Sophia-hymns as the lyrical expression of Böhme's prose.

I have enumerated what appear to me to be the dominant themes in Beissel's poetry: renunciation, asceticism, and human suffering; the necessity of attaining the state of *Einkehrtheit*; the evil inherent in the self; God as he is conceived in the abstract and represented in the concrete; and the cult of Sophia. A few words now on Beissel as a stylist will round out my survey.

As a poet-craftsman Beissel was quite versatile. He was adept at most of the traditional lyrical forms and metrical patterns. His verse ranges from terse, clipped iambic dimeter to *Langzeilen* of up to seven accented syllables; from the elevated Alexandrine quatrain to the simple folksong strophe; from the short, pregnant epigrammatic couplet to the long lyric stanza. In his chronicle, *Ephrata. Eine amerikanische Klostersgeschichte*, Oswald Seidensticker hurls the following charge at Beissel as a stylist: "Beissel, der bei weitem die meisten Lieder lieferte [among the Ephrata brethren], schrieb zu viel und zu handwerksmässig. Der ehemalige Bäcker knetete seine Verse als stände er am Backtroge und schob Strophe an Strophe, als gälte es so viel Laib Brod zu machen."⁴³ There is no denying a degree of truth in Seidensticker's accusation. Beissel's meters are at times forced and contrived, and he uses certain standard rhymes with such frequency that they become all too predictable: e.g., "das keusche Lamm . . . der Bräutigam," "die Gottesfülle . . . die ewige Stille," "die Schmerzen im Hertenzen." One searches in vain for a thread of unity in some of the longer hymns which contain more than thirty stanzas.

However, certain mitigating factors might be mentioned which partially explain, if not vindicate, Beissel's stylistic flaws. He had had very little formal schooling and probably had little more than a rudimentary knowledge of the prescriptive poetic of his day. His foremost purpose was always

to communicate his mystical vision to those who believed as he did, and he was not averse to forcing a metrical pattern or using a hackneyed rhyme to achieve his end. The phenomenon of Ephrata's longevity as a vital religious community is proof of his admirable success. Furthermore, Beissel was also a gifted composer and a unique one, having invented his own system of musical notation. His unorthodox theories of harmony, which he explains in detail in the preface to the *Turtel-Taube*, are doubtless at least partially responsible for the unbending rigidity of his meters.⁴⁴ In any case, most of his poems are also hymns of his own composition, which means that the musical factor must be taken into account in any comprehensive evaluation of Beissel as an artist.

Moreover, one should not let Beissel's shortcomings as a stylist blind one to his strengths in the same area. Examples of bland imagery and humdrum meter can be countered with bursts of true poetic inspiration. Numerous lyrics can be cited in which language, meter, rhythm, and idea evolve as an inextricable unity. Consider, for example, the first stanza of hymn number sixteen in the *Paradisches Wunderspiel*, in which Beissel consoles the brethren by pointing to the imminent end of their time of suffering:

Bald gehen zu ende die traurige Stunden,
betrübete Seelen, die Gott sich verbunden;
die öfftens gesessen in mancherley Drang,
und vielen Weh-Tagen statt Lobens-Gesang.⁴⁵

The tripping amphibrachs and feminine endings in the first two verses establish the joyful anticipatory mood of a rapidly approaching end to the hours of sadness, while a sudden, contrasting static effect is achieved in verses three and four through the heavy masculine rhyme *Drang* and *Gesang*, emphasizing the seemingly endless suffering of the past. Consider how the poet's apocalyptic rapture is so contagiously conveyed by the high-pitched vowel sounds and by the rhythmic flow of liquids and sibilants in hymn number seven, stanza one, *Paradisches Wunderspiel*:

Ach verzeuch doch länger nicht,
meine Seel, erheb dich wieder:
siehe wie das Dunckle bricht,
darum singe deine Lieder.⁴⁶

Notice, finally, how the poet elsewhere makes the fullest use of dizzying amphibrachs and liquid sounds to express the dynamic, bitter-sweet vacillation of the spirit between this world and the next:

Wir loben in Freuden, und lieben in Leiden:
und leben auf Erden in himmlischer Freud.⁴⁷

It should be clear from the foregoing discussion that, although Beissel spent almost half his life in the contemplative seclusion of the Ephrata community, his thinking and creative work were by no means carried on in intellectual isolation. Unfortunately, the dearth of biographical evidence makes it difficult to single out specific influences of other poets on Beissel. As far as I can ascertain, neither the *Chronicon Ephratense*, which is the most authentic account of Beissel's life, nor Beissel's prose writings yields any information as to his poetic models. Nevertheless, internal evidence alone leads one to suspect that Beissel patterned the Alexandrine couplets in the collection, *Mystische und sehr geheyme Sprueche* (1730), on those of another mystic and devotee of Böhme, Angelus Silesius.⁴⁸ A comparison of Beissel's *Sprueche* with those in Silesius' *Cherubinischer Wandersmann* reveals several arresting parallels in theme and style. Both poets proclaim the paradoxical mystical death as the way to eternal life:

S.: Indem der weise Mann zu tausendmalen stirbet,
Er durch die Wahrheit selbst um tausend Leben wirbet.⁴⁹

B.: Wilt leben du in Gott, so much du erst verderben,
Der beste glantz u. schein, musz gantz in dir ersterben.⁵⁰

Complete withdrawal into the self enables one to establish closer contact with God:

S.: Wer in sich selber sitzt, der höret Gottes Wort,
Vernein es, wie du willst, auch ohne Zeit und Ort.⁵¹

B.: Geh in der seelen grund, aus allen weltgetümmel,
So findest du in dir den stillen Gottes-Himmel.⁵²

We must break the chains of enslavement to the self; possession of God and love of self are mutually exclusive:

S.: Wer sich verloren hat und von sich selbst entbunden,
Der hat Gott, seinen Trost und seinen Heiland, funden.⁵³

B.: Wer Gott besitzen will, der musz sich selber lassen,
Dann wer sich selbst besitzt, kan Gott nicht in sich fassen.⁵⁴

Both poets delight in exploiting the contrapuntal qualities inherent in the structure of the Alexandrine couplet. Half-lines stand poised against each other in the tense interplay of verbal paradox:

S.: Die Armut ist ein Schatz, dem keine Schätze gleichen.
Der ärmste Mensch im Geist hat mehr als alle Reichen.⁵⁵

B.: Das ist der Reichste mensch, der ärmste von begehren,
Wer sich darinnen find't, den kan kein ding beschweren.⁵⁶

Although both poets were mystics within a general Bohemian orientation, there were also certain deep-rooted differences in outlook and temperament that should be acknowledged in any comparison between them. For example, although the themes of renunciation and worldly vanity crop up repeatedly in the epigrams of both poets, Silesius' pantheistic tendencies enabled him to view external reality as a positive good and to see in it the signature of its Divine Author:

S.: Die Schöpfung ist ein Buch; wers weislich lesen kann,
Dem wird darin gar fein der Schöpfer kund getan.⁵⁷

Beissel, on the other hand, never spoke approvingly of external reality except when using some aspect of it as a

metaphor of the soul. Otherwise, he viewed the world with grave suspicion and believed that its natural function was to seduce man from his eternal destiny:

B.: O Welt! du trügerin, mit deinem eitlen schein
Ich bin dir nun entflohn, geh nimmer in dich ein.⁵⁸

Moreover, Silesius firmly believed in the total interdependence of God and man:

S.: Ich weiss, dass ohne mich Gott nicht ein Nu kann leben;
Werd ich zunicht, er muss von Not den Geist aufgeben.⁵⁹

Such a notion must surely have struck Beissel as blasphemous, feeling as he did that man could never be quite sure of his standing with the Creator:

B.: Hast du noch nicht gesehen das thal der nichtigkeit,
So baue ja kein nest ins Hauss der Sicherheit.⁶⁰

The theosophical ideas and the attitudes toward the religious life that find expression in Beissel's poetry did not come to him in the form of revelation from on high, even if he did not discourage his followers from believing so. I have already alluded to Böhme's influence on his conception of God and his cult of Sophia. Beissel's idea of the *Ich* or self-will as giving rise to evil probably derives from Böhme as well.⁶¹ Moreover, much of Beissel's specialized vocabulary of mysticism, including such terms as *magia*, *Tinctur*, *centrum*, and *Temperatur*, can be found scattered throughout Böhme's writings. But the question of whether Beissel knew Böhme's works directly or through his interpreters cannot be answered with certainty. It seems likely that he read both Böhme and his interpreters.

Two of these interpreters were Johann Georg Gichtel and Gottfried Arnold. Beissel probably became familiar with their writings through Haller's encouragement while in Heidelberg. He may have understood Böhme's concept of self-will and individual desire as the origin of evil (*Finsternis*) through

Gichtel's mediation.⁶² Arnold's tract, *Das Geheimnis der Göttlichen Sophia* (1700), could also have contributed to Beissel's understanding of the Heavenly Wisdom⁶³ — although, according to Stoudt, Arnold conceived of Sophia as the threefold body and blood of Christ, an idea that would not be consonant with Beissel's theosophy.⁶⁴ It seems much more likely that Beissel's position on Sophia came directly from Böhme. Beissel's glorification of virginity and celibacy could have been influenced by Arnold, who was vehemently against natural marriage,⁶⁵ as well as by Ernst Christoph Hochmann von Hochenau, who preached union with Christ as the only pure marital state.⁶⁶ Beissel knew of Hochenau through Alexander Mack and his Dunker sect, with which he came in contact during his wanderings in Wittgenstein.⁶⁷

In any outline of probable and possible influences on Beissel's thought, the English Philadelphian movement should not be omitted. The Philadelphians were a society of mystics in the Böhmist tradition founded in London in 1670 by John Pordage and Jane Lead.⁶⁸ Their espousal of separatism and their ideas on the formation of religious communities with the designation of members as "brother" may well have been a contributing stimulus to Beissel's founding of Ephrata.⁶⁹ If this is so, then the Philadelphians may also have been the mediators for some of Beissel's knowledge of Böhme. Since Beissel had almost no knowledge of English, it is doubtful that he had any direct association with the Philadelphians. But he probably gained a familiarity with their ideas through the German Philadelphian sect in Wittgenstein before coming to America.⁷⁰ It is also possible that he later renewed this indirect contact through the members of Kelpius' monastic community near Germantown. Before setting sail for America in 1694, Kelpius had lived in London and had made the acquaintance of Pordage and Lead. While in Pennsylvania he maintained a lively correspondence with them.⁷¹

Finally, it is possible that even Rosicrucian mysticism did not escape Beissel's interest. Julius Sachse, the well-known

chronicler of Ephrata, identifies Beissel as one of the revivers of Rosicrucianism in Pennsylvania.⁷² Sachse refers to the Ephrata community as the successor to Kelpius and his chapter of "true Rosicrucians" on the Wissahickon and says that at Ephrata "the secret rites and mysteries of the true Rosicrucian philosophy flourished unmolested for years."⁷³

Influences come from the future as well as the past. Although Beissel's intellectual links with the religious poets and thinkers of his native Germany were deep and durable, the visionary temperament of the mystic could not help but be profoundly shaped by the promise of spiritual rebirth held out by the New World to which he had come. One could easily be led to infer from Ephrata's situation of relative isolation from its environment and from Beissel's strong inclination to the solitary life that his only interest in America was as a refuge from repressive ecclesiastical authority. However, his prophetic, if ungrammatical, words in the fifth "Theosophical Epistle" reveal a much grander, chiliastic vision of the New World:

Asia ist gefallen u. seine Leuchter ist verloschen.
Europa ist die Sonne am hellen Mittag untergangen.
America siehet eine Lilie blühen, ihr Geruch wird
unter den Heiden erschallen. Abend und Morgen wird
wieder einen Tag machen. Das Licht gegen dem Abend
wird einen Schein setzen gegen dem Morgen: und der
letzt verheissene Abend-Regen wird dem Morgen zu
hülff kommen, und wird das Ende wieder in seinem
Anfang bringen; alsdann wird Jacob fröhlich seyn,
und Israel sich freuen.⁷⁴

The full significance of these cryptic utterances can be decoded without undue difficulty. Beissel first refers to the crumbling of the old ecclesiastical order in Asia and Europe. He then says America will bear witness to the blooming of a lily. The rich symbolism of the lily in Christian mystical literature has its origins in the Song of Songs in which Christ, the Bridegroom, woos the lily, which is the church, or, as the mystics would have it, the individual soul.⁷⁵ Beissel's pro-

phesy of the blooming of the lily is thus meant to symbolize the regeneration of the Christian spirit in the New World. This vision of the gradual westward movement of religion and of America as the new kingdom of God has deep intellectual roots in the medieval historical concept of the *translatio imperii*, the belief based on Old Testament prophecies that Rome's abuse of secular and religious authority had forced God to transfer the earthly seat of power to the Germanic peoples.⁷⁶ Beissel, along with other Pennsylvania German separatists, viewed his own forced exodus from the oppressive religious atmosphere in Germany and his journey to America as the beginning of still another phase in the westward migration of God's kingdom on earth. The remaining metaphors in the oracular passage quoted above are also rooted in the Old Testament. The image of evening and morning forming one day derives from the account of the creation at the beginning of *Genesis*. It would seem that Beissel envisioned this imminent spiritual regeneration as analogous to God's act of material creation. The promised evening rain is probably based on the innumerable Old Testament metaphors depicting rain as the beneficent, fertilizing shower. The references to Jacob and Israel imply that America is the New Canaan, the land of spiritual plenty where the descendants of the twelve tribes of Israel will flourish. Beissel thus expresses his vision of America in sweepingly apocalyptic style as a utopian land which was to witness a profound revolution of the Christian spirit.

The following passage from the preface to the *Paradisches Wunderspiel*, anonymously written by one of the brethren, expresses the similar sentiments of the entire Ephrata community:

Erweckung über das grosse Welt Meer in America begleiten. Wer wolte noch zweiffeln, das nicht Pennsilvanien von Gott darzu bestimmt, des sich darinnen die Nachkommen der Zwölf-Sämmen unsers himmlischen Jacobs solten ausbreiten als in dem Land ihres Erbteils.⁷⁷

Using Beissel's prose as a conceptual key, one can delineate a lyrical *Amerikabild* in the first, second, and fifth poems from section one of the hymnal, *Vorspiel der Neuen-welt* (1732), the title of which is itself significant. The first poem presents an expansive, euphoric vision of the New World in terms of its lush natural beauty, which inspires the poet to identify it with the Garden of Paradise. In the first stanza Beissel makes effective use of tropological imagery to represent America as the land of spiritual fertility with unlimited potential for the flowering of the soul. Also implied is the notion of a new era of religious freedom which is metaphorically contrasted with the former era of discrimination and persecution:

Ich sehe die pflantzen im Paradies feld
 Vom lieblichen frühling sehr herrlich aussprossen,
 Nun wird wieder sanfte was vor war verstellt,
 Durch herbe und kälte im winter verschlossen.
 Da stehen die bäume mit lieblichem grünen,
 So dass es zur freude und wollust muss dienen.⁷⁸

That Beissel is actually describing America as an earthly paradise and not merely entertaining visions of an afterlife becomes clear in the first two lines of stanza seven, in which he refers to the sisters of Ephrata:

Da gehen die Töchter sehr prächtig einher,
 In diesem gefilde der Paradies-erden.⁷⁹

The second poem also abounds in tropological imagery, beginning with a triumphal proclamation of the end to Old-World strife and the imminent reunion of the Bridegroom with his Bride:

Der frohe Tag bricht an, es legt sich nieder,
 Der harte Jacobs-dienst, es wird ihm wieder,
 Gegeben seine Braut die ihm vermählet,
 Und sich beym lebens-bronn, zu ihm gesellet.⁸⁰

In stanza three the poet exhorts men to bear witness to America as *die neue liebes-welt* and prophesizes the worldwide spread of the spiritual revolution:

Der neuen liebes-welt, die sich thut zeigen,
Mit ihrem vollen pracht, wer solte schweygen,
u. es nicht zeigen an, was er thut sehen,
Weil es bald aller welt, wird offen stehen?⁸¹

The fifth poem is the shortest, consisting of only ten stanzas. Its relative brevity enables the poet to achieve a pleasing structural symmetry and thematic integration. The first four stanzas are earthbound and portray the blossoming of spring in the landscape of the New World, which, as always, is also the landscape of the soul. That Beissel intends his landscape to contain these two levels of meaning is evident from the following verses in stanza one:

Im geist man sieht,
Wie alles blüht,
Und breit't sich aus zur fruchtbarkeit.⁸²

In the second stanza the poet alliteratively affirms the unfettered growth of the spirit in the New World and deplors its former smothered existence in the Old:

Der kalte winter geht zu ende,
Es rückt herbey das frohe jahr,
Drum hebet auf hertz, haupt und hände,
Weil nun wird hell und offenbar,
Was lang verdeckt,
Und war versteckt.⁸³

Stanza four reveals that this renaissance of the spirit is not limited to the confines of Ephrata. Even the infidels will be engulfed in its wave:

Die blätter dieser fruchtbarkeiten,
Die dienen auch zur artzeney,
Und zum genuss der wilden heyden.⁸⁴

In the fifth and sixth stanzas the New Jerusalem is significantly set in the middle of the landscape, and in the middle of the city are assembled the priests and Levites of the Old Testament. Stanzas five and six, then, are the pivotal stanzas of the poem both structurally and thematically, since they

form a transition from the earthbound description of the first four stanzas to the transfigured vision of the last four.

As the poem moves into its final stanzas it becomes increasingly difficult to discern whether the scene of events is still the greening utopia of America or whether we have been transported to the Eternal Kingdom. Occurrences seem no longer to be rooted in time and space: a sacrificial offering is made to the Lord at his golden altar (st. 8), and the soul-bride takes her place beside her King and receives the golden crown (st. 9). Subtly, imperceptibly the poet has blended the one realm with the other. The New World, the New Jerusalem, and the Kingdom of Heaven have become one. In the final stanza the two realms of reality resume their separate modes of existence as the poet realizes he has allowed his imagination to be seduced by the fertile promise of his new earthly environment:

Ich freue mich schon in dem geiste,
Ob ich schon noch auf erden bin.⁸⁵

Conrad Beissel's lapse into obscurity among the German poets and writers on the early colonial scene is an undeserved fate. Few of his colonial contemporaries could match the range of his religious thought or the breadth of his poetic vision. Although it is certainly easy to fault him on esthetic grounds, such fault hardly diminishes the monument of his poetry as a profound probing into the depths of the human soul, combining the homely simplicity of biblical wisdom with the all-embracing mystical vision of an Eckhart or a Böhme.

I have had to work with a microprint reproduction of the original editions of the Ephrata hymnals. A complete lack of dating of individual hymns makes it most difficult to trace Beissel's development as a poet within a chronological framework. Clearly, much remains to be done even in the area of preliminary scholarship. To my knowledge, no comprehensive survey of Beissel's poetry has yet been made and there is no

edition of selected poems. The few critics such as Stoudt and Stoeffler who have touched on Beissel as a poet have not really distinguished him from the many members of the Ephrata community who composed verse. No effort has been made to sort out Beissel's poetry from that of the cloister as a whole. Also, a much more thorough investigation of the sources of Beissel's mysticism is needed. As the leader of a thriving and influential religious community entrusted with the education of many of early Philadelphia's young people, Beissel was an important connecting link in the transmission of religious culture from the Old World to the New. His relationship to some of the great religious poets and writers of the German baroque, such as Daniel Czepko, Paul Gerhardt, Quirinus Kuhlmann, and Gottfried Arnold, is still virtually unexplored. I have dealt with only a few of the most obvious strains of Böhme and Silesius in his poetry; if Sachse is correct in asserting that Rosicrucian rituals were carried on at Ephrata, there may well be traces of Rosicrucian mysticism and symbolism in Beissel's verse that I have not managed to uncover. A more intensive scrutiny of the theosophical writings than I have been able to make might help to bring some of these connections to light.

NOTES

¹Thomas Mann, *Gesammelte Werke* (Berlin, 1956), VI, 93. In an informative article, "Conrad Beissel and Thomas Mann," *AGR*, XXVI (1959-60), 24-25 and 38, Andres Briner identifies as Mann's factual sources for his account of Beissel a letter by Jacob Duche, an Anglican priest, written in 1771, and William Fahnestock's "An Historical Sketch of Ephrata" in *Hazard's Register of Pennsylvania*, XV, 11. Both sources describe the moving effect of Beissel's music on the listener.

For an extensive analysis of Beissel's function as a character in Mann's novel, see Theodor Karst, "Johann Conrad Beissel in Thomas Manns Roman 'Doktor Faustus,'" *Jahrbuch der deutschen Schillergesellschaft*, XII (1968), 543-585.

²Walter C. Klein, *Johann Conrad Beissel: Mystic and Martinet* (Philadelphia, 1942), p. 2. Hereafter cited as Klein.

³Klein, p. 26,

⁴Klein, p. 27.

⁵Klein, p. 29.

⁶Klein, p. 34.

⁷Klein, pp. 40-41; 198.

⁸Oswald Seidensticker, *Bilder aus der deutsch-pennsylvanischen Geschichte, Geschichtsblätter, Bilder und Mittheilungen aus dem Leben der Deutschen in Amerika*, II, ed. Carl Schurz, 2nd ed. (New York, 1886), p. 188. Hereafter cited as Seidensticker.

⁹Seidensticker, p. 194.

¹⁰John F. Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania, The Olden Time...*, II (Philadelphia, 1850 ed.), p. 110. The later edition was not available.

¹¹Conrad Beissel, *Jacobs Kampff- und Ritter-Platz...* (Philadelphia, 1736), p. 13, no. 5, st. 1. Hereafter cited as *JK*. According to Eugene E. Doll and Anneliese M. Funke, *The Ephrata Cloisters: An Annotated Bibliography* (Philadelphia, 1944), p. 41, no. 182, Julius Sachse claims that Beissel is responsible for twenty-eight of the thirty-two hymns in the collection.

¹²*JK*, p. 13, no. 5, st. 4.

¹³Conrad Beissel, *Das Gesang der einsamen und verlassenen Turteltaube Nemlich der Christlichen Kirche...* (Ephrata, 1747), p. 7, no. 7, st. 4. Hereafter cited as *TT*. According to Doll, p. 92, no. 374, two-thirds of the hymns in the *Turteltaube* are by Beissel, the remaining hymns having been contributed by sixteen brothers and twenty-three sisters. The style and thematic development of hymn no. 7 indicate Beissel's authorship.

¹⁴Conrad Beissel, "Theosophische Gedichte," in *Erster Teil der Theosophischen Lectionen...* (Ephrata, 1752), p. 407, no. 39. Hereafter cited as *TG*. Doll, p. 96, no. 380, says the "Theosophische Gedichte" are to be attributed to Beissel.

¹⁵Conrad Beissel, *Vorspiel der Neuen-welt. Welches sich in der letzten Abendroethe als ein paradisischer Lichtes-glanz unter den Kindern Gottes hervor gethan...* (Philadelphia, 1732), p. 18, no. 8, st. 2. Hereafter cited as *Vorspiel*. The authorship of hymn no. 8 is uncertain, but the mystical images and concepts it contains suggest that it may have been Beissel's.

¹⁶*TT*, p. 15, no. 18, st. 3. The style of the hymn indicates Beissel's authorship.

¹⁷*TT*, p. 4, no. 5, st. 1. Again, authorship is uncertain, but the didactic tone points to Beissel.

¹⁸*TG*, p. 403, no. 25.

¹⁹*TG*, p. 401, no. 18.

²⁰*TG*, p. 409, no. 49.

²¹*TG*, p. 412, no. 60.

²²*TG*, p. 418, no. 82.

²³*TT*, p. 1, no. 1, st. 1. Authorship is uncertain, but the progression of thought and feeling indicates Beissel. Moreover, it was customary to print Beissel's hymns first in the Ephrata hymnals out of deference to his position before printing those of the other brothers and sisters.

²⁴*TT*, p. 1, no. 1, st. 4.

²⁵*TT*, p. 1, no. 1, st. 5.

²⁶*TT*, p. 1, no. 1, st. 6.

²⁷Conrad Beissel, "Die 1. Gemüts-Bewegung," *Urständliche und Erfahrungsvolle Hohe Zeugnisse Wie man zum Geistlichen Leben gelangen möge* (Ephrata, 1745), p. 2. Hereafter cited as *UZ*.

²⁸*TT*, pp. 1-2, no. 1, st. 8.

²⁹*TT*, p. 2, no. 1, st. 10.

³⁰Conrad Beissel, *Paradisisches Wunderspiel, Welches sich... als ein Vorspiel der neuen Welt hervorgethan...* (Ephrata, 1766), p. 1997, no. 298, st. 1. Hereafter cited as *PW*. The first section consists of 441 hymns by Beissel.

³¹*PW*, pp. 197-198, no. 289, st. 4.

³²*PW*, p. 198, no. 298, st. 5.

³³Klein, pp. 188-197.

³⁴E. Ernest Stoeffler, *Mysticism in the German Devotional Literature of Colonial Pennsylvania*, The Pennsylvania German Folklore Society, 14 (Allentown, 1949), pp. 43-65. Hereafter cited as Stoeffler.

³⁵Rufus M. Jones, *Spiritual Reformers in the 16th & 17th Centuries* (London, 1928), pp. 174-175. Hereafter cited as Jones.

³⁶Stoeffler, pp. 50-51.

³⁷*PW*, p. 224, no. 331, st. 10.

³⁸*PW*, p. 194, no. 293, st. 1.

³⁹Conrad Beissel, *Mystische und sehr geheyme Sprueche, Welche in der Himlischen schule des heiligen geistes erlernet...* (Philadelphia, 1730), p. 19, no. 53. Hereafter cited as *MS*.

⁴⁰John Joseph Stoudt, *Consider the Lilies How They Grow*, The Pennsylvania German Folklore Society, II (Allentown, 1937), pp. 127-131. Hereafter cited as *Lilies*.

⁴¹Hans Lassen Martensen, *Jacob Böhme: His Life and Teaching, or Studies in Theosophy*, trans. T. Rhys Evans (London, 1885), p. 234. Hereafter cited as Martensen.

⁴²Martensen, p. 265.

⁴³Seidensticker, p. 222.

⁴⁴Conrad Beissel, "Vorrede über die Sing-Arbeit," in *TT*, 2nd preface, pp. viii-xxi. This is Beissel's treatise on the basic rules of harmony peculiar to the choral music of the cloister.

⁴⁵*PW*, p. 13, no. 16, st. 1.

⁴⁶*PW*, p. 6, no. 7, st. 1.

⁴⁷*TT*, p. 8, no. 9, st. 4.

⁴⁸John Joseph Stoudt, *Pennsylvania German Poetry 1685-1830*, The Pennsylvania German Folklore Society, XX (Allentown, 1955), lxx-lxvi. Stoudt mentions the connection between Silesius' *Cherubinischer Wandersmann* and Beissel's Alexandrine couplets, but does not pursue the subject.

⁴⁹Angelus Silesius, *Sämtliche Poetische Werke*, ed. Hans Ludwig Held, 2nd ed. (Munich, 1924), III, bk. 1, 15, no. 27. Hereafter cited as Silesius. Silesius is abbreviated "S." and Beissel "B." to save space.

⁵⁰*MS*, p. 17, no. 35.

⁵¹Silesius, bk. 1, 24, no. 93.

⁵²*MS*, p. 15, no. 8.

⁵³Silesius, bk. 2, 65, no. 61.

⁵⁴*MS*, p. 17, no. 38.

⁵⁵Silesius, bk. 5, 188, no. 80.

⁵⁶*MS*, p. 15, no. 11.

⁵⁷Silesius, bk. 5, 189, no. 86.

⁵⁸*MS*, p. 18, no. 41.

⁵⁹Silesius, bk. 1, 12, no. 8.

⁶⁰*MS*, p. 15, no. 13.

⁶¹Jones, p. 178. Jones discusses Böhme's concept of the light and dark worlds: individual desires and aims sever a being from the totality of divine goodness, thereby creating the realm of darkness. This idea seems to conform closely to Beissel's notion of *Finsternis* in his theosophical prose and his notion of the evil *Ich* or *Mein* in his poetry.

⁶²Klein, p. 201.

⁶³Stoeffler, p. 40.

⁶⁴*Lilies*, p. 127.

⁶⁵Klein, p. 199.

⁶⁶Stoeffler, p. 42.

⁶⁷Klein, pp. 30-31.

⁶⁸*The Encyclopedia Americana* (New York, 1963 ed.), XXI, 734-735.

⁶⁹Stoeffler, pp. 39; 48-49.

⁷⁰Seidensticker, p. 176.

⁷¹Brothers Lamech and Agrippa, *Chronicon Ephratense, Enthaltend den Lebens-Lauf des ehrwürdigen Vaters in Christo Friedsam Gottrecht* [Beissel], *Weyland Stiffers und Vorstehers des geistl. Ordens der Einsamen in Ephrata . . .* (Ephrata, 1786), p. 11. According to Doll, p. 117, no. 427, the *Chronicon Ephratense* contains a history of the Ephrata community of Seventh-Day Baptists since its foundation, including the background, customs, struggles, and accomplishments of the brothers and sisters, as well as the biography of the founder, "Friedsam Gottrecht." It is the chief source of information on life in the cloister and was used extensively by both Klein and Seidensticker.

⁷²Julius Friedrich Sachse, *The German Pietists of Provincial Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1895), p. 198. Hereafter cited as Sachse.

⁷³Sachse, pp. 4-5; 7. Sachse makes much of Rosicrucian mysticism in Beissel's thinking and in the religious ceremonies at Ephrata, but, unfortunately for us, he neglects to support his assertions with documented evidence.

⁷⁴Conrad Beissel, "Die V. Theosophische Epistel," in *UZ*, p. 98.

⁷⁵In *Lilies* Stoudt traces the history of lily-symbolism in Christian mysticism beginning with the Old Testament. On pp. 113-122 he quotes numerous passages from Böhme's writings in English translation (Bath, 1775 ed.) to illustrate the meaning of the lily for Böhme: essentially, it is the true reflection of God since it is an image of the new-born or regenerated soul. It is quite possible that the stimulus for Beissel's use of this symbol in his fifth theosophical epistle is to be found in Böhme.

⁷⁶See Ernst Robert Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*, 4th ed. (Bern and Munich, 1963), pp. 38-40.

⁷⁷"Vorrede," *PW*, p. 5.

⁷⁸*Vorspiel*, p. 5, no. 1, st. 1. Beissel is most likely the author of all seven poems in section one of the *Vorspiel*.

⁷⁹*Vorspiel*, p. 6, no. 1, st. 7.

⁸⁰*Vorspiel*, p. 7, no. 2, st. 1.

⁸¹*Vorspiel*, p. 8, no. 2, st. 3.

⁸²*Vorspiel*, p. 13, no. 5, st. 1.

⁸³*Vorspiel*, p. 13, no. 5, st. 2.

⁸⁴*Vorspiel*, p. 13, no. 5, st. 4.

⁸⁵*Vorspiel*, p. 14, no. 5, st. 10.