

Henry Suso's Use of the Beautiful

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If one wished to find a medieval figure to advance contemporary conversations about the place of beauty in theology, the Rhineland mystics would not immediately suggest themselves. Known for their apophatic mysticism and Neoplatonic leanings, Eckhart, Tauler, and Suso seem unlikely candidates for anything more than an historical investigation into their views on beauty and their impact on their cultural milieu. However, Henry Suso presents an interesting case because he adopted much of the Eckhartian system and yet crafted rich, beautiful images to help him spread the very system that repudiated them. These images are especially present in Suso's *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom* (hereafter *LBEW*) and autobiographical *Life of the Servant* (hereafter *Life*), which will provide most of my textual evidence. In this essay, I argue that Suso's use of images presents one possible model for contemporary theology in using beauty to evangelize, even if this model would need to be purified of a philosophy that distrusts materiality.

I. Suso's Neoplatonic underpinnings

Born in Constance in modern day Germany in 1295¹ or 1300,² Suso entered the Dominican monastery at a young age and embarked on a spiritual journey that earned him a reputation for mystical holiness and ultimately beatification. During his time as a student, he came under the influence of Meister Eckhart, whose ideas dominated the German mystical

¹ Charlotte C. Radler. "Meister Eckhart, Johannes Tauler, and Henry Suso." *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Julia A. Lamm (Central Hoboken: J. Wiley, 2013) ProQuest Ebook, 351.

² James Midgley Clark, *The Great German Mystics: Eckhart, Tauler and Suso* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1949) Google Books, 55.

tradition. This tradition emphasized Neoplatonic themes that include “the emanation and return of all things in relation to the One...[and] the virtual and higher reality of all things in the mind of God (corresponding to Plato’s realm of ideas).”³ While Eckhart and the other German mystics did not use all of Pseudo-Dionysius’ ideas (nor did any of the medieval or post-medieval admirers),⁴ the concepts of emanation and return and the sense that true beauty is in the mind of God are particularly relevant to our theme. In *The Divine Names*, Pseudo-Dionysius writes of God as “Beauty,” which is “beautiful beyond being,” “gives beauty from itself in a manner appropriate to each,” and “calls all to itself.”⁵ He also emphasizes the participative character of created beauty: “beauty is said to be the participating in the beauty producing cause of all that is beautiful.”⁶ We will find this stress on participation and the “call” from God-Beauty in Suso, but before turning to his works, we should consider the way Eckhart presents these Dionysian themes.

Whether Meister Eckhart directly taught Suso is unclear,⁷ but Eckhart’s acquaintance and influence is certain. Suso’s *Little Book of Truth* (hereafter *LBT*), a philosophical treatise, recasts much of Eckhart’s thought in dialogue form, while avoiding or recasting those ideas that caused Eckhart to be censured.⁸ Thus it is fitting to examine how Eckhart incorporates Neoplatonic thought, since Eckhart influenced Suso’s writing from the first.

³ Randall Studstill, “Doctrine and Practice In German Mysticism,” *The Unity of Mystical Traditions : The Transformation of Consciousness in Tibetan and German Mysticism* (Leiden: BRILL, 2005). ProQuest Ebook Central, 176.

⁴ Alexander Golitzin, “Dionysius Areopagita: A Christian Mysticism?” *Pro Ecclesia*, 12, no. 2 (2003): 162.

⁵ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names, The Divine Names and Mystical Theology* (Milwaukee, Wisc: Marquette University Press, 1980) IV.7, 138.

⁶ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 138.

⁷ Benedict Ashley claims that Eckhart taught Suso at Cologne beginning in 1324, based on the 1295 birthdate. However, if we were to use the timeframes given in Suso’s autobiography and the 1300 birthday, it would have been impossible for Eckhart to teach Suso directly. See Benedict M. Ashley, *The Dominicans*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009) 72; and Clark, *The Great German Mystics*, 57.

⁸ Ashley, *The Dominicans*, 73.

As in Pseudo-Dionysius' work, Eckhart sees the Divine Beauty as the source and end of all beautiful created things, and emphasizes the participative aspect to the point of near-complete apophaticism regarding God. He has an "understanding of reality according to which everything begins and ends with the One, which is the First and Final Cause and in its richness diffuses itself in creation."⁹ This diffuse creation is in "evanescent diaspora" and completely "ephemeral."¹⁰ In themselves, creatures are essentially nothing, because their foundation of being is in God.¹¹ With this view of creatures, it should not surprise us that Eckhart emphasized apophatic over kataphatic approaches, counseled silence, and practiced a mystical prayer in which "no creatures or images or even a sense of self may enter."¹² Consequently, Randall Studstill proposes this apophatic "emptying of consciousness" or "unknowing" as "the definitive aspect of German contemplation." One must repudiate images and concepts to attain this higher mystical experience.¹³ With this background in mind, let us turn to Suso and see how he appropriates the Eckhartian recasting of Neoplatonic themes.

Suso echoes the Neoplatonic/Eckhartian emphasis on the virtual existence of all things in God,¹⁴ such that he calls each soul to "hasten to the outflowing streams of these sweet teachings and learn to see them according to their source where they existed alive and in attractive beauty" before being emanated.¹⁵ Not only concepts emanate, but creatures: Suso writes that when he "look[s] at attractive living forms or see pleasing creatures, they say to [his] heart, 'Oh, look how very pleasing he is from whom we flowed forth, from whom all beauty comes!'"¹⁶ It follows that

⁹ Radler, "Meister Eckhart," 341.

¹⁰ Radler, "Meister Eckhart," 342.

¹¹ Studstill, "Doctrine and Practice," 200.

¹² Radler, "Meister Eckhart," 343.

¹³ Studstill, "Doctrine and Practice," 210.

¹⁴ Studstill, "Doctrine and Practice," 198.

¹⁵ Suso, "Little Book of Eternal Wisdom," prologue, 209.

¹⁶ Henry Suso, "Little Book of Eternal Wisdom," *Henry Suso: The Exemplar, with Two German Sermons*. The Classics of Western Spirituality, ed. and trans. Frank Tobin (New York: Paulist, 1989) chap. 24, 286.

Suso considers God the absolute highest and loveliest, and this ecstatic praise leads him to say, “Lord, I do not see or hear or feel my soul in all that exists without it finding each thing a thousand times more desirable in you, my Beloved.”¹⁷ If that formulation is unclear, leaving open the possibility that the lovely things are still the focus of the beholding, instead of God, in another place “the Servant” complains:

Everything in this world that appears lovable and seems valuable turns out to be deceptive as soon as one begins to know it intimately. Lord, wherever I have set my eyes, I always found a *nisi* and an “if it were not for this.” If something had a beautiful form, it lacked grace. If it was beautiful and desirable, it lacked refinement. And if it had this, too, I always found something within and without, that repelled the overtures of my heart...But you, Beauty boundlessly attractive, Grace wedded to form, Word joined to melody, Nobility to virtue...something I never found on earth: a proper balance satisfying the capabilities, capacities, and the longing of the will of a truly loving heart.¹⁸

This passage clearly indicates a relative disgust for created beauty, even the beauties of nature, which Neoplatonism tended to value.¹⁹ What value would art have in this scheme? Even less, it seems. However, we should note at this juncture that Suso only despises the created things because they cannot satiate his fathomless desires, which implies that he had been asking too much of created beauties to begin with. In other words, the fault is with the subject, not the beautiful objects. It is also important to note that Suso wrote his *LBEW* as a dialogue between Eternal Wisdom and various subjects, none of which he clearly identifies as Suso himself. Therefore, while the words of the “Servant” give the reader an idea of Suso’s thought, a more nuanced reading may be possible. For now, we can conclude that Suso adopted wholeheartedly the Eckhartian/Neoplatonic idea of emanation and confidence that “Whoever on earth

¹⁷ Suso, “Little Book of Eternal Wisdom,” chap. 23, 279.

¹⁸ Suso, “Little Book of Eternal Wisdom,” chap. 7, 231.

¹⁹ William Ralph Inge, “Lecture VIII,” *Christian Mysticism*, reformatted from *The Bampton Lectures, 1899 Considered in Eight Lectures Delivered before the University of Oxford*, 2005, Project Gutenberg.

experiences a single drop of me [God] will find all the joy and pleasure of this world to be bitter, all possessions and honor to be worthless trash.”²⁰

Suso also adopts the apophatic tendencies in Eckhart’s system, although it is difficult to parse out what comes directly from Eckhart and what comes from the monastic tradition. After all, Suso himself spent about ten years in strict seclusion and austerity in his cell and chapel, the latter of which he had painted with images and sayings of the Desert Fathers.²¹ He has Eternal Wisdom counsel the Servant to stay apart from all men and stay “free of all images coming from outside.”²² However, it does not matter if this tendency came via Eckhart or not because of the Neoplatonic influence on the desert fathers themselves. Whatever its provenance, the apophatic tendency shines through in Suso’s parting counsel to his spiritual daughter, Elsbeth Stagel, when he follows an analogy for the Trinity with the following: “Noble daughter, now note that all these images I have developed, and these thoughts distorted by images I have explained, are as far removed from the truth, which is beyond images and as unlike them, as a black Moor is unlike the beautiful sun.”²³ The interesting difference between Suso’s approach in this passage and what Eckhart’s doctrine is that Suso attempts to use images and ultimately admits their inadequacy, while Eckhart avoids extended images and counsels, “We should worship God without the help of comparisons, and love him without material images, and enjoy him without a sense of ownership.”²⁴

In fact, despite clearly espousing Neoplatonic tendencies and echoing Eckhart in a variety of passages, Suso does more than parrot his master. He clearly counteracts, for example,

²⁰ Suso, “Little Book of Eternal Wisdom,” chap. 7, 221.

²¹ Henry Suso, *The Life of the Servant, Henry Suso: The Exemplar, with Two German Sermons*. The Classics of Western Spirituality, ed. and trans. Frank Tobin (New York: Paulist, 1989), chap 35, 137.

²² Suso, “Little Book of Eternal Wisdom,” chap. 22, 275.

²³ Suso, *Life*, chap. 53, 203.

²⁴ Meister Eckhart, “The Poor in Spirit,” *Life of the Spirit* 7, no. 76 (1952), JSTOR, 144.

Eckhart's insistence that the soul in God is completely absorbed and loses its ontological distinction.²⁵ In addition, while he considers knowledge of the "exalted Godhead" an advancement over simply being concerned with the "sweet humanity" of Christ,²⁶ he nevertheless places a much stronger emphasis on Christ's body than Eckhart or Tauler.²⁷ As we will see, the beauty of Christ's body is a particular preoccupation that will ultimately fit into his evangelistic style.

II. The Beauty of Christ's Body

The best introduction for Suso's complex preoccupation with Christ's beauty is the one he gives in his *Life*. By his account, his conversion from lukewarm religious to fervent lover of Christ begins with an attraction and spiritual marriage to Wisdom as described in the Wisdom literature read at the monastic meals.²⁸ He begins his *LBEW*: "I have loved her and sought her out from my youth, and have chosen her for my bride."²⁹ Suso unabashedly describes Christ – in other places clearly identified as the Eternal Wisdom he loves – as a lovely woman. Following the presentation of Wisdom in scripture "as an agreeable beloved who gets herself up in finery to please male inclinations,"³⁰ Suso finds himself with a "love-crazed spirit."³¹ While convincing himself to pursue Wisdom whatever the cost, he prays, "O God, if I might just catch a glimpse of my dear one! If I could just once talk with her! What must my beloved look like if she has so many delightful things hidden within her?"³² This feminization is understandable for two

²⁵ Studstill, "Doctrine and Practice," 222.

²⁶ Suso, "Little Book of Eternal Wisdom," chap. 9, 237.

²⁷ Radler, "Meister Eckhart," 352.

²⁸ Suso, *Life*, chap. 3, 67-70.

²⁹ Wis. 8:2 quoted in Suso, "Little Book of Eternal Wisdom," chap. 1, 211.

³⁰ Suso, *Life*, chap. 3, 67.

³¹ Suso, *Life*, chap. 3, 67.

³² Suso, *Life*, chap. 3, 69.

reasons. First, in the preface to *LBEW*, Suso writes that “As a teacher should, he [the author] takes on the roles of all persons, now speaking as a sinner, now as someone perfect, now as an example of the loving soul...”³³ and so on. In other words, Suso readily flips from a masculine persona who loves Lady Wisdom to a feminine persona who loves Christ Crucified *for didactic reasons*. In addition, as Barbara Newman points out, this tendency to feminize Christ is amplified in *The Clock of Wisdom*, a Latin rewrite of *LBEW* that, unlike the original meant for nuns, he aimed at priests and male religious.³⁴ Suso’s willingness to reimagine Christ (and himself as subject³⁵) in such a variety of images ironically underscores the Neoplatonic underpinnings, and one could even say with Charlotte Radler, echoing Newman, that “This fluid and ambiguous gendering signals a refusal to reify Wisdom.”³⁶

One could say this refusal to “reify” also tinges many of the passages on Christ Crucified. In some passages, he considers Christ’s suffering didactically, as when he describes Eternal Wisdom as a rainbow, “red, green and yellow” from his bruises, and has Christ say to the Servant, “The fall of your nature shall make me fresh again. Your willingly endured hardships shall provide a bed for my weary back.”³⁷ This passage uses Christ’s suffering beauty as a motivator instead of presenting it as beautiful in itself. In other passages, His humanity is secondary, as when Suso has Mary say of her Son, “His beautiful, friendly humanity was for me a joy to look upon; his revered divinity was a delight for my eyes.”³⁸ This passage clearly

³³ Suso, “Little Book of Eternal Wisdom,” prologue, 208.

³⁴ Barbara Newman. “Gender.” *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Julia A. Lamm (Central Hoboken: J. Wiley, 2013) ProQuest Ebook, 47.

³⁵ See Suso, “Little Book of Eternal Wisdom,” chap. 5, 219-220 for an example of Suso writing in the persona of a bride. For a discussion of how Suso illustrates himself in a feminine manner in order to present himself as an exemplar to women, see Jeffrey Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists: The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 64-65 and 178.

³⁶ Radler, “Meister Eckhart,” 352

³⁷ Suso, “Little Book of Eternal Wisdom,” chap. 5, 222.

³⁸ Suso, “Little Book of Eternal Wisdom,” chap.17, 260.

distinguishes between the flesh of Christ and his divinity, with an emphasis on the immaterial consolations and suffering Mary experienced. In another passage, he asks the Father to “Look at his fair body, so rosy-red and martyred, and forget your anger against me.”³⁹ Notice here that the beauty of Christ’s body is the first consideration, and secondarily suffering, which is the cause of that beauty. However, in another passage, Suso writes, “He was then given the power, and he understood that he was to complete it (the book), and that God intended to clothe in eternal splendor, with a rose-colored garment beautifully fashioned from his wounds, those who spent their time with this book.”⁴⁰ Paralleling the “rose-colored garment” of Christ’s wounds with the eternal beauty of the elect clarifies that the original image is metaphorical. Are we then to conclude that Suso’s ecstatic praise of Christ’s body is merely part of the overall didactic function of his works?

Two other images – those of Mary and the IHS he carved into his own flesh – suggest that we should in fact view the aforementioned passages extolling Christ’s humanity primarily as functional images pointing to immaterial realities. While his descriptions of Mary often focus on her spiritual beauty, such as when Suso exclaims, “you who surpass red roses and all lilies....What abundant favor in his eyes does your delicate, charming beauty have, surpassing that of all humanity, and in comparison with which all beauty is extinguished like the light of a glowworm in the glaring radiance of the sun,”⁴¹ in at least one passage he focuses more on her body. In the following passage, he presents Mary to the Eternal Wisdom:

... I offer before your eyes the pure, tender, beloved Mother as well. O kind and beautiful Wisdom, now look at her. See those kind eyes that often looked upon you so lovingly. Look at those beautiful cheeks that she so often pressed so caressingly to your small face. Oh, see that sweet mouth that often covered you with kisses so tenderly.⁴²

³⁹ Suso, “Little Book of Eternal Wisdom,” chap. 5, 221.

⁴⁰ Suso, “Little Book of Eternal Wisdom,” prologue, 209.

⁴¹ Suso, “Little Book of Eternal Wisdom,” chap. 16, 258.

⁴² Suso, “Little Book of Eternal Wisdom,” chap. 16, 258-259.

On first reading, Mary's body and physical beauty are primary, but Suso cannot help but associate some of these descriptions with actions that flow from her love, tenderness, and purity. Still, the appreciation for her physical body is clearly there. He does something similar when describing the scar on his chest that he caused by carving IHS over his heart in his first fervor. He writes that once, while in ecstasy, he saw a vision in which a golden cross filled with precious gems appeared over the wound, and light glowed out so that "no matter how much he hid it" so it would not shine in the dark, "nothing could diminish its powerful beauty."⁴³ While Suso is clearly teaching veneration for the Holy Name and willingness to suffer pain for Christ in this passage, the tie to the physical world is unmistakable. The wound (like the crucifixion) while not beautiful in itself, is somehow transfigured by the love that caused it so that it radiates beauty.

III. Suso as Image-Builder

Thus far, we have considered the Neoplatonic influence on Suso's work and the way even his strongest images betray that influence, such that he tends to present beauty in a functional way. In this section and the next, I will argue that Suso goes beyond the Neoplatonic framework of his milieu and models how beauty and images can be used for evangelization and catechesis, even if today we might want to value beauty for more than just its functionality.

First, I will consider the ways in which Suso was an image-builder. Suso did more than just speak effectively: he built a literary style that readers might perceive as flowery now but was, at the time, a significant accomplishment. Despite the fact that he preferred Latin and thought his words, when set on parchment and written in German, would "somehow grow cold

⁴³ Suso, *Life*, chap. 4, 71.

and lose their color, like a plucked rose,”⁴⁴ there are more extant manuscripts of his *Exemplar* than any other devotional work of late medieval Germany except for the *Imitation of Christ*.⁴⁵ Unlike other mystics, he always finds a way to describe his experiences in “glowing and vivid language.”⁴⁶ As Frank Tobin points out, the dialogue format for his *LBEW* was not new, nor were some of his images. But he presents, for example, the Hound of Heaven motif at the beginning of the *LBEW* with a new and fresh intensity, using “his vivid imagination to recreate the story of the passion and the feelings of the two chief participants.”⁴⁷ The fact that Suso pays such attention to language, building rich images, indicates that he believed in the power of beautiful words to move hearts and minds. The fact that his *Exemplar* (the collection he edited of his *Life*, *LBEW*, *LBT*, and some letters) enjoyed such popularity suggests that he was right.

In the *Life*, Suso builds even richer descriptions when he describes the visions of the Servant. For example, he describes a vision of Mary in which she steps forward and asks for the verse “O you delicate rose of summer,” resulting in angelic accompaniment that sounded, “as though all the strings of the world were being played.”⁴⁸ In another passage, he finds himself in a beautiful green meadow with a heavenly escort. A song fills his soul “so joyously that it chased away all mere sense impressions by its overwhelming, sweet sound....When the song was over, a picture [of Mary and the Christ child] was put before him in which one wanted to teach him the song, so that he might not forget it.”⁴⁹ Notice that he makes auditory imagery primary and

⁴⁴ Suso, “Little Book of Eternal Wisdom,” prologue, 209. See also T p. 196

⁴⁵ Radler, “Meister Eckhart,” 351.

⁴⁶ William Ralph Inge, “Practical and Devotional Mysticism.” *Christian Mysticism* reformatted from *The Bampton Lectures, 1899 Considered in Eight Lectures Delivered before the University of Oxford*, 2005, Project Gutenberg.

⁴⁷ Frank Tobin, “Introduction,” *Henry Suso: The Exemplar, with Two German Sermons*. The Classics of Western Spirituality, ed. and trans. Frank Tobin (New York: Paulist, 1989) 36.

⁴⁸ Suso, *Life*, chap. 36, 143.

⁴⁹ Suso, *Life*, chap. 41, 165.

downplays the physical senses overall. Again, Suso uses the beauty of these scenes to advance the content he wishes to impart.

It is important to note the contribution of Elsbeth Stigel, Suso's spiritual daughter, who collected the stories of his life and presented them to him in his old age. It would be tempting to dismiss the *Life* because it could be the result of Stigel's authorship and not Suso's. However, Tobin argues convincingly that we should consider Suso, who edited the *Exemplar* carefully, a true author of the work.⁵⁰ In the prologue to the *Exemplar*, Suso writes that he "demonstrates in a veiled manner how a beginner should order his inner and outer self."⁵¹ According to Bernard McGinn, the presentation is made in an "image-giving manner" (*bildgebender wise*) that allows for literary license,⁵² and Tobin agrees with other scholars that the work should be understood at least as much hagiography as biography.⁵³ Tobin translates *bildgebender wise* as "veiled manner" because of the addition of the adverb *togenlich*, which he says causes ambivalence that suggest a "certain lack of factuality" in the *Life*.⁵⁴ If not all of the visions are factual descriptions, it means that Suso is not simply a mystic relating what happened to him in prayer, but also an artist who deliberately crafts an aesthetic experience for his readers.

The aesthetic experience Suso constructs is not limited to his literary style or choice of verbalized images. As McGinn points out, Suso became a mystical iconographer, which made him unusual if not unique among his contemporaries.⁵⁵ Suso reports that as a young man "he had

⁵⁰ Frank Tobin, "Henry Suso and Elsbeth Stigel: Was the Vita a Cooperative Effort?" *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and their Interpreters*, ed. Catherine Mooney (Philadelphia, Pa: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), JSTOR Ebooks.

⁵¹ Henry Suso, "Prologue," *The Life of the Servant, Henry Suso: The Exemplar, with Two German Sermons*. The Classics of Western Spirituality, ed. and trans. Frank Tobin (New York: Paulist, 1989), 57.

⁵² Bernard McGinn, "Henry Suso's Spiritual Philosophy," *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany (1300-1500)* (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co., 2005) 203.

⁵³ See discussion in Tobin, "Introduction," 40-42.

⁵⁴ Tobin, "Henry Suso and Elsbeth," 122-123.

⁵⁵ McGinn, "Henry Suso's Spiritual Philosophy," 208.

had eternal Wisdom painted on parchment...surpassing in her lovely beauty and pleasing form the beauty of all creatures....He carried this lovely image around with him all the years of study...gazing at it lovingly with longing in his heart.”⁵⁶ He also commissioned paintings of the desert fathers and their sayings in the chapel,⁵⁷ and, most notably, illustrated his own manuscript of the *Exemplar* in his last years. While we do not have original manuscripts, several of the oldest copies bear witness to the originals,⁵⁸ and at least one work has explored his influence on medieval art.⁵⁹ While Suso knows the limitations of images as of words, they are essential to communicate his message.⁶⁰ All these facts support the idea that even though Suso espoused a Neoplatonic distrust of images in some places, he frequently and artistically employed images to convey his message, which paradoxically included that distrust. As McGinn points out, sometimes Suso’s attempts at a synthesis of several strands of late medieval German mysticism do not always resolve the tension between the disparate elements.⁶¹

We must address one particular aspect of Suso’s use of images: does he think they are only suitable for beginners? When describing his image of Eternal Wisdom, for example, he mentions it and “other models he had as objects of devotion, as is proper for him and other beginners.”⁶² Similarly, in the prologue to the *LBEW*, he writes, “The thoughts expressed here are simple; their expression simpler still, because they come forth from a simple soul and are spoken to simple people who still have failings to rid themselves of.”⁶³ If Suso thought images dispensable once one advanced in the spiritual life, it would be consonant with his statement in

⁵⁶ Suso, *Life*, chap. 35, 137.

⁵⁷ Suso, *Life*, chap. 35, 137.

⁵⁸ Clark, *The Great German Mystics*, 72

⁵⁹ Clark references Ursula Weyman, *Die Seusesche Mystik und ihre Wirkung auf die bildende Kunst*, 1938, but I cannot gain access to this book. See Clark, *The Great German Mystics*, 72.

⁶⁰ McGinn, “Henry Suso’s Spiritual Philosophy,” 209.

⁶¹ McGinn, “Henry Suso’s Spiritual Philosophy,” 196.

⁶² Suso, *Life*, chap. 35, 137.

⁶³ Suso, “Little Book of Eternal Wisdom,” prologue, 208.

the *LBT* in reference to the “nothing” which is God: “we must understand it apart from any illuminating form or image because no understanding based on images and forms can grasp it.”⁶⁴ Suso seems to contradict himself in the *LBEW*, where he has the Eternal Wisdom say, “Look, constant contemplation of my dear suffering turns a simple person into a highly learned master. It is a living book where one discovers all things...What great wisdom and grace he can gain, comfort and sweetness, the loss of all his faults and my continual presence!”⁶⁵ However, if we understand the contemplation of Christ’s sufferings to move from a beginning phase more focused on his physical suffering and beauty to a higher phase concentrated on spiritual suffering and beauty, there is no contradiction. We must conclude that Suso considers images most suitable for beginners, though he includes himself as a beginner and maintains that self-designation even when he is an old friar editing his *Exemplar*.

IV. How he used images to instruct

While Suso used beautiful images for a variety of evangelical purposes, two examples will suffice. First, Suso maintains that suffering with Christ is a way to praise God and is more pleasing than self-inflicted penances or other means of growing spiritually. He uses the image of red roses and describes a vision in which a rose grows in the palm of his hands to match the “roses” or wounds on Christ’s hands and feet.⁶⁶ The crown of roses became, for Suso, an emblematic way of depicting himself as someone who had embraced the way of suffering and detachment.⁶⁷ By first depicting Christ as the fair one who suffers, and then presenting himself as

⁶⁴ Henry Suso, “Little Book of Truth,” *Henry Suso: The Exemplar, with Two German Sermons*, The Classics of Western Spirituality, ed. and trans. Frank Tobin (New York: Paulist, 1980) chap. 5, 319.

⁶⁵ Suso, “Little Book of Eternal Wisdom,” chap. 14, 250-251.

⁶⁶ Suso, *Life*, chap. 23, 107.

⁶⁷ See Suso, *Life*, chap. 23, 106; and Jeffrey Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, 64.

a model in suffering, he makes himself an exemplar patterned after Christ the Exemplar, whom he often describes in terms of flowers. For example, he calls Christ “delicate Flower of the field”⁶⁸ and has Eternal Wisdom describe himself as “finely arrayed...with a flowery mix of colors of fresh flowers, with red roses, white lilies, pretty violets and flowers of all kinds....”⁶⁹ In other words, he presents a series of images meant to arouse desire in order to make the necessity of Christian suffering more palatable and desirable to his audience. This emphasis on suffering/detachment/serenity (*gelassenheit*) is important to the Rhineland mystics as a whole,⁷⁰ but Suso is the one who uses beautiful images to convey the message.

Suso also uses images to excite desire for Heaven and conversion in his audience. When describing Eternal Wisdom in the Godhead, Suso depicts Christ not only as adorned with beauty beyond all the flowers mentioned above, but also as singing with a “sweet mouth [that] surpasses the song of all the angels, the strains of all harps, all dulcet strings.”⁷¹ Heaven drips with beauty: it “glitters,” “glows,” and is “alive with the sparkle of red roses, white lilies, and all kinds of fresh flowers.”⁷² Suso describes the order of Heaven, from the Queen to the angels to the saints, and exclaims, “What a beautiful sight this is!”⁷³ Eternal Wisdom promises to clothe the bride “with the beautiful garment of the light of glory” and a “transfigured body, which shall shine seven times brighter than the sun.”⁷⁴ Surely, other medieval writers emphasized the beauty of heaven, but the collective weight of all of Suso’s images together show that he found them essential for motivating ongoing conversion and devotion.

⁶⁸ Suso, *Life*, chap. 7, 230.

⁶⁹ Suso, *Life*, chap. 7, 229.

⁷⁰ Studstill, “Doctrine and Practice,” 212.

⁷¹ Suso, “Little Book of Eternal Wisdom,” chap. 7, 229.

⁷² Suso, “Little Book of Eternal Wisdom,” chap. 12, 241.

⁷³ Suso, “Little Book of Eternal Wisdom,” chap. 12, 242.

⁷⁴ Suso, “Little Book of Eternal Wisdom,” chap. 12, 243.

This survey of Suso's use of beauty would not be complete without relating the story of how he prompted the conversion of a young nun in an uncloistered convent who had avoided Suso because of her attachment to wasting time with company. When friends arranged for her to be alone with Suso, he addressed her with the following words:

Alas, beautiful, gentle, chosen maiden of God, how long do you intend to leave your beautiful, lovely body and your sensitive, dear heart in the power of the hated devil? You really have been fashioned so very graceful in your whole being that it would be unfortunate if such an angelic, fine looking, noble person should be given to anyone as a beloved but to him who is noblest of all....No, dear lovely maiden, open your bright falcon-like eyes and think of the beautiful love that goes on forever....And so, angelic being, lovable, noble heart, direct your natural nobility to eternal nobility and give up your present way of life.⁷⁵

We must read Suso's decision to highlight the nun's physical beauty in the overall context of the *Life*, which requires that we reject both A) that Suso is attracted to her in an unseemly way and B) that Suso flatters her or speaks insincerely. The only viable option is that Suso really sees a connection between the physical beauty of the nun and the spiritual beauty that will result from her conversion. The fact that he makes this connection for this nun, or, at least, describes the conversation in this way, helps clarify his complex relationship with beauty. While physical beauty nearly always serves a didactic purpose in his writing, Suso is in no way insensible to it because he sees as a springboard to God.

V. Conclusion

While Suso clearly retains his Neoplatonic/Eckhartian apophaticism to the end, he also uses both written and visual imagery to convey theological truths. In this way, he can serve as a model for those who wish to evangelize. Today no less than in the late medieval period, people gravitate toward beauty. That beauty can be a pathway to a deep relationship with God. Of

⁷⁵ Suso, "Little Book of Eternal Wisdom," chap. 41, 163.

course, many theologians today would balk at the idea of thinking of beauty as merely useful. Instead, they might propose a more Aristotelian appreciation for the uselessness of the highest things. However, one could easily complement Suso's approach with a greater appreciation for the beautiful things in themselves and more confidence that their beauty can evangelize without explicit ties to a spiritual lesson.

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