

“Daz man bild mit bilde us tribe”: Imagery and Knowledge of God in Henry Suso’s *Exemplar*

By Ingrid Falque

“The soul never thinks without an image.”
Aristotle, *De Anima* 3.7, 431a16

Around 1362, a few years before his death, Henry Suso (or Heinrich Seuse, c. 1295–1366) started to write the *Exemplar*, the authorized compilation of his German works, preserved today in fourteen manuscripts, six of them illustrated with drawings.¹ In the prologue, the Dominican friar makes a point of revealing the purpose of this vast literary enterprise—the fear that his oeuvre would sink into oblivion or would be misinterpreted—as well as the content of his “four good books” (*vier guotú buechlu*). Interestingly, Suso also takes pains to unveil the strategies displayed in his texts in order to convey his teachings. Regarding the first book, the *Life of the Servant* (*Seuses Leben*), which he probably composed with the help of his spiritual daughter Elsbeth Stigel,² he writes, “The first book in its entirety describes in a manner that offers examples (*mit bildgebender wise*) the life of a beginner and demonstrates in a veiled manner how a beginner should order his inner and outer self according to God’s dear will. And, since good actions are, without a doubt, more instructive and uplift one’s heart somehow more

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¹ The four works of the compilation are the *Life of the Servant* (*Seuses Leben*), the *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom* (*Büchlein der Ewigen Weisheit*—hereafter BdEW), the *Little Book of Truth* (*Büchlein der Wahrheit*—hereafter BdW) and the *Little Book of Letters* (*Briefbüchlein*—hereafter BB). As an introduction to Suso’s life and oeuvre, see Kurt Ruh and Alois Haas, “Seuse, Heinrich OP,” in *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters: Verfasserlexikon*, ed. Kurt Ruh et al., 14 vols. (Berlin, 1992), 8: col. 1109–1129; Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Germany*, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* 4 (New York, 2005), 195–239. The standard edition of the *Exemplar* is Henry Suso, *Heinrich Seuse, Deutsche Schriften: Im Auftrag der Württembergischen Kommission für Landesgeschichte*, ed. Karl Bihlmeyer (Stuttgart, 1907; repr. 1961). All quotations are taken from this edition and cited by page and line number preceded by the title of the work concerned; the English translation used in this article is Henry Suso, *The Exemplar, with Two German Sermons*, ed. and trans. Frank Tobin (New York, 1989). All quotations from this translation will be cited by page number. In several passages, I have chosen to make some modifications to Tobin’s translation, which are indicated. I would like to thank Nigel Palmer for his help with several complex issues related to the translation.

² On Elsbeth’s intervention, see Frank Tobin, “Henry Suso and Elsbeth Stigel: Was the *Vita* a Cooperative Effort?,” in *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, ed. Catherine M. Mooney (Philadelphia, 1999), 118–35.

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than words alone, it describes by providing allegories (*mit glichnusgebender wise*) many holy deeds that really happened as depicted.”³

Suso introduces his “autohagiography”⁴ as a spiritual guide aimed at beginners, which takes the form of an exemplary account of the experiences of the Servant of Eternal Wisdom (*der diener*). He offers this life dedicated to God as a model that his readers should imitate, the first audience for the *Exemplar* being Dominican nuns, as suggested by the provenance of the preserved manuscripts.⁵ It is well known that the Servant is a fictive persona inspired by the life of the author himself.⁶ As Bernard McGinn points out, the Servant “cannot be totally identified with [Suso] in a simple way. Part of the fascination of Suso and his *Exemplar* rests in this studied ambiguity.”⁷ The recourse to the stylized figure of the Servant as a role model for his readers is not the only strategy employed by Suso to convey his teachings; there are many more. In this regard, the expressions used to describe this book—“mit bildegebender wise” and “mit glichnusgebender wise”—require particular analysis. These two expressions are verbal inventions by Suso, which can be literally translated as “in an image-giving/producing manner” and “in an allegory-giving/producing manner.” What does the Dominican mean when he states that the first book of his compilation describes the life of a beginner “mit bildegebender wise” and that the actions evoked in this book are related “mit glichnusgebender wise”?⁸

As Jeffrey Hamburger argues, the semantically complex expression “mit bildegebender wise” allows Suso to insist, from the very beginning of his work, on the crucial utility of resorting to and producing images in the course of contemplative

³ “Daz erst seit überal mit bildegebender wise von eim anvahenden lebene und git togenlich ze erkennen, in weler ordenhafti ein reht anvahender mensch sol den ussere und den inren menschen richten nah gotes aller liepsten willen. Und wan guotú werk ane allen zwivel me wisent und dem menschen neiswi reht sin herz erluphent, me denn wort allein, so seit es für sich an hin mit glichnusgebender wise von mengerley hailigen werken, dú in der warheit also geschahen”: Henry Suso, prologue to the *Exemplar*, ed. Bihlmeyer, 3, lines 2–10; trans. Tobin, 57. Tobin translates “mit bildegebender wise” as “by concrete examples” and “mit glichnusgebender wise” as “by many examples.”

⁴ This frequently found term comes from Richard Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu* (Chicago, 1984), 6.

⁵ Most of these manuscripts come from Dominican nunneries. See Rüdiger Blumrich, “Die Überlieferung der deutschen Schriften Seuses: Ein Forschungsbericht,” in *Heinrich Seuses Philosophia spiritualis: Quellen, Konzepte, Formen und Rezeption. Tagung Eichstätt 2.–4. Oktober 1991*, ed. Rüdiger Blumrich and Philipp Kaiser (Wiesbaden, 1994), 190–91. See also Appendix 1.

⁶ On the exemplary functions of the *Life* in particular, and of the *Exemplar* in general, see the seminal article by Jeffrey F. Hamburger, “Medieval Self-Fashioning: Authorship, Authority, and Autobiography in Seuse’s *Exemplar*,” in *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany* (New York, 1998), 233–78. See also Niklaus Largier, “*Figurata locutio*: Hermeneutik und Philosophie bei Eckhart von Hochheim und Heinrich Seuse,” in *Meister Eckhart: Lebensstationen–Redesituationen*, ed. Klaus Jacobi, Quellen und Forschungen zur Geschichte des Dominikanerordens, Neue Folge 7 (Berlin, 1997), 303–32.

⁷ McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism*, 196. As Werner Williams-Krapp recently noted, Suso never identifies himself clearly to the Servant. On the contrary, he deliberately preserves his anonymity and thus produces a stylized figure, thereby reducing “the life of the Servant to a generic pattern, a true path that others can follow.” See Werner Williams-Krapp, “Henry Suso’s *Vita* between Mystagogy and Hagiography,” in *Seeing and Knowing: Women and Learning in Medieval Europe 1200–1550*, ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker (Turnhout, 2004), 35–47, at 44.

⁸ I would like to thank Nigel Palmer for discussing this issue in detail with me.

progression.⁹ But there is more. Indeed, the expression appears fundamental for two reasons: on the one hand, it reveals the mechanisms set up by Suso to pass on his intentions, or, in other words, his literary strategies, in the most effective way. These consist of a particularly vivid figurative language (full of verbal images and metaphors), several anecdotes justifying the use of mental and material images in meditative practices,¹⁰ and, finally, the presence of actual images (the drawings) in the text itself.¹¹ On the other hand, together with the expression “mit glichnusgebender wise,” the expression “mit bildgebender wise” insists on the kind of reading and interpretation that Suso is expecting from his audience—that is, a figurative one. As we will see later on, this aspect of the *Exemplar* is crucial for our understanding of this work.

Oscillating between denial and acceptance, his complicated (and a priori equivocal) attitude towards imagery makes Suso a singularly complex author in the field of late medieval mysticism. It thus comes as no surprise that his discourse on images has attracted much attention in scholarship. It is nonetheless my contention that much of his image theory has not yet been fully examined and understood. The aim of this article is thus to provide a renewed and deepened interpretation of Suso’s figurative thought as it is embodied both in the textual and visual content of the *Exemplar*. As I will first argue, the complexity of the *Exemplar*’s image theory has been somewhat underestimated. More precisely, I will show that Suso’s discourse on images unfolds in two distinct, but complementary, directions: on the one hand, he makes explicit the essential place occupied by images in the process of mystical transformation (in a quite traditional and well-studied fashion). On the other, he develops a much less explored metadiscourse on images that states their utility as instruments of mystical knowledge. In this latter context, we will see that Suso emphasizes the effectiveness of figurative discourse and images in order to capture what lies beyond images. As I will demonstrate, considering Suso’s image theory in this way allows us to reassess the received notion that Suso’s statements about images in mystical contexts are generally paradoxical and contradictory. Secondly, I will focus on the depictions of Eternal Wisdom in the drawings of the *Exemplar* in order to show that they visually express—or implement—this theory. As a representation of God—that is, of the unrepresentable—Eternal Wisdom appears as the *lieu plastique* where Suso’s thought on images unfolds. In other words, this study aims at elucidating the figural dimension and strategies of the *Exemplar*, as expressed both in its texts and in its images. But before focusing on Suso’s image theory, it is necessary to first consider the *Exemplar* in its material aspect, that is, as a book combining both textual and visual elements.

⁹ Jeffrey F. Hamburger, “The Use of Images in the Pastoral Care of Nuns: The Case of Heinrich Suso and the Dominicans,” *Art Bulletin* 71/1 (1989): 20–46, at 23.

¹⁰ As Hamburger notes, “[Suso] provides a living exemplar for the use of images. The relationship between copy and model extends from the work of art to those who use them”: Hamburger, “The Use of Images,” 42.

¹¹ I agree with Hildegard Elisabeth Keller, according to whom the expression refers to a narrative full of imagery as well as to the illustrations: Hildegard Elisabeth Keller, “Heinrich Seuse (um 1295–1366): Bilder mit Bildern austreiben,” in *Mystik: Die Sehnsucht nach dem Absoluten*, ed. Albert Lutz (Zürich, 2011), 78–83, at 80.

THE *EXEMPLAR*, A BOOK WITH TEXTS AND IMAGES

The major peculiarity of the *Exemplar* lies in the fact that several copies of the work include a cycle of drawings directly related to the texts. More precisely, four of the seven manuscripts containing the complete version of the *Exemplar* and two other manuscripts containing a shorter version are illustrated by such drawings.¹² Furthermore, the two early printed editions also include the cycle in the form of woodcuts (see Appendix 1 for a complete description of the manuscript and printed versions).¹³ These eight illustrated copies of the *Exemplar* present the same iconographical program composed of twelve drawings/woodcuts.¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, several small changes can be observed in some copies, but the cycle has otherwise been repeated and passed on in a relatively stable way, with the compositions usually staying the same (see Appendix 2 for a detailed description and comparison of the different cycles). Exceptions occur in the case of drawings 4, 8–9, and 12, for which the artists of Strasbourg, Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire, MS 2929 [A]; Wrocław, Bibliothek des Domkapitels, cod. 46 [R]; and Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, MS germ. fol. 658 [B¹] opted for a composition in two registers, while the artists of Einsiedeln, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. 710 [K]; Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Cod. Guelf. 78.5 Aug. fol. [W]; and the printed editions chose to place them on two distinct pages.¹⁵ Likewise, the insertion of the drawings within the text is nearly always the same, with the exception of Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS allem. 222 [P], in which all the pictures are gathered together right after the text (fols. 118v–124v). Thus, if one puts this manuscript aside, all copies of the *Exemplar* begin with a drawing on the very first page of the book, preceding the prologue. The next ten pictures are located in the *Life*—usually right after the textual passage to which they are linked—and the last one in the BdEW. The other differences are a matter of iconographical

¹² The four complete illustrated manuscripts are Strasbourg, Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire, MS 2929 (A); Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Cod. Guelf. 78.5 Aug. fol. (W); Einsiedeln, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. 710 (K); Wrocław, Bibliothek des Domkapitels, Cod. 46 (R). The two shortened and illustrated versions are Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS allem. 222 (P); and Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, MS germ. fol. 658 (B¹). See Appendix 2 for a complete description of their visual contents. Furthermore, Stuttgart, Württembergische Landesbibliothek, Hbl 15 contains empty pages obviously designed to contain drawings that were ultimately never created, although the legends for them are included.

¹³ The first edition of the *Exemplar* was printed by Anthon Sorg in 1482 (Sorg 1482). The second edition was printed by Johann Otmar for Johann Rynmann in Augsburg (Otmar 1512). The woodcuts are attributed to Hans Schaufelein (c. 1480–1540). This edition is an adaptation of the first, in terms of both the textual and visual contents. See Appendixes 1 and 2.

¹⁴ The iconographical cycle of A (the oldest manuscript) contains eleven drawings, of which three are divided into two registers (this layout also appears in B¹ and R). Although he based his edition on A, Bihlmeyer listed twelve drawings, listing the eighth picture, which is divided into two registers (fol. 67r) under the numbers 8 and 9. His numbering from 1 to 12 has been retained by most scholars, Edmund Colledge and J. C. Marler, “‘Mystical’ Pictures in the Suso *Exemplar* MS Strasbourg 2929,” *Archivum fratrum praedicatorum* 54 (1984): 293–354 being the exception. In this article, I adopt Bihlmeyer’s numbering for the sake of clarity.

¹⁵ P occupies an intermediary position, as drawing no. 8–9 is divided across two pages, while the two registers of drawing no. 4 are kept on the same page.

detail (consisting of modifications, omissions, or additions) and variations in the inscriptions inserted into the pictures.¹⁶

The constant transmission of the visual program of the *Exemplar* during the fourteenth, fifteenth, and early sixteenth centuries reveals its value and its importance in the eyes of its successive readers, while the iconographical variations indicate that it was not only copied but also interpreted by scribes and illustrators.¹⁷ The large number of illustrated copies, the presence of the cycle in the oldest version (A),¹⁸ the relative stability of its transmission, the complexity of the iconography, and its close link to the textual content of the book strongly suggest that this cycle was designed by Suso himself or was at least created under his direction, although this cannot be proven with certainty.¹⁹ Furthermore, several passages of the text also suggest that the drawings were an integral part of Suso's original project. The mention in the prologue of the “heavenly images (*himelschen bilde*), which precede or follow” and “serve the purpose of allowing a religiously minded person, when he leaves the world of the senses and enters into himself, always to have something to draw him away from this false world, which pulls him down, and upward toward our beloved God,”²⁰ seems to be

¹⁶ Regarding the texts inserted into the pictures, A is the most complete version. In the other copies, titles and captions are not always inserted. K, R, and P are quite similar to A, while B' and W present the less frequently inserted texts: Identification of personae are almost always absent and the comments are usually shortened.

¹⁷ These iconographical variations are important, for they lead us to ponder the illustrators' understanding of this quite complex and slippery text, especially when it comes to the depiction of Eternal Wisdom, who lies at the core of this essay.

¹⁸ The manuscript is dated from 1365–70, so shortly after Suso's death: see Jeffrey F. Hamburger, “Heinrich Seuse, ‘Das Exemplar,’” in *Katalog der deutschsprachigen illustrierten Handschriften des Mittelalters*, ed. Norbert Ott (Munich, 2008), 156–92, at 175. It comes from Grüneworth (founded in 1371). Its place or origin could thus be different.

¹⁹ This opinion—which I follow here—was first formulated by Bihlmeyer in his introduction to Heinrich Seuse, *Deutsche Schriften*, 45*–46*. According to Bihlmeyer, Suso is also responsible for the conception of the illuminated initials that one can observe in several manuscripts. Nowadays, most scholars agree that Suso was indeed the creator of the iconographical program, or that at least it was created under his supervision. See among others Colledge and Marler, “Mystical Pictures,” 300; Henry Suso: *The Exemplar*, ed. Tobin, xv; Hamburger, “The Use of Images,” 25; Thomas Lentjes, “Der mediale Status des Bildes: Bildlichkeit bei Heinrich Seuse—statt einer Einleitung,” in *Ästhetik des Unsichtbaren: Bildtheorie und Bildgebrauch in der Vormoderne*, ed. David Ganz and Thomas Lentjes (Berlin, 2004), 13–73, at 15; McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism*, 208; Keller, “Heinrich Seuse (um 1295–1366),” 82; José van Aelst, “Visualizing the Spiritual: Images in the Life and Teachings of Henry Suso (c. 1295–1366),” in *Speaking to the Eye: Sight and Insight through Text and Image (1150–1650)*, ed. Thérèse de Hemptinne, Veerle Fraeters, and María Eugenia Góngora (Turnhout, 2013), 129–49, at 140. A few years ago, Stephanie Altmann and Hans-Joachim Ziegeler went against this hypothesis, in “Vom diener der ewigen weisheit zum Autor Heinrich Seuse: Autorschaft und Medienwandel in den illustrierten Handschriften und Drucken von Heinrich Seuses ‘Exemplar,’” in *Text und Kultur: Mittelalterliche Literatur 1150–1450*, ed. Ursula Peters, Germanistische Symposien 23 (Stuttgart and Weimar, 2001), 150–81. The authors argued that the cycle dates from an early reception of the *Exemplar*, more precisely from the Strasbourg manuscript (A). Hamburger, “Heinrich Seuse, ‘Das Exemplar,’” 159, underlines the fact that it is difficult to resolve this problem, while leaning towards the first hypothesis.

²⁰ “Und dú himelschen bilde, dú hie vor und na stand, sind dar zuo núzz, daz ein goetlicher mensch in sinem usgang der sinnen und ingang dez gemuetes alle zit etwaz vinde, daz in von diser valschen niederziehenden welt wider uf zuo dem minneklichen got reizlich ziehe”: Henry Suso, prologue to the

a direct allusion to the drawings that are actually located before and after the prologue.²¹ Moreover, in chapter 53 of the *Life*, the Servant speaks to his spiritual daughter of the distance between “disú ellú entworfnú bild und disú usgeleiten verbildetú wort”²² (all these images I have developed and these thoughts distorted by images) and the truth they are supposed to represent; this could be an allusion not only to the many examples and verbal images to be found in the text, but also to the pictures.²³ On a more general level, chapter 53 supports the hypothesis of the drawings being part of the original project, since Suso takes care to synthesize his spiritual teachings on the Neoplatonic process of emanation/return (*exitus/reditus*) and this summary is nothing but a step-by-step commentary on the famous picture of the mystical way that closes the *Life*. Although these passages do not in themselves constitute irrefutable proof that Suso conceived or designed the iconographical program of the *Exemplar* himself, they nonetheless testify to the great value that the Dominican attached to images and visuality. The strong interdependence between chapter 53 of the *Life* and the picture of the mystical way furthermore indicates that the designer of the visual program—and then the illustrators of the different copies—had a deep knowledge of the text. A careful consideration of the message conveyed by the images is thus entirely justified. In order to do so, it is first necessary to fully understand Suso’s conception of the role and the place of images in a mystical context.

HENRY SUSO’S FIGURATIVE THOUGHT, BETWEEN APOPHATISM AND IMAGINATIVE THEOLOGY

A disciple of Master Eckhart and a spiritual director of Dominican nuns, Suso not only had deep theological knowledge but also strong pedagogical concerns. This dual aspect makes his works very interesting as they combine a high degree of intellectual sophistication with a strong sense of teaching skills, which implies the adoption of a series of literary strategies. Furthermore, in terms of imagery, this “duality” results in a complex attitude that makes Suso a singular figure among late medieval mystics.

The Dominican was deeply influenced by the apophatism of Eckhart, as he took several themes from his master’s mysticism of the ground (*grunt*), such as detachment (*abgescheidenheit*), releasement (*gelassenheit*), and dis-imagination

Exemplar, ed. Bihlmeyer, 4, lines 24–28; trans. Tobin, 58. This function assigned to material images can be observed in other medieval texts. For several examples, see Herbert L. Kessler, “Turning a Blind Eye: Medieval Art and the Dynamics of Contemplation,” in *The Mind’s Eye: Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Anne-Marie Bouché (Princeton, 2006), 413–39, at 415–17.

²¹ Hamburger, “Medieval Self-Fashioning,” 236; *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, ed. Tobin, 383 n. 6; McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism*, 209 n. 82.

²² Henry Suso, *Seuses Leben* 53, ed. Bihlmeyer, 193–94, lines 31–32; trans. Tobin, 203.

²³ This hypothesis has been put forward by Hamburger, “The Use of Images,” 25 n. 33. Hamburger argues that this sentence is a direct reference to the drawings. In her French translation of the *Exemplar*, Jeanne Ancelet-Hustache also identifies “disú ellú entworfnú bild” with the drawings: Bienheureux Henri Suso, *Œuvres complètes*, trans. Jeanne Ancelet-Hustache (Paris, 1977), 311.

(*entbildung*).²⁴ Parts of his works are also reminiscent of Eckhartian teachings on the return to God via the detachment from the sensible world.²⁵ In chapter 49 of the *Life*, which consists of a series of aphorisms, Suso states, “A detached person must be freed (*entbildet*) from the forms of the creatures, formed (*gebildet*) with Christ, and transformed (*überbildet*) in the Godhead.”²⁶ The person involved in this process described by Suso must “dis-image” him/herself (*entbilden*) or, in other words, she or he must leave images of creatures behind. However, although Suso was strongly anchored in the apophatic tradition, his discourse also granted a significant role to images and it thus takes on a cataphatic dimension, for he uses all kinds of imagery. The most striking evidence of Suso’s cataphatic inclination is without doubt the drawings themselves.

Combining apophatic and cataphatic elements, Suso’s texts thus confront their readers with an *apparent* contradiction between the necessity of going beyond images and their vital importance. As Hamburger has put it, “Suso’s evident ambivalence toward images is more than a result of deep-seated misgivings combined with a practical awareness of their pastoral applications. Suso’s attitude is at times contradictory, even deliberately paradoxical.”²⁷ Unsurprisingly, many scholars have attempted to explain this ambivalence. For instance, Steven Rozen-ski explains Suso’s apparent oscillation between apophatism and cataphatism by the fact that images “appeal to Suso’s instincts in the exercise of the *cura monalium* even as they clash with his ideals of an imageless apprehension of the divine.”²⁸ In short, we would be confronted with a dilemma between theory and

²⁴ These are major concepts of Eckhart’s mystical theology. They all allude to a process leading to a state of mystical consciousness, which can only be attained if the intellect is freed from all created things. As an introduction to these themes, see McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism*, 164–76, 217–22; and Wolfgang Wackernagel, ‘*Ymagine denudari*’: *Éthique de l’image et métaphysique de l’abstraction chez Maître Eckhart* (Paris, 1991).

²⁵ Notably, the BdW is a defense (not without qualifications) of Eckhart’s positions on true detachment and on discernment. On Eckhart’s negative theology see Vladimir Lossky, *Théologie négative et connaissance de Dieu chez Maître Eckhart* (Paris, 1960); and Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: The Man from Whom God Hid Nothing* (New York, 2001). On the relationships between the BdW and Eckhart, see Herma Piesch, “Seuses ‘Büchlein der Wahrheit’ und Meister Eckhart,” in *Heinrich Seuse: Studien zum 600. Todestag, 1366–1966*, ed. Ephrem M. Filthaut (Cologne, 1966), 91–133. See also Loris Sturlese’s introduction of Henry Suso, *Das Buch der Wahrheit*, ed. Loris Sturlese and Rüdiger Blumrich (Hamburg, 1993).

²⁶ “Ein gelassener mensch muoss entbildet werden von der creatur, gebildet werden mit Cristo, und überbildet in der gotheit”: Henry Suso, *Seuses Leben* 49, ed. Bihlmeyer, 168, lines 9–10; trans. Tobin, 181. This famous passage illustrates particularly well how Suso’s mode of thought relies upon his master’s, for it is a Christocentric reworking of a famous section of Eckhart’s *Book of the Divine Consolation*: Meister Eckhart, *Die deutschen Werke*, ed. Josef Quint, 5 vols. (Stuttgart, 1963), 5:11. On this, see Heinrich Stirnimann, “Mystik und Metaphorik: Zu Seuses Dialog,” in *Das “einig Ein”*: *Studien zu Theorie und Sprache der deutschen Mystik*, ed. Alois M. Haas and Heinrich Stirnimann (Freiburg, 1980), 209–80, at 247–49.

²⁷ Hamburger, “The Use of Images,” 25.

²⁸ Steven Rozen-ski, “Von Aller Bilden Bildlosekeit: The Trouble with Images of Heaven in the Works of Henry Suso,” in *Envisaging Heaven in the Middle Ages*, ed. Carolyn Muessig and Ad Putter (London, 2007), 108–19, at 109. See also Alois Haas, “Seuses Visionen,” in *Kunst rechter Gelassenheit: Themen und Schwerpunkte von Heinrich Seuses Mystik*, ed. Alois M. Haas (Bern, 1996), 179–220, at 204–5. In this context, it is worth underlining that resorting to visual strategies and images is not limited to Suso’s German works. The same phenomenon can be observed in his Latin *Horlogium*

practice.²⁹ This issue can nevertheless be formulated in a different way. Indeed, differentiating theory and practice in Suso's texts appears to be a vain and fruitless task, as such a dialectic does not allow for a complete understanding of the power of his texts. In fact, as I will show here, Suso's position is not contradictory or paradoxical. He does not try to juxtapose and manage a tension between these two opposites; he actually transcends them and develops a figurative thought of his own, which is founded on the figurative and allegorical nature of his texts.

Barbara Newman has argued that Suso's texts—and in particular his *Horologium sapientiae*, the Latin adaptation of the BdEW—form part of a literary field that she calls “imaginative theology” and that encompasses literary works heterogeneous in their form and audience, but sharing the same epistemology.³⁰ The particularity of texts classified within this field is that they “think with images, rather than propositions or scriptural texts or rarefied inner experience—although none of them needs to be excluded. The devices of literature—metaphor, symbolism, prosopopoeia, allegory, dialogue, and narrative—are [their] working tools.”³¹ Such works also possess an exploratory dimension, for the “mode of writing served not only to *express* a religious meaning or truth already possessed, but also to *discover* meaning, no less than the exegetical query or the scholastic debate.”³² The *Exemplar* includes such literary devices. Visions are numerous; Suso has recourse to visualization and imagery (verbal, mental, and material),³³ to dialogues,³⁴ and to personifications. In other words, the texts gathered in the

sapientiae, which was aimed at a wider audience, including clerics and monks. On the *Horologium* audience and strategies relying on imaginative theology, see Barbara Newman, “Henry Suso and the Medieval Devotion to Christ the Goddess,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 2 (2002): 1–14.

²⁹ This kind of dilemma between theory and practice has already been underlined by Sixten Ringbom when dealing with devotional imagery: see Sixten Ringbom, “Devotional Images and Imaginative Devotions: Notes on the Place of Art in Late Medieval Private Piety,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 73 (1969): 159–70. Jeffrey Hamburger uses the same dialectical opposition while underlining Suso's ambiguous position when he states that “Suso's writings are also typical in being difficult to evaluate, for mystical theory [according to which images are necessary for beginners and are inadequate to express mystical union] is one thing, actual practice quite another”: Hamburger, “The Use of Images,” 20. Hamburger nonetheless demonstrates that the use of imagery was encouraged within the Dominican order and concludes that “in practice however, Suso used images as signposts for all travellers on the mystical way, no matter how far they had advanced toward spiritual perfection”: *ibid.*, 45.

³⁰ Barbara Newman, *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 2003). As Newman states (at 292–304), resorting to this designation does not mean that the previous categories (such as scholastic, monastic, pastoral, mystical, or vernacular theologies) need to be rejected or criticized. Her aim is to shed light on a particular mode of enunciation.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 298.

³² *Ibid.*, 304. On visions and their role in Suso's oeuvre, see Alois Haas, “Seuses Visionen.”

³³ Several passages of the *Life* attest to (and often justify) the use of images in meditative practices. The most famous of these are the mention of the mural paintings in the Servant's chapel illustrating the lives of the desert fathers (Henry Suso, *Seuses Leben* 21, ed. Bihlmeyer, 59–60; on these paintings, see Hamburger, “The Pastoral Care of Nuns,” 29–35) and of the parchment depicting Eternal Wisdom that the Servant owed during his youth (Henry Suso, *Seuses Leben* 35, ed. Bihlmeyer, 103). Several passages of the *Life* also recount how the Servant used to pray in front of works of art in churches (see Henry Suso, *Seuses Leben*, ed. Bihlmeyer, 26, 66–67, 111).

³⁴ The dialogue form is used occasionally in the *Life*, whereas it structures the whole of the BdEW and the BdW. On Suso's use of dialogue in his teachings, see Stirnimann, “Mystik und Metaphorik,” 209–80, esp. 214–29.

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compilation are allegorical texts that are impregnated with figures: not only do they stage allegorical figures, such as the Servant and his beloved, they also abundantly use figures of speech (*figurata locutio*)³⁵ and are further punctuated with drawings (plastic figures), which materialize these allegorical figures. These furthermore require a figurative interpretation, something the reader is regularly reminded of.³⁶ In Suso's oeuvre, the *figura* appears as a nodal point, which is not so much an object as a dynamic interpretive (or hermeneutic) process, as we will see later on.³⁷

In order to understand the nature and content of Suso's figurative thought, it is worth focusing on his vocabulary, and more precisely on his use of the word *bild* and its derivatives. In Middle High German, *bild* is a polysemous term that has several meanings and connotations. Depending on the context, it can mean “image” (*imago*, both as model/*Urbild* and as copy/*Abbild*), but also “example” or “model” (*exemplar*), “idea” (*ratio*), “form” (*forma*) and “representation” or “resemblance” (*phantasma*).³⁸ Suso uses the term in several registers: plastic/representational (material and mental images), anthropological/theological,³⁹ and in the context of mystical progression (where *bild* refers to the sensible world that one must leave behind). If the context in which Suso uses the term regularly allows us to determine more or less precisely what kind of *bild* he is referring to,⁴⁰ it is striking to note that when it comes to passages where Suso unfolds his discourse on images and figures, the reader is facing a certain “indeterminacy”: the nature of what Suso calls *bild* in such cases is often subject to discussion. Is he

³⁵ In the prologue of the *Horologium*, Suso theorizes his literary approach: “Visiones quoque in sequentibus contentae non sunt omnes accipiendae secundum litteram, licet multae ad litteram contingerint, sed est figurata locutio”: Heinrich Seuse: *Horologium Sapientiae*, ed. Pius Künzle (Freiburg, 1977), 366, lines 20–22. On Suso's *figurata locutio*, see Largier, “*Figurata locutio*.”

³⁶ This is especially the case in the prologues of Suso's texts, as we will see later on. Furthermore, as Niklaus Largier has shown, the *Life* is pervaded by an allegorical hermeneutic, whose aim is to help the reader become closer to God, just as the Servant (an allegorical figure) did. See Largier, “*Figurata locutio*,” 311–14.

³⁷ In addition to the seminal Erich Auerbach, “Figura,” *Archivum Romanicum* 22 (1939): 436–89, and for a recent study on the concept of “figure” (and the related process of figurability), see Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance et figuration* (Paris, 1990; reprint, 1995); Ralph Dekoninck and Agnès Guiderdoni, “La pensée figurée au coeur des savoirs et des arts de la première modernité: Le cas des *Physicae et Theologicae Conclusiones* d’Otto van Veen,” *GEMCA: Papers in Progress* 1 (2012), http://gemca.fltr.ucl.ac.be/docs/pp/GEMCA_PP_1_2012.pdf, as well as Agnès Guiderdoni, “Mystical Theory and Emblematic Practice in Sandaeus's Works,” *GEMCA: Papers in Progress* 2 (2013), http://gemca.fltr.ucl.ac.be/docs/pp/GEMCA_PP_2_2013_1_006.pdf.

³⁸ See Wackernagel, *Ymagine denudari*, 15–17 and 108–10.

³⁹ According to Wackernagel, *bilde* possesses three semantic levels: (1) the Trinity (with the Father as model of the Son and the latter as model of humankind), (2) humankind (as image of God), (3) the sensible world. In this context, the process of *entbildung* alludes to the third level and is a kind of “negative evaluation” of the image: see n. 44. On the contrary, referring to the relationship between the first and second level, *bildung* appears as a positive evaluation of the image and can be understood as a process of “formation of what is divine in man” (my translation). See Wackernagel, *Ymagine denudari*, 109–10. See also n. 44.

⁴⁰ Such clear and unequivocal use of the term *bild* can be observed when Suso speaks about material images (works of art, in front of which the Servant prays, for example), or about man as an image of God.

talking about actual images (and then of what kind?) or figurative expressions? What is the purpose of this indetermination? In order to answer these questions, a closer look at Suso’s discourse on images and figures is necessary.

SUSO’S (META-)DISCOURSE ON IMAGES

In the *Exemplar*, Suso elaborates a complex theory of images in mystical experience and discourse that is profoundly linked to the Dionysian apophatism inherited from Eckhart on the one hand and to the literary strategies of “imaginative theology” on the other. As I would like to argue now, this image theory can be divided into two distinct but complementary lines.⁴¹ If we understand that Suso’s discourse on images consists of these two aspects it becomes possible to solve the apparent contradiction between theory and practice that scholarship comes up against. The first line is dedicated to the *place* of images in the process of mystical transformation (“discourse on images”). Aiming at describing mystical experience, it deals with images as traces of the created world and creatures that one has to leave behind in the course of mystical progression in order to attain spiritual perfection and union with God. Obviously, this aspect of Suso’s image theory depends on apophatism. The second line relates to the *role* of images in the formulation of mystical discourse and teaching (“metadiscourse on images”). Here, Suso leaves aside mystical experience itself in order to focus on mystical language and the account of such experience. In this context, images (verbal, mental, and material) are considered as instruments of knowledge and expression and their use is theorized. Suso’s originality as a late medieval mystical author certainly lies in his attempt to theorize his use of images as instruments of knowledge.⁴²

Discourse on Images: The Place of Images in Mystical Transformation

The first axis of Suso’s image theory appears relatively traditional and there is no need to dwell on this at length. According to Suso, images are traces of the created world, and the person involved in the process of mystical transformation must detach him/herself from the senses and from the world (becoming “dis-imaged,” *entbildet*) in order to attain a state of spiritual perfection in which the spirit is annihilated and withdrawn into the naked Godhead;⁴³ in this state, images have then disappeared. A passage from the BdW offers a synthesis of the

⁴¹ It is worth pointing out that these two facets are intrinsically linked to each other and that both are rooted in the theory of speculation, as will be discussed later on.

⁴² This idea, according to which images can serve as instruments of knowledge, is also to be found—although expressed with some differences—in a broader medieval tradition of secular literature. For example, in *Der Wälsche Gast* (1215), Thomasin von Zerclaere elaborates upon the role of images in the cognitive process of learning, where words and images are conceived to work together. See Horst Wenzel and Christina Lechtermann, eds., *Beweglichkeit der Bilder: Text und Imagination in den illustrierten Handschriften des “Welschen Gastes” von Thomasin von Zerclaere* (Cologne, 2002). I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer of this article for pointing out this example.

⁴³ As is well known, Suso assigns to Christ—the perfect image of God and the model to which man must conform—a fundamental role in this process. Letter 10 of the BB is a good example of this.

outcome of this process of *entbildung*:⁴⁴ “One text⁴⁵ states well that one finds a kind of person, set apart and proven, whose spirit is so purified and godlike that the virtues exist in him in a manner approaching the divine. Such persons have lost their own forms and have been transformed into oneness with the first exemplar (*entbildet und überbildet in des ersten exemplars einikeit*), somehow achieving complete forgetfulness of transitory and temporal existence; and they are changed into a divine image (*verwandelt in goetliches bilde*) and are one with him.”⁴⁶

Likewise, in chapter 51 of the *Life*, Suso states, “Direct sight of the naked God-head: this is pure genuine truth without any doubts. And every vision, the more intellectual and free of images (*vernünftiger und bildloser*) it is and the more like this same pure seeing, the nobler it is.”⁴⁷ To summarize, the more aniconic the contemplation of God, the better it is. Despite this statement in favor of aniconism, Suso largely takes into account sensible experience, and his discourse is deeply rooted in speculation, an epistemological concept that is crucial for our understanding of late medieval mysticism in general and of Suso in particular.⁴⁸ The theory of speculation is based on Romans 1.20 and benefits from a long Neoplatonic tradition that sees the created world as a mirror of its Creator. Suso uses this notion in chapter 50 of the *Life* in order to answer Elsbeth’s question, “What is God?” Reminding her of the superior and inaccessible nature of God, the Servant advises Elsbeth to approach him by seeking his traces in the created world. He then embarks on a lyrical description of the beauty and richness of nature, which appears to be proof of divine kindness, before concluding by stating again that the process of speculation leads from natural to supernatural perception.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Suso borrows this concept from Meister Eckhart, for whom the process of *entbildung* can be understood as a “processus de détachement des images dissemblables et de ressemblance à l’Image [le Christ],” which consists of “traverser les différents niveaux du champ sémantique de l’image, en procédant par ‘abstraction’ des images sensibles pour aboutir au Verbe-Image.” See Wackernagel, *Ymagine denudari*, 60 and 85.

⁴⁵ This is the *Summa theologica* of Thomas of Aquinas (*Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, ed. Tobin, 400 n. 39).

⁴⁶ “Wol spricht ein schrift, daz man vindet einer hande menschen, usgesundertú und geleptú menschen, daz die sijen so gar gelútertes und gotfoermiges gemuetes, daz die tugenden in in standen nach goetlicher glicheit; wan sú sint entbildet und überbildet in des ersten exemplars einikeit, und koment neiswi in ein volles vergessen zerganklichs und zitliches lebennes, und sint verwandelt in goetliches bilde und sint eins mit im”: Henry Suso, *Büchlein der Wahrheit* 4, ed. Bihlmeyer, 338, lines 1–7; trans. Tobin, 315.

⁴⁷ “Ein mitelloses schowen der blossen gotheit, daz ist rehtú lutrú warheit ane allen zwivel; und ein ieklichú vision, so si ie vernünftiger und bildloser ist und der selben blosser schowung ie glicher ist, so si ie edelr ist”: Henry Suso, *Seuses Leben* 51, ed. Bihlmeyer, 183, lines 4–8; trans. Tobin, 195.

⁴⁸ Cf. Jeffrey F. Hamburger, “Speculations on Speculation: Vision and Perception in the Theory and Practice of Mystical Devotion,” in *Deutsche Mystik im abendländischen Zusammenhang: Neu erschlossene Texte, neue methodische Ansätze, neue theoretische Konzepte. Kolloquium Kloster Fischingen* 1998, ed. Walter Haug and Wolfram Schneider-Lastin (Tübingen, 2000), 353–408.

⁴⁹ Henry Suso, *Seuses Leben* 50, ed. Bihlmeyer, 172, lines 1–6; trans. Tobin, 187; and *ibid.*, ed. Bihlmeyer, 173, lines 9–12; trans. Tobin, 188. A similar idea can be found in Richard of Saint-Victor’s *Benjamin minor*: “When it is written that the invisible things of God are seen by the intellect from the creation of the world, through things that are made, this plainly means that reason would never rise to the knowledge of invisible things unless its handmaid imagination presented to it the form of invisible

Indeed, as Hamburger reminds us, “the whole point of the process defined as speculation is to connect inner and outer, the empirical and suprasensible, within a single, unified system.”⁵⁰ Suso’s conception of speculation and of its role in the process of mystical knowledge leads us to a better understanding of his oeuvre.⁵¹ Consequently, and taking into consideration the bipartite dimension of his image theory, a reformulation of the apparent paradox between the theory and practice of images in his oeuvre becomes possible: comprehension of invisible realities is only possible if one observes and understands their traces in the visible world. This is why Suso gives so much importance to the senses, the body, images, visions, and the imagination, despite his commitment to the apophatic way. More precisely, images play a crucial role in the process of mystical transformation even if, in the same way as language, they cannot lead to a perfect understanding of divine realities.⁵²

Metadiscourse on Images: The Role of Images in Mystical Discourse

Suso’s program consists of “suggesting the imageless by the means of images,”⁵³ a complex method that apparently required him to explain how to proceed. Taking into account the strong didactic aspect of the *Exemplar* and Suso’s wish for his oeuvre to outlive him without being tarnished by misinterpretations, one can easily understand why Suso felt the need to clarify his approach and to guide his readers by offering them interpretive keys. As a matter of fact, a significant part of Suso’s image theory consists of a “metadiscourse”—or an attempt at theorization—on the use of images in mystical discourse. Here we come to the second, and most original, axis of his image theory, dedicated to images as instruments of mystical knowledge. This aspect of Suso’s theoretical discourse unfolds in the form of small phrases in selective passages as well as in more elaborate sections located in key passages of the work.

The whole text of the *Exemplar* is thus punctuated with short sentences spoken by the protagonists, which allow Suso to draw attention to the fact that the following passage adopts a figurative language or should be interpreted in an imaged manner. In chapter 48 of the *Life*, for instance, the Servant explains to his spiritual daughter the difference between preceding and subsequent detachment through the example of a reformed thief, whom he introduces with “Und des nim war in einer bischaft” (note what these are by this example/comparison).⁵⁴ Further on, in the BdW, Truth explains how man can become one with God by

things” (cited after Barbara Newman, “What Did It Mean to Say ‘I Saw’? The Clash between Theory and Practice in Medieval Visionary Culture,” *Speculum* 80/1 [2005]: 1–43, at 15).

⁵⁰ Hamburger, “Speculations on Speculation,” 359.

⁵¹ This has been emphasized by Hamburger, “Speculations on Speculation,” 364–67, who also underlines Suso’s incarnational understanding of speculation.

⁵² This paradox is based on the nature of deity itself: the Word is the source of all images of the Creation, even if God is beyond images. See McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism*, 209.

⁵³ Hamburger, “The Use of Images,” 27. This idea can also be found in Walter Lehmann, *Heinrich Seuses Schriften* (Jena, 1922), 41 (cited by Stirnimann, “Mystik und Metaphorik,” 237); as well as in Haas, “Seuses Visionen,” 204.

⁵⁴ Henry Suso, *Seuses Leben* 48, ed. Bihlmeyer, 161, line 16; trans. Tobin, 179.

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resorting to a comparison (of the eye becoming one with the object seen), which she announces to the Disciple by saying, “Und des gib ich ein glichnúst” (I shall give you an analogy).⁵⁵ In some passages, the person speaking calls on the imagination of his interlocutor, as in chapter 53 of the *Life*, when the Servant uses the image of the three concentric circles formed by a stone on the surface of the water in order to describe the relationship between the persons of the Trinity. He introduces this image by asking Elsbeth to imagine it mentally (“hie sezz in diner biltlichen betrachtung”).⁵⁶

If these brief passages shed light on the significance of images, figures, and comparisons in Suso’s discourse, other sections of the text also develop these issues in a more consistent way. Interestingly, these passages that theorize the role of images in mystical discourse are located in strategic sections of the work: in the main prologue of the *Exemplar*, in the prologues of the BdEW and the BdW, and in the last chapter of the *Life*, which closes the speculative part of this book and can be understood as a summary of Suso’s mystical theology.

The first of these passages is the—already mentioned—description of the *Life* in the main prologue. Here, Suso uses the expression “mit bildgebender wise” to highlight the fact that his first book presents his spiritual teachings in the form of good examples. In doing this, Suso refers to his method, which consists of illustrating some points of his discourse with concrete examples that the reader must first assimilate and then imitate.⁵⁷ He shows that the good actions (“guotú werk”) that are presented in the *Life* actually happened in the way he recalls them, but he also implies that they serve to put into practice the imitation of the Servant’s *living image*. In order to emulate the Servant’s model, the reader is invited to assimilate the images and examples presented in the book. Furthermore, in this exemplary context, the expression “mit bildgebender wise” also reveals Suso’s strategy aimed at guiding the reader in this imitation process. Frank Tobin has already noted the ambiguity of this expression, which could be translated as “by providing a model/images” or as “in a figurative manner.”⁵⁸ Indeed, by stating that the *Life* describes the life of a beginner “mit bildgebender wise,” Suso also suggests that the content of the book must be interpreted figuratively, and, if he is insisting on the authenticity and the exactitude of the recalled events,⁵⁹ their exemplary and figurative nature matters even more. This is precisely one of the strengths of Suso’s work, which is full of figures of all kinds that the reader is invited to interpret. These figures are found not only in the text but also in the drawings, as we will see later on when analyzing the depictions of Eternal Wisdom. In other words, and to recall Suso’s expression, the first book of the compilation gives to the reader figures that she or he has to interpret and in return, the reader’s imagination produces other figures. The *Life* is thus based on an open and figurative writing process that perpetually solicits the reader’s imagination.

⁵⁵ Henry Suso, *Büchlein der Wahrheit* 5, ed. Bihlmeyer, 345, line 15; trans. Tobin, 321.

⁵⁶ Henry Suso, *Seuses Leben* 53, ed. Bihlmeyer, 191, line 15; trans. Tobin, 201.

⁵⁷ Hamburger, “Heinrich Seuse, ‘Das Exemplar,’” 156.

⁵⁸ Henry Suso: *The Exemplar*, ed. Tobin, 383 n. 2.

⁵⁹ “Mengerley hailigen werken, dú in der warheit also geschahen”: Henry Suso, prologue to the *Exemplar*, ed. Bihlmeyer, 3, lines 9–10.

And the very first lines of the *Exemplar* inform the reader about this figurative process.

The prologues of the BdEW and of the BdW include similar devices aimed at informing the readers about the contents of the book and at offering recommendations regarding Suso's literary strategies and understanding of images and imagination. Both works take the form of a dialogue, while their prologues inform the reader that these conversations did not actually take place, at least not physically. In the prologue of the BdEW, Suso states that the “conversation with Eternal Wisdom (*ein kosen mit der Ewigen Weisheit*),” which forms the heart of the work, “did not take place in the manner of physical conversations or with responses perceptible through the senses. It took place only in meditation, in the light of sacred scripture whose answers can never deceive”⁶⁰ before underlining the didactic function of the dialogue. Similarly, the prologue of the BdW presents the dialogues between Truth and the Disciple as a literary device: “He [the disciple] received an answer in bright clarity: All of this would take place in the manner of an interpreted allegory (*nach der wise einer usgeleitē bischaft*), as though the Disciple were asking and Truth answering.”⁶¹ Although they do not directly refer to (actual) images, these two passages need to be taken into consideration, as they shed light on the strategies used by Suso to suggest the figurative interpretation required for the reading of his texts. Such a device—related this time to the visions recalled in the text—can also be observed in the prologue of the BdEW. In this passage, Suso states that “these visions are not actual physical events. They are interpreted allegory (*ein usgeleitū bischaft*).”⁶² In other words, what matters is not the truthfulness of the visions described, but the interpretation the reader makes of them.⁶³

In the passages evoked here, Suso describes the visions and the dialogues as “usgeleitū bischaft.” The term *bischaft* is usually translated as “parable,” “forewarning,” or “interpretation” (in other words, allegory), while *ûzlegen* means “interpret” or “explain.” Heinrich Stirnimann showed that Suso uses this expression because it allows him to indicate that the conversations and the visions recalled should not be understood as such, but rather as interpretations in an allegorical way (“als Auslegung in ‘gleichnishafter’ Weise”).⁶⁴ In any case, these sections of the text imply that the reader must go beyond the literal meaning and interpret the visions and dialogues figuratively. Another passage of the prologue

⁶⁰ “Und daz geschah nit mit einem liplichen kosenne noh mit bildricher entwûrt, es geschah allein mit betrachtunge in dem licht der heiligen schrift, der entwûrt bi nûti getriegen mag”: Henry Suso, prologue to the *Büchlein der Ewigen Weisheit*, ed. Bihlmeyer, 197, lines 114–16; trans. Tobin, 208.

⁶¹ “Also wart im in liehtricher wise geantwûrt, daz dis alles soelte geschehen nach der wise einer usgeleitē bischaft, als ob der junger fragti und dú warheit antwûrti”: Henry Suso, prologue to the *Büchlein der Wahrheit*, ed. Bihlmeyer, 327, line 30; trans. Tobin, 308. Tobin translates “nach der wise einer usgeleitē bischaft” as “in the manner of an explained allegory.”

⁶² “Die gesichte, die hie nach stent, die geschahen ovch nût in liplicher wise, sù sint allein ein usgeleitū bischaft”: Henry Suso, prologue to the *Büchlein der Ewigen Weisheit*, ed. Bihlmeyer, 197, lines 22–23; trans. Tobin, 208. Tobin translates “ein usgeleitū bischaft” as “a simple allegory.”

⁶³ Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 27. Regarding this matter, the prologue of the *Horologium* (the Latin adaptation of the BdEW) is more explicit (see n. 35).

⁶⁴ Stirnimann, “Mystik und Metaphorik,” 233. See also Haas, “Seuses Visionen,” 203.

of the BdEW leads to the same conclusion and expresses it even more clearly. Here, Suso writes that in this book “es ist nahe alles in tovgenlicher wise us geleit” (almost everything is explained symbolically).⁶⁵ In doing this, Suso explicitly invites his readers to engage in a figurative interpretation of the BdEW: “Suso’s intention is clear: he does not interpret ‘images’ or ‘allegory’; he wants to interpret *through* ‘images’ and ‘allegory.’”⁶⁶

Suso’s aim appears thus clearly: by drawing attention to the necessity of a figurative interpretation of the content of the *Exemplar*, he insists on the function of the imagination and images. These are predominant instruments in his oeuvre, and since this fact is quite atypical for a mystical text that bears a clear apophatical dimension, he takes care to justify their presence and explain how to use them. Other passages of the *Exemplar* emphasize the utility of images and figures in mystical discourse and experience, even if their limits are also acknowledged from time to time.⁶⁷ This appears quite clearly in letter 9 of the *Briefbüchlein*, entitled “Wie ein mensch ze ruowe sines herzen in got sül komen” (How a Person Should Achieve Peace of Heart in God), in which Suso insists in a very traditional way on the necessity of resorting to imagination and images if one wants to know God on earth, because human nature is imperfect and tarnished by original sin.⁶⁸ It is nevertheless in chapter 53 of the *Life* that the Dominican gives his most important thought on the utility of images and, even more importantly, on the way images must be used as instruments of knowledge of God. This chapter closes the third section of the *Life* (chapters 46–53), in which Suso forsakes the narrative frame of the previous chapters to focus on a series of theoretical questions about mystical experience and the contemplative process. The last four chapters (chapters 50–53) take the form of a dialogue between the Servant and Elsbeth, who asks him questions about “hohen dingen” (sublime matters). Chapters 50–52 consist of long expositions on what God is, where God is, and how he can be both one and three, but also on the distinction between pure Truth and visions

⁶⁵ Prologue to the *Büchlein der Ewigen Weisheit*, ed. Bihlmeyer, 198, line 6; trans. Tobin, 208.

⁶⁶ “Seuses Intention ist somit klar: er legt nicht ‘Bilder’ oder ‘Gleichnisse’ aus; er will *durch* ‘Bilde’ und ‘Gleichnis’ auslegen” (my translation): Stirnimann, “Mystik und Metaphorik,” 234.

⁶⁷ See, for example, “Fro tohter, nu merk eben, daz disú ellú entworfnú bild und disú usgeleiten verbildetú wort sind der bildlosen warheit als verr und als ungelich, als ein swarzer mor der schoenen sunnen, und kunt daz von der selben warheit formlosen, unbekanten einvaltekeit”: Henry Suso, *Seuses Leben* 53, ed. Bihlmeyer, 194, lines 1–2; trans. Tobin, 203.

⁶⁸ “Wie daz sie, daz dú warheit an ir selben bloss und ledig sie, doch von únsér natúrlichen eigenschaft so ist úns angeborn, daz wir si in biltlicher glichnúss muessen nemen, unz daz der nidersenkend lip wirt ab geleit und daz gelútert oge der sele vernúnftikeit in der ewigen sunnen rad bloklich wirt gesteket. . . . So wir joch etwen haben die warheit, so enwissen wir nit, ob wir die warheit haben, und tuegen als der ein ding suocht, daz er in der hand hat. Der mensch lept in zit nit, der diss genzlich lidig stande, wan es ist ein nahklank der erbsünde.” (Although it is the case that truth in itself is pure and free [of representations], because of the characteristics of the nature we are born with, we have to imagine it for ourselves through an imaged allegory until our frail body is put aside and the purified eye of the soul’s spirituality is placed immediately in the circle of the eternal sun. . . . If we sometimes possess the truth, we do not realize we have it, and we act like someone who is looking for something that he has in his hand. There is not a person on earth who is completely free of this condition because it is an echo of original sin.) Henry Suso, *Briefbüchlein* 9, ed. Bihlmeyer, 387, lines 8–16; trans. Tobin, 356–357. Tobin translates “in biltlicher glichnúss” as “through the analogy of images.”

coming from the senses, on detachment, and on spiritual perfection. The very last chapter appears as a synthesis of these teachings “mit kurzen einvaltigen worten” (in a few simple words), and it begins with Elsbeth’s final question: “Sir, you have spoken from your own thinking and from sacred scripture very knowledgeably and in keeping with Christian teaching about the mystery of the naked Godhead, about the flowing out and the flowing back in of the spirit. Could you outline for me the hidden meanings, as you understand them, by an imaged allegory, so that I might understand better? I would also like you to give me a summary in brief, concrete form of all the sublime thoughts that were extensively treated earlier, so that they might stick longer in my poor mind.”⁶⁹

Respecting the apophatic tradition inherited from his master, Suso first answers by recalling the ineffable and invisible nature of God and the limits of human intellect: “How can one form images of what entails no images or state the manner of something that has no manner (of being), that is beyond all thinking and the human intellect? No matter what one compares it to, it is still a thousand times more unlike than like,”⁷⁰ before carrying on, more atypically, “But still, so one may drive out images with images, I shall now explain to you through images and by making comparisons, as far as it is possible, for these same meanings beyond images—how it is to be understood in truth, and thus conclude a long discussion with a few words.”⁷¹ This final conversation between the Servant and his spiritual daughter constitutes a crucial passage of the *Life*—if not of the whole *Exemplar*—for it clearly evokes the power and function of images in mystical expression, that is, their ability to express as far as is possible the invisible and the ineffable. The conversation summarizes Suso’s opinion on the role of images in mystical discourse. Indeed, he underscores the fact that, despite their own limitations and also because of the limits of human intellect (something also expressed in letter 9 of the BB), images must be used if one wants to speak about God and mystical experience. Furthermore, as Hamburger notes, the famous formula “driving out images with images” is deeply rooted in the doctrine of speculation, for it “artfully combines the cataphatic and apophatic methods, not simply by way of replacing an inferior procedure rooted in sense experience with another capable

⁶⁹ “Dú tochter sprach: ‘ach herr, ir redent, baidú uss eigem grunde und uss der heiligen schrift, als gar kuntlich und cristanlich von der togenheit der blossen gotheit, von des geistes usgeflossenheit und wideringeflossenheit; moehtind ir mir die togen sinne nah úwer verstentnust etwie entwerfen mit bildgebender glichnus, daz ich es dest baz verstuende! Und woelti och gern, daz ir mir alle die hohen sinne, die da vor witsweíflich gerueret sind, daz ir die mit kurzer bildlicher rede zesamen vassetind, dar umbe daz sú minen kranken sinnen dest beliplicher wurdin’”: Henry Suso, *Seuses Leben* 53, ed. Bihlmeyer, 190–91; trans. Tobin, 200–201. Tobin translates “mit bildgebender glichnus” as “by concrete comparisons.”

⁷⁰ “Wie kan man bildlos gebilden unde wiselos bewisen, daz über alle sinne und über menschlich vernunft ist? Wan waz man glichnust dem git, so ist es noh tusentvalt ungelicher, denn es glich sie”: Henry Suso, *Seuses Leben* 53, ed. Bihlmeyer, 191, lines 6–9; trans. Tobin, 201.

⁷¹ “Aber doch, daz man bild mit bilden us tribe, so wil ich dir hie biltlich zoegen mit glichnusgebender rede, als verr es denn móglich ist, von den selben bildlosen sinnen, wie es in der warheit ze nemen ist, und lang red mit kurzen worten beschliessen”: Henry Suso, *Seuses Leben* 53, ed. Bihlmeyer, 191, lines 9–12; trans. Tobin, 201. Tobin translates “daz man bild mit bilden us tribe” as “so one may drive out one image with another.”

of overcoming it, but because there is no other way: all knowledge, even knowledge of God, begins by necessity with images.”⁷²

But there is even more at stake in this passage from chapter 53. Its main interest lies in the fact that the Dominican explains how these instruments of knowledge must be manipulated. First we should note that the readers are faced again with an indetermination: what kind of *bilde* is Suso talking about? From the context of this chapter, it is not possible to determine this fact, and this appears to be on purpose: by choosing not to specify, Suso is formulating a theory on the use of all kinds of images and figures provided in and produced by his text, which is quite unusual at that time. More precisely, by stating that one must drive out images with images, Suso invites his readers to use their imagination and to mentally work on the images stored in their memory.⁷³ The mind becomes an internal space where images and signs are subjected to a perpetual process of repetition and transformation of their form and content.⁷⁴ In other words, Suso’s program consists not so much of an elimination or disappearance of images, but rather of a particular mode of use: each image must be replaced by another one, so that they can complete and correct each other. In doing this, Suso offers a continually changing, flexible, and dynamic alternation of images, which he believes provides the best explanation about the nature of God and mystical union.⁷⁵

Suso’s metadiscourse invites the reader to consider images as aids towards mystical knowledge and it gives clues as to how the imagery provided in the work must be used. It is thus worth analyzing the drawings of the *Exemplar* by taking into consideration the theory developed in the text. Indeed, the large number of illustrated copies (including the oldest one) and the strong interdependence of texts and images strongly suggest that the drawings are not simple illustrations of the text but must be conceived as an integral part of the work, working hand in hand with the text,⁷⁶ in order to convey Suso’s teachings in the most effective way. One may thus rightfully ponder the possible existence of visual strategies

⁷² Hamburger, “Speculations on Speculation,” 381.

⁷³ It is worth mentioning that this invitation to use images and the imagination is directly put into practice in the text. In the paragraph that directly follows this advice, Suso invites his readers to visualize God as a circle whose center is everywhere and its circumference nowhere, before imagining the Trinity as three concentric circles formed at the surface of the water by the throw of a stone, and then describing at length the several steps of the drawing of the mystical path: Henry Suso, *Seuses Leben* 53, ed. Bihlmeyer, 191–94; trans. Tobin, 201–4.

⁷⁴ As Hildegard Keller has shown in her study of the rose motif (a recurrent theme linked to meditation and the *imitatio Christi* in Suso’s works): Keller, “Rosen-Metamorphosen,” 54.

⁷⁵ On this key passage of Suso’s oeuvre, in addition to the references already cited, see also Bruno Boesch, “Seuses religiöse Sprache,” in *Festgabe für Friedrich Maurer zum 70. Geburtstag am 5. Januar 1968*, ed. Werner Besch (Düsseldorf, 1968), 223–45, at 238–39; Alois M. Haas, *Sermo mysticus: Studien zu Theologie und Sprache der deutschen Mystik* (Freiburg, 1979), 179–81; Hamburger, “The Use of Images,” 27; Lentjes, “Der Mediale Status des Bildes,” 58–59; Wolfgang Wackernagel, “Les noces mystiques du bienheureux Henri Suso,” *Diogenes* 208 (2004): 114–31, at 125.

⁷⁶ On this point, I agree with José van Aelst, “Het gebruik van beelden bij Suso’s lijdensmeditatie,” in *Geen povere schoonheid. Laat-middeleeuwse kunst in verband met de Moderne Devotie*, ed. Kees Veleenturf (Nijmegen, 2000), 86–100, at 96. Furthermore, McGinn writes about Suso (but also about Hildegard of Bingen and Joachim of Fiore) that “art does not so much illustrate theology in the sense of being a secondary adjunct to it; it is a necessary expression or manifestation of theological insight itself. Image is not just illustration, it is argument”: McGinn, “Theologians as Trinitarian Iconographers,” 188.

that helped to put Suso's image theory into practice. This is the task I will now undertake, arguing that the drawings located in the *Life* are visual expressions of Suso's teachings, notably on the ineffability of God and on the use of images.

ETERNAL WISDOM IN TEXT AND IMAGE: AN AMBIGUOUS FIGURE

If Suso's discourse on images can seem ambiguous at times, this ambiguity is even more obvious in the pictures of the *Exemplar*, at least in some respects. Let us begin with the Strasbourg manuscript, that is, the oldest illustrated copy of the *Exemplar* (A). The first drawing—which is also the very first page of the compilation—shows, according to the title of the picture written on the upper part of the folio, “the espousal of Eternal Wisdom with the soul” (Fig. 1).⁷⁷ Identified by a caption (“der diener der ewige wisheit”), the Servant appears on the left. Tonsured and young in appearance, he wears the Dominican habit and his partially open frock discloses the engraved monogram of Christ on his chest (a direct allusion to chapter 20 of the *Life*). His left hand holds a banderole with a quotation from the Book of Wisdom stating that he chose Eternal Wisdom as his spiritual bride (“diz han ich geminnet vnd üsgesuochet von minen iungen tagen und han mir sie vserkorn ze einer gemahel,” Wisdom 8.2). On top of the banderole appears a Latin translation of the first words of the quotation (“Hanc amaui et cetera”). The complete version of this Latin quotation opens the first part of the BdEW, where Suso writes that “these words are written in the Book of Wisdom and refer to beautiful, lovely Eternal Wisdom,” before giving the German translation again.⁷⁸ These quotations indicate clearly that the Servant evokes the feminine figure of Wisdom, in accordance with the way she is presented in the sapiential books of the Old Testament. In the drawing, Eternal Wisdom—who is identified by a caption—is nevertheless depicted as a crowned and bearded man whose attitude, however, evokes the feminine figures found in Gothic sculpture or illumination.⁷⁹ Standing on the right, the figure holds a *Weltscheibe* (a blue disc depicting the sun and the moon)⁸⁰ and a banderole with a German quotation (Ecclesiasticus 1.33).⁸¹ These features of the picture confirm the identification.

⁷⁷ “Disú bild bewisent der Ewigen wisheit mit der sele geischlich gemahelschaft.”

⁷⁸ “Disú woertlú stant geschriben an der wisheit buoche, und sint gesprochen von der schoenen minnerichen Ewigen Wisheit und sprechent ze tútsche also: ‘dis han ich geminnet und us gesuochet von minen jungen tagen und han mir si us erkorn ze einer gemahlen’”: Henry Suso, *Büchlein der Ewigen Weisheit* 1.1, ed. Bihlmeyer, 200, lines 16–19; trans. Tobin, 211.

⁷⁹ It is quite difficult to establish with certainty to what extent the androgynous aspect of Wisdom was produced on purpose or results from an unskillful execution on the part of the illustrator. The play with Wisdom's gender and the way the illustrator executed the drapery (summarily, but not rudely) suggests that it was a deliberate choice.

⁸⁰ The *Weltscheibe* is a symbol of Creation and thus an allusion to the presence of Wisdom next to God during the creation of the World. The traditional attributes of Wisdom are the scepter and the book, but the figure is sometimes depicted with a *Weltscheibe*, as for instance in a manuscript of Petrus de Ebulo's *Liber ad honorem Augusti sive de rebus Siculis* dated c. 1195–97 (Bern, Bürgerbibliothek, MS Cod. 120 II, fol. 140r). On the iconography of Wisdom, see Thérèse d'Alverny, *Études sur le symbolisme de la Sagesse et sur l'iconographie*, ed. Charles Burnett (Aldershot, 1993).

⁸¹ “Kind mins begerst du der götlichen wisheit so behalt die tugent der gerechtikeit” (My son, if you long for divine wisdom, preserve the virtue of justice).



Fig. 1. *The Servant and Eternal Wisdom*, Henry Suso, *The Exemplar*, Strasbourg, Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire, MS 2929, fol. 1v, Strasbourg, c. 1370. © Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire de Strasbourg. See the online edition for a color version of this image.

The very first page of the *Exemplar* thus confronts the reader with an ambiguity regarding Wisdom: is this androgynous figure a man or a woman?

Even more remarkably, this ambiguity is cultivated in the other pictures of the Strasbourg cycle: Wisdom is depicted five times, but never in the same way. In the

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second picture (which relates to a passage of chapter 5 of the *Life*), the Servant is opening his mantle to show “gotes verborgnú wonung in siner sele” (God’s hidden dwelling place in his soul), that is, his heart, in which one can see Eternal Wisdom embracing his soul (Fig. 2). As tradition dictates, the soul is depicted as a naked child, while Wisdom appears as a woman with long hair and a halo. Here again, the reader is confronted with a contradiction between text and image: while Wisdom is depicted as a woman in the picture, the main text and the legend of the image refer to her through the use of masculine pronouns.⁸²

Eternal Wisdom appears a third time in the sixth drawing of the cycle (which is incorporated into chapter 41 of the *Life*), where the figure takes the form of the Christ Child (Fig. 3). The image recalls a vision in which the Servant is driven by a singing angel to a meadow where there appeared “únser frowen, wie dú ir kind, die ewigen wisheit, geneiget hate an ire mueterliches herze” (Our Lady pressing her Child, Eternal Wisdom, to her motherly heart).⁸³ The picture shows the Servant kneeling in front of a figure holding a child who, according to the text, must be Wisdom. Contrary to the first picture, the protagonists are not identified by captions. Furthermore, it is somewhat difficult to determine whether the standing figure is a man or a woman. Following the text, it should be the Virgin, as is the case in the other manuscripts. Yet the figure looks androgynous, if not masculine. Indeed, she/he seems to have a beard, but his/her attitude evokes the Gothic statues of the Virgin and Child. This ambiguity led Colledge and Marler to identify the standing figure with Eternal Wisdom depicted as a man.⁸⁴ However, this hypothesis raises more questions than it answers. Indeed, if Eternal Wisdom is the standing figure, then who is the child in his arms?⁸⁵ Furthermore, it is difficult to establish the extent to which the figure has been deliberately represented as androgynous.⁸⁶ In any case, the text and drawings of the other copies of the *Exemplar* argue in favor of the hypothesis that in the Strasbourg manuscript, Eternal Wisdom is the child being carried by this androgynous figure, who should probably be identified with the Virgin.

The fourth representation of Eternal Wisdom appears in the lower part of the eighth drawing of the cycle (the ninth picture according to Bihlmeyer’s numbering), whose theme is spiritual knighthood (Fig. 4). This picture is inserted into chapter 44 of the *Life*. In this chapter, the Servant encounters a knight who tells

⁸² Above the Servant’s head, one can read, “Er hat mich vnd ich in minneklich vmbuangen. Dez stan ich aller creaturen ledig, vnd bin mit vnbehangen” (*He has lovingly embraced me and I him. Through this I remain empty of all created things and unimpeded by them [my emphasis]*). See Colledge and Marler, “Mystical Pictures,” 308. The main text notably states, “It [the soul] was inclined in love at God’s side, embraced by his arms, and pressed to his divine heart.” For the main text, see Henry Suso, *Seuses Leben* 5, ed. Bihlmeyer, 20, lines 10–23; trans. Tobin, 73.

⁸³ For the complete passage, see Henry Suso, *Seuses Leben* 51, ed. Bihlmeyer, 139–40.

⁸⁴ Colledge and Marler, “Mystical Pictures,” 322. Following the identification of the text and the woodcut of the edition of 1482, Bihlmeyer identified the standing figure as the Virgin: Heinrich Seuse, *Deutsche Schriften*, ed. Bihlmeyer, 50*.

⁸⁵ Monique Gruber suggests that the standing figure could be either Wisdom or Christ holding the soul of the Servant. See Monique Gruber, *Henri Suso ou la recherche d’un chemin mystique à l’aide du texte et de l’image* (Diss. Metz, Université Paul Verlaine, 2008), 138–39.

⁸⁶ See n. 79.



Fig. 2. *The Servant Showing the Dwelling Place of God in His Soul*, Henry Suso, *The Exemplar*, Strasbourg, Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire, MS 2929, fol. 8v, Strasbourg, c. 1370. © Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire de Strasbourg. See the online edition for a color version of this image.

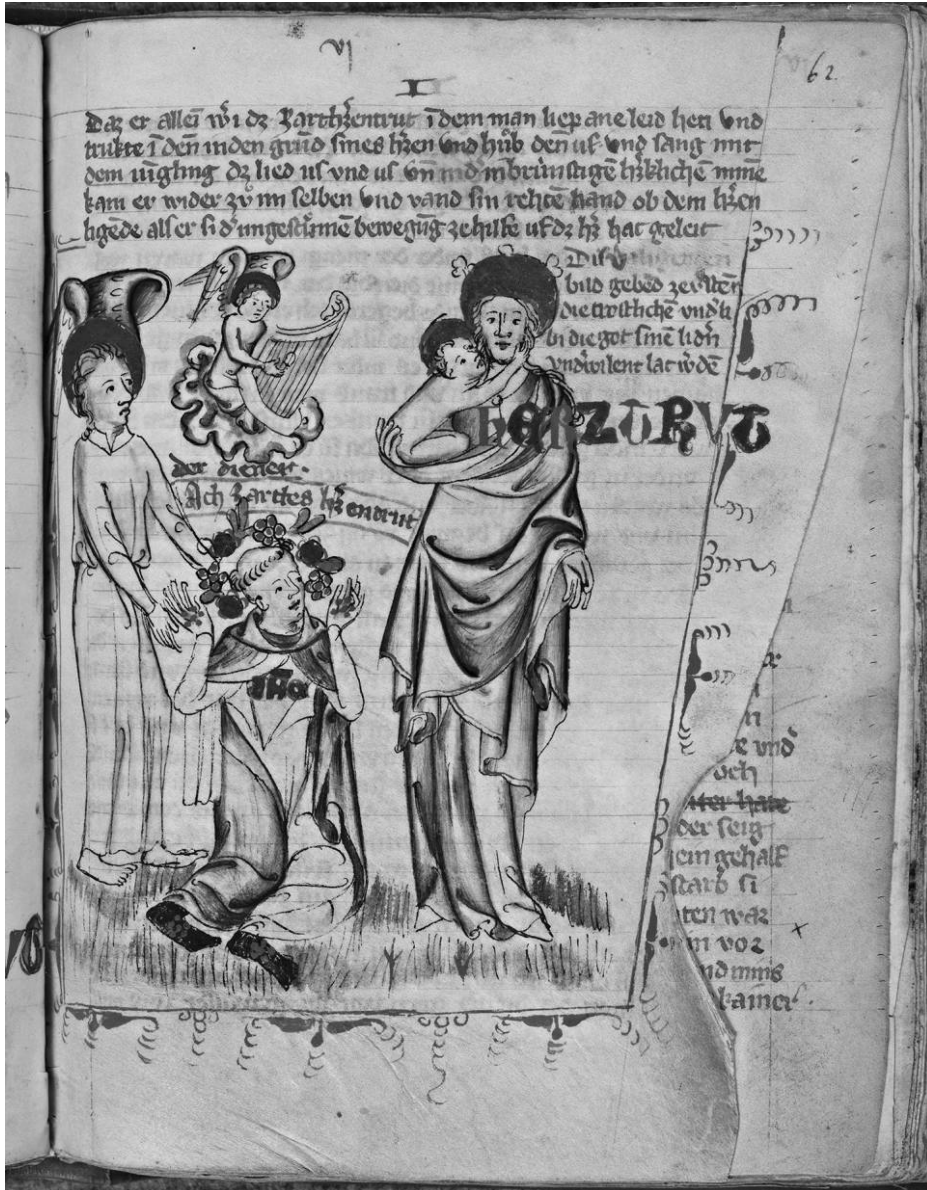


Fig. 3. *The Servant Having a Vision of Eternal Wisdom*, Henry Suso, *The Exemplar*, Strasbourg, Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire, MS 2929, fol. 62r, Strasbourg, c. 1370. © Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire de Strasbourg. See the online edition for a color version of this image.



Fig. 4. *The Servant Invested with Knightly Attire*, Henry Suso, *The Exemplar*, Strasbourg, Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire, MS 2929, fol. 67r, Strasbourg, c. 1370. © Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire de Strasbourg. See the online edition for a color version of this image.

him about the sufferings he has had to endure during the tournaments in order to gain the ring and the love of his lady. The Servant starts to hope he will become the spiritual knight of Eternal Wisdom and to receive a ring from her.⁸⁷ The drawing materializes this hope, as the legend suggests: “Ritterlichú klaid und ere son sú eweklich niessen die sich hie dur got lidens vnd midens nit land verdriesen” (They who, for the love of God, are not here daunted by pain and suffering shall in eternity enjoy the trappings and the honor of knights). The Servant is kneeling on the left, holding out his arms to Wisdom, who is emerging from a starry disc that symbolizes heaven. Wearing a red tunic and long hair, she gives to her Servant the much-desired ring. Because of the chivalric context, Wisdom is obviously depicted here as a woman.

Finally, the last depiction of Eternal Wisdom occurs in the tenth drawing, inserted into chapter 45 of the *Life* (Fig. 5). The picture recalls one of Elsbeth’s visions: the Virgin tells her how the Servant spread the sweet name of Jesus around him. The Servant is giving the monogram of Christ to Elsbeth who, in turn, gives some other IHC monograms to a group of people including Dominican nuns, a monk, and lay people. The scene takes place under the mantle of Eternal Wisdom, who is depicted on a larger scale. She is identified by a caption located above her head. On the right, the legend “in minen götlichen schirm wil ich sú nemen die minen namen Ihc in ir begird wen tragen” (I will take those under my divine protection who will bear my name Ihc in their desire) corresponds to this iconography, which clearly derives from the famous iconography of the Madonna of Mercy (*Schutzmantelmadonna*).⁸⁸ Once again, the legend and the picture contradict each other: while the text is pronounced by Christ (“minen namen Ihc”), the image depicts Eternal Wisdom as a woman. Here she wears a crown and holds the scepter, her traditional attributes.

To sum up, in the Strasbourg *Exemplar*, Wisdom is successively depicted as a bearded man, a young woman, the Christ Child, again as a young woman, and finally as a crowned woman. She thus appears as an unstable and indeterminate figure throughout the iconographical cycle of the manuscript. Furthermore, in the case of most of the drawings (picture nos. 1, 2, and 9), a “gendered contradiction” between the verbal and the visual identification of Wisdom can be observed, thus reinforcing her fluid nature. Likewise, in the other manuscripts of the *Exemplar* and in the two printed editions, the iconography of Eternal Wisdom is never stable. Similar plays on her identity can be discerned, as Table 1 summarizes.

Depending on the manuscripts and their drawings, Eternal Wisdom thus appears sometimes as a woman (crowned or not); as a young bearded man, evoking Christ; as the Child Jesus; or as an old bearded man, evoking God the Father

⁸⁷ Henry Suso, *Seuses Leben* 53, ed. Bihlmeyer, 151–52.

⁸⁸ This reference aims at showing that the friends of God are placed under the protection of Eternal Wisdom. On this iconography, see Paul Pédrizet, *La Vierge de miséricorde : Étude d’un thème iconographique* (Paris, 1908); Dominique Donadieu-Rigaut, “Les ordres religieux et le manteau de Marie,” *Cahiers de recherches médiévales et humanistes* 8 (2001): 107–34; and, more recently, Hélène Millet and Claudia Rabel, *La Vierge au manteau de Puy-en-Velay: Un chef-d’œuvre du gothique international (vers 1400–1410)* (Lyon, 2011), 59–78.



Fig. 5. “Eternal Wisdom of the Sheltering Mantle” with the Servant and Elsbeth, Henry Suso, *The Exemplar*, Strasbourg, Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire, MS 2929, fol. 68v, Strasbourg, c. 1370. © Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire de Strasbourg. See the online edition for a color version of this image.

(this is the only case absent in A). As some scholars have already noticed, the gendered ambivalence of the depiction of Wisdom disappears in K, W, and the printed editions, where the character is not portrayed as a feminine figure at all.

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TABLE 1
The Iconography of Eternal Wisdom in the Copies of the *Exemplar*

Copy	Fig. 1	Fig. 2	Fig. 6	Fig. 9	Fig. 10
A	Young bearded man (fol. 1v)	Woman (fol. 8v)	Child (fol. 62r)	Woman (fol. 67r)	Woman (fol. 68v)
P	Young bearded man (fol. 118v)	Young bearded man (fol. 119r)	Child (fol. 121r)	Angel (fol. 122v)	Woman (fol. 123r)
K	Old bearded man (fol. 22v)	Young bearded man (fol. 28av)	Child (fol. 82v)	Young bearded man (fol. 88r)	Young bearded man (fol. 89r)
W	Old bearded man (fol. 4v)	Young bearded man (fol. 14r)	Child (fol. 88r)	Young bearded man (fol. 95v)	Young bearded man (fol. 97r)
B ¹	Young bearded man (fol. 87v)	Child (fol. 95v)	Child (fol. 152v)	Angel (fol. 158r)	Woman (fol. 159v)
R	Young bearded man (fol. 1v)	Woman (fol. 9v)	Child (fol. 82r)	Angel (fol. 89v)	Woman (fol. 91r)
Sorg 1482	Bearded man (fol. 5v)	Young bearded man (fol. 14v)	Child (fol. 81v)	Young bearded man (fol. 87v)	Old bearded man (fol. 89r)
Otmur 1512	Bearded man (fol. 2v)	Young bearded man (fol. 9r)	Child (fol. 55v)	Young bearded man (fol. 60r)	Old bearded man (fol. 61r)
<i>Textual description</i>	<i>feminine</i>	<i>masculine</i>	<i>Christ as child</i>	<i>In the text related to this drawing, Wisdom is not directly mentioned. Nonetheless, this passage is placed the context of spiritual knighthood, which implies that Wisdom is here a feminine figure</i>	

It is quite difficult to explain why the double-gendering is abandoned in these copies, but it is nonetheless important to underline that the identity of Wisdom is still kept as unstable, for the figure sometimes appears as an old man, evoking God the father; sometimes as Christ (child or adult). As for the relationship between the pictures and the captions inserted within them, the ambivalence is also maintained throughout the whole tradition, with some variations appearing from one copy to another. For instance, in all the copies, the legend of the first picture of the cycle refers to the Old Testament feminine Wisdom, but she is, nevertheless, always depicted as a man (evoking Christ or God the Father). Likewise, the ninth picture clearly alludes to textual passages dealing with spiritual knighthood where Wisdom is evoked as feminine. Nonetheless, if Wisdom does indeed appear as a woman in A, most of the other manuscripts depict the figure as Christ in this drawing.⁸⁹ In the tenth picture, only K and W maintain the equivalence between the image and its legend by representing Wisdom as Christ. Finally, in the second and sixth pictures, the interdependence between the textual and visual depictions is more often maintained.⁹⁰

In order to leave no doubt about the voluntary and significant nature of the variations in the depictions of Wisdom in the *Exemplar* manuscripts—and more precisely in the *Life*, as the five pictures are located in this book—one can compare the first and the tenth pictures of all the copies in which Wisdom is systematically identified as such by a caption but is never depicted in the same way: in A, P, B¹, and R, the figure is first depicted as a bearded and crowned man,⁹¹ then as a crowned woman holding a scepter (Figs. 6 and 7). In K and W, Wisdom is first shown as an old man evoking God the Father, then as Christ (Figs. 8 and 9).⁹² From this presentation of the visual depictions of Wisdom in the illustrated copies of the *Exemplar*, we can conclude that the ambivalence of Wisdom is broader than a “simple” dual-gendered image, as it has been usually underscored. In all

⁸⁹ Some illustrators decided to diverge from the text and depict an angel in place of Wisdom (P, B¹, and R). It is hard to state to what extent this departure from the text and the visual tradition is voluntary or the result of a misunderstanding of either the textual or the visual source from which these copies have been produced.

⁹⁰ As for the second drawing, only A and R draw away from the text—which mentions Wisdom as masculine—by depicting the figure as a woman. In the sixth drawing, all copies follow the text and show the figure as the Child.

⁹¹ In A and P, the man is young (and this could be seen as an allusion to Christ Pantokrator), while in B¹ and R, the man is older and appears to be God the Father.

⁹² In the printed editions, the difference between the two depictions of Wisdom is less clear, if not completely absent. In Sorg 1482, the figure appears twice as God the Father, and in Otmar 1512, first as Christ Pantokrator and then as God the Father, but the physical differences are slight. The printed versions of the *Exemplar* thus present a drastic simplification of Wisdom’s depictions. It is quite difficult to put forth a reason for this phenomenon. It should nonetheless be mentioned that Sorg 1482 and Otmar 1512 depend strictly on W, which presents a clearer separation between the textual and visual contents of the book and where a less important role is played by the drawings in comparison to the text than in the other manuscripts, as already mentioned by Hamburger, “Heinrich Seuse, ‘Das Exemplar,’” 174. A similar phenomenon is observed by Kathryn Starkey in the evolution of the illustrated manuscripts of Thomasin von Zerclaere’s *Wälsche Gast*: see Kathryn Starkey, “From Symbol to Scene: Changing Models of Representation in Thomasin von Zerclaere’s *Welsche Gast*,” in *Beweglichkeit der Bilder: Text und Imagination in den illustrierten Handschriften des “Welschen Gastes” von Thomasin von Zerclaere*, ed. Horst Wenzel and Christina Lechtermann (Cologne, 2002), 121–42.

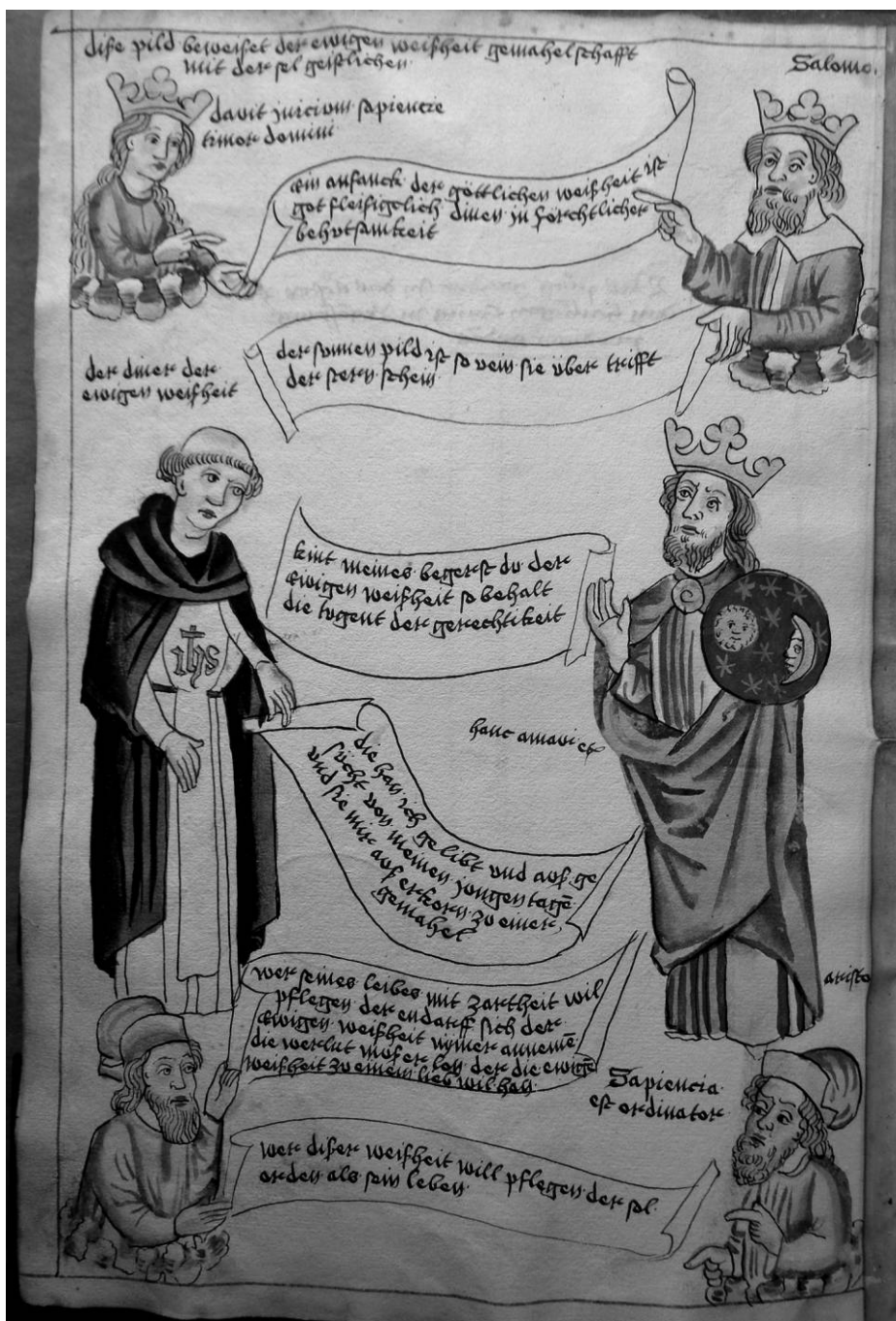


Fig. 6. *The Servant and Eternal Wisdom*, Henry Suso, *The Exemplar*, Wrocław, Bibliothek des Domkapitels, Cod. 46, fol. 1v, Regensburg, c. 1475–1500. © Wrocław, Bibliothek des Domkapitels. See the online edition for a color version of this image.

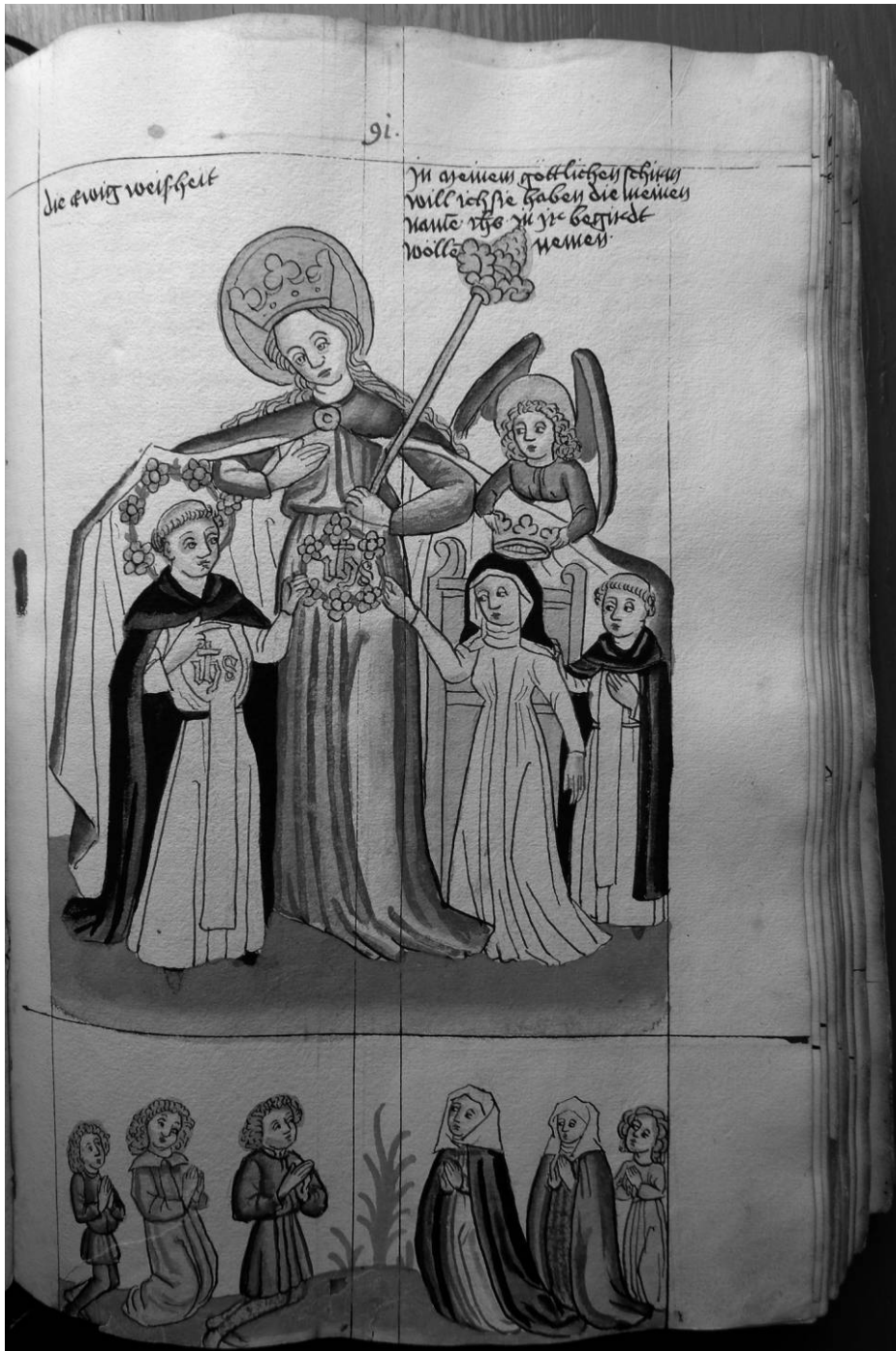


Fig. 7. "Eternal Wisdom of the Sheltering Mantle" with the Servant and Elsbeth, Henry Suso, *The Exemplar*, Wrocław, Bibliothek des Domkapitels, Cod. 46, fol. 91r, Regensburg, c. 1475–1500. See the online edition for a color version of this image.



Fig. 9. "Eternal Wisdom of the Sheltering Mantle" with the Servant and Elsbeth, Henry Suso, *The Exemplar*, Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Cod. Guelf. 78.5 Aug. fol., fol. 97r, Augsburg, 1473. © Herzog August Bibliothek. See the online edition for a color version of this image.

illustrated copies, readers were confronted with an ambiguous and multiple figure of Wisdom, whose iconography and textual description was never stable.

In order to understand what these variations in the depictions of Wisdom mean, a detour via the text of the *Life* is required. Chapter 3, entitled “How He Entered into a Spiritual Marriage with Eternal Wisdom,” recalls how the Servant discovered Eternal Wisdom by reading the sapiential books in his monastery. In these biblical texts, Wisdom was depicted “as lovable as an agreeable beloved who gets herself up in finery to please male inclinations, speaking softly, as a woman does, so that she might attract all hearts to her.”⁹³ One day, while he was seated at table and one of these texts was read out loud, he felt an impulse in his heart. He then decided to search for Wisdom and to become his Servant. Following this decision, some questions relating to the nature and the appearance of his beloved occurred in his mind. He wonders, “What must my beloved look like if she has so many delightful things hidden within her! Is she divine or human, man or woman, art or knowledge, or what?”⁹⁴ While the Servant was trying to work out what she looked like “in den usgeleitē bischaften der schrift” (through the interpreted allegories of scripture), she finally appeared to him:

She was suspended high above him on a throne of clouds. She shone as the morning star and dazzled as the glittering sun. Her crown was eternity, her attitude blessedness, her words sweetness, and her embrace the surcease of all desire. She was distant yet near, far above yet low, present yet hidden. She engaged in activities with others but no one could claim her. She towered above the summit of heaven and touched the bottom of the abyss. She spread herself out sovereign from one end of the earth to the other and ordered all things sweetly. The minute he thought her to be a beautiful young lady, he immediately found a proud young man before him. Sometimes she acted like a wise teacher, sometimes like a pert young thing. She presented herself to him endearingly, and greeted him smiling, saying kindly, ‘*Prebe, fili, cor tuum mihi!* Give me your heart, my child.’⁹⁵

This passage is crucial, as it illuminates Suso’s deliberate choice to present Eternal Wisdom in an ambiguous manner by emphasizing her changing and multiple nature: although the Servant has built up a certain image of his beloved through his (figurative) reading of the scripture, she appears to him in several

⁹³ “Als minneklich als ein lútselíú minnerin, dú sich finlich uf machet, dar umb daz si menlich wol gevalle, und redet zartlich in froewlichem bilde, daz si ellú herzen gen ir geneigen muge”: Henry Suso, *Seuses Leben* 3, ed. Bihlmeyer, 11–12; trans. Tobin, 67.

⁹⁴ “Ach wie ist das liep gestalt, daz so vil lustlicher dingen in im hat verborgen? Weder ist es got ald mensch, frow oder man, kunst ald list, oder waz mag ez sin?”: Henry Suso, *Seuses Leben* 3, ed. Bihlmeyer, 14, lines 6–8; trans. Tobin, 68–69.

⁹⁵ “Si swepte hoh ob ime in einem gewúlkten throne, si luhte als der morgensterne und schein als dú spilndú sunne; irú krone waz ewikeit, ire wat waz selikeit, irú wort suezzekeit, ire umbfang alles lustes gnuhsamkeit. Si waz verr und nahe, hoh und nider, si waz gegenwúrtig und doch verborgen; si liess mit ir umb gan, und moht si doch nieman begriffen. Si reichete úber daz obrest dez hoehesten himels und ruorte daz tiefst des abgrundes; si zerspreite sich von ende ze ende gewaltteklich und richte ellú ding us suessecklich. So er iez wande haben ein schoen jungfrowen, geswind vand er einen stolzen jungherren. Si gebaret etwen als ein wisú meisterin, etwen hielt si sich als ein vil weidenlichú minnerin. Sie bot sich zuo im minneklich und gruozte in vil lechelich und sprach zuo ime guetlich: ‘*Prebe, fili, cor tuum mihi!* Gib mir din herz, kind mins!’”: Henry Suso, *Seuses Leben* 3, ed. Bihlmeyer, 14, lines 10–23; trans. Tobin, 69.

shapes and in different attitudes, so he is finally incapable of determining what or who she actually is. Here we are obviously approaching a commonplace of mysticism, namely the impossibility of saying the unsayable and showing the invisible. It is nonetheless important to note that already in the sapiential books, especially in the Book of Wisdom and in Proverbs, Wisdom is characterized by a certain indecisiveness. She is sometimes described as a young girl, a mother, or a spouse, sometimes as a prophet or a preacher.⁹⁶ Regarding the Book of Wisdom, C. Larcher even wrote “There is no need to reduce all aspects of Wisdom to an unequivocal notion or to one figure. The author can very well pass from one to another, consider alternately wisdom as a human quality, as an objective norm or as a divine quality. . . . There is also no point in forbidding him the successive use of several kinds of personifications.”⁹⁷ Thus, by opting for an ambivalent depiction of Wisdom, Suso somehow perpetuates a tradition that goes back to the Old Testament.

The next chapters of the *Life* make the situation even more complex regarding the identification of Wisdom: if the first references clearly allude to the Old Testament feminine Wisdom, a great number of the next passages follow the tradition of the New Testament by identifying Wisdom with Christ (child or adult).⁹⁸ Some passages are nonetheless quite equivocal. In this regard, the most fascinating excerpt of the *Life* is without any doubt a section of chapter 7 in which we learn that during his meals, the Servant “directed the inward contemplation of his heart to Eternal Wisdom, begging her very fondly if she would go to the table and eat with him. He would say to him: ‘Dearest Jesus Christ, it is the great desire of my heart to invite you’.”⁹⁹ Here Suso even changes the gender of Wisdom in the middle of the sentence, passing from the feminine Wisdom to Christ as Wisdom. A similar case can be observed in chapter 8, in which Suso recounts how the Servant celebrated New Year by reciting a song in front of a statue of the Virgin and Child, hoping that the latter would offer him a crown of flowers. The Dominican

⁹⁶ C. Larcher, *Études sur le Livre de la Sagesse* (Paris, 1969), 132; James Wood, *Wisdom Literature: An Introduction* (Old Woking, 1967; reprint, 1979), 83. See also Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 190–91.

⁹⁷ “Ainsi la nécessité de ramener tous les aspects de la sagesse à une notion univoque ou à une même figure ne s’impose pas. L’auteur peut fort bien passer de l’un à l’autre, considérer alternativement la sagesse comme une qualité humaine, comme une norme objective ou comme une qualité divine. . . . Il n’y a pas lieu non plus de lui interdire l’utilisation successive de plusieurs sortes de personnifications” : Larcher, *Études sur le Livre de la Sagesse*, 402 (my translation).

⁹⁸ Bibliography on sapiential books and Christ as Wisdom in the New Testament is extensive. See, among others, Larcher, *Études sur le Livre de la Sagesse*; Wood, *Wisdom Literature*; Pierre-Emile Bonnard, “De la Sagesse personnifiée dans l’Ancien testament à la Sagesse en personne dans le Nouveau,” in *La Sagesse de l’Ancien Testament*, ed. Maurice Gilbert (Leuven, 1979; rep., 1990), 117–49; John Balchin, “Paul, Wisdom and Christ,” in *Christ the Lord*, ed. Harold Rowdon (Leicester, 1982), 204–19; William Gray, “Wisdom Christology in the New Testament: Its Scope and Relevance,” *Theology* 89 (1986): 448–59.

⁹⁹ “So knüwet er nider mit inrllicher betrachtung sines herzen für die ewigen wisheit, und bat die vil getrúlich, daz si mit ime ze tische giengi und mit im enbissi, und sprach zuo im also: ‘aller suessester Jesu Criste, ich lade dich mit grosser begirde mins herzen’”: Henry Suso, *Seuses Leben* 7, ed. Bihlmeyer, 24, lines 11–15; trans. Tobin, 76. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer of *Speculum* for drawing my attention to this change of gender within this sentence.

friar first identifies Wisdom with the Child before describing the figure in feminine terms and considering “her beauty, gentility, virtues, gentleness, freedom and constant dignity to be above that of all the beautiful young ladies of this world.”¹⁰⁰ In other places, Wisdom is identified with God, without any further specification, as for instance in the passage of chapter 5 related to the second picture (“der minneklich got”).¹⁰¹ Finally, Suso sometimes associates Wisdom and God the Father, as is the case in chapter 50, which relates a mystical union between the Servant’s heart and the Father’s heart, which the author identifies with Eternal Wisdom (“daz veterlich herz, die ewigen wisheit”).¹⁰² Thus, if the figure of Eternal Wisdom to whom the Servant dedicates his life is mainly identified with Christ in the text, the fact nonetheless remains that Suso does not present her systematically as such.

For several decades, gender issues have indeed occupied a prominent place in scholarship devoted to late medieval mystical literature.¹⁰³ In this context, Barbara Newman notably focused on the gender ambivalence of Wisdom in Suso’s oeuvre.¹⁰⁴ She demonstrated that Suso assigns a specific gender to Wisdom and presents union between God and the soul in different ways depending on his audience: in the BdEW—the German version originally aimed at Dominican nuns—Wisdom is clearly identified with (the suffering) Christ and allusions to Lady Wisdom are rare. Nuns, who were considered by canon law as “Christ’s spouses,” had indeed no difficulty imagining themselves as being united with Christ. On the contrary, in the *Horologium*—which aims at a larger audience composed of monks and clerics—Suso opts for a different strategy, namely presenting Wisdom sometimes in a feminine way, sometimes in a masculine way

¹⁰⁰ “[Er] ruomde si mit lobe an schoeni, an adel, an tugenden, an zartheit, an friheit mit iemer weren-der wirdekeit über alle schoen jung frowen diser welt”: Henry Suso, *Seuses Leben* 8, ed. Bihlmeyer, 26, lines 19–21; trans. Tobin, 78.

¹⁰¹ See also “Er versank die wil als gar in gote die ewigen wisheit, daz er nüt konde dur von gesprechen” (During this time he sank so completely in God into Eternal Wisdom that he was unable to speak of it): Henry Suso, *Seuses Leben* 50, ed. Bihlmeyer, 173, lines 20–21; trans. Tobin, 188.

¹⁰² “Eins tages waz im, wie daz veterlich herz in geischlicher wise neiswi unsaglich ane alles mitel an sin herz zartlich geneiget were, und daz sin herz eben gen dem veterlichen herzen begirlich ufgetan were, und duht in, wie daz veterlich herz, die ewigen wisheit, minneklich und formlosklich in sin herz spreche” (One day he felt as though the heart of the Father was tenderly inclined toward his heart somehow inexpressibly, in a spiritual manner, with no obstacles intervening, as though his heart were opened in longing to the heart of the Father. It seemed to him that the Father’s heart, Eternal Wisdom, spoke lovingly and immediately into his heart): Henry Suso, *Seuses Leben* 50, ed. Bihlmeyer, 174, lines 1–5; trans. Tobin, 189.

¹⁰³ For an overview, see Barbara Newman, “Gender,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Julia A. Lamm (Malden, MA, 2013), 41–55. In addition to Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, and Caroline Walker Bynum’s seminal works, see also Saskia Murk-Jansen, “The Use of Gender and Gender-Related Imagery in Hadewijch,” in *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Jane Chance (Gainesville, FL, 1996), 52–68; Hildegard Elisabeth Keller, *My Secret is Mine: Studies on Religion and Eros in the German Middle Ages* (Leuven, 2000); Rebecca Selman, “Spirituality and Sex Change: *Horologium Sapientiae* and *Speculum Devotorum*,” in *Writing Religious Women: Female Spirituality and Textual Practices in Late Medieval England*, ed. Denis Renevey and Christiania Whitehead (Toronto, 2000), 63–79.

¹⁰⁴ Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 12–14, 26–27, 206–22; and Barbara Newman, “Henry Suso and the Medieval Devotion.”

(with the first option clearly dominating). In adopting this approach, Suso distances himself from the monastic paradigm of the union between Christ and the feminized soul, and he offers to his masculine audience a model of heterosexual mystical union in which the man does not have to play the role of the feminized soul.¹⁰⁵ Newman concludes her analysis by showing that Suso gives the readers of the *Horologium* a dual vision of Eternal Wisdom: “s/he is at once the creatrix of the Old Testament and the redeemer of the new, at once glorified and crucified, divine and human, man and woman.”¹⁰⁶

Obviously, there is also a reflection on Wisdom’s gender in the *Life*, but by portraying different images of Eternal Wisdom,¹⁰⁷ Suso goes even further in this text. Indeed, the manner in which he uses these images in the *Life* differs from the strategy he uses in the BdEW and the *Horologium* that have been studied by Newman. In the *Life*, the readers are not simply confronted with a gender ambivalence, but also with the author’s wish to show several facets of Wisdom. In the text and in the pictures, Wisdom is deliberately presented as a changing and multiple figure. It is thus important to elucidate further this particular choice and to examine how it functions in the economy of the work.

ETERNAL WISDOM AND VISUAL DISCOURSE ON IMAGES IN THE *LIFE*

Texts classed as imaginative theology frequently resort to feminine figures, such as Lady Wisdom, Frau Minne, and Lady Poverty, who appear as intermediaries between God (from whom they emanate) and humankind. These figures should not be understood as simple personifications, but rather as emanations of the divine (or goddesses, as Newman calls them). Authors have recourse to such goddesses because “male God-language was taken more literally and therefore carefully regulated, while female God-language was accepted as figurative and granted some latitude.”¹⁰⁸ In the case of Suso, “Wisdom, although specially identified with Christ, is in reality an attribute of the undivided Godhead,”¹⁰⁹ as a passage of the first chapter of the *Horologium* clearly illustrates:

Certainly he did not see God in his essence, as he is in himself, in this abstraction which is being described, but only a supernatural emanation of divine rays, brighter than light. . . . Yet that object . . . was not only the Person of the Father or solely the Person of the Son or the Holy Spirit, nor was it the deity itself accepted in its most abstract simplicity, but it was that same divine essence accepted according to our fashion of understanding. . . . And he understood that this was that spouse of whom we have been

¹⁰⁵ On this topic see, among others, Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 210; Murk-Jansen, “The Use of Gender,” 59–60; and Keller, *My Secret is Mine*, 22–43.

¹⁰⁶ Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 211.

¹⁰⁷ Suso is certainly not the only medieval author who applies different genders to God or Wisdom. For the cross-sexual imagery of the divine in Hildegard of Bingen’s *Scivias*, see Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard’s Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley, 1987). Hadewijch also uses gender reversal in her works: see Murk-Jansen, “The Use of Gender.”

¹⁰⁸ Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 40.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 217.

told, Eternal Wisdom. It is indeed true that each of the Persons may be accepted as being himself Wisdom, and that all Persons together are one, Eternal Wisdom.”¹¹⁰

In this extract from the *Horologium*, Suso offers a hint at his conception of Eternal Wisdom by showing that it goes beyond a simple gender ambivalence: she is a way to encounter God, to know God, whose essence is unapproachable “secundum nostrum modum intelligendi accepta” (according to our way of understanding). In other words, Eternal Wisdom is a *figure* of God, in the sense that she consists of a mode of representation and interpretation of God. Turning back to the *Life*, one can see that the figure of Eternal Wisdom allows the Servant (and in turn the reader who is supposed to imitate him) to gain access to knowledge of the Deity from which she emanates and which she represents. The passage from chapter 3 quoted previously illustrates this very well: Eternal Wisdom first reveals herself to the Servant inwardly “in den usgeleitē bischaften der schrift,” and this gave rise to a series of interrogations in his mind as to the nature and the origin of this figure. These are precisely the questions that place the Servant within an interpretive process that allows him to attain both union with Wisdom and a higher degree of mystical knowledge.¹¹¹ Eternal Wisdom can thus be considered as a figure engaging the Servant in a quest for sense and, in fine, leading him in “daz grundlos abgründ aller lieplichen dingen” (into the endless abyss of all charming things),¹¹² that is, to the naked Deity.

Apprehending the nature of God is at the heart of the spiritual process described in the *Life*: very traditionally, God is presented as an ineffable reality, which the human intellect cannot know in its essence. In chapter 50, Elsbeth asks the Servant, “Waz ist got, ald wa ist got, ald wie ist got?” (What is God or where is he or how does he exist?). The Servant answers that even the most learned theologians could not explain precisely what God is because he is “über alle sinne und vernunft” (above all thought and intellect). Nevertheless, by consciously looking for traces of God in the created world, one can finally gain some knowledge, even if it is far from what God is in his essence.¹¹³ A little further on,

¹¹⁰ “Sane ipsum per essentiam, prout in se est, in praedicta abstractione non vidit, sed solum quandam divinorum superluculentum radorum emanationem supernaturalem . . . in se percepit. Porro obiectum . . . non fuit persona Patris tantum vel solum persona Filii aut Spiritus Sancti, nec fuit ipsa deitas in sua abstractissima simplicitate accepta, sed fuit ipsa essentia divina secundum nostrum modum intelligendi accepta. . . . Et hoc intellexit esse praedictam sponsam aeternam sapientiam. Verum licet quaelibet persona per se accepta sit sapientia, et omnes personae simul una aeterna sapientia”: Henry Suso, *Horologium Sapientiae* 1, ed. Pius Künzle, 381, lines 2–14; Henry Suso, *Wisdom’s Watch Upon the Hours*, trans. Edmund Colledge (Washington, 1994), 73.

¹¹¹ “Do tet er ein inrich frage und frage sin minnesuochendes herze also: ‘ach herz mins, luog, wannen flüset minne und ellú lütselikeit? Wannē kumt ellú zartheit, schonheit, herzlust und lieplich? Kunt ez nit alles von dem usquellenden ursprung der blossen gotheit? Wol uf dar, herz und sin und muot, dar in daz grundlos abgründ aller lieplichen dingen! Wer wil mir nu werren? Ach, ich umbvach dich hüt nach mins brinnenden herzen begirde!’ Und denne so trunkte sich in sin sele neiswi der ursprunglich usfluss alles guotes, in dem er bevand geischlich allez, daz schoen, lieplich und begirlich waz; daz waz alles da in unsprechlicher wise”: Henry Suso, *Seuses Leben* 3, ed. Bihlmeyer, 14–15; trans. Tobin, 69.

¹¹² Henry Suso, *Seuses Leben* 3, ed. Bihlmeyer, 14, line 32; trans. Tobin, 69.

¹¹³ “Von der ersten frage, waz got sie, solt du wissen, daz alle die meister, die ie wurden, kunnen daz nit us gerihten, wan er über alle sinne und vernunft ist. Und doch so gewinnet ein flissiger mensch

the Servant affirms, “The divine being we have been describing is subsisting intellect that cannot be seen by mortal eyes as it is in itself. One can see it very well in its effects, just as one recognizes a good master by examining his work. As Paul said, ‘Creatures are like a mirror in which God is reflected’. And this knowledge is called speculating.”¹¹⁴

This passage shows that even if it is impossible for the human intellect to fully understand—and thus explain—what God is, the human mind is nevertheless invited to try to apprehend the essence of God in a manner adapted to its cognitive abilities, that is, by observing the traces of God on earth in order to discover divine beauty¹¹⁵ and by using good and suitable images, including those provided in the *Exemplar*. Indeed, as early as the main prologue, Suso presents the images of the *Exemplar*—these “himelsche bilde”—as a way to draw the reader into a quest of inwardness toward God. This is obviously an invitation to consider the drawings as instruments aimed at helping spiritual progression.¹¹⁶ It is thus tempting to understand the changing and multifaceted figure of Eternal Wisdom as a strategy created by Suso to guide the reader towards this better understanding of the invisible and ineffable nature of God.

First aimed at Dominican nuns, the *Exemplar* is a work as profoundly didactic as it is complex; each aspect of the compilation is skillfully constructed in order to convey Suso’s teaching and to lead the reader in an interpretive quest in the most effective way. Among the strategies developed by the Dominican, there is the well-known fashioning of the Servant and the Disciple as models of spiritual perfection to be emulated by the reader, as well as the presence of Elsbeth as a character with whom the nuns can identify.¹¹⁷ Likewise, the author’s use of figures (visual, rhetorical, and theological) must be understood in that context. Suso’s use of and discourse on images strongly indicate that he considers images in general, and the drawings (in which Wisdom occupies a predominant place) in particular, as instruments of mystical knowledge. They have to be seen, examined, and used as tools that enable a better understanding of mystical experience, but not in a random way: Suso’s metadiscourse on the role of images as instruments helps the readers to work out how to use and interpret the pictures effectively. In the *Exemplar*, texts and images are thus intricately and sophisticatedly intertwined in order to produce figures that the readers can interpret.

Scholars usually acknowledge that Suso’s famous formula “driving out images with images” is the key passage of the *Exemplar*, and can even be considered as

mit emzigem suochene etwaz kundsami von got, aber gar in verrer wise, dar an dez menschen obrestú selikeit lit”: Henry Suso, *Seuses Leben* 50, ed. Bihlmeyer, 171, lines 6–11; trans. Tobin, 187.

¹¹⁴ “Er sprach: luog, daz goetlich wesen, von dem geseit ist, daz ist ein soelichú vernúnftigú substancie, die daz toedemlich oge nit gesehen mag in im selb; wan siht in aber wol in siner getat, als man einen guoten meister spúrt an sinem werke, wan als Paulus seit: ‘die creaturen sind als ein spiegel, in dem got widerlúhtet.’ Und dis bekennen heisset ein speculieren”: Henry Suso, *Seuses Leben* 50, ed. Bihlmeyer, 172, lines 1–6; trans. Tobin, 187.

¹¹⁵ “Ach zarter got, bist du in diner creatur als minneklich, owe, wie bist du denn in dir selb so gar schoen und minneklich!”: Henry Suso, *Seuses Leben* 50, ed. Bihlmeyer, 172, lines 21–23; trans. Tobin, 188.

¹¹⁶ See nn. 20 and 21.

¹¹⁷ See Hamburger, “Medieval Self-Fashioning.”

his *method* for using images. Indeed, by stating that one must “drive out images with images” in order to “form images of what entails no images,” the mystic explains to his readers how to use all the imagery provided in his compilation including, notably, the changing figure of Wisdom. Indeed, the bringing together of Suso’s metadiscourse on images and this iconographical incongruity encourages us to see this figure as a visual expression of the key concept of the compilation: throughout the whole text of the *Life*, the reader is confronted with a personification of God known in the Middle Ages for its versatility and its figurative power. The changing identity of Wisdom in the iconographical program and in the text is an invitation to reflect upon the nature of God. Passing from one depiction of Wisdom to another, confronting its verbal descriptions and visual depictions—that is, entering into a dynamic interpretive process of the figures offered in the work—the readers slowly discover Suso’s goal, which consists of showing different aspects of God through different images that alternate with each other in order to give the most complete vision and understanding possible of God on earth. In other words, the readers are thus involved in a process of figurability, which consists in putting these figures together in a network in order to produce figural meaning.¹¹⁸

In this regard, it is worth returning to chapter 3 of the *Life*, which expresses the same content as the theoretical section of chapter 53, although in a very different way, and thus acts as its counterpart. More precisely, by recalling how the Servant was used to imagine the appearance of his beloved “through the interpreted allegory of scripture (*in den usgeleiten bischaften der schrift*)” and how ambivalent she was when she finally appeared to him, this chapter underscores the crucial importance of figurative interpretation by staging it through the Servant’s experience. In the economy of the work, the reader is thus first confronted with the living example of the Servant, who proceeded to a figurative reading of the scripture, then saw the changing figure of Wisdom in visions and understood her as such before gaining mystical knowledge. It is through experience that the Servant (and thus Suso) is able to communicate something that is ineffable. Then, at the end of the book, the reader is presented with another version of this teaching: Suso theorizes this “driving out of images with images” method. Chapters 3 and 53 (the beginning and the end of the book) thus express the same thing, firstly in concrete, practical terms and then in abstract, theoretical terms. Between these two crucial moments of Suso’s teaching, the reader is also led to experience him/

¹¹⁸ On this process of figurability, see in particular Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico*, 234. In this study, Didi-Huberman further explains the process of figurability that is at stake in a Fra Angelico painting in a way that oddly echoes the process in which Suso invites his readers to engage: “Pour une pensée nourrie d’exégèse, le mystère n’est *que* figurable. Si l’on suppose chez Fra Angelico un tel mode de pensée, alors il faut supposer que, pour lui, *figurer* ne voulait pas dire donner son aspect à l’histoire, mais voulait dire: appréhender le mystère en pratiquant picturalement la diffraction du sens, sa mise en perpétuels déplacements. . . . Que le mystère soit figurable, cela signifie moins la ‘capacité’ représentative des figures que leur humilité, au contraire, et la nécessité de leur mouvement perpétuel, de leur lent déplacement tournoyant et anagogique. . . . Jamais une figure ne représentera le mystère comme tel. Son essence est le détour. Elle représentera donc toujours le mystère *pour une autre figure*, qui elle-même représente le mystère pour une autre figure, et ainsi de suite, en spirale, autour du mystère” (233–35).

herself the changing figure of Wisdom by looking at the pictures and by being confronted with the text in order to capture the best understanding possible of what God is. On the one hand, the structure of the *Life*—and more precisely its articulation of text and images—thus allow Suso to stress the importance of experience as a means of knowledge that he presents through the example of the Servant and thus makes accessible to his audience. On the other hand, in order to convey his teaching on the ineffability of God, Suso calls on the textual and visual components of his work and thus deploys a net in which the reader is led to interpret figuratively the content of the book.

In conclusion, the changing and multiple figure of Wisdom in the images of the *Life* corroborates and works hand in hand with the message Suso develops in his text (God is ineffable and invisible; he cannot be fully and perfectly represented); furthermore, the Dominican also helps his readers to find a solution. Despite the ineffability of God, it is human nature to desire to see and to know him. Images can be useful as an aid in this regard if manipulated in the particular way described by Suso, that is, in a dynamic manner and while admitting their limitations. Understood in this context, the multifaceted Eternal Wisdom, described in the *Life* in words and in pictures, actually appears as a figure of God, elaborated by Suso in a complex and dynamic way in order to show the imageless by means of imagery.

Ingrid Falque is a postdoctoral researcher at Université catholique de Louvain and the University of Namur, Belgium (e-mail: ingrid.falque@uclouvain.be)

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APPENDIX 1
DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE ILLUSTRATED MANUSCRIPT AND PRINTED COPIES OF THE *EXEMPLAR*¹¹⁹

Siglum	Shelf mark	Dating	Place of production	Provenance	Textual content
[A]	Strasbourg, BNU, MS 2929	c. 1365–70	Strasbourg	No mark of provenance. The MS comes from the Commandery of the Order of St. John zum Grünen Wörth in Strasbourg, but it might not have been produced for or in this place.	• <i>Exemplar</i>, complete version: - Main prologue - <i>Life</i> - BdEW - BdW - BB
[P]	Paris, BNF, MS allem. 222	c. 1430	Alsace	In 1423, the MS belonged to Margareta Zorne, a Dominican nun from Unterlinden. In 1431, the MS was in the possession of the convent St. Nikolaus in undis in Strasbourg, which had been reformed by nuns from Basel and Unterlinden.	• <i>Exemplar</i>, shortened version: - <i>Life</i> (abbreviated) - BB (letters 1–9, title of letter 11) • Collection of sermons and mystical texts from anonymous authors, Ulrich von Grünenwörth, Johannes Tauler, Marquard von Lindau, Nicholas of Strasbourg, Meister Eckhart.
[K]	Einsiedeln, Stiftsbibl., Cod. 710	c. 1455	Constance	Commissioned by Heinrich Ehinger (1438–79) and his wife Margaretha von Kappel (1440?–after 1483). It then entered the Dominican convent of St. Peter in Constance. The MS was either a gift from the couple or entered the convent via the couple's niece, Dorothea Ehinger, who entered the convent in 1503.	• Register • <i>Kreuztragende Minne</i> • <i>Christus und die minnenden Seele</i> • <i>Disput zwischen der minnenden Seele und unserem Heern</i>

¹¹⁹ For a more detailed presentation of the illustrated manuscripts and editions, see Jeffrey F. Hamburger, "Heinrich Seuse, 'Das Exemplar,'"

(continued)

Siglum	Shelf mark	Dating	Place of production	Provenance	Textual content
[W] 487	Wolfenbüttel, HAB, Cod. Guelf. 78.5 Aug. fol.	1473 (dated on fol. 322r)	Augsburg	Unknown, most probably the Benedictine abbey of Saints Ulrich and Afra in Augsburg	• Exemplar, complete version: - Main prologue - <i>Life</i> - BdEW - BdW - BB • Collection of ascetic and mystical texts from anonymous authors; <i>Von der ewigen Weisheit Gemahelschaft</i> (chapter 2.7 of Suso's <i>Horologium</i>) • Register • Exemplar, complete version: - Main prologue - <i>Life</i> - BdEW - BdW - BB • Addition to the BB • <i>Bruderschaft der ewigen Weisheit</i> • <i>Neufelsenbuch</i> (short version) • Exemplar, complete version: - Main prologue - <i>Life</i> - BdEW - BdW (chapters 3, 4, 6, 7 missing) - BB (letters 6, 7 missing)
[R]	Wrocław, Bibl. des Domkapitels, Cod. 46	c. 1475–1500	Regensburg	Regensburg, Dominican convent of the Holy Cross; copied by the nun Katharina Menttelwenger	

(continued)

Siglum	Shelf mark	Dating	Place of production	Provenance	Textual content
					• <i>Großes Briefbuch</i> (letters 14, 17, 18, 20, 23, 28 missing) • Addition to the BB • <i>Bruderschaft der ewigen Weisheit</i>
[B']	Berlin, Staatsbibl., MS germ. fol. 658	c. 1480	East Bavaria	Dominican convent of Altenhohenau, near Wasserburg am Inn.	• <i>Der Heiligen Leben</i> (Sommerteil) • Exemplar, shortened version: - Main prologue - <i>Life</i> - BdEW without the <i>Hundred Considerations</i> • Register • Exemplar, complete version: - Main prologue - <i>Life</i> - BdEW - BdW - BB
[Sorg 1482]		1482	Augsburg	Copy based on W. As the strict textual and visual dependence testifies, Sorg 1482 has obviously been copied from W, which also comes from Augsburg and is dated 1473; ¹²⁰ the two copies present the exact same sequence of texts attributed to Suso (the complete <i>Exemplar</i> followed by the addition to the BB and the <i>Bruderschaft der ewigen Weisheit</i>) followed by the short version of the <i>Neumfelsenbuch</i> , which was then	

¹²⁰ See Daniela Kuhlmann, *Heinrich Seuses "Buch der Wahrheit": Studien zur Textgeschichte* (Diss. Würzburg, 1987), 76–77; and Hamburger, "Heinrich Seuse, 'Das Exemplar,'" 184.

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Siglum	Shelf mark	Dating	Place of production	Provenance	Textual content
[Otm 1512]		1512	Augsburg	attributed to Suso. As strong iconographical and formal dependence indicates, the woodcuts were copied from W as well.	• Addition to the BB • <i>Bruderschaft der ewigen Weisheit</i> • <i>Neunfelsenbuch</i> (short version)
				As the strict textual and visual dependence testifies, Otm 1512 has been copied from Sorg 1482.	• Editor's foreword • Exemplar, complete version: - Main prologue - <i>Life</i> - BdEW - BdW - BB • Addition to the BB • <i>Bruderschaft der ewigen Weisheit</i> • <i>Neunfelsenbuch</i> (short version) • Register

APPENDIX 2
DESCRIPTION AND COMPARISON OF THE VISUAL CYCLE OF THE *EXEMPLAR*'S
MANUSCRIPTS AND PRINTED COPIES

Siglum	Visual content
[A]	• Cycle of the <i>Exemplar</i> divided into 11 drawings: - Inserted within the text. - Full page, except no. 7 with a few lines of text above. - Nos. 4, 8/9, and 12 presented as two scenes on a single page. • Other drawings in the <i>Exemplar</i>: - 3 small extra drawings/inscriptions inserted within the text (<i>IHC</i> on fol. 7r, grid pattern on fol. 47v, <i>Herzentrut</i> on fol. 61r). - 4 historiated initials.
[P]	• Cycle of the <i>Exemplar</i> divided into 13 drawings: - Gathered after the text. - Full page. - No. 8/9 divided into two pages. - No. 11, "the mystical path": the motif of the couple with the Death has been drawn on a separate folio located after no. 12. • Remark: The text of P differs quite strongly from A (the <i>Life</i> is abbreviated) but the iconography and composition of most of P's drawings are quite close to those of A, as confirmed by some details, like the bench on which the Servant is seated in picture no. 2 or the small red dots on the Servant's hands in picture no. 4 (which do not appear in the other copies). P nonetheless presents some major differences from A (see above).
[K]	• Cycle of the <i>Exemplar</i> divided into 14 drawings: - Inserted within the text. - Full page: nos. 1, 5, 7, 10, 11. - With a few lines of text above or beneath: nos. 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 12. - Nos. 4, 8/9, and 12 divided into two pages. • Other drawings in the <i>Exemplar</i>: - 1 small extra drawing inserted in the text (<i>IHC</i> on fol. 27v). - 5 historiated initials. • Other drawings in the MS: - Full page with coats of arms. - 1 drawing (half page) opening the <i>Kreuztragende Minne</i>. - 21 small drawings inserted in <i>Christus und die minnenden Seele</i>.

(continued)

Siglum	Visual content
[W]	• Cycle of the <i>Exemplar</i> divided into 14 drawings: - Inserted within the text. - Full page: nos. 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12a. - With a few lines of text above or beneath: nos. 3, 4, 11, 12b. • Other drawing in the <i>Exemplar</i>: 1 extra drawing added to the <i>Exemplar</i> (chapter 34 of the <i>Life</i>, fol. 61v): Anna in a castle. This image precedes the picture of the Servant receiving the fruits of the Passion and completes it. The text indicates that Anna was a noblewoman living in a castle. By adding this image, the copyist/artist of W followed the structure of picture no. 4 of the cycle, which also depicts one of Anna's visions involving the Servant, with Anna on one side and the vision on the other. • Remark: Modifications in the order of the pictures: the upper part of no. 12 (the Servant receiving the fruits of the Passion) is placed in chapter 34 of the <i>Life</i> (fol. 62r), to which it is directly related, instead of in the BdEW, as in the other copies. This image relates to a vision of Anna, a spiritual daughter of the Servant. In this vision, she saw the Child Jesus on a rosebush, throwing roses to the Servant, as a symbol of his forthcoming sufferings. • Other drawings in the MS: - 2 drawings in the <i>Neunfelsenbuch</i>.
[R]	• Cycle of the <i>Exemplar</i> divided into 11 drawings: - Inserted within the text. - Full page. • Other drawing in the <i>Exemplar</i>: 1 small drawing inserted in the text (<i>IHC</i> on fol. 7vb). • Remark: R's cycle is relatively close to A's but nonetheless presents differences in some details: the composition of picture no. 3 is inversed; picture no. 9 presents a composition in two registers that is absent in A. Interestingly, R shares most of these changes with B¹, which was produced at approximately the same time, but which does not share exactly the same textual content. R's cycle is indeed very similar to B¹'s. In particular, they are the only copies showing an angel instead of Wisdom in picture no. 9. Also, the composition of picture no. 3 is reversed in both. They also share some elements of the setting in other pictures, such as the bench in no. 2. The correlation between the two cycles is nonetheless not complete. For example, in picture nos. 9 and 12, the composition of B¹ is simpler.

(continued)

Siglum	Visual content
[B ¹]	• Cycle of the <i>Exemplar</i> divided into 11 drawings: - Inserted within the text. - Full page. • Other drawing in the <i>Exemplar</i>: 1 small drawing inserted in the text (<i>IHC</i> on fol. 93vb). • Remark: B¹'s cycle is quite similar to R's (see above).
[Sorg 1482]	• Cycle of the <i>Exemplar</i> divided into 14 woodcuts: - Inserted within the text. - Full page: nos. 1, 5, 6, 10, 11, 12a. - With a few lines of text above or beneath: nos. 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 12b. • Other woodcuts in the <i>Exemplar</i>: - 1 extra woodcut added to the <i>Exemplar</i> (chapter 34 of the <i>Life</i>, fol. 61v): Anna in a castle, as in W. - 5 historiated initials • Remark: Modifications in the order of the pictures as in W.
[Otmar 1512]	• Cycle of the <i>Exemplar</i> divided into 14 woodcuts: - Inserted within the text. - Full page: nos. 1, 10, 11. - With a few lines of text above or beneath: 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12a, 12b. • Other woodcuts in the <i>Exemplar</i>. 3 extra woodcuts added to the <i>Exemplar</i>: - Anna in a castle (chapter 34 of the <i>Life</i>, fol. 61v), as in W and Sorg 1482. - A woman led by an angel (opening of the BdW, fol. 244. Same woodcut as picture no. 4a of the cycle). - A woman seated in a courtyard (opening of the BB, fol. 132v. Same woodcut as on fol. 61v). • Remark: Modifications in the order of the pictures as in W and Sorg 1482. • Others woodcuts in the book: - Two angels bearing a coat of arms with <i>IHC</i> (at the end of the editor's foreword, fol. 2r). - The Servant greeted by an angle (opening of the <i>Bruderschaft der ewigen Weisheit</i>, fol. 147r). - The ascension to heaven (opening of the <i>Neunfelsenbuch</i>, fol. 152r). - Two angels bearing a coat of arms with <i>IHC</i> (at the end of the <i>Neunfelsenbuch</i>, fol. 179v). - <i>Sursum corda</i> (after the register, fol. 182v).