

JACOB BOEHME

SIGNATURA RERUM

THE SIGNATURE OF ALL THINGS

CHAPTER I

HOW THAT ALL WHATEVER IS SPOKEN OF GOD WITHOUT THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE SIGNATURE IS DUMB AND WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING; AND THAT IN THE MIND OF MAN THE SIGNATURE LIES VERY EXACTLY COMPOSED ACCORDING TO THE ESSENCE OF ALL ESSENCES ¹

1. ALL whatever is spoken, written, or taught of God, without the knowledge of the signature is dumb and void of understanding; for it proceeds only from an historical conjecture, from the mouth of another, wherein the spirit without knowledge is dumb; but if the spirit opens to him the *signature*, then he understands the speech of another; and further, he understands how the spirit has manifested and revealed itself (out of the essence through the principle) in the sound with the voice. For though I see one to speak, teach, preach, and write of God, and though I hear and read the same, yet this is not sufficient for me to understand him; but if his sound and spirit out of his signature and similitude enter into my own similitude, and imprint his similitude into mine, then I may understand him really and fundamentally, be it either spoken or written, if he has the hammer that can strike my bell.

2. By this we know, that all human properties proceed from one; that they all have but one only root and mother; otherwise one man could not understand another in the sound, for with the sound or speech the form notes and imprints itself into the similitude of another; a like tone or sound catches and moves another, and in the sound the spirit imprints its own similitude, which it has conceived in the essence, and brought to form in the principle.

¹ Being of all beings.

3. So that in the word may be understood in what the spirit has conceived,¹ either in good or evil; and with this signature he enters into another man's form, and awakens also in the other such a form in the signature; so that both forms mutually assimilate together in one form, and then there is one comprehension, one will, one spirit, and also one understanding.

4. And then secondly we understand, that the signature or form is no spirit, but the receptacle, container, or cabinet of the spirit, wherein it lies; for the signature stands in the essence, and is as a lute that liest still, and is indeed a dumb thing that is neither heard or understood; but if it be played upon, then its form is understood, in what form and tune it stands, and according to what note it is set. Thus likewise the signature of nature in its form is a dumb essence; it is as a prepared instrument of music, upon which the will's spirit plays; what strings he touches, they sound according to their property.

5. In the human mind the signature lies most artificially composed, according to the essence of all essences; and man wants nothing but the wise master that can strike his instrument, which is the true spirit of the high might of eternity; if that be quickened in man, that it stirs and acts in the centre of the mind, then it plays on the instrument of the human form, and even then the form is uttered² with the sound in the word: As his instrument was set in the time of his incarnation,³ so it sounds, and so is his knowledge; the inward manifests itself in the sound of the word, for that is the mind's natural knowledge of itself.

6. Man has indeed all the forms of all the three worlds lying in him; for he is a complete image of God, or of the Being of all beings; only the order is placed in him at his incarnation; for there are three work-masters in him which prepare his form [or signature], viz. the threefold fiat, according to the three worlds; and they are in contest about the form, and the form is figured according to the contest; which of the masters holds the predominant rule, and obtains it in the essence, according to that his instrument is tuned, and the other lie hid, and come behind with their sound, as it plainly shews itself.

7. So soon as man is born into this world, his spirit plays upon his instrument, so that his innate genuine form [or signature] in good or evil is seen by his words and conversation; for as his instrument sounds, accordingly the senses and thoughts

¹ Or, formed itself; or originally put forth itself.

² Proceeds from the mouth.

³ Or conception.

proceed from the essence of the mind, and so the external spirit of the will is carried in its behaviour, as is to be seen both in men and beasts; that there is a great difference in the procreation, that one brother and sister does not as the other.

8. Further we are to know, that though one fiat thus keeps the upper hand, and figures the form according to itself, that yet the other two give their sound, if their instrument be but played upon; as it is seen that many a man, and also many a beast, though it is very much inclined either to good or evil, yet it is moved either to evil or good by a contrary tune, and often lets its inbred signature [or figure] fall, when the contrary tune is played upon his hidden lute or form: As we see that an evil man is often moved by a good man to repent of and cease from his iniquity, when the good man touches and strikes his hidden instrument with his meek and loving spirit.

9. And thus also it happens to the good man, that when the wicked man strikes his hidden instrument with the spirit of his wrath, that then the form of anger is stirred up also in the good man, and the one is set against the other, that so one might be the cure and healer of the other. For as the vital signature, that is, as the form of life is figured in the time of the fiat at the conception, even so is its natural spirit; for it takes its rise out of the essence of all the three principles, and such a will it acts and manifests out of its property.

10. But now the will may be broken; for when a stronger comes, and raises his inward signature with his introduced sound and will's spirit, then its upper dominion loses the power, right, and authority; which we see in the powerful influence of the sun, how that by its strength it qualifies a bitter and sour fruit, turning it into a sweetness and pleasantness; in like manner how a good man corrupts among evil company, and also how that a good herb cannot sufficiently shew its real genuine virtue in a bad soil; for in the good man the hidden evil instrument is awakened, and in the herb a contrary essence is received from the earth; so that often the good is changed into an evil, and the evil into a good.

11. And now observe, as it stands in the power and predominance of the quality, so it is signed and marked externally in its outward form, signature, or figure; man in his speech, will, and behaviour, also with the form of the members which he has, and must use to that signature, his inward form is noted in the form of his face;¹ and thus also is a beast, an herb, and

¹ His look, or physiognomy.

the trees; everything as it is inwardly [in its innate virtue and quality] so it is outwardly signed; and though it falls out, that often a thing is changed from evil into good, and from good into evil, yet it has its external character, that the good or evil [that is, the change] may be known.

12. For man is known herein by his daily practice, also by his course and discourse; for the upper instrument, which is most strongly drawn, is always played upon: Thus also it is with a beast that is wild, but when it is overawed and tamed, and brought to another property, it does not easily shew its first innate form, unless it be stirred up, and then it breaks forth, and appears above all other forms.

13. Thus it is likewise with the herbs of the earth; if an herb be transplanted out of a bad soil into a good, then it soon gets a stronger body, and a more pleasant smell and power, and shews the inward essence externally; and there is nothing that is created or born in nature, but it also manifests its internal form externally, for the internal continually labours or works itself forth to manifestation: As we know it in the power and form of this world, how the one only essence has manifested itself with the external birth in the desire of the similitude, how it has manifested itself in so many forms and shapes, which we see and know in the stars and elements, likewise in the living creatures, and also in the trees and herbs.

14. Therefore the greatest understanding lies in the signature, wherein man (*viz.* the image of the greatest virtue) may not only learn to know himself, but therein also he may learn to know the essence of all essences; for by the external form of all creatures, by their instigation, inclination and desire, also by their sound, voice, and speech which they utter, the hidden spirit is known; for nature has given to everything its language according to its essence and form, for out of the essence the language or sound arises, and the fiat of that essence forms the quality of the essence in the voice or virtue which it sends forth, to the animals in the sound, and to the essentials¹ in smell, virtue, and form.

15. Everything has its mouth to manifestation; and this is the language of nature, whence everything speaks out of its property, and continually manifests, declares, and sets forth itself for what it is good or profitable; for each thing manifests its mother, which thus gives the essence and the will to the form.

¹ Vegetables.