

EPIC OF THE AFTERLIFE

A Literary Approach to Swedenborg



OLOF LAGERCRANTZ

Translated by Anders Hallgren

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THE AFTERLIFE

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by

Olof Lagercrantz

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FOREWORD

Olof Lagercrantz is one of Sweden's most famous writers and critics. He was born in Stockholm in 1911 and in his early adult years gained fame as a poet, poems that are still read and recited in Sweden. In 1952, Lagercrantz received his doctorate in the History of Literature from Stockholm University, writing his dissertation on another Swedish author, Agnes von Krusenstjerna (1894–1940).

The complete bibliography of Lagercrantz's life work to date includes hundreds of titles, ranging from full biographies to essays on a wide variety of subjects. Two of his major works have been translated and published in English: *From Hell to Paradise: Dante and His Comedy* (Washington Square Press, 1966), and *August Strindberg* (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1984).

He has also written books on Nelly Sachs, Marcel Proust, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, and George Orwell, and translated Izaak Walton's *The Complete Angler* (1653) into Swedish. His travel journals from the United States of America, the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republic, and the People's Republic of China, have also attracted much attention. His high reputation as an author rests on a strange brilliance of style, his distrust of entrenched opinions, the originality of his critical perspective, and his conscientious research and broad learning. Of his later books, *The Art of Reading and Writing* (*Konsten att läsa och skriva*) has become a bestseller in Europe and has been translated into a number of different languages.

Most recently, Lagercrantz turned his attention to Emanuel Swedenborg, another literary giant in his series of critical monographs. Being a modern literary scholar and critic, Lagercrantz approaches the works of all authors as a sincere and careful reader, the texts being his field of scrutiny and analysis. Secondary literature is of secondary interest to him, and the use of biographical data or ideological and historical framework is subordinated to the actual words of the literary text. In all his

books, Lagercrantz has avoided the beaten track and has assiduously started from the beginning to guide himself through the work of the author, ignoring what other people have told him about it, and never led astray by any current opinion or scholarly standpoint whatsoever, searching for basic lines in the warp of the texture and clues to the heart behind it. In this way he approached the fourteenth-century work of Dante Alighieri, and this is still his method when studying Swedenborg as another great writer in the history of literature, one of the eighteenth century.

For this reason, Lagercrantz's study of Swedenborg is an original and very personal approach, quite unlike any earlier monograph or biography of Swedenborg, except possibly the unusual study published in 1915 by a fellow Swede, Martin Lamm, another scholar from the same department at Stockholm University and one of Lagercrantz's teachers. Lamm's book was later translated and published in German in 1922 and also translated and published in French in 1936. It is a strongly positivistic study, demonstrating that there is a logical and consistent line of thought development in Swedenborg from his earliest childhood experiences to his most mature theological statements. But what is perhaps most remarkable about this work is that, in Lamm's opinion, otherworldly experience is quite irrelevant to the conclusions reached; for Lamm, Swedenborg's claim that his theological concepts were largely based on such experiences is simply something for those interested in the paranormal to investigate. Lamm's concern was an analysis of the texts, and he approached them from the point of view of the history of ideas, finding that Swedenborg's scientific work and his theological work were built on the same set of ideas or the same kind of paradigm. As a scholar, Lamm tried to outline structure and to understand it. To believe in what is written or not to believe in it is not considered as a matter of knowledge, and faith has never been the concern of comparativists like Lamm. Actually, a similar stand has been taken by all Swedish Swedenborg scholars from the department of Literature at Stockholm University: Martin Lamm, Olof Lagercrantz, Inge Jonsson, and Anders Hallengren, the translator of the present work.

Very much the same might be said of Lagercrantz, even though he long ago turned his back on the university to become a free writer beyond all restricted views. He takes a long stride further, however, looking upon Swedenborg as merely an author of literary texts, open to new interpretation. For instance, Lagercrantz declares: "I will read the works of Swedenborg as a poem about an unknown country with strange laws and customs." And, "Call Swedenborg's God that force that makes people rise from a gross material subsistence to seek a new and deeper sense of community. . . . Replace the term "God" with the everlasting longing for something that braves time and death or that brings solidarity and justice to the human race."

At the same time, Lagercrantz states sincerely that Swedenborg's works contain an enormous amount of wisdom about the human being and all the passions that shake us and make us human. Early in the book, he reacts with bewilderment to Swedenborg's "commission," his claim that Christ appeared to him and appointed him to be a revelator. But the author then states, "I feel compelled to write this book because of what he wrote and taught after he endured this dream crisis." A little further on he writes, "Swedenborg guides us through a long series of exciting metamorphoses; his commentary contains suggestions enough to keep a whole celestial academy busy with new ideas."

Lagercrantz did his homework. He clearly read deeply in Swedenborg's works before he began to write. His book deals concisely with a great many fundamental Swedenborgian concepts, and he often inserts references to his sources. But he makes no claim to be a believer, a dedicated Swedenborgian, one who has accepted the faith of Swedenborg. Why?

It is my conclusion that Lagercrantz fits quite precisely the definition of an adherent to "a twentieth-century philosophy—naturalistic humanism—a belief system that rejects belief in all forms of the supernatural; that considers the greater good of humanity on this earth as the supreme ethical goal; and that relies on the methods of reason, science, and democracy for the solution of human problems," as described in the *Dictionary of Philosophy* (Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1968).

It is in this sense that Lagercrantz is so attracted to the wisdom he found in Swedenborg. Thus he pays high tribute to his fellow Swede time after time, while at the same time either denying his claims or making clear that he has no interest in where Swedenborg states he received the wisdom that he wrote. Dedicated well-read Swedenborgians will find statements here and there with which they may disagree. Or possibly they will smile and conclude that the author just didn't understand the point. The editors, in fact, may deem it advisable from time to time to insert a footnote to clarify or to dispute a view expressed by the author. None of this, however, in my opinion, should be seen as serious flaws in this often humble and candid tribute to one of the world's great thinkers.

In many ways recalling Ralph Waldo Emerson's striking pro-and-con essay on Swedenborg in *Representative Men* (1850), which was a starting point of Swedenborg's literary reputation worldwide, Lagercrantz's critical essay, in its own way, testifies to the late recognition of Swedenborg in his own country, where the interest in Swedenborg and his work constantly grows. The name of Swedenborg, along with Saint Bridget, August Strindberg, or Alfred Nobel, is more and more considered an honor to his nation, and Lagercrantz's book has already passed two Swedish editions due to the demand of the reading public. Remarkably enough, Lagercrantz has put Swedenborg into a literary pantheon, alongside with Dante Alighieri of Italy and Marcel Proust of France. Something similar was done by Emerson, undeniably one of Swedenborg's greatest American vassals, in his essay on "The Poet," where he wrote, "After Dante, and Shakespeare, and Milton, there came no grand poet until Swedenborg."

And so, we take a cue from Emerson. Read *Epic of the Afterlife* as a poem of praise by a poet of the natural plane to a poet of the spiritual plane.

WILLIAM ROSS WOOFENDEN

INTRODUCTION TO THE SWEDISH EDITION

Emanuel Swedenborg was born in Stockholm on January 29, 1688, and died in London on March 29, 1772, at the age of eighty-four. At his death, few people knew of him. His reputation did not extend beyond a limited circle of friends and readers. Today, however, our perspective is different: no Swede has had a more profound influence on the spiritual world of humanity.

Swedenborg was the son of the theologian and ecclesiastical politician Jesper Swedberg, who was later to become bishop of Skara, and his first wife Sara Behm, both of whom had their roots in Bergslagen, the mining district. When as an old man Swedenborg reviews his life, he neglects to mention his mother's name. Maybe the reason for this oversight was that he thought that the human soul is transmitted from generation to generation by means of the sperm.

Jesper Swedberg, an accomplished writer himself, with a remarkable autobiography among his works, overshadowed Swedenborg's childhood and youth. *The Book of Hymns* that Emanuel used throughout his life ended with his father's prayer:

Herre, signe du och råde
och bevara nu oss väl.
Herre, ditt ansikt i nåde
lyse alltid för vår själ.
Herre Gud, dig till oss vänd
och din frid oss allom sänd.
O Gud Fader, Son och Ande,
dig ske pris i allo lande!

Bless and govern, O Lord, and protect us.
May your face shine in grace before our soul.
Turn to us and send peace to all of us.
O God Father, Son, and Spirit, be praised in all countries!

The verse is still found in the Swedish *Book of Hymns*, testifying to an ardor that withstands time.

Swedenborg studied at Uppsala, defended a thesis on Latin maxims, and devoted himself with the widest possible scope to philosophy and science. When he was in his twenties, he embarked on a five-year tour of Europe, during which time he studied the known sciences.

Young Swedenborg arrived in England when Isaac Newton was still alive, but thirty years later he was to meet the great scientist in the realm of the dead. At the time, England was in a state of rapid progress, scientifically as well as culturally, and was therefore a natural pilgrimage site for any young man wishing to broaden his horizons.

In 1716, he returned to Sweden and, in due time, met with King Charles XII, who had, at long last, returned from his military campaigns in Turkey. The autocrat, whose favor the young man eagerly sought, would be caricatured many years later by the old theologian.

The king appointed Swedenborg to be an associate member of the Royal Board of Mines, his commission being to lead and control the mining industry in the country. This appointment determined the course of Swedenborg's life for the next two or three decades. He inherited shares in several mines, but, as far as is known, never experienced any conflict between his own interests and that of the public. Indeed, Swedenborg was highly regarded as a zealous official. When he was ennobled in 1719—a right of the bishop's son—he inserted, into his coat of arms, the picture of a smoking foundry mound and one of the arrows of Dalecarlia. At the same time, he let the syllable "Swed" in his ancestral name "Swedberg" grow into "Sweden."

Swedenborg the scientist and public official published comprehensive mineralogical works, one of them on iron and iron works, which was then the greatest industry of Sweden. Time and again, he traveled abroad to other European countries—saw France, visited St. Peter's in Rome, and adopted England as his second home. Oddly enough, he lived in Amsterdam—the city of Spinoza and Rembrandt—from May 1739 to October 1740, without ever mentioning seeing a painting. But one of

his depictions of hell, in which a ship is sailing in the sky [*True Christian Religion* §462(6)], calls to mind a painting by Hieronymus Bosch.

In the 1730s, Swedenborg turned his attention from ore constitution to humanity, setting out to investigate the anatomy and the physiology of the human being. He was a sincere and, according to many, a great scientist, whose findings are still respected. In the history of learning, he has a place even without his theological teachings.

OLOF LAGERCRANTZ
Drottningholm, Sweden
May 1996

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THE DREAM CRISIS

Emanuel Swedenborg, a distinguished scientist and government official, underwent a crisis at the age of fifty-six that changed his life. Because of this revolutionary turn of events, he joined the ranks of the enviable few who break out of the routine of everyday life to start anew.

From this crisis, Swedenborg produced a unique document: a journal kept from March 24, 1744, until October of that same year. Found many years after Swedenborg's death, the manuscript was bought by the Royal Library in Stockholm; national librarian G. E. Klemming interpreted the text, which is difficult to read in its original script, and published it as a book entitled *Swedenborgs drömmar 1744*. From Sweden, the extraordinary journal has spread throughout the world in a number of editions. It is generally entitled simply *The Journal of Dreams*.

The diary consists largely of dreams that Swedenborg records day by day, along with his attempts at interpretation. The book itself has been the subject of numerous interpretations, lately a very careful and well-

researched one by Lars Bergquist, *Glädjen och det stora kvalet* (The Joy and the Anguish), published in Sweden in 1988.¹

As the journal opens, Swedenborg is traveling throughout Europe in order to publish his most recent scientific works in Amsterdam and London. An experienced traveler, a true European, he knows Amsterdam, Paris, Rome, and London; and in his future writings, images from these cosmopolitan centers appear repeatedly. Indeed, the young Swedenborg lived for a while in London in the 1710s. In the early eighteenth century, Sweden was still a great power, ruled by the imperialistic Charles XII. The spirit of this age is crucial to the enormous ambitions Swedenborg cherishes all his life, particularly in the profundity of his claims.

On his trips, Swedenborg usually carries a notebook in which he jots down short and rather dry notes. Contemporaries remark that he is somewhat reserved—he completely fits the role of the government official—and few people manage to get to know him well. It may be that he felt ill at ease in social gatherings because of a slight stutter.

When we look at notes that Swedenborg made before he began recording his dreams, we see that, suddenly, in the middle of a sentence, the writing stops—empty pages follow. A couple of pages seem to have been torn out. Then, a year later, in an entry dated March 1744, the following list appears, in strong contrast to the prosaic travel notes of the year before:

1. In my younger days, and the Gustavian family
2. In Venice, concerning the beautiful palace
3. In Sweden, about the white cloud in the sky
4. In Leipzig, on one lying in boiling water
5. About one who stumbled with a chain into the depths
6. Of the king who showed such generosity in a poor farmer's cottage
7. About the farmhand who wanted me to depart
8. On my nightly amusements

1. An English translation has recently been published in the United States. Lars Bergquist, *Swedenborg's Dream Diary*, translated by Anders Hallengren (West Chester, Pa.: Swedenborg Foundation, 2001).

Gunnar Ekelöf uses these mysterious words in his poem *En Mölna-Elegy*, calling them “wreckage on the shores of the dream,” an apt description.² Swedenborg has apparently made notes of dream images that appeared to him important and shocking.

After this list, the journal proper follows. It is written in Swedish, even though almost all of his other works, the scientific as well as the theological, are written in Latin. But now, in his personal crisis, Swedenborg discards the formality of his Latin dress suit and of the restrictions of academic language and speaks in his mother-tongue. Now, for once, he is not addressing an audience but writing for himself and for no one else. Everything is simple, straight to the point. He is a man engrossed by an internal process. There is no room for the slightest revision or stylistic beautifying. The text is completely extraliterary—if such a thing is possible.

In one of the first dreams, Swedenborg says he is “*in exstasibus vigilibus*,” in a state of wakeful ecstasy. During these travels, he begins to write in an exalted mood, a remarkable contrast to his former style. The change of places and constellations contribute to his anxiety and to his various moods.

During the entire period of his journal, Swedenborg begins to sleep more than usual, indeed, unnaturally much, every night—ten, eleven, twelve hours—a habit he maintains for the rest of his life. He has torrents of dreams, an endless procession of spectacular scenes, by turns comical, ridiculous, pathetic, and moving, flooding in one upon the other. Usually, his dreams come at the moment of awakening, in the hypnagogic state between dream and wakefulness. This point is probably what attracted Ekelöf, since the hypnagogic state suggests that we can never know for certain what is dream and what is imagination.

From the very beginning of this crisis, Swedenborg regards his dreams as acts in a spiritual drama, a morality play of the soul, enacted especially for his guidance. Dreams will remain an essential part of his life, and he lies in wait for them as a hunter for his prey. He is never content to regard them as amazing and inscrutable artifacts or fictive

2. Gunnar Ekelöf (1907–1968) was a Swedish poet and essayist.

works. To him, every dream is a riddle to be solved, a rebus to be read, as if Sigmund Freud—born eighty-four years after Swedenborg’s death—had been whispering in the dreamer’s ear. But whereas Freud thought that a dream can never be interpreted completely, Swedenborg incessantly searches for the Godsent elucidation, the absolute answer. In this quest, Swedenborg, the confirmed Christian, follows a biblical tradition, endeavoring to be a Joseph, the definitive interpreter of the pharaoh’s dreams.

In his dreams, Swedenborg often finds himself riding a horse or in a carriage drawn by horses in dazzling harness.³ In one dream, huge windmills appear along the road, and he is hit by a sail, as happened to Don Quixote two centuries earlier. In another dream, with horror in his heart, he tries to keep his balance while traversing mines on ladders. He walks on a footbridge over “depth and dangers”; he clings to a rope; he is attacked by strange dogs. In dreams like these, we see shadows of his former life, when he inspected mines and forges as the assessor of the Royal College of Mines, an important position to which Charles XII had appointed him, mining having been Sweden’s foremost industry at the time.

From the very beginning of the journal, on his arrival at The Hague, Swedenborg writes that he has lost his “inclination toward women,” a motivation that, until this point, had been his “chief passion.” We might speculate that his passion has moved underground since, up to his death, his writings exhibit a strong erotic sentiment. During the months covered by the journal, women are constantly present in his dreams, teasing, enticing, exposed in a variety of positions. In one dream, two women, one of them young, the other older, lie down on either side of him. He kisses their hands but doesn’t know which one to make love to. On another occasion, a woman touches his penis, which grows bigger than ever, but collapses during penetration. In a horrifying nightmare, he sleeps with a woman who has teeth in her vagina that prevent him from entering.

3. See, for example, dream entries 30, 197, and 279. [*Ed.*]

In his interpretation of these erotic scenes, Swedenborg abstains from moralizing. He is searching for the symbolic meaning, although he duly notes the sweetness radiating from the women. The figure with the toothed vagina represents, he believes, his scientific approach, a sign that he must go no further with this form of inquiry. That conviction emerges more and more, and he begins to chart his intellectual course in a new direction.

I see Swedenborg's intense imagination as an unconscious protest against his excessive mental discipline. For decades, he had strained himself working on a tremendous writing project: he had tried to prove the existence of the soul through scientific evidence. At a furious speed, he pursued anatomical and physiological studies. In one dream, he listens to a lecture in anatomy and waits to no avail to hear his name mentioned among the authorities in this field. It is, thus, a dream of disappointed aspirations. He has begun to doubt whether he will achieve his scientific goal.

Night after night, ghastly images of all kinds spill from his soul. "Sighs of dread," a term taken from the book of hymns that his father, Bishop Jesper Swedberg, had edited, are now his daily fare. In dreams, he fights a dark-gray snake. An executioner roasts disembodied heads, throwing them into an oven. His dead brother Eliezer lies between two wild boars, which feast on his head. As is usual in dreams, the macabre mixes with the ridiculous and the amusing. So, in one dream, he dines out with a clergyman but cannot get over the fact that he had to pay too much for the food. To cover his loss, he covertly appropriates two silver bowls from the table. Afterward he repents and racks his brains to think how he can return the silver without anyone's knowing. He interprets this dream in a pious way.

I don't think there is any other document like Swedenborg's journal in Swedish literature, perhaps not even in the history of world literature. Strindberg, during his occult period, appears alert, sober, and clear-sighted compared to Swedenborg, who roves about in a fog of dreams. Fragments of reality and contemporary Swedish and European events intertwine with Christian thought. Charles XII and his sister Ulrika Eleonora, Fredrik I and his mistress Hedvig Taube, ladies-in-waiting and

courtiers drift in and out of scenes. Swedenborg himself appears in a royal setting, only to find himself improperly dressed and feeling ashamed, a type of dream we all recognize. Then, his father steps forward, wondering why his son is making “such a fuss.” The historical allusions and the Christian terminology require footnotes for modern readers. Despite this, everything seems close to us because the circumstances, the excitement, the shape-shifting, the feeling of being pursued are all familiar.

The journal describes the painful dissolution of a soul. Swedenborg is grateful for the grace bestowed upon him, but he is also fearful, as if he had been given a dose of a medicine too strong for his constitution. He often bursts into tears, although not tears of grief; rather they are tears of heartfelt joy that the Lord has graciously given him. Hands clasped in prayer, he throws himself to the ground. He wakes up in anguish, with a cold sweat on his forehead. He questions the value of his scientific work, condemns his worldly ambitions, and feels the presence of someone who will give him a new task.

Even in his future life, Swedenborg often confuses dreams with imagination. But this is an important step because now he breaks free from science and enters into the realm of poetry. His dreams are poems, still wild and rambling, still in a whirling chaos, but a cosmos is in the making.

On April 6, 1744, Swedenborg is in The Hague; during the day, which was Easter Day, he receives Communion in a church in the city. That night he encounters Jesus face to face in a dream and thinks that Jesus must have looked like this when he walked the earth. Jesus smiles at him and asks if he has “a certificate of health” (*sundhetspass*). Swedenborg replies, “Lord, you know that better than I.” “Then do,” Jesus says before departing. The journal entry concludes with the words, “Woke up, with shivers.” This encounter with Jesus had been a dream.

As spring 1744 proceeds through Ascension Day and Pentecost, Swedenborg’s anxiety grows. He vacillates between happiness and dejection, between pride and doubt, and asks God for help. Images of women emerge more vehemently than ever, as if the erotic and the

sacred were the same. As all this occurs within his dreams, he still engages in an active life, traveling to various European cities. On April 24, he is in Leiden but leaves the same day for Amsterdam. In his journal, he writes that he is neither awake nor dreaming, but “in a strange torpor.” The journey stimulates him, but he lives enclosed in his own drama, and, with only a few exceptions, records nothing about the cities he visits or the people he meets.

Frankly, I cannot accurately depict what is happening to him. He seems close to the reader, as if he were present in the same room—the vitality of his words penetrate so deeply—yet what is going on within his mind and heart is obscure. I feel compelled to write this book because of what he wrote and taught *after* he endured this dream crisis.

As Swedenborg continues his journey, it becomes increasingly clear to him that he should dedicate his remaining years “to that which is higher.” He must leave his scientific life to devote himself completely to the core of life: the love of the Lord.

On May 1, he leaves The Hague and arrives in England three or four days later. Cosmopolitan London with its hustle and bustle surrounds him, but he is alone. He lodges with a craftsman, goes to church, and receives Communion. And his visionary dreams continue.

In 1745, Swedenborg is fifty-seven years old. Many years later, when he is eighty years old, Swedenborg tells Carl Robsahm, one of his neighbors at Södermalm, the southernmost district of Stockholm in Swedenborg’s time, about an encounter with Jesus, which occurred after he stopped writing his dream journal. In a London tavern, in April 1745, Swedenborg sees a man sitting in a corner, who says, “Don’t eat so much!” That night the same man comes to Swedenborg’s room, explains that he is the Lord himself, and gives Swedenborg the task he has been awaiting: he is commissioned to interpret the Bible. From that day on, he tells Robsahm, he will write only on spiritual matters. “Afterwards the Lord opened, very often daily, my bodily eyes, so that in the

middle of the day I could see into the other world and in a state of perfect wakefulness converse with angels and spirits.”⁴

It seems to me that the London episode is also a dream, belonging to the same long sequence covered by the journal of 1744. The words “Don’t eat so much!” link the encounter to the strange “certificate of health” that Jesus mentioned in the earlier dream. After all, when Robsahm speaks with Swedenborg, the elderly seer has lived for a long a time in his poetic world—for twenty-three years. On the other hand, perhaps Robsahm misunderstood him.

In the Christian world, there is magic in everything concerning Jesus, and ordinary reason has no chance. The two appearances of Jesus have formed an integral part of a Swedenborgian mythos that has had an impact on the way Swedenborg is viewed by posterity. Some scholars, Martin Lamm among them, have compared Swedenborg’s encounters to those of Teresa of Avila’s visions of Christ and have counted him among the world’s great mystics.⁵

I, however, think that another interpretation can be offered. The torment of his heart and mind at the time of his dream crisis was a rite of passage, a purification that led him to a new life. As he wrote in his journal of dreams, he believes, according to the Christian rite of confession, that he has overcome his desire for fame and has attained a child’s innocent faith. But might it not be that his longing for immortality, which he so ardently sought in the field of natural science, has now been transferred to a new field? The scientist, forced to obedience by the natural laws, is transformed into an artist who is master over his world’s existence. The child that he believes himself to be is succeeded by an authoritative teacher, not unlike his

4. Robsahm’s memoir of Swedenborg can be found in R. L. Tafel, *Documents concerning the Life and Character of Emanuel Swedenborg*, vol. 1 (London: The Swedenborg Society, 1875), doc. 5, pp. 30–51. [Ed.]

5. Martin Lamm, *Emanuel Swedenborg: The Development of His Thought*, translated by Tomas Spiers and Anders Hallengren (West Chester, Pa.: The Swedenborg Foundation, 2000). Lamm, an influential Swedish scholar, first published his study of Swedenborg in 1915.

father the bishop, who in a dream is called his “brother,” a title change of weighty symbolic significance.

That the meeting with Jesus in the London restaurant is a dream is borne out by Swedenborg’s writings. For the next twenty-eight years, he sits at his desk every day writing comprehensive works into which all his experience and knowledge flow. Not once in all these volumes does he mention the London episode, apart from an allusion to a detail in Robsahm’s account that has nothing to do with Jesus.

LIFE AFTER DEATH

With diminished intensity, the journal of dreams continues through the summer of 1744 and up to October. The end of the journal is as difficult to interpret as its beginning. In the final dream entry [§285], fireworks are discharged in the sky above Swedenborg and shoot a radiant rain of fire: “Love of the high, maybe” is his comment. After that, silence.

From now on, Swedenborg’s destiny is determined. At the command of God, he begins writing in a new vein, and the body of his work grows to enormous proportions. Initially, his writings are formally exegetic, but the same title could be used for all his volumes: *Life in the Spiritual World* or *Life after Death*. With an indefatigable and superhuman power of imagination, he devotes himself to describing the life of the dead, their manners and customs, their thoughts and feelings, and the organization of celestial societies. To a growing circle of readers, he is now the great spirit seer.

But from where did it come, this detailed knowledge about spiritual life that Swedenborg recounts? According to his own testimony, it is derived directly from conversations with spirits. These communications take place in a specific state of consciousness that Swedenborg terms “being in the spirit.” This divine faculty was granted to him during the dream crisis, and that inspirited state of mind continues. He perceives that he is elevated out of his body; then the Lord, as well as angels and other spirits, talk to him. In this way, it was granted to him, he says, “to hear and see the wondrous things that exist in the other life, and which never before have been known to any human being.”

In this lofty state of mind, Swedenborg’s doctrine is created. In another private journal that he began in 1747 and kept for almost two decades, known as the *Spiritual Diary*, we can follow how his work proceeds. This diary can be viewed as a continuation of the journal of dreams, but without the chaos and the anguish of the former. The *Spiritual Diary* almost exclusively records his inner life and his meetings with spirits. If something of the external world peeps through, it is reflected as an image appearing in the spiritual sphere.

In his work *Angelic Wisdom concerning Divine Providence*, Swedenborg maintains that, in these exalted states, he receives knowledge directly from God and rarely from angels or spirits. This information is difficult to take at face value since his works are filled with angelic discourse. The revelations of God are to be considered as feasts, whereas the daily bread is something else. The diary is an endless feast of such everyday nourishment.

The talks take place at night, in bed. Swedenborg still sleeps more than usual and will continue to do so, and dreams play the same decisive role they did during his crisis. In one of the more extensive dream accounts, Swedenborg, standing on a mountain, sees a ship drawn by horses on the sea below. The helmsman/coachman steers the boat in circles, and both horses and vessel are drawn under water. On deck, a man and a young woman are standing together with their child, and Swedenborg feels sorry for them.

When he wakes up, spirits tell him that they had been on board, that

they were nearly drowned, but that they had come up to the surface with billowing hair. They decide to punish the captain, who had reined the horses so carelessly, and tear him to shreds. This punishment did not occur in the dream but in reality, Swedenborg explains. Thus, dreams here are blended with visions, and no one can tell one from the other. The spirits take part in the dreams and are active there.

In an endless stream, spirits appear to Swedenborg. If they do not come, he enters their world himself and makes contacts. Some spirits are benevolent, but others want to hurt him. Sometimes it is difficult to understand why he would call up such spirits, those impulses, temptations, and oddities that occupy the internal scenes of our minds.

Many spirits are people whom Swedenborg knew personally during their lifetime or people he knew of through conversations or through reading. Now they manage to get in touch with him. He incorporates a large part of the messages he receives during this period into his monumental exegetical work *Arcana Coelestia* (Heavenly Secrets), which he is writing during the same years that he begins the *Spiritual Diary*. It seems as if the diary served as a kind of sketchbook in this enterprise. In a sober and clear manner, Swedenborg describes what is happening to him. The breathless excitement of his accounts in the journal of dreams is gone. As he becomes better acquainted with spirits and angels and begins to see them on a daily basis, he recounts his visitations in a natural and simple style, as if neighbors were coming to his home, Hornsgatan in Södermalm in Stockholm.

Despite this style, the impression of the *Spiritual Diary* as a whole is something like a wizard's workshop, where spirits of all kinds emerge. There in the middle stands Swedenborg, like a Faust, preparing a spiritual composition intended for worldwide distribution.

According to Swedenborg, in the *Spiritual Diary* §651, connection with the spiritual world can be established in four different ways. The first takes place during sleep in moments when everything in a dream appears before us as clearly as if we were wide awake. It sometimes occurs to us that, if this were really a dream, wakeful life might just as well be a dream, too. A second particularly receptive state occurs when we

are awake and seem to perceive things as distinctly with our eyes shut as with our eyes open. The only difference is the increased loveliness and gracefulness of our vision. A similar transformation can sometimes occur when our eyes are open. That happened to Swedenborg two or three times. The third state of awareness can be enjoyed with open eyes; in this instance, the heavens and spirits present themselves in images—representations—although, for the most part, in symbolic form. The fourth kind of connection is established when the mind is separated from the body and becomes “inspirited.” In this state, the visionary is fully convinced that he or she is awake and that all the senses are vividly alert. In such a situation, the person will not realize what has happened until afterwards, when he or she returns to the state of normal wakefulness.

This short survey presents features that may appear more-or-less familiar. To some extent, everyone has had similar experiences, although we do not refer to these phenomena as spiritual but rather psychological.

In his diary, Swedenborg glides freely through his dreams, unimpeded as he passes to and fro. When he awakens, he longs to go back to sleep. When he is fully awake, he can be thinking so deeply that he debates with himself “on a specific subject, with vivid imagination” (*Spiritual Diary* §192.) The four states of awareness, as outlined above, could just as well describe a process of artistic creativity. Gunnar Ekelöf makes use of his dreams in a similar fashion, allowing them to be merged into the cast of conscious ingenuity. To Ekelöf, the hypnagogic state of awareness is a natural point of departure that occurs when the light in his studio is dim.

Swedenborg repeatedly affirms that he can create the mental states necessary to receive the spirits in his abode. When he is guided through heaven and suddenly is lost in worldly thoughts, the celestial locale disappears (*Spiritual Diary* §304). Every creative mind recognizes such a situation: propitious conditions are lost when an interruption occurs.

Swedenborg’s visits to the spiritual world have been interpreted in various ways by critics and supporters, with undisguised hostility as well as with sympathy and fascination. Swedenborgians, members and followers of the New Church, a creed built on his writings, consider the

existence of the spiritual world as a fact. They regard Swedenborg as a spiritual Columbus who discovered a new continent and inspired a new confidence. They base their belief on Swedenborg's reiterated assertion that what is told in his writings is empirically tested reality.

However, in 1766, Immanuel Kant wrote a book about Swedenborg, *Träume eines Geistersehers* (The Dreams of a Spirit Seer), critically examining the visionary and calling him a daydreamer, utterly devoid of reason, the worst kind of idealist. Kant concluded that Swedenborg's conversations with the dead were madness and illusion of a specific kind that frequently afflicts people who, like Swedenborg, are raised in the belief in spirits and angels.

Kant's starting point was a few anecdotes circulating in Europe in his time, bearing witness to Swedenborg's powers of communication. After having studied the *Arcana Coelestia*, he concluded that Swedenborg had not provided any tenable evidence whatsoever of a life beyond the grave. With his pontificating, the whole matter was settled and the case closed, at least according to Kant.

Anyone who approaches Swedenborg has some difficulties in getting rid of the Kantian problem of verity. When there is no incontestable evidence for life after death, we are often left with judging hallucinations, automatic writing, or pathological fantasies. But Martin Lamm, foremost among Scandinavian interpreters of Swedenborg, possessed an affectionate skepticism, calling the revelations of Swedenborg "objectified manifestations of his own world of thought, being an unconscious continuation, in dreams and in hallucinatory form, of deliberate speculation."

I find this description largely apt. However, Lamm's expression "in dreams and in hallucinatory form" could be restated "in poetic form." Already after a few months in Swedenborg's world, I found that the question of truth was irrelevant to me.

As with all poetical works, anyone is allowed to enter into Swedenborg's spiritual world. Time and again, he tells us how meetings with spirits take place. Spirits array themselves in Swedenborg's shape, and he attires himself in spiritual garment. Spirits "play" human, but the spirits

are Swedenborg himself, speaking through a mask. Evil spirits are his own sinister impulses, while angels, who violently resist evil urges, are manifestations of a deeper level of consciousness.

Thus, in his works, the life of the human soul is dramatized, with spirits and angels as actors and the reader as audience. Swedenborg invites us to a spiritual theater, where he plays the principal role. He hardly ever turns to the audience in a confidential aside to ask, "Do you follow me? Can you believe it?" We must take it or leave it; these are the only choices offered.

Compare this, for a moment, with an example taken from a world equally astounding as Swedenborg's, one from the same century. When we read Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, we doubt the existence of Lilliputians and Brobdignagians and certainly doubt the universal wisdom of horses. But once we have entered into this world, Gulliver recounts his experiences with such self-evident authority that we suspend our disbelief and enjoy ourselves. From this experience, we are offered a view of our own world, seen from an unusual angle. Our pleasure comes from what we recognize and from nothing else. We see ourselves in the strange mirror of Swift's creation. The same applies to Swedenborg.

Seen from this literary viewpoint, Kant looks like a man who wants to prove to Swift that giants do not exist and that his account, for this reason, is fallacious. Because Kant based his analysis on hearsay and anecdotes, he believed that what he heard was presented as fact and should be interpreted as such. Thus, Kant was lead astray, and, with him, a large part of humanity, even today. It's true that Swedenborg never denied the accuracy of these anecdotes, one of which concerning an interview with a dead Dutch minister over a lost receipt attracted particular attention. Nevertheless, in his published works, there are no traces of such clairvoyant stories. On the contrary, Swedenborg expressly repudiated all kinds of "miracles."

I conclude my thoughts on the reality of Swedenborg's spiritual world. Although the author himself may state that what he relates is the truth and tell his friends about the visits of spirits, such conflation of the fictitious and the factual is found elsewhere in the history of literature.

To the reader, it is all the same because the trail of words he or she follows on the way to understanding give the appearance of reality, be they “lies” or “truths.” The reader looks for an internal structure concealed in the work, not something outside the text.

From this viewpoint, I will read the works of Swedenborg as a poem about an unknown country with strange laws and customs. This “poem” occupied him for almost thirty years, right up to his death, taxing all his powers, constituting one of the greatest intellectual constructions of Western literature. His works contain an enormous amount of wisdom about the human being and all the passions that goad us and make us human. But primarily his works create a utopia, placed at the other side of the tomb, a vision of a more worthy life, rendered possible by the absence of worldly limitations in the spiritual world. Those who regard this utopia as something actual and eternal have the right to do so. Even dreams of eternal life constitute a part of the human predicament.

LIFE IN THE SPIRITUAL WORLD

While Swedenborg presides over his interpretation of the Bible, the spiritual world grows in his imagination and assumes a more definite shape. The first spirits had appeared at the end of the dream crisis. Now they are with him night and day and provide him with their knowledge.

Sometimes spirits talk to him as he walks down the street. On one occasion, the conversation concerns God's providence. Swedenborg writes that the world seems to be disordered and disjointed, like building materials at a construction site where a grand palace is going to be erected. At the site, all that the architect has ordered is piled up. No one else can see even a trace of a palace, but every segment is present, preordained to be a part of a grand edifice.

This is the way Swedenborg looks upon his mission—in effect, to

find the parts and put all the pieces together—and he sets about the task with passion and ardor. When his work is finished, the towering palace is standing there in all its splendor, high above us, shimmering in brilliant colors and ornately embellished.

This structure, however, is quite different from any palaces we know. It stands beyond space and time and surpasses our comprehension. To enter, we must keep close to Swedenborg, our cicerone.

When the human body wears out, it dies. But when our heart ceases to beat and our breathing stops, the inner “I” continues to exist in another dimension. This “I” is called spirit, and no one on earth can see it. In its spiritual form, the human body retains all its features, although it is now made from a substance the exact nature of which Swedenborg could not identify with certainty. The spirit can see, hear, and feel. It has a stomach, a liver, even a bladder, and knows hunger and thirst.

If the spirit did not have a body, it would be something insubstantial, a phantom, a chimera. A spirit cannot exist without form, and this form is human, as is obvious to anyone who is familiar with Swedenborg’s conception of God. Swedenborg treats the usual Christian picture of eternal life with scorn. The belief in life after death is part and parcel of the Christian faith. According to the current funeral rite of the Swedish church, “all people will, after having rested in their graves, on Judgment Day be resurrected to eternal life.” In Swedenborg’s time, the clergyman said at the burial service: “Earth to earth, dust to dust; Jesus Christ, your Savior, will resuscitate you on the Last Day.”

But Swedenborg questioned this. If the dead will not be revived until doomsday, where are they meanwhile?:

Are the souls of Adam and Eve and all who have lived since during six thousand years or sixty centuries still flying about the universe, or are they kept shut up in the center of the earth awaiting the last judgment? What could be more painful and wretched than such a wait? Might not their lot be compared to that of men bound in chains and fetters in prison? If such were the lot of man after death, would it not be better to be born an ass than a man? Moreover, is it not contrary to reason to believe

that the soul can be re clothed with its body? Is not the body eaten up by worms, mice, and fish? Can such a new body be put on a skeleton that has been burnt up by the sun or reduced to ashes?

True Christian Religion §693

Swedenborg's poem of the life that begins immediately after death is a handsome counterbid.



The newcomer in the spiritual world is received by two angels and two spirits. The angels sit silent beside the head of the deceased: angels do not “talk” but communicate through thought. They give the dead a new face, even two, since the angels are couples. When the angels perceive that their faces have been received, they understand that the person is dead. Minute details in the features, around the lips and the eyes, are important. On the other hand, the two spirits represent infernal forces, constituting a dark opposite to the angelic power.

On a few occasions, Swedenborg witnesses the awakening of a soul. He smells the aromatic odor of embalming because, when angels are present, the cadaverous becomes fragrant. Sometimes he sees friends and relatives rush to greet the recently arrived soul.

All are welcome and are carefully attended. The person now undergoes a probationary period, at the end of which his or her final destination will be determined: heaven or hell.

At first, new spirits are a bit dazed and confused because everything is new to them. A vast new world extends before them. Although it is similar to our world, there is one important difference. Even though there are cities, countryside, forests, deserts, mires, and huge castles, everything is mobile and transient. Let us suppose for a moment that we were, like Swedenborg, allowed to enter into the spiritual world. We approach a little town with an ordered street system and well-built houses. The inhabitants believe in a planned economy; they doubt that free competition and free markets lead to prosperity and happiness.

But, alas! When we reach the town, the houses are gone. The network of roads has sunk into the ground and disappeared.

What happened? Nothing! The town was the creation of the traveler's imagination, the materialization of a thought, which dissolved when we thought of something else.

When Strindberg grew older, he became acquainted with Swedenborg's work and was so inspired by what he read that his own writing made a leap forward. Swedenborg released Strindberg's imagination and animated his world; in this spirit, *A Dream Play* and *Inferno* were produced. In *A Blue Book*, which Strindberg dedicated to Swedenborg, "the teacher and the leader," Strindberg too describes the spiritual world. He relates that all that the angels perceive appears to be created by themselves. This is obvious to them since everything disappears after they leave. When other angels come by, things take a different shape according to what the newcomers think.

But to return to Swedenborg's explanation, the recently arrived soul soon overcomes its sluggishness. After an initial dimness, vision gradually becomes sharper than ever.

In one episode (*Spiritual Diary* §4354), Swedenborg observes a young, beautifully dressed woman accompanied by a child, five or six years old, going into a garden. The moment they enter, the decorated portal, adorned with beautiful flowers, gleams with a sparkling light. Someone tells him that young girls think they are adorned in a similar manner and get new clothes according to their behavior. But neither the garden nor the dirt road, which they are walking on, is real, and neither are their clothes, Swedenborg explains. Yet the experience is more real, alive, and vital than any garden in our world.

Swedenborg guides us through a long series of exciting metamorphoses; his commentary contains enough suggestions to keep a whole celestial academy busy with new ideas. In his company, we stroll through magnificent landscapes; but then, suddenly, evil thoughts turn up and, with them, everything changes into a morass with crocodiles and serpents. We see a black raven; but when it comes nearer, it turns into a man, staring at us with malice and hatred. What we first saw, a

raven, has a counterpart in another form. In the distance, we can see one person sitting in a carriage drawn by horses in magnificent harness. Yet when the equipage comes closer, we see two people in the coach. This transformation illustrates a true marriage, where two are one.

Just as the Italian countryside is discernible in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the Swedish panorama is distinguishable in the spiritual world. Swedenborg's descriptions of nature have their place in the literary history of his country.

On one occasion, we are brought to Sweden in midwinter when it is bitterly cold. Frost has penetrated deep into the ground, and lakes are covered by a thick sheet of ice. As recounted in *True Christian Religion* §185, one Sunday, people go to church in sleighs shaped like horned dragons. Small horses with cropped tails race forward, driven onward by the cracking whips of coachmen. The church itself is buried in the snow, so the sexton digs a path for the worshipers. The self-righteous parson preaches heresies but is hailed by his congregation. After the sermon, the churchgoers slip into their sleds and rush away, intoxicated by paradoxes. A dense darkness falls upon them. This episode is a scathing picture of Swedenborg's native country where people are too idle for spiritual reflection, content with the fraud of deluded preachers.

Swedenborg sometimes amuses himself by placing some of his earthly adversaries in his world. Since we are in a dimension unlimited by space and time, the spirits of the dead are readily at our disposal, anytime. So in the very act of thinking of a person causes his or her spirit to appear instantly. Swedenborg relates [*True Christian Religion* §797] that, when Luther's friend Melanchthon arrived in the spiritual world, he was at once given a house similar to his home on earth. His study was an exact copy; there was even a book shelf on the wall, filled with rows of his own books. Melanchthon sits down at his desk. Faith without good works is enough, he writes, just as he had preached when he was alive. What happens? After only a few weeks, the room darkens, the walls calcify, and the floor turns into stone. Eventually, the room disappears completely. Only the table, the paper, and the inkpot remain. At the same time, Melanchthon's clothing becomes rough and

shabby. Every physical change has its counterpart in the spiritual status of the reformer.

Similarly, in the world of spirits, architects do not design buildings; the houses change according to the inhabitant's moods. When a spirit thinks of a solution to a problem, a window suddenly opens in the ceiling to permit the inflow of heavenly light. But if his thought doesn't solve the problem, the house shrinks, and all of a sudden, the spirit finds himself standing in the street, begging for bread.



Spirits usually appear in full daylight. The Hades of classical antiquity was dark, and many still envision blackness as pervading the netherworld, with countless ghostlike beings, sprites, demons, and ghouls creeping about in the dark. Swedenborg, however, rejects all such belief with contempt. In this respect, he subscribes to the eighteenth-century cult of reason, a man of his time. Unlike James Joyce, Swedenborg did not collect folklore when he created his kingdom of the dead. If Swedenborg's spiritual world can be compared to anything at all, it is to Elysium, the isle of the blessed as described by Homer and Hesiod, a place at the ends of the earth where favored heroes are brought after death. Swedenborg himself alludes to this mythological paradise when he allows some spirits to compare their heavenly lives to the happiness in the Elysian fields (*Spiritual Diary* §1232).

Considering the unusual character of Swedenborg's spiritual world, it is not surprising that misconceptions have arisen. If angels have mouths, stomachs, kidneys, intestines, spleen, and an appetite for food, where does the defecation go in the city of souls?

The answer is simple: everything in the other world is spiritual and appears in the image of a recognizable and understandable object. There is no need for bakeries and toilets. The spirits are not oppressed by worries about making a living. In that respect, they remind us of Swedenborg, who was economically independent and was able to subsidize the

printing of his works. Thus, the contempt for money often expressed by Swedenborg and the spirits echoes in emptiness.

The spirits come alive when they meet Swedenborg. They emerge out of his consciousness, and he lends them his body and senses. Indeed, Swedenborg emphasizes that the bodies of spirits are exact duplicates of human bodies, and their urge to satisfy desires promotes spiritual life. For example, hunger is a craving for the nourishment of righteousness, while the thirst for wine signals a longing for the water of eternal life. In other words, sensual needs signify something higher on the spiritual plane. Earthly drives are transformed into spiritual inclinations. Evil spirits undergo a similar change but go in an opposite direction; they feast on revenge and malice.

Although we can view Swedenborg's spirits as a creation of his own psyche, sometimes they become so lively that even he finds them difficult to handle. In *Spiritual Diary* §3157, Swedenborg extends his hand to greet a spirit. The latter, who remembers this earthly custom, reciprocates the greeting, believing that Swedenborg's body is like his own, a spiritual body. But the handshake takes place only in the spirit's imagination, since he has no body that can interact with mortals.

As an analogy, let's say that, when Leopold Bloom, in Joyce's *Ulysses*, fries his breakfast kidney—and burns it—and then takes the tray with tea upstairs to his wife, it is Joyce carrying the tea tray because he has created the scene. Now, if Joyce the author had encountered Bloom the character on the steps, Joyce could not have extended his hand to touch his creation, since he would be ensnared by his fictional wordnet. Swedenborg, on the other hand, *can* act as creator and created at the same time.

On one occasion, when Swedenborg approaches a group of debating spirits, he is stopped. "I was astounded," one of them says, "to see that, when you came closer to us, you were sometimes visible, and sometimes invisible. Obviously, your state of existence differs from ours."

Swedenborg answers, smiling, that he is neither a magician nor a mirage. His nature is dual. When he is "in spirit," the spirits can see him,

but when he is not, they cannot. The physical and spiritual modes of existence are totally different.

In the *Spiritual Diary* §4315, Swedenborg recounts a meeting with comic actors in the spiritual world, who aroused his sympathy because they have mastered the art of imitation so cleverly that the spectator thinks that all the actors appear to be real. In their particular angelic society, actors serve as mediators because analogies and correspondences are to them matters of course. And returning to the contemporaneity of Swedenborg's descriptions, we are reminded that, in London, at the Drury Lane Theatre, he might have seen the famous David Garrick, foremost among contemporary actors.

In an excellent study, Carl-Göran Ekerwald points out that the spirits Swedenborg sees are never given any detailed description.¹ Their inclinations—their loves and hates—attract Swedenborg's attention, but we rarely are told what they look like. After all, it would be interesting to know the color of St. Augustine's eyes. To ask for such things is blasphemous, however, because, in the spiritual world, the inner life is the focal point, revealing the true nature and leading to a heavenly or hellish existence.

How much of our earthly existence is transferred to the afterlife? Swedenborg states that all in our earthly life is revealed after death. Everything is filed in a tremendous memory archive. However, trivia and incidentals soon fade away, and the internal life of the soul comes forth. Swedenborg confesses to his spiritual friends that he fears that he cannot adequately communicate the notion of a God separate from time and space relationship. However much he tries, nature pervades his thought. For this reason, to expect exact information is often asking too much of him. But as it happens, he sometimes contradicts himself.

The depiction of the spiritual world is, after all, an attempt to translate the inscrutable. Human beings are not entirely incapable of grasping

1. Carl-Göran Ekerwald is a prolific Swedish writer, who has written several essays and articles about Swedenborg, has translated memorabilia from *True Christian Religion*, and has published a monograph on the seer's visions: *Memorabilier: minnesanteckningar från himlar och helveten* (Stockholm, 1988).

what is beyond space and time because our thoughts and dreams already exist in such a world.

From this kind of comment, I get the impression that Swedenborg is aware of his creative imagination but, from time to time, enters into his world completely and behaves as if he lives on earth and in heaven. Indeed, he may have believed this to be the case on those occasions when he claims dual citizenship.

Frankly, I don't know whether Swedenborg thought that what he wrote should be interpreted symbolically, in the same way he read the Bible, or should be understood literally. Everything he writes is based on his doctrine of correspondences, and all his writings are enlivened by his ability to find similarities and to draw conclusions from parallels between worldly and heavenly things. We are all left to choose the meaning as we see it.

This ambiguity is, I think, an important trait in Swedenborg's writings: the belief that the spiritual world exists in a concrete sense balanced by the conviction that it is really symbol and sign, an imaginary picture of great significance. As his disciple Strindberg does in *Inferno*, Swedenborg legitimizes his account by repeatedly pointing out the authenticity of his narrative, although he just as often underlines the symbolic character of the scenes.

The author himself sometimes acts as an emissary between the spiritual world and our earthly life. Sometimes he does so with a bitter sense of humor.

Christopher Polhem, the ingenious inventor with whom Swedenborg had collaborated and whom he admired greatly, died on a Monday; but, on Thursday of the same week, the departed Polhem talked to Swedenborg who then happened to be "in spirit." Polhem was permitted to use Swedenborg's eyes and thus could see his own coffin in the church. The astonished inventor asked why he was buried when he felt he was still alive.

This incident is reported in a smug fashion because Polhem was an atheist and did not believe in life after death, as he had often pointed out to Swedenborg. In the spiritual world, Swedenborg gets the last word.

THE BOOK OF GOD

God cannot be seen, known, or defined by anyone. God exists everywhere but remains silent and unapproachable. In his creation, however, he has left traces and signs for us to study and follow.

Swedenborg forgets the rule that God may not be described; and when he does so, he leaves the theological lectern and becomes a lyric poet. The universe is hand-made by God, Swedenborg writes. God loves what he has created, even those who reject him and choose evil. God is like the mother bird who warms the newly hatched nestlings, taking them under her wing and sustaining them from her own substance. The divine love of God operates in soulless things as well—in trees and herbs, in minerals and stones.

Everything emanating from God bears the stamp of the Divine, and everything has a double meaning. The doctrine of correspondences is based on this conviction. Things, people, even words have a counterpart in the other world. Nature as a whole is a setting full of meaning

for us to decode. For the one who is able to interpret the message, walls collapse and locks break open.

This doctrine, deeply rooted in the history of humankind, is developed from simile and the analogy of opposites. From an earthly point of view, Swedenborg expounds the nature of heavenly things; and from a heavenly perspective, he understands the earthly environment.

According to the theory of correspondence, nature is a picture book where something of higher value and deeper meaning is concealed in every object, which represents that higher value. Swedenborg observes that, when children play, they regard even stones as living beings. Thus, it is clear to them that nature is animated.

I once heard Ingmar Bergman say in an interview, “For me, the movie has been a marvelous means of breaking walls and roofs.” Long before that imaginative medium was invented, Swedenborg created conditions that made it possible to smash through the veil of reality in a similar manner. Today, film can reproduce the spiritual environment; but long before there were motion pictures, writers like Goethe, Almqvist, and Strindberg drew on Swedenborg’s conquests.

The bilingualism of creation also includes the book God wrote, the Word, always capitalized by Swedenborg. Yet even the Word can be grasped on four different levels at the same time, Swedenborg asserted, as so did many learned men before him. The doctrine of correspondences provides him with a key to the Word; and when that key is given to him after the dream crisis, he begins to write it all down, and he continues to reveal the secrets of this God-given book up to his death.



Swedenborg’s interpretation of the Bible is a colossal enterprise, almost superhuman. Its size is not for ordinary people but for giants. Year by year, he sits with his Bible—for interpreting the Old Testament, he even learns some Hebrew—and ponders the internal, hidden meaning of Scripture. He composes endless alphabetical lists of words and episodes,

thus providing himself with a dictionary, a concordance, which he uses every day.

His persistence, his application, his power of concentration on this subject alone are incomparable. But even though the divine assignment came with the powers necessary to carry it through, after ten years, he has gotten no farther than the end of the second book of Moses. By that time, his work comprises the eight tomes published in the first edition of the *Arcana Coelestia* through the years 1749–1756. The Swedish translation consists of 10,000 pages in seventeen volumes. In two other works of almost the same size, Swedenborg will analyze the Book of Revelation.

I have seen some of Swedenborg's manuscripts in the library of the Royal Academy of Sciences in Stockholm. The paper is thick and in good condition in spite of the passage of 250 years. He used every inch of the page. There are no margins. He apparently used a template since the lines are straight and the distance between them is always the same. His handwriting slants forward slightly and is beautiful and restful, yet also very small; perhaps this smallness reflects his humility in the face of the magnitude of the work at hand. Each letter is precisely formed; indeed, downstrokes and upstrokes are not very long, which is sometimes considered a sign of harmony. Some letters, such as "f," "g," and "s," have an extended downstroke, almost ornamental like a decoration. Sometimes he lets the upstroke of a "d" sweep back to cover the whole letter like a veil. But these features do not seem to me to be the essence of his script; to me, his handwriting indicates will rather than feeling.

Swedenborg states that spirits occasionally guide his hand and that his handwriting changes in accordance with the spiritual society he is presently visiting (*Spiritual Diary* §2962) One biographer, Signe Toksvig, calls this phenomenon automatic writing and presents a few examples.¹ The changes seem to me too minor to deserve much attention.

1. Signe Toksvig, *Emanuel Swedenborg: Scientist and Mystic* (1948; Reprint New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1983), chapter 16. For a response to Toksvig's claim that Swedenborg practiced automatic writing, see William Ross Woofenden, "Swedenborg's Use of Language," *Studia Swedenborgiana* 5, no. 3 (Jan. 1985): 42–44. [Ed.]

Swedenborg's character is so unwavering that the essential features of his handwriting stand no matter what happens.



A poor map is better than no map at all, someone once said. After all, Columbus discovered America in this way. Swedenborg is convinced that the Bible is the Word of God and that its books are written in code. The Bible is the connection between earth and heaven, between the cosmos and humanity. To some, this may appear as folly, but Swedenborg proudly replies that the Bible is a treasure chest filled with diamonds and rubies, and he will show them to you. The words in the Bible are shadows of heavenly words, and he shall offer them to you. He keeps his promise.

From the viewpoint of modern hermeneutics, Swedenborg's method of interpretation is immediately recognizable. Anyone who is concerned with textual analysis shares Swedenborg's belief in hidden meanings. The idea that every word has a secret signification is not preposterous. Swedenborg, however, pushes the hidden message of Holy Writ very far indeed. His radical exegesis is astounding. The essential duality is applied to all episodes, all names of people and places, every word, each and every letter.

The Bible is, as we now know, the work of many different authors. Swedenborg, however, takes it for granted that one author wrote it all, namely, God. He makes a few exceptions, remarkably enough one of them being the Song of Songs, the erotic outspokenness of which competes with his own dream journal images. Without any explanation, he declares that the Song of Solomon lacks internal meaning and thus was not written by God. On the other hand, all the important books, with the Pentateuch and the Gospels at the head, are marked by divine unity.²

2. The biblical books that Swedenborg considered to have a continuous and connected inner sense are the five books of Moses, Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habbakuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi in the Old Testament; and the four Gospels and Book of Revelation in the New Testament. [Ed.]

The main theme of the Bible, found everywhere, is the way the human became divine, for the Bible is not only a work by God but also a book about God. It culminates in God's final appearance in human form: Jesus Christ. All prominent prophets and biblical figures who precede Jesus are to be regarded as sketches, drafts of the final picture. God seems to be outlining the picture. He creates *figurae*, behind which the divine pattern is visible.

This method of interpretation is more or less applicable to the works of any human author; but it is particularly fruitful when applied to the Word of God because, despite the Bible's apparent variety, it has come into being within an old and uniform tradition.



Swedenborg's starting point is the assertion in Genesis that God created humankind in his image. Thus, when we study the image, the Divine comes into view.

When Adam alighted from the hand of God, he was perfect and god-like. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden spoke with God as an equal. Even Abraham still saw God as human.

Why don't we all radiate a divine light, then? The answer is that humankind forgot its origin and now retains only a dim recollection of it. In small children, our true source peeps through. Infants are unconscious and innocent, and adults respect their proximity to the Divine. When we grow to adulthood, God withdraws into himself, but the divine origin invisibly remains. This remnant constitutes our real life, the soul, our internal and immortal being. Without a soul, we would become beasts and descend into madness.

The meaning of life is to return to what we were. The body is made to be a receptacle of the Divine, and it longs to be filled up by the Life that once was there.

Contemporary man is, Swedenborg writes, like a creature who has been living in a hut in the wood for so long that he has no idea that

there are empires and kingdoms in the world. We must awaken the potentialities—the kingdoms within—to become angels.

“Angel” is one of the most common terms within Swedenborg’s works. The word—*angelus* in Latin—confuses us. To many of us, angels are winged beings from childhood stories. The religious consider them as glorious figures like the archangel Gabriel who startled the Virgin Mary or the archangel Michael who walks on water and dispels devils, as he does in Dante.

John Milton dominated the literary world of the eighteenth century. There is ample reason to believe that the young Swedenborg was enchanted with *Paradise Lost*.³ Winged angels of superhuman size appear in that epic, first and foremost among them Satan, the angel of light, Lucifer, whose pride caused his fall and who from the depths of hell tries to reconquer heaven.

But Swedenborg’s angels are neither fabulous nor heavenly supermen. No angel was created before humankind, and no angel is our superior. In Swedenborg, angels are common people: they look like us, and they have lived on earth like us. After death, they have passed a phase of ordeal and become purified enough for fulfillment in heaven, a sort of rite of passage. If they pass through the three stages of heaven, they reach God.



Swedenborg’s *Arcana Coelestia* is difficult to read. Frankly, I am inclined to say that it is almost impossible to get through the entire work. This is partly due to the enormous size and partly to Swedenborg’s microscopically close reading, slowly inching from paragraph to paragraph of the biblical text, not leaving a single word without comment. Considering that God has written it all, each word must have a

3. Regarding Swedenborg’s interest in *Paradise Lost*, see C. O. Sigstedt, *The Swedenborg Epic: The Life and Works of Emanuel Swedenborg* (London: The Swedenborg Society, 1981), 202–203; and H. Lj. Odhner, *Swedenborg’s Epic of Paradise and Its Literary Sources* (Bryn Athyn, Pa.: Academy of the New Church, 1945). [Ed.]

heavenly referent, and this correspondence is constant. Whatever God writes—“prince” or “rainbow” or “sea” or “wind” or “horse” or “tree” or something else—Swedenborg consults his biblical dictionary and tells us of all the passages where these words are used. The *Arcana* becomes a shower of sparks that bind the words and the episodes together, but the multitude of meanings can be perplexing, even exhausting. Even when the Bible rattles off long lists of names and pedigrees, Swedenborg maintains that there is an inward meaning concealed behind each.

It is possible that those who know the Bible more or less by heart—and they were many in Swedenborg’s time—are capable of enjoying the igneous flow through passage after passage of the sacred text and imaginative sparks being kindled by the array of combinations. Some Proust scholars work in the same *esprit*, and their research will be stone-dead the day *À la recherche du temps perdu* is no longer read.

The reader of the *Arcana* faces another difficulty: when Swedenborg himself is not able to decipher the internal meaning, he asks the angels for advice and receives advanced clarifications, which, of course, the reader cannot verify intellectually. In this way, Swedenborg keeps us out of his assignment. He informs us that trees signify knowledge about the good and the true, that sheep denote gentleness. Unfortunately, when we are forced to accept these renderings as fact, with no questions asked, the tree withers away in our mind and the sheep lose their wool.

Of course, even Swedenborg observes that the strict definition of word to symbol cannot be maintained. Seven cows in the dream of Pharaoh signify truths when they are fat, but signify falsities when they are skinny. The lion in one instance is divine truth, but the next moment, it symbolizes destruction. Swedenborg has to keep the door wide open for divergent interpretations.

I imagine that, as author of the Bible, God would quite likely have been a bit proud of his ability to captivate readers by a variety of fascinating fates and adventures: for example, Noah’s Ark, which conquered the flood of destruction and the rainbow God arched across the sky as a promise; or Samson, whose power was in his hair and his beloved Delilah, who led him to destruction. God, to be sure, knew the

twofold meaning and furthermore thousands of other levels of interpretation, passing human and angelic comprehension. Had God seen the result of Swedenborg's endeavors, he might have regretted giving this assignment.

Swedenborg is aware of the problem, however. He does not deny that both the literal and the internal meanings are important and should be carefully considered. When he principally dwells upon the internal sense, the reason is its novelty and doubts about this sometimes cross his mind.

For example, in *Arcana Coelestia* §5492, Swedenborg tells the story of Jacob's sons, who traveled to Egypt to buy grain. Suddenly, he interrupts the narrative and addresses the reader. Is it really possible, he asks, that the trivial statement "the sons loaded the grain onto their donkeys" contains a higher truth? He answers, of course, that the angels read the words in another way than we do. But I find Swedenborg's hesitation noteworthy.

In another instance, he discusses, with what I regard as obvious anxiety, the construction of Noah's Ark and its measurements, as described in the sixth chapter of Genesis—three hundred cubits in length, thirty cubits in height, and so forth. If this should be understood literally, there would be no spiritual or heavenly meaning at all in this passage, only something historical of no more importance than various matters described by profane writers. A spiritual meaning is required.

Not surprisingly, few readers were attracted to the *Arcana* when it was published, despite the fact that the author gave away copies. Even today it is read by very few, and then mostly for the sake of certain passages—the conversation with angels, the sensory impressions after death, life on other planets, or the Grand Man.

Swedenborg's persistent ambition always to find the internal sense repeatedly leads him out into deserts of desiccated diction. But during the few moments divine guidance seems out of reach and he ventures a personal interpretation, he is brilliantly successful and arrives at remarkable findings.



In the Old Testament, nobody better illustrates the course of the Divine becoming human than does Abraham in the eighteenth chapter of Genesis. On a hot day, while Abraham sits at the door of his tent in the terebinth groves of Mamre, the Lord comes to visit him in the shape of three angels. There follows an episode stored forever in the memory of our civilization.

The Lord tells Abraham that he is going to destroy Sodom, the city of sin. Abraham asks anxiously, "Will you also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Perhaps there are fifty righteous in the city. Will you not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous? Be it far from you to do this, to cause the righteous to die with the wicked, so that the righteous be as the wicked; be it far from you! Should not the Judge of the earth be fair?"

Then begins the famous bargaining. God consents to spare Sodom for the sake of the fifty righteous. Straight away, Abraham lowers the number to forty-five, then to forty, thirty, twenty, and, finally, ten. The Lord yields and promises that if, perchance, ten righteous can be found in the city, he will not raze Sodom to the ground.

Swedenborg shows that this scene may not, under any circumstances, be taken literally. God is Mercy itself, not the cruel destroyer who appears here. Rather, God is outside and above this haggling, dreading the outcome.

Since Abraham represents the Divine, he is arguing with himself. The bargain in the terebinth grove is an internal conflict, an attempt to come to terms with his conscience. Abraham disarms himself and humanity, thus temporarily warding off the threat of mass destruction. At the moment he flings the weapon from his hands, he is nearing the moment when Jesus overcomes human limitations and becomes God-Man.

God is the vital force inside the mortal. Our destiny is to return to our divine root. Abraham resumes his "godbecoming" when God commands him to sacrifice Isaac, his only son, the barbarous bidding of a barbarous god. According to the biblical letter, God changes his mind at the last minute and sends a ram instead to replace Isaac on the altar.

But Swedenborg, the interpreter of the internal sense, explains that the animal is a sign and a symbol of Abraham's regret and regained self-control. Abraham asks himself, "How could I be so foolish to follow the decree of a primitive god when I possessed the memories of another and higher God?" He refuses to obey the tribal god, who requires human sacrifice, and thus he advances toward participation in the divine nature. It's a pity that Kierkegaard had not read Swedenborg, when, in *Fear and Trembling*, he wrote his acclaimed interpretation of the Abraham episode. There Kierkegaard would have found a higher message.

When Swedenborg arrives at the beautiful and affecting episode of pharaoh's daughter's finding the basket made of reed where baby Moses lies crying, he discerns a figurative representation of Jesus. The baby's mother, fearing that the cradle of reeds would leak, has caulked it with pitch and tar. In his concordance, Swedenborg finds that pitch and tar signify something bad. Thus, he states, this indicates that, from a poor beginning, the child Moses in the basket will, like the infant Jesus in the manger, rise to save his people. Of course, Moses is born in Egypt, and this alludes to the flight from Herod and the saving of the child Jesus. When the princess feels pity for the crying child and is filled with compassion, the Divine within her is awakened; as we know, her father had decreed that all newborn male Hebrew babies should be killed, so her defiance is not without risk. In the course of time, when Moses has reached adulthood and is tending the sheep of his father-in-law Jethro in the desert, he one day arrives at Horeb, the mountain of God. The Lord's angel appears before him in a flaming bush; the fire burns without being consumed. Curious about the unusual phenomenon, Moses takes a closer look. The text tells us that when God saw that Moses came closer, God called his name twice, and then Moses responded, "Here I am." God then commands, "Don't come nearer; take your shoes off because this is sacred ground."

Swedenborg thinks this encounter in the desert should, naturally enough, not be understood literally. Why should it matter to God if Moses is wearing shoes or not? Nor to God are there any particularly holy places. Rather the Divine is concerned here not with a place but

with a state of mind. The Divine is awakened in Moses' heart, and he realizes that his shoes symbolize the natural and lower qualities he should avoid. God appears to be outside Moses, speaking to him and instructing him; but, behind the scene, we realize that Moses is about to become God, that the voice is inward and at heart his own.

The God of the Old Testament is terrible, bent on revenge, a despot who takes a thousand lives for one. In Swedenborg, he becomes a ghost from another time, opposed and defeated by the great figures of the Old Testament, whose work is completed through Jesus. In Swedenborg's rendering, the Bible becomes an epic on progress, Jesus being the omega, the climax and culmination.



Swedenborg's view of God should be welcomed by anyone who believes in the possibility of inner growth and fulfillment. I call it natural religion because it doesn't rely on supernatural miracles. Its creed is a belief in a prosperous development of the innate possibilities of each person.

It is with Jesus as with Abraham. In Swedenborg, the story of Jesus reads like this: God descends into the womb of Mary and is born a human being. God naturally chooses the human form, which is his own. Like the lives of other people, Jesus' human existence is a lifelong effort to uncover his divine derivation. Jesus conquers all worldly trials, the last and the hardest being the crucifixion, after which he becomes entirely divine. When we look at the man called Jesus, we see God. Jesus *is* God.

According to Swedenborg, the Gospels make it clear that Jesus and God are one. When Jesus refers to the Father, he refers to himself or to his inner divinity. Father and Son are like body and soul, which cannot be separated.

In Christendom, Swedenborg observes, Jesus is called the son of Mary, and that appellation has given rise to serious delusions, particularly in Catholicism where Mary is extolled as queen of heaven. The truth is that the Lord discarded the trappings of humanity inherited

from his mother and became one with the Father (*True Christian Religion* §93–94). In his epic saga, Swedenborg meets with Mary in heaven, who is annoyed at the proclivity to call Jesus her son. She regards herself as a mere station on the way of God.

Anyone can empathize with Swedenborg's Christ. Jesus realizes the divine program of becoming an angel through his own efforts. Swedenborg disregards miracles, faith-healing, raising the dead back to life, and such inexplicable phenomena. The cross symbolizes the internal struggle of Jesus; Swedenborg divests the mystery of the cross. The vicarious sacrifice of Christ, venerated by Christianity, is heretical to him. The saying "Jesus died for you" has been a solace to many but a deterrent to others. Each and everyone must pay for his or her deliverance and, like Jesus, let the divine internal emerge victorious. Thus, the idea that Jesus bought us freedom with his blood seems absurd to Swedenborg. The mistake of Christian churches is to regard the suffering on the cross as the redemption proper.

Or to put it another way, Swedenborg brings Jesus down to raise him up. The miracle worker in Jerusalem disappears. Jesus did not die for our sins but, triumphantly, for his own, thus purifying and glorifying his human form.

Call Swedenborg's God the force that makes people rise from a gross material subsistence to seek a new and deeper sense of community. Let humankind be a cathedral of brilliant light set ablaze by God long ago. Replace the term "God" with the everlasting longing for something that braves time and death or that brings solidarity and justice to the human race—the dreams expressed by philosophers, mystics, poets, composers, idealists, and revolutionaries through the ages. Do this and you arrive at Swedenborg's religion. Jesus seen as a righteous man trying to follow the call of his inner voice—this, and not the Passion alone, makes him divine to us.

Any person who strives in this way is God. It doesn't matter what we call him. But he exists, and in Swedenborg he is present on every page.

Ernst Bloch, a contemporary theologian, thought deeply about Jesus and finally arrived at conclusions very similar to Swedenborg's. Bloch

found a solid basis to start from in the appellation used by Jesus himself—the Son of Man. This term implies that Jesus instituted divine nature as the human goal. Each person shall be his or her own savior. The *deus ex machina* apparatus assembled around Jesus—the operative Ascension, so alien to his human nature—has been added to make him resemble the gods of classical antiquity. Jesus gained in stature and reputation at such speed that he was soon as high above common mortals as the sun is above the earth. At such a distance, we lose sight of him.

Bloch interprets the message of Jesus as basically social in character. Seen from this viewpoint, Jesus continues and fulfills the utopian tradition of the Old Testament. Thus, the exodus from Egypt represents a march out of slavery to a country where justice and prosperity prevail.

Swedenborg's view of humanity is the adaptation of a great author. Whether he transcribed God's dictation or conceived it all on his own makes no difference. It *is*, and it is there to the great delight of anyone who becomes acquainted with it.

Should we call Swedenborg a Christian? Certainly, he is a professed Christian, and the Bible is the basis of his life. Into his notion of God, however, gods and ideas from past millennia stream, as has been shown by respected scholars. Inge Jonsson is in the front rank in contemporary Sweden, due to several extensive and excellent books, in which he examines Swedenborg's thinking from the standpoint of comparative literature and the history of ideas. But I view my own task as approaching Swedenborg as closely as possible as he appears to me now. My question is neither "how" nor "why" but "what."



The Bible opens with the words, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was a void and emptiness, and thick darkness was upon the faces of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the faces of the waters." Then follow the first words uttered by God: "Let there be light." God makes the moon to rule the night and the sun to rule the day. At his command, the earth becomes verdant.

Birds fly in the air, fish swim in the oceans, and cattle graze in the grass. Finally, God makes humankind to have dominion over the fish of the sea, the fowl of the heavens, and the beasts of the earth, to be ruler of all. When six days have passed, it is time for God to rest and regard his work.

Swedenborg throws new light on this mystical course of events. Some psychologists maintain that we are magically connected with our begetting, the moment when our life is sparked in the intercourse of our parents. The biblical story of creation has a similar power of attraction and was for centuries the most popular literary theme. In seventeenth-century Sweden, Haquin Spegel, Jesper Swedberg's colleague and antagonist, recapitulated the wonders of the world's inaugural week in his monumental work *Guds Werk och Hvila* (God's Work and Rest). Spegel enthusiastically describes how things, animals, and human beings sprang forth and were arranged in an ingenious pattern. He regards the world as created for the benefit of humanity and looks upon God as a good-hearted magician. Spegel's book appeared in a new edition the year of Swedenborg's divine call, 1745.

Swedenborg, however, rejects all this as mere childishness. While the story of creation may have a historical reference, the six days represent stages of spiritual evolution. It is not the world that is empty; we are. The darkness over the deep refers to the inner life of the human race. We are spiritually devastated. This word, *vastatio*, so often used by Swedenborg, indicates the onset of a painful purging of evil and falseness in the human soul. This particular state of mind heralds the new birth. The regeneration that follows is the meaning of life.

The six days of creation symbolically illustrate gradual spiritual growth. God makes herb-yielding seed and tree-bearing fruit, symbolizing inner growth. The life born in the waters and in the sky typifies the spiritual course. The newly created confronts the lingering darkness. The animals of the earth step forward. Soon it is time for humanity to come into being. When humankind is born, the work of salvation is complete. Next, the evil spirits are put to flight and the devastation

ceases. Finally comes the divine peace of Sunday when humanity is admitted to heaven.

That this is said to take one week is due to the ingenious bilingualism of God. To him, time does not exist; but to make us understand, the Author uses a chronology. The reader, for whom this is all written, is not yet mature enough to understand the purpose of life. For this reason, God makes use of well-known metaphors—the sun, the moon, sprouting seed, flying birds.

To see the story of creation as the days of spring after a long winter in the heart of the human being is to me a very beautiful thought. Flowers and birds, fish and wild animals are the images of a new hope. Nothings hinders the reader from returning, after having been initiated into the secret language of God, to a profane reading of Scripture, to see it all as a happy saga. If, then, the regeneration of humanity is perceived behind the creation of the earth, the joy is doubled.

THE DEMON AND HIS HARLOT

During the years that Swedenborg first experienced his spiritual crisis, he wrote a literary work entitled *De Cultu et Amore Dei* (The Worship and Love of God), about the creation of the world and the first appearance of humankind on earth.

Swedenborg envisions Adam as being born from an egg hanging on the Tree of Life in the middle of paradise. The ovule has been fertilized by the spirit of God. Any reader who wants to know the literary models and historical setting of that wonder will find a reliable guide in Inge Jonsson's dissertation on Swedenborg's drama of creation.¹

1. Inge Jonsson, "*Swedenborgs skapelsdrama de Cultu et Amore Dei*," Ph.D. diss, University of Stockholm, 1961. This work is currently being translated into English and is scheduled to be published by the Swedenborg Foundation in 2003. [Ed.]

The infant Adam grows up in the most beautiful natural surroundings and is watched over and cared for by affectionate spirits. Indeed, all parents should consider the child-rearing methods they use. The child's attention is directed to a low-hanging bunch of grapes. Eager to reach them, the child learns how to stand erect and to lift himself from the ground.

Soon Adam is a young man who feels the desires of youth. The theme of loving companionship, which Swedenborg never fails to address, is thus introduced. Adam loses his way one night; he sleeps under a wonderful tree, a replica of the tree of his birth. He dreams of a beautiful, seductive nymph. As he tries to embrace her, she flees, and his desire is redoubled by her resistance. As they grapple together in the grass, Adam twists his body so badly that he feels a rib break loose. At that point, the beautiful woman yields, and they kiss passionately.

He wakes up to find his arms empty, the lovely woman but a vision of his dreams. However, during the wrestling and kissing, he has, without being aware of it, touched an egg hanging in the tree and fertilized it with a vital spirit. With erotic heat, Swedenborg thus depicts the orgasm, the little death, of which eighteenth-century poets sang in a thousand different ways. This intercourse has given rise to a new life. Eve is conceived, and she grows in the bosom of nature. When she has become a young girl, in her first age of laughter and play, she comes one day to a woodland mere with crystal-clear water. She kneels down and sees "her own ivory-white neck, her breasts, arms, and hands." Amazed, she discovers that her own astonishment is reflected in her face. The young girl is yet wholly ignorant of the art of dissembling, still in the state of innocence that, according to Swedenborg, is the most desirable of all.

When Swedenborg describes this amorous rendezvous, he remains in the area where he is at home—in dreams. Sexual excitement intensified by female resistance is a theme elaborated on in Swedenborg's *Conjugal Love*, where it recurs in numerous variations, providing us with a hint of his personal preference. I fear that many modern readers will find Adam's wrestling and Eve's wistful gazing a bit ridiculous. There is a tinge of the boudoir to these accounts as if courtly life, so familiar to Swedenborg, had proved contagious.

But behind these scenes, powerful literary prototypes are discernible, as Inge Jonsson has shown. Behind Adam chasing the fleeing nymph is the god Apollo pursuing Daphne, who was saved by Zeus, transforming her into a laurel. Behind Swedenborg's Eve, another Eve is visible as the source, the heroine of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, whose sisters will be reflected in thousands of literary creations in the centuries to come. In Swedish literature, the most beautiful of them all is named Selma, in bishop Frans Michael Franzén's poem *The Visage of Man*.²

Swedenborg is a genius, and he expects from himself the new and the genuinely original. He knew that the narrative in *De Cultu* was derivative; thus, he did not finish the book. In fact, he had already planned another and more independent variant of God's creation drama, which we have already seen in the preceding chapter.



Swedenborg did not entirely abandon his ambitions to write literature, however. Up to his last book, he strewed his theological paths with fabulous flowers called *memorabilia*, memorable relations or things worth remembering. The genre that comes closest to these creative miniatures is the short story, and their style is related to that of cautionary comedy and opera, two other popular genres that Swedenborg knew very well. The scene of these episodes is always laid in the spiritual world, yet it is impossible for me to believe that they were written "in spirit," because they are ingeniously styled and show the meticulous care of literary productions. Swedenborg was so proud of them that they reappear in work after work.

Swedenborg often adopts the persona of a *flâneur* in the spiritual world, a stroller who just by chance happens upon curious surroundings. "Once when I was wandering in a tranquil mood and with peace in my heart, I saw at a distance a grove. . . ." or "When I went home from a

2. Frans Michael Franzén (1772–1847) was a Swedish poet, professor, and clergyman. His work *Selma and Fanny* (1824) is a lyrical cycle. He also wrote epics, didactic poems, and biographies of prominent Swedes.

school of wisdom, I saw on the road an angel clad in hyacinth-colored garment. He approached me and said . . .” This approach is a literary device used by many writers here on earth, but it is particularly productive in the spiritual world where environments emerge and characters come alive as soon as we think of them.

In one memorable relation [*Apocalypse Revealed* §463], Swedenborg arrives at a magnificent harbor with many ships, heavily laden with goods. On deck, young boys and girls sit, handing out wares to all passers-by. Is this Gothenburg, the point of departure and arrival of many of Swedenborg’s sea voyages, or is it a port in Holland or in England, the port of ships from all parts of the world? The children are waiting for their “beautiful tortoises,” which shortly disembark, carrying their young on their backs. The little tortoises look around, seeing the far-off islands, an archipelago. The old tortoises have two heads, one large and enveloped in the same shell as their bodies, emitting a reddish light. The other head is small and hides inside the larger one.

The boys and the girls give the animals, who have human faces, various sweets, and the creatures gratefully lick the children’s generous hands. Then a moral exposition follows. The hard exteriors typify ossified priests, and the dual heads delineate their duplicity. Swedenborg delivers a powerful speech, and the whole spectacle is dissolved. The reader, however, principally remembers the lively scenery with the youngsters on deck and dispenses with the moral sense.



In one of the best of the memorabilia (*True Christian Religion* §80), an overbearing young man ascends from the underworld, having received special permission to enter the heavenly realm. The spirit arrives at the house where Swedenborg lives during his visit in the spiritual world. The distressed Swedenborg closes his window, subsequently talking to the spirit through the windowpane. The devil is accompanied by a woman, a seductress, as fetching as the goddess of love herself and just as eloquent.

When Swedenborg asks if the woman is his wife, the demon answers, "What is a wife? I do not know, and my society does not know either; she is my harlot." Then, with the magic of sirens, she arouses lascivious desire in the devil. Aflame, he kisses her, and she sighs, "O, my Adonis!"

Swedenborg, impatient at this sudden intimacy, asks the demon what his occupation is, and the spirit replies, "I am a philosopher." As a confirmation of this, his mistress puts a laurel wreath on his head, and the spirit begins his theological exposition:

God, heaven, angels, and the like, about which many people in the world have much to tell, are empty terms and fictions. To us God is Nature and the Sun, the great deliverer and begetter and feeder of all. . . . Religion is nothing but an enchantment of the common people, which encompasses their minds like an ether, in which notions of piety fly like butterflies in the air. . . . From a desire to fly, the unlearned masses in this way make wings for themselves, with which they can soar like eagles and cry boastfully to those on the ground, "Look at me!"

As for us, we believe what we see, and we love what we can touch. [He grabs his concubine.] This is the object of my faith because I see and feel it. But we throw that other nonsense out of our windows, and blow it away with a puff of laughter.

When Swedenborg asks the deluded spirit if he believes in heaven and hell, the philosopher bursts out laughing:

What is heaven but the ethereal firmament above? What are the angels but shadows wandering about the sun? What are archangels but comets with long tails? And what is hell but bogs where, in the believer's imagination, frogs and crocodiles are devils! All the ideas of heaven and hell are mere trumpery brought forth by some prelate for the purpose of winning glory from the ignorant multitude.

I personally don't for a minute believe that Swedenborg indeed shut the window when he saw this fiend and kept it closed. Swedenborg's good-humored satire of this contemporary Age-of-Reason hedonism,

with its battery of irreverent scoffing and liberal ideas, proves as much. Swedenborg does not drift into caricature, so I am inclined to think that he himself may once have shared the demon's views or at least had been tempted by similar lines of thought.

Voltaire's contemporary satire *Candide* had triumphed throughout Europe for several years at the time Swedenborg recounted this memorable encounter, and its jesting and jeering tone may have been on his mind. Interestingly enough, Kant concluded his diatribe against Swedenborg with a quotation from that very work.

But more important, on the literary scene of the time there was another naysayer—the aforementioned Satan of John Milton, whose powerful rejection of divine power can properly be labeled horrifying. Furthermore, contemporary opinion placed Milton on a level with—if not above—Homer, Virgil, and Dante. Swedenborg never mentions Milton in his writings—neither does he refer to Voltaire—but this is a revealing silence. Undoubtedly, Swedenborg was aware that the master hand of Milton had moved behind his quill in *De Cultu* and that *Paradise Lost* was invisibly present in his work.

During the first thirty years of his life, Swedenborg lived under royal tyranny, that of Charles XII. The Swedish king managed to tear the country to pieces almost as successfully as Hitler destroyed Germany. In the spiritual world that Swedenborg constructs, there is no room for a dark instigator of rebellion, just as there was no room for such a revolutionary in the dominion of Charles. The heavenly king retains totalitarian control; in his world, no other way and no other sway may exist. And so, to put the rebel in proper perspective, Swedenborg makes his godless blasphemer a harmless youngster. This depiction epitomizes what I regard as a fundamental foible in the author's character: his lack of insight into the complexity of the soul. Evil becomes dangerous only insofar as it is combined with good impulses. Milton's Satan becomes furious when he realizes that Eve is innocent, a trait that touches a nerve within himself. In Swedenborg, the evil oozes like a poison into the souls of mortals and spirits. Even though the destruction of the soul

is an ever-impending peril, Swedenborg is never shaken by this state of affairs.

When confronted with the impious young spirit, Swedenborg resorts to a trick question, one that he repeatedly delights in using. He asks the imp about life after death, to which the latter replies that it is certainly a thing of the imagination. Perhaps some effluvium might rise from a buried corpse in the shape of a man, the evil spirit says, which would account for the belief, which so terrorizes foolish people.

As with his spiritual encounter with Polhem, Swedenborg finds that he who laughs last laughs best: now the time has come for Swedenborg to set things right. "You are raving mad," the author laughs. "You are now living after death!" At this point, the evil spirit at last recalls where he is—and where he has been and what he has seen—and regretfully cries out, "I am mad!" Ashamed, he now remembers that he once saw the heavens above and heard angels "utter things ineffable." He promises to tell everyone about this when he returns to hell and assures Swedenborg that his hellish cronies will be abashed too. But, according to the psychological laws of the other life, on his return to hell, the demon forgets everything he has learned and tells his friends that all that he heard from Swedenborg was sheer madness.

The man of learning and free inquiry, with his academic cap on his head, is one among many of the same profession that Swedenborg scourges. Philosophers invent beautiful terms only to disguise their emptiness. They are like seekers lost in a vast forest who cannot see the sky for the dense ceiling of branches and foliage above their heads; thus, they rove about in the dark forever. But despite his taunts, Swedenborg cannot conceal that he is himself a philosopher and that his view of the world and his outlook on humankind have been carefully considered.

FREE WILL

God, who made the universe and is its ruler, has put good and evil in opposition to one another. With didactic clarity, almost as in a wall chart used at school, Swedenborg draws his world picture.

In the spiritual world, there are as many communities of heavenly angels as there are communities of infernal spirits. These worlds reflect each other in point-counterpoint; the signatures are inverted. Imagine a man standing *on* a mirror: an exact copy of himself is found below his feet, turned upside down.

Spiritual qualities, too, are inverted in this manner. In hell, philanthropy is answered by misanthropy, and good will by malice. The gentle predilection toward forgiveness has its counterpart in murderous vindictiveness. Benevolence is balanced by envy, peace and conciliation by mischief and dissension, generosity by its stingy twin avarice, and so forth. Any interpretation of texts, as well as of dreams, must take this duality into account. An image evoking goodness and pleasure on the

surface at once turns into something bad and dangerous in the mirror below.

We experience the workings of this mechanism every day. What appears to be discipline on the upper plane can be interpreted as slavish, blind submission from another viewpoint. Democratic liberty is transmogrified into lawless tyranny.

Even the immaculate refulgence of heaven radiating into the lower depths comes out as blackness, and truth changes into a lie. Words and objects, even creatures, that denote or symbolize goodness and truth turn nefarious and noxious in the abyss. Left alone in their dark world, sinister spirits think they are blameless; but let the smallest beam of heavenly light slip through and penetrate their atmosphere and they apprehend their wickedness. Then the appallingly distorted features of their faces come into view.

This dualism permits Swedenborg to dramatize with abandon. The two societies, the positive and the negative, are a form of checks and balances, creating equilibrium, both being equally strong. The result is stasis. This spiritual balance is also reflected within each human being. Throughout our earthly life, we are accompanied by two angels, one for the will and the other for the understanding; but we also have two demonic spirits. These spirits are also present in the afterlife. Our freedom rests on the balance of these antagonistic forces. At the same time, they maintain our connection both with the ethereal realms and the lower depths.

Without the angels and the evil spirits beside us, we would soon perish. It happened to Swedenborg once that they retreated from him to some extent. In an instant, he almost suffocated and would have died had they not been sent back to him.

God has contrived a world that stands still, waiting on tenterhooks. We all are in the center of this force field; within us is the breakeven point. Among all living creatures, humans alone can think, talk, and act in freedom. Thus, only we can disturb the balance between good and evil. If we did not believe in our free will, life would be devoid of

meaning. We would sit in stunned silence, bereft of our lives, of the struggle and the choice.

With this concept, Swedenborg displays an amazing proficiency in depicting the conditions of spiritual freedom. “What could stop the Omnipotent,” he once asks, “if he really wanted to compel us? He could force us to the altars with lightning-bolts and thunder, to bend our knees so we genuflect in worship. . . . With one word he could crush our wills with perpetual miracles. What would be genuine, then, if we were thus forced to comply? Would not our hearts burn with corruption!”¹

Swedenborg’s own works may well be seen from a similar point of view. What could have stopped him from proving the existence of the world of the dead, where he went every day, if he had really wanted to convince us? Such a miracle would have forced our knees to bend in prayer. Swedenborg’s model, however, is God himself. The author’s task is to show us a way of life that we can find reasonable and right. Miracles would humiliate and confuse us, would constrain our ability to choose rationally. That Swedenborg does not offer such proofs—apparently never even considers their necessity—demonstrates that his spiritual world is a realistic construction.

The mystery of life is concealed in the fact that we may freely choose good but, in the moment of decision, can also realize that God is leading us. How is this possible? This means that we attribute everything to God at the same time that we acknowledge acting from free will. When our choice favors goodness and truth, we become aware of God’s presence and support and in this way realize that he has influenced our decision. If, on the other hand, we think that we do everything by ourselves, that we execute merely our own will, then we are deceived, and our evil spirits have gained the day.

God knows everything. His divine providence looks into the future. He silently links our lives together, guiding us all the time. But if we

1. This passage is a free translation of *Economy of the Animal Kingdom*, II, §331, as found in Inge Jonsson’s dissertation, “*Swedenborgs skapelsdrama*,” 179.

knew this consciously, we would become furious and rebellious because freedom above all is precious to the human race. For this reason, God in his benevolence does not openly direct us but does so furtively and imperceptibly, as an invisible stream or a rising tide slowly carries a ship forward.

Swedenborg says that humanity sees providence from hindsight, never from viewing the future. In other words, we do not understand our fate until we look back on our lives, until we retrospectively consider how it all came about. This teaching speaks directly to me and confirms my own experience. This is another way of acknowledging that the Divine is present within all of us, but I am free to affirm or deny this.

To the beautiful image of the invisible current that makes the ship move while the crew notices nothing, Swedenborg adds an example from his beloved garden. A man picks a fruit from a tree and gives it to a friend. In lifting his hand and taking the fruit, the man's free will is engaged. The fruit, however, is created by God and has come to delicious ripeness thanks to the light and warmth of the sun, by means of which God makes everything on earth grow and ripen. The man, seeing the fruit on the branch and wanting to give it to someone, thereafter consistently acts in a manner that emulates God. But what then comes from himself or reflects his own personal humanity? The answer is that the man possesses the will of God in his breast. If, on the other hand, the man thinks he is the sole bestower of the fruit whose sweet pulpy mass his neighbor gratefully enjoys, then he is misled by pride and egotism, choosing to live in a fog of misconceptions and to run about aimlessly.

FAITH

Faith, in Latin *credo* and *fides*, is a concept that occupies a great deal of thought in Swedenborg's writings. In the comprehensive English concordance by John Faulkner Potts, comprising six thousand pages, the English words *belief* and *faith* take up about fifty full pages.

Swedenborg takes great pains to combat false doctrines, but two of them, in particular, aroused his wrath.

The first of these heresies was the notion of the split personalities of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, having the effect of being three different persons. The consequence of this conception of the Trinity is polytheism, an unpardonable sin.

One day on a heavenly stroll, Swedenborg meets with some exalted clergymen, one of them a bishop who superciliously expounds his idea of God. The cleric states that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit sit on thrones placed at the midpoint of heaven. The throne of the Father is made of solid gold; in his hand, he holds a scepter. The royal seat

of his Son is made of silver; he wears a crown on his head. On a throne made of clear crystal, the Holy Spirit sits, cradling a dove in his hand. Around the Blessed Trinity, innumerable angels sing. The proud clergyman goes on to exclaim that the Father and the Son discuss who might be worthy enough to be admitted into heaven, while, occasionally, the Holy Spirit flies out to present the selected with the gift of salvation. The Spirit's breath dispels the darkness in their hearts, just as smoke from an oven is dispersed when a fan begins clearing the air.

Swedenborg listens attentively. When the clergyman finally becomes silent, our guide speaks up. If our imagination of God is built up by sensuous imagery—like the throne, the scepter, the crown, the dove—we inevitably end up with the fallacy of three gods. That we confess belief in one God makes no difference. As far as he is concerned, Swedenborg goes on, he has never, not even in childhood, connected God with anything sensory or material. God is one and indivisible—there is no other reasonable conception of the Divine. When Jesus speaks about the Father, he refers to the Divine *within* himself.

The second heretical delusion is related to the first. Faith without good deeds has no value at all. Consequently, the Holy Spirit cannot be sent out to deliver any gifts of grace. As a matter of fact, “faith alone” is a main entry in the English concordance to Swedenborg's works, a concept he waves unceasingly as a red flag.

It may seem that, among matters of faith, Swedenborg pays too much attention to the Trinity. But to understand the explosiveness of this topic, we must examine the contemporary religious debate. When we read about a war raging in Swift's Lilliput between those who eat eggs from the round end and those who prefer the more pointed one, we need to be informed that the point at issue is the Holy Supper. Swift employs the egg for our amusement, and Swedenborg too wants us to laugh at the absurdity of the heretical premises. In his polemics, he mobilizes every conceivable literary weapon: subtle irony, coarse insults, sharp satire. He often repeats his ruse. A priest in the spiritual world, who swears by his monotheistic conviction, is asked to write down the simple statement “God is One.” No matter how he tries, his hand is

seized with a cramp and not a word gets on the paper in front of him because, in his heart, there are three gods.¹

I think that God does not interfere with our fates nor does he listen to our prayers because he knows that everything depends on us. We harbor God within ourselves. To Swedenborg, faith is nothing but an observance of our internal divine nature. It is a form of love, not a thought, not something to be confessed. Faith comes with compassion as summer follows spring. Angels don't use the word *faith*; they don't even know its meaning. But if they hear the word spoken, they sense it as love. Those who are not in the service of love are outside the range of religion. Faith and love are always simultaneous.

Faith is not strengthened by miracles; indeed, they undermine it. Miracles are violent since they force us to believe what we do not grasp intellectually. Celestial angels, superior in spiritual development to other beings, know neither love nor faith. Instead of love, they have love of goodness, while instead of faith, they have love of truth.

The only faith that can save is one that leads to a righteous life. Hence, the notion of justification by faith alone is a fallacy. For Swedenborg, thoughts lack value until they are put into practice. For this reason, iniquitous thoughts do not necessarily lead to damnation.

Thus, a creed without direction is like a bird lost in the air. To believe in an invisible God is nothing more than blind faith. If we imagine that God is a spirit or a soul, we will look for him everywhere in the universe; by doing so, the cosmos or nature itself becomes God, and we end up in a cult of the material. No one can approach an understanding of God without realizing that God is divine *and* human. Once we understand this essential point, God becomes the foundation of our soul and the goal of life.

In the Gospels, Jesus causes Swedenborg some worry because of his sayings on faith. In Matthew 9: 22, Jesus says to the woman who has

1. In one encounter in *The Spiritual Diary*, Swedenborg asks a spirit to say, "God is One." The spirit cannot comply no matter how hard he tries because he does not believe it in his heart. [Ed.]

bled for twelve years, “Daughter, be comforted; your faith hath made you whole.” He assures the apostles that if they have faith, they can command mountains. Even more radical is his assurance that all that we ask for in prayer will be granted.

Swedenborg seems to me to be uncomfortable in the face of Jesus’ miracles: walking on water, healing the sick, bringing the dead back to life, etc. Since he does not want to deny these feats, he affirms the historical accuracy of the episode and makes allowances for divine nature and the people involved, intuitively feeling that Jesus was in a process of becoming God and that the Almighty may break the laws he has himself instituted.

As for moving mountains, Swedenborg explains this in another way: Jesus expresses himself in correspondences. The mountain is a metaphor of conceit, weighing colossally on the heart, where the tiniest mote of belief in divine love is enough to kick the whole mount—sin—into the sea that is hell. In the same light, Jesus’ statements on answered prayers can be explained if we consider that the petitioner can never ask for anything beyond the kingdom of God.

When Paul sings the praises of love in 1 Corinthians 13, Swedenborg’s faith is expressed. Love is a way of life. It contains an awareness of a divine origin from which compassion and mercy sprout. The central message is that we see everything as in a mirror. Some day we will stand face to face with God, and we will be known.

THE GRAND MAN

The Grand Man—*Homo maximus*, literally translated, “the greatest human”—is the boldest conception engendered by Swedenborg’s daring mind. His reports on this universal formation are scattered throughout the *Arcana Coelestia*.

“I may now relate and describe wonderful things which, as far as I know, have not as yet been known to anyone, nor have entered into the mind of anyone.” With these words in *Arcana Coelestia* §3624, Swedenborg introduces the subject, and perhaps there is a touch of hesitancy in his words.

The human being is a representation of God, but all that God made resembles the originator. Hence the universe, the creation of God, must have human form, a human body of astronomical size. In the Grand Man, the planetary systems move, and those spirits who love God and the neighbor live there. Complacent souls are not let in, but hover outside. If they were admitted into the community where they do not

belong, they would immediately become ill (see *Arcana Coelestia* §4931 and elsewhere).

The Grand Man is a spiritual body, and all its parts correspond to limbs, organs, and tissues found in the perceptible world. The Grand Man consists of the heavenly kingdom, which is the realm of the heart, and the spiritual kingdom, which is the domain of the lung. In a wonderful way, the two kingdoms are joined to one another, like the heart and the lungs in the circular system of the human body.

The embryo and the fetus in the womb wholly pertain to the kingdom of the heart, since, while in the amniotic fluid, the lungs have not yet begun to operate. When the baby is born, he or she becomes subject to both kingdoms, with the lung being dominant. If the child grows up to lead an honorable life, in love and truthfulness, then it will be possible after death to return to the heart's kingdom. This means, figuratively speaking, a return to the matrix and a new birth. Thereafter, the heart is the ruler.

All human organs are found in the Grand Man, and each corresponds to identical parts of the human body, which, in turn, respond to their spiritual counterparts. In fact, this unifying bond is the rationale of our lives. Without this connection to the macrocosm, we would not exist.

Once Swedenborg experienced this conjunction directly. He felt how his thoughts and his will were controlled and directed in his brain. He observed that his lungs expanded and contracted by themselves, independent of his own volition. His heartbeat synchronized with his breathing. He vaguely distinguished how the activity of his kidneys—indeed, of all parts of his body—worked in congruence with the rhythms of the Grand Man, both bodies moving in the same way.

The angels, who have their habitation in the Grand Man, are found in both kingdoms, some of them living in the heavenly realm, others in the spiritual. These dominions, however, are in turn divided into countless smaller societies, as many as there are members and fibers in the human body. In other words, there are millions of them. While the heart of each angel pit-pats individually—and this is the marvelous

thing—to all of the angels it seems that their pulse is identical with that of the Grand Man.

To make clear where they come from, Swedenborg's informants among the angels reconfigure themselves in the shapes of hearts and lungs, showing him their true home in a ringed dance. Once Swedenborg observed that evil spirits wanted to harm him; despite this, he went to sleep. At ease in his mind, he rested peacefully, until he woke up later that night. Then he felt that his breath was not his own, but that of heaven.

In his diatribe, Kant uses the Grand Man as an argument against Swedenborg, calling it something dreamed up from an enormous imagination, the wildest figment of the visionary's brain.¹ But in commenting on Kant, Martin Lamm explains that the human form of the macrocosm is an ancient notion and that erudite speculation of classical antiquity and the Renaissance form the basis of Swedenborg's thought.² Both Plato and Aristotle cherished the idea of the world as a living being. In Hermes Trismegistus, reflected in the poetry of Gunnar Ekelöf, the universe is conceived as a human being with a perfect body.

In a poem by William Butler Yeats, a Native American speaks of how animals and plants think of God. The grouse visualizes the Lord of creation as a colossal representation of itself. Safe and secure, it passes its tranquil life under the protective wings of an eternal bird. The water lily, floating on a pond, imagines that the ocean is a drop of rain in a corolla of divine petals, while the peafowl sees the unfolded plumage of a peacock tail in the starry sky.

Swedenborg's Grand Man is a variation on this same ancient theme, distinguished by its corporeal totality and graphic depiction. Another poet, Lennart Sjögren, has compared the suspended, split carcass of an

1. Immanuel Kant, *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer and Other Writings on Emanuel Swedenborg*, trans. by Gregory Johnson (West Chester, Pa.: The Swedenborg Foundation, 2002).

2. Martin Lamm, *Emanuel Swedenborg: The Development of His Thought*, trans. by Tomas Spiers and Anders Hallengren (West Chester, Pa.: The Swedenborg Foundation, 2000), 254–255.

animal to a triptych.³ Likewise, the interiors of Swedenborg's Grand Man are visible; heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, bowels. Nothing is passed over or left out, and all is wide open to our view. Every detail represents a spiritual society.

In *The Spiritual Diary*, Swedenborg writes that among his daily visitors are spirits who tend to their business in his inner organs as well as hovering around his body. Spirits pop up under the soles of his feet, ascend to his knees and his thighs, and climb from his thighs to his chest. One spirit, who claims to be Aristotle, approaches his right ear. Benevolent spirits for the most part take up residence in his head, while evil ones congregate in more sordid places below his waist. Some spirits ask Swedenborg for permission to be put up for the night inside him. Some arrive upside-down, head down and feet up, recalling weightless astronauts in space shuttles where the force of gravity is suspended. A drone of spirits float in and around Swedenborg, as if he were a buzzing hive in human form. When he walks the streets of Stockholm, Amsterdam, and London, he is besieged by a swarm of beings that other people cannot see. He listens to them; and when he gets home, he writes down what they have told him. Sometimes they pilot his pen.

The throng of spirits in the prodigious divine body stimulates his imagination in an extraordinary way. At times, he vividly traces, as it were, landscapes and visual sequences that can be regarded as harbingers of surrealism. On one occasion, he observes a visage above a sky-blue window, a little star alight at the left eye. Then several reddish stars begin to glow. He sees walls, but only on the left side; there is no roof. He assumes that some devilry is brewing in the wind. Suddenly, the walls and the sky vanish, and a well pops up instead. From its waters rises white steam. He learns that this is a representation of the funnel-shaped duct in the brain and that the vapor is the lactic lymph, the home of various spirits.

Did Swedenborg really believe that these spirits were there? Should

3. Lennart Sjögren (b. 1930) started his career as an artist but then turned to poetry. He is famous for perceiving metaphysical meanings in gross and "low" rural or carnal reality.

he not then be treated as psychically afflicted and the victim of hallucinations? If Kant had gotten the opportunity to read the *Spiritual Diary*, which was first published in the 1800s, that would have borne out his diagnosis.

Year after year, Swedenborg spurs the flight of these fancies, yet he also keeps them under control, so that they form a consistent and rational whole. He leads a harmonious life during this entire time and appears in perfect health. For his garden, he orders plants and flower seeds from Holland. He welcomes visitors—the journalist Carl Christopher Gjörwell, grandfather of C. J. L. Almqvist, interviews him—and he attends dinner parties. One would think he would appear irrational with all those spirits running riot in his body, but he remains the same as ever. Smiling, each day he records his discoveries.

A folly that is constant and that can be gauged, weighed, calculated, and described with exact precision, each detail of its method geared to a grand scheme, cannot be called crazy. Thus, the allegation of madness is negated by Swedenborg's own essential method. All those spirits toiling within Swedenborg's body are connected with the Grand Man. Our entire life and all that we experience in the natural world constitute a theater where scenes from the spiritual world are staged, all in the figure of the Grand Man.

In the late-nineteenth century, when Darwin's theory of evolution was first introduced, Strindberg thought he felt within himself the movements of fish and other creatures from prehistoric ages before *homo sapiens* first appeared on earth. Swedenborg, convinced that the Grand Man exists, weaves a net and joins himself to it. Thus, he has an immediate connection with the entire universe.

Swedenborg repeatedly attests that he is fully awake, all his senses being aware and alert, when he visits spiritual beings. But so what? Strindberg concludes his novel *Inferno* by declaring that he actually lived through all the events in the book, and he invites anyone who doubts the authenticity of his tale to read his diary for verification. But this was a lie, which today can be refuted by anyone who wants to inquire into the matter by reading Strindberg's now-published journals.

This does not, however, hamper us from being impressed by the *Inferno* or from learning from it. Dante too writes in the first person, and he descends into the kingdom of death and reports on his wanderings. A contemporary anecdote tells us of an Italian woman who thought Dante's dark complexion was caused by the burning flames of hell.



In 1744, when he was fifty-six years old, Swedenborg was permitted to resign from his post as assessor of the Royal College of Mines. He also took leave of science. From the study of nature and human anatomy, he progressed to the matters of the soul. To reveal the hidden meaning of Holy Writ became his most important task. Nevertheless, the scientific knowledge he had gained was not lost; it weathered this determined transformation and manifested itself in his new field of studies. Swedenborg draws on his scientific lore, finding a new expression for it in his grand, didactic poem. He leaps from the body to the soul but keeps the same system..

In Sweden, many learned authors have written about Swedenborg's research and his contribution to science, Inge Jonsson foremost among them. Swedenborg's scientific output is not as comprehensive as his religious production, but it is still immense. In 1734, his *Opera Philosophica et Mineralia* was published, comprising three volumes, a remarkable tome on iron and iron works being one of the books. The first volume of the trilogy, entitled *Principia rerum naturalium*, is an approach to natural philosophy, where a cosmogony strictly based on the laws of mechanics is outlined. In his next monumental work, on the dynamics of the soul's domain, *Oeconomia regni animalis*, nature is described as an organic system, the development of which is best understood by analogy to the human body. Finally, in *Regnum animale*, 1744–1745, he penetrates the labyrinths of the human body in search of channels to the soul. The formation of the Grand Man provides him with an opportunity to apply his theoretical erudition in full measure, and he quickly seizes it.

Linnaeus, another contemporary Swedenborg never mentions, based his world-famous sexual system on the arduous study of minute details. Swedenborg built the Grand Man on his studies in natural science, and his reputation was to rival that of Linnaeus.⁴

Strindberg, the disciple of Swedenborg, created a Grand Woman of his own. After a long period of scientific studies, he wrote a poem called *Holländaren* (The Dutchman), consisting of three songs. In the second song, a woman is described as representing a cosmic system in miniature, being a semblance of the universe. In the curve of her hip, the writer sees the comet's course; and in the hemispheres of the buttocks, he beholds the earth's orbit around the sun. Her intimate parts are pictured in the brilliant constellation of Orion, and her knee is a nebula in the Milky Way. All the universe, from the biggest to the smallest thing, is made to serve the daughter of heaven. The tendrils of a vine are visible in her nostrils. Her eye is like a brown agate resting on a bed of white-blue like a dove's egg. This, one of the greatest and most magnificent poems in Swedish literature, is a continuation of Swedenborg's poetic creation.

But there is a difference: while Strindberg aims for beauty, Swedenborg seeks wisdom. Strindberg depicts a beloved woman, and he writes in sensual intoxication. Swedenborg writes of a being that is both man and woman, but he too is in love. God himself is the object of his love, and to be human is a distinguishing quality of God, who is also a unity of love and wisdom. The purpose of studying the Grand Man is to learn more about life and the laws that regulate it. In the ordinary course of events, with the help of various things, lines, smells, visions, and sounds, Swedenborg draws his conclusions and relates them in the systematic form of the *Arcana*.

Occasionally—and the reader notes this with some concern—Swedenborg forgets his task and turns into a professor of anatomy

4. Swedenborg and Linnaeus probably encountered each other at the Academy of Sciences and also at weddings and funerals since they were related by marriage, but neither mentions the other in his published works or personal writings. [Ed.]

delivering a lecture to his students: “When the cranium, and the membranes beneath, have been removed, wonderful convolutions and circuits become visible, in which barky substances are located,” he says, and proceeds his academic exposition with an account of the cortical fibers.

The millions of provinces contained in the Grand Man also comprise the intestines, the circulatory system, the different body fluids and the secretive and digestive systems. Lymphatic vessels, mesentery, liver, pancreas and spleen all have their allotted share.

A continual communication is maintained between the Grand Man and us. Spirits are insidious guests with us all the time; today, we would term them the unconscious. The spirits feel the slightest change in our thoughts, our memory, and our desire.

The hips and all sexual parts, including the womb and the ovaries, belong to the sphere of marital happiness. Since these are the source of coarse expressions and vulgar thoughts on earth, information on these parts is kept secret. Certain defiant spirits cause pain in the testicles—both male and female genitals are found the gigantic tapestry.

Around the buttocks dwell those spirits who reveled in cruelty during their lives. The angels shudder at these monsters who, after battles on earth, cared nothing about whether their country prevailed but only delighted in the torrents of blood and in their fame as great warriors.

In the magnificent celestial play, to which the Grand Man invites us, the interplay between the soul and the body is the main motif. In particular, Swedenborg treats the organs of perception. The soul is the innermost aspect of our being and survives death because its fountainhead is divine and cannot perish. Because the soul is present throughout the human body, the human spirit has human form.

The world we see is a spectacle, the shadow play of the spiritual world. The heart of the Grand Man palpitates in our chest. This cadence determines the meter.

In many clever and inventive descriptions, Swedenborg shows how every incident in the Grand Man has its counterpart in our social life. Each human being is a microcosm. In the macrocosm, the smallest

terrestrial prank is seen. Spirits live in the macrocosm in the part that best fits their character and relations. For example, the kidneys scrutinize the blood for contamination, and together with the ureter and the bladder drive impurities from the body. In these organs within the Grand Man reside judges whose tasks once were to search the secret thoughts of criminals and cleanse society of delinquency (*Arcana Coelestia* §§5283–5284). Their example is the righteous God of Psalms 7:9, who “tests the hearts and minds.”

It’s hard for me to accept this account of a heavenly judge in all seriousness. I see it more as a flash of wit. I find it rather stimulating to be presented with multiple body functions and organs as pieces of a puzzle.

The tongue serves a double purpose since it receives food and forms speech. In the *Homo maximus*, it is the home of those who love the word of God and hunger for wisdom. Spiritual nourishment is knowledge, and taste corresponds to comprehension. With such fare, angels and spirits thrive, and—wonderful to say—children in heaven grow to adulthood.

The stomach digests the food, sorting out what is useful for the circulation of the blood, but at the same time the stomach is affected by fear and anxiety. The future is the source of our unrest. When we get the better of our fear, the belly becomes appeased. In the abdomen, there are spirits who take pains to fill us with compunction, even when there is no reason at all for uneasiness. That’s why our stomachs are so sensitive.

When we speak, our soul is speaking, but it is also hearing, although we are not aware of any of this. We listen, and we think that we hear with our ears, but the soul is the true auditory organ. The tone of our speech, which is dictated by the soul, is more important than what we say. For spirits, to hear is to obey, as the original meaning of *obey* is “to hear.” There are many kinds of listening, each corresponding in the spiritual world to a specific part of the ear: eardrum, malleus, stirrup bone, incus, the cylinders, the cochlea. The spirits of the ear are obedient, but those connected with the external ear often do not understand what they hear.

The internal senses determine the features of the angels. Their human form can no longer moderate or dissimulate the facial expression. When an angel's mood changes, his face immediately reflects it. Angelic visages are gradually completed as they acquire wisdom, but they never attain perfection, since only God is perfect.

Whatever Swedenborg feels in his body is interpreted as the workings of spirits. He regards every disease as the effect of appetite, dissolute living, and discord; and he affirms that, when such passions control the body, heat ascends from hell and underlies attacks of fever. Agues immediately disappear when vice ceases its temptation.

THE SPEECH OF SPIRITS

Interviews with angels and spirits provide Swedenborg with information on the spiritual world. What language do they speak? The answer is that in the spiritual world there are many channels of communication.

In the first era of the human race, our species made use of a type of internal breathing that did not reflect in any way on our outer form. Speech was not yet articulated. People communicated silently by means of the breath and subtle shifts in their lips and eyes. Swedenborg informs us that he learned to breathe in this special way when he was just a child, only to find out later in life that this particular mode of respiration is used in conversation with angels.

When language was in its infancy, every word corresponded to a spiritual idea. Through the words in the Bible, Swedenborg can approach God. Biblical language is holy. In fact, this applies to some extent to all tongues. The conjunction between word and spirit exists in all language

but is concealed from us for the most part. At certain illuminating moments, we intuitively feel this. Poets show us the connection.

Swedenborg addresses the spirits in different languages. Often he uses his native tongue; a remarkable feature of the spiritual world is that spirits immediately understand the language of a newcomer and begin to speak his language too. For a traveler from the far north whose native tongue is usually not understood, this is a dream come true. Spirits are capable of moving into any person they encounter, acquiring the memories and diction of their host, which makes them believe that they really are the individual they are inhabiting. At night in his bed, Swedenborg is frequently visited by spirits who believe they are Swedenborg, assuming his wishes and phobias.

Since the spiritual world is divided into kingdoms and societies, angels and spirits are distributed on different spiritual levels. The celestial angels, who live in the innermost heaven, are people of superior spiritual dignity. They never use words because they consider words gross and imprecise. They cannot even pronounce a word of any human language. Nor can they understand the fundamentalist's meaning of the Scriptures because, to them, the letter is dead. However, the twofold meaning of the Word exists for them. They cannot talk to human beings without angels of a lesser order acting as intermediaries.

All living in heaven finally end up using a common vernacular, a universal tongue. They are not taught this idiom, nor do they learn it. Rather, they are blessed with it.



More than anything else, language fertilizes Swedenborg's fantasy. In this respect, he is like other great authors. Words constitute the medium he uses, and, as Inge Jonsson has pointed out, Swedenborg was acquainted with the philosophies of language of his time as well as those of bygone eras. Among his Swedish masters we find Georg Stiernhielm, Olof Rudbeck, and even his father Jesper Swedberg, who knew the language of angels.

Swedenborg takes quite a fancy to the way angels understand numbers. To them, figures do not represent countable units of time and distance and the like—because there are no such things in heaven—but numbers represent concepts and ideas. When he was “in the spirit,” Swedenborg once saw a long series of digits; he suddenly realized that some angels were communicating in an ancient, extinct language of numbers. On another occasion, he saw a heavenly writ constituted solely in numerals.

Consider the poverty of our language. There is for the most part one word for “grief,” though there are thousands of related forms of pain. Or think of the concept “green,” the many tints and hues of which language, being such a limited instrument, is insufficient to express. I remember Harry Martinson mentioning forty shades of green, for which he complained he did not have words.¹ A numeral language, on the other hand, would manage an infinite exuberance of tints.

In the past, Swedenborg tells us, every number had a profound and specific meaning, which is now forgotten, lost to us. Just a few of these significations remain. The number two, for example, signifies the dual nature of God. The stone tablets of the Law, given to Moses, are two. The first of these concerns the love of God, while the second, the love of one’s neighbor. The number three is holy since God is trine, made up of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; but as we have seen previously, it is a grave sin to have the Trinity disintegrate in three different parts.

The number seven represents the peace of the seventh day of creation. Whenever the angels of heaven use it, they recall its origin. And the number ten is a representation of God, which is seen by the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments. The number twelve signifies faith—think of the Apostles. The dynamics of that figure remain when raised to its second power or even when multiplied by itself 12,000 times, which is proved by the 144,000 people, with the name of the Lord writ-

1. Harry Martinson (1904–1978), Swedish novelist and poet. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature (along with Eyvind Johnson) in 1974.

ten on their brows, encircling the Lamb on the mountain of Zion in the Revelation 14. A number retains its value even when divided; thus, for example, the number ten remains in the number five.

For us, numeral language is dead. Its sparse remnants sometimes incite us to play around with them, but its primary purpose is to liberate the soul as correspondences do.



When words came into being, their meanings were not fixed and solid; rather, they were fluid, almost evanescent. Intonation decided meaning. Humans considered the first words spoken on earth simplistic and crude. Vibrations and overtones produced by pronunciation conveyed an internal sense.

The speech of celestial angels is perceived as a balmy breeze. Some angelic discourse flows slowly and peacefully as a river quietly drifting forward along grass-covered banks. Angels who have not reached a higher spiritual state speak in a somewhat jolting or staccato-like manner, similar perhaps to Swedenborg's own speech.

Actors, who know the possibilities of modulation, would profit from studying Swedenborg. In an interview with poet Katarina Frostenson, actress Agneta Ekmaner said, "Sometimes I feel a strong sense that my voice is not mine. It is enormous, colossal. It is the pillar between the underworld and the unearthly. In this company, the human becomes very small. I hear my maternal grandmother in my mother's voice, and my mother's voice in mine and in my sisters' voices. This awareness, that the voice is not just my own, makes me grateful. . . . Tones can be more pregnant with meaning than the words themselves."² She sounds as if she were conversant with Swedenborg's angels.

For Swedenborg, the words of the Bible appear as originally vocalized by a primordial voice, that of God. What God uttered, no mortal could

2. The poet Katarina Frostenson became the youngest member of the Swedish Academy in 1992. Swedish actress Agneta Ekmaner has created a variety of roles on the stage and screen.

grasp or translate into ordinary words. The voice of God sounded like whistling winds or the murmur of the oceans, in which the breath of God was felt.

As time went by, the divine voice sank through the heavens and was gradually formed into words. Whenever we hear them read, we sense their wordless derivation in the same way as Agneta Ekmanner caught her own grandmother's voice in her own.

In his book *Beröringens ABC* (A Primer Of Touch), Horace Engdahl writes that we apprehend the language and the text of a book's page as something spatial and firm.³ The reader's primary task is to vitalize the original thought once it has been solidified in the written word. Engdahl quotes a passage in Goethe: "When Shakespeare wrote his plays, he could hardly imagine that his works would live word for word in print and thus be criticized, compared to other works, and studied. Rather, he had the stage before his eyes when he wrote, looking upon his plays as mobile and animated, swiftly passing hearing and sight as they flew out from the stage into the audience, impossible to hold and to scrutinize. For him, the immediate moment and the meaning grasped in that fleeting second was all."

I assume that, from his intensive study of Swedenborg's works, Goethe inferred that the Bard's words are preceded by wordless images and events. This is a delightful idea, but I find it hard to be convinced that the words really don't come first.

With true artistry, the angels enact their meaning. Knowledge is simultaneously received by the eye and the ear. To do this, angels and spirits emit wonderful alternations of light and shade to make themselves clear. In the innermost heaven, everything is expressed by the interplay of celestial light effects.

In one episode, spirits communicate with Swedenborg using flames of various colors. As an act of courtesy and to make their listener, the anatomist, understand, the spirits happily illustrate their discourse

3. Essayist Horace Engdahl is the permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy.

with physical imagery, displaying brains, marrow, lungs, liver, stomach, intestines, and even genitals, since all parts of the body have a spiritual aspect.

In addition to the light show, musical tones create a harmonious effect. In the speech of the celestial angels, the vowels A, O, and U are particularly resonant.

When we follow the meanings of a word written in the Bible from the legible letter up to the abstract heights of its hidden meaning, we get beyond words and lose sight of the original meaning as we travel the realm of the ineffable. Names of persons, countries, cities finally disappear behind us in the distance. The angels, high above, are beyond any concept of individuality and personal names. They are conscious of what “Abraham” and “Moses” stand for, but not who they are. To the angels, names are gross and material.

Thus, in the heavenly realms, we lose our names, but Swedenborg’s heart isn’t set on this point consistently. Truly prominent people retain both their earthly names and knowledge. One day disciples of Aristotle, Descartes, and Leibniz, the big three in Swedenborg’s heaven, discuss the communion of the soul and the body. In the distance, the venerable masters themselves are seen—for safety’s sake placed at some remove from each other. The three parties present their views in grand disquisition. The bodily senses are like auricles of the soul, the Aristoteleans say. The Cartesians reply that the eye is not infatuated by a woman’s beauty; rather, the soul, which commands the body, is. The students of Leibniz agree but point out that body and soul interact in immediate congruence.

The dispute is settled—after all, we are now in the spiritual world and everything is possible—by lot. One lottery ticket reads, “The body commands the soul.” Another says the opposite: the soul dictates perception. The third ticket states that a pre-established harmony reigns. The winner is—and here God interferes—those who ascribe the determining role to the soul. In other words, Swedenborg wins as usual.

Evil spirits detest the angel’s way of talking, and angels cannot bear to listen to the language of hell. When an angel addresses a human

being on earth, no sound is heard. The reason is that the speech of angels flows *into* the human mind and subsequently emerges from inner person outward, reaching the auditory organs not from sound but from thought.

Many angels don't even know they were once human beings. They have forgotten their own life on earth. When they first arrive in the spiritual world, the dead certainly remember their former existence and their nearest relations as well, but soon enough these memories wither away and the spiritual world becomes their only habitat. The Lord does not want them to talk to humans because then they might pick up knowledge that is not related to their new life.

Swedenborg's exposition of the language of spirits and angels provides good mental exercise. Often he experiments with alternative channels of communication. We read in *The Spiritual Diary* that twice Swedenborg hears music, the violin and harp, in the street. The music has a calming effect on the spirits who are accompanying him that day. They forget themselves and think they are in heaven. Swedenborg feels their happiness and reminds them of how Saul's sadness and spite were lifted when he listened to David's harp. When the spirits heard the music, evil thoughts could not enter their minds. Even now, Swedenborg states in his diary, as I write these words down, the music sounds in my heart.

Music, as well as other kinds of art, is an alternate form of speech. Swedenborg tells us that tones do not originate in our world, but that their source is entirely spiritual. Harmonies correspond to the different kinds of joys and satisfactions of heaven. Wind instruments express a longing for goodness, while strings appertain to truth. All musical instruments relate to spiritual and heavenly sensations, as does singing. The tonal power of expression supersedes words in precision. Tonal language is a more refined and smooth tool compared to the parlance of tongues.

Swedenborg describes a heaven where a prince provides musical diversions to enliven dejected hearts. Music is performed publicly. Clusters of grapes form fences, and musicians line up in three rows, wind

players and strings arranged according to the intensity of their instruments. Singers, both male and female, stand to the side. To the delight of all, the music plays from dawn to dusk. Swedenborg is a profoundly musical person. Like many other writers, he finds conventional language heavy and unsatisfactory and is drawn to euphonious strains, to music's purity and clarity of pitch. He would have agreed with Eric Gustaf Geijer's poignant avowal:

Tanke, vars strider blott natten ser!
 Toner, hos eder om vila den ber.
 Hjärta, som lider av dagens gny!
 Toner, till eder, till er vill jag fly.

Thought, which to twilight torments the prey!
 Tones, for atonement in Thou it will evermore pray.
 Heart, torn by diurnal caviling and pain!
 Tones, in dream absconding, with Thou to remain.⁴

Often angels gather to sing in choirs. Their songs manifest joy, and they resemble earthly singing. Song links the present life and life hereafter. Swedenborg has heard the angels sing, and he noticed how the spirits were entranced by the sound. Angels congregate in choirs and sometimes group around the head of the Lord to form a golden crown aglow with diamonds. He envisages the same kind of configurations described in Dante's *Paradiso*.

Swedenborg's angelic choirs calls to mind the Hosanna chorus in Handel's *Messiah*, which Swedenborg might have heard in London. Anyone listening to its soaring strains can imagine that it resounds in heaven as on earth.

4. Erik Gustaf Geijer (1783–1847) was a professor of history at Uppsala University, a composer, and a lyric poet. The poem quoted is “Tonerna” (translation by Anders Hallengren).

THE FIVE SENSES

Compared to poets like Georg Stiernhielm and Carl Michael Bellman, Swedenborg is not a sensualist.¹ He shuns the material world for ideas and systems. However, he does pay assiduous attention to the five senses. Of course, he had done this already in his earlier works on anatomy. During his theosophical period, this interest blazes up again with redoubled intensity because the eye, ear, nose, and skin offer ideal opportunities to illustrate the doctrine of correspondences. So, the sensuous world enters through a back door, as it were, and infuses enchanting life into his work.

Each part of the indefinitely complex organism that constitutes the human body has, according to Swedenborg, a spiritual counterpart, and

1. Georg Stiernhielm (1598–1672), a relative of Swedenborg, is often called the father of Swedish poetry. Like Swedenborg, he was a scientist, philosopher, and government official; he also wrote epic poetry and laudatory verse. Poet and composer Carl Michael Bellman (1740–1795) was the most famous troubadour in Swedenborg's Stockholm.

this also applies to the senses. Behind the physical eye, there is another eye determining sight, while inside the ear, a spiritual ear allows our hearing. Our soul determines our perception.

Of course, we are all more or less aware that our senses are geared to impulses from within, as our vision complies with the mind's eye. Passion and imagination determine experience. Look at the person you love. Your visual organs don't paint the features you adore; your inner eye does. By always keeping this idea at the center of his vision, Swedenborg makes it easier for each of us to understand ourselves.

When the body dies, the inner sensory organs take charge. Once we feel at home in the spiritual world, perception becomes clearer than ever because on earth the external senses obscured everything, as if all were covered with a veil. In a touching way, Strindberg also used this idea in his drama *Ett Drömspel* (*A Dream Play*). The daughter, who belongs to a higher, purer world, bewails her earthly dwelling-place, cut to the quick by "feeling my vision weakened by an eye, my hearing lessened by an ear, my bright lofty thoughts cooped up in labyrinths of lard." She longs to return from whence she came, where the senses are not enslaved and imprisoned. Swedenborg brings her thither, repatriating this daughter of heaven.

The eye is the finest part of the countenance, on intimate terms with the understanding. Through the eye, light streams into each person. When we say that one's eye has been opened, that one has gained insight, we harken back to a relic of primordial language, where everything relating to the senses had spiritual significance. A certain flame of life and quivers of light in the eye guide us. Everything has a double sense, but we are not aware of this in our mortal life.

The eye has the power to change the world. In the spiritual world, Swedenborg sees foxes, eagles, sheep, and bucks; but when they come nearer, they transform into humans. The animals were images created by the internal sight. The great French artist Grandville, who brilliantly depicted people as beasts, would feel at home here.²

2. Jean-Ignace-Isidore Gérard (1803–1847), who used the pseudonym Grandville, was a caricaturist who achieved fame with satirical lithographs, often depicting public figures as animals.

Anyone who listens to music knows that our inner ear determines what we hear. The soul must be awakened before the ear can grasp anything. Music is sweeter and more meaningful in the spiritual world than on earth, and the angels singing in choirs experience the highest bliss of harmony, a feeling made even greater by the curious fact that each angel thinks he or she is the conductor.

Smells too have corresponding functions. This is perhaps the most surprising aspect of Swedenborg's doctrine of the senses. Swedenborg remained a child at heart even at an advanced age, and he was always fond of children. Several people who knew him testified to this. As we know, children are more sensitive to smells than are adults. The olfactory sense is regulated by the oldest part of the brain and is thought to be the most primitive sense. Scents thus have the remarkable power of calling up buried memories, a faculty unparalleled in the sensory system. Swedenborg calls our attention to this fact.

Individuals, Swedenborg remarks, have a distinctive perfume, peculiar to their character. This is not clearly perceived before we enter the spiritual world, where it becomes obvious. On earth, these odors are sensed by dogs and a select few. Some people today believe that computerized "sensomographs" of the future will be able to detect those secret scents, which will replace personal codes and social-security numbers. If such a machine should ever be constructed, it should be named after Swedenborg.

The nose is in the service of goodness since life-giving air streams into it. The nostrils, constituting a holy twosome, can tell the good from the bad. The wind in God's nostrils signifies heaven.

We must remember that deodorants were not known in Swedenborg's time. Smells were more apparent than nowadays, and there was nothing special about an offensive stench. Domestic animals were always close at hand, and cows and horses left their marks on home life. Sweat bathed each moment, and remarkably enough it continues to be felt in the spiritual world. Swedenborg's London stank, and alleys in particular were infernally offensive, as William Blake was to describe so

vividly. Stockholm was not much better than London. The rich drowned themselves in perfume to stand out from the common stink.

In this respect, we can consider our time poor and Swedenborg's rich. He lived in a wealth of odors. And he evokes this when he sets a thousand sweet smells free in heaven, replenishing them with a symbolic essence.

In the natural world, animals recognize each other by their smells, Swedenborg observes. In the afterlife, we will congregate in a similar way and seek a community with our own smell.

Swedenborg makes up whole registers of odors that can be used as maps for tours of the spiritual world. We can smell what kinds of people are living in a particular spiritual area. He assures us that spirits have the keenest scent and that their sharp sense of smell helps to orient them.

For example, if we smell burnt bread, we are approaching eloquent speakers who fill themselves on empty rhetoric. If there is a nasty smell of excrement, then voluptuaries are nearby. Spiteful and vindictive spirits reek of corpses. Once a few of these were granted leave from hell to give Swedenborg the opportunity of examining them. The nauseating stench made him vomit. Those who persecute the innocent smell like hovels infested by vermin. The greedy smell of rats or have a puff of "the fumes of scalded swine in a slaughtering-trough."

However, when we approach loving and tender spirits, we recognize the fragrances of the earth in spring or perhaps the scent of newly baked bread. If a vapor of wine is detected, a flatterer may be lurking in the vicinity. However, if the spirit's intention is good and his disposition charitable, flattery is excusable. A happy marriage is revealed by the smell of cinnamon.

In the spiritual world, Swedenborg somewhat resembles his contemporary Linnaeus in that he notes remarkable things without always forcing them into a moral scheme. But then the artist within him prevails; and thanks to his poetic nature, the smells come alive. They are still fresh, redolent, and pungent, as if they had been just picked or preserved through the centuries. Erik Axel Karlfeldt, our foremost lyricist

of fragrances, a man who also hailed from the Bergslag district, would have felt at home with Swedenborg.³

A delightful scent arises from the public baths. Among the benches and the tubs of hot water, female bath attendants are dimly seen through the steam. Kitchen smells blend with those of medicinal ointments and concoctions.

If a spirit has a good heart, he or she inhales this wealth of sweet smells with the greatest delight but is repelled by anything that smells nasty. It is just the other way round with the evil spirits, who perceive the sweet scents as acrid and horrid and delight in the foul-smelling. This substantiates spiritual law, according to which everyone gets on well in an environment that fits his or her nature.

The tongue plays a twofold and wonderful role. Among the sensory organs, it alone is visible. A tongue can be stuck out or withdrawn mysteriously into the body. Swedenborg says that the tongue guards the entrance of both the lungs and the stomach, because of its double service. It is both the organ of taste and an organ of speech and thus unifies heaven and earth. In the spiritual world, it refuses anything evil, but some tongues, looking like small flames, have been seen descending to the underworld.

When we arrive in the spiritual world, the tongue can distinguish between truth and lie. The proud polyglot who had not used his knowledge of earthly languages to seek after truth suddenly does not understand a single word. In this new world, the tongue commands the thought.

3. Erik Axel Karfeldt (1864–1931) was a sensitive and contemplative Swedish nature poet. In 1931, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature posthumously, after having refused it in 1917 because he was then a member of the Swedish Academy, which awarded the prize.

OTHER PLANETS

Swedenborg's spiritual kingdom is a powerful creation. Like other works of art, it aims at captivating our senses and, at the same time, providing moral and religious edification.

Swedenborg does not content himself only with spirits from our world. He creates life on all known planets of our solar system and on the moon as well. Millions of distant worlds in the star-studded sky are also populated. However, the laws of life are the same everywhere because God rules the universe. Humans live on all worlds; and after a short sojourn in the flesh, they live on as spirits.

The world of spirits is the common assembly point. Spirits from Earth comprise a humble minority, of course. All around the universe, there are humans, the inhabitants of our little planet being relatively few considering the myriads in space, almost as a pool compared to the ocean, Swedenborg observes in *Arcana Coelestia* §3631.

Swedenborg does not himself visit any of the other heavenly bodies.

But in the course of his wanderings in the timeless, eternal universe in the world beyond, he meets spirits from other celestial regions. They greet each other and exchange experiences, like the birds of passage in Selma Lagerlöf's *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*.¹ At times, extraterrestrial spirits are afraid of being infected by earthlings, among whom heresies are more endemic. When he ventures into alien societies in the universe, Swedenborg gets into trouble as he did in London in his youth, when he illegally disembarked a ship sailing under a cholera flag and risked capital punishment.

His fantasy always bubbles with activity, but perhaps never so much as in his encounters with people from other planets. The faraway worlds orbit his horizon, a celestial circus presenting a variety of spirit life. This imaginary life arises between 1746 and 1758.

In his 1753 publication *Si le progrès des sciences et des arts a contribué à corrompre ou à épurer les mœurs*, Rousseau wondered if morality had been perverted by the progress of science and art. In 1755, the earthquake in Lisbon takes place, shaking all of Europe as well and prompting the two greatest satirical novels of the era, Voltaire's *Candide* and Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*. These three works question our civilization and culture. Swedenborg does not mention any of these writers by name, but they seem to me to be present in the background.

Swedenborg is not the first space traveler. In antiquity, Lucian visited strange planets, and such excursions have been taken by writers and thinkers of all times, but Swedenborg's flights sparkle with dazzling originality.

Swedenborg often appears to live in his fantastic creation. One day in October in 1748, he records in his diary that, whenever he thinks of his garden, of the gardener who cares for it, of financial affairs, of the reception of his work and how it would perhaps be misunderstood, or of purchases close at hand, he loses his ability to concentrate and becomes

1. Selma Lagerlöf (1858–1940) was a Swedish novelist who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1909. She was the first woman member of the Swedish Academy.

melancholic (*Spiritual Diary* §3624). As if by mistake, a picture of his everyday life at Hornsgatan in Stockholm, marked by ordinary worries, slips through. From 1747 to 1751, he is traveling throughout Europe. On returning home, his flower garden is his first and most precious concern. He sends for bulbs and seeds from a friend in Amsterdam. Now and then he enjoys the social life of Stockholm. He sits in the House of Noble, where he is established as the head of his family, and submits judicious proposals on government finances. He recommends that individuals be prohibited from distilling alcoholic beverages in their homes, assigning exclusive rights for the production of liquor to the state. But his days and his nights are mostly devoted to dreams and to his mighty exegesis, and current history rarely obtrudes. The earthquake in Lisbon leaves no trace.

Such silence on current events can be explained in many ways. Swedenborg's spiritual world is a product of his time, and he shares the long-cherished dream of a just and equal society, as fostered among the flower of intellectuals, a dream that soon would materialize in the American war for independence and the French Revolution. Swedenborg's universe is part of a large utopia, to which Plato, Thomas More, and Jonathan Swift had earlier contributed. It was followed by thinkers like Karl Marx and Edward Bellamy, until the time came for George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, and later writers to portray the future as a hell and to depict the failure of a world plan.

In a tragicomic turn, Johan Henric Kellgren, Sweden's most celebrated representative of the Age of Reason, associated Swedenborg with all sorts of tricksters, mesmerists, and alchemists who appealed to superstition.² There were many of that sort at that time, but Swedenborg repeatedly took exception to them. Out of ignorant spite was Swedenborg reckoned among them. Kellgren's poem "Man äger ej snille för det

2. Johan Henrik Kellgren (1751–1795) was a prolific literary figure. A sensitive poet and sharp critic, he also composed verse drama and collaborated on an opera. He was the literary hand of King Gustav III and was the first director of the Swedish Academy, instituted by the king in 1786.

man är galen” (Madness Does Not Make You a Genius) engendered a thousand laughs and affected the verdict of literary history:

Men fast man någon gång i solen fläckar såg,
 blir månen likafullt, men sina fläckar måne.
 Fast Newton själv en dag i andefeber låg,
 blir Swedenborg ändå helt rätt och slätt—en fåne.

Although once in a while some spots in the sun were seen,
 The moon with all its dots no less remains a moon.
 Although Newton once from vexations ailing had been,
 Swedenborg for all that is quite simply a loon.³

Even Kellgren once remarked that it might seem harsh to call a loon or an oaf someone who, even though he might not be numbered among the geniuses, showed proficiency in mineralogy and chemistry. However, what Swedenborg has written on these matters—and Kellgren here phrases his words with a turn of the infamous obloquy so popular in academic circles—“rather bears witness to what he has learnt than to the lucidity of reasoning.” Nevertheless, it is “the mystical works, which cover a whole wall” that are the source of Kellgren’s rancor and made him, unconscionably, “place Swedenborg on the list of nitwits.”

As in Kant’s case, ignorance and superficiality revile. Kant was unaware that Swedenborg was an ally. In his *Spiritual Diary* §5565, Swedenborg mentions the magazine *The Spectator*, which flourished in 1711 when Swedenborg was in London on his long educational journey. Its liberal attitude was his own. Perhaps the mark of folly, with which Kant and Kellgren branded Swedenborg, may have had some fortunate effects. For generation after generation, Emanuel Swedenborg was a mystery, libels lending a certain luster to his name. Nothing is more powerful than suppressed merit.



3. Translation by Anders Hallengren.

Swedenborg's description of Jupiter is sweet, and some of its features are touching.⁴ To the inhabitants of this planet, facing somebody eye to eye is considered discourteous. Accordingly, the people of Jupiter turn around after every third step and slightly bend sideways. When they are in their beds, they never face the wall but always the room so as not to turn their backs on the Lord. When Swedenborg learns about this, he recalls that he usually sleeps with his face to the room. Now he understands why.

The people of Jupiter don't say much but think a lot. When they speak, no words are heard, only a soft buzz. They spend considerable time dining, not because their cooking is that extravagant but to entertain guests and enjoy their company. They do not use chairs but sit on fig leaves on the floor.

Their houses are built low and decked with whitish-blue bast fiber or bark. On the edges of the roofs, there are tiny stars, representing the firmament. But some people live in tents and eat their meals there.

The faces of these people are more beautiful than ours because their way of living is more sound and natural. Jupiter is densely populated, allotments being fairly distributed and no one asking for more than he or she needs. When Swedenborg wants to inform these neighbors in our universe about wars and murders on our planet, they immediately turn away and refuse to listen, such matters being contagious.

They believe in one God. His shape is human, and he has revealed himself several times (*Arcana Coelestia* §8541) They do not know that God has been born a human on Earth, but consider that unnecessary with them, since, from time immemorial, they have known that God is one and rules the universe.

But not even on Jupiter is everything bright and proper; there are somber aspects too. For example, God threatens skeptics; if the threat

4. Although the author quotes from Swedenborg's interchapter material on extraterrestrial spirits found in his long *Arcana Coelestia*, Swedenborg brought these chapters together in *De Telluribus de Mundo Nostri Solari* (1758), a small book that is usually titled *Earths in the Universe*. [Ed.]

does not produce the desired effect, the blasphemer is punished, if necessary, exiled. Deprived of his environment, the miscreant cannot breathe. Thus, the death penalty is the verdict.

There are also Catholic dissidents on Jupiter. A few call themselves saints, urging their henchmen to address them as “Lord.” These masters forbid their followers to pray to God directly, regarding themselves as demigods or a kind of middlemen. As a sign of their loftiness, they wear towering top hats. Such undemocratic and elitist traits provoke Swedenborg’s anger.

During his spiritual crisis, on April 7, 1744—the day after Jesus had revealed himself in a dream—Swedenborg thought that perhaps he would himself one day be looked upon as “a holy man.” Sometimes, he writes, people are regarded as saints and become objects of devotion. Startled by this thought, Swedenborg makes up his mind to be wary of such a dangerous conceit. Still, I think it’s worth noting that this thought does occur to him, like a daydream of unprecedented honor. Given an assignment by God, from whom he has received the keys to unlock his Word, how could he avoid reflections of pride?

After his death, Swedenborg’s adherents acclaimed him almost like a saint. His splendid sarcophagus is on display in Uppsala Cathedral. The reverence paid to his texts by translators serves those who find it hard to read his Latin. The New Church translators spare no pains to preserve every shade of meaning.

In many ways, Swedenborg resembles the “holy” inhabitants of Jupiter. When people with such pretensions arrive in heaven, they are initially idolized by their dependants, but soon enough they cut a ridiculous figure and are ridiculed. On earth, Swedenborg often was the object of such derision. The spirits of Jupiter relate that these legions of people, among whom we recognize some popes and canonized divines, think they can chop wood in heaven to stay warm. Under the billets, there is a human form—which is actually their own reflection—and they hack through themselves. This inability to see clearly is explained by their presumptuous and self-assumed holiness, their self-idolatry. Among them, we can catch a glimpse of Swedenborg himself.

When spirits from Jupiter leave for heaven to become angels, their departure is magnificent. Chariots drawn by fiery horses appear, and they take off like the biblical Elijah.

Spirits from Mercury are more clever and quick-witted than those of Earth. They hunger for wisdom, seeking it everywhere. They closely examine Swedenborg's memory, leaving nothing to chance, imbibing all spiritual nourishment, turning up their noses at the rest. When Swedenborg wants to show them the splendor of meadows, gardens, forests, and glittering rivers, they hasten to fill the meadows with serpents and pollute the rivers. When he asks them why they are doing this, they reply that they try to screen off external reality completely, making the inner life their pivot.

As it turns out, however, they are not unwilling to listen to Swedenborg and make exceptions to this puritanical attitude (see *Arcana Coelestia* §7071) For example, they watch the flight of birds with joy. Swedenborg finally manages to make them see a wonderful garden with Chinese lanterns and lamps, without their changing it. Thus, the spirits of Mercury were able to see tangible things, with the proviso that some spiritual meaning was implied.

Once, when Swedenborg was writing at his desk, spirits from Mercury were present and criticized his style for not being spiritual enough, too blunt and gross. In his defense, Swedenborg pointed out that the people of Earth would otherwise not understand him because they themselves are materialists. The spirits of Mercury scoffed at the Earth creatures who would believe things written down on a piece of paper. They certainly were not of two minds about Rousseau's question whether morality has been perverted by science and art.

Spirits from Saturn are honest and humble and, therefore, appear small (*Arcana Coelestia* §8948). If someone tries to lure them away from God, they wish they were dead, and small knives immediately appear in their hands. They'd rather stab themselves in the breast than live without faith. Spirits from Earth laugh at this craziness, and the Saturnians then admit that they are not actually going to kill themselves, just that the suicidal impulse is there.

On Saturn, everyone knows that their spirits will exist forever; therefore, they do not care much about their bodies. They don't bury their dead but dispose of the corpses in woods, covering the stiff bodies with branches. The people of Saturn live on fruits from the trees, and they are lightly clad, their skin being thick and resistant to cold.

One day, spirits from Earth ask their brothers and sisters from Saturn about which God they worship. The Saturn spirits regard this question as a sign of stupidity. How could anyone but the Creator command the creation?

The speech of Martians is felt as a light breeze on the temple. In a strange scene from Swedenborg's discussion with Martian spirits, light materializes in the shape of a magnificent bird of glowing colors. It flies into a narrow bedroom. While flying, its life ebbs, and the bird turns into stone. Despite this, it keeps advancing through the air. One spirit attempts to catch it but is stopped by the others.

There is no central government on Mars. Administration is organized according to the Syndicalist dream of the following century.

On Venus, Swedenborg reports (*Arcana Coelestia* §7246), there are two breeds of the human species—one crude and almost bestial, the other gentle and humane. When the savages die, they continue to wallow in rapine and fury until, after a while, they are seized with despair. Racked with pain, they renounce their wild ways, the only prospect for which is damnation. Because of this remorse, they are forgiven and are elevated to heaven (*Arcana Coelestia* §7250–7251). Swedenborg, who had the opportunity to witness this act of redemption, says that the happiness shining in the eyes of the saved moved him to tears.

Outside our solar system, life is more like the Golden Age on Earth (*Arcana Coelestia* §10159 f.) Swedenborg shares Rousseau's dream of a life of innocence in the bosom of Nature. He must at least have heard of Rousseau. Indeed, he somewhat resembles Rousseau in his plain and frugal way of living. On his trips abroad, he lodged with workmen. Bread, coffee, and some vegetables composed his fare. His material needs were modest, and this bestowed freedom upon his soul. He cleaned his room and made his bed, and his clothing was simple.

In Swedenborg's cosmos, nobody dominates another, nobody craves more than subsistence, all have peace in their hearts. Some spirits relate that, on their home planet, they had meadows, flower gardens, woods of fruit-bearing trees, lakes with fish, and sky-blue birds with golden quills. They had beasts of burden, but did not eat meat, only fish, fruit, and vegetables. They did not build houses but lived in woods, sheltering themselves with branches from the rain or the heat of the sun. Women twine threads for clothes, reclining in arm chairs, twisting the fiber with their toes. In short, this is not a life fit for the climate of Sweden.

There is a likeness between Swedenborg and the Swedish poet Artur Lundkvist because of central importance of dreams in their work and the imaginary creation of worlds.⁵ In *Drakblod* (Dragon Blood), published in 1936, Lundkvist writes: "We must invent symbols for our elusive dreams, of the yet uncertain and unattainable we imagine will materialize in a remote future, symbols that can shine in our dreams by night and branch out into the thickets of our wishes." Swedenborg produces such symbols by means of distant planets.



In Swedenborg's time, humankind had not yet gotten over the shock of Copernicus. Until the sixteenth century, our little Earth was the center of the universe, and the sun its vassal. At the midpoint of the world's history, Jerusalem was built, and there at Mount Calvary the cross was erected, from which issued the message that saved the world..

This world picture conferred to every newborn a special blessing, that of the Elect, corresponding to the position of Earth. Copernicus crushed the natural nobility of the human race. Since his time, the Earth and its inhabitants have had to put up with being tucked away in

5. Artur Lundkvist (1906–1981) was a cosmopolitan author, critic, and translator. He was a member of the Swedish Academy.

an out-of-the-way corner of the universe. The cosmos incessantly expands, and we are marginalized.

But the measure of Swedenborg's mind is far greater than that of any of his contemporaries, and he does not accept such dethronement. While many eighteenth-century poets expounded on the theme "The Littleness and Powerlessness of Man," Swedenborg takes the opposite line. Whereas he allows millions of celestial bodies to be inhabited by people who after death congregate in a collective haven, he transcends Copernican order. The same God rules everywhere. All suns, stars, planets orbit in the organism of the Grand Man. What more could unity-seeking humanity wish for!

However, in this constellation, Jesus poses a problem since he cannot be known on any other planet. It would be absurd to state that Jesus had been crucified on each of the infinite number of rotating worlds.

So, Jesus is not found on Mars nor anywhere else in the universe, except on Earth. Maybe Swedenborg felt this as a relief. It has sometimes crossed my mind that he created these inhabited expanses just to get rid of his own objections. The absence of Jesus is the invisible pattern of these planetary stories.

The words of the Sermon on the Mount, "the Kingdom of God is within you," are reflected everywhere in Swedenborg's outlook on humankind. Nonetheless, the idea that humanity has been let off scot free with the blood of Christ repels him (see my chapter 4, "The Book of God"). Each individual must pay for him- or herself. This substantially adds to Swedenborg's supplies of tolerance. In this way, he acknowledges the great liberation process of the Renaissance and the Age of Reason. He joins the struggle against religious tyranny. The afterlife is not a gift reserved for Christians. All human beings are received in heaven and have the same chance to become an angel as any Christian has, be they born in uncharted regions of the African continent or in another solar system where the name of Jesus has never been heard. Jesus turns into a local god by the side of the Ruler of the universe. This being unacceptable to a bishop's son, Swedenborg solves the problem by

making Jesus and God into one. The historical Jesus with his miracles and Resurrection gives way to the invisible God. At last.

Life on other planets shows there is a direct connection between humankind and God without Jesus' acting as intermediary. An oral tradition, passed on from generation to generation, proclaims that humanity was created by God and resembles the Father and that the final goal of our lives is to reunite with the Source. People far from the fields of the Lord still live in the innocence of faith, embodying the saying of the evangelist, "Let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil" (Matt. 5:37). When they enter the communal realm of the spirit, they learn of the Incarnation of Christ and soon understand its full meaning. They never needed Jesus since they had never lost the wisdom of the Golden Age.

People on other planets, all having their allotted places in the Grand Man, espouse a belief in God similar to Swedenborg's own. Their religious expression is often more pious and ardent than that of earthly creeds. Some of Swedenborg's extraterrestrial fancies may be reckoned as artistically extravagant. He did, after all, have an inclination for curlicues. All in all, life and manners on other planets often seem to me recounted with the tacit purpose of demonstrating that Jesus is not indispensable for the work of redemption.

Why, then, did God manifest himself as Jesus on our planet and not elsewhere? Swedenborg's answer courts mockery, but at the same time it demonstrates the boldness of his thoughts and the purity of his heart.

On Earth, knowledge about God had withered away, and humanity was wandering in the darkness without a guiding light. However, God's love and wisdom were extant in the Word. God saw to it that the ability to read and write evolved on our planet. This knowledge was not required in other worlds, where wisdom had survived (*Arcana Coelestia* §9350). Here on Earth, different nations actively exchanged ideas, ships crossed oceans, and the Bible had a wide circulation. This terrestrial wanderlust was lacking on other worlds where people stayed in the same place all their lives and were content with their little piece of the universe. Yea and Nay.

IMAGERY

Swedenborg imagines that the first human beings on earth apprehended reality as a pictographic screen. Everything meant something. Henrik Wergeland saw in the snake an angel trying to unfold its wings. He works in the spirit of Swedenborg.¹

In Swedenborg's figurative language, animals and plants play clearly defined parts. Some are good and some are bad according to a classification that is hard to accept. Birds signify intellectual animation and light. The turtle dove is connected with love, but the black color of the raven is associated with falsity. The eagle has two roles. On its powerful wings, it ascends toward light, but it also flocks to carrion along with other predators.

Swedenborg assesses the animals from a strictly human point of view.

1. Henrik Wergeland (1808–1845) was a Norwegian poet and dramatist. He is the author of the epic *Skabelsen, mennesket og Messias* (1830) (Creation, Mankind, and the Messiah).

Our modern era sneers at this anthropocentric and anthropomorphic vision, but Swedenborg is a man of his times. The crocodile, he says, transforms its food into poison. In the same manner, the brier produces thorns. A good tree, however, returns good fruit from the gifts of sun and rain. The lamb's trust in the shepherd reflects its gentle nature.

Natural things, then, are actors in God's grand drama. The owl and the bat that live in darkness have chosen evil, to say nothing of the viper that crawls in the dust. A dove descended upon Jesus as he was being baptized by John the Baptist, indicating its bright and pure nature. Our language overflows with similar values.

All nature gives evidence of rebirth, Swedenborg says. Some birds wash their small bodies in water to clean and purify themselves before they continue their song. A few decades later, the Finnish poet Johan Ludvig Runeberg made use of the same image:

Som vattenfågeln dyker ned i fjärdens klara bölja
att minsta fläck av stoft därmed
från sina vingar skölja.

As shore birds dive into the crystal bay
The slightest trace of dust upon their wings
To rinse away.²

Swedenborg feels imprisoned in one dimension when he cannot find a correspondence. On one occasion, he meets some spirits who are busy translating the Bible (*Spiritual Diary* §1950). Reading their earthbound version troubles him and makes him profoundly depressed. They brag about their knowledge of Hebrew; but they only grasp the external meaning of the words, while the essential meaning escapes their notice. All this makes Swedenborg almost too tired to stand, and he finds himself thinking that children and common folk are wiser than these learned men.

If the Bible indeed was written by shepherds, peasants, and fishermen,

2. Johan Ludvig Runeberg (1804-1877) was a Finnish/Swedish poet who wrote lyrical poetry, epics, and prose works. Translated by George F. Dole.

Swedenborg the Exegete could draw from his own rural experience for his interpretation.

The task of clergymen is to explain the sacredness of Scripture and the divinity of the Lord. But among many of them, a lying tongue pays lip service to sacred things, while the real object of their devotion is nature. There are zealous enthusiasts too. They winnow out faith and love, stuffing them in a knapsack on their backs, as it were. When they preach, it is as if they have a ruminant stomach to vomit things apt to be congested by the audience. Such regurgitation is still going on, and the heartburn has not lost its acidity.

Although Swedenborg has a solid knowledge of nature and its workings, the reader may not notice this because sensory impression immediately becomes spiritual and ethical substance. False people are like cheaters who deceitfully proffer pigeon eggs labeled as great horned owl ova, Swedenborg observes. In other words, he knows that the eggs of the owl are as white as those of the dove.

One morning in the spiritual world, Swedenborg met with some people whom he identified as Chinese since they manifested images of a woolly goat, a millet loaf, a spoon of ivory, and a city floating on glassy water, all of which means that their composure is built on a spirit of community. This is, after all, the time of the East India Company, and relations with China are busy.

Swedenborg says that those reluctant to accept his message resemble a lad playing blindman's buff who thinks he can find his way with covered eyes; a sailor sailing without a compass; a wanderer in the fog who thinks he has grabbed a bird but has snared a scorpion that gives him a lethal sting; or seagulls and kites sinking their claws into a huge fish that drags them down into the black depths.

In my youth, on a spring day in the Uppland countryside, I stumbled on a stone. When I got on my feet, I saw a resplendent rose, shining with a luminosity I had never seen before. I was convinced that this illumination had a profound significance. Someone had presented me with a gift, and I didn't know how to handle it. I only knew that it was real and penetrated into my soul. The radiant flower was like a window

through which, for a moment, I gazed into another reality, unknown to my physical eyes.

I pondered over this mystery for many years, but I never doubted there was an answer. In Swedenborg, I recognize this experience of intensified light, only his is stronger and more frequent.

Light in heaven is spiritual, Swedenborg explains, and it is emitted from the Lord who is the sun of the spiritual world. Our sun is a symbol of that higher sun. This seems to be an excellent solution to my mystery. It is also, Swedenborg says, a key to Jesus' words, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12).

A human spirit is laid bare to the eyes of angels, who immediately perceive its inward dimensions. A spirit who is false fears the rays of heaven. If a spirit is good, it looks beautiful, but an evil spirit is monstrous to behold.

In heaven, heat and love are one. Divine truth appears as light, and divine goodness as warmth. However, the two are combined into one, although some angels acquire one aspect more than the other.

This combination of heat and light makes the earth bloom with life. In heaven, the same thing happens. It is named paradise for the union of truth and goodness, which is seen in the marriage of light and warmth in springtime on earth.

With a strange trembling in his voice, Swedenborg says that trees, corn, grass, fruit—everything in our earthly environment—comes from the light and heat of the sun. Such is the vital force of sunshine. How great, then, must be the generative power of divine light!

That words and things are signs becomes evident to any reader of Swedenborg. In a passage in his great book on iron, published in 1734—ten years before the dream crisis—Swedenborg describes the discovery of a vein of pure silver in an iron mine in Nordmark in Värmland, 1726. "That precious find," he wrote, "lay in the iron as though in the bosom of its mother or nurse. The iron had long been pregnant with this child, until, after the passage of much time, it brought forth this progeny. However, this beautiful and eagerly awaited child did not live long before departing some months later, in its father's care." This

beautiful passage shows that Swedenborg did not need help from angels to find striking images.

It is to Swedenborg's credit that he, unlike so many fanatical Christians, had a sympathetic attitude toward pagan idols, just as he respected the gods of classical antiquity: Jupiter, Diana, and Apollo.

In Judges 17–18, we are told how the Danites went to Micah's house and stole his carved images and how Micah mourned for their loss. Some pious pagans, who also worshiped idols, were gripped with sympathy, which revealed their good and noble natures. When good spirits later informed them that the Lord is the God who rules the world, they understood this fully. Compassion and love were within them. Swedenborg furthermore tells us that, after instruction, they were admitted among the angels in heaven.

HAPPINESS IN HEAVEN

When the dead awaken, they often ask to be brought to paradise, yearning for its bliss. This prayer is granted by the angelic welcoming committee. Their arrival is instantaneous. However, in the land of happiness, disappointment awaits the unsuspecting newcomer.

The reason for this state of things is that, according to spiritual law, the newcomer is offered the kind of paradise he or she has dreamt of. Consequently there are numerous paradises. Although many people have a primitive idea of happiness, Swedenborg still shows marked attention to them.

He behaves like a school teacher who wants to have all boys and girls in the classroom with him, even the less clever pupils. He believes that there are many levels in the house of learning and ways of thinking that are despised by the high-brow but cherished by others.

One day Swedenborg sees a tyro who, upon his arrival in the other world, throws himself to the ground and prays to God to be enlightened

about the topology of ultimate reality. A helpful angel gets him on his feet, saying, "You have asked to learn about heaven and hell. Then please explore the nature of joy, and you will learn." The angel then disappears, and the spirit goes on his quest. He asks everyone he meets on the road, but the answers differ. "A joy is a joy," somebody replies. "Joys are all the same. We know no difference between them."

"Joy is the smile of thought," someone else responds. "When you are happy, your face is bright and exuberant. You are merry and satisfied and move about with a light heart."

"Joy involves delicious food with good beverage, to be intoxicated by choice vintages, to prattle about various matters involving erotic playfulness. These are still other assets in the realm of joy," replies yet a third spirit.

The curious spirit is left disappointed with these answers, which appear to him boorish. Then the angel reappears and guides him to a hill where spirits preach that joy is a feeling stemming from active love. Joy is benevolence. All human beings live in their joy. The pleasure of the evil person is revenge and deceit. The good person delights in the good deeds of his or her kindness.

Swedenborg produces a number of cautionary tales from paradise, which accentuate the childlike, Sunday-School aspect of his character.

Those who hope for sensuous pleasures and grand banquets in paradise are invited to feast in heaven with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as dinner partners. They sit at long tables, and exquisite dishes and select wines are served. They eagerly sink their teeth into the courses. It is dinner and dancing, and during the subsequent performance, symphonic music is heard. Having thus gorged themselves for two days, the guests are getting nauseated with the food and disgusted with the wine. They finally sue for mercy to get out of there.

The angel, the director behind this scene, then discloses that they have been victims of an illusion. The "patriarchs" at the head of the table were just old men disguised with bushy beards.

Others who longed for happiness believed that, in paradise, they will do nothing. These are brought to a garden where sweet fruits are served

to the sound of song and rippling fountains. Everywhere, however, people are sitting around crying, rocking to and fro with their heads in their hands. When an angel asks them why, they explain that, after three days in paradise doing nothing, they feel felicity fading and want to leave. But they have searched in vain for an exit, finding themselves wandering in a labyrinth. “Now we have been sitting here for a day and a half, but the more we look at the roses and taste the sweet oranges, the more they weary us. That’s why we are weeping.” This reminds me of the young Swedish author Stig Dagerman, who could not work at all during his last years and was diagnosed as suffering from “overwork.”¹

Other spirits who believed life in heaven consisted in praising God are shut up for three days in a church where God is worshiped from morning to night. People fall asleep or yawn and try to slip away, but guards bar the way and shove them back. The confined feel ready to faint in the stuffy air of pious preaching and prayers, but eventually they are mercifully released and instructed that the Lord has no need of praise but only wants us to do a good job in our community.

Much worse is the fate of those who thought heaven consists of cheerful chat and mirthful jest. They are taken to salons where everyone seems to be exhilarated by laughter and off-color jokes. Some listen to gossip from the courts, others to slander about politicians and tittle-tattle from the world of belles-lettres. People dash madly between rooms to hear the latest news. They are breathless with excitement but soon become exhausted and beg to leave. But the doors are locked. They feel like fish out of water, on the brink of suffocation.



What diversion might rescue us from the transience of delights? Most of those who cry for Kingdom Come think that the essential element is the entry-permit. It’s like acquiring a ticket to a theatrical performance. As if

1. Stig Dagerman (1923–1954) wrote somber and dark short stories, novels, and plays. He committed suicide when he could not write anymore.

heavenly happiness were a gift, a lottery prize that will change your life! Swedenborg derides such ideas.

One day Swedenborg witnesses how recently arrived spirits find a home for themselves in an angelic community. Some of them look in vain for suitable quarters. A specially trained watchman then is called in, to gauge the inward light and heat of the homeless visitors. It turns out that they are in the wrong place.

Misconceptions on the nature of bliss arise from the difficulty of understanding heaven as a summit of the human soul that has to be conquered in every heart. If you want to go to heaven, you must bring heaven with you; you will not get more than you can carry. Heaven is not a kingdom of happiness where God rules as king who distributes gifts of grace. God is not in heaven. God is the force behind everything as the sun is the source of life. God is transcendent.

God does not interfere. He could not even if he wished to, since he does not see the finite but only what comes from him. God can only live with his own. God is simply the infinite and eternal within each of us.

As we have seen in the earlier chapter "The Book of God," humankind is an image of God, but the Divine is hidden within us and invisible to us. Although we no longer know what heavenly happiness is, the need for it remains with us. We long to return. That quest gives meaning to our lives. Swedenborg's heaven is a dream of the soul's growth.

Therefore, we cannot be lifted up to the angels by mercy. Were this possible, anyone could achieve heavenly bliss. Jesus was a bit rash when he promised the repentant thief hanging beside him on the cross, "On this day you will be with me in paradise." Swedenborg avoids criticizing such an exalted authority, but he stresses that heaven is not a gift and that not even God can present it to just anyone. We get our just deserts. Heaven is the triumph of the heart.

It is impossible to reach heaven without preparation and a lengthy spiritual growth of the mind. Thieves in heaven would soon enough feel uncomfortable and hope to make a getaway. I believe that Swedenborg's hostile attitude toward St. Paul might be based on the latter's sudden

conversion. When Swedenborg encounters Paul in the other world, they debate miraculous conversions. Such changes of heart are impossible, Swedenborg declares, whereupon the apostle appears before him as a baby who can neither think nor talk but only wave its hands, a picture of the helpless who believe they can be saved by a miracle (*Spiritual Diary* §4322).

Swedenborg stresses that the serenity of heavenly happiness is ineffable. Only those who know the way can reach heaven. We learn the route by reflecting on its noble travelers.

Evert Lundquist, the painter, once recounted an episode from the time when he studied at the Academy of Arts.² A classmate advised him not to imitate Leonardo da Vinci, but instead try to find a characteristic style of his own. His teacher, Carl Wilhelmson, overheard this and remarked that self-realization is achieved in love toward something higher—that is, by studying the masters. This is Swedenborg’s teaching.



One morning in May 1748, Swedenborg was in a strangely peaceful mood and then realized that he was experiencing the harmony of heaven. He felt compassion for all the wretched souls who are plagued by worries. This was the hour of deliverance. This beatific state lasted about sixty minutes. Perhaps the splendor of the day contributed to this singular experience. It was spring and the migrating birds had recently arrived (*Spiritual Diary* §1908).

During the fall of the same year, Swedenborg recounts in his diary the story of a man who was celebrated on earth and had acquired reputation as a wise and pious man. Newly disembarked in heaven, he declared that celestial joy is a wonderful golden sunlight, which he called “the light of glory” (*Spiritual Diary* §3348). If he were permitted to dwell in that light, he thought he would be in heaven.

2. Evert Lundquist (1904–1994), a Swedish artist and professor of art, was known for his expressive oil paintings.

Swedenborg remarks that evidently not even the wisest among mortals know that reciprocity is an absolute condition for celestial delight. The man infatuated with the glorious light had to learn that there is yet another and much deeper blessedness.

It is likely that this man is a secret self-portrait, and that the diary entry written in autumn reconsiders the tranquil poise of the experience of spring. Isn't this venerable individual Swedenborg himself? The light of glory may imply self-indulgence. At heart, affection turned outward is pivotal: the love of the neighbor. Here I personally come to think of the enjoyments of the arts, of music especially, with all its transports of joy that tempts us to escape from reality.

Even in the diary entry of May, we find beautiful words on compassion, however, and that is the sense of belonging. Community is the essence of paradisiacal felicity. The sluggishness of newcomers is not only an effect of the unfamiliar milieu, but also stems from the absence of like-minded companions with whom they can exchange heartening thoughts (*Spiritual Diary* §400). Swedenborg's writings are manuals of living together. The exchange of views with kindred souls is Swedenborg's ideal, a dream that hardly ever came true in his own life. His works are alive with personal need for contact. Some of the most persistent and lonely-hearted spirits among those trying to get in touch with him are from his own sparsely populated and reticent homeland.

Swedenborg was an eccentric and heretic who had to keep quiet and act in secrecy to avoid prosecution. All his works were published abroad, and in his lifetime he had few readers. In his heaven, seats of honor are reserved for those who fought for the freedom of speech and for the liberty of the press. In the London of the spiritual world, such important persons live in stately neighborhoods. According to Swedenborg, the English in particular have an inward intellectual light and represent a superior Christianity. Although this cannot be seen in the present life, it becomes obvious in the next. They have acquired this light through liberty of thought and other democratic rights and privileges.

Accordingly, Swedenborg's gigantic exegetical work, the *Arcana Cœlestia*, was published in London. What a stroke of bad luck that

Immanuel Kant bought a copy for £7 and then had to write something about it to get value for his money and for the pains he took reading the multiples volumes, impudently yet somewhat disarmingly remarking that otherwise he would not have spent so much time on such a fool.

Swedenborg desires intellectual fellowship and a spirit of community, and all his writings bear the stamp of this longing. All human beings exist through others, and they cannot see themselves unless they stand face to face with someone else. When humans make themselves understood and meet with a response, their faces beam and their eyes gleam to show candor. An Israeli who had been living in Sweden for some years said to me that Swedish people do not have the guts to be happy. If two Swedes lived on a desolated island in the ocean, you can be sure they would built their houses at opposite capes. Two Israelis, however, would camp together since they know that happiness can thrive only in companionship. Swedenborg would have loved such talk.

In Christendom, holy men and women retreat to sacred seclusion, symbolic Swedes all of them. The devout hermit in the desert is a hal-
lowed Christian figure. But to Swedenborg, that recluse is a disgrace to humanity because he has forgotten that love of God presupposes love of his fellow man. In reality, his solitary contemplation is mere selfishness.

For Swedenborg, all spiritual growth is based on encounters and dialogue. Mystical union with God and religious ecstasy are alien to him. There is no worship without charity. This duality is the essence of human nature.

In Swedenborg's visions, the saints are in trouble. Even the apostles are ungraciously dealt with. Thousands of angels are their spiritual superiors, Swedenborg reports [*Spiritual Diary* §1330]. He also notes that the arrival of parsimonious individuals to a spiritual community makes life a misery. Generous care and sharing are the source of cosmic exultation.

One stubborn apparition surprises Swedenborg by assuring him that living alone is a piece of cake. This lone wolf was granted complete isolation, just as he wished. When all communication was cut off and all connections were severed, his mental activity gradually ebbed, and finally he lay insensate on the floor, helplessly waving his arms in the air.

Swedenborg says that he has witnessed palpable manifestations of communal rapture [*Arcana Coelestia* §552; *Spiritual Diary* §2646]. A number of spirit-angels form a candelabra of lights and floral arrangements and think they have made this themselves. Swedenborg then informs them that the Lord conducts their performance, and they realize that the stranger is right. The same kind of heavenly phenomenon, where several spirits assemble to form sacred images, is found in Dante's *Paradiso*.

In the higher heavens, angels have fulfilled all the potentials latent in humankind. Still, every angel knows that he or she is far from the godhead and that there is yet a long way to travel. They visualize divine delight as a wonderful palace with a stairway of twelve steps. Nobody gets to even the first step without divine guidance.

Although angelic bliss is a state of ardent attachment, it does not include any specific understanding of how their satisfaction is brought about. They do not store in their memories what they learn about divine wisdom. Rather, they embody it and bring it to life.

Angelic wisdom shows itself in a humble awareness of not being wise. They don't consider themselves superior to anyone and assume that every being they meet is their equal or better.

For them, divine truth is self-evident. Doubt is impossible. To an angel, doubt would be like visiting a garden with a friend and then quarrelling about the existence of the garden.

Swedenborg is exceptionally intense and persuasive when he describes the stages of angelic development. A sudden impression of inner growth and an impulse to share with others are good signs. In hell, everything is reversed. In the infernal world, all want to keep things for themselves and anxiously guard their possessions, and this greed is the major source of pain.

Angels refuse all tokens of gratitude, since they feel that their charitable actions are inspired from above. They are baffled to learn that anyone can believe he is wise and good from his own efforts. Spirits who think that way are not received in heaven. Angels avoid them, regarding

them as thieves who rob the One to whom honor is due, assuming it for themselves.

Distinctive features of angels are unpretentiousness, strikingly pure conduct and manners, and an awareness of the independent existence of others and of the world at large. Swedenborg once writes that angels are like orphans and widows. They have no other parent or spouse than the Lord.

Vilhelm Ekelund was one of Swedenborg's disciples.³ "Wherever you look in Swedenborg's universe," Ekelund writes in his book *På Hafsstranden* (On The Seashore), "you find your attention directed to the misrepresentation of truth caused by the perverting powers of egotism; and there is every reason to believe that his blessed frame of mind in his old age, his regeneration proper, stems from his concentration on this point."

Ekelund further explains that attaining heavenly joy means escaping the sense of self, whereas the underworld is the region of the self. Self-love is devastating for the soul, and love toward others is the only cure.

The happiness of heaven is beyond all comprehension, Swedenborg tells us. Its delights originate in the heart and spread throughout the body, penetrating every fiber. Compared to the consummate delight of the heavens, sensual pleasures are like a crude and rough mass of earth. The higher you get in heaven, the quicker is your spiritual growth. There are no limits, no dead-ends. Millennia pass, and your growth continues. For this reason, there is an infinite scale of happiness.

3. Vilhelm Ekelund (1880–1949) was a Swedish writer of essays, poetry, and aphorisms, who is admired particularly for his imagery.

HELL: THE WORLD OF EVIL

God never turns his face from anyone. And he would never hurl any wretch into the pit of despair. God is all mercy and charity. The fallen enter hell freely, since depravity is their own choice.

Swedenborg tells us that the infernal abodes are located beneath the angelic heavens. This should, of course, not be understood literally, because “up” and “down” do not exist in spiritual life, such words being used just for our earthly orientation.

The inhabitants of hell think it is a very nice place to be. To us, there are dingy, foul-smelling dens down there, holes with narrow alleys where souls in distress scream with terror, and fens of crawling toads and snakes. But the local population is fond of its home, enjoying the surroundings. This is, of course, a matter of taste, and the choice is optional. The repulsive perspective Swedenborg offers us is not that of the hellish spirits but that of the angels.

When people pass the gates of death, their desire for like-minded

companions and soul mates comes with them, and this need prevails. The atheist seeks other atheists. Those who delight in terrifying other people are drawn to assassins and troublemakers. In this respect, the next life is just like this one. Indeed, taking it point for point, they are identical.

The Bible describes eternal fire and the gnashing of teeth. Some readers have envisioned a real fire burning the poor devils. Others have inferred that the weeping and gnashing of teeth means that the doomed are seized with remorse. Swedenborg is eager to refute such misconceptions. Pangs of conscience do not exist in hell; only good people can be stricken by such qualms. The deathless bonfire agrees with the vicious victim, since our proclivity and nature invariably determine our pleasures and delights.

In Dante's *Inferno*, reality is ordered according to an easily understandable system of moral pedagogy. Adulterers, pimps, serial killers, blasphemers, leaders of gangs, and traitors are found there. Compared to Dante, Swedenborg is more like a boy from a good home whose experience of convicts and revolutionaries is limited. Accordingly, unrepentant minds in his world are slaves to sin and offenders of faith rather than vicious criminals.

His personal examples are few. The tragic liaison between Paolo and Francesca has no counterpart in Swedenborg's casuistry; all his fornicators are anonymous. Instead of citing specific individuals as examples of what one should not do, he prefers a general censure. Strindberg and Dante practiced quite another method: only by nailing persons can you hit the devil. Again, we see Swedenborg as the scientist who makes discoveries from observation, whereas Dante is the artist who creates in flesh and blood.



Like many other Christians, Swedenborg believes that our eternal fate is determined during the present life. Considering the shortness of our existence on earth, this may seem cruel. Swedenborgians have discussed

this problem and have tried to show that Swedenborg saw a possibility for us to obtain redress after a period of tutelage in which they learn how things really are.

But, to my mind, this question is unnecessary. There is no reason to worry about the hellish community, since the populace is doing just fine. Those reprobates are only worried when they are allowed to confront heaven and in anguish intuit the existence of a better life. But then they slam their doors and windows and return to their life of devilish delight—exactly as it is on earth. Sometimes they fight one another because they all want to be top dog, and the resulting hullabaloo is the “gnashing of teeth“ mentioned in the Bible. There is no real hell-fire; it just doesn’t exist. During their sojourn in the world of spirits, people choose their connecting route according to their own desires. Even the lost find their home; and on the whole they live happily ever after, except for the internal struggles and the disturbing light from above, which occasionally penetrates into their world and distorts the perspective, a confounded nuisance that makes them depressed.

Each and everyone of us who for a fleeting moment has seen him- or herself in a light other than our normal condition of self-conceit knows what happens next. Where a smiling face was seen a little while ago when everything could be reasonably explained and excused, a horrible monster appears.



Swedenborg’s description of infernal scenery is admirably inventive. It’s the stuff dreams are made of. As soon as he falls asleep, he is transported to a world of marvelous chimera. Hellish images dominate and form an inferno. This place is not as serious and embittered as in Dante, but more vivid and agile. Swedenborg’s ingenious variety is unmatched in the history of hell. Among artists, Hieronymus Bosch comes to mind. In his paintings, men are devoured and disgorged by prodigious whales. In a swamp, people snap at each other’s shoulder. Voluptuous women claw each other to bits. Old crones run amuck on a shore trying to kill each

other with horrible devices. One man atones for his sins by forced inebriation. Devils appear dressed as vermin; others wear shrouds, striking lewd poses. Some infernal spirits are cursed to spend all their time in bed. In a subterranean stone house, someone lies on a berth. As you come nearer, you see only something burnt, and a black cloud rises along the brick wall.

Just as he had done during his dream crisis, Swedenborg interprets his spiritual visions and dreams, but as soon as the moral is clear to him, he discards the stories since they are mere semblances and allegories of the more important meaning.

Who is the progenitor of these throngs of wickedness and aberrations? From whose life experience do they stem? Perhaps this is all an expression of the secret suffering of the human race, finding expression through a spokesman.

The world Swedenborg perceives contains the accumulated experiences of humankind. Some thrive in love's light and stretch their arms toward heaven. Others are drawn to the depths because their own kind beckons them.

Among the vices, Swedenborg ranks hate and revenge first. Several spirits confess that retaliation is the ultimate delight. They are forced by the angels at the Lord's command not to let their malicious pleasures leak out, however; and their suppressed hatred ferments and finally engulfs them completely. Their delight over other people's misfortunes reaches a climax when they manage to destroy their enemies morally. They are chastened by being sunk into a Cimmerian crevice, a threat that strikes terror in their black hearts.



In his vast goblin tapestry, Swedenborg elaborates on certain details in the pictorial fabric. In one dream, sacks of money lie open, stuffed with glittering silver. Two angels stand guard, but anyone is welcome to grab a share. The moneybags are placed in a stable crib. Young women and a mother with her two children are in a connecting room. Someone says

that one should not romp with children but talk to them judiciously. A harlot is there, too, and a dead horse.

The intrigued reader is happy to take part in this diverse gathering and doesn't much care to be instructed by Swedenborg's concluding allegorical exposition.

In Dante's *Inferno*, the damned remain forever trapped in the same zone, which means that we, the readers of the poem, will always find them where we expect them to be. Swedenborg's fiends, however, change places and positions all the time. Together they constitute a fictional ballet where each demon and siren enact miscellaneous parts, swiftly shifting roles between them. No doubt Swedenborg found these plays entertaining, though frightening too. We may regard them as a kind of divertissement performed in his summerhouse in his garden at Hornsgatan.

Two centuries later, on that site, the Mullvaden (mole) block at Södermalm in Stockholm, Swedenborg's former property, young protesters occupied buildings, reacting against the Swedish demolition frenzy of the 1970s. Their sit-in was protracted, the squatters enduring severe hardships for a year. Finally, the police launched an armed assault, resulting in a war drama of songs and speeches against police batons, swords, and rearing horses. Swedenborg could have directed this from his heavenly abode.

Swedenborg's descriptions of hell are interspersed within various chapters of his monumental oeuvre. As an artist, he is a confirmed squanderer who puts diamonds in dark chambers and plants oases in impenetrable deserts.

In some unforgettable scenes, a possibly tragic situation turns into mordant satire. In one episode [*Conjugal Love* §231], unfair judges are made a laughing stock in such a comical and grotesque way that Voltaire would not have felt ashamed had it been attributed to him. We enter an amphitheater in the spiritual world. Judges are assembled, dressed in top hats and cloaks edged with purple. On the center of the stage is a fireplace where stokers are busy throwing in fir sticks dipped in sulphur and tar. The firelight flickers on the plastered walls, forming

shadow images of nocturnal birds flitting about in the dusk. The whole spectacle symbolizes capricious verdicts.

When the court proceedings are over, the ground gives way and turns into a yawning cavern, which swallows the amphitheater. The judges are slung into hollows where their faces harden into burnished steel and their bodies are petrified. Legs and feet are snakes, and the Code of Laws is a deck of cards. Instead of passing sentences, their duty is now to put makeup on prostitutes, transforming hags into beauties.

One day Swedenborg conferred with two angels about the power of imagination. Swedenborg argues that selfish and criminal people on earth hide their culpability to escape punishment, whereas these rascals in the afterlife, unrestrained and uninhibited, have the time of their lives. Because their imagination is unbridled, their instincts rage out of control. They turn into idiots who believe they own the whole world. These dolts don't want to hear the truth, that pure egotism destroys both mind and heart. They rave in their deliriums.

Swedenborg and the angels regard each other. Let's go down to hell and test your hypothesis, one angel says. Others warn Swedenborg that the illusory world of the damned might cause him to lose his own wits.

They descend a stair and come to a house made of loose reed. It is surrounded by a mist, steam hissing from chinks in three of the walls. Inside fifty round-faced men are sitting, their eyes shining from a green light of greed. In front of every person is a table, and on top of each table are moneybags and gold coins. Each thinks he has the entire exchequer at his disposal.

Swedenborg points out the absurdity of this notion because there are too many people present, but they explain that they are not allowed to think "mine is not yours," but only "yours is mine."

Light streams in through the cracks, making the treasures appear as grains of gold. The collective illusion makes coins out of dust. Whence comes all this folly? Swedenborg wonders. They tell him they are aware of their stupidity, and when they leave the house, they become rational again. But as long as the illusion is maintained, it makes them happy, so they gladly sit and indulge the fantasy.

This scenario [recounted in *Conjugal Love* §267–268] is remarkable. Indeed, I know of no other passage in world literature where daydreams have been elucidated in this way. The fifty men in the dim hut have many comrades, affected by the same delusions. Is not Swedenborg one of them, although he is not greedy for gold?



Hell is composed of people who lack barriers. In one of his memorabilia [*Apocalypse Revealed* §655], Swedenborg is again in an amphitheater, this time in the form of a gladiatorial circus. Satyrs and priapi sit on the lowest benches, some naked, others covered only slightly. Bulls, rams, sheep, kids, and lambs are driven into the arena, followed by lions, panthers, leopards, and wolves.

In this theatrical scene, the wild animals, which have been conjured up in the satyr's wicked hearts, represent lust. The beasts of prey attack the innocent and peaceful grazing-animals, which represent decent and law-abiding people. A terrible massacre ensues. When the bloodbath is over, the satyrs strew sand over the place.

In the *Spiritual Diary*, Swedenborg meets with a spirit who in the hour of death had thought of vampires and then been smitten with desire to suck other people's blood to regain life. He hung around Swedenborg's throat and stuck fast to the carotid artery. Swedenborg, who was protected, escaped the bloodsucker. The vampire spirit had been awakened since Swedenborg was a human of flesh and blood.

The special liking for evil, Swedenborg writes another day, can be compared to the sensual amusements of frogs in the stagnant water of a pond or worms snacking on a cadaver. On the other hand, a predilection for goodness is like refreshing your senses in gardens among flower beds. In both cases, we are concerned with pleasures. Those who desire frog happiness think they chose it freely. These people are disregarded by Swedenborg because he himself does not have such tendencies or see them as reasons for rejoicing. They, on the other hand, think they have done the right thing.

True sympathy, which does not question belief or politics, escapes Swedenborg. Perhaps this might be a reason the figure of Jesus seems so strange to him. It seems to me that Swedenborg would gladly have Jesus replaced by another, more resolute and determined man—himself, maybe.



In his youth, Swedenborg met and spoke with Charles XII. This exchange took place in Lund in 1716, when the king returned from exile in Turkey. Swedenborg humbly tried to win the autocrat's favor. He had produced the first scientific journal in Sweden, *Daedalus Hyperboreus*, in which he published his own sketch of "a machine to fly in the air," and hoped his majesty would take an interest in this venture. The pilot should not worry too much, the young inventor wrote, if he lost an arm or a leg on the first flights. He placed his trust in the valor of pioneers. In his youth, Swedenborg too had his share of audacity.

The king appointed Swedenborg assessor in the College of Mines, which initiated and controlled the mining industry in Sweden. This royal assignment determined Swedenborg's fate for three decades. He inherited several mines in the Bergslag, but as far as is known he never experienced any conflict of interest between owning private property and performing his official duties.

When Swedenborg meets the monarch in the spiritual world, he no longer needs to be as slavishly polite as he had been in his youth. He describes the potentate as released from all the considerations and scruples that hinder despots in our world. Charles now plots to conquer the world and control the minds of all people. Human lives are nothing to him. Even in heaven he wants to be king.

In a short story recounted in his *Spiritual Diary* (§1257 f.), Swedenborg writes of a man living in a godforsaken tract among treacherous and felonious miscreants. The spirit begs to be released from this ghastly prison and is eventually placed among more honorable spirits. His new principled and square-dealing neighbors do not like him,

however, so this move does not work out very well. The spirit cannot understand this because, during his life, he had associated only with honest people and had always concealed his obnoxious nature. Why can he not manage to live as he had before, as other people seemed to be doing?

The man was then sent down to a region in front of the right foot—Swedenborg continues to locate spirits relative to the Grand Man. Our spirit then digs a hole there, something like a grave. Suspicions arise that he had committed a murder during his lifetime.

Another man rises from a bier with a black cloth and walks up to Swedenborg. He tells him that he thinks he had once been poisoned by the gravedigger. One evening he and the other man had been drinking wine together, and afterwards he had felt deadly sick. At the moment of death, he thought of this but wasn't sure whether his suspicion was well-founded. He explained that his station in life had been very low; thus, he thought a murderous person might have tested a deadly poison on him to find the perfect use for it in a premeditated crime.

Now that shady spirit who dug his own grave confesses that he did indeed commit such a homicide. As a punishment, he is twice rolled around in his grave, after which he is coal black, his face resembling that of an Egyptian mummy. He is sent up in the air to fly so high that the angels can see his true character. Swedenborg could feel his agony and grief. The man admits that he always wanted to learn about the evil in human nature and never cared about the good and that the lust for killing the innocent remains with him after death. He is surprised to find himself unmasked in the world of the dead.

With such tales, Edgar Allan Poe, the king of the horror story, reaped immortal laurels a century later.

MEMORY

We have, Swedenborg informs us, two different memories—one internal, the other external. We are not aware of the internal memory during our lifetime; but without it, we couldn't think. The inward memory flows into our conscious memory as a liquid pours into connected vessels.

All that we have heard, seen, and experienced since our earliest childhood and up to our last sigh is stored in the interior memory. Nothing is ever lost. Even our most shadowy perceptions remain, and in the other life, they emerge.

Today, we use the term “the unconscious” to describe Swedenborg's internal memory. He is a forerunner in the field of psychoanalysis. Internal memory is active in our dreams, and in this way it influences us also when we are awake.

When the human being after death is transformed into a spirit, internal memory becomes the most important source of knowledge.

However, the external memory is also saved, so that all that we have learned on earth remains with us.

Now, after our passage to the other side, the superiority of the internal memory becomes apparent. Swedenborg uses the following example. Think of a friend or enemy you have known for several years and with whom you have discussed a number of things. When you are alone, you try to recollect the person's features, but the visual picture is blurred. How different then in the other life, when you have complete access to the internal memory and its superior retrieval system. There you can observe your friend or adversary in detail and with the finest acuity and definition perceive his or her movements, facial expressions, scents, intonation, and diction.

Alas! How much I wish such a refined memory were now mine, that all my lost loved ones would appear before me! Still, Swedenborg is right—in dreams, our memory can draw lifelike portraits where even the smallest characteristic is present. The dead return and appear before our eyes as if they were alive.

In one scene among the dead, a young man complains that his memories of love are fading, that the colors and redolence of his hours of dalliance are losing their vividness, and that he finds it hard to believe that another kind of liaison awaits him. Although it remains, external memory is often banned, since it can be equivocal and deceptive. If the spirits were engrossed in these earthly memories, they might stop maturing and risk becoming silly.

When a spirit grows in wisdom and develops into an angel, the exterior memory gradually fades away and finally disappears completely. Earthly life gives way to heavenly existence. Names of persons and places are forgotten.

Swedenborg tells us of a spirit who could not remember where he came from. Swedenborg, the experienced traveler, takes him to towns and cities, one after another; and through his bodily eyes, Swedenborg shows the spirit distant streets and squares. Finally, they reach the city where the man had lived, and immediately he knows his way about.

Swedenborg thinks that, had he known the buildings better, he could have walked the spirit home.

When memory is purified, the light from which we originate and toward which we are heading grows stronger. Memory houses this light.

Swedenborg is peculiarly specific about everything. He can hilariously show us how difficult the dead find it to leave their past. One day in November 1748, as recounted in the *Spiritual Diary*, a spirit comes to Swedenborg's dinner table, longing for food—macaroons, pears, succulent doves. On this particular day, obviously, Swedenborg was enjoying a feast in the spirit's taste, making an exception from his well-known spartan repasts. The spirit thinks it can enjoy the delicious food if Swedenborg just consents to act as intermediary, but Swedenborg believes this is forbidden. The hungry spirit has a long way to march to reach heaven. Of course, the spirit is Swedenborg himself.

On another occasion, Swedenborg and some spirits discuss the nature of life. Life is will and understanding, one of them says. But, another objects, people who do not worry about truth and goodness still think they live intensely. They deny the inner light and feel just fine. To this it is replied that those light-hearted pleasure-seekers are spiritually dead. Enjoyments have been an obstacle in their rational development, and in the next life, they easily fall a victim to evil impulses.

Swedenborg is quite generous in providing death certificates to those he finds spiritually dead. In a late entry in *The Spiritual Diary* [5711], he states that once, when his inner sight was opened, he had seen the street Stora Nygatan in the Old Town. This is one of the rare occasions when Stockholm appears in his writings. It is almost as if he were a disciple of Strindberg, who in his work *Sömngångarnätter* (Sleepwalker Nights) has a bird's-eye view of Stockholm and watches the crowded streets from above. The angels guide Swedenborg down the cobblestone street, and they observe that all the inhabitants are spiritually dead. The angels shiver in the lane. They do not see windows in the facings, only black holes. Yet people live inside. Together, Swedenborg and the angels stroll through the city: they pass the Pharmacy and the Exchange, cross Järntorget (Iron Square), and walk down the slope to Skeppsbron (the

Pier). In spite of the throng of people surrounding them everywhere they go, the angels find the streets and the squares deserted since they can perceive only those who are spiritually alive.

The spirits wonder what makes the human being human? Witless people believe the body and the face are its chief characteristics, Swedenborg observes. Less fatuous souls believe the ability to speak is the distinctive feature. Still others say that humans are distinguished by thought. They are all mistaken. The distinctive human quality is moral awareness, the aptitude to behold the Divine, which is internal in the human. It does not matter if you look like a human being and can talk and think like one: if you are full of falsehood and evil, you are not human.

The human race left to its own devices is worse than animals because it surrenders itself to destruction. Animals live according to the order of providence, whereas humans go against the grain. If the Lord did not have mercy on our species and had not connected it to himself through the angels, humanity would not survive. But humans are not aware of this fact.

The function of memory can be compared to the way cattle chew cud. As long as the food stays there, it is not part of the body; but when it comes up, it gives life. Truths concealed in the memory act in the same way.

Swedenborg's attitude toward memory changes. Sometimes he says the dead do not remember anything at all. But a reader who looks in vain for further explanations should not hold Swedenborg accountable for this: an author is sovereign in his poetic universe. Swedenborg himself brings all his memories to the spiritual world. Once it happens that spirits overwhelm his memory. There they see a servant whom Swedenborg has not remunerated properly. Swedenborg is indignant because he knows he has paid the man and has dreamt about it, but in his external memory this has been erased, and as a result the spirits accuse him.

MORAL NOTES

During the dream crisis, Swedenborg one day notes that someone “at the table”—in a London restaurant—asks his neighbor “whether a person with much money can be melancholic.” Swedenborg smiles and is tempted to butt in, but refrains from doing so. Nonetheless, in his journal, he points out that insolvency is nothing compared to paucity of soul. “By the mercy of God,” he adds, he has himself been granted material wealth, “and being a person of independent means, I can do what I want” and still have money left. And yet he is afflicted “with grief or melancholy,” surpassing any suffering caused by material poverty.

As I reflect on this episode, I find it delightful that Swedenborg, in a restaurant in London, overhears a thought from the ranks of ordinary people who rarely are heard of in literature.

A friend of mine—he died many years ago—had been poor all his life. He was a fisherman and casual laborer living in the Ingå archipelago

in Finland. Once, when we were talking about an acquaintance of ours whose son had tragically killed himself, my friend objected: "But he is rich!"

This was the starting point for an extended discussion, to which we now and again returned. Could a rich person really be depressed by sorrows comparable to the misery of those lacking food and housing for themselves and their families? My friend never changed his mind on this point.

"Do you mean that a mother with a dead child in her arms would suffer less if she is well-to-do?" I asked. But all in vain, and the issue has often upset me since then because money creates a wall between the self and reality.

At least in theory, our time esteems social empathy as a virtue and is suspicious of riches. That stand is considered Christian. Swedenborg, however, qualifies Jesus' warning about the camel and the eye of the needle. The rich, he assures us, have an equal or better chance of attaining heaven compared to the poor.



One day in the ethereal world, the angels observe that Swedenborg is dejected (*True Christian Religion* §848) and ask him the reason. He replies that he has offered humankind a knowledge that exceeds anything hitherto known, but people say it has no value.

The angels are surprised to hear this and ask God's permission to look down on earth to see what is going on. This is granted, but they see nothing but darkness. Someone, perhaps Swedenborg himself, asks them to write down the truths, which he has revealed, on a piece of paper and drop it down from heaven. The paper shines like a star as long as it traverses spiritual space, but when it approaches earth, the writing becomes obscured and hardly legible. On earth, some learned clergymen catch it.

"Why, this is just figments of the brain," they assert, crumpling up the paper and stepping on it. The angels sadly witness this scene.

Most authors will recognize this situation and wish they had an angel to support them. During his lifetime, Swedenborg's merits were never acknowledged and acclaimed. But thanks to his strong conviction, he endured.



When Jesus says that children belong to heaven, this is meant figuratively and should be understood on that level, Swedenborg explains. Their innocence is distinctive, and for this reason Jesus embraces them. But their freedom from guilt is just the starting point for genuine purity of heart, which is always united with wisdom. And wisdom is beyond their reach.

According to Delacroix, innocence is like the work of the artist. First comes the sketch, then execution, then back to the sketch again.



“I was in a street in a big city,” Swedenborg jots down, “and I saw some boys scuffling. A crowd of people gathered around the combatants and had a good time. I observed that their parents cheered them on.”

Good spirits and angels were disturbed and exclaimed, “In this way the parents obliterate empathy and innocence in their children and initiate them into wrath and revenge” (*Arcana Coelestia* §2309).



In the celestial Athenaeum, the ancient sages assemble in the octagonal palace called the Palladium (*True Christian Religion* §693). Socrates is there and Xenophon and all the disciples. They are crowned with laurel wreaths. The guardians serve them water from a crystal chalice to welcome them. The water comes from the spring that gushed forth under the hoof of Pegasus, the well consecrated to the nine muses.

Three people who have recently arrived from earth—an ecclesiastic, a

politician, and a philosopher—have entered the city and are received in audience.

“Any news from earth?” one of the thinkers asks, greeting them as is customary in the world beyond. The clergyman says that there is news indeed. A man has appeared on earth “claiming that he can speak with angels and look into the spiritual world and see everything as clearly as on earth.”

The cleric then summarizes Swedenborg’s teachings, and the wise men in the Palladium ask about people’s reaction to all this. The priest answers that his fellow clergymen first considered the man to be a mystic, then a dreamer, and finally believed he had seen ghosts. Doubt remained, however, and eventually the clergy declared, “Believe it or not.”

The politician and the philosopher add their remarks. They ostentatiously dispute the likelihood of life after death. “How can a phantom survive which can neither eat nor drink?” they rhetorically ask.

The sages of Athenaeum stand astonished, and among them, the followers of Socrates are particularly astounded. They fully agree with Swedenborg. It occurs to them that the internal minds of humankind must have been closed and that the knowledge about the country of the blessed has been lost. To them, the human survival in the Elysian Fields has always been commonly accepted.

In this way, Swedenborg has the masters of classical antiquity crediting his doctrine and thus achieves an auspicious triumph. His writings abound with similar victories, easily achieved since every step he takes in the spiritual world corroborates his words.

In this respect, he resembles an author who was not born until Swedenborg had been dead for exactly a hundred years, namely, Marcel Proust. His novel *Remembrance of Things Past* is studded with scenes where he is raised from shame to glory. Young Marcel arrives at a fine hotel with his rural grandmother and is snubbed by the manager. But after a little while, a grand lady enters, unbelievably rich, lending her noble luster to the premises—his grandmother’s classmate and intimate friend. The metamorphosis of the scene is miraculous. The manager of the hotel bows to the grandmother, and Marcel is transformed into a prince.

Proust's novel is built on such scenes. An uncontrollable desire for recognition cries out for satisfaction every moment. It's the same thing with Swedenborg.



There is no fear of death in Swedenborg, and that may be felt as a deficiency. It is often said that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were, more than our time, marked by an awareness of impending doom. Illness and death seized everyday life. In *Hercules* (1658), Stiernhielm allows Death majestically to appear in brutal grandeur, ravaging all that is lovely and beautiful:

Heel, i Dagh, och sund; frisk, lustigh, fager och röder.
Morgon är kaller i Munn, stock-steelnad-styfwer, och döder.

[. . .]

Döden krossar i kras alt hwad här kraft har, och heelt är.
Döden trampar i Träck, alt hwad här fagert, och fijnt är.

Healthy today and sound; attractive, merry, and rosy-cheeked;
Tomorrow is icy in mouth; stiffened rigid and peaked.
Death cracks to pieces whatever is spry, or vital and sweet;
Death tramples down in dung whatsoever is fair and discreet.¹

“Sighs of agony” is a heading in Jesper Swedberg’s book of hymns. In C. M. Bellman, Charon, the ferryman on the river of death, is linked to Eros and Bacchus.² In Swedenborg, however, death brings constant rejoicing as if he were hearing off in the distance a choir of angels. True, he felt distress during the dream crisis period, but then he felt that his soul was in danger. He never shows any fear of physical death. The basic ar-

1. The poetry in this chapter has been translated by Anders Hallengren.

2. Bellman’s songs abound with Greek mythological figures. In the song referred to here from *Fredmans epistel No. 79*, “*Kron i luren tutar*” (Charon toots on his horn), drink and women are on a dying man’s mind. The scene is set in a tavern.

gument of his narrative on the kingdom beyond is that there is no death, so why should he—or we—be afraid?

Let me note that Swedenborg never experienced the horror of losing a loved one or had worries for their future, all of which frames our fear. He writes that the residents of Jupiter do not fear death unless they have to say farewell to husband, children, or parents. His father wrote in one of his hymns:

Jag skiljs väl bort med kvida
från dem mig hava kär
Dock skall jag dem förbida
hos Kristum och hans här.

From the loved ones wrenched away,
wailing I must abide.
Awaiting our reunion day,
the Lord of Hosts aside.

When the time came for Swedenborg to die, on March 29, 1772, he was free to die. I envy him.



Swedenborg never married and had no children. He had a home, but he lived abroad for years, and he died in London. As far as is known, he had no close friends. The garden blooming in spring and glowing in autumnal adornment is his symbol of feast.

He found his *joie de vivre* at his writing desk, bending year after year over the white paper before him, busy with feathered pen and ink. He must have written more than he read, although he was exceedingly bookish. In the *Spiritual Diary*, he tells of a man who was stopped from writing by an evil spirit, and we feel his quiver of woe in such a story. Unfortunately, he has nothing to say about the happiness of writing. Here he is like most other authors. This creates a misunderstanding of the writer's life on earth because the largest and most important part is missing.

Heavenly happiness, according to Swedenborg, accommodates few elements from the present life. When Pär Lagerkvist dreams of eternity, he envisions his beloved ten thousand years from now wandering blond and slender under the same birches as she did long ago.³ For Swedenborg, eternal life overflows with that spirit of community he seldom experienced on earth.



Swedenborg writes without any contact with a reader. There is much loneliness behind this, and he felt this deeply. This also explains why there is no coherent plot to his narrative. He sprinkles his best parts here and there throughout his entire production, so the reader is forced to wander through a desert of words before he comes to a refreshing oasis. Thus, Swedenborg's renown rests upon the work of translators and interpreters.

Although he rarely makes use of it, he has an exceptional knack of telling stories, and at times he allows himself to write with real panache, as in the following [from *True Christian Religion* §672]:

It is easily seen that if you wash your face, your hands, and your feet, yes, washing your whole body in a bath, the dirt is washed away; and you can show yourself among people, clean and neat. And that's it. It does not make you any better. Any thief, brigand, or murderer can take a bath and scrub himself until he shines. This is just an empty show; the soul is not purified.

The inward exerts an influence on the external appearance and has its way. But the outward cannot affect the internal—that would be against nature and to upset divine order.⁴



3. Pär Lagerkvist (1891–1974) was a Swedish novelist, playwright, and poet, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1951. Love, death, and eternity were his constant themes.

4. Translated by Carl-Göran Ekerwald and Anders Hallengren.

When a father arrives in the next life, he at once asks about his children if they died before him. When they meet, he tells them that his fatherhood is ended and that God is now their father. Father and son depart, determined never to think of one another anymore.

But if the father's soul is still attached to the earth, he embraces his children and never tires of seeing them and talking to them. If such fathers are told that their children did much harm in their life, without further ado, they gather the entire family, and all descend to the lower depths.

This is far from, too far from, Jesus' story of the prodigal son.



When we arrive in the world of spirits, no one asks about our faith; we are asked only about our life. On earth, the same question is crucial. This is in accordance with the thesis "faith without deeds is dead."

Do not humans have, Swedenborg asks (*True Christian Religion* §375), a head and body, connected by the neck? Does not the body carry out the will and thought of the head? What is the use of good intentions in the head if the body does not act accordingly but remains passive? The thoughts would be like homeless birds that, lacking a nest, lay their eggs in the air to be cracked against the ground. A person who keeps love and faith to him- or herself is a specter hovering in vacant space, a flitting butterfly swallowed by a sparrow.

How we live, the alertness of the internal human, determines our fate on the other side of the grave. Sometimes it turns out that the person is already dead when he or she dies. I think nobody, without shuddering inwardly, can reject this idea—that our soul can be lost. That Swedenborg also shuddered is certain.



Swedenborg states that our acts should be appraised with regard to our purposes. He gives two examples (*Spiritual Diary* §2451). If somebody

manages to convert all humankind to Christianity but pursued this ambition only for fame, the act is of no value at all. If, on the other hand, he roots out the whole Christendom, but the intention of his campaign is good, then he should be rewarded.

Voltaire, the moral oracle of the era, whom Swedenborg must have had constantly before his eyes, loudly objects: it does not matter whether we are well-disposed or mean: the result counts. The worst ruler whose most notorious decisions make his country prosper should be lauded. Against Swedenborg's extremely personal demands, Voltaire puts public interest, and few of us would disapprove. I suspect that an unconscious abhorrence of Christianity directs Swedenborg's choice of examples. In another respect, he sided with Voltaire. Voltaire didn't care in the least for the endless prayers of the hermit in barren land, unless the recluse did something for his fellow beings.



In Swedenborg, *temptation* (Lat. *tentatio*; Swedish *frestelse*) is a recurrent term. As can be seen from J. F. Potts's concordance, the term, in Swedenborg's usage, signifies trial, probation, suffering, affliction, and passion. In his writings, as elsewhere, the context determines the actual meaning.

Swedenborg calls the Flood, which drowned biblical humanity, a temptation of Noah. Humans are not drowning in the waters; profane and evil thoughts are. The water level sinks, and raven and dove are sent out to find land. At this point, Noah's temptation—the inundation—is over. As long as it lasts, doubt and despair reigns, symbolized by drowning people and animals. When it is all over, Noah is relieved and comforted, and the symbolic flood stops.

An uncorrupted person cannot be tempted. Temptation presupposes weakness. The temptation of Jesus shows that he was not one with God until he overcame his last temptation—dying on the cross.

Temptation is the first sign of regeneration. During this process, the angels and demons are at war inside us. Our anxiety is the work of evil spirits (*Arcana Coelestia* §5036). Memories of all evil thoughts and

plans we ever had are awakened; and overwhelmed by remorse, we fear we are lost and devastated. God himself is in combat in our temptation. Conscientious people are, of course, the greatest sufferers; the spiritually dead have no temptations. In every temptation, the outcome is dreaded because the exposed person thinks he or she is all bad.

The good spirits inside us, the angels, defend us. This antagonism between good and evil constitutes the temptation, the meaning of which is only darkly perceived by the sufferer, who knows hardly more than he is lost. In reality, the soul is saved through this torture. Within, an ark is being built that will carry the forlorn across the raging sea.



Some of Swedenborg's memorabilia are constructed as fairytales with the moral cheerfully disguised, as with the tales of Hans Christian Andersen. Once upon a time, Swedenborg walked with angels in a garden (*True Christian Religion* §387). Follow me to paradise, one of them suggests. There is, the angel continues, a gorgeous temple that can be seen only by those who realize the limitation of their mind, whereas those who claim to be wise see nothing.

Swedenborg, who knows he qualifies, beholds the marvelous temple building, with its crystal walls and its arched roof of transparent jasper. Under the ceiling cherubs fly. We, the proud and presumptuous, would see nothing.



At the moment he awakens from a deep sleep, Swedenborg sees wreathes of laurel leaves [*Spiritual Diary* §166]. They wave in harmonious rhythms and fill him with joy. Shortly afterwards, something even more charming appears in a dream: children at play. But he can see them only dimly, as through a veil.

When he tells the spirits about this, they confess that they had seen the wreathes of laurel, but not the children. Their envy is aroused and

heightened. They are seized by feelings of uneasiness and distress, and Swedenborg tries to soothe them. After all, he says, they have seen the laurels and should be content. This argument makes them furious, however, and they declare that allusions to their incapacities will no longer be tolerated.

The frenzied jealousy of these outsiders has few parallels in our literature.



The tablets containing the Law, acquired by Moses on Mount Sinai, were two in number. One tablet concerns relations between humankind and God, while the other deals with human relations. If an individual fulfills the requirements of the human code, the Lord affords that person the ability to answer to the decrees found on his tablet. A murderer, a thief, an adulterer, or a perjurer cannot possibly love the Lord at the same time. That would be unreasonable, Swedenborg states.

Dostoevsky has shown us that a criminal can love the Lord, and Swedenborg here may appear strange and severe.⁵ Legal technicalities frequently arise, and Swedenborg often expresses the conviction that a true belief in God is a sure protection against evil tendencies.

Nevertheless, Swedenborg feels compassion for those who believe they are lost. That happened to him one time. All things considered, his spiritual doctrine is an education in happiness. When Cain, who killed his brother, confesses that his wicked deed is too heavy for him to bear, his remnant of goodness becomes visible. When the Lord put a mark on Cain, it meant that, if he were slain, vengeance would be taken on his murderer sevenfold, because it is forbidden to do violence to the unhappy.



5. For an instance where the angels explain how a supposed sinner can be deemed innocent, see *Conjugal Love* §527 [3]. [Ed.]

The ambitious, who raise their standards and rise above other people, notice only upward tendencies in others and those who already have reached the heights. Swedenborg terms this driving force in humankind divine providence. The true nature of this progressive desire to achieve is unknown because we want to think that our advance is voluntary and self-willed.

Still, we believe in a providence that links our fates. Swedenborg refers to an experience from parlor games [*Divine Providence* §212]:

Gamble with dice or play cards or ask someone who is familiar with these things. What gambler would deny the existence of luck? They actually play with it, and it plays with them in a wonderful way. Who can achieve anything if there has been a turn of fortune? When we attempt to contravene, does not fortune then laugh at wisdom and prudence? When you roll the dice, shuffle and deal the cards, is it not then as if luck oversaw and directed the turns and the twists of the wrist to favor, for some reason, one or the other partner at the table? Can the basic reason be anything but, ultimately, divine providence, which secretly acts upon us through various dispensations, long-term as well as short-term? Luck is neither a delusion nor a freak of nature. Our idea of Fortuna and her interventions in our lives indicates the presence of God in our thoughts and actions.

In a recent article, Swedish author Henning Mankell compares the extremely popular television program of the late 1950s, the highly intellectual quiz *10,000-kronorsfrågan*, to its 1990s counterpart *Bingolotto*.⁶ In the former, the competitors were amateurs with special knowledge in different fields—Roman Catholic Popes, for example—and those who passed all the rounds and finally won the money were applauded by the whole nation. But in the more recent game, the bingo, the lottery is based on “blind luck.” Everything hinges on the lottery number and whether the indicator will land on that number.

6. Henning Mankell (b. 1948) is a Swedish novelist who currently lives in Mozambique.

Mankell continues, “This makes me wonder. In the former game, knowledge was all. In the latter case, it is all about luck. And if it is that what it’s all about, it is all about nothing at all. Haven’t people who trust in fortune always been a bit resigned?”

Swedenborg and Mankell face each other. Perhaps the bingo players are waiting for God. The divine moment comes for everyone some day.



In the *Arcana Coelestia*, Swedenborg closely reads the thirty-ninth chapter of Genesis. It is about Mrs. Potiphar’s attempt to seduce the handsome young Joseph, who is a trusted employee in her Egyptian husband’s house. Potiphar’s wife says to Joseph, “Sleep with me,” and Joseph rejects her. She persists, and one day when the house is empty, she appealingly grips his garment.

Strangely enough, in his observations on this scene of temptation, Swedenborg does not see the erotic tension, which Thomas Mann in his series of biblical novels written two hundred years later was to adorn with spicy detail. Swedenborg always seems to be on guard against any suspicion that earthly adventures have incidentally made God forget his real purpose, the instruction of humanity. When Swedenborg in his exegesis eventually faces the Song of Solomon, with its kisses, caresses, endearments, and alluring fragrances, his explanations no longer suffice, and he promptly declares that this particular biblical book was not written by God. We see the same kind of thing when some scholars, from internal clues, dispossess Shakespeare of some of his plays.

LOVE BETWEEN SPOUSES

“**T**he inclination toward women, which had been my chief passion, [has] suddenly ceased.” This well-known entry in Swedenborg’s private journal of dreams leaves us perplexed. All his life he lives alone; we know next to nothing about his love affairs. When, in his old age, women called on him, he always asked that another person be present, whether to avoid gossip and slander or temptation. Yet he describes matrimonial love with an affection unmatched in Swedish literature. In this respect, he is the antithesis of Strindberg, yet he himself had no experience of marriage.

Swedenborg devoted a comprehensive work to this subject, *Conjugal Love*, which was published in London in 1768. It consists of two parts: *The Delights of Wisdom concerning Conjugal Love*, and *Pleasures of Insanity concerning Scortatory Love*. In eighteenth-century Sweden, *hor* (whoredom) signified carnal knowledge between a married person and an unmarried one and, even worse, extramarital relations

between individuals married to others, redoubling the infidelity. In former days, such adulterous relations were a crime called *dubbelt hor*, for a long time considered a penal offense. Today, the word *hor* still retains something of its old and robust sense of sinfulness, but in sophisticated circles, it has been transferred to other areas. To the young, *whore* has sexual connotations, but also pertains to working life: to do something hateful just for the money. Journalists are familiar with the term.

In Swedish translations, the adjective *horisk* is used to describe the baser kind of love that Swedenborg analyzes in the second part of his book, drawn from the Latin words *scortatorius*, *fornicatorius*, and *meretricius*. His writings swarm with such illicit love.

The eighteenth century has acquired some notoriety for licentiousness and loose living. But this pertains mostly to the royal courts and high society. With the rank and file, it was probably as it has always been—coarse sensuality, rudeness, prudishness, and artificiality in a variety of blends. Swedenborg is harsh and practical and takes the ordinary view on gender. He thinks that connubial delights are as superior to other erotic pleasures as springtime excels the Nordic winter. But he doesn't condemn an unmarried man who, owing to his urgent desire, keeps a mistress—granted that she is not a virgin and he does not entice her with a promise of marriage. In populous societies, brothels ought to be established, he suggests, although stressing that it is always preferable that sexual fire be ignited in married life. Women who are mistresses or work at those brothels are all beyond his ken, which tend to confirm the suspicion that they do not belong to “mankind.”

In a dark forest, Swedenborg meets with satyrs who have hairy chests [*Conjugal Love* §521]. Some of them are cloven-footed; others have paws like panthers or wolves. They run about, inspired by burning desire, shouting, “Where are the women?”

Scarlet women are waiting for them, and the satyrs take them to a subterranean cavern. A huge snake enfolds the hole and spits poison into it. In the trees above, nocturnal birds croak and shriek.

Afterwards the party enjoys a blasphemous conversation on matrimony. Swedenborg listens at a distance. What is more comical than

married men whose wives are unfaithful to them, someone asks, and they all laugh and cheer.

A little later Swedenborg encounters this wild crowd. Now they look like ordinary, respectable people. He tells them that he saw them as satyrs and whores and that their sinful lust made them look like those vicious creatures. He then refers to the episode in Homer's *Odyssey* where Circe—by a slip of tongue, Swedenborg calls her Medea—transforms Ulysses' men into swine. Swedenborg explains that this did not in reality come to pass but illustrates the men's lechery.

An interesting discussion follows, resembling Swedenborg's conversation with the incubus who had such a beautiful paramour. Don't they know that scortatory love is iniquitous? Are they not familiar with the sixth commandment? They reply: Should a children's book plot the life of adults? Have you not heard divines preach on the righteous life, Swedenborg retorts. They answer that they have indeed paid attention to the timbre of the clergymen's voices but have not been keenly alive to the gist of their words.

Swedenborg goes home, leaving the party in an uproar, quite indignant at his filthy imagination. When he comes back the next day, the forest is gone: there is only a sandy moor and a puddle with a few red snakes. A couple of weeks later, he is back again. Now some farm workers are preparing land for reclamation, and he hears a voice from heaven calling to him: "Go to your bedroom, and shut the door. Begin the work on the Apocalypse and finish in two years."

Swedenborg graphically depicts erotic obsession and amorous extravagances, corroborating the journal entry on his passionate inclination. He can easily rival the amatory virtuosi of the century, from Diderot's *Jacob the Fatalist* down to John Cleland's notorious *Fanny Hill*. He describes frivolous and fickle men who crave a new woman every day (*Conjugal Love* §507) All of womankind is to them one gigantic harlot. They are set aflame only by the charm of novelty. After an hour or a day, they are fed up with their partner. This is the Don Juan-type, presented long before Mozart and Mérimée.

These men suffer in the afterlife. Their proclivity is retained in full,

but they are brought to brothels where they are allotted only one whore a day. This remedy helps to temper some of them for the better, but the confirmed whoremongers are stuck in damnation.

Swedenborg takes an interest in rapists, men who are only excited when they are violently resisted. They are like highwaymen who are indifferent to gifts but take pleasure in taking what's not freely given, Swedenborg observes. If they notice that a woman is willing, they are turned off. Cunning wives who discover this trait in their husbands kindle his flame by insubordination.

When a man of such inclinations arrives in the spiritual world, he is ushered to harlots who are talented actors [*Conjugial Love* §512]. They pretend to be chaste and innocent. When the rapist approaches one of these women, she simulates fright and flees to a bedroom, leaving the door ajar. She stretches out on her back, giving the assailant's imagination plenty of rope. He thrusts the door open and rushes in. The harlot rebuffs him with hands and nails, scratches his face and tears his clothes, screaming for help, bending to the open window. When the deed is done, the woman pretends despair and threatens the perpetrator with destruction if he does not give her a large sum of money.

Swedenborg also visits a community where people's faces are like blue steel. They are dressed as comedians with a little skirt on their hips, tight waistcoats, and ruffled forage caps. A potentate—his standing is indicated by his monumental top hat—kindly receives Swedenborg and his companion angel and invites them to talk. In the course of the discussion, it becomes evident that men here have two or three wives, or more.

These men consider being bound to one wife as downright incarceration. Life becomes dull and humdrum. We men, somebody says, want to be treated as kings, obeyed and respected. Is not the woman made to be subservient? We demand compliance and not any vexatious equality. In a marriage where there are many wives, they compete to make their husband happy. What becomes of the spirit of community in a society like this, Swedenborg questions the impudent male chauvinist. In a

marriage, he points out, love disappears the moment when one side takes command.

Swedenborg is laughed at. Is not pleasure the same and the women different, the riff-raff yell. The angel at his side informs Swedenborg that people from earth arrive every day to this place.



Yet, in the drama of love, Swedenborg assigns the leading role to the woman. Her face and her body make her superior in beauty, and in her demeanor she is closer to life. Her amorous life is aimed in one direction, since she is responsible for the offspring.

When she grows up, she longs for a lasting love relation. But she conceals her wish because she knows that men treasure their freedom and for this reason are chilled by women who want to bind them.

A woman's love is primary, men's love merely secondary, since a man is a receptacle without knowing it. The female says to the male she has chosen, "How clever you are!" In the same instant, a flame is kindled in her eyes, she reddens, and warmth streams down into her heart. The man suddenly sees how attractive she is and replies, "How beautiful you are!" Then a love relationship is established; and if the two are lucky, this lasts for life.

The starting point is the intelligence the female perceives in the man, which reflects her own. The swain is convinced that he is the conqueror, unaware that the woman has got him going. In the divine two-some, woman represents love, while man represents wisdom. Wisdom and love cannot live without one other, so these virtues are comprised of both the male and female.

We are meant to live in couples. Although Swedenborg himself lived alone all his life, he shows no understanding or sympathy for the solitary. On the contrary, he states that such people wither away spiritually.

In a good love relationship, the joint assets of experience constantly grow. To devastate that capital, which is constituted by the pooled funds of the husband and wife, is like feeding the dogs from the pantry

so there is no food left in the house. There is not room for more than one person in our hearts. The smallest misstep discards something valuable. Nor do we have time for more than one person during our short life. If we have diverse love affairs, secretiveness grows, and complete solidarity and mutual understanding are destroyed, since one partner is shut out from the union.

One day in heaven, Swedenborg and some women discuss matrimony (*Conjugal Love* §293). They are in a rose garden in the center of which is a spring, and these women are called the virgins of the fountain. The women talk about sexual delights—symbolized by the fountain—and they think that this delectation depends on the wisdom of their husbands.

Swedenborg is astonished at this. Men seduce women by means of eloquence and witticism, he objects, but what on earth has this to do with wisdom?

The women are resentful. “As wives,” they say “we think of our husbands’s well-being from morning to night. Only on rare occasions are they completely out of our thoughts. On the other hand, we know that our spouses think of us infrequently during the day.”

We know the wisdom of our husbands, they explain, and this insight of ours is the foundation for the delights that love offers.



When we are in the spiritual world, our senses are still intact. Consequently, erotic attraction remains. This is troublesome to Swedenborg, and he hesitates and diffidently sways in his opinion.

In one of his relations (*Conjugal Love* §44), three men, two of them youths, have just arrived in the afterlife and are strolling about their heavenly abode, rather disappointed at its worldly character.

They have a chance encounter with two angels who tell them that there are gorgeous women and handsome men around, and that man is male and woman female, just as on earth.

The young men immediately ask about sexual love and are told that

love in heaven is chaste and free from erotic stimulation. Women regard men with an appetite for sex as repellent satyrs. The young men sigh in disappointment; love in heaven seems to be dry and dreary.

“We are no stones and stocks,” they protest. “We are living beings. The attraction to beautiful women is the essence of our life.”

No wonder they long to go back to earth! Heaven is obviously hell. These passionate youngsters are presumably dear to Swedenborg’s heart.

The angels explain that only marital love is permitted. “Then there is love in heaven!” the relieved adolescents whoop—only to be confused again when the angels tell them that, in heaven, sexual intercourse is verily more pleasing than on earth and remains the basis of a love relation, whereas not children but wisdom and love are begotten. Thence comes the joy felt immediately after coition, instead of despondency as on earth. Furthermore, the partners are recompensed with youthfulness and increased powers. Soon, they have regained all the sexual stamina of their youth.

Is Swedenborg’s observation that one feels ill at ease after intercourse based on his own experiences acquired during his travels and probable visits to brothels? On the other hand, when he talks about spiritual eroticism, he is strangely childlike and innocent. We are invited to engage in intercourse where erotic hunger is transformed into a state of community, a transubstantiation act in a bodily Communion.

Swedenborg states that all young women shrink from sexual advances that do not aim at lifelong marriage. Perhaps doubts in that direction still remain with some members of the female gender, who in our time, thanks to thousands of media images getting fresh with them, are daily introduced into the mysteries of love.



Swedenborg teaches that God has a twofold nature because love and wisdom are combined in him. For this reason, the Lord has two names, *Jesus* signifying the good, which is love, and *Christ* signifying truth, which is wisdom.

Indeed, all of creation, as well as the Creator, is dual, and in every part, even in the least, union and generation exist. The human body bears the imprint of this duality. Two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, two kidneys, two testicles, although we have only one sight and hearing, one voice, and one olfactory sense. Man and woman are made to amalgamate into one. When the conjunction takes place, they constitute a complete whole. Together—but not apart—they mirror the Supreme Being. Marriage, then, is an image of the Lord. Adultery, therefore, is a blasphemy against God.

But is not everything in nature marked by this duality? Don't horses have two eyes? Don't the donkey and the she-ass mate, and doesn't the swan-groom pair with his swan-bride? Do they then get offspring in the image of God? True, animals have the same drives as we, but human love is not a matter of gender. Swedenborg take great pains to make this clear and to guide us to the fountain of love.

In the spiritual world, Swedenborg attends a conference on the subject, and the frame is magnificent [*Conjugal Love* §§103–114]. Four flying riders, in orange cloaks and helmets adorned with crests, emerge from skies, fiery as the light of dawn. The horsemen, with winged arms, rise in the stirrups, and the horses race at great speed towards the ground. Swedenborg, spiritually present, hears a voice saying that the cavaliers are conveners, summoning all to a meeting. Straight away distinguished people from all over Europe arrive in twenty-seven coaches, drawn by honey-colored chargers in dazzling harness. The passengers alight and enter a quadrangular house with crystal windows aligned with the four cardinal points. The walls are made of cedar wood, the ceiling of arbor vitae, and the floor of poplar boards. On one side of the assembly-hall is a gold-coated table, and on top of the table is a miter—*cidaris* in Latin—set with precious stones. That is the prize that will be awarded to the winner in the debate.

An angel is the master of ceremony. Committees are elected for each nation and begin their meetings. As a member of parliament, Swedenborg knew the procedural rules. Committee reports are recorded and placed in a silver bowl on the golden table. As if drawing lots, the

chairperson/angel randomly selects answers from the bowl, one after the other, reading them aloud.

Compared to the frame, the resolutions are plain, as in an opera where scenery and machinery with gods among the clouds outshine the story. Most of the delegates state that the sexual instinct is the driving force in love but is refined when it results in marriage. The erotic force is quintupled if it is concentrated on one object, the practical Dutch put in. The English consider that sex would run wild if marriage were not sanctified and sanctioned by law. Unless there were strong prohibitive laws, whole populations would wander about in fields and forests with harlots and abducted girls. Countries would disintegrate. The Polish propose that the igniting sparks of love initially spread in all directions but that, after a while, the shower of sparks converge in one point. Nature has arranged things this way. Lust precedes wisdom.

When all answers have been read, some strangers from Africa are seen standing at the door. They ask permission to make a contribution, and one of them says, "You Europeans consider sexual desire to be the origin of love between spouses, but Africans derive this love from the God of heaven and earth, because it is virtuous, pure, and true." At these words, the entire assembly rises. A window is opened where a moment ago a bare wall was seen, and a voice is heard: "The miter belongs to the African." The angel presents it. The African receives it but does not put it on. That is the end.

This is not the only time Swedenborg acknowledges the excellence of Africans. Christian Europe has forfeited Golden Age wisdom, but this ancient sagacity lives and thrives in Africa. One disciple of Swedenborg, August Nordenskjöld (1754–1792), was an adventurer and alchemist in the service of King Gustav III. He had a laboratory for making gold at Drottningholm. Nordenskjöld went to Africa hoping to find a primordial love there and to lay the foundation for a perfect Swedenborgian utopia. Having reached a little way inland, he was roughly handled by the natives and died when he managed to get back to the coast.

The matrimonial love of the Golden Age no longer exists in the Christian world, but a dream of another and deeper relation between

man and woman remains. This longing is inborn in the same way that divine light is innate in us. This love should not be confused with any instinct found in nature. It does not originate in Eros but in a desire for wisdom (*Arcana Coelestia* §2727 f.) Our sexual drive is only a vehicle for this desire.

True love certainly begins with sexual attraction; but in sensual exhilaration, the divine unity of Love and Wisdom is covertly implanted. The prerequisite for fulfillment is a desire for monogamy. When love truly takes root in the male, the sexual urge is transformed. Then Eros is not before the man, but behind him. Sexual desire is preserved, but it becomes chaste and even sweeter than before.

In this way, Swedenborg frees us from the captivity of our natural desires. But this liberation becomes even more paradoxical since this is a sphere of human life that more than anything else appears to be subject to natural laws. Swedenborg's conjugal love is a dream that unites heaven and earth. It puts a golden pattern in our lives. It lets heaven come into marriage. Marital love, as Swedenborg describes it, is lifelong and can only be alive with one partner. It is a love that holds sexual attraction and erotic pleasures but is rooted first and foremost in a profound spirit of community.



One day when Swedenborg is "inspired," he asks to be introduced to a couple from the Golden Age [*Conjugal Love* §75]. An angel appears and promises that his wish shall be fulfilled, but—as if he had read Dante—at the same time warns him that the route is full of hardships and passes through a dark and foreboding forest where no one can find his way without a guide authorized by the Lord.

After an adventurous ramble, Swedenborg and the accompanying soul arrive at one of the luxuriant orchards that frame otherworldly blessedness. There the happy couple greets them, the husband dressed in hyacinth-colored cloak and a waistcoat of shining wool, his wife clad in purple toga with an embroidered silk vest beneath.

Swedenborg likes to write about clothes. He is the sophisticated spirit's tailor, dressing up people in the most elegant garbs. Like all other things in heaven, garments are not substantial in a worldly fashion but are reflections of the condition of those who wear them and are interlaced with symbolical meanings. Undoubtedly, Swedenborg had read Stiernhielm's *Hercules*, where Lady Lust is rigged out in exquisite apparel, while Lady Chaste dresses like a Puritan. Nevertheless Swedenborg attires the angels according to their level of wisdom. The brightest wear a glistening cloth, looking as if it flashes with fire. The less well-informed have slightly duller outfits, completely without glare, and the least advanced spirits wear costumes of mixed colors like harlequins. In the innermost heaven, however, the angels are naked, since nudity is the state of innocence. Titian's famous painting *Sacred and Profane Love*, where the worldly woman is splendidly dressed but the divine is nude, is here borne out.

An spiritual woman in love changes gown continually as she turns to her beloved. If a man or a woman gets a stain on their clothes, it signifies a defect or a sin surfacing from within. The spot disappears when the wearer's fault is ameliorated.

When Swedenborg meets with the blissful pair from the Golden Age, his eye goes from one to the other, to and fro, and he observes how the unity of their souls is mirrored in their faces, exactly as he had expected.

"You are two and yet you are one," he says. The man answers, "We are one. Her life is in me and my life is in her. We are two bodies and one soul. There is a union between us as between the two fonts in the chest, called heart and lung. She is my heart and I am her lung."

Swedenborg the bachelor is moved by these beautiful words, but still he harbors a doubt. Are there no clouds in this married sunshine? Can the husband really look at other women without desire? The man replies, "I can. Since my wife is united with my soul, we see everything at one and the same time. When encountering other women, I see them through her eyes. She guides my thoughts and instills coldness and dread of the unchaste."

This is an ingenious way of preventing escapades.

The conjugal happiness of the Golden Age is still with us when we fall in love. A boy and a girl who have fallen in love have the opportunity—during the time of engagement, in the solemn wedding ceremony, and on the honeymoon—to see divine love reborn.

Anyone who has experienced a love of that kind knows that any impulse heading in another direction than the beloved dies in one's breast. The heart screens the surrounding world and its manifold temptations, and our sexual urge exists only in the presence of the beloved. The feeling is close to religious ecstasy. Those who experience this live within a two-tongued flame of fire and do not exist outside it (*Conjugal Love* §58).

APOCALYPSE

In the late fifteenth century, Albrecht Dürer created his famous woodcut series “The Apocalypse,” which depicted the four riders found in Revelation 6, the heralds of destruction. Swedenborg has an equine predilection akin to that of Dürer. Horses of all colors trot and gallop through his works. The white horse of Revelation 19 is the starting point for one of his best pieces, the small work *On the White Horse*, published in 1758.

“Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war.” With these words, Revelation 19:11 begins. In verses 12–14 we read:

His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself.

He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God.

And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses.

It is impossible to understand this without knowing the internal meaning, Swedenborg writes. Who would contradict this statement? Swedenborg, intrepid as always, immediately begins his explication. He explains that the white horse symbolizes the intellectual penetration into the inner sanctum of the Word, stating this as a fact, which means that the subject is really his own powers of interpreting the Bible. The Lord himself is on horseback. The flames issuing from his eyes signify divine truth and love. The secret name written upon him, known to none but himself, is "The Word of God." Here it is shown that the Lord has clothed himself in the Word, the Holy Writ proper. His garment drenched in blood indicates that the letter of the Word has been violated. The mounted escort, clothed in fine linen and following him on white horses, is conscripted among those who firmly grasp the interior sense.

Unstated yet understood tacitly by the reader is that Swedenborg points the way for the riders, having unlocked the Bible by his interpretation. The three verses mean that, someday in the future, the internal sense of the Word will prevail.

For Swedenborg, the horse is a cherished symbol. As a deputy of the Board of Mines and as the author of a book on foundries and minerals, he has crossed the country time and again in horse-drawn conveyance or on horseback. The horse was part of his life. While it is an ancient symbol of strength and freedom, for Swedenborg, the horse principally represents intellectual life. A horseman understands. But the assumption is that the horse is white.

White is connected with truth. The light of God is white, and the clothing of angels is white. There is no fairer image of innocence than the white lamb. Whiteness is a gift of God, and wherever it appears, it affirms the Lord's presence. For this reason, the horse is white. Every

other color is suspect. When a white dress is soiled or discolored, this is a mark of moral impurity. A dead horse is a horrible representation of denial and misunderstanding. A horse in captivity is reason imprisoned.

The other three horses of Dürer's foursome symbolize lost understanding. The scarlet horse signifies lost goodness. Red is good, but flaming red is disastrous. The horse of such a color annihilates peace. The black horse signals falsehood because black is the opposite of the white. Finally, the fourth horse, the sickly pale one, needs no interpretation, its name being Death.

On one occasion [*Apocalypse Revealed* §839], Swedenborg observes a herd of red and black horses rushing forward. Monkeys ride them, sitting with their backs to the horses's heads. They attack white horses.

Swedenborg's makes full use of his collection of Bible quotations in proving that the horse in Scripture always has the same signification. The words on riding upon the Word of truth found in the Psalms; Habakkuk's horses and triumphant chariots; and the prophet Elijah's ascent by horse and chariot bolster his argument. Swedenborg also knows from experience that this interpretation is true because horses, riders, and carriages are often seen in the spiritual world. Contemplative spirits, lost in thought, suddenly, without knowing how, find themselves in the saddle. A field seems to contain an endless number of chariots and horses. New arrivals in the spiritual world are taught that this is not real but an appearance produced by all the intellectual work going on. The place is called the assembly of the intelligent and wise. Swedenborg also had seen some people ascend with shining horses and fiery chariots, uplifted to heaven by the truths of doctrine.

Not finding biblical evidence enough, Swedenborg shows that even the sages of antiquity knew equestrian symbolism. They imagined that the sun, the very emblem of enlightenment and wisdom, is a chariot drawn by horses. Accordingly, the ancients envisaged the winged horse Pegasus, whose hoof opened the spring of the nine muses. Another proof is the famous Trojan Horse, symbolizing the intellect's power of tearing down walls.

This art of symbol excites me. I find irresistible. It is wonderful to

follow the horse through the centuries and to be transported by horses into paradise. One is carried along by Swedenborg's voracious search for a meaning, with the horses, the trees, and the stars disclosing Holy Writ behind all.

I don't know if Swedenborg was familiar with Gulliver's voyage to the land of the Houyhnhnms, where the horses are endowed with reason but human beings are not. The horses are wise rulers. Of the all the books of *Gulliver's Travels*, published in England in 1726, this one is the least known. In this particular travel journal, Swift's misanthropy culminates when he describes human beings, the dirty Yahoos, who offer such a frightful contrast to their noble four-hooved masters. Swedenborg's horse-filled imaginary fields fit well in Swift's world, however; and deep down in the gloomy grottos of his hell, many spirits resemble Yahoos.

Swift, however, does not share Swedenborg's taste for vivid colors. Gulliver's host in the country of the horses is dapple-gray, and his subordinate is a brown bay. But there is a beautiful white mare too. In all, there are noteworthy similarities in Swift's satire. As on Swedenborg's Jupiter, doubts and disbelief are unknown in the land of the Houyhnhnms. Science is disregarded since wisdom is inherited from generation to generation, and therefore books are not needed.



The Revelation of John is the strangest book in the Bible and offers a challenge to Swedenborg. He identifies with John of Patmos, who introduces himself in the first verse. Both of them see a door opened in heaven when they are caught up "in the spirit" (Rev. 4:2).

John of Patmos tells that his errand is to show "what must shortly take place" and foreshadows the end of the world as have thousands of prophets through the ages: "The time is near."

Swedenborg wrenches the time bomb loose from John's hands, at the same time disarming the worldly sting in his words.

Swedenborg explains that the word *near* does not refer to time, because

to God there is no time. Rather, it signifies a state. God, who is all mercy, would not permit destruction of the world in the external sense. If God had meant to set out the limits of time, it all would have been over long ago. “The time is near” indicates preparedness for an immense change, a vigilance of the soul.

The same hermeneutic method is applied to the famous prophecies and warnings in Matthew. When Jesus tells his disciples of forthcoming disasters preceding the Last Judgment—earthquakes, famine, civil war, the sunning turning dark, and the stars falling from the sky—none of this is meant literally. Just as the creation narrative in Genesis is about the regeneration of a soul, the doomsday descriptions in Matthew and John relate to a failing civilization and a devastated soul.

The Book of Revelation offers the most fantastic and anguished drama. No wonder today’s rock bands take their words and symbols from that source. Like the Book of Revelation, their lyrics have a worldwide reach and rouse their audience to ecstasy.

Swedenborg feels more at home in the apocalyptic context than anywhere else, but ecstasy is alien to him, and he never permits himself to be lured away from his general method: everything is an image and a symbol. When he gets to the strange scene in Revelation 12, where a pregnant woman, robed with the sun and with a crown of twelve stars on her head, cries out in anguish to be delivered of her labor and a dragon with seven heads and ten horns places himself in front of her, ready to devour the child at the moment of delivery, he conveys no sense of the overwhelming anxiety and the evasive mystery of the drama. Cool as a cucumber, he explains that the woman in travail is his own doctrine that is brought forth and that the dragon corresponds to the Protestant churches, which by “faith alone” wish to gorge on and eradicate his teachings.

In this manner, the Book of Revelation becomes a rebus to decipher and loses its complexity. Swedenborg raises his claims by regarding the holy city of Jerusalem which John of Patmos saw coming down from heaven—with its streets of gold and gates of pearls—as an image of his own blessed teachings. This is rather strange.

Millions of Christian believers have seen the New Jerusalem as the end of their lives and long for the day when they shall march in. “He has opened the gate of pearl”—this is the first words of a hymn the Salvation Army often sings, full of implicit faith. Swedenborg connects this longing with that moment God will wipe away all tears and sorrow and pain will be no more; but he completely rejects this sentimentality. The reasonable interpretation of the biblical symbols is all that matters.

Much more fruitful is Swedenborg’s construal of the Apocalypse as symbolic of the devastation and salvation of a soul, or an account of the disintegration, destruction, and renaissance of a civilization.

Since the dawn of humanity, there have been four churches on earth, Swedenborg says. They can also be called covenants between humankind and God. These churches correspond to the mythical ages of gold, silver, copper, and iron. The first three of them have already had their “last day.” The oldest church serves as a model for all the others. During that era, God and humanity were closely connected, and the human race lived in harmony and neighborly love. But the spiritual body deteriorated, and the divine truths were forgotten. Self-complacency then flourished in the congregation. This oldest church was symbolically ended by the Flood, not as a drowning catastrophe but as a sign of moral degradation and spiritual ruin. In the world of correspondences, water represents human decadence and devastation.

Swedenborg closely chronicles the course of events step by step. When the rain stops, Noah sends out a raven from the ark; its return means that souls were still in decline. But when he then sends out a dove, which returns with a green leaf, this signifies a new life germinating in people’s hearts. This is the dawn of the new covenant, and the rainbow glows in the sky.

A new epoch begins with Moses after the Egyptian bondage. The coming of Christ was another rebirth after an era of degeneration and torment. Now, in the Iron Age, the modern era, the time has come for another destruction. This is prefigured by the powerful symbols in the Book of Revelation.

The Last Judgment takes place in society and within every individual.

All humans despair at some time and feel that the end is near. But in our suffering, salvation is near. Swedenborg learned this from his own crisis. Devastation takes place within all of us. Doomsday is not a catastrophe at the end of time. It is here and now.

In Swedenborg's character, there is a trait of robust *karolin*, a Swedish soldier of Charles XII who returned from Siberian captivity and now teaches in a wintry Sweden. The expanses of the Russian *taiga* are retained in his vast perspective, but there is also something solid and numb.

The magnificent stage-settings of the Apocalypse show us again how rich is the human heart and how far is the reach of human imagination and emotion.

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