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In Search of the Absolute: Essays on Swedenborg and Literature

(The Swedenborg Society, 2004)

edited by Stephen McNeilly

In Search of the Absolute is a collection of six essays. The book's principal purpose is to disclose to the general reader, as well as to the scholar, the impact of Emanuel Swedenborg's thought on the western literary *imaginaire* from romanticism to contemporary times. Having been neglected for too long by academics, the question of Swedenborg's legacy undoubtedly needs to be reassessed. It calls for a more attentive investigation into the role played by the Swedish thinker in encouraging and inspiring the mapping of imagination in the frame of literary discourse. In this regard, McNeilly's book fills a significant gap by inaugurating a promising area of research on the entwinement between Swedenborg's challenging philosophical system and literature.¹ Indeed it must be said that although the volume concentrates on authors whose Swedenborgian influence has been widely recognised, it provides an in-depth original analysis that systematically focuses on the way these authors have read and interpreted Swedenborg.

Each of the essays contributes to the collection convincingly and demonstrates how far-reaching and pervasive the "Swedenborg effect" has been on writers and poets belonging to different cultural and historical backgrounds; from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's attempts to incorporate Swedenborg's theological works into his philosophical system to Jorge Luis Borges' fascination with Swedenborg's mystical reveries.²

The book covers a significant number of issues that help to understand and qualify what kind of "correspondence" has existed between Swedenborg and the literary world. Special consideration is given to those poets and writers who have acknowledged the literary potential of Swedenborg's works, for example, *The Spiritual Diary* (1748-1767) and *Apocalypse Revealed* (1766).

Accordingly, such an unconventional perspective reveals a tension between philosophical enquiry and poetic vision that proves to be particularly appealing to poets like Ralph Waldo Emerson. Indeed Emerson's aesthetics directly emerges from an inexhaustible negotiation between a pure philosophical speculation and an intense poetical drive. In this regard, Ander Hallegren in his "Swedenborgian simile in Emersonian edification" perfectly exemplifies Emerson's enthusiastic reception of Swedenborg. For the American poet he is "a man of genius [...] whose literary value has never been

¹ See for example Jonathan S. Rose, Stuart Shortwell and Mary Lou Bertucci (eds.) *Scribe of Heaven: Swedenborg's Life, Work and Impact* (West Chester (PA): The Swedenborg Foundation, 2005), which examines Swedenborg's life and works in the light of the cultural impact he has had on Scandinavia, Great Britain and America.

² Obviously the list of authors who have been influenced by Swedenborg could be longer than that suggested in the volume: it could include William Blake, Charles Baudelaire, Honorè de Balzac, William Butler Yeats, Sheridan Le Fanu and Carl Jung, just to mention the most obvious examples.

rightly estimated” (“American Scholar Address”, 1837). Equally important Swedenborg’s “extraordinary perception” and ability to connect man’s inner life with the Divine Soul seem to have served as the basis of Emerson’s doctrine of Transcendentalism.

In his second contribution to the volume (“A Hermeneutic Key to the title *Leaves of Grass*”), Hallegren pursues even further the effects of Swedenborg’s influence on American literature, by showing how the philosopher’s profound spirituality reverberates in Walt Whitman’s poetic language. Inspired by Emerson’s powerful definition of Swedenborg’s system of correspondences as “a grammar of hieroglyphs”, Whitman borrows the “rules” of such a grammar for the creation of his own poetic language. It follows that the poems collected in *Leaves of Grass* (1855) become Swedenborgian in every respect. Even its ambiguous and obscure title is enlightened by the idea that there must be a correspondence between a physical and a spiritual reality. Thus using the Swedenborgian *Dictionary of Correspondences, Representatives, and Significatives, derived from the Word of the Lord* (1841) as a decoder of Whitman’s idiolect, Hallegren brilliantly translates the title “Leaves of Grass” into “truths of what is alive in man”, which fully depicts Whitman’s poetic quest.

In his dense and fascinating essay “Swedenborgian Ideas in the Poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning”, Richard Lines discusses the Brownings’ poetic imagery in the light of Swedenborg’s thought. In particular Lines focuses on Swedenborg’s conception of “conjugal love” as the highest level of human and spiritual communion (*Conjugal Love*, 1768). As he points out, the “theme of marriage love runs like a leitmotif through the poems of both Robert and Elizabeth”, and this epitomises Swedenborg’s notion of divine unity.

Elizabeth was introduced to Swedenborg’s doctrines by Charles Augustus Tulk, a prominent figure among the Swedenborgians, the son of one of the founders of the New Jerusalem Church (1789) and a founder himself of the Swedenborgian Society (1810). As for Robert, he and Tulk’s eldest son, Augustus Henry, met at the University of London, during the poet’s years of study. Even after their move to Italy the Brownings continued to receive visits from preeminent Swedenborgians, like the sculptor Hiram Powers or the painter William Page. Lines succeeds in showing how Swedenborg’s world-view echoes in the whole poetic corpus of both Elizabeth and Robert, profoundly marking their major output. For example, in the narrative poem *Aurora Leigh* (1856), Elizabeth compares the love of the “wedded soul” to God’s love, so that the very concept of wedded love becomes the essence of the poet’s interpretation of Christianity. In the dramatic monologues that constitute the structure of *The Ring and the Book* (1868-69), Robert Browning is concerned with the problem of faith, both as a question of “having faith” (i.e. believing) and of “being faithful”, represented in the relationship between a man and a woman. In such a context marriage becomes the symbolic seal of a

renewed communion with God.

The matter of a possible influence of Swedenborg's theological and scientific works on Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poetry requires particular consideration. As H. J. Jackson points out in her essay "Swedenborg's Meaning is the truth": Coleridge, Tulk, and Swedenborg", Coleridge "cannot even be said to have been influenced by Swedenborg", rather one might observe that his connection with him passes through Tulk.³ Coleridge met Tulk in 1817, after he had already moved to the Gillmans in order to cure his opium addiction. More precisely it was in 1819 that Tulk introduced Coleridge to Swedenborg's thought first and then to the Society, although he never succeeded in gaining an official endorsement from him.⁴ By quoting Coleridge's notebooks and annotations, Jackson shows the ambiguity of his position on the Swedish thinker. On the one hand he seemed to appreciate Swedenborg's "project of interpreting the Bible in a spiritual sense" against the philosophical materialism of his time, convinced as he was that "Swedenborg's Meaning is the truth"; on the other he questioned Swedenborg's soundness of mind, and criticised the basis of his philosophical and scientific approach. Undoubtedly, what perplexed Coleridge most were his visions of angels as well as the risk of a misinterpretation of his works by his followers (the Swedenborg Society).

By contrast, as Jackson clearly demonstrates, it is Coleridge himself who often "adapted" (not to say distorted) Swedenborg's thought for his own purposes. As a matter of fact, in his analysis of Swedenborg's works, Coleridge tried to find an intelligible thread to follow, thereby striving to dematerialise the vivid and extremely concrete accounts of his encounters with God and angels. Taken as a whole, Coleridge's response to Swedenborg embodies the poet's struggle to work out an intellectual system, where the search for a significant internal coherence had to be combined with an urge to reach a unity of feeling. It should come as no surprise, then, that his commitment to understanding Swedenborg's eschatological discourse was destined to be only partially fulfilled, if not to fail. As Jackson argues, Coleridge's emendations of Swedenborg's major theological works (for example the doctrines of justification and the Trinity of the persons) produced a *normalisation* of his thought, which placed him securely into the Protestant mainstream, at a safe distance from any visionary drift. In this respect, the account of Coleridge's idiosyncratic readings of Swedenborg is very effective. Whereas other scholars have restricted their research to trace the connection between the two, Jackson extensively discusses its very nature, thus revealing the arbitrariness of some of the poet's conclusions.

Since my field of study is related to English literature, I particularly enjoyed the essays on the relationship between Swedenborg and the Anglo-

³ Cf. Richard Lines, 'Coleridge and Charles Augustus Tulk', *Charles Lamb Bulletin* n.s. 140 (October 2007), 167-79.

⁴ Coleridge first mentions Swedenborg, in his letters, in February 1818, (CL IV 835) writing to Tulk and returning Blake's poems. He seems familiar with Swedenborg's thought.

American poetry, though other challenging insights are offered in the last two contributions to the collection: Lars Berquist's "Subjectivity and Truth: Strindberg and Swedenborg" and Emilio R Báez-Rivera's "Swedenborg and Borges: from the Mystic of the North to the Mystic *in puribus*". As for the first, Berquist persuasively proves how Strindberg's literary production is marked by Swedenborg's notions of dreams, intuition (the truest form of knowledge) and *vastatio*, a sort of purgatory, which functions as an aid to spiritual catharsis. Through Swedenborg, Strindberg seems to have found a certain philosophical reference point for his painful reflections on a possible higher existence, on remorse and on sense of guilt expressed at various levels in his works.⁵

Jorge Louis Borges' interest in Swedenborg primarily concerns his mystical experiences, which he felt to be very close to his own. In this respect one of Borges' favourite works of Swedenborg was *The Dream Diary* or *The Journal of Dreams* (1743-1744). This is a travel diary in which the Swedish thinker recorded his most compelling visions and reveries. From a more philosophical perspective, however, it is Swedenborg's concept of unity, as an ontological nexus between the universe and its components, that exerts greater attraction to Borges' thought, as far as it provides a powerful precedent for his own mystical writings. Báez-Rivera's excursion on Borges' mysticism invites the reader on an engaging "parallel journey" through the depth of the Argentinean writer's spiritual experiences, and through Swedenborg's epistemological revelations. Thus, for instance, Borges' peculiar use of the spatial and temporal dimensions in "The Aleph" (1949) is consistent with Swedenborg's notion of space and time. Strikingly anticipating the contemporary debate on these categories, Swedenborg describes space and time as no longer absolute, but strictly dependent on consciousness.⁶

The collection as a whole provides an excellent reference for studies on the engagement between Swedenborg and literature. While it can of course by no means be exhaustive, the variety of authors examined in the essays has the merit of giving new light to the extent of Swedenborg's legacy in the literary field, and of suggesting further research and analysis.

⁵ See for example *Inferno* (1897), *There are Crimes and Crimes* (1839), *A Dream Play* (1902).

⁶ See for example, *Conjugal Love and Divine Providence* (1764).