



Emanuel Swedenborg, Transpersonal Psychology and the Literary Text

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Abstract

This article examines how Swedenborgianism linked the conscious and unconscious mind through the literary symbol. It has long warranted critical attention that Swedenborg, nearly two centuries before Jung, launched an exploration of archetypal images. What I will attempt below is a study of the reception history of Swedenborg, or, more precisely, an examination of how the psychological and literary dimensions of Swedenborg's writing have been a significant attraction to readers.

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This article examines how Swedenborgianism linked the conscious and unconscious mind through the literary symbol. It has long warranted critical attention that Swedenborg, nearly two centuries before Jung, launched an exploration of archetypal images. What I will attempt below is a study of the reception history of Swedenborg, or, more precisely, an examination of how the psychological and literary dimensions of Swedenborg's writing have been a significant attraction to readers.

The theosophist and visionary Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) was undoubtedly the most influential spiritualist on both sides of the Atlantic during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He has influenced a wide number of philosophers, psychologists and thinkers, such as Arthur Schopenhauer, D. T. Suzuki, and William James and the reverberations of his teachings are still discernible in many New Age movements. There is a salient influence of Swedenborg to be found among a number of well-known artists. These include William Blake, S.T. Coleridge, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Robert and Elizabeth Browning, Charles Baudelaire, Honoré de Balzac, Walt Whitman, August Strindberg, William Butler Yeats, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Ezra Pound, Robert Frost, Jorge Louis Borges, A.S. Byatt, and

the list goes on (see further list in MacNeilly, xxii). Most of these names were never confessors to the Swedenborgian Church, but seem to have been attracted to Swedenborg since he allowed art to have a psychological dimension, linking it to man's inner quest for spirituality and transcendence.

This article progresses in three stages. (1) I will first examine the early and still ongoing recovery of Swedenborg as a pioneer of psychological theory. It is possible to document how early developments of *transpersonal psychology* were in fact responding to Swedenborg's works. (2) I will then train the lens on Swedenborg's theory of divine archetypes. Swedenborg and his followers took a pluralistic interest in world mythologies. The spiritual investment in non-Christian images was based on Swedenborg's notion that myths harboured archetypes capable of effecting psychic transformation. (3) Finally, I will focus on the reception history of Swedenborg's own visions. Even when commentators rejected Swedenborg's claims to map Heaven and Hell as factually untrue, his figurative scenarios have often been accepted as constructive allegories for fantasy formation and utilization – capacities to be activated (it is believed) to heal mankind's fractured psyche. I will trace how continuous attempts at reading Swedenborg as essentially a *literary* writer in this respect have contributed to sustaining an interest in his highly eccentric writing.

Swedenborg and the “Internal” Mind

To begin with, a brief introduction to Swedenborg and his work is in order. Emanuel Swedenborg was born as the son of a Lutheran bishop in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1688. During the first 56 years of his life, he pursued a career as a scientist and inventor with numerous publications on scientific, civic, and philosophical subjects. Among Swedenborg's published works, his contribution to the field of brain science, especially neuro-localization theory, is increasingly being recognized today. Swedenborg was particularly prescient about the functions of the cerebral cortex, the corpus callosum, and the pituitary gland (see e.g. Norsell; Gordh et al.; Gross; and Akert & Hammond). But Swedenborg's life took a dramatic turn in the year 1744, when he began to have a series of strange dreams. Over time, these dreams developed into full-blown visions. In his later theosophical works, Swedenborg claimed that he was able to travel to the spiritual world, where he would encounter spirits of the dead living in communities (or even cities) of Heaven and Hell.

Central to Swedenborg's teaching is the idea of psychic growth. This hinges on the science of what he terms Correspondences, which is one of the most developed and applied ideas in his works. The entire natural universe (the *liber naturae*) was written in types, which man should interpret as spiritual signs. Swedenborg believed that man could use his “internal” mind to interpret the external universe, and, by doing so he would reach a higher state of mind in contact with spiritual essences. Swedenborg also produced several works of

biblical exegesis, explaining how divine symbols for psychic transformation were written into the testaments. Swedenborg's *Arcana Coelestia* (1749-1756), which in English translation fills twelve volumes, is one long exegesis of the two first books of Genesis. Here, Swedenborg expounds the "internal sense" of the creation narrative as a tale of human psychic reintegration with a higher understanding of the self and its spiritual potential. Swedenborg is at the end of a long "inner light" tradition of mysticism in which the Bible is read as a series of allegories for mental transformation of the spiritual human.

From this short account of Swedenborg, we may proceed to discuss Swedenborg's reception history. Several commentators have called attention to the fact that Swedenborg's investigations of how the mind functions on different levels make him one of the forerunners of psychology. As Oluf Lagerkrantz explains, what Swedenborg referred to as the "internal" mind is what psychoanalysis today calls "the Unconscious" (115). Those who see Swedenborg as an early pioneer of psychology also refer to his emphasis on dreams, while his description of man going through various stages of mental illumination is seen to correspond to the progression towards psychic wholeness described by Jungian psychologists (see e.g. Spoerl; Grange; Taylor "Historic Implications;" and Cole). A good deal of Swedenborg's theosophical and mystical vocabulary is difficult to fit into mainstream paradigms of modern psychology. However, as Carolyn Blackmer maintains (expressing a now mainstream view): "unless the psychological basis of Swedenborg's spiritual-world experience is understood, his theology is easily misinterpreted" (1).

In some sense, it is possible to "translate" all spiritual searches to psychological notions of self-actualization. Indeed, the possibility of appropriating Swedenborg's systematic investigation of the spiritual mind to psychology is discernible in the early reception history of Swedenborgianism. The Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge openly disagreed with a number of Swedenborgian tenets, yet he concedes that Swedenborg demanded "gratitude and admiration" as a "Psychologist" (992). A more sustained attempt at connecting Swedenborg's works with the emerging science of psychology appeared in the posthumous English publication of Swedenborg's *Regnum animale anatomice, physice et philosophice perlustratum* (written 1744). This book was Swedenborg's attempt, through various medical examinations, to describe the location of the soul in the human brain. Swedenborg's insistence that a higher spirit was rooted within the mind, but out of reach of consciousness, encouraged Swedenborg's English translator to entitle the tract *The Soul, or Rational Psychology* (Swedenborg 1887).

In the wake of this publication, the prominent Swedenborgian propagator James John Garth Wilkinson declared that Swedenborg had inaugurated what would be a new "chapter" in the examination of man's psychological foundation. He believed that psychology, which was fast emerging as a secular science at the time, should be reintegrated with a Swedenborgian focus on the "spiritual". In recent years, this call for reintegration of epistemologies has

been answered by developments in psycho-therapeutical practice. Leon James, Professor of Psychology at the University of Hawaii, has launched a method of investigation which he coins ‘theistic psychology’. This operates on the basis of a Swedenborgian model of man (www.theisticpsychology.com). A Swedenborgian approach is similarly promoted by the South African clinical psychologist Abie Venter (www.quantuminteractive.net).

A link to Swedenborg is most often found in relation to the branch of study labeled *transpersonal psychology*, which is often concerned with humanity’s recognition and realization of transcendent states of consciousness (Martin). In fact, it may be possible to discern a direct line of Swedenborgian influence in the development of *transpersonal psychology* as a school. In his textbook on the subject, Paul F. Cunningham writes:

Modern transpersonal psychology is a uniquely American psychology and a reflection of America’s visionary folk psychology and alternative reality tradition embodied in Swedenborgianism, spiritualism, utopianism, and the New England Transcendentalist movement at the turn of the century’ (16; cf. 98; see also Taylor “Swedenborg in the *History of American Psychology*”).

The Transcendentalist movement, represented by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, incorporated Swedenborgian elements into their philosophy of man. Emerson included a long essay on Swedenborg in his *Representative Men* (1850). An even more direct route of influence goes through William James, sometimes dubbed “the father of American psychology,” who grew up in a Swedenborgian household (Warren 55-86). We may certainly discern a strain of Swedenborgianism in James’ dictum that psychology must include the study of “altered states of consciousness,” since “no account of the universe in its totality can be final,” if it “leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded” (379).

For Swedenborg, the sphere of the unconscious is intrinsically connected with spiritual experiences. Therefore, his ideas are not Freudian but have more in common with those of C. G. Jung. What Jung shares with Swedenborg is the notion that man is alienated from himself in a hostile universe and that spiritual experiences are essential to maintaining mental health. Based on his studies in various religious cultures, Jung believed a journey of transformation towards individuation is at the centre of our unconscious strivings. Jung describes an endeavour to meet the hidden self on a higher, conscious level, which is simultaneously a meeting with the divine (Crowley).

Jung read Swedenborg and referred to him in his writing in a way that indicates he believed the seer to possess extrasensory abilities. For instance, he quotes the case of *Swedenborg* experiencing a vision of a fire in Stockholm at the same time as an actual fire was raging. *Jung* considered that Swedenborg had temporary access to “absolute knowledge” in a realm that transcends time and space (Jung *CW* 8:481). But it is Jung’s reference to Swedenborg’s idea of

the Collective Unconscious which is important. In one place, Jung defines this controversial concept of a psychological superstructure in terms of “a gigantic anthropomorphism of the universe” and the individual’s contact to the collective “greatest man” (CW 10:86). This may allude to Swedenborg’s concept of all humankind being spiritually united, which he figurizes as a *maximus homo* (Taylor “Jung”). This is the notion that all humans form part of a united spiritual human body – an idea originating in Kabbalistic lore. In one place, Jung refers directly to Swedenborg’s *maximus homo* as a “matrix or organizing principal of consciousness” (CW 10:86). Nonetheless, Jung never directly credited Swedenborg as having an influence on his theory of the Collective Unconsciousness. One of Jung’s central ideas connected with the Collective Unconscious concerns “symbols,” as these appear in dreams and myth. We will therefore now turn to the importance of a universal symbolic language as this had earlier played an important role for Swedenborg.

Symbols and Archetypes: Swedenborg and the Collective Unconscious

Jung believed symbols appearing in dreams and myths could be identified as eternal types embedded in the unconscious, representing paradigms of psychic significance. Included among the collective (often religious) symbols to which he paid attention are the cross, the six-pointed Star of David, and the Buddhist wheel of life. According to Jung, such symbols were a method the Self uses to raise unconscious energy and aspirations to the level of the conscious. According to Jung, the investigation of such perennial and recurring symbols, or archetypal images, turn “our way back to the deepest springs of life.” Such symbols (also referred to as “primordial images” and “archetypes”) are what the artist, poet or storyteller may crystallize with his or her rendering of an imaginative vision. They can also be truncated narratives as in the archetypal tale of hostile brethren (Jung “Approaching the Unconscious”). On this basis, Jung’s followers started collecting mythological, ritualistic, and symbolic imagery in the 1930s under the auspices of the Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism (ARAS), an organization that now has institutes throughout the U.S.

Swedenborg would also trace symbols, which he calls Correspondences, across cultural divides. Many of the relationships between spiritual verities and natural images have survived as metaphor in our everyday language. Swedenborg explains how *birds* correspond to *thoughts*, *light* to *truth*, *heat* to *love*, *vision* to *understanding* and many other such symbolic relationships (James “Swedenborg’s Religious Psychology”). Nature and man’s ancient mimesis of nature could be decoded through what Swedenborg called a “hieroglyphic key” (Swedenborg *Hieroglyphic Key*). In England, where Swedenborgianism grew early and fast, dictionaries were soon published (J.

Hindmarsh 1794; Nicholson 1800), explaining the “code” of these Correspondences to new readers of Swedenborg.

One symbol, or hypostasis, which Swedenborg often returns to is the horse, which he claims instantiates man’s understanding of the divine word, while a rider represents the interpreter who tries to tame the meaning of the divine word. According to Swedenborg, the symbolism of the horse and the rider can be found many places. He points to the riders in the Revelation of St. John (Swedenborg *White Horse*), but he also saw this symbolism manifested in various scenarios experienced on his dream-like journeys to the spiritual world.

Swedenborg holds that Correspondences were originally intuitively understood and disseminated throughout ancient Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Syria, Mesopotamia, Arabia, and the land of Canaan. Most importantly, they were worked into the Bible, but they were also carried into Greece, where they were turned into fables. In Greek tradition, Correspondences are discernible in the stories of Olympus, Helicon and Pindus, and in the story of the winged horse called Pegasus, which symbolizes an understanding enlightened by spiritual insight. The transmutations that the human mind will go through in its quest for psychic wholeness were also reflected in the stories composed by the ancient writers of Greece. These were collected and recorded by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* (c. AD 8), in which Swedenborg sees originally divine Correspondences turned into fable (Swedenborg *True Christian Religion*, nos. 201-2).

Even though Jung describes the symbols in our common human psyche as genetic, i.e. hardwired through evolution, he is also at pains to emphasize the numinous quality of them and what they afford in terms of communion with a divine or world mind (Cook 405). The notion that man and his creative products are full of images that have an immediate (literal) as well as a profounder (transpersonal) interpretation is consonant with what is found in Swedenborg’s writing on Correspondences. Indeed, in a publication of 1822, Robert Hindmarsh, the founder of the Swedenborgian Church in London, wrote that Swedenborg’s Correspondences can be described as “archetypes” of human-divine consciousness (56). Swedenborg picked up on various Neoplatonic trends, which were in vogue in eighteenth-century mystical milieus, and it is essentially a refracted light of Neoplatonism that also underlies many of Jung’s ideas of transpersonal psychology (Winther).

According to Jung, man must try to know these transpersonal symbols and archetypes in order to achieve what (in English translation) is called *individuation*. Swedenborg similarly emphasizes a raising of consciousness as the primary goal of man through approaching symbols and archetypal narratives. For Swedenborg, the primary repository for these Correspondences is the Bible. For instance, Swedenborg reads the story of Adam in the garden of Eden as signifying man in his “internal” state. The trees of that garden are his possible perceptions of love and intelligence, while the one he must not touch is the pain of death etc. In this way, Swedenborg sees the Testaments as

providing images that will guide man towards inner psychic growth and deeper collective wisdom. Likewise, in *Arcana Coelestia*, a work of biblical exegesis, Swedenborg understands the six days of creation in the Book of Genesis as six successive states of a psycho-spiritual regeneration, moving through stages of redemption, forgiveness, reconciliation, the new life, and final consummation. That it is possible to elucidate this as Swedenborg instructing the seeker in his psychological transformation toward individuation is emphasized in Douglas Taylor's recent *Hidden Levels of the Mind: Swedenborg's Theory of Consciousness* (61-3, 101-4).

For Swedenborg, “religion” is a negative word, which he uses to denote archetypal symbols and narratives that have been deactivated as a means to spiritual renewal. When this happens, they stultify into worship false images and inflexible doctrines. As an example of this, Swedenborg refers to the magnificent sculptures of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, constructed as “Types and Representations” of “Divine Things,” created from unmediated knowledge of Correspondences. However, as humankind lapsed into evermore exterior perception, these works of art lost their significance to man and were worshipped as idols (Swedenborg *True Christian Religion*, no. 291).

We find a version of Swedenborg's description of decline in the English poet and painter William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (c. 1790), when he recounts the beginning of priesthood (a decidedly negative term in Blake's vocabulary) as “Choosing forms of worship from poetic tales” (38). When composing these lines, Blake had been reading Swedenborg for some time, annotating his books and, for a short time, attending the Swedenborgian Church in Eastcheap, London (Rix 47-66). Blake criticizes Swedenborg, however, for imagining that all others are “religious & himself the single one on earth that ever broke a net [i.e. the trap of “religion”]” (43). Blake claims himself to be someone who taps archetypal knowledge and therefore offers his art – in the language of therapeutic cure – as “salutary and medicinal,” capable of connecting man with the “infinite which was hid” (39).

The Jungian analyst June K. Singer claims in *Blake, Jung, and the Collective Unconscious* that Blake tapped into the Collective Unconscious, giving form and voice to the primordial psychological energies in his self-made mythology (2000). However, this reading of Blake in Jungian terms is at odds with Jung himself, who believed Blake's representations to be overly contrived and therefore did not connect directly with the inner recesses of the archetypal brain. In a letter (to Nanavutty, 11 Nov. 1948), Jung wrote: “I find Blake a tantalizing study, since he has compiled a lot of half or undigested knowledge in his fantasies. According to my idea, they are an artistic production rather than an authentic representation of unconscious processes” (Jung *Letters* 513-14).

The critic Northrop Frye sees Blake as someone presenting the psychological archetypes of human existence. Frye mentions Swedenborg as a general influence on Blake and as the origin of symbols in Blake's poetry (for

example 109, 133, and 140), but otherwise pays little attention to the fact that Blake was specifically influenced by Swedenborg's method of reading the Bible, myth and religious art for the supposed spiritual archetypes they contain. However, Frye notes that in the illustrations Blake made to Chaucer, Dante, Milton and Bunyan, Blake was working to clarify "other poets' vision so that their readers may more easily understand their archetypal significance" (415). For later critics, this has invited psychological analysis of the illustrations. In relation to the illustrations to Bunyan, for example, Gerda S. Norvig informs us that she felt it necessary to draw on "the vocabulary of Jungian and post-Jungian theory to articulate some of Blake's most characteristic moves" (17). Blake describes one of the illustrations, the copper engraving of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Pilgrims* (c. 1808), as follows:

...some of the Names are altered by Time, but the Characters themselves for ever remain unaltered [a]nd consequently they are the Physiognomies or L[i]neaments of Universal Human Life beyond which Nature never steps. The Painter has consequently varied the heads and forms of his Personages into all Nature's varieties; the Horses he has varied to accord to their riders... (570).

The reference to horses as symbolic of their riders' mind-sets unmistakably reveals a Swedenborgian influence. In addition to this, the emphasis on human types of men also smacks of Swedenborg, as we shall see in a moment.

Like Swedenborg, Blake sought out a number of mythological and symbolic narratives that he believed provided mankind with archetypal images of divine significance. In his annotations to Bishop Richard Watson's *An Apology for the Bible* (1797), for example, he scribbles an angry response: "Read the Edda of Iceland the Songs of Fingal the accounts of North American Savages (as they are calld) Likewise Read Homers Iliad. he was certainly a Savage. in the Bishops sense. He knew nothing of God. in the Bishops sense of the word & yet he was no fool" (Blake 615, transcription of Blake's original entry). Blake offered the spirituality of these non-Christian mytho-poetic works as an antidote to the bishop's exclusive and apologist focus on the Bible.

We find a similar pluralistic approach with the Swedenborgian publicist James John Garth Wilkinson. He is known primarily for translating several of Swedenborg's works into English, but he was also the first to publish Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* in conventional letterpress in 1839. In the introduction to his edition, Wilkinson describes Blake's *Songs* (which have various speakers) as a model of higher psychological activities: "Blake transcended Self and escaped from the isolation which Self involves; and ... his expanding affections embraced universal man" (Wilkinson, "Introduction" 19). It is apparent that Wilkinson saw Blake as tuned in to the collective unconsciousness of Swedenborg's maximus homo.

In 1897, Wilkinson published an investigation of archetypal symbols represented in Norse mythology, *The Book of Edda called Völuspá: A Study in Its Scriptural and Spiritual Correspondences*. Wilkinson interprets the mythology of the *Poetic Edda* by explaining the symbolic significance of lion men (31), the fig tree (53), and that of various animals that represent good and evil affections. This was a Swedenborgian analysis to the core, relying on Correspondences identified in his works. In particular, the promise of a renovated Golden Age, captured in the image of the rebirth that follows Ragnarok, is interpreted as a representation of spiritual renewal. This is analogous to Swedenborg's interpretation of the Book of Revelation as a narrative about an inner apocalypse, and it is seen as a non-biblical narrative of the same.

Wilkinson sets out to categorize the Norse mythological figures as representations of eternal personality types. This typologization is a very Swedenborgian strategy, which we may briefly discuss. The groups of men that Swedenborg encounters in the spiritual world are classified as types, ordered in accordance with their psycho-spiritual characteristics (for example, either Compassion or Self-Love, or whatever their minds direct them to). Swedenborg tells us that men with similar mindsets would gravitate towards one another in the spiritual world and form communities. These communities inhabit various strata of Heaven and Hell, descending from the very high to the lowest deep. These groups of men are described in terms of the mental and religious proclivities they share, but are otherwise most often anonymous. However, Swedenborg may sometimes choose to call them by the name of "Machieavellists" or other such denominations in order to indicate their particular bent of mind. This attempt at typologization triggered a negative response from Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote that Swedenborg denotes "classes of souls as a botanist dispose of a carex, and visits doleful hells as a stratum of chalk or hornblade" (*Representative Men* 67).

It would stretch matters too much to compare Swedenborg's typology with the psychological types identified by Jungian practitioners. Nonetheless, in the work of the Swedenborgian psychologist Leon James, this is precisely what is attempted. James takes the Swedenborgian notion that man displays either 'Heavenly' or 'Hellish' traits to construct a psychological typology (James "Lecture Notes").

According to Swedenborg, men morph into outward symbols of their dominant convictions in the spiritual world. In this way, the mind would be visibly externalized. The beautiful angels are not divine creatures, but men who are entirely governed by love and affections. Conversely, men who live a life of evil may take on the appearance of the vile animals which their minds resemble. Thus, men who prey on others for their own benefit may appear as ferocious carnivores, such as lions, tigers, or even dragons. In one place, Swedenborg writes of men, residing in a special region of Hell, whose minds are warped, thus appearing as "serpents twisted into inextricable folds, which

is a consequence of their vain devices and incantations”. In fact, “the ancients, who wove all things into fables”, had also described such types of men. Drawing on spiritual correspondences,” classical Greek writers described these types as “Lernean Hydras,” “Giants” and “Cyclops.” These beings, who besieged the camp of the gods, were cast down by Jupiter’s thunderbolts and thrust under the fiery mountain Etna. The Hell of these men, the ancient also called “Tartarus”, and the “pools of Acheron,” and the deeps “Styx” (*Coronis* no. 38).

The emphasis Swedenborg placed on the dissemination of archetypal images in myth, the Bible and vision is one reason for the tendency to rework Swedenborg’s vocabulary to make it fit a poetic agenda. In the comments Blake made to Swedenborg’s writing, for example, he recalibrates the idea of divine influx flowing into everyman’s unconscious mind, as the origin of poetic inspiration. In the annotations to the English translation of Swedenborg’s *Heaven and Hell*, for example, Blake adds: “He who Loves feels love descend into him & if he has wisdom may perceive it is from the Poetic Genius which is the Lord.” Only a few lines later, he annotates Swedenborg’s statement “the negation of God constitutes Hell” with the explanatory comment “the negation of the Poetic Genius” (603).

The American modernist poet Ezra Pound took a similar approach in translating Swedenborg’s other-worldly concepts into something that the artist could use here and now. Pound wrote to Viola Baxter Jordan (October 24, 1907): “Swedenborg has called a certain thing ‘the angelic language’... This ‘angelic language’ I choose to interpret into ‘artistic utterance’” (“Letters” 109). The “angelic language” was a means of heightened communication (spoken by angels) which Swedenborg described as pure symbol, flowing directly from the interior life without the use of human words. Pound sees this as the definition of the language the poet seeks to reach for a higher state of consciousness.

If the artist could use Swedenborg to define art as drawing on an arche-symbolic register of signification, the stumbling block for many was Swedenborg’s claim to have undertaken journeys to Heaven and Hell. The remainder of this paper will address the ongoing attempt to play down Swedenborg’s claim that these visions were factual eyewitness accounts. Instead, an attempt is made to see Swedenborg’s visions as externalized psychological fantasies, which can be decoded into literary allegories.

Swedenborg’s Visions as Literary Allegory

Swedenborg’s posthumous *Journal of Dreams* has been the focus of some critical interest into the process that he went through, when he recorded his visionary and often highly sexual dreams during 1743-1744. These dreams would eventually turn him away from science towards metaphysical investigations. In the English edition, Wilson Van Dusen uses Jungian

psychology to explain the content of the dreams (Swedenborg *Dream Diary*). The process Swedenborg went through has also been analyzed in accordance with Jung's description of the *individuation* process, as this takes place through a meeting with symbols and archetypes of the Collective Unconscious (Ekström).

When it comes to the full-blown spiritual journeys to Heaven and Hell (and other planets), a number of readers have also approached these as explorations of archetypal symbolism, not as the documentary accounts Swedenborg claimed they were. Jung, for one, compared Swedenborg's meetings with the dead and recently departed with the encounters described in the Tibetan *Bardo Thodol* (CW 11:519). Jung held this book – often referred to as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* – in high esteem. This was not least because he believed its metaphysics could be construed as “statements of the *psyche*, and therefore psychological” (CW 11:511). Rather than a verifiable account of the afterlife, the *Bardo Thodol* shows what is essentially a metaphor for psychological “illumination and releasedness” (CW 11:514). The same idea may lie behind Jung's unequivocal proclamation that Swedenborg was a “visionary of unexampled fertility” (CW 18:299).

Reading Swedenborg as speaking in a mytho-psychological vocabulary that meant something more than its literal sense was a strategy already adopted by S. T. Coleridge, who refused to regard Swedenborg's “System” as one that derived from “actual Travels.” Rather, the reader must “receive it as the Account of a Series of allegorical in part & in part symbolical Visions.” However, Coleridge also held that Swedenborg had mistaken the “series of appropriate and symbolic visual and audital [sic] Images spontaneously rising before him” as “objective” facts. Instead, Swedenborg should – like a poet dreaming – have acknowledged that they were “subjective” truths formed by inner creative forces (qtd. in Ford 95-6). In some sense, Coleridge here approaches Jungian notions of imaginative activity, or what is also seen as the extension of the conscious horizon by the including numerous personal fantasies for the purpose of bringing about a psychic change (see Jung CW: 358)

In America, Walt Whitman declared “the altitude of literature and poetry has always been religion,” after which he would provide a long line of visionary mytho-spiritual works, including the Indian Vedas, the Jewish Talmud, the Christian Scriptures, Plato's works, the Koran, and the Edda. Evidently, Whitman evaluated these works not for their various religious doctrines but for the spiritual truths they conveyed. He finishes his list with the comment: “this leads on toward our own day, to Swedenborg” (417).

Whitman's fellow poet Ralph Waldo Emerson believed that the human mind demanded a religion that was imaginative. Thus, “if we tire of the saints, Shakespeare is our city of refuge.” In the same breath, Emerson urges that one “should draw the line of relation that subsists between Shakespeare and Swedenborg” (45). Emerson saw the Swedish seer as essentially a literary

writer of spiritual truths: “[a]fter Dante, Shakespeare and Milton there came no grand poet until Swedenborg sung the wonders of man’s heart in strange prose poems” (Emerson “Poet” 327).

Compared to the epic compositions of Dante and Milton, Shakespeare may seem the odd one out. But we must understand Emerson’s commentary on the background of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century bardolatry, whose “psychology, ritual and rhetoric reveal a latent religious pattern” (Dávidházi ix). It was a widespread opinion that Shakespeare wrote his plays as spiritual allegories, a code of truly divine messages. For example, Arthur Conan Doyle, who had a profound interest in the metaphysical, remarks that Swedenborg’s countless symbols bring us to “a realm of make-believe which can only be compared with the ciphers which some ingenious critics have detected in the plays of Shakespeare” (14).. Swedenborg, Shakespeare and the early hypnotist Frantz Anton Mesmer came to form a “Spiritualist trinity,” as Jeffrey Kahan documents in a recent book (esp. 17-38).

Dante is the literary writer to whom Swedenborg is most often compared. Swedenborgian scholars have argued that since the architecture of the afterlife which Dante describes in the *Divine Comedy* (c. 1308-1321) is similar to that of Swedenborg, it proves that this world existed. Both Frank Sewell and Arthur Edgar Beilby painstakingly trace the similarities, while they both maintain that Swedenborg was a true visionary, while Dante was more of a myopic sage who was only allowed fractured glimpses of the world beyond (Sewall; Beilby).

Swedenborg’s descriptions of the journey to the spiritual world and his detailed accounts of the various strata of Hell certainly bring to mind Dante’s journey through the nine circles of Hell. A major theme in Swedenborg’s writing on life after death is that the psychological and moral character of an individual creates an external environment corresponding to the disposition of his/her mind. Thus, evil minds find themselves in various menacing environments, not unlike the idea in Dante’s *Inferno*, where the punishment fits the crime of the evildoer. In contrast, benign and compassionate spirits find themselves in agreeable landscapes. The occultist poet William Butler Yeats admired Swedenborg’s artistic and painterly approach to depicting landscapes of the unseen. However, Yeats objected that Swedenborg was hobbled by his neoclassical training insofar as he was unable to appreciate the “terror” of sublime landscapes, from which the Romantic poets drew their energy and invigorated their literary genius:

Swedenborg because he belongs to an eighteenth century not yet touched by the romantic revival feels horror amid rocky uninhabited places, and so believes that the evil are in such places while the good are amid smooth grass and garden walks and the clear sunlight of Claude Lorraine. (52)

The Romantic poet Blake saw Swedenborg and Dante as essentially painting the same vision of heaven, as he noted in an inscription to his illustrations of

The Divine Comedy (689). However, he rated them differently. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake censures Swedenborg for providing too little nourishment for spiritual seekers compared to what can be found in “Dante or Shakespear” (43). Late in life, he stated that he considered “the visions of Swedenborg and Dante as the same kind,” only that “Dante was the greatest poet” (Bentley 697).

Others have been more egalitarian in their assessment. In *La Beatrice de Dante* from 1842, the Italian poet and scholar Gabriele Rossetti compares Dante’s cosmology with the architecture of Swedenborg’s spiritual world (Miller 343). When Ezra Pound read Rossetti in 1956, he commented that Rossetti ‘hooks’ Dante to Swedenborg like he himself had done for fifty years. Pound further explains that he believed both Dante and Swedenborg shared a “schema of increasing enlightened consciousness” (Miller 335).

This reading of the two writers’ descriptions, depicting the journey from the lowest Hell to the highest Heaven, parallels the theories of modern psychologists Bonney Gulino and Richard Schaub, who refer explicitly to Dante’s *Divine Comedy* as an epic metaphor for personal growth. A journey out of depression, anxiety, and addiction takes place through Dante’s purgatory. They base their theories on the Italian transpersonal psychotherapist Roberto Assagioli, who gave prominence to Dante’s poem in his treatment of patients. In a Jungian fashion, Dante’s fantasy quest is here construed as a means to bring the ego mind (consciousness) into a working relationship with the unknown terra incognita of the mind.

Jorge Louis Borges also compared Dante to Swedenborg on several occasions. He admired both writers, but insisted that Swedenborg entertained true visions, while Dante was a poet (Rowlandson 47-78). Nonetheless, in his laudatory sonnet to Swedenborg, Borges reveals that he viewed Swedenborg’s otherworldly travels as literary allegories for inner journeys that were capable of guiding man towards psychic reintegration with a higher reality: “He [Swedenborg] knew that Glory and Hell too/ Are in your soul, with all their myths” (353).

It seems that Swedenborg as a myth-making artist of the inner life has garnered admiration, while his attempt at systematizing archetypes scientifically – like another Linnaeus – has provoked negative responses. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake saw Swedenborg the artist lose out to “insolence sprouting from systematic reasoning” (42). Similarly, Emerson qualified his admiration of Swedenborg by criticizing his “hard pedantry” that “poorly tethers every symbol.” Emerson rejected outright the possibility of writing a “dictionary” of divine symbolism (*Representative Men* 58). Similarly, Robert Alfred Vaughan, in his well-known *Hours with Mystics*, censured Swedenborg’s systematic approach to the spiritual: “The happy thoughts of the artist, the imaginative analogies of the poet, are exchanged with Swedenborg for an elaborate system” (231).

In the twenty-first century, Swedenborg's fantastic journeys to Heaven and Hell are increasingly read as creative and imaginative approaches that are capable of guiding the individual towards psychological wholeness. In *Epic of the Afterlife: A Literary Approach to Swedenborg* from 2002, the renowned Swedish author Olof Lagercrantz sets out to identify the affinities that Swedenborg's visionary journeys share with other works in the literary canon. For example, Lagercrantz compares Swedenborg's travels to the otherworld with August Strindberg's *Ett Drömspell* (A Dream-Play), while Swedenborg's recurrent images of the horses are read as having a similar function to Jonathan Swift's allegorical Houyhnhnms. Lagercrantz sees Swedenborg's encounter with spirits of Heaven and Hell as primarily an externalized psychological drama where the spirits are "Swedenborg himself, speaking through a mask." We see in Swedenborg's visions the "life of the human soul ... dramatized, with spirits and angels as actors and the reader as audience" (16-17, 18). The clinical psychologist Wilson van Dusen also attempts a translation of Swedenborg's symbolism into a psychological vocabulary, believing that "[w]hen Swedenborg started his journey inward he watched inner processes spontaneously represent themselves in images"

Conclusion

Despite a paradigmatic gap that has grown between modernity and Swedenborg's centuries-old visions, the incorporation of the seer's ideas in discourses of psychology has prevented his work from fading out of focus. Several commentators now hail Swedenborg as a precursor of *transpersonal psychology*. His emphasis on physical-spiritual Correspondences has appealed to literary writers, who look for signs of the universal forms, the life behind things, and thereby escape the impoverishment of pure realism. Finally, there is an ongoing attempt at reading Swedenborg as a psychopomp guiding the spiritual seeker by means of literary allegories. From this perspective, the fantastical visions are clearly separated from his theological doctrines. To put a general gloss on this turn in the reception history: his visions are reclaimed as literary iconography whose teleology is personal transformation. In this article, I hope to have demonstrated how the influence of Swedenborg on a number of readers helped to establish a nexus between psychological investigation and a literature pertaining to an unseen metaphysical reality. The pervasiveness of an eccentric and unfashionable visionary in such discourses deserves to be noted and requires further study.

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