

Book Reviews

The Arms of Morpheus—Essays on Swedenborg and Mysticism. Edited by Stephen McNeilly. London: Swedenborg Society, 2007. 176 pp. index. Paper (ISBN 978-0-85448-150-7). £9.50

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There is something missing in the fabric of the twenty-first century. The Old Testament and other traditions had their prophets, their messengers of a spiritual condition, while the modern world has completely marginalised the notion of a “spiritual condition” by laying total emphasis on the physical state. Yet between the old and the new there have been several voices that have “kept the flag flying” so to speak. Emanuel Swedenborg is one such voice, largely ignored and regarded mostly as out of step with modernity. Consequently, he hardly figures in academic courses on the history of ideas as they became swamped in the tide of science and the exclusive rationality that fed on it and now defines us.

The Arms of Morpheus represents a step in redressing this balance. This title suggests that we are still asleep in the coils of a way of thinking that is determined to keep such voices marginalised. The figure of Swedenborg represents a key to a wake-up call, for it was his voice that warned against the excesses of the kind of thinking emerging from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries which threw an impenetrable girdle around thought itself. In spite of that, the purely rational process expanded into the Enlightenment program which developed into the kind of thought whose practical applications seduced the mind intellectually and in which we are now fully immersed.

This book is a series of essays in which Swedenborg is used as a pivot. The key to that wake-up call can be represented in this way, that there is a limit to what can be known using a purely rationalised program, and that this limit is measured and subsequently expanded by the “revealed” knowledge which plots its scope and moves beyond it. This largely explains why he is marginalised. Our own attitudes are such that we live within the throes of a tradition that is averse to such knowledge. Our

questions require answers that seek a pedigree in clear terms. “Where is the proof?” Until this is provided, credibility is suspended.

But set against this tradition, there now exists a sense of dissatisfaction too easily dismissed as merely a physical want. It is a sense that is vehemently denied by the commercial programs we find ourselves in, in which every lack (the experience of which is intimately connected, though denied, to an inchoate sense of spiritual lack) is met with a barrage of “things” in an attempt to quell them. It is in the terms of that merchant philosophy that such thinkers are marginalised and ignored, something easily done since nothing they say can be proved.

Yet far from being a fault, this non-provability is actually its strength, reflecting the weakness of the modern tendency that finds itself incapable of incorporating the “received” or “revealed” wisdom. Indeed, the difference that now exists between these two simple words highlights the problem. We live by received wisdom, which is the knowledge we now imbibe in virtually dogmatic form, while “revealed” wisdom requires its reception and receptor to be free from such dogma. In other words, our own habits of thought have reversed the polarity, in which received wisdom is supposedly undogmatic yet compelled by its dependence on evidence, while “revealed” wisdom is compelled by nothing at all, and therefore free.

Consequently, it is something of a paradox that while “revelation” comes in a variety of different ways, conclusions from diverse quarters are often very similar. Both Paracelsus and Boehme are discussed in different chapters here, both predecessors of Swedenborg, and yet all three rediscover the more ancient notion of what is now better known as the microcosm/macrocosm. The question that we might ask is whether Swedenborg had read their writings, and yet his reply is pertinent to us today. Ariel Hessayon quotes him on this matter: “I have never read them . . . and this for the reason that otherwise unfounded opinions . . . might easily have insinuated themselves, which afterwards could have been removed only with difficulty” (Ariel Hessayon, *Jacob Boehme, Emanuel Swedenborg and their readers*, 19).

What an interesting implication for our own age steeped in imbibed wisdom; we have read much, and ideas are insinuated into us and are virtually impossible to shift.

We get a sense of this difficulty in the essay comparing Swedenborg and Steiner in an essay by Gary Lachman. In his writing we find something of the modern tendency and interest in the machinery of spiritual inspiration. But for all that, he points out that Steiner was not interested in pushing the esoteric line but keen to establish a firmer footing in human terms for forms of knowledge that had become unfamiliar. Indeed, Lachman notes Steiner's demand that "any modern spiritual investigations be carried out in full, rational consciousness; hence, his insistence that his teaching, anthroposophy, was a spiritual science" (Gary Lachman, *Swedenborg, Rudolph Steiner and the Hypnagogic State*, 62).

This is very much in keeping with Swedenborg's own thinking. His exegeses do not require an especial knowledge on our side, for his whole effort is bent to showing a continuous sense in the Bible from beginning to end by reference to the text itself, and how much it is enriched by a use of symbology which is consistently applied. Unfortunately for us, we find ourselves burdened with the historical shift towards literalism on one side, and the irrelevance of spiritual concerns on the other which leads back to "How does he know that these words mean these things?" Again it is the opposition of received wisdom to revealed knowledge.

There are two essays that have their eye on the ball, so to speak. One concerns Madame Guyon, a little known seventeenth century woman, by Richard Lines. She had written an exegesis of "The Song of Songs," a book often overlooked for its sexual overtones. Yet, like Swedenborg, Boehme, Paracelsus and Steiner, the claim is that she was inspired by God to write it. Sexuality is a notoriously difficult area of experience to incorporate into modern ideas of spirituality, yet Richard Lines succeeds in making this an urgent matter for modern consideration: "If the beautiful language of the Song of Songs, written in words that will be understood by every man who has ever loved a woman and by every woman that has loved a man, is fit to describe the highest ecstasy of the soul's yearning for the divine, does this not signify that erotic love itself is sublime and good? . . . The interrelation of sex and spirituality is a complex subject and one that requires much fuller treatment than can be given here" (Richard Lines, *The Feminine Mysticism of Madame Guyon*, 84).

Quite so, and not forgetting that Swedenborg had written a long and difficult treatise on the subject entitled *Conjugal Love*. But Richard Lines

also succeeds in indicating that this physical experience is akin to the notion of “losing oneself.” This integral feature of the experience of love is akin to the idea of surrender which is the meaning of Islam. This leads to the essay by José Pacheco on Swedenborg and Ibn Arabi, the twelfth century mystic. José Pacheco points to the fact that while our culture today is largely drawn from conceptualised philosophies, these in turn are responsible for the decline in the figurative philosophies that operate in an entirely different manner, working internally rather than externally where the boundaries of distinction are less defined. It is here that the human mind shifts from conceptions of “self” to “other” and begins the long process of creating an identity of self that begins to feel more at home in that other. By invoking the names of God, for instance, the process is one in which that God appears to be called upon, but the effect of which is to awaken that quality of Godness hidden in the name within the self. “Each name therefore needs us to appropriate it and this appropriation constitutes us in our own determination” (José Antonio Antón Pacheco, *Ibn ‘Arabi and Swedenborg: Proposals for a Figurative Philosophy*, 130). Swedenborg uses the word “appropriation” to signify the symbolic nature of eating, but his equivalent to appropriation as José Pacheco uses it is acknowledgement. This acknowledgement is akin to both the sense of surrender in the Muslim tradition and humility in the Christian tradition. Without this initial step of acknowledgement, any advance or deepening understanding of our spiritual natures will remain at a distance from us. It is no surprise therefore to find that the conceptual structures of our age should regard such humility and surrender as weaknesses rather than strengths.

These essays indicate in different ways that something is lost to us. It seems too trite to say that what is lost cannot be returned without some effort on our own part. What we see in the work of thinkers and mystics like Swedenborg is not a sudden road-to-Damascus experience, but a heartfelt desire to know beyond the limited range of what is presented as knowledge. This was as true in his time as it is in our own, and perhaps more so. The key, it seems, is to nurture the sense of dissatisfaction that intuitively this, and to keep in mind a sense of that humility which marks its starting point. That is perhaps the hardest part of wisdom, or indeed the whole of it. □