

SWEDENBORG, PARACELSUS, AND THE DILUTE TRACES: A LYRICAL AND CRITICAL REFLECTION ON MYSTICISM, REFORM, AND THE NATURE OF INFLUENCE

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The mystic treads a lonely path. Onlookers from one side sling the profane at him, those watching from the other side sling the sacred. The mystic is bespattered, caked in a mixture that permeates through all his words and deeds. Followers and detractors are lured with equal ease (or difficulty), attracted and disgusted by the claims of insight and privileged knowledge. Both sets are passionate and problematic. As year is plastered over year, and the grass grows green above the mystic's grave, support might increase, but so might the original message become distorted or diluted. Meanwhile the detractors might fade away, train their gaze on a different mark—shooting a moving target is more rewarding. But perhaps, more worryingly for the devotees, these mockers and scoffers may move on because they feel the foundations have been blown asunder and leveling rubble is too much of a chore. Whatever it is that transpires—adoration, neglect, degradation, respect—it is somehow irrelevant, for the mystic is forever a man of the elsewhere and the subjunctive, whose intended audience is never realized, but always in realization.

The very tag of “mystic” is worn like armor, offering protection, deflecting criticism as misreading, but at the same time slowing the protagonist down, making him cumbersome and difficult to deal with. It is probably just as hard to embrace a man adorned in plate metal as it is to punch him in the guts. The “mystic” moniker is both high praise and a slur in one. A garland of laurel leaves or ass's ears, depending on who bestows them. The mystic rarely bestows upon himself such a title, aware of its double-edged nature. No, the mystic prefers to see himself as a reformer.

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This essay will meander through the lives and thought of two such mystics, two such reformers: Paracelsus and Swedenborg. It will seek out comparisons and attempt, where possible, to note the influence of the former upon the latter.

Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim (1493–1541), otherwise known as Paracelsus, and Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) are two men who warrant their places in both the history of science and the mystical tradition; they also, in very different ways, lay claim to being reformers. Paracelsus, living at the time of the Reformation, was dubbed by his contemporaries *Lutherus medicorum* (the Luther of physicians). A man who arched his back more times than a cat, he interpreted the comparison as unfavorable, but was in no way deterred from avowing his own greatness and the importance and verity of his teachings and their breaking from traditional medical authority:

Follow after me Avicenna, Galen, Rhasis, Montagnana, etc. Follow after me, and not I after you . . . Italy, Dalmatia, Sarmatia, Athens, Greek, Arab, Israelite, follow me and not I you. Not one of you will survive, even in the most distant corner, where even the dogs will not piss, I shall be monarch and mine will be the monarchy. . . . With what scorn have you proclaimed that I am the Luther of physicians, with the interpretation that I am a heretic. I am Theophrastus and more so than him to whom you compare me. I am that and am a monarch of physicians as well, and can prove what you are not able to prove. . . . The heavens did not make me a physician, God made me one: it is not the business of the heavens but a gift from God. I can rejoice that rogues are my enemies, for the truth has no enemies except liars.¹

A reformer, certainly, Paracelsus' inflammatory words and deeds could even see him described as a revolutionary—his public burning of

¹Paracelsus, *Das Buch Paragranum* (1529–30), quoted in Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke (tr. and ed.), *Paracelsus: Essential Readings* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1999), 73–4.

the books of Avicenna symbolized a breaking with the past and he sought to “not only change the odd prescription but the woof and web and the government of the medical corpus.”² However, Paracelsus never held down a position of authority long enough for any overhaul. His most prominent appointment came in March 1527, when he was made town physician at Basle, but he lasted only ten months in the job. Paracelsus used the authority that came with his municipal appointment to attempt to reform the apothecaries, whom he saw as unqualified and purveyors of fraudulent medicines, and he tried to break their ties with the doctors—which union had led to price fixing and exploitation of the poor. He was scorned and ridiculed by the medical faculty of the University of Basle, sent up as “Cacophrastus” in an anonymous notice nailed to the cathedral doors.³ When he took a canon of the Church, Cornelius von Liechtenfels, to court for failing to pay his doctor’s fee, the court ruled in favor of the canon. Outraged, Paracelsus printed up and distributed a “flying-sheet” outlining his contempt for the corrupt authorities.⁴ A warrant was drawn up for Paracelsus’ arrest and he had to flee under cover of nightfall.

Paracelsus’ medical teachings survived the lampooning and certainly influenced the shift in the Renaissance away from the Hippocratic/Galenic system of the balance of the four humors towards a more scientific treatment of illness. He has been credited as the founder of homeopathy, from his notion that “You should be able to recognize diseases according to their anatomy, for it is in its anatomy that the remedy is identical with the agent that caused the disease”⁵ and as a pioneer in prescribing chemical medicines. But many of his more administrative reforms still struggle

² Michel de Montaigne, “On the resemblance of children to their fathers,” in *The Complete Essays*, tr. M A Screech (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 873.

³ Theophrastus can literally be translated as “reflection of the divine.” Cacophrastus has an etymology from the Greek *kakos* “bad,” but also with more than a hint of the Latin *cacare* “to defecate.”

⁴ Philip Ball, *The Devil’s Doctor: Paracelsus and the World of Renaissance Magic and Science* (London: William Heinemann, 2006), 220; Anna Stoddart, *The Life of Paracelsus: Theophrastus von Hohenheim 1493–1541* (London: John Murray, 1911), 137.

⁵ Paracelsus, *Das Buch Paragranum*, in *Paracelsus: Essential Readings*, 74. Swedenborg too is often cited as an influence on homeopathy, see, for example, Robert H. Kirven and David B. Eller, “Selected Examples of Swedenborg’s Influence in Great Britain and the United States,” in Jonathan Rose et al. (eds.), *Scribe of Heaven: Swedenborg’s Life, Work, and Impact* (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2005), 232–4.

to be implemented today, when pharmaceuticals are more than ever a big business: drug companies continue to exert pressure on doctors to prescribe one drug over another, whilst prices are held high on new drugs during the periods in which their manufacturers hold a monopoly.⁶

Like Paracelsus, Swedenborg too claimed to be divinely appointed:

I have been called to a holy office by the Lord Himself, who most mercifully appeared before me, His servant, in the year 1743, when He opened my sight into the spiritual world and enabled me to converse with spirits and angels, in which state I have continued up to the present day. From that time I began to print and publish the various *arcana* that were seen by me or revealed to me, concerning heaven and hell, the state of man after death, the true worship of God, the spiritual sense of the Word, besides other important matters conducive to salvation and wisdom.⁷

Swedenborg's teachings gleaned from the spiritual world and his reading of the internal sense contained within the literal sense of the Word of God were to form a universal theology not to rival any Christian Church, but reform Christianity as a whole. Swedenborg seemed to place little importance on the Church as an hierarchical institution or organization, for him the Church was instead internal or spiritual. Attending services at churches as places of worship had become little more than a decorative practice and the true meaning of the sacraments had been lost in rituals: "baptism and the Holy Supper, are in the Christian church like two ornaments on a king's sceptre; if their purpose were not known, they would be merely two ebony shapes on a staff."⁸ The pouring of water on an infant's head or eating of a wafer make one no more a Christian than the tying of a shoelace does. Although Swedenborg sent, at his own expense, copies of his works

⁶ The average patent term for pharmaceuticals in the UK is 8 years, often increased by EU Supplementary Protection Certificates (SPCs) to a maximum fifteen years protection: <<http://www.cipa.org.uk/pages/info-papers-phar>>.

⁷ Swedenborg, *Answer to a Letter written to me by a friend*, in R. L. Tafel (tr., ed. and comp.), *Documents concerning the Life and Character of Emanuel Swedenborg* (London: Swedenborg Society, 1875–7), vol. I, 7. The letter was to Rev. Thomas Hartley who printed it in London in 1769.

⁸ Swedenborg, *The True Christian Religion*, tr. John Chadwick (London: Swedenborg Society, 1988), vol. II, § 669.

to many clergyman both Protestant and Catholic, it seems to me that Swedenborg's reforms were never supposed to be demonstrative, like those of Luther or Henry VIII. It wasn't about smashing stained glass windows. It wasn't about labels and denominations: "they call this Swedenborgianism, but I for my part, True Christianity."⁹ Many of his early followers in England read Swedenborg whilst continuing to practice in the Anglican Church. It is perhaps therefore hard to gauge the successes of his reforms, but one would have to say they have been limited—there are several Churches in existence today that follow Swedenborg's teachings with a worldwide membership of about 35,000, and a readership of perhaps a further 15,000.¹⁰

As a man of the Enlightenment, Swedenborg illustrated his theology with a strange form of empiricism, with "things heard and seen" in the spiritual world, heaven and hell. It is these accounts that have captured the popular imagination more than his theology, placing Swedenborg at the head of the Spiritualist movement in the nineteenth century, influencing poets and painters, and providing us with the modern, tangible image of the afterlife we have today.

From our twenty-first-century vantage point we might be forgiven for perfunctorily stating that as a reformer of medicine Paracelsus has been more successful than Swedenborg as a reformer of theology. On the one hand modern medicine does not follow as its authorities the writings of Galen and Avicenna, as Paracelsus desired; on the other, the majority of people do not know, for example, that in its spiritual sense the word "horse" stands for the intellect, and are unfamiliar with Swedenborg's internal sense of Scripture.

But our reading of history can change, and we might see, conversely, Paracelsus as incidental in the abandonment of the humoral system, the departure being more likely to stem from Andreas Vesalius and his investigations into anatomy. We might also see Swedenborg's teaching that

⁹ Swedenborg, Letter to Gabriel Beyer, April 12, 1770, in *The Letters and Memorials of Emanuel Swedenborg*, tr. and ed. Alfred Acton (Bryn Athyn, PA: Swedenborg Scientific Association, 1948–55), vol. II, 709.

¹⁰ Jane Williams-Hogan and David B. Eller, "Swedenborgian Churches and Related Institutions in Great Britain, the United States, and Canada," in Jonathan Rose et al. (eds.), *Scribe of Heaven*, 248. The estimate is given for the year 2003.

“Dominion from evil and falsity is the complete reverse of dominion from good and truth. Dominion from evil and falsity consists in the desire to make slaves of everybody else, but dominion from good and truth consists in the desire to make them free men”¹¹ as playing an important part in the antislavery movement¹² and his theology as having a far greater impact than can be measured in terms of congregation numbers.

We are faced with a rather deceptive two-dimensional image of Paracelsus and Swedenborg by portraying them only as reformers of medicine and theology respectively. Both men were multifaceted in their lives and works and, if I am permitted an analogy that stereotypes by nationality, I might say that Paracelsus, born in Einsiedeln, Switzerland, was the author of a system of belief that had many appendages like a Swiss army knife—pathology, alchemy, astrology, Kabbala, ethics, and religion. Meanwhile Swedenborg, born in Stockholm, with his prodigious literary output offers us a smorgasbord of topics and disciplines, from cosmology to currency reform, Latin poetry to the Last Judgment via longitude and the liquor trade. It is perhaps understandable that they are both called mystics when any other single title or profession seems lacking in scope.

Paracelsus, a hands-on man who received hands-on reactions. A physician who got physically involved. Curing patients, hoarding his secrets. A reformer whose reforms ring out like a war cry. Burn the works of those who went before. Why read books when you can read Nature? A clean slate, a revolution; out with the old, I am the new!

Swedenborg, aloof and distant, studies and synthesizes from book learning, the greatest anatomist to deign not to get his hands bloody.¹³ A

¹¹ Swedenborg, *Arcana Caelestia*, tr. John Elliott, 12 vols. (London: Swedenborg Society, 1983–99), vol. 2, § 1749.3.

¹² Cf. Robert H. Kirven and David B. Eller, “Selected Examples of Swedenborg’s Influence in Great Britain and the United States,” in Jonathan Rose et al. (eds.), *Scribe of Heaven*, 202–6.

¹³ Swedenborg did perform some dissections when in Paris in October 1736, as evinced in his *The Economy of the Animal Kingdom*, tr. Rev. Augustus Clissold (New York: New Church Press, n.d.), vol. I, § 401: “as I myself have found upon experiment in the hearts of more than thirty animals.” But he seems to have quickly stopped practicing anatomy, believing his discoveries to be clouding his judgment. Cf. *ibid.*, vol. I, § 18: “I therefore laid aside my instruments, and restraining my desire for making observations, determined rather to rely on the researches of others than to trust my own.”

political and practical reformer who goes through the approved channels: the House of Nobles and the Riksdag. Publishes his arcana for all to see and use: open, nothing to hide. A reverence for what went before mixed with a thirst for the new, and he spent the first half of his life trawling the libraries of Europe for connections and correspondences.

The inveterate Swiss and the abstemious Swede. The former dies as a result of a head wound in a ruckus and becomes tied up in posterity with the Faust legend; the latter dies in the peace of old age and in posterity inspires a New Church, whose adherents accept his claim to be servant of Christ.

As one can emphasize difference, so too can one illustrate similarity. And in the case of Paracelsus and Swedenborg there is a consonance of both life and teaching. Pushing aside their teachings for the moment, let us cast our eyes over the parallels in their lives. I was going to say “cast our eyes over the *facts* of their lives,” but the portraits of both men have undergone great defacement and touching up over the years, layers of slander and idolatry alike rendering the canvas beneath inaccessible, whilst the abstraction of time forever acts as a catalyst for corrosion.

Both men lost their mothers in childhood. Swedenborg’s mother died when he was eight, whilst Paracelsus’ mother was dead by 1502 when he was nine, some saying that she took her own life, throwing herself off a bridge into the river Sihl. Both then moved from their birthplaces. After his mother’s death, Paracelsus moved with his father, Wilhelm, to the village of Villach in Carinthia. The Swedenborgs (or Swedbergs as they then were, before the family’s ennoblement) moved from Stockholm to Vingåker in 1692 and then again a year later to Uppsala. Paracelsus and Swedenborg greatly loved and revered their fathers and can be said to have followed in their respective footprints. Paracelsus became a physician like his father. Swedenborg never entered the clergy, but in his capacity of theologian he mirrored somewhat his father, Bishop Jesper Swedberg, who had published numerous theological tracts.

The young Swedenborg and Paracelsus each grew up with a background in mining and mineralogy that would influence their adult work. Paracelsus’ father, Wilhelm von Hohenheim, took a job as a teacher in a mining school after their move to Villach, and Paracelsus would have been surrounded by the influence of the Fuggers’ mining dynasty—he served

as an assistant in the Fugger workshops, and at school at St. Andrae in Lavanttal had as his teacher Bishop Erhart, an alchemist who aided the Fuggers in converting metals and minerals into material wealth. Paracelsus' background in mining and metallurgy not only served him well as an alchemist, but also as a mineralogist: in a work entitled *De mineralibus* (written c. 1526), published after his death in 1570, Paracelsus can be credited with the discovery of a new metal, zinc.¹⁴ Later in his life Paracelsus would return to the Fugger mines of the Tyrol and be inspired to write his *On the Miner's Sickness and other Miners' Diseases* (c. 1533–4), observing the particular ailments the miners incurred in the course of their work. Much of Swedenborg's personal wealth, meanwhile, came through inheritance of shares in mines and ironworks through his mother, Sara Behm, step-mother, Sara Bergia, and maternal uncle, Albrecht de Behm. Swedenborg would go on to take up his one professional post as Assessor on the Swedish Board of Mines, writing extensively on mineralogy in his *Opera philosophica et mineralia* (1734) and in numerous unpublished manuscripts.

Swedenborg traveled widely for his work, surveying mining practices across Europe, and life on the road was amenable to him, his wanderlust having been sparked by a grand tour of England, France, the Low Countries and Germany between 1710 and 1715, after the completion of his studies at Uppsala University. Swedenborg would continue to traverse Europe throughout his life, leaving his Stockholm home to publish his works in Amsterdam and London, where he died in 1772. Paracelsus too traveled widely. He studied in Italy where it is believed he attained his doctorate at Ferrara in 1515, and his wanderings then took in France, Spain, Germany, England, Ireland, Scotland, Holland, Denmark, Sweden (where he visited Uppsala University), Bohemia, Russia, Poland, Transylvania, the Baltic States, Turkey and Arabia. Paracelsus registered as a citizen of Strasbourg in December 1526, but he could never put down roots for long. His restlessness—combined with the need to search for employment and a temperament that often courted confrontation and frictions—meant that he moved from town to town and village to village until his death at Salzburg in 1541. Both Paracelsus and Swedenborg died in rented accommodation in foreign lands.

¹⁴ See Ball, *The Devil's Doctor*, 35–6.

During their travels both men followed the military in different capacities: Paracelsus was a barber surgeon in the army of Charles I of Spain, and was later appointed royal physician to Christian II of Denmark, accompanying Danish troops in an expedition to Sweden; Swedenborg was an engineer to Charles XII of Sweden, helping to design and build a dry dock for the king's navy at Karlskrona, and in 1718 assisting in the transportation of Swedish ships fifteen miles overland from Stromstäd to the river Idefjord as part of the monarch's campaign against Norway.

Both men were patriotic and proud of their respective Swiss and Swedish heritages, a sense of home and belonging often becoming clearer to those who travel or are in exile. Paracelsus placed importance on writing in the vernacular and most of his works are written in his native High German. He also gave his lectures in his mother tongue, markedly going against the standard practice of using Latin. Swedenborg wrote the majority of his works in Latin, but nevertheless esteemed the Swedish language and saw the importance of writing in the vernacular to popularize and disseminate scientific ideas in Sweden. In his preface to a work on algebra, *Regel-Konsten Författad i tijo böcker* (Uppsala: J. H. Werner, 1718), Swedenborg writes:

I have, moreover, endeavoured to express in our own language such terms as have been derived from and are continued to be used in Latin. As we possess a language sufficiently rich and copious, as well as other nations, there was no reason why we should not avail ourselves of this advantage. We confide quite enough in others, without its being necessary, in this instance, to manifest our deficiency in words and in understanding, which would be very evident to all, if we did not exert the prerogative which our language affords.¹⁵

Another commonality in the lives of Paracelsus and Swedenborg is that they remained lifelong bachelors, which fact has led to much speculation on both counts. Swedenborg has had mistresses, earthly and spiritual, pinned to him, whilst the erotic nature of a few of the entries in his *Dream*

¹⁵ Swedenborg, *Algebra, composed in Ten Books*, tr. J. N. Cossham, MS in Swedenborg Society Archives (B/102).

Diary (written 1743–4) has drawn a disproportionate amount of critical attention. Paracelsus, meanwhile, is said to have been a eunuch, his genitals cut off in childhood by drunken soldiers or a wild boar.¹⁶

The parallels in the lives of Swedenborg and Paracelsus can be explained away as the kind of coincidental details any comparative study is likely to dredge up. But perhaps they are of worth, nevertheless, providing the possibility of tracing patterns in the *modi operandi* of the mystical mindset, to those who wish to discern them.

Lest we take ourselves too seriously, though, we might provide a couple of more bizarre/trivial similarities.

Paracelsus is often pictured with a broadsword which he is said to have carried with him everywhere he went, legend having it that he kept his magical curative laudanum within its pommel. Swedenborg too is often described as carrying around as part of his dress a sword. Perhaps it is a requisite part of mystic chic to be tooled up?

Another strange similarity is that the two men had abnormally large skulls which have attracted posthumous attention and not let the men rest easy in their coffins. Paracelsus, buried in St. Sebastian's church in Salzburg in 1541, had his remains twice dug up and reburied, first in 1572, when a new chapel was built, and again in 1752 when he was transferred to a marble tomb at the church entrance. As with Swedenborg, the gravitation to plusher, marble-clad surroundings didn't put pay to the prying eyes and fingers of doctors and scientists. Paracelsus' tomb was jemmied open at least five times in the nineteenth century, first by the German physician, Samuel Thomas von Soemmering, and then on four separate occasions (1878, 1881, 1884, and 1886) by a Dr. Aberle who believed that the curvature and thickness of the skull had been the result of rickets in childhood.¹⁷ Swedenborg, meanwhile, has had his skull fondled and scrutinized by countless people and he can perhaps lay claim to be one of the most widespread and mobile skeletons in modern literary history, at least since John Milton had his bones flogged to tourists as souvenirs by

¹⁶ Carl Robsahm, *Memoirs of Swedenborg*, tr. Anders Hallengren (London: Swedenborg Society, 2011), 16, 61 n. 2, and 114; Ball, *The Devil's Doctor*, 24, 346, and 365.

¹⁷ Stoddart, *The Life of Paracelsus*, 294–5. Dr. Aberle published his findings in *Grabdenkmal Schädel und Abbildungen des Theophrastus Paracelsus* (Salzburg, 1891).

opportunistic hawkers. Swedenborg was buried at the Swedish church on Princes Square, Wapping, before his remains were removed to his native soil in 1908 and a resting place of Uppsala Cathedral. In the intervening years Swedenborg had his skull robbed, swapped for a ringer, and the ringer stolen too! His skull(s) and skeletal remains have been subject to two systematic analyses in 1909 and 1958.¹⁸ The skull determined to be Swedenborg's in 1958 after tests made by numerous British and Swedish chemists, radiologists, dentists, and anthropologists is of a large, smooth, oblong form known as the scaphocephalic type, once associated with mental debility.¹⁹ Both this skull and that of Paracelsus are also noticeable for their scars. After his examination of Paracelsus' skull, von Soemmering reasoned "that a fracture, once thought to be the mark of a fatal blow struck by his enemies, was probably caused by some milder violence earlier in Paracelsus' life and had simply become enlarged over time after his death,"²⁰ a conclusion that has done little to dispel the mysteries surrounding Paracelsus' cause of death: he was killed in a drunken brawl; hired goons threw him off a cliff; he was poisoned with powdered diamond; the worse the wear after a drinking bout, he fell down a flight of stairs; he died abruptly when roused from a magic sleep by a servant. Meanwhile, William Rutherford, commenting on Swedenborg's skull suggests that a gash on the right temple "might have been caused by a sabre or

¹⁸ For accounts of these investigations, their findings, and biographies of Swedenborg's skull, see J. V. Hultkrantz, *The Mortal Remains of Emanuel Swedenborg* (Uppsala: C. J. Lundström and London: Williams & Norgate, 1910) and *Additional Note to The Mortal Remains of Emanuel Swedenborg* (Uppsala: A.-B. Akademiska Bokhandeln, 1912), and Folke Hensche, *Emanuel Swedenborg's Cranium: A Critical Analysis* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1959). There are also files of correspondence and press cuttings in the Swedenborg Society Archives concerning the skull(s) and the sale of one of them at Sotheby's auction house in 1978 (D/54, D/55, D/55a, D/56). The skull sold at auction went for £1,650 to the Swedish Royal Academy of Sciences who placed it with the rest of Swedenborg's remains in his stately marble sarcophagus in Uppsala Cathedral. Reunification of Swedenborg's skeleton remains incomplete, however, the Swedenborg Society listing in its Archives Catalogue (N/7), a fragment of Swedenborg's ear bone! A useful summary of the story of Swedenborg's skull can be found in Colin Dickey, *Cranioklepty: Grave Robbing and the Search for Genius* (Unbridled Books, 2009), 130–40, 245–66, 285–96.

¹⁹ Scaphocephaly (Gk. = keel-shaped head) is the result of the premature fusion of the sagittal suture which joins the left and right parietal bones of the skull. The whole case of the examination and classification of Swedenborg's skull seems to be an example of anatomy eating itself, Swedenborg himself having commented upon the loose sutures and joinings of Blaise Pascal's skull: cf. Swedenborg, *The Economy of the Animal Kingdom*, vol. I, § 48.

²⁰ Ball, *The Devil's Doctor*, 353.

cutlass.”²¹ Perhaps Paracelsus and Swedenborg carried swords with them for good reason.

Paracelsus and Swedenborg often sit in proximity to each other in histories of the occult, but few have sought any congruency between them. The first to do so was Johann Christian Cuno, a German merchant and a banker in Amsterdam, who sent a letter to Swedenborg dated March 8, 1769. Cuno writes as a reader and acquaintance of Swedenborg, saying of the latter’s works that “They are refulgent with beauties; but I likewise became aware of many blemishes.”²² Cuno finds Swedenborg’s support for his work, his “things heard and seen” and divine commission, problematic and says “no one can be a witness in his own cause.”²³ Having politely yet candidly expressed his doubts and desires for further confirmation, Cuno then compares Swedenborg to Paracelsus:

Ecclesiastical history informs us, that many distinguished, pious, and most learned men, by indulging too much in their meditations in religion, have fallen into Scylla, while endeavouring to avoid Charybdis. I will mention but one instance—Theophrastus Paracelsus. This great investigator of nature, and finally of the mysteries of religion, was a real ornament of his age and a paragon of learning. His contemporaries admired in him the great physician and chemist; and posterity will still admire these qualities in him. Yet the church and Christendom abhor him as a mystic, and as a man who would judge of Divine things from natural things. Men in endeavouring to avoid faults are apt to run into extremes.²⁴

²¹ Quoted in Hultkrantz, *Additional Note to The Mortal Remains of Emanuel Swedenborg*, 2.

²² J. C. Cuno, letter to Swedenborg, March 8, 1769, in R. L. Tafel (tr., ed. and comp.), *Documents*, vol. II:1, Doc. 256c, 466. Cuno, under the pseudonym David Paulus ab Indagine, printed his letter in German and Latin in *Sammlung einiger Nachrichten, herrn Emanuel Swedenborg...* (Hamburg: Christian Herolds Wittwe, 1771), 11–24.

²³ Cuno, letter to Swedenborg, March 8, 1769, in R. L. Tafel (tr., ed. and comp.), *Documents*, vol. II:1, Doc. 256c, 469.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 473.

Cuno tells us that a short time afterwards Swedenborg came to see him and, by way of a reply to the letter (or lack of a reply as Cuno viewed it), gave him an autograph that would later form the concluding paragraph of Swedenborg's treatise *The Interaction between the Soul and the Body* (1769). There is no mention of Swedenborg bringing up the matter of the Paracelsus comparison. Swedenborg may have deemed the mention of Paracelsus the least important part of Cuno's letter, he may have forgotten it or been too busy to address it, but the lack of response is interesting when compared to a similar situation a few years earlier. On September 17, 1766, Dr. Gabriel Beyer, a follower of Swedenborg who was later to be put on trial at the Gothenburg Consistory for publishing biblical explications based upon Swedenborg's teachings, wrote to Swedenborg asking amongst numerous other things for Swedenborg's opinions on the writings of Jakob Boehme, a German mystic. In his reply dated September 25, 1766, Swedenborg concluded the letter with a short answer to Beyer's query: "As to Boehme's writings, I can pass no judgment for I have never read them."²⁵ At the end of 1766 or beginning of 1767 Swedenborg received another letter, this time from Beyer's brother-in-law, Peter Hammarberg, also enquiring after Swedenborg's thoughts on Boehme. Swedenborg answered via a letter to Dr. Beyer dated February 1767:

*My thought concerning the writings of Boehme and L—. I have never read them, and it was forbidden me to read dogmatic and systematic books in theology before heaven was opened to me, and this for the reason that thereby unfounded opinions and novelties might find occasion to insinuate themselves, which afterwards could be removed with difficulty. Therefore, when heaven was opened to me, I had first to learn the Hebrew language, and also correspondences, of which the whole Bible is composed, and this led me to read the whole of God's Word many times. And since God's Word is the source from which all theology must be taken, I was thereby put in a position to receive instruction from the Lord who is the Word.*²⁶

²⁵ *The Letters and Memorials of Emanuel Swedenborg*, tr. and ed. Alfred Acton, vol. II, 623.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 630.

As Gary Lachman points out in his *Into the Interior: Discovering Swedenborg*, many seen as mystics or involved in the esoteric tradition are dismissive or derisive towards others in the same field.²⁷ Swedenborg here is at the very least defensive when mentioned in the same breath as Boehme, but it isn't easy to dispute his claim that he had read no "dogmatic and systematic theology" earlier in his life. Swedenborg grew up in the Lutheran Church in which his father was a bishop and in which his brother-in-law and mentor, Erik Benzelius, became an archbishop, and he would have been surrounded by theological discussions and disputes for most of his life, but the large majority of his reading was scientific, as evinced by the auction catalogue of his library.²⁸ Swedenborg did possess the odd book such as *A Manual of Doctrine; or, a second essay to bring into the form of question and answer as well the fundamental doctrines, as the other scripture-knowledge, of the Protestant congregations...call'd The Brethren* (London, 1742), from his time with the Moravian Brethren in London, but perhaps he didn't count such works as dogmatic or systematic (or perhaps he didn't even read the book, it being written in English, and only kept as a sort of souvenir). It is somewhat harder to deny the theological nature of Hugo Grotius' *De Veritate Religionis Christianae* (1627), or the works of St. Augustine, whom Swedenborg shows more than a passing knowledge of.²⁹ Paracelsus' writings are systematic, dogmatic, and theological and it is curious that he doesn't receive the same treatment from Swedenborg as the twice-denied Boehme. The reason why Swedenborg could not deny having knowledge of Paracelsus is, quite simply, because he did have.

²⁷ Cf. Gary Lachman, *Into the Interior: Discovering Swedenborg* (London: Swedenborg Society, 2006), 113, n. 36.

²⁸ *Förtäckning på Af. Wälborne herr Assessor Swedenborgs efterlemnade wackra Boksamling, i åstilling Språk och Wetenskaper, som kommer at försäljas på Bok-Auctions-Kammaren i Stockholm d. 28 Nov. 1772* (Stockholm: Joh. Georg Lange, 1772). For an emended version of the list see Lars Bergquist, *Swedenborg's Secret* (London: Swedenborg Society, 2005), 469–82. The majority of the listed books are scientific, but there are also lexicons and grammars, classical works, travel books, histories, and memoirs. The theological element of the list is mainly restricted to Bible editions.

²⁹ Cf. Swedenborg, *The Economy of the Animal Kingdom*, vol. II, pp. 226–7, 238–9, 242, 311, 323–4 (Grotius); p. 364 (Augustine). Swedenborg owned a 1662 Amsterdam edition of Grotius' *De Veritate Religionis Christianae*.

Ideas can spread aggressively and visibly over a chasm of years, like bramble across a forest floor; they can be swept up and become a part of broader currents, like raindrops falling into a river; and they can be passed on imperceptibly like a congenital trait or disease that may or may not surface from generation to generation. Paracelsus' ideas of how to treat patients and the prescription of particular chemicals and minerals as remedies for particular diseases seem to have spread aggressively like the first category. Most of Paracelsus' works appeared posthumously from 1565 and their influence seems to have been felt quickly, so much so that Montaigne could write prior to 1580 that "some newcomer called Paracelsus is changing or reversing the entire order of the old rules, maintaining that, up to the present, medicine has merely served to kill people."³⁰ These ideas and his other writings on astrology, alchemy and Kabbala in turn became swept up and absorbed into broader paradigms, what would emerge, roughly speaking, into "science" on the one hand, and "occult" on the other. Labels that, like "mystic," are somewhat hard to define and deal with, the categorization shifting to and fro as innocuously as banks of cloud in the sky.

Swedenborg may have been influenced by Paracelsus via this process of dissemination and dilution and perhaps this is why correspondences (an apt choice of word) can be seen in their writings. I will now compare some of their ideas, focusing exclusively on the works of Paracelsus and Swedenborg. For those who desire a discussion of these ideas and their history and placement in the context of a wider movement or tradition, I might suggest you try Désirée Hirst, *Hidden Riches: Traditional Symbolism from the Renaissance to Blake* or Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*.³¹ Yates charts the spread and influence of hermetic thought up until the time of Giordano Bruno (1548–1600) and into the early seventeenth century. Hirst looks at a tradition of symbolism incorporating hermetism, alchemy, Kabbala and Neoplatonism up until the life of William Blake (1757–1827), including a chapter on Swedenborg.

³⁰ Montaigne, "An apology for Raymond Sebond," in *The Complete Essays*, 643. This essay was probably written around 1576, first appearing in Montaigne's first edition of his *Essais* in 1580.

³¹ Désirée Hirst, *Hidden Riches: Traditional Symbolism from the Renaissance to Blake* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964); Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

The most overt similarity between Swedenborg and Paracelsus' ideas is between the former's doctrine of correspondences and his notion of the Grand Man and the latter's writings on the relationship between the microcosm and macrocosm.

For Swedenborg, man and all things in the natural world correspond both in general and in specifics to the spiritual world. "The natural world arises from and is sustained in being by the spiritual world, exactly the way an effect relates to its efficient cause."³² Swedenborg says that "there is a spiritual world and a natural world within each of us."³³ As such our "natural world," our bodies and our senses, corresponds to our "spiritual world," our minds, intelligence and will. And so without dissimulation body language and facial expressions reveal our inner or spiritual state. On another level "a human being is a heaven *and* a world in least form in the image of the greatest"³⁴ and heaven as a whole is in human form, a Grand Man. The different communities of heaven correspond, as such, to different parts and functions of the body. Everything else in the natural world—flora, fauna, minerals, manmade artefacts, geological, meteorological and astronomical features—has a correspondence to something spiritual too. What is natural is sustained by the spiritual, both originating in the Divine. "Nature in its entirety is a theater portraying the Lord's kingdom."³⁵

For Paracelsus, "Heaven is man, and man is heaven, and all men together are the one heaven, and heaven is nothing but one man,"³⁶ in a similar structure to Swedenborg's Grand Man. As for Swedenborg, man has a natural and spiritual make-up that Paracelsus calls the elemental and sidereal bodies. For Paracelsus too there are correspondences between the microcosm (man) and the macrocosm (the totality of Creation). These correspondences are the source for Paracelsus' medicine, alchemy,

³² Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, tr. George F. Dole (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2000), § 89.

³³ *Ibid.*, § 90.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, § 106 note a.

³⁶ Paracelsus, *Paragranum* (1530), quoted in *Paracelsus: Selected Writings*, ed. Jolande Jacobi, tr. Norbert Guterman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 39.

astrology, and theology. There is an analogy between the planetary bodies and organs within the human body: “[T]he brain is the Moon, the heart the Sun, the spleen Saturn, the lungs Mercury, and the kidneys Venus,”³⁷ and in Paracelsus’ astrological medicine “that which corresponds to the brain in the outside world can cure the human brain. . . . What should act in the brain will be directed to it by the Moon.”³⁸ Different herbs and roots likewise fall into Saturnian, Mercurian categories, etc., and so can be used to treat illnesses of the corresponding organs; marjoram, for example, is a herb under the influence of the moon and can be used to treat the head. Perhaps more similarly to Swedenborg’s correspondences, Paracelsus too believed that everything natural was supported by something spiritual: “there is nothing corporeal but has latent within itself a spirit . . . men, animals, worms in the earth . . . there are different kinds of spirits, just as there are different kinds of bodies . . . human and metallic, the spirits of salts, gems, and marcasites, arsenical spirits, spirits of potables, of roots, of liquids, of flesh, blood, bones, etc.”³⁹ And just as Swedenborg takes pains to point out that after death we do not turn into beings resembling breaths of ether or clouds, but continue to have a body, a spiritual body, which experiences all the senses, memories, thoughts and affections we had on earth, for “when anything spiritual touches and sees something spiritual, it is just like something natural touching and seeing something natural”;⁴⁰ so too does Paracelsus stress that “The spirit of man is substantial and visible, tangible and sensitive to other spirits. They relate to other spirits, just as the body does. I have a spirit, another man also has one, and the spirits know each other as I do another man, they converse with each other, not through our speech, but through their own.”⁴¹

As well as correspondences, Paracelsus also talks of *signatum* or “signatures” (a term also used by translators of both Swedenborg and Boehme). On one level the art of signatures dictates that “each herb is given the form

³⁷ Paracelsus, *Volumen Medicinae Paramirum* (c. 1520), in *Paracelsus: Essential Readings*, 52.

³⁸ Paracelsus, *Das Buch Paragranum*, *ibid.*, 75.

³⁹ Paracelsus, *De Natura Rerum* (c. 1537), *ibid.*, 178–9.

⁴⁰ Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, § 461.

⁴¹ Paracelsus, *Volumen Medicinae Paramirum*, in *Paracelsus: Essential Readings*, 54–5.

that befits its nature” and so a *satyrion* root “formed like the male privy parts” can “restore a man’s virility and passion.”⁴² On another level “man is endowed with a form corresponding to his inner nature. . . . The same is true of the face, which is shaped according to the content of his mind and soul. . . . For the sculptor of Nature is so artful that he does not mould the soul to fit the form, but the form to fit the soul.”⁴³ In his *The Economy of the Animal Kingdom* (1740–1), Swedenborg almost repeats Paracelsus’ words in saying, “the body being constructed according to the soul’s nature,”⁴⁴ and the idea of signatures would resurface in Swedenborg’s angelic language of correspondences in which a spirit’s appearance reveals their affections and ruling loves. Paracelsus’ signatures even seem to foreshadow Swedenborg’s notion of an internal sense to Scripture:

The names which are given in the Hebrew tongue indicate by their mere bestowal the virtue, power, and property of the very thing to which they belong. So when we say, “This is a pig, a horse, a cow, a bear, a dog, a fox, a sheep, etc.” the name of a pig indicates a foul and impure animal . . . a fox, a crafty and cunning animal . . . a sheep one that is placid and useful, hurting no one. Hence it happens that sometimes a man is called a pig on account of his sordid and piggish life . . . a fox, because he is versatile and cunning . . . or a sheep, because he hurts nobody but himself. . . .⁴⁵

Swedenborg’s correspondences drawn from his study of Scripture in the Hebrew run along similar lines:

In general, earth’s living creatures correspond to affections, the mild and useful ones to good affections, the fierce and useless ones to evil affections. . . . We humans are like animals as far as our natural person is concerned, which is why we are compared to them in colloquial usage. For example, we call a gentle person a sheep or a lamb . . . a crafty one a fox or a snake. . . .⁴⁶

⁴² Paracelsus, *Astronomia Magna* (1537–8), in *Paracelsus: Selected Writings*, 121–3.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁴⁴ Swedenborg, *The Economy of the Animal Kingdom*, vol. II, § 208.

⁴⁵ Paracelsus, *De Natura Rerum*, in *Paracelsus: Essential Readings*, 190.

⁴⁶ Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, § 110.

For both Swedenborg and Paracelsus, knowledge of correspondences had deteriorated since ancient times. Swedenborg says that the most ancient people used to think in correspondences and could thus communicate with angels. But man fell more and more into self-love and love of the earth and so lost this ability. Paracelsus saw a similar degeneration in knowledge, whereas in bygone ages “the ancients had cultivated the spirit of observation . . . and recognized the heavens were the mother of all human wisdom.”⁴⁷

Outside of correspondences, there are similarities between the theology of Paracelsus and Swedenborg, both being opponents of solafideism, yet also aware that all good done by man stems from the Divine. However, whereas for Paracelsus the devil is more aligned with medieval beliefs and is a far more real character, the author of evil acts, for Swedenborg it is really our own closing ourselves off from the Divine that is the devil. Both men also see the importance of Scripture as a confirmatory source. For Paracelsus, “Holy Scripture represents the beginning of all philosophy and natural science . . . For truth springs from theology, and cannot be discovered without its help.”⁴⁸ Swedenborg, meanwhile, long before his spiritual enlightenment, in the midst of his studies of metaphysics and natural science, turns to Scripture to authorize his conclusion that the nexus between the infinite and the finite is Christ: “we have all these matters revealed in Holy Scripture, so where reason is perplexed in its apprehensions, we must at once have recourse to revelation. . . . In this way natural theology must proffer her hand to revealed, where the meaning of revelation seems doubtful; and revealed theology must lend her guidance in turn to rational theology when reason is in straits.”⁴⁹

Paracelsus and Swedenborg also share in common a subscription to certain folk beliefs. We might expect this of the former, who gathered many folk remedies in the course of his travels and lived at a time when suspicion and credulity were greater, but it is perhaps surprising that they persisted into the Enlightenment and the highly educated mind of

⁴⁷ Paracelsus, *Astronomia Magna*, in *Paracelsus: Essential Readings*, 114–15.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁴⁹ Swedenborg, *The Infinite. The Final Cause of Creation*, tr. J. J. G. Wilkinson (London: Swedenborg Society, 1992), 133–4.

Swedenborg. Both men believed that imagination played an important role in pregnancy and that what the expectant mother saw could influence the appearance of her child. “The imagination of a pregnant woman is so strong that it can influence the seed and change the fruit in her womb in many directions. Her inner star acts powerfully and vigorously upon the fruit, so that its nature is thereby deeply and solidly shaped and forged,” says Paracelsus in *De Natura Rerum* (c. 1537).⁵⁰ Swedenborg treats of the same in *The Economy of the Animal Kingdom*:

For in case the mother experience any great alarm, or any inordinate emotions of terror or longing, and in this state the representation of anything be vividly made to her mind, it will immediately descend to the brains of the embryo through the vascular and fibrous passages, and (if I am not mistaken in the conjecture) through the innermost coat of the arteries and the outermost coat of the veins, and thence through the spiritous fluid and the purer blood. In this manner we find impressed upon the tender body of the embryo, figures of strawberries, cherries, plums, rape-seed, figs, apples, pomegranates, herbs, ears of corn, grapes, roses, parsley, lettuces, mushrooms, cauliflowers, finger-marks, weals, rods, flies, spiders; hence also arise dark-coloured stains, fissured forehead, hare-lip, swine’s snout; marks of fish, serpents, oysters, crab’s-claws, bunching or webbed fingers, slugs, combs of cocks, mice, dormice, &c.: nay, further, from the continual contemplation of a beautiful person, the mother may superinduce the impression of a beautiful face, it may be her own or that of some other object of her admiration.⁵¹

They both also believed that man could survive great lengths of time without sustenance. Paracelsus says, “The nature of man, too, may be sustained in the absence of food, if the feet are planted in the earth. Thus we have seen a man who lived six months without food and was sustained only by this method: he wore a clod of earth on his stomach, and, when it got dry, took a new and fresh one. He declared that during the whole of

⁵⁰ Paracelsus, *De Natura Rerum*, quoted in *Paracelsus: Selected Writings*, 32.

⁵¹ Swedenborg, *The Economy of the Animal Kingdom*, vol. I, § 267.

that time he never felt hungry."⁵² Swedenborg broaches this subject in his *The Animal Kingdom* (1744–5), speaking of “those who have continued for months, years, and still longer periods [lustra], without visible and terrestrial food, and whose life has been renewed from day to day with blood,” he then appends a footnote with a long list of sources and examples, one of which is “Of [one Esther Johanna], a Swedish maid, born in the village of Norre Oby, in Scania [Schonen], who abstained from food for ten years, and from drink for eight, and whose case was carefully watched by many; and is treated of by Joh. Jac. Doebelius Professor of Medicine in the University of Lund, and by Jesper Swedberg, Doctor of Theology and Bishop of Scara, my beloved father.”⁵³

Another major aspect of Paracelsus’ system that may have influenced Swedenborg in a diluted form is his notion of the Three Principles: Sulphur, Salt, and Mercury. For Paracelsus, a combination of these three substances made up the body of every tangible thing, they are “principles of constitution, representing organization (Sulphur), mass (Salt), and activity (Mercury) . . . Sulphur represents the combustible, Mercury the smoky or volatile, and Salt the unchangeable in any natural object.”⁵⁴ This idea of the Three Principles was vanishing by the time Swedenborg was making his scientific studies, but there nevertheless remained with him a reverence and fascination for these substances in the chemical terms we know them today. Swedenborg wrote manuscript works on both sulphur and salt and salt works,⁵⁵ whilst he published in his *Principles of Chemistry* (1721) a section on experiments with mercury.

I earlier mentioned that ideas may be passed on like hereditary traits or diseases that may or may not crop up in any given generation, by this I

⁵² Paracelsus, *Neun Bücher Archidoxis* (1526), in *Paracelsus: Essential Readings*, 69.

⁵³ Swedenborg, *The Animal Kingdom*, tr. J. J. G. Wilkinson, 2 vols. (Cincinnati: E Mendenhall and Boston: Otis Clapp, 1858), vol. II, § 509. Swedenborg also mentions adipsia or the prolonged abstinence from food in vol. I, § 93, and vol. II, § 406.

⁵⁴ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, “The philosophy, medicine, and theology of Paracelsus,” in *Paracelsus: Essential Readings*, 28–9.

⁵⁵ Swedenborg, *De Sulphure et pyrite* and *De Sale communi*. See notes 72 and 69 below for more details.

was alluding to the influence of the written and especially the printed word. For our books are the dead, filed in libraries, ranged on shelves like graves in cemeteries—names on spines, names on headstones and memorial plaques. The papers we write and print upon are largely made of the same complex carbon-based molecules that we ourselves are made of, but we preserve them better than the teeth and dust in wooden boxes beneath the ground, the ash in urns, and in doing so we preserve ideas and allow the dead to talk which for the mystic, whose *true* audience is always forthcoming, is of vital importance. Years of abandonment or neglect may at any time come to an end with the chance opening of a volume.

Paracelsus published little during his life, but numerous works were written in manuscript—dictated to amanuenses or copied down by disciples. The collecting, printing and editing of these tracts began around 1560 through the efforts of Michael Toxites, Adam von Bodenstein and Peter Perna. Johannes Huser published the first complete edition of Paracelsus in ten volumes in 1589-91. The existence of these books allow for the possibility that Swedenborg may have had a more direct contact with Paracelsus than through the dilute traces present in the emerging paradigm of science. However, the references to Paracelsus in Swedenborg's works are few and far between. With relatively little of Paracelsus' writings being available in English translation, and much of Swedenborg's scientific works being untranslated, out of print, or hard to track down, I will give some of the following citations *in extremis* in the hope that those with more astute powers of perception than mine may be better able to attribute Swedenborg's sources.

In his *Principles of Chemistry*, in the eighteenth of his "Experiments on Mercury," Swedenborg writes:

18. If mercury be dissolved in oil of vitriol and precipitated, the mass at the bottom of the vessel is white like snow.

When oil of vitriol is added to the mass, it becomes comparatively fixed, and austere to the taste.

By adding still more oil of vitriol, it becomes a fiery, metallic, and corrosive oil.

If the powder be washed in water, it becomes of a citrine yellow, and forms what is called the panacea of Paracelsus.⁵⁶

This is one of the more detailed of the twenty-seven experiments listed, many reading like the kind of bullet-pointed statistics you might find contained in an inset fact file box accompanying a newspaper or magazine article. In the other experiments the resultant chemical compounds are referred to by their properties or described by the processes they have undergone: “this precipitated powder”; “a white corrosive powder”; “this red precipitate”; “the solution” etc.⁵⁷ If Swedenborg followed this pattern in experiment no. 18 it wouldn’t be out of place for him to stop writing after “it becomes a citrine yellow.” The mention of “the panacea of Paracelsus” seems to be a piece of information not intrinsic to experiment no. 18 itself, but an additional aside. Unfortunately, neither in the Latin (“*Si pulvis abluatur aqua, fieri colorem citrinum, qui est panacea Paracelsi*”) nor in the English translation does Swedenborg’s language aid us in determining whether he uses the term “panacea of Paracelsus” as one he expects his readership to be familiar with. Is Swedenborg revealing a great secret? Is this the recipe for the much discussed and sought after wonder medicine of Paracelsus? Or is he just adding clarifying words to the end of his little experiment to the effect of “this is more commonly known as the panacea of Paracelsus”? The reserved prose, lack of fanfares and placement of the text (at the back end of an anonymously published work) would indicate the latter and suggest that this was not the Swede’s discovery, but something glossed from his reading. Swedenborg was inconsistent in his attribution of sources, often more so in his published works (especially his youthful ones) than in his unpublished manuscripts, and here, unfortunately, he gives no reference.

Paracelsus did use both mercury and vitriol in his remedies, but I can find no obvious connection in his writings between those substances and the mysterious cure-all of his that he called laudanum and supposedly carried in the pommel of his sword. Paracelsus’ assistant, Johannes

⁵⁶ Swedenborg, *Some Specimens of a Work on the Principles of Chemistry, with other treatises*, tr. Charles Edward Strutt (London: William Newberry, 1847; repr. Swedenborg Scientific Association, 1976), 177.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 177–8.

Oporinus, described these laudanum pills as having “the form of mice excrements,”⁵⁸ which does not tally with Swedenborg’s citrine powder. Many alchemical writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries gave recipes and experiments for wonder cures that they attribute to Paracelsus, often conflating them with the notion of the philosopher’s stone, but also giving them the epithets of *panacea*, *elixir vitae*, *aqua vitae*, *aurum potabile*, *liquoris Alkahest* and *Azoth*, the latter a word written on the pommel of Paracelsus’ sword in certain portraits. There was a certain cachet to adding Paracelsus’ name to a concoction and, doubtlessly, many formulae will have spurious provenances with little connection to the man. I expect that Swedenborg was probably just the latest in a long line of people to copy down an experiment in an ever truncated and distorted form, the only constant in this Chinese whisper-style chain of citation being the tacking on of Paracelsus’ name to give it some authority.⁵⁹

In the second volume of *Opera Philosophica et Mineralia*, concerning iron, Swedenborg gives a short “Appendix” to a section headed “*Sal Martis seu victriolum ex Marte partum*”:

Innumera illa praeeparata chymica ex victriolo Martis praetereo, quae in considerationem & recensionem veniunt, quum de victriolis agendum sit: ut de *gilla victrioli*, de *spiritibus diversissimis ex victriolo fatis*, de *spiritu ejus dulci*, de *spiritu ejus tartarisato*, *sulphureo*, *coagulato*, *aperienti Penoti*, *tartaro victriolato*, *spiritu ejus volatili*, *philosophico*, *antepileptico Paracelsi* ut & *Quercetani*, *anodyno* & *narcotico Pinerii*, *Mymsichti*. De *sulphure victriolo anodyno*, *fixo* & *volatili*, de *sulphuris ejus tinctura* & *essentia*, de *balsamo soperifero*, de *floribus sulphuris rubri ex victriolo*. De *terra metallica vel ochra victrioli*, de *terra dulci victrioli*, de *sale victrioli*; de *aqua stiptica*, *lapide medicinali*, *admirabili*, *lapide Driff Hellmontii*, *philosophico*; *arcano duplicato*,

⁵⁸ Ball, *The Devil’s Doctor*, 187.

⁵⁹ I have a suspicion that Swedenborg may have taken the experiment from Johann Joachim Becher’s *Grosse Chymische Concordanz*. Swedenborg owned a 1726 edition of this work, but the book had been printed many years earlier and he could well have consulted it in libraries before deciding to purchase his own copy. In the 1682 edition published in Frankfurt by Johann Georg Schiele, there is in section no. 30, p. 352, an experiment written in a combination of Latin and alchemical symbols that describes the sublimation of mercury in oil of vitriol and a resultant substance of “citrino colore” which is a “potentissima & secretissima medicina Theophrasti.”

victrioli Martis tincturis & oleis, crocis, anima Mynsichti, panacaea ex victriolo, pulvere sympathetico, & plurimus aliis, de quibus videas tractationem de victriolo.

(I neglect countless chemical preparations made from vitriol of Mars, which come into consideration and enumeration wherever the vitriols might be acting, for example: the emetic salt of vitriol, the most varied spirits made from vitriol, its sweet spirit, its tartarized spirit, its sulphurous spirit, its coagulated spirit, Penotus' laxative, tartarus vitriolatus, its volatile spirit, its philosophical spirit, Paracelsus' antepileptic and also that of Quercetanus, Pinerius' and Mynsichtus' anodynes and narcotics. Also, concerning the sulphur of vitriol, there are anodynes, both fixed and volatile, and its tincture and essence of sulphur, sleepbringing balms, and flowers of red sulphur from vitriol. Also metallic earth or ochre of vitriol, sweet earth of vitriol, salt of vitriol, styptic water, medicinal and wonderful stone, van Helmont's driff stone, philosopher's stone, arcanum duplicatum, tinctures and oils of vitriol of Mars, saffrons, the anima [resin?] of Mynsichtus, panacea from vitriol, sympathetic powder, and many others, for which see my tract on vitriol.)⁶⁰

Here, in a list of chemical products and substances, the names of Penotus, Paracelsus, Quercetanus, Mynsichtus and van Helmont stand out like brands.⁶¹ With many of the preparations going unqualified ("anodynes, both fixed and volatile," "sleepbringing balms," etc.), those that are ("Penotus' laxative," "Paracelsus' antepileptic," etc.) would seem to be so on grounds of familiarity. Swedenborg again doesn't give his sources, so perhaps he expected his readership to recognize these names or at least be able to hunt down more information on their concoctions with relative ease? (Today, even with the great assistance afforded by the Internet and online library catalogues, it can be more than tricky—for the chemistry

⁶⁰ Swedenborg, *Regnum Subterraneum sive Minerale De Ferro* (Dresden & Leipzig: Frederik Hekelius, 1734), pt. III, paragraphus XV, p. 335. The translation is mine.

⁶¹ Bernadus Georgius or Gilles Penotus (c. 1530–1620), French chemist; Josephus Quercetanus (pseud. Joseph Duchesne, 1544–1609), French chemist; Adrian von Mynsicht (1603–38), Austrian chemist; Jan Baptista van Helmont (1577–1644), Flemish chemist.

layman such as myself, at least—to pin chemical preparations to the texts of those they are accredited to.)

With regards to Paracelsus' antepileptic, I can confirm that he did indeed write about epilepsy, or the "falling sickness" and that vitriol, in various preparations, often figured in Paracelsus' prescriptions. In his *The Diseases that Deprive Man of his Reason* (written c. 1525, first published by Adam von Bodenstein in Basle, 1567), Paracelsus gives several recipes for cures for the falling sickness in which *arcanum vitrioli* forms the basic ingredient,⁶² and he goes on to write in greater detail about the important role vitriol can play in alchemy and especially in medicine⁶³ with sections "On the Use of White Vitriol in Physical and Surgical Disease"⁶⁴ and also "On White and Green Vitriolic Oil"⁶⁵—which is "a perfect medicine against falling sickness in all its forms."⁶⁶ The *sal martis* and *victriolum Martis* that Swedenborg refers to in the second volume of his *Opera Philosophica et Mineralia* (quoted from above) are, respectively, also known as, green vitriol and white vitriol. Paracelsus also said, in his *Paragranum* (1529-30), that "crude vitriol . . . in the oily, 'leafy' stage . . . is a remedy for epilepsy,"⁶⁷ and would write a separate work on the condition, *Liber de Caducis, das ist von Hinfallenden Siechtagen* (1530). Paracelsus had many different antepileptics [plural], which suggests to me that Swedenborg glossed this mention of "Paracelsus' antepileptic [singular]" from his general reading and not a specific work of Paracelsus.

In the third volume of *Opera Philosophica et Mineralia*, on copper (for which we fortunately have a translation), when talking about fluxes (compounds of salts and ashes used to determine the content or quality of a metal ore), Swedenborg lists twenty-four examples of how to prepare a flux. The tenth illustration is as follows:

⁶² Paracelsus, *The Diseases that Deprive Man of his Reason, such as St. Vitus' Dance, Falling Sickness, Melancholy, and Insanity, and their correct treatment*, tr. Gregory Zilboorg in Henry E. Sigerist (ed.), *Paracelsus: Four Treatises* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 170–2, 200–4.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 187 ff.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 192–4.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 197–8.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁶⁷ Paracelsus, *Paragranum*, quoted in Walter Pagel, *Paracelsus: An Introduction to Philosophical Medicine in the Era of the Renaissance*, 2nd rev. edn. (Basle: Karger, 1982), 76.

10. Take equal proportions of flagellated ashes (cineres clavellatos), ashes burnt from bean-stalks, and quicklime, in any quantity you please and pour water thereon, filter the lixivium and abstract it to dryness. Keep this menstruum in a warm place. For this we are indebted to Th. Paracelsus.

Whilst the twenty-third illustration is:

23. Paracelsus' astral flux is said to be prepared in various ways. Take 8 semunciae of nitre, 4 of sulphur, and 2 of tartar, and triturate them to powder, and mix them with small portions of the metal (to be assayed) so that they kindle. It is said by this method the metal is smelted, and is found in grains underneath the flux; it must be crushed to powder and seethed, in order that the copper may be obtained from it. Or, previously detonate the nitre or the tartar, before adding the sulphur. Or take 8 semunciae of sulphur, 2 of nitre, and 2 of tartar, and triturate them to powder and mix them together in a mortar, and kindle them. Or, take any quantity of nitre, tartar and sulphur in equal proportions, pulverize them, and arrange the powder in alternate layers with thin plates of metal. The mixture may be kindled in the crucible, even if the crucible is held on the table or in the hand, and the metal is said to be fused by this method and to become smelted into little granules among the scoriae.⁶⁸

Swedenborg's apparent source for all twenty-four preparations is listed after the twenty-fourth: "Collect. chym. metal." which most likely is David Kellner's *Collectanea chymico-metallurgica curiosa...* (Leipzig: Joh. Herbart Kloss, 1715), a copy of which is listed in the auction catalogue of Swedenborg's library ("In Octavo," no. 30). This is an exceedingly rare book and I have been unable to consult a copy.

In *On Common Salt* (written c. 1724), when describing the calcination of salt, Swedenborg again mentions Paracelsus:

Calcination is also carried out by *melting salt*. The salt is put in a crucible, and the crucible in a smelting oven, until the salt melts, flowing like

⁶⁸ Swedenborg, *Swedenborg's Treatise on Copper*, tr. Arthur Hodson Searle (London: British Non-Ferrous Metals Research Association and Swedenborg Society, 1938), section 3, pt. II, ch. II, pp. 407, 408; the Latin can be found in *Regnum Subterraneum sive Minerale De Cupro et Orichalco* (Dresden & Leipzig: Frederik Hekelius, 1734), pp. 422, 423.

water. This melted salt solidifies into a hard substance. But it ought to be kept in a rather warm place, for if it is exposed to air, it readily dissolves into brine or into a liquid. You should filter this liquid through commercial paper and put it in a glass container. Paracelsus calls this “dissolved salt” and “water of salt.”⁶⁹

Swedenborg neglects again to give a source, but Paracelsus does mention processes for making *aqua salis* in his *Chirurgia Magnia* (1536–7) and in his *Archidoxis* (c. 1526), where it is referred to as the “Ens of Salt.”⁷⁰ I think this reference to Paracelsus best illustrates how Swedenborg acknowledges him as a credible authority whose influence and vocabulary were still prevalent and relevant at the time at which Swedenborg was writing. Why else would Swedenborg unnecessarily mention Paracelsus’ terminology if it wasn’t familiar to and utilized by his (intended) readership?

Swedenborg also mentions Paracelsus in three hitherto unpublished manuscripts. In *De Victriolo*, written c. 1724, Paracelsus clocks up five mentions.⁷¹ The source for the first reference is Georg Stahl, *Fundamenta Chymiae Dogmaticae & experimentalis . . .* (Nurimbergae: Johannis Ernesti Adelburneri, 1723), § 17, p. 53. The second and third references are from *Collectanea Chymica Leydensia*, ed. Christopher Love Morley (Antverpiae: Henricum & Cornelium Verdussen, 1702), ch. 518, p. 518. The fourth reference is from Johann Joachim Becher, *Grosse Chymische Concordanz* (Frankfurt: Johann Georg Schiele, 1682), p. 456, no. 26, which is written in a mixture of German and Latin that Swedenborg transcribes in Latin, translating the German pieces. Interestingly, Becher gives “Theophr,” which Swedenborg renders “Paracelsus” in his transcription. The source for the fifth reference is Paolo Snellen, *Dissertatio Physico-Chemica, qua Salis*

⁶⁹ Swedenborg, *On Common Salt*, sec. XXXIX, “Crackling and Calcination of Salt,” tr. Michael V. David and J. Durban Odhner, in *The New Philosophy* (Bryn Athyn, PA), vol. XCII, no. 2, (April–June 1989): 96–7. Swedenborg’s *De Sale communi* was written up as a fair copy MS (codex 83 in the Library of the Swedish Royal Academy of Sciences) c. 1724, but was never published by Swedenborg. Alfred Acton edited the first printed edition (Philadelphia, PA: Swedenborg Scientific Association, 1910), where the citation can be found on p. 92.

⁷⁰ Paracelsus, *Chirurgia Magnia* (Argentorati, 1573), pt. II, tract. III, ch. II, 146–7, and *Paracelsus, His Archidoxis, or, Chief Teachings; Comprised in Ten Books*, tr. J. H. Oxon (London: Printed for Lodowick Lloyd, 1663), Bk 10, ch. 3, 146–8.

⁷¹ Swedenborg, *De Victriolo*, an unpublished MS written in fair copy, forming codex 85 in the library of the Royal Academy of Sciences, in Sweden, pp. 224, 227, 228, 322, 398.

Communis Triumviratus Physicè & Chemicè demonstratur (Amstelodami: Janssonio-Waesbergios, 1714), § 43, p. 109. Snellen has “Peracelsi” which Swedenborg corrects to “Paracelsi”—at the very least Swedenborg knew how to spell his name!

In *De Sulphure et pyrite*, also written c. 1724, Swedenborg refers to Paracelsus a further two times.⁷² Swedenborg states his source as Glauber, but I have been unable to specify which work.

Finally, in Codex 88 of the library of the Swedish Royal Academy of Sciences, a book that Swedenborg used as his travel journal for the years 1733–4, and which also contains drafts for portions of his *Principia* (1734, the first volume of *Opera Philosophica et Mineralia*) and *The Infinite* (1734), he mentions the homunculus of Paracelsus in a section headed “Ex Martini Schurigii Spermatalogia vel Seminis humani consideration.”⁷³ Swedenborg’s source is Martin Schurig, *Spermatalogia* (Francofurti ad Moenum: Johannis Beckii, 1720), ch. vii, § 8, pp. 330–1. Schurig gives a list of authors who have written about the homunculus in the past and briefly outlines their methods for making homunculi. At the beginning of his summary, Schurig points out that the origin of the *Homunculus spagyricus* goes back to Paracelsus, referencing the Swiss’ works *De Vita longa* (written c. 1526) and *De Natura Rerum*. Schurig then goes on to cite several other writers. Swedenborg, however, in extracting from Schurig in Codex 88, conflates the material and attributes it all to Paracelsus. Swedenborg writes “*Paracelsus loquatur de homunculo omniscio, qui chymice et spermatis ope calori et sanguini humani praeparat*” (“Paracelsus speaks of the all-knowing homunculus prepared chemically with sperm and with the power of heat and human blood”—tr. mine), but Paracelsus didn’t speak of an omniscient homunculus, in fact his descriptions are of a homunculus that

⁷² Swedenborg, *De Sulphure et pyrite*, an unpublished MS forming codex 82 in the library of the Royal Academy of Sciences, in Sweden, pp. 92, 95. Photostat reproductions of codices 82 and 85 can also be viewed at the library of the Swedenborg Society, London, and The Swedenborg Library in Bryn Athyn, PA. No English translations exist.

⁷³ Codex 88, p. 236. James Hyde in his *A Bibliography of the Works of Emanuel Swedenborg Original and Translated* (London: Swedenborg Society, 1906) lists this work as no. 255 [*Observata de corpore humano*] and heads the section from which the Paracelsus citation hails as “Ex Martini Schurigii Considerationes partium genitalium mulierum, Dresdae et Lipsiae, 1729.” Photostat reproductions of codex 88 can be viewed at the library of the Swedenborg Society, London, and The Swedenborg Library in Bryn Athyn, PA.

grows up into adolescence with the capability of then learning and being taught.⁷⁴ Here, we see Swedenborg latch on to the most familiar name (perhaps the only familiar name) in the passage he is reading and then, in an abridged transcription, pin all of the information he wants to relay on to that name. Swedenborg again exhibits his recognition of Paracelsus, whilst also displaying a lack of any close reading of his works.

These appear to be the only times that Swedenborg cites Paracelsus by name, but in a couple of other places he uses distinctly Paracelsian terms:

In *The True Christian Religion* (1771), Swedenborg writes “After death every person lays aside the natural which he got from his mother, and keeps the spiritual which he had from his father, together with a sort of fringe (*limbus*) around it composed of the purest natural substances.”⁷⁵ Elsewhere he uses *limbus* to refer to the limbo of Catholic theology or in its more usual Latin usage as a “hem” or “border.” Here Swedenborg seems to be using the word *limbus* in its Paracelsian sense: “Formless and quality-less matter, endowed with primal life, the sole mother of everything earthly, the ‘chaos’ of the alchemists, which contained as in a reservoir all things, in a potential state. It also constitutes the primal matter in the *compositio humana*, and consists of the *limus coelorum* [the basic heavenly substance which forms the eternal part of the *compositio humana*].”⁷⁶

And in *The Economy of the Animal Kingdom*, Swedenborg says: “There is a certain formative substance or force, that draws the thread from the first living point, and afterwards continues it to the last point of life. This is called by some the plastic force, and the *Archaeus*.”⁷⁷ The plastic force is that of Henry More and the Neoplatonists, but the *Archaeus* or *archeus* is a neologism of Paracelsus. And Swedenborg’s “formative substance” is indeed similar to Paracelsus’ *archeus*, which the latter characterizes as an

⁷⁴ Cf. Paracelsus, *De Natura Rerum*: “This we call a homunculus; and it should afterwards be educated with the greatest care and zeal, until it grows up and begins to display intelligence.” Quoted in *Paracelsus: Essential Readings*, 175. The omniscience of the homunculus appears, from Schurig, to have been a quality added by the later writer, Johann Sigismund Elsholtz (1623–88, German botanist, physician, and alchemist), in his *Destillatoria Curiosa* (1674).

⁷⁵ Swedenborg, *The True Christian Religion*, vol. I, § 103.

⁷⁶ “Glossary,” in *Paracelsus: Selected Writings*, 255–6.

⁷⁷ Swedenborg, *The Economy of the Animal Kingdom*, vol. I, § 253.

inner workman or alchemist which turns prime matter into ultimate matter as, for example, when food “is chewed and digested, so that it becomes flesh and blood.”⁷⁸ The *archeus* distributes the ultimate matter to the appropriate places within the microcosm, and expels the harmful or waste contents. Swedenborg’s formative substance similarly “marks out the provinces, disposes the guards, distributes the offices, and keeps everything in the station in which it has been placed” in the body.⁷⁹ Both men also recognize that the formative substance / *archeus* is specific from microcosm to microcosm, and so a pig’s will differ from a toucan’s will differ from a man’s, etc.⁸⁰

Swedenborg’s references to Paracelsus and essentially Paracelsian terms are passing at best and usually occur in lists of examples either compiled from Swedenborg’s general reading, or in summarizing excerpts from specific works, but he treats Paracelsus as an authority, and one that his (potential) readers should already be familiar with and through this practice we can see that Paracelsus still exerted considerable influence over the evolving science of the Enlightenment period. There remains the possibility that Swedenborg could have consulted tomes of Paracelsus, but even if this more direct influence is discounted, he has encountered him via authors such as Stahl, Becher and Glauber, whose works are saturated with references to and citations from Paracelsus.

Influence is, beyond sheer physicality, a somewhat nebulous and malleable concern, forever subject and suggestible to the limitations and projections of the investigator or onlooker. The findings may seem negligible, but examining and exploring the influence of our antecedents (over each other, and over our selves) is nevertheless a worthwhile task, perhaps even a necessary and inevitable one—as Robert Pogue Harrison comments:

Everywhere one looks across the spectrum of human cultures one finds the foundational authority of the predecessor . . . We inherit their

⁷⁸ Paracelsus, *Labyrinthus Medicorum Errantium* (1538), quoted in *Paracelsus: Essential Readings*, 103.

⁷⁹ Swedenborg, *The Economy of the Animal Kingdom*, vol. I, § 259.

⁸⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, § 269, and Paracelsus, *Volumen Medicinae Paramirum*, in *Paracelsus: Essential Readings*, 50.

obsessions; assume their burdens; carry on their causes; promote their mentalities, ideologies, and very often their superstitions; and often we die trying to vindicate their humiliations. Why this servitude? We have no choice. Only the dead can grant us legitimacy.⁸¹

And I think that even in the handful of references Swedenborg makes to Paracelsus, we see, however slight, that desire for legitimacy.

“A mystic must not fear ridicule if he is to push all the way to the limits of humility or the limits of delight,” says Milan Kundera.⁸² Ridicule did not hinder Paracelsus, who seemed, if anything, to be fuelled by it, to be further confirmed in his correctness of belief. Nor did it hinder Swedenborg, who seems to have maintained an unruffled dignity in the face of questions about his sanity. As for humility, it is a word that you would struggle to associate with Paracelsus and, indeed, Swedenborg, in the first half of his life which was directed in pursuit of greatness. But both men were humble before God, and delighted in their experience of the Divine. In expressing this experience, however, Paracelsus, Swedenborg, all mystics, and all mankind even, must struggle with language. Conveying the *personal* through a *common* language can seem paradoxical at the best of times; and articulating the Divine must be even more impossible. It is perhaps not a surprise, therefore, that the mystic uses a language that can be oblique even at its most straightforward. Such apparent obscurity (!) can be frustrating, but it is also inviting—inviting of praise and of abjuration, yes, but more importantly, inviting of the process that precedes such judgments, viz., interpretation; interpretations that will be as personal as the mystic’s experience. Interpretations will invite interpretations and, together with a preservation of the written or printed word, the mystic will be kept aloft, punted from era to era—like a beach ball in the crowd of a cricket match—affecting many or few and, perhaps, none as intended. □

⁸¹ Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), ix–x.

⁸² Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, tr. From the Czech by Michael Henry Heim (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), pt. 3, ch. 2, 57.