

EDITORIAL REMARKS

In This Issue

We are delighted to have Dr. Devin Zuber, M.A., M.Phil. serve as Guest Editor for this issue. Dr. Zuber is Assistant Professor for American Studies, Literature, and Swedenborgian Studies at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. He is a graduate of Bryn Athyn College (B.A., 2000). The articles included here are papers of students in his spring 2013 course on “Swedenborg and History.”

As a matter of record for the Swedenborg Scientific Association we include in this issue the Treasurer’s Report for 2013. As there was no Annual Meeting in the traditional sense in 2014, no transactions are included.

Erland J. Brock

READING SWEDENBORG AT THE RIM OF THE WORLD: PERSPECTIVES ON SWEDENBORGIAN THOUGHT FROM THE GRADUATE THEOLOGICAL UNION

Devin Zuber

The Graduate Theological Union (GTU) in Berkeley, California, was formed in 1962 as an ecumenical consortium for religious and theological education, part of a larger groundswell of interdenominational goodwill that included the liberalizing policies of the second Vatican Council (or “Vatican II”). Today the GTU is not only a leader in interdenominational divinity programs, but remains a pioneer of interreligious graduate education, with centers and programs for Jewish Studies, Buddhism, and Islamic Studies, in addition to its eight Protestant and Catholic-affiliated seminaries and theological institutions.¹ Since 2002, the

¹ Over the next two years, the GTU will be launching a new Center for Dharma Studies that is to offer graduate courses in Hinduism, Sikhism, and Jainism, thus broadening the GTU’s comprehensive coverage of all the world’s major religions.

Swedenborgian House of Studies, formerly the Swedenborg School of Religion in Andover, Massachusetts, has resided at the Pacific School of Religion—one of the founding Protestant members of the GTU consortium—and has contributed distinctly Swedenborgian courses and theology into the broader GTU curricula over the last decade. Swedenborg's own remarkable 18th century religious pluralism, an enlarging facet of his Christian theosophy that went on to make substantial contributions to the history of American interreligious dialogue and the study of comparative religion,² has meshed well with the GTU's mission to be a place "where religion meets the world."

One has a sense of that meeting, quite literally, from the expansive vistas of the Pacific School of Religion campus that overlook the San Francisco Bay, with the city towers of San Francisco rising across the water. With such a westward facing view—the Pacific Ocean can often be seen, framed by the Golden Gate Bridge—one never loses the resolute sense of being perched on the Pacific rim, facing westwards towards Asia: the terminus of the North American land mass. Perhaps it is no wonder that it was in purview of such a vista, in the mountains above nearby Santa Cruz, that a former Swedenborgian minister named Hermann Vetterling began publishing the *Buddhist Ray* in 1888—a periodical "Devoted to Buddhism in General and to the Buddhism in Swedenborg in Particular," which stands today as the first Buddhist journal to be published in North America.³ In the density of San Francisco, Berkeley, and Oakland that lies below this panorama afforded by "Holy Hill" (as the GTU is affectionately called by locals) sits one of the most demographically and religiously diverse urban areas in the United States. The graduate students who come to the GTU refract the microcosm of the globe that is the Bay Area, and a

² The importance of Swedenborgian theology for the world's first (inter)religious parliament of 1893 is addressed in George Dole, *With Absolute Respect: The Swedenborgian Theology of Charles Carroll Bonney* (West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 1993). For the possible background role of Swedenborgian thought in William James's foundational text for the comparative study of religion, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), see Eugene Taylor, "The Spiritual Roots of James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*" in William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature, Centenary Edition*, ed. by Eugene Taylor and Jeremy Carette (New York: Routledge, 2002), xv–xxxviii.

³ See Devin Zuber, "Buddha of the North: Swedenborg and Transpacific Zen." *Religion and the Arts* 14.1–2 (2010): 1–33.

typical GTU classroom has students of varying theological and spiritual stripes, both those practicing a religious tradition and those there to study religion from a more secular point of view. It is an exciting, and occasionally challenging, environment in which to teach Swedenborg's writings.

The students who took my spring 2013 course on "Swedenborg in History" were no exception to this diversity. Some were PhD and MA students studying comparative theologies or interdisciplinary approaches to art and religion; others were enrolled as divinity students to earn a degree that would qualify them for denominational ordination or to work as chaplains. All, by and large, were relatively new to reading Swedenborg, and part of the delight of teaching such a class was to watch how their various encounters with Swedenborg could open unexpected perspectives on their own research agendas, while simultaneously casting new light on several areas of Swedenborg Studies. The three essays gathered here represent the best thinking to come out of that seminar, and each contributes to our better collective understanding of how Swedenborgian thought impacted various cultural contexts that lie outside the pale of the denominational history of the New Church. The essays are arranged chronologically, and cover periods prior to Swedenborg's life, the 18th century in which Swedenborg lived and wrote, as well as moments of later artistic reception in the 19th and 20th centuries. The methodologies and approaches to Swedenborg are as varied as the different centuries and time periods under consideration. In "Seven are the Steps to Heaven: a Comparative Study of Swedenborg and Simnani," Cassie Lipowitz deploys a comparative theological framework to explore some of the profound parallels between Swedenborg's concepts of spiritual regeneration and those of 'Ala' ad-dawla as-Simnani (1261–1336), the great medieval Islamic mystic. This dexterous bridging across-the-centuries owes, as Lipowitz acknowledges, much to the pioneering comparative work of Henry Corbin, the first scholar to address the significant parallels between Swedenborgian theology and esoteric Islam.⁴ Despite Corbin's breadth of consideration, however, Lipowitz's essay here will be the first to directly

⁴ See the posthumous collection, Henry Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam* (West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 1995).

address Simnani viz-a-viz Swedenborgian hermeneutics. “Both Swedenborg and Simnani understood,” Lipowitz argues, “that human beings—like the sacred texts they interpreted—have multiple levels. They may also have understood, better than most, that if we, as individuals, remain inert on the lowest level, we remain ‘dead’—just as a literal reading of the sacred text renders it lifeless.”

A different set of parallels is noted by Sarah McCune in “Mining the Connections between Falu Gruva and Emanuel Swedenborg.” McCune offers a close-reading of Swedenborg’s earlier poetry about mines, finding in their ambivalent combination of wonder and terror an anticipation not only of Swedenborg’s later descriptions of hell, but of a Romantic poetics of the sublime that came to reevaluate subterranean spaces. McCune’s literary interpretation of Swedenborg’s poetry sheds light on an often neglected corner of Swedenborg’s pre-theological writing, and may even, McCune writes, help us gain insight into relationships between poetry, natural science, and theology—fields that, particularly in the case of the latter two, were quickly emerging as fault lines of conflict as the 18th century progressed.

Painters and poets of the subsequent Romantic era readily gravitated to Swedenborg’s dual role as scientist and revelator, and often attempted to develop a theory of representation, an accounting for the power of the aesthetic as a spiritual agent, out of their respective engagements with Swedenborg’s writings—in some cases, even using the word “science” to describe their approach to color, form, and poetic sound.⁵ These earlier Romantic attractions to Swedenborg—sign-posted by Ralph Waldo Emerson’s use of Swedenborg as his iconic figure of the mystic, for his influential *Representative Men* essay collection (1850)—paved the way for a more general diffusion of Swedenborgian thought in various avant-garde circles of the nineteenth century, from the French Symbolists to the groundbreaking, radical poetics of Walt Whitman. The Swedish literary critic and scholar of Swedenborg, Anders Hallengren, has spent considerable time

⁵See Jane Williams-Hogan, “Emanuel Swedenborg’s Aesthetic Philosophy and Its Impact on 19th Century American Art,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 28(1): Spring 2012, 105–124. The American painter George Inness’s “scientific” use of Swedenborgian theology for aesthetics is further addressed by Rachel Ziady Delue in *George Inness and the Science of Landscape* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

thinking on the nature of this diffuse influence, including more recent reflections on the Whitman-Swedenborg connection.⁶ Swedenborg's traces in cultural history, writes Hallengren, makes us consider "What, or rather, *why* is influence then? What is the nature of influence in general? . . . 'Influence' implies that you open yourself up to receive an effect, since there is an imminent attraction or an imminent affinity: it belongs to you and has already domiciliary rights in the world of your mind."⁷

The final essay in this issue by Colette Walker, "The Language of Form and Color: Traces of Swedenborg's Doctrine of Correspondences in Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*," takes up the challenge presented by Swedenborg's amorphous presence within the history of post-Romantic abstract painting in the early 20th century, particularly in the work and theories of Wasily Kandinsky (1866–1944). By following how French Symbolist painters, novelists, and poets variously adapted and appropriated Swedenborg's doctrine of correspondences, and the consequent ways that Symbolism generated anti-mimetic tendencies in later Modernist painting, Walker argues we can locate a definitive Swedenborgian presence behind early Abstraction's overtly spiritual preoccupations with "pure" forms and color. While this topic has been broached by art historians before, Walker opens fertile new ground for delineating specific affinities between Swedenborgian theology and Kandinsky's highly influential theories of non-representational art.

Taken as a whole, these three essays that respectively deal with the visual arts, 18th century depictions of mines, and Islamic mysticism, represent quite a variegated terrain to survey from the singular perspective of Swedenborg Studies. Their diversity and breadth of chronological scope attests, at the very least, to the longevity and significance of Swedenborgian thought. They demonstrate how Swedenborg has vitally mattered, and further suggest—like the capacious prospects of the Pacific afforded by the view from the GTU—of the ongoing relevance of Swedenborg's writings in the future.

⁶ Anders Hallengren, "A Hermeneutic Key to the title of 'Leaves of Grass'," in *In Search of the Absolute: Essays on Swedenborg and Literature*, ed. Stephen McNeilly (London: Swedenborg Society, 2004): 45–60.

⁷ Anders Hallengren, *Gallery of Mirrors: Reflections of Swedenborgian Thought* (West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 1998), xxix–xxx.