

BOOK REVIEW

Norman Newton, *The Listening Threads. The Formal Cosmology of Emanuel Swedenborg*, Swedenborg Scientific Association, Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania, 1999. Text 407p. Illustrated. Index. ISBN 0-915221-70-5. Publication date Fall 1999.

It is certainly not a simple task to provide a precise synthesis of N. Newton's volume entitled *The Listening Threads* because of the wealth of themes called into question by the author and the way in which he constructs his own line of research. In fact, he deals with arguments which range from ancient to contemporary philosophy and which draw on sources and traditions of thought which are different and, at times, contradictory. This highlights the complexity of the thematic structure of the volume—which is nevertheless comprehensive—and at the same time confirms that Swedenborgian thought constitutes, yet again, the occasion for critical reflection which focuses a series of questions on man and the world, questions which could be defined as fundamental and recurrent and which undoubtedly have not been fully explored within the historical dimension in which Swedenborg lived and worked. From this point of view, the work of N. Newton is a further confirmation of the vitality of Swedenborgian philosophical reflection, which is difficult to assimilate into a systematic type of thought and which, for this very reason, does not cease to give rise to new considerations and ideas and provides reasons and stimuli destined to be taken up in even recent contexts which are both philosophical and scientific as well as literary.

The author does not propose his work as “rigorous” (see Introduction, p. xv) and, in fact, he does not intend to furnish the reader with a philologically attentive reconstruction which deals with the difficulties intrinsic to Swedenborg's texts on natural philosophy, which, as is well-known, constitute a real problem for the modern reader. Rather, he intends to develop an original interpretative key which in some way allows an approach to the philosophy of Swedenborg through a series of authors ranging from Plato to Augustine, from Lullus to Hegel and Marx. With regard to the last two it should be emphasized that such an approach could appear, and not

without reason—indeed, it is the author himself who draws attention to this problem in the introduction—quite unusual and controversial. Nevertheless, he succeeds in identifying a common thread which allows him to link these thinkers together with some themes which strongly characterize the natural philosophy of Swedenborg and in particular, speculation concerning natural points.

In this regard N. Newton reasserts that one of the most innovative aspects of Swedenborg's philosophy consists in having carried out "...transformation of logical categories into dynamic cosmological ones" (see Introduction, p. xiv). In order to demonstrate this point he examines some salient features of the first volume of *Opera Philosophica et Mineralia* (1734), entitled *Principia Rerum Naturalium*, which constitutes a sort of summa of Swedenborg's philosophical and naturalistic thought as it developed starting from the years of his apprenticeship with Ch. Polhem. In the first part of his work N. Newton takes into consideration the cosmology of Swedenborg and delineates the constitution of all natural reality starting from the creation of a metaphysical or natural point which is the source and the passage through which the finite is generated from the Infinite, according to a hierarchy of forms and connections which adapt themselves well to the eighteenth century idea of the Great Chain of Being, which was studied in the 1930s by A.O. Lovejoy. This idea may be connected to that in which, according to Swedenborg, nature is "...a physical realization of logical and mathematical ideas, ideas which are, at their source, the Ideas of God" (see p. 190).

Here it is not the intention to make a detailed examination of the phases of the generation of the natural world according to the text of *Principia*; and as well, these are elements which are already well-known to Swedenborgian scholars in great detail. N. Newton, however, provides an accurate summary, in particular in the chapters dedicated to the examination of natural and Zenonian points, to the first natural element, the magnetic element, ether and the solar vortex, as well as earth, air, fire and water, furnishing the text with figures that accompany the explanations of the different passages of the constitution of the world and which aid comprehension greatly. The author underlines the fact that *Principia* develops the idea of a hierarchical universe whose forms find their origin each one in the other through a complex dynamic process starting from a

single cause or origin, from an "...Infinite Being, in the sense that, if He ceased to act into it, it would immediately cease to be, leaving no trace behind" (Part 1, Chap. 1, p. 20).

This is one of the key passages of Swedenborgian philosophical reflection and in this regard N. Newton underlines how the creation, for Swedenborg, is not an act which is defined and concluded in a unit of time, but rather should be considered as a continuous act which is continually sustained by the Supreme Being (ibid., p. 22). Thus the universe is a continuous generation of structures which are founded not on inert matter but on a unextended point between Infinite and finite. From such a point active, passive, elementary and finite elements of differing degrees of complexity take their origin, according to a dialectic articulation which transforms and acquires a concrete form creating a cosmological dynamics which gives rise to the infinity of nature (Introduction, p. xiv), according to an analogical order. In these elements it is possible to recognize a certain consonance with certain aspects of the Hegelian *Philosophy of Nature* which emerge, for example in the following passage taken from the second part of the *Encyclopedia* in which one may read,

Nature is to be considered as a system of degrees, of which one necessarily comes out of the other and it is the immediate truth of that from which it comes; not in the sense that one is produced from the other naturally, but in the sense that it is thus produced in the intimate idea, which constitutes the reason of nature. (§249, p. 207)

As has already been stated, the work of N. Newton is not easy to synthesize. It contains many points of great interest which urge the reader to analyze more closely and to examine from a new perspective particular aspects of the philosophy of Swedenborg, for instance, the links which exist between the latter and the thought of the classical authors. These arguments are examined in the second part of the volume in which, besides the exemplarism of the Platonic-Augustinian tradition (p. 198), the philosophy of Swedenborg is related to an even more ancient knowledge, that of the Orphic myths and Mosaic philosophy. In this regard the author is inclined, and rightly so, to take up a position against those historiographical interpretations which categorically link Swedenborgian thought

with that cabalistic and magical-alembic tradition extending from the Renaissance to Romanticism, with which Swedenborg's thought has very little to do. From this point of view I am of the opinion that N. Newton's evaluation is substantially correct concerning the fact that, "In short, the Swedenborg of the literary critics is a person who never existed" (p. 227), and he calls for a careful rereading and comprehension of the Swedenborgian texts, not only because they constitute a rich field of research for the specialist, but also are a source of true enrichment in terms of personal development for whoever approaches them free from prejudices. However, what is more interesting is the way in which the author highlights the fact that Swedenborg's cosmology is an absolutely rational one, constructed through a series of experiences which obey the rules of mathematics and geometry, brought to fruition in the wake of the Cartesian tradition rather than that of magic (p. 301). Swedenborg had, as most of the authors of his time did, a classical education, and in the authors of the past he did not seek magical and astonishing keys for the interpretation of nature, but rather those arguments which have the role of sustaining the idea that nature is a whole constituted of analogous and corresponding parts which occurs according to a spiraliform dynamics which arises from the conatus of the metaphysical points. N. Newton writes that the Swedenborgian vision of the cosmos can be synthesized in a system of "correspondences," in a universal analogy (p. 362) in which everything is interrelated and in which even the slightest part cannot be modified without affecting the whole and in which no understanding of the part can be established without the comprehension of the whole, both physical and spiritual, harmoniously linked and tied together by an Infinite Intelligence.

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