

THE LANGUAGE OF FORM AND COLOR: TRACES OF SWEDENBORG'S DOCTRINE OF CORRESPONDENCES IN KANDINSKY'S *CONCERNING THE SPIRITUAL IN ART*

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Wassily Kandinsky's groundbreaking book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, appeared in December 1911, and has come to be considered perhaps the most influential art theoretical book of the twentieth century.¹ In it, Kandinsky lays out his belief that art, especially abstract painting, can counteract the degenerative effects of contemporary materialist society and help usher in the coming "epoch of the Great Spiritual." By moving away from recognizable imagery of the visible world, and relying solely on color and non-representational form, he believed, painters could access and express the invisible realities behind our everyday experience of the world, thus acting as vanguard for the rest of humanity as it evolved toward a higher state of consciousness.²

Kandinsky's book, which he likely drafted between 1900 and 1909 (Kandinsky, vii), drew together a number of currents widespread in European thought in the first years of the twentieth century, among them the critique of the current age, with its materialistic rejection of spiritual realities, and the belief that the everyday world masked higher invisible realms which were apprehensible only to gifted seers. In forming his ideas, Kandinsky read widely on the subjects of esotericism, philosophy, art, and science, and a number of scholars have addressed the contributions of Theosophy, Anthroposophy and contemporary scientific theories

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¹ The first edition sold out almost immediately, requiring two further editions in 1912 to keep up with demand. (Kandinsky, vii) Within a few years it had been translated from German into English, Russian and French.

² As Dann has shown, the term "consciousness" to discuss the possibility of evolutionary progress in the human psyche was already in use by the late nineteenth century, favored by those who embraced such evolutionary models following Darwin. Those who did not tended to prefer the term "soul" (Dann, 46).

on his thought, sources that Kandinsky alludes to in his book.³ Given the wealth of material upon which to draw, Kandinsky and others of the era were free to construct an ideological *mélange* from the available sources, making it exceptionally difficult to pin down specific currents of thought surfacing in his art theory beyond those that he specifically mentions in his writings, especially where the initial concepts had already gone through a series of mutations before reaching him.

One such intriguing current—to date, relatively unexplored in relation to Kandinsky—originates in the writings of the eighteenth-century scientist and visionary Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), which exercised a profound influence on nineteenth-century esoteric thought. Swedenborg's "doctrine of correspondences" and use of cross-sensory analogy in his descriptions of spiritual realms were especially attractive to artists and writers. They were embraced—and also transformed—by such nineteenth-century French writers as Honoré de Balzac and Charles Baudelaire, who in turn inspired an intense enthusiasm for Swedenborg among Symbolist poets and artists internationally, among whom Kandinsky counted himself in his early years as a painter. Swedenborg's doctrine of correspondences suggests that the material world is a form of divine language, revealing truths of higher realms to those whose spiritual eyes have been opened. (Swedenborg, n. 87–89; Balakian, 13–14).⁴ Such visionaries—including Swedenborg himself—were to reeducate their fellows in the reading of this hidden language of nature, and thereby redeem their decadent society. This doctrine resonated with the yearnings for profound meaning and mystery of the Romantics and, in turn, the Symbolists, for whom the Swedish seer became identified with the poet or artist, and the visions themselves became conflated with the rare neurological condition of synesthesia, in which one sense is experienced in terms of another. By the time Kandinsky wrote his book, this understanding of correspondences, which would likely have been unrecognizable to Swedenborg himself, had been

³ Scholars addressing Kandinsky's debt to Theosophical ideas include Sixten Ringbom, followed by Rose-Carol Washon Long and others. Linda Dalrymple Henderson and others have discussed Kandinsky's interest in scientific theory at length.

⁴ Note: It is standard scholarly practice to refer to passages in Swedenborg's works by section number rather than by page number.

so thoroughly assimilated that Kandinsky seemingly takes it as self-evident.

Swedenborg's doctrine of correspondences

Swedenborg was well advanced in his career as a natural scientist when he began having vivid, extraordinary visions of supernatural beings and places in 1743. Through his experiences of conversing with “angels”—the spirits of the deceased—and Jesus Christ, he believed he was charged with communicating the deeper spiritual truths of God’s Word written in the Bible and present in the correspondences of nature, truths to which humanity had lost access. To this end, Swedenborg wrote a number of works—including the immense, nine-volume *Arcana Coelestia* (1749–56)—in many of which he interspersed extensive biblical exegesis with passages describing his own visionary experiences. When the *Arcana* failed to attract a significant audience, Swedenborg published *Heaven and Hell* in 1758, intended as an abridged, more accessible version of the earlier work, removing most of the exegesis, and instead highlighting his spiritual accounts of things “seen and heard.” *Heaven and Hell*—which describes Swedenborg’s conversations with angels and his observations of the three realms of heaven, the intermediate realm of recently departed souls, and hell—became his most widely read book during his lifetime, and was translated from neo-Latin into German, English and French by the early 1780s, and continued in popularity during the following century.⁵ Another Swedenborg text that was unavailable to his contemporaries but was read with interest in the nineteenth century was his *Dream Diary* of 1743–1744, a personal record of his initial visionary experiences, which was first

⁵ In Germany, F.C. Oetinger translated the work as *Vom Himmel und von den Wunderbaren Dingen desselben, wie auch von der Geisterwelt und vom dem Zustand des Menschen nach dem Tod; und von der Hölle; so wie es gehöret und gesehen worden, von Emanuel Swedenborg*, published in Leipzig in 1774. The first English edition, translated by William Cookworthy and revised by Rev. Thomas Hartley, appeared in 1778 and was entitled *A Treatise concerning Heaven and Hell, containing a relation of many wonderful things therein, as heard and seen by the author, the Honourable Emanuel Swedenborg, of the Senatorial Order of Nobles in the kingdom of Sweden*. In France, *Les Merveilles du Ciel et de L’Enfer, et des terres planétaires et astrales, par Emanuel de Swédenborg, d’après le témoignage de ses yeux et de ses oreilles*, translated by Abbé Antoine-Joseph Pernety, appeared in 1782 (Hyde, 222, 245, 247).

published in 1859 and was soon thereafter translated from Swedish into French, English, German and other languages.

Both texts were valuable sources for readers interested in Swedenborg's doctrine of correspondences, which was itself a reworking (or perhaps a re-visioning) of the ancient Hermetic dictum attributed to Hermes Trismagistus, "That which is above is like that which is below, to perpetuate the mystery of the One Thing" (Quoted in Dann, 37–38). Swedenborg, who served to re-popularize the idea, taught that everything encountered in the visible, material world contains multiple levels of meaning, not simply the literal sense apparent on the surface. In Swedenborg's words, "The whole natural world corresponds to the spiritual world—not just the natural world in general, but actually in details. So anything in the natural world that occurs from the spiritual world is called a correspondent. It is vital to understand that the natural world emerges and endures from the spiritual world, just like an effect from the cause that produces it" (Swedenborg, n. 89). Objects in nature, then, correspond to a series of increasingly profound truths coinciding with the three levels of Swedenborg's heaven: the natural, the spiritual, and the celestial. According to Swedenborg, during a golden age in the distant past, humanity had been able to read these correspondences without effort, but due to increasing degeneration and materialism had gradually lost this ability. In his own age, he believed, only those granted the divine gift of vision were able to see through to the deeper meaning written by God in nature.⁶

In addition to nature, Swedenborg also saw spoken and written language as a form of God-given communication that operates on multiple levels, a belief that suggests elements of Kabbalism, with which he was

⁶Swedenborg contrasted his contemporaries with "the ancient people," who prized their knowledge of correspondences and through using this knowledge "thought like angels and actually talked with angels" and to whom "the Lord often appeared . . ." in order to teach them directly. By his own era, on the other hand, this knowledge had been lost, largely because "man has moved himself away from heaven through love of self and love of the world. For a person who loves himself and the world primarily focuses on worldly things only, since these appeal to his outward senses and gratify his inclinations. He does not focus on spiritual things because these appeal to the inner senses and gratify the mind. As a result, people of this kind reject spiritual things, calling them too lofty to think about" (Swedenborg, n. 87).

likely familiar.⁷ Swedenborg believed that by learning to use spiritual vision in reading the Bible, which he believed was “composed by pure correspondences” and contained both “a literal and a spiritual meaning,” he and his readers could begin to regain the fusion of vision and understanding humankind had once had, and that angels enjoy still (Swedenborg, n. 114, Wilkinson, 95). Through understanding these correspondences, present both in the Word and in nature, he felt, humanity could bring about a new golden age, a millennialism that finds an echo in that of Kandinsky over a century later.

The concept of a “language of nature” that may be read by means of spiritual sight links Swedenborg’s correspondences to the broader search for a universal language that occupied a number of thinkers during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Among them was Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), who hoped to establish a universally understandable system of characters that could communicate human thought, including metaphysical concepts, as unequivocally as arithmetic expresses numbers. As Inge Jonsson has shown, Swedenborg was for a time similarly interested in constructing such a language, a “*philosophia universalium mathematica*,” in order to express the essence of the soul (Jonsson, 98–99). The quest for a universal language also led some to speculate on the origins of human language systems, with some concluding that human languages evolved separately in response to specific characteristics of place and people group, an orientation found, for example, in the writings of Johann Gottfried Herder. Others posited that all human languages began as a single system that then mutated over time until humankind was left with but a dim reflection of the power that language once held, an idea in keeping with Swedenborg’s ideas of the golden age. The interest in universal language continued to evolve over the nineteenth century with the development of synthetic languages such as Esperanto, intended to become a shared global language, and in the more poetic and esoteric explorations of writers and artists—among them Kandinsky, who hoped

⁷ Describing the written language of heaven, for example, Swedenborg writes “Once a small page was sent me from heaven, with only a few words written on it in Hebrew letters. I was told that each letter enfolded secrets of wisdom, and that these were within the bends and curves of the letters and therefore in the sounds as well” (Swedenborg, n. 260). Regarding Swedenborg’s awareness of Kabbalistic teachings, see Goodrick-Clarke, 165–166.

color and line within abstract painting could become such a medium of communication (Wilkinson, 3–5).

This search revived the metaphor of the hieroglyph, a concept that exerted a strong fascination on the European mind in the eighteenth century, and continued to resonate even after Champollion's deciphering of the Rosetta Stone in 1822. Although Plato had knowledge of Egyptian hieroglyphics as an alphabet-based writing system, knowledge of the symbols was gradually lost over the centuries, and the symbols came to be equated with esoteric ciphers that both communicated and concealed secret knowledge. This understanding was furthered with the discovery of Horapollon's *Hieroglyphica*, a book of late antiquity rediscovered in 1419, which described the late "enigmatic" hieroglyphics as symbols of religious and philosophical principles rather than as a straight-forward writing system, and which contributed to the sixteenth and seventeenth century craze for emblem books, which were often called "hieroglyphical" (Dieckmann, 307, Jonsson, 107, 112–114). As Jonsson has shown, the concept of hieroglyphics within the emblematic tradition had clear similarities with Swedenborg's theory of correspondences, suggesting as it did that "before the invention of alphabets, humanity knew God through hieroglyphics, and what are the heavens, the earth, and all beings but hieroglyphs and emblems of his glory?" (Jonsson, 112–113). The fascination with hieroglyphs was intensified with William Warburton's assertion in 1741 that Egyptian writing had shifted over time from a system of "natural" signs, in which the character was directly linked to the meaning it represented, to arbitrary, symbolic signs. The same year, Swedenborg likewise took an interest in the metaphor of the hieroglyph, and personally linked it with his doctrine of correspondences in his unfinished manuscript *Clavis hieroglyphica (An Hieroglyphical Key to Natural and Spiritual Mysteries, by Way of Representations and Correspondences)*, written in 1741, but unpublished during his lifetime. Other writers specifically invoked the metaphor of the hieroglyph in relation to poetry and art, among them Denis Diderot, writing in 1751, who described poetic expression as "a web of hieroglyphs which depict thought. In this sense one might say that all poetry is emblematic" (Dieckmann, 306). This linkage continues in the nineteenth century, with the German Romantic artist Philip Otto Runge describing his highly symbolic and enigmatic paintings as "hieroglyphs,"

and André Gide, who used the term to refer to the mysterious and essential relationships between nature, language and poetry (Dieckmann, 306).

Another aspect of Swedenborg's writings that provided a strong draw for the artists and poets that followed him was his use of sensory metaphors in his descriptions of the heavenly realms. This often is associated with the effects of various levels of speech—or even thought—on the senses, as when Swedenborg explains that “to angels, hellish speech is like a foul smell that hurts the nostrils,” or when he relates that angels' thoughts and speech can create “changes in heaven's light” or a sense of warmth (Swedenborg, n. 239, 245). Swedenborg frequently uses such descriptions in order to suggest the *otherness* of the sensations experienced in non-earthly realms, a technique that may have contributed to Swedenborg's significance for nineteenth-century poetics despite his otherwise rather scientific and unpoetic writing style.

Popularizing Swedenborg in the nineteenth century

These concepts of the hieroglyph, correspondences, and the intermingling of the senses were compelling to the generations of Romantic and Symbolist poets. By the nineteenth century, Swedenborg's works had been translated into many languages, including English, French, German and Russian, and the popularity of Swedenborgianism was such that Balakian asserts it had become “the basic mysticism of the time” (Balakian, 12). Most nineteenth-century readers, who included such luminaries as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, William Blake and George Innes, were far less interested in Swedenborg's interpretations of the Bible than in his mystical visions, and turned primarily to *Heaven and Hell* and to his dream journal for inspiration. As William Blake pointed out in his *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1791), this draw was due less to the originality of Swedenborg's ideas, than to his ability to synthesize and thereby popularize so many esoteric philosophies of past ages in one system (Balakian, 12).⁸

⁸For more on Blake's contested entanglement with Swedenborg, see Noah Adrien Lyon's essay in this issue, “Blake and Swedenborg: a New Approach to Opposition,” [page numbers]

Despite the strong interest in Swedenborg's doctrine of correspondences among nineteenth-century artists and poets, there were aspects of his work with which certain close readers took issue. Although Swedenborg's visions were in many ways radical, he nonetheless remained a member of the Lutheran Church all his life, and for some his interpretation of his spiritual experiences indicated a hesitance to stray too far from his Christian and scientific roots. Whereas nineteenth-century readers sought to use the idea of correspondences to explode open the meaning inherent in the natural world and to bypass too strict a reliance on the rational mind, Swedenborg took an Enlightenment approach of cataloging such meanings, which Balakian calls "old-fashioned allegory and not *symbol*, as the word evolved in the century following Swedenborg" (Balakian, 14). This aspect of Swedenborg—the compulsion to pin down meaning definitively—led to critiques by writers who were otherwise quite appreciative of his ideas. They typically embraced those aspects they found useful or appealing while dismissing, ignoring or altering those with which they disagreed. Such reworking resulted in popularized—and in some cases mistaken—understandings of Swedenborg's ideas, especially since few people in the nineteenth century seem to have actually read the works of Swedenborg for themselves, according to Wilkinson.⁹ "In nineteenth-century everyday and literary English and French," she explains, "'correspondences' took on a new sense: the word came to designate potential meanings suggested by the existence of an allegorical language of nature which, it was believed, Swedenborg had explained in a series of exegetical works" and yet few people delved deeply enough into his writings to discover the key to this allegorical language, a tendency strengthened by the Romantic and Symbolist preference for embracing—rather than explicating—mystery (Wilkinson, 19).

Given such relatively loose interpretations of his ideas, Swedenborg could, chameleon-like, be adapted to serve as patron saint for diverse

⁹ Even those who did often had to rely on abridged or faulty translations of his works. In his study of the reception of Swedenborg's writings in France, Karl-Erik Sjöden reports that the first French translator of *Heaven and Hell*, Antoine-Joseph Pernety, took great liberties in his translation such that "when [he] came across a paragraph that did not suit him personally, he simply changed it," and even "interjected answers from his oracle into his translations" (Quoted in Gyllenhaal, 88).

causes and perspectives. Swedenborg's works, for example, were embraced by radical utopian movements such as that of Joseph Fourier in France and the United States, and in France Swedenborg's name came to be additionally associated with populist political orientations, despite the fact that in Protestant lands his politics were seen as relatively conservative.¹⁰ At the same time, Swedenborg's ideas also became associated with and were transmitted alongside the doctrines of Mesmerism, leading to his doctrine of correspondences becoming interwoven with ideas of energetic healing and clairvoyance in some circles (Wilkinson, ix; Gabay, 40–41, 218).

Swedenborg's reception in French literary circles: Balzac, Baudelaire and the Symbolists

The literary works of Honoré de Balzac played a key role in spreading and popularizing certain aspects of Swedenborgian thought well into the twentieth century, and served as a bridge delivering his ideas—though through Balzac's own personal lens—to later writers and artists including Baudelaire and the composer Arnold Schönberg. This is especially true of his two "Swedenborgian novels" *Seraphita* and *Louis Lambert*, two of the three works collectively titled *Recherche de l'Absolu*. *Seraphita* introduces a number of Swedenborgian concepts through recounting the story of the title character Seraphita, or Seraphitus, a 17-year-old visionary cousin of Swedenborg's. Seraphita's/Seraphitus' position between heaven and earth is underscored by the ambiguity of her/his gender, suggestive of Swedenborg's concept of heavenly marriage in which two individuals are bonded together "into one mind" such that they "are not referred to as two angels but as one" (Swedenborg, n. 468). Seraphita/Seraphitus befriends a young man and woman, Wilfred and Minna, both of whom fall in love with her/him, and s/he shares with them some glimpses of the higher worlds. Balzac uses these and other conversations within the novel to present a number of Swedenborgian concepts, such as the correspondence

¹⁰ For further exploration of nineteenth-century American Fourierists' embrace of Swedenborgian ideas, see Robert W. Gladish, *Swedenborg, Fourier and the America of the 1840s*.

of the earthly with the heavenly, and the intermingling in heaven of sense perceptions that on earth are distinct from one another. Minna's father, Pastor Becker—depicted as a close reader of Swedenborg despite his marked skepticism—alludes to this latter idea, explaining to Wilfred and Minna that “some very good men will not recognize [Swedenborg's] worlds where colors are heard in delicious concerts, where words are flames, and the Word is written in inflected letters” although he allows that “to poets and writers [his theosophy] is infinitely marvelous; to seers it is all absolute truth” (Balzac, 50).¹¹ The most striking presentation of synesthesia comes with the apotheosis of Seraphitus (who, in the end, is referred to only in the masculine), in which Minna and Wilfred are given a glimpse of heaven as their friend completes the transformation from earthly being to heavenly seraph. During this vision “they heard the songs of heaven which gave them all the sensations of color, perfume and thought and which reminded them of the innumerable details of all the creations, as an earthly song can revive the slenderest memories of love” (Balzac, 140; Balakian, 18–19).

In contrast to Seraphita/Seraphitus, the title character of *Louis Lambert* is likewise a visionary figure, but one who is ultimately unable to reconcile his spiritual vision with life in the world and succumbs to madness. Balzac weaves elements of Swedenborg's philosophy throughout this novel as well, using them to mirror aspects of his character's intellectual and spiritual development. In a passage near the beginning, for example, Balzac utilizes the concept of the hieroglyph in reflecting on Lambert's extraordinary love of reading from early childhood and his delight in the mystical qualities of language (Wilkinson, 152). Lambert asks the narrator, “Who can philosophically explain the transition from sentence to thought, from thought to word, from word to its hieroglyphic presentment, from hieroglyphics to the alphabet, from the alphabet to written language, of which the eloquent beauty resides in a series of images, classified by rhetoric, and

¹¹ Seraphita's/Seraphitus' own words only once directly suggest the experience of synesthesia, and then rather wryly, allowing that people ascribe all manner of supernatural abilities to her. “They say that I walk on clouds; I am on familiar terms with the eddies in the fjord; the sea is a horse I have saddled and bridled; I know where the singing flower grows, where the talking light shines, where living colors blaze that scent the air . . .” (Balzac, 85).

forming, in a sense, the hieroglyphics of thought?" (Balzac, 147). In certain of his works, then, and especially in these two "philosophical novels," Balzac makes use of ideas from Swedenborg without adhering to them rigidly, transmitting, as Wilkinson terms it "a literary myth of Swedenborg which was, perhaps in spite of itself, relatively faithful to the original" (Wilkinson, 152).

Baudelaire's "Correspondances" and French Symbolism

Charles Baudelaire, whose 1857 poem "Correspondances" was to popularize a version of Swedenborg's doctrine throughout *fin de siècle* Europe, certainly would have read Balzac's *Recherche de l'Absolu*, in addition to reading certain of Swedenborg's works directly, including *Heaven and Hell*.¹² Baudelaire is a notoriously difficult poet to categorize, described by scholars as both a decadent and a Catholic, as a Romantic, a proto-Symbolist, or even the father of Symbolist poetry. As was the case with Balzac, Baudelaire furthered an understanding of Swedenborg's ideas that differed significantly from their original source. As Wilkinson notes of Baudelaire's critical writings, although the French poet makes reference to Swedenborg eight times in his essays on Victor Hugo, Richard Wagner, Fourier and Eugene Delacroix, and mentions the doctrine of correspondences seven times, he primarily does so in order to support his own aspirations for the role of the artist as visionary.¹³ In his 1861 essay on Victor Hugo, for example, he wrote "the metaphors and epithets of excellent poets are drawn from the inexhaustible fund of the Universal analogy . . . Swedenborg already taught us that everything, form, movement, number, color, perfume, in the spiritual as well as in the natural, is significant, reciprocal, converse, correspondent" (Wanner, 150). Elsewhere in the same essay he asks, "Thus what is a poet (I take the word in its widest sense) if not a translator, a decipherer?" (Dann, 38). Thus, where Balzac

¹² According to Gyllenhaal, Baudelaire's copy of *Heaven and Hell* survives and includes the poet's underlining (Gyllenhaal, 90).

¹³ Wilkinson points out that in all seven cases where Baudelaire includes the term "correspondences," he uses it to suggest analogies among the arts, to describe the artistic process in terms of a linguistic model, and to discuss utopianism (Wilkinson, 19, 219, 240).

clearly took an interest in (but was perhaps ambivalent about) the visionary states reported by Swedenborg that he reflected in passages of his own novels, Baudelaire deliberately recasts the *poet* in the role of the visionary, the seer who can reveal truths invisible to the less gifted.

This association is implicit in the poem “Correspondances,” the enthusiastic reception of which helped establish the perceived hieratic role of the artist—here linked with cross-sensory experience—in the minds of the Symbolist generation, and embedding this in the popular understanding of Swedenborg’s doctrine:

Correspondences?

Nature is a temple where living pillars
Let sometimes emerge confused words;
Man comes there over forests of symbols
Which watch him with intimate eyes.

Like those deep echoes that meet from afar
In a dark and profound harmony,
As vast as night and clarity,
So perfumes, colors, tones answer each other.

There are perfumes fresh as children’s flesh,
Soft like oboes, green as meadows,
And others corrupted, rich, triumphant

Possessing the diffusion of infinite things,
Like amber, musk, incense, and aromatic resin,
Chanting the ecstasies of spirit and senses.¹⁴

As literary scholars have pointed out nearly from the beginning, the poem has a very noticeable shift of orientation halfway through. The two quatrains with which it begins are much closer in spirit to Swedenborg’s

¹⁴ Translated by Geoffrey Wagner (Baudelaire, unpaginated).

doctrine (although the “living pillars” of the temple only sometimes allow “confused words” to emerge), while the following tercets turn instead toward earthly sensory experience. With their oracular and mysterious tone and suggestion of spiritual meaning infusing the objects among which we move, the quatrains’ lines suggest “vertical correspondences,” linking the earthly with the divine unity, in which even the sensory allusions (“perfumes, the colors and the sounds”) are oriented toward things beyond the physical plane. The two tercets that follow, in contrast, have been described as presenting “horizontal correspondences.”¹⁵ In them, Baudelaire turns from contemplating mysterious worlds to reveling in the mystery and pleasure of the here and now. These lines, though written before the concept of synesthesia had entered the artistic lexicon, were initially understood to echo the use of sensory analogy found in Swedenborg’s own writings about heavenly realms. However, by the end of the century Baudelaire’s poem had become firmly linked with the idea of synesthetic experience, a faculty coveted by Symbolists—including Kandinsky—who equated it with spiritual insight.

Although by 1911 the idea of synesthesia was widely discussed by poets, artists and musicians, in 1857 it had yet to emerge from medical journals where the phenomenon was first noted, and in Swedenborg’s day had not yet appeared at all. Kevin Dann traces the fortunes of the concept from its earliest appearances in medical treatises, through its “discovery” by French literary culture with the publication of Arthur Rimbaud’s poem “Voyelles” in 1872, to the resultant craze for synesthetic experience that continued in Kandinsky’s day and beyond. The poem, in which Rimbaud assigns a color to each vowel, was inspired by the poet’s avid reading of medical encyclopedias, in which he likely came across just such a list described by a true synesthete (Dann, 17, 25). The enthusiasm for his poem

¹⁵ For discussion of the concepts of “horizontal” versus “vertical correspondences” and their use by scholars in discussing Baudelaire’s poem, see Wilkinson, 218-219.

and the ensuing curiosity about synesthesia led to a reappraisal of the cross-sensory language in Baudelaire's "Correspondances" as well.¹⁶

Russian Symbolism and Baudelaire

Swedenborg's doctrine of correspondences was thus enthusiastically embraced by the emerging generation of French Symbolist poets and artists, who in turn inspired parallel movements elsewhere in Europe, including Germany, Sweden, Norway, Finland and Russia. Although the Symbolist poets and artists were not necessarily reading Swedenborg directly, "their international coterie agreed on accepting a common origin in the philosophy of Swedenborg," as Balakian explains (Balakian, 11). The Symbolists, who sought to counter the superficial materialism of the era—in some cases with the ennui and cynicism of the "Decadence," in other cases with optimism and a sense of spiritual mission—turned inward, seeking profound truths in esotericism, seeing the artist/poet as a prophet with exquisite sensitivity to realities invisible to the rest, and who could then reveal these to humanity. Thus the poet, and later the painter, placed themselves in the role of seer that Swedenborg had occupied earlier.

These Symbolist groups also shared an intense cult-like veneration of Baudelaire, which Wanner reports started earlier in Russia than elsewhere in Europe, culminating in the "Silver Age" of Russian culture in the early

¹⁶ Dann makes a point of differentiating between the extremely rare phenomenon of neurological synesthesia, which he terms "idiopathic synesthesia," and imaginative or poetic expression that incorporates synesthetic imagery. True synesthetes, for example, commonly experience letters—especially vowels as in Rimbaud's poem—or numbers, as having a particular color, associations which stay quite stable over time, whereas the colors assigned more subjectively by non-synesthetes are likely to change frequently. Also telling is the tendency for artists to assign relatively pure colors (Rimbaud's vowels, for example) rather than the complex mixes reported by true synesthetes—for example, a synaesthete might describe a letter as "yellowish gray, like new rope" or "mouse color." These color associations typically do not follow an organized pattern, such as the sequence found in the spectrum or color wheel. In contrast, the Russian composer and self-proclaimed synesthete Alexander Scriabin, whom Dann asserts was not an idiopathic synesthete, made use of color to correspond to notes in his work *Prometheus: the Poem of Fire* of 1910, but based his system upon a direct relation between the musical scale and the color spectrum. Scriabin also felt free to alter the sequence of colors somewhat for aesthetic effect. Finally the tendency for these color attributes to coincide with color symbolism of ancient or more recent vintage would make a determination of true synaesthesia unlikely (Dann, 11–12, 71–73).

years of the twentieth century (Wanner, ix).¹⁷ Toward the end of the nineteenth century, and especially once censorship of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* was finally lifted in 1906, the demand for his books in Russia was "furious" (Wanner 124). As with Swedenborg's reception in France earlier in the century, Baudelaire's image in Russia was likewise conveniently mutable. "In fact," writes Wanner, "perhaps the most striking feature in the Russian response to Baudelaire is the surprisingly various images of the French poet. Baudelaire was seen in turn as a social critic, decadent, symbolist, revolutionary, reactionary, aestheticist, pornographer, nihilist, and religious prophet. . . . Baudelaire appealed to members of both the "progressive" and the "decadent" camp. As do the changing colors of litmus paper, Baudelaire's metamorphoses indicate the character of the milieu in which he was immersed" (Wanner, 2). While he was initially celebrated by the poets known as the "Decadents," by the 1890s, the younger generation of Symbolist writers—with whom Kandinsky was a contemporary—turned from the pessimism and self-indulgence of the poets immediately preceding them, and wished to use art to reveal transcendent truths. They turned to Baudelaire's more spiritually resonant poems, especially "Correspondences," for inspiration, and quickly made *sootvetstviia* ("correspondences") their "omnipresent slogan and catchword" (Wanner, 123). In Russia, the Swedenborgian concept, as filtered through Baudelaire, was merged with the theological philosophy of Vladimir Solovyov (1853–1900), whose rejection of the positivism of the age and call for the progressive transfiguration of the material world through beauty and art, exerted a strong influence on the second generation of Russian Symbolists (Wanner, 145, 152).¹⁸ Although Baudelaire's

¹⁷ For a discussion of Swedenborg's influence on Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky who, like Baudelaire, was embraced as a predecessor by the Russian Symbolists, (Wanner, 70) see Czeslaw Milosz's article "Dostoevsky and Swedenborg."

¹⁸ One of these mystically oriented Symbolist poets, Vyacheslav Ivanovich Ivanov (1866–1949), pronounced his love of Baudelaire while also maintaining a critical stance toward the French poet's less spiritual elements. Ivanov, who believed art should be the "revelation of a higher, transcendental truth," had an ambiguous attitude towards Baudelaire's *Correspondances*, approving primarily of the initial half, which he wrote "discloses the real mystery of nature, completely alive and completely founded on secret correspondences, kinship, and confidences of something that appears to our dead ignorance as separate and dissonant, accidentally close and lifelessly mute. In nature, for those who can hear, there is a sound of a[n] . . . eternal word" (Wanner, 147). In an article on contemporary symbolism published in 1908, he disapproves of the sensuality and abandonment of mystical unity in the tercets, and draws a parallel between the quatrains and passages from Balzac's two philosophical novels, suggesting Baudelaire may have appropriated the quatrains from Balzac (Wanner, 148).

poem was widely read, translated and commented upon, Wanner contends that his Russian Symbolist enthusiasts more often used him as a screen upon which to project their own ideas, much as had been the case with Swedenborg in mid-century France. Wanner suggests that “Baudelaire’s significance lay perhaps ultimately less in his poetry, let alone in his critical writings (which few Russians bothered to read) than in his *image*. He turned into a mythical presence, a poetic icon which could be upheld for veneration and derision. . . ” (Wanner, 196).

Kandinsky’s involvement with international Symbolist movements

Although Kandinsky is most often discussed in context of Expressionism and early modern abstraction, at the time that he wrote *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* the term “Expressionism” had not yet been coined, and his ideas and his art during the period emerged in the context of Symbolism. He began his career as an artist relatively late, leaving a promising career as a law professor in 1896 at the age of 30, and moved to Munich where he completed his art studies in the atelier of Franz von Stuck, a prominent German Symbolist painter and member of the Munich Secession.¹⁹ The artistic culture in Munich through the first decade of the new century remained strongly Symbolist and *Jugendstil*—the German version of art nouveau—and Kandinsky’s painting during these years reflects aspects of a folkloric Symbolist style. Kandinsky also cultivated professional relationships with prominent Symbolist painters, among them the Finnish Symbolist Akseli Gallen-Kallela, whose interest in Swedenborg has been noted by Nina Kokkinen.²⁰ He also had connections with Symbolist groups outside of Munich. While living in Sèvres near Paris in 1906-1907, he established links with the French Symbolist group that published the mystically oriented journal *Les Tendances Nouvelles*. He also maintained close ties with Symbolist colleagues in Moscow and St. Petersburg, traveling to Russia in 1903 and again in 1910, subscribing and contributing

¹⁹ It was in Stuck’s atelier that Kandinsky met and befriended a number of younger artists who were to become his Expressionist comrades in the Blue Rider group, including Franz Marc and Paul Klee.

²⁰ See, for example, Kokkinen’s article “Hugo Simberg’s Art and the Widening Perspectives into Swedenborg’s Ideas” in *Emanuel Swedenborg—Exploring a “World Memory.”*

articles to Russian Symbolist journals, and participating in exhibitions of the Moscow-based Symbolist artists group the Blue Rose (Düchting, 57). Kandinsky was thus clearly still strongly affiliated with Symbolist groups while formulating the ideas expressed in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*.

Concerning the Swedenborgian in Art

Returning to Kandinsky's slim book of 1911, we can begin to tease out traces of Swedenborg's doctrine of correspondences as filtered through nineteenth-century sources. Kandinsky's embrace of aspects of Symbolist thought is relatively easy to see, as is his debt to contemporary theories of subtle energy, filtered in part through Theosophical writings.²¹ Kandinsky's position often remains relatively close to those of the Russian Symbolists—especially in the first section, "About General Aesthetics"—emphasizing the soulless state of contemporary European culture, and the attendant need for a spiritual regeneration, themes championed by Soloviev whose work Kandinsky had read while still in Russia. Kandinsky's sense of a dawning new age of human spiritual progress emerged, in part, from the long-standing tradition of millennialism within Russian philosophical thought dating back to the seventeenth century, but also drew upon esoteric evolutionary theories current within the Theosophical Society and other spiritual circles at the time (Weiss, 140). It should be noted, as well, that Swedenborg's belief that the Last Judgment had already taken place and that humankind was henceforth living in a post-apocalyptic world in which spiritual regeneration was immanent likely had played a role in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century discourse about human spiritual evolution.

In keeping with Symbolist views, Kandinsky includes artists of all media (painters, but also poets and musicians) among the prophets destined to help humanity in this evolutionary process. Such visionaries, he

²¹ This is especially apparent in his discussion of "vibrations" caused in the artist or viewer when looking at form or color, of which Kandinsky makes mention several times. Another fascinating trajectory to explore, though beyond the scope of this paper, is the traces of Swedenborgian thought that reach Kandinsky by way of nineteenth-century mind cure trends as interpreted by the Theosophical Society and others.

claims, are able to sense “inner need” to a degree their fellows cannot, and to communicate knowledge of it through their art. Kandinsky’s descriptions of what constitutes the apprehension of “inner need” appear inconsistent at times—at certain points he seems to be suggesting psychological processes, at others a sense of divine communication, and at yet others a secularized objective need on the part of a personified “Art”—shifts which may reflect his changing perspective over the several years during which he drafted the book.

Intriguing parallels with Swedenborg’s doctrine of correspondences appear in Kandinsky’s discussion of *how* painters might communicate this inner need to viewers. Kandinsky advocates a move toward non-representational art as the best means by which artists can help usher in the coming spiritual era. In the current materialistic age, in his view, representational art is no longer able to point the viewer beyond the surface of things. Only those artists who incorporate levels of abstraction *following the sense of inner need* rather than simply visual beauty, are, like Cézanne, “endowed with the gift of divining the inner life in everything” (Kandinsky, 37). The abstract artist presents mysterious signs that startle the attentive viewer into seeing differently, seeing the “inner meaning” within the composition, form and colors acting as “human words in which a divine message must be written in order for it to be comprehensible to human minds”—though he felt that at the time he was writing viewers were not yet ready to encounter fully non-representational painting (Kandinsky, 59). Throughout his treatise, Kandinsky uses “abstract” and “non-material” seemingly interchangeably, making a conceptual connection between non-representational art and the non-physical or “spiritual” dimensions. In this regard, Kandinsky’s proposed language of pure color and form in painting could be interpreted as a yet more radical intervention than that offered by Swedenborg, whose words pointed back to nature and to the Bible, for an era even further removed than Swedenborg’s from the golden age when humankind could comprehend the universal language of nature.

Yet by moving away from recognizable subject matter, Kandinsky is forced to address the question of whether a universal language of form and color is actually possible. Here, in his long treatment of color, he is clearly trying to find some universally accepted criteria by which various shades of color can be interpreted. In doing so, he moves between subjec-

tive color analogies and associations, traditional color symbolism systems, and physiological responses to color in an attempt to establish some solid ground, but without being entirely successful. He at one point introduces a medical account of synesthesia, in which the patient consistently experienced the taste of “blue” when eating a particular sauce, though Kandinsky attributes this experience to the individual’s exquisite sensitivity of soul, rather than to a neurological difference (Kandinsky, 50). Given the aspiration that Kandinsky held out for abstract art to express the “eternal and objective,” the intractable subjectivity of color experience remains problematic, and a hurdle for his modernist revision of the concept of correspondences.

Finally, Kandinsky’s emphasis on the parallels between painting and music throughout the book bear some echo of the trajectory of Swedenborg’s legacy by way of French literature. In his conclusion, Kandinsky discusses his own experimental forms of painting in terms of musical terminology, calling his quickest sketches in response to specific experiences “Impressions,” his intuitively created pieces “Improvisations” and his carefully constructed pieces, for which he would often create scores of preparatory sketches, “Compositions.” In music itself, he hails the rejection of conventional tonality by avant-garde composers such as Arnold Schönberg as a parallel project to his own.²² Such atonal compositions, he suggests, force the listener out of a passive reception of familiar beauty to experience the “inner beauty” of the music being expressed, much as do non-representational canvases (Kandinsky, 34, 35).

Kandinsky’s reference to Schönberg, and the connection that he forged with the composer only months before *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* was published, is a fitting element with which to conclude.²³ Kandinsky had attended a concert of Schönberg’s music in January 1911, an experience that inspired him to paint *Impression III (Concert)* in response to the sensations and emotions the music awoke in him. He wrote to Schönberg within

²² Although in the 1920s, Schönberg became especially associated with the twelve-tone system he invented, in 1911 he had only recently embraced atonal composition, and had published his theories regarding this in his book *Harmonielehrer* published only months before *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*.

²³ Kandinsky had all but completed his manuscript by the time he became acquainted with Schönberg, thus precluding direct influence on the ideas expressed in it.

a couple days of the concert, expressing his appreciation of the music and his belief that he and Schönberg were pursuing parallel paths. “What we are striving for and our whole manner of thought and feeling have so much in common,” Kandinsky wrote, “that I feel completely justified in expressing my empathy [for your work],”²⁴ Kandinsky’s letter initiated many years of warm friendship and collaboration between the two men. During these years, Schönberg likely had opportunities to share with Kandinsky his enthusiasm for Swedenborgian ideas, which he had encountered through Balzac’s *Seraphita*, a novel he described as “perhaps the most glorious work in existence” in a letter to Kandinsky on August 19th, 1912 (Hahl-Koch, 54, 144). In the same letter, Schönberg reflected on their shared artistic and spiritual goals in more overtly Swedenborgian—and yet also avant-garde modernist—terms:

We must become conscious that there are puzzles around us. And we must find the courage to look these puzzles in the eye without timidly asking about “the solution.” It is important that our creation of such puzzles mirror the puzzles with which we are surrounded, so that our soul may endeavor—not to solve them—but to decipher them. What we gain thereby should not be the solution, but a new method of coding or decoding. The material, worthless in itself, serves in the creation of new puzzles. For the puzzles are an image of the ungraspable. And imperfect, that is, a human image. But if we can only learn from them to consider the ungraspable as possible, we get nearer to God, because we no longer demand to understand him. Because then we no longer measure him with our intelligence, criticize him, deny him, because we cannot reduce him to that human inadequacy which is our clarity. (Hahl-Koch, 54–55)

²⁴ Letter dated January 18, 1911 (Hahl-Koch, 21).

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