

## REVIEW

THE SWEDENBORG EPIC, by Cyriel O. Sigstedt. Bookman Associates, New York, 1952; price \$4.50.

It is now more than two years since the publication of Cyriel Sigstedt's *The Swedenborg Epic*. This work has received some consideration in these pages, but recently a review by Dr. Ernst Benz of Marburg (in the *Review of Religion*, November 1953) has come to our attention and has aroused some reflections. This month of Swedenborg's birthday seems an appropriate time to discuss the *Epic* and other biographies of Swedenborg. The following is from Dr. Benz's review, and is reproduced with the permission of the *Review of Religion*:

"The present work by Cyriel O. Sigstedt differs from the other versions of the last decade in method in that it is a biography in the strict sense of the word, and, as regards its contents, it is an interpretation of Swedenborg from the standpoint of a member of the New Church, which regards itself as the fulfillment of his promised form of the true church.

"The pure biographical design has the advantage of a comprehensive presentation of the entire Swedenborg tradition. Everything which R. L. Tafel assembled in his two volumes of Documents concerning the Life and Character of Swedenborg, and all the documents and testimonies which, in the meantime, the research work of the Academy at Bryn Athyn has collected in addition, are here brought together in an orderly historical sequence. . . . The enumeration of his works is accomplished with industry and care, not only by means of a brief informatory resumé, but also with an account of the echoes found in contemporary reviews. In this respect the book represents a notable scientific achievement in that the complete manysidedness of the figure and work of Swedenborg is plainly revealed, as on a motion picture reel, so to speak. And, as an introduction to a wider circle of readers, it is the more suitable in that it is presented in a pleasing, lively style.

"But exactly in this method there lies a limitation of viewpoint. The historical character of Swedenborg, in its uniqueness and singularity, is lifted entirely out of the context of history, and herein the dogmatic New Church interpretation is apparent. Exactly that which is problematical for the reader of today is set

forth as self-evident, i.e., that Swedenborg is the only man who, by reason of a special grace, from a definite point of time in his life kept an open view into the spiritual world and reported its secrets as an authentic witness, on the basis of seeing and hearing, and, on the basis of this personal observation, revealed the true sense of the Word of God.

“While Swedenborg the scientist, in a summary way at least, is placed in the scientific history of his day, for Swedenborg the seer, this is left completely undone. The impression is created that, as regards his visionary experience, his theological ideas, and his religious type, there is no historical analogy to whom he can be compared. So just the question which the modern reader directs toward such a figure remains unformulated and naturally unanswered, namely, How does it stand with the claim to truth of his revelation? What is his place in the history of Christian visionaries who have come forward at various times with revelations and claims similar to his?

“That which Martin Lamm has overdone in his attempt to represent the teaching of Swedenborg as only a new form of Neo-Platonism, and to define him according to a pre-existent model of philosophical thought-form, is, by Sigstedt, too little done. She has lifted him, as theologian and seer, entirely out of history, and put him on a pedestal, as if truly, after a thousand years of spiritual degeneration, the whole truth, in the form of a unique revelation from heaven, had fallen upon him, and as if any comparison to earlier forms of vision and knowledge of truth, or even the presentation of an historical analogy, were a crime of lese-majesté.”

From Dr. Benz’s review it seems evident that Mrs. Sigstedt has achieved to a remarkable degree what any New Church biographer of Swedenborg would aim to do, that is, to show Swedenborg as unique among men. Mrs. Sigstedt believes in Swedenborg’s theological teachings and in the plain statements which he made about his work. She believes and intentionally conveys the “impression . . . that as regards his [Swedenborg’s] visionary experience, his theological ideas, and his religious type, there is no historical analogy to whom he can be compared.” It is also evident from this review that one biography cannot satisfy all readers. Mrs. Sigstedt has written primarily for New Church

readers, however much she might like to interest others in her book.

It would be interesting to know how Dr. Benz reacted to Signé Toksvig's work on Swedenborg. Toksvig admits that Swedenborg is unique, but she tries nevertheless to fit him into the strained and distorted picture that psychologists have built up in their efforts to explain psychic phenomena. She tries to explain Swedenborg's communication with the spiritual world as a "personality association" with the "psychon systems" of discarnate memories which are supposed to remain as an echo of one's mental life for an indeterminate period after death. How much easier it is to accept Swedenborg's own explanation. Why do psychologists find the "common subconsciousness of mankind" more acceptable than the belief in the individuality of man after death? Toksvig treats Swedenborg's revelation as something he dreamed up to satisfy his own emotional needs. She gives him credit for a good religious system ("if only he had not gone in for interpreting the Bible"), but assumes it was all borrowed from someone else. She does not ask where these others got it.

Benz feels that we need more critical and authoritative comparison of Swedenborg's work with that of his contemporaries in order to judge of his contributions to science. This is true. We should not make claims for Swedenborg which are not fully justified. Such studies as Benz suggests would be interesting and worthwhile, but to a New Church man, Swedenborg's place as a scientist is of secondary importance. The New Church man makes a clear distinction between the Theological Writings of Swedenborg, which contain revealed truth, and his earlier writings on philosophical and scientific subjects. The New Church man does not look for any new scientific information in the former, for the facts of science are never revealed. His acceptance of the Theological Writings is not based on any new scientific knowledge which they contain. As to the scientific and philosophical works, he studies these in order better to understand how the Lord in His providence prepared a man to receive the Revelation of the Second Coming. We can learn much from Swedenborg's attitude and approach to science. The fact that Swedenborg did foreshadow certain scientific discoveries is of great interest to us and should not be belittled. But these do nothing toward *proving*

the truths of the Theological Writings. The Writings must be judged on their own merits.

The New Church man enjoys the assurance, amply offered in the *Epic*, that Swedenborg was an honest, straightforward man, respected, admired, and loved by his contemporaries; but he does not *need* this assurance, for the Writings could not have been the work of any human brain, whether that of a brilliant scientist or quack. Our interest in human beings makes us wonder about the man whom the Lord chose to do this work, and it is this interest which this biography satisfies more fully than any of its predecessors.

More convincing than a comparison of Swedenborg's *scientific* work with that of his contemporaries would be a comparison of his theological works and his claims as a revelator with the claims of mystics and religious reformers. The differences are striking. We are impressed by the fact that Swedenborg, after receiving his call, did not go out and tell the world, but sat down quietly to study the Word. We are impressed by the fact that he never attempted to found an organized church body.

Mrs. Sigstedt says that she has not attempted to interpret Swedenborg's life, but rather to give a chronological story which speaks for itself. Dr. Benz is evidence of the fact that her viewpoint inevitably resulted in interpretation. The flaw in this book, if any, lies in its attempt to appeal to the skeptics as well as to the believers. It would be interesting to know how it would strike one who had had no previous contact with Swedenborg.

To the New Church reader this is a satisfying book. As Mrs. Sigstedt says in the Foreword: "At the sacrifice of brevity I have tried to cover the ground thoroughly, passing by no documents of importance to make this volume a storehouse of information." Dr. Benz agrees that she has done just this, but the result is not ponderous and dull. Instead, it is a leisurely and unhurried story with the little incidents of daily life lightening the drama of mental development and spiritual struggle. In some aspects of the treatment of the subject matter, it probably appeals more to the feminine reader than to the masculine. But as a storehouse of information it can be enjoyed by all. It is for making this material available to the New Church reader that we are deeply grateful to Mrs. Sigstedt.

MORNA HYATT