

## SWEDENBORG, AN ANATOMICAL DISSECTOR

BY ALFRED ACTON

When Swedenborg published the *Principia* in 1734, he had in mind the application of its principles to his study of the connection between the soul and the body. This is abundantly shown in his unpublished work on the *Mechanism of the Soul and the Body* written just prior to his journey to Germany for the purpose of printing the *Principia*, and also by his *Psychologica* written while the *Principia* was being printed. Both these works evidence the principles laid down in the *Principia*; indeed, the second contains a drawing of the soul as consisting of the first and second finites of the *Principia*.

It is still more evident in the *Prodromus* or Forerunner, commonly known as *The Infinite*, published a week after the *Principia*. Part 2 of this work treats of the connection between the soul and the body. This treatment, however, was merely preliminary, and was to be further developed in "the work itself" of which *The Infinite* was the forerunner.

But Swedenborg felt that for the further pursuit of this subject, a thorough grounding in anatomy was necessary. Even while the *Opera Mineralia* (of which the *Principia* was the commencement) was being printed, he procured a German work on Anatomy and carefully studied it, even translating parts of it into Latin—a translation which is known as *The Human Body*.\* While in Leipzig, he also procured several other anatomical works.

The title of "the work itself" was to be "The Animal Kingdom or a System of Natural Principles and Phenomena concerning the two parts of Man, the Soul and the Body"—a title which Swedenborg wrote out just prior to his journey to Paris in 1736.

In his application to the College of Mines for two or three years' leave, he stated that his purpose was to publish the work which he had promised in *The Infinite*, and that it would be necessary for him to study abroad before this work could be written.

In Paris he took lodgings near the School of Chirurgery, where the work of dissection, established during the reign of Louis XIV,

\* This translation has been erroneously thought to be a work by Swedenborg himself.

was under the charge of Dr. Petit.† Swedenborg remained as a student in this School for about a year and a half, during which time he was busily engaged in dissection.

This is an inference drawn from his journal for 1736–1738 where he speaks of his lodging and where, after many days of sight-seeing, he is silent for many months. But the inference becomes certainty when we note that in his work on the *Cerebrum*, written in Venice in 1738 immediately after his departure from Paris, he for the first time alludes to dissection practiced by himself.

In that work he speaks of having dissected the brain of a sheep (*Cer.* n. 339). In the first volume of the *Economy of the Animal Kingdom* n. 409, written in 1739, he gives a detailed description of what he had observed in the dissection of a heart, and in n. 403 he speaks of having observed fifteen plicatures in the heart of a sheep.

In volume 2 of the *Economy* n. 43, written in 1740, he speaks of having dissected several animal brains, and he gives details, accompanied by a drawing, of what he had observed when dissecting the brain of a drake.

Doubtless the work of dissection was necessary for him in order the better to understand the more or less crude plates of many of the anatomists; but he felt also that for him there was a danger in this work. "Here and there," he says, "I have taken the liberty of throwing in the results of my own experience [dissection], but only sparingly. There are some who seem born for experimental observation and are endowed with a sharper insight than others. There are others again who enjoy a natural faculty for contemplating facts already discovered, and eliciting their causes. The two gifts are seldom united in the same person. Besides, I found when ardently occupied in exploring the secrets of the human body that as soon as I discovered anything that had not been observed before, I began (seduced probably by self love) to grow blind to the most acute researches of others. . . . I therefore laid aside my instruments and determined rather to rely on the researches of others than to trust to my own" (1 *E.A.K.* n. 18).

† See *The Cerebrum*, p. 616 footnote.