

## JOYOUS READINGS AND MISREADINGS OF SWEDENBORG\*

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Sylvia Montgomery Shaw†

It is an honor and a great pleasure for me to be here with you as we gather to acknowledge once again our appreciation of one of the most remarkable men, Emanuel Swedenborg. My object tonight is three-fold: to comment briefly on Swedenborg as a writer who faced the daunting task of transposing spiritual experience into natural language; to offer a partial listing of the many writers who were influenced by him; and then to focus on six of these writers: a marooned diplomat who read from the *Arcana Coelestia* largely out of boredom, a brash Frenchman who wrote a novel about an androgynous angel, a depressed Swedish dramatist who clung to his sanity by reading descriptions of hell, a highly imaginative Argentinean poet and master storyteller who made the Spanish-speaking world aware of Swedenborg, an Eastern Orthodox priest and Buddhist scholar whose spiritual journey was invigorated by his study of the Writings, and lastly a Mexican physician who translated the Writings for thirty years without receiving payment or seeing them published, and yet he went on with his solitary project, like a character out of a Borges story.

All were idiosyncratic readers. As the title of my talk indicates, I'll be examining a few samples of readings and misreadings of the Writings. Of course, I am being relativistic. I'm conscious of the fact that I come to the Writings as a Mexican-American New Church woman with a whole biography that colors my own interpretation of everything that I read. Each of us brings to any texts our own distinctive self with all its perceptions—and misperceptions. So on the one hand, I am hesitant to judge the quality of any reader's interpretation of a text or texts. On the other hand, as a

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professor of literature, I am expected to judge and to evaluate the interpretations of students and critics alike. My way out of this bind tonight is to simply remind you that on some level, we are *all* called upon to judge interpretations if we ourselves are trying to read with critical attention. We just need to remain relativistic rather than absolutist.

If ever there was a person who was a critical reader, it was Emanuel Swedenborg. One has only to look at *Arcana Coelestia/Secrets of Heaven*. As you know, all eight volumes are devoted to the exegetical analysis of two books of the Word: Genesis and Exodus. In the New King James Bible, Genesis and Exodus only take up a total of 133 pages. By contrast, the standard edition of the *Arcana* takes up a whopping 4,559 pages, as he painstakingly analyses and explains these two biblical texts verse by verse, and often word by word. Talk about a close reading! Nothing in literary theory compares to this! Why such attention to detail? To minutiae? As George Dole has noted, the title *Arcana Coelestia* could be translated “a Disclosure of the Heavenly Depths in Sacred Scripture or in the Word of God.”<sup>1</sup> Swedenborg is trying to demonstrate the *depths*—the amazing, unsuspected depths—hidden within the Bible.

Swedenborg writes in his introduction, “In the letter, or literal meaning, people see only that it deals for the most part with the external facts of the Jewish religion. The truth is, however, that every part of the Old Testament holds an inner message. Except at a very few points, those inner depths never show on the surface.” Reading further from Lisa Hyatt Cooper’s beautiful translation: “The Christian world, though, remains deeply ignorant of the fact that each and every detail down to the smallest—even down to the tiniest jot—enfolds and symbolizes spiritual and heavenly matters; and because it lacks such knowledge, it also lacks much interest in the Old Testament.”<sup>2</sup>

I can attest to that on a personal level. I was raised by a Catholic mother and a Presbyterian father who became an Eastern Orthodox priest. When my dad underwent a spiritual crisis and left the priesthood, he explored the world’s religions, bringing us in tow. He focused his search

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<sup>1</sup> George Dole, *A Thoughtful Soul: Reflections from Swedenborg* (West Chester, PA: Chrysalis Books, 1995), xii.

<sup>2</sup> Emanuel Swedenborg, *Secrets of Heaven*, trans. Lisa Hyatt Cooper, §§ 1, 2. New Century Edition (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation).

primarily on Protestantism in all its variety and Buddhism. By the time I was a teenager, our religious pluralism had left me with a healthy sense of religious tolerance, but also thoroughly confused about God and the Bible. In my anger, I stopped attending church and termed myself an atheist. In my calmer moments, I was honest enough to acknowledge that strange and exasperating as the Bible seemed to me, especially the Old Testament with its bloodthirsty stories and its angry god, it was nonetheless a special book, one to be treated with respect.

Years after I joined the New Church, I found a kindred spirit in John Bigelow, that American diplomat and civil servant extraordinaire. This founder of the New York Public Library wrote a small book that resonated deeply for me: *The Bible that was Lost and is Found*. He and I suffered from a similar, conflicted respect and skepticism towards the Bible. He only found his way back to an appreciation of the Word when circumstances forced him to read the first volume of the *Arcana Coelestia*. In the winter of 1854 he was marooned (quarantined) on the island of St. Thomas and had little else to read for several weeks. Similarly, in 1968, I was marooned on the island of Bryn Athyn—or so at least it struck me at the time. I was a freshman in the tiniest college in the cosmos when all of my friends were attending large, exciting universities; I was a non-Swedenborgian surrounded by “the enemy.” I knew virtually nothing of New Church theology until a copy of *Heaven and Hell* was assigned for reading in my Religion 101 course. My father, who had immersed himself in the Writings, had persuaded me to try the college for one year. “The Swedenborgians are an interesting bunch,” he tried to assure me. “You’ll learn much from them.” The deal was that if after a year I wanted to transfer out, I could do so. So here I was, reading *Heaven and Hell* with adolescent belligerence. I argued with Swedenborg in just about every paragraph, interrupting the text with monotonous regularity. *How can he make such claims? Why should I believe him? Who is this man, anyway?*

And then one afternoon when I was reading *Heaven and Hell* in the library, I had a thought—the most sensible thought of my life. Unfortunately, as we know from the Writings, we can’t even take credit for those great thoughts that travel through us. The thought, which was almost a voice, admonished me. “Don’t read to believe; read to understand.” That was the true beginning of my reading, a reading that was as transformative for

me as *Arcana Coelestia* was for the marooned John Bigelow. I did not transfer out of the college at the end of the year. Instead, I made the first adult decision of my life and chose to be baptized into the Church. I had never been happier than I was in Bryn Athyn those two years. When I transferred to a larger college for my junior and senior years, it was with reluctance. What's more, I can honestly say that in all my subsequent years of study at Clark University, at the University of Rhode Island, and as a professor at Boston University, I never again encountered such a wonderful, holistic approach to knowledge—that conscious, joyous union of the natural and the spiritual in the pursuit of knowledge.

In the thirty-eight years since I left Bryn Athyn College, I have tried to share my appreciation of Emanuel Swedenborg's work through my teaching and my own writing. People invariably ask me: why was a *scientist* of all people called to the task of explaining the hidden depths of the Bible? Why a man who was steeped in the knowledge of metallurgy, of anatomy, and of astronomy? A man who published a nebular hypothesis and a theory of matter; a man who loved mechanical contraptions and designed a submarine and even an airplane that was later shown to be aerodynamically correct? Why did God *not* enlist a man or a woman specifically trained in theology? Instead poor Swedenborg had to scramble and immerse himself in the study of ancient Greek and Hebrew in order to begin his great task. Was he chosen because he had the qualities of a mystic?

Isn't that requisite to be a revelator? A mystical encounter with God?

But what about the many men and women before Swedenborg and since, who also perceived the divine? Why did the Lord not choose one of them for this specific task? Why not a St. Augustine or a Hildegard Von Bingen? Consider the French philosopher, Blaise Pascal, who claimed that on the night of November 23, 1654 he saw God as fire. Many people, including my own father, have been privileged to experience such a phenomenon. What is special about Pascal's experience is that he wrote about it almost immediately afterwards, while it still burned in his mind. He recorded it on a strip of paper, rolled it up and sewed it into the lining of his coat so that he could have it with him everyday. He obviously felt this was far too personal, far too wonderful, for publication. It was only discovered after his death. His account of that night has come to be known as "Pascal's Night of Fire" or as "Pascal's Amulet." I'll only quote the first

half, which should be enough to give you an idea of the emotional intensity of the experience.

Fire

God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of philosophers and scholars.

Certainty, certainty, heartfelt, joy, peace.

God of Jesus Christ.

God of Jesus Christ.

My God and your God.

'Thy God shall be my God.'

The world forgotten, and everything except God.

He can only be found by the ways taught in the Gospels.

Greatness of the human soul.

'O righteous Father, the world has not known thee, but I have known thee.'

Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy . . .<sup>3</sup>

Here is a man overwhelmed with spiritual joy. We sense that language is simply inadequate to portray and to contain such an experience. The best Pascal can give us is a joyous babble: a collage of biblical verses, aphorisms and a string of nouns wrenched from his rapturous emotions. "Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy . . ."

Swedenborg also had his "night of fire" so to speak: two specific, life-altering encounters with the Lord. They were monumental. But they were quite different from Pascal's spiritual experience. Likewise, Swedenborg's response was markedly different. The first encounter occurred in 1744 on Easter weekend; the second one happened a year later in London. My father, Daniel Montgomery,<sup>4</sup> describes Swedenborg's second illumination in his current work-in-progress, *Borges and Swedenborg*, in terms of what the Zen Buddhists call *satori*. My dad, who has had his own joyous

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<sup>3</sup>Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and the Ground of Truth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 407–408.

<sup>4</sup>Daniel Montgomery, *Fire in the Lotus: Buddhism of Nichiren* (London: Mandala, an Imprint of Grafton Books of HarperCollins, 1991).

readings of the Writings since the years when he was a priest in the Eastern Orthodox Church, has remarked to me that two things strike him about Swedenborg's second encounter with the Lord—its initial horror and its utter banality. There were no celestial angels to herald it. No divine light or fire. Only darkness, horror, and then the startling comment by the stranger in the corner of the room: *Eat not so much*. We can infer from this and other accounts that gluttony and spirituality are incompatible. As my father notes, once Swedenborg had gotten over his shock, "he knew who the stranger was and calmly conversed with him later that night, face to face. What did the man look like? To Swedenborg that was immaterial. 'The Lord appears to people according to their receptiveness.'<sup>5</sup> He could appear as a customer in a butcher shop, as an infant staring into his father's eyes, as a stranger sitting in a corner, or in any of Whitman's 'ordinary things.' If the receptor is ready, he will instantly understand."<sup>6</sup>

Emanuel Swedenborg was ready.

But like Pascal before him, or like anyone who has had an encounter with the Divine, he was now faced with the challenge of transposing spiritual experience into natural language with all its limitations. And not just to describe one or two or a dozen life altering experiences, but a constant flow of them over a period of thirty years or more. Just how was he to accomplish this? Kristin King offers us the following insight: "Emanuel Swedenborg's writings frequently use language to point the way to all the things they cannot say, claiming that there are realities that find no place in language, whether they be the 'indescribable, unutterable' thoughts of angels (*HH* 576) or the 'unspeakable' malice of hellish spirits, beyond description in the vocabulary of any language (*HH* 577)."<sup>7</sup> Inadequate or not, language has long been a crucial medium of revelation. Swedenborg wrote voluminously—not in the rapturous tones of Pascal, but in the calm, analytical tone of a scientist reporting what he has observed, carefully accommodating the spiritual into the natural. And *that*, I would argue, is why the Lord chose Swedenborg instead of a theologian, or a poet, or a

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<sup>5</sup> *Heaven and Hell* § 118.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Montgomery, *Borges and Swedenborg*. A book in progress, 40.

<sup>7</sup> Kristin King, "Reading What the Writings Say They Cannot Say," *New Church Life* (August 1999): 344.

composer, or any other type of person. Yes, the arts can move the heart. But in an age of scientific skepticism, in an age—his and our own—where the scientific paradigm demands rationality over emotion, or at least a balance between them, a very special kind of person was needed to appeal to our rationality first and foremost without negating the validity of our emotions.

What was needed was a man well schooled in the scientific method, but also endowed with a profoundly religious sensibility; a man who initially could weep and pray like any true mystic, but who over the long haul was able to perceive and to proceed with the clarity and the dispassionate discipline of a scientist. As readers, we can be stirred by the emotionality of Pascal's account. It has its own eloquence. But imagine if Swedenborg had described his spiritual insights only on that high emotional level where words fail? How then could he have tackled the daunting task of unveiling the different levels hidden in the Scriptures? Of giving detailed accounts of life in the innumerable heavens and hells? Of laying out and resolving the complex issues of ontology, cosmology and theodicy? In short, only a very special person could undertake such a task. We believe that man was Emanuel Swedenborg, prepared by the Lord step by step for a writing task of epic proportions.

And indeed, many have read his books or portions of them. Like pollinating bees, such writers have disseminated many "Swedenborgian" ideas. We can all draw up a partial list of such writers—which reminds me of an anecdote narrated by Dr. Mehmet Oz in the 2007 November-December issue of the journal, *Spirituality and Health*.<sup>8</sup> Dr. Oz, who has become an internationally renowned heart surgeon, describes how his reading of Swedenborg has given him a more holistic approach to his practice of medicine. He notes that it was his wife, Lisa Lemole, who introduced him to Swedenborg. Early on, when they first started to date, they had the following exchange. Quoting Dr. Oz: "[Lisa] asked what Jung, Blake, Goethe, Emerson, Dostoevsky, Balzac, and even Helen Keller had in common. I responded that they had all died, which did not impress her."

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<sup>8</sup> Mehmet Oz, with Jonathan S. Rose and Lisa Oz, "Mehmet Oz Finds His Teacher," *Spirituality and Health: The Soul-Body Connection* (November-December 2007): 48.

My answer tonight is that they, and so many others, read or misread Swedenborg—and all of them joyously. Some may strike us as having missed the central point of the Writings, as with Emerson who praised Swedenborg for the powers of his imagination, an observation that Emerson's New Church friend, Sampson Reed, found offensive. Yet who can deny Emerson's genuine fascination with the doctrine of correspondences, which his works continue to convey to others so powerfully? Or that Emerson has been tremendously instrumental in inspiring others to read Swedenborg for themselves? In the Spanish-speaking world no other writer has served such instrumentality more forcefully or more imaginatively than Jorge Luis Borges. Borges may strike some New Church readers as taking too cavalier an attitude toward the Writings at times. We can appreciate his humor when he quips, "As the English are not very talkative, Swedenborg fell into the habit of conversing with devils and angels."<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, some of Borges' pronouncements may strike us as just *too* cavalier, as when he asserts: "In heaven . . . the souls of the rich are richer than the souls of the poor, since the rich are accustomed to wealth."<sup>10</sup>

My instinct on reading a line that most readers will take literally is to admonish Borges to read more carefully! Or to contextualize such an observation within the Swedenborgian concept of wealth and use. Yet who can doubt the genuine admiration he felt for Swedenborg? "Voltaire said that Charles XII was the most extraordinary man recorded by history. I [Borges] would say—if we admit such superlatives—the most extraordinary man was the most mysterious of the subjects of Charles XII, Emanuel Swedenborg."<sup>11</sup> In a poem entitled, "Emanuel Swedenborg," Borges expresses this more richly:

Taller than the rest, that distant  
man would walk among men, faintly  
calling out to angels, speaking

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<sup>9</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *El Libro de los Seres Imaginarios* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Kier, 1967), 141.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>11</sup> James F. Lawrence, ed., *Testimony to the Invisible: Essays on Swedenborg* (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1995).

their secret names. What earthly eyes  
cannot see he saw . . .

Certainly one of the most idiosyncratic of all readers of the Writings was the poet Blake. As his poetry demonstrates, he was as passionate in his initial enthusiasm for Swedenborg as he was in his rejection of him. In later years he came to see that what he had rejected so vehemently was not Swedenborg per se, but the *institutionalization* of Swedenborg's works into a church with sharply defined doctrines. Either way, Blake's reading or misreading of Swedenborg inspired some of the most haunting images in poetry—which in turn have led others to their own individualistic interpretations and appropriations of New Church theology. I heartily agree with Kristin King's observation that "The Writings through their very effort to convey the inexpressible rouse the imagination."<sup>12</sup>

One of the most enthusiastic readers of Swedenborg was the French writer, Honoré de Balzac, who was arguably *the* monumental figure of 19th century French literature and culture. Balzac observed to a friend, "Do you know, I have come back to Swedenborg after vast studies of all religions, and after reading all the works published within the last sixty years? Swedenborg undoubtedly epitomizes all the religions—or rather the one religion—of humanity." This is high praise coming from the author of the monumental *Comédie Humaine*, Balzac's ambitious attempt to depict all of French culture—and through it humanity itself in all its rich variety.

Balzac actually called himself a Swedenborgian. Ironically, he sometimes misinterpreted the very works he so admired. In this context, I would like to pause to share a story that my father emailed me, a story that exists and circulates out there in hypertext:

Picture Sherlock Holmes and his sidekick, Dr. Watson on a camping trip. They set up their tent and fall asleep. Some hours later, Holmes wakes his faithful friend.  
"Watson! Look up at the sky and tell me what you see."

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<sup>12</sup> Kristin King, "Reading What the Writings Say They Cannot Say," *New Church Life* (August 1999): 349.

Watson replies, "I see millions of stars."

"What does that tell you?"

Watson ponders for a minute. "Astronomically speaking, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, it tells me that Saturn is in Leo. Time wise, it appears to be approximately a quarter past three. Theologically, it's evident the Lord is all-powerful and we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, it seems we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. What does it tell you, Holmes?"

Holmes is silent for a moment, then speaks.

"Watson, you idiot, someone has stolen our tent."

This story sounds a cautionary note for all of us—about getting so caught up in the complexities that we ourselves create, that we then miss the obvious. Without being unduly judgmental, I would like to point to Balzac in this context. His novella, *Seraphita*, the third in his trilogy of metaphysical novels, is a curious work. It is explicitly Swedenborgian in concept and in its direct references to Swedenborg. Yet Balzac misses some of the most fundamental of Swedenborg's concepts about angels, as we'll see.

He wrote the novel in 1835. It's short, barely seven chapters in length. In simplest terms, the plot revolves around a love triangle. A young couple, Wilfred and Minna, are both in love with the same person who then becomes an angel of the highest order: a seraph. Minna, the female protagonist, perceives this person as a very handsome young man whom she knows as Seraphitus. Wilfred, on the other hand, perceives the very same person as a breathtakingly beautiful woman whom he knows as Seraphita. The mysterious Seraphita/Seraphitus lives in a castle in Norway and is supposed to be related to Swedenborg. Pastor Beck, Minna's father, serves as the garrulous explicator of Swedenborgian theology. As a traditional churchman, he perceives the import of Swedenborg's message less clearly than young Minna and Wilfrid will come to see it. Pastor Beck can quote Swedenborg, sermonize for pages on key concepts, but ultimately he understands little.

Some literary critics have described the pastor as Seraphita's nemesis, but I think they are missing the mark here. Balzac, as a reader of Swedenborg, was certainly aware of the three fundamental levels of per-

ception: the natural, the spiritual, and the heavenly. It is clear to me that each of the three characters perceives the angelic Seraphita on one of these distinct levels: the pastor on the purely natural level. (He can narrate biographical information about Seraphita, for example, or about her privileged status in the town of Jarvis, but he never sees beyond surface realities.) Wilfrid, with his rational approach, perceives on a higher plane and represents the spiritual level of the mind (though he also wrestles with natural passions inspired by the beautiful, unattainable Seraphita). Minna, on the other hand, represents the more intuitive, heavenly level of the mind, a mind better able to understanding love and hence the angelic nature of Seraphita long before the others do.

Personally, I find the book to be flawed, both in literary and in theological terms. Flawed yet powerful. As a narrative, it falls short whenever Balzac sets aside artistry for the sake of his didactic impulse. For example, he ends chapter two with the pastor asking the young couple if they are familiar with Swedenborg. "Then I must relate to you the whole chronicle of Swedenborg!"<sup>13</sup> which he then proceeds to do *uninterrupted* for the next thirty-one pages! When Wilfrid and Minna are at last allowed to speak, most readers have probably forgotten that they were even in the room. Dialog has succumbed to monologue of the driest sort. Hardly fine art. On the other hand, the novel also offers the reader passages of lyrical prose. I love the following passage for its vivid description:

The sky, always gray, gave the pool a hue of tarnished steel. Now and again an eider-duck might fly across with impunity, thanks to the thick down that shelters the dream of the wealthy, who little know the dangers that purchase it; but the bird—like the solitary Bedouin who traverses the sands of Africa—was neither seen nor heard . . . the rush of its wings was noiseless, its joyous cry unheard.

So *Seraphita* is a curious blend of literary art and dry sermonizing. And that isn't the only problem. Balzac, who explicitly intended it to be a purely Swedenborgian novel, gets a crucial theological point wrong. By making the angel of the story both male and female—permanently an-

<sup>13</sup> Honoré Balzac, *Seraphita*, trans. Katherine Prescott Wormeley (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 55.

drogenous—and then by having that same angel ascend into heaven, where it will remain androgynous *and celibate*, he clearly misreads Swedenborg. How did he do that? Where did he get this idea of angelic androgeny?

Is this a case of a quick or of an incomplete reading on the part of Balzac? Or of artistic license? Again, since Balzac himself commented that this was to be a purely Swedenborgian novel, I assume that he meant to offer a faithful interpretation, and that his androgynous angel is simply the result of a misreading, or what amounts to the same, of not reading far enough. Jane Williams Hogan, who has researched sources of Swedenborg that would have been available to Balzac, notes that Pernety's 1782 translation of *Heaven and Hell* from Latin into French is flawed. She also notes that there is evidence that Balzac probably read abridgements of Swedenborg, particularly the anthology by Jean Francois D'Aillant de la Touche, a work that was published in the late 1780s.<sup>14</sup> Could this be the cause of what seems to many of us a misreading on Balzac part? That he was depending on abridgements? Certainly, he didn't get it all wrong. Readers familiar with Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell* can easily find passages that resonate with Balzac's novel: (1) that all angels are in perfect human form (as with the beautiful Seraphita); (2) that all angels were humans on earth at one time, not a breed apart (again, as in the case of Balzac's angel who had earthly parents). But say if one were to read only the table of contents of *Heaven and Hell* and go no further than that, couldn't one be misled? Consider the following topical statements as listed in the table of contents: "The Whole Heaven, Grasped as a Single Entity, Reflects a Single Individual." Or this topical statement: "Each community in the Heavens Reflects a Single Individual." If that's the case, we can see how a partial understanding could lead Balzac to make a perfectly logical mistake. Hence, the androgynous angel. We can then argue that he has either missed or has deliberately ignored several essential concepts about angels: (1) that people remain clearly gendered after death; (2) that there are marriages in heaven, and (3) that seen from a distance, an angelic couple often appears to be one angel. In *Conjugal Love*

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<sup>14</sup> Jane Williams-Hogan, "The Place of Swedenborg in the Spiritual Saga of Scandinavia," a paper delivered at the Donner Institute Conference, Finland, August 2007.

§ 42, more recently titled *Marriage Love*, Swedenborg describes such a vision: “And lo, a chariot was then seen descending from the highest or third heaven, and in it was seen a single angel, but as it drew near, two were seen” [A married couple; a husband and a wife].

Clearly, Swedenborg’s concept of oneness is not a literal androgyny. Husband and wife are two distinct beings who sometimes *appear to be one angel*. If we take Balzac’s novel at face value, then he seems to have missed this vital point. Only a metaphorical reading of the novel can salvage it for Swedenborgian readers—that is, if we can interpret the androgynous angel as a representation of our own mental androgyny—the male and female aspects of mind that each of us has within us, then we are more at peace with Balzac’s androgynous angel. But I suspect that most readers take the novel at face value, which may or may not be what Balzac intended of us. I can only comment as a Swedenborgian reader who finds the conclusion of *Seraphita* troubling—or more specifically, a missed opportunity. In the culminating scene, celestial angels receive the newly transformed Seraphita among them with “adoration.” Minna and Wilfrid, who are allowed the beautiful vision of this transformation, fall to their knees in an attitude of worship, something that clearly violates one of the core ideas of heaven: that only the Lord is to be worshipped.

So from my perspective, I can only regard this as a misreading on the part of Balzac. Yet he exudes a sense of joy that is unmistakable, a joy that his novel has passed on to other readers. I wholly concur with Jane Williams Hogan’s assessment that Balzac’s three metaphysical novels, *The Search for the Absolute*, *Louis Lambert*, and *Seraphita*, have, in her words, “schooled several generations of Westerns intellectuals, artists, writers and poets about the message of Swedenborg, from Balzac’s own unique point of view.”<sup>15</sup> One of the many readers who were led to read Swedenborg after reading *Seraphita* was the tormented Swedish dramatist, August Strindberg. Strindberg, whom Eugene O’Neill called “that greatest genius of all modern dramatists” was a complex man who lived a tempestuous life. He was divorced three times and teetered more than once on the brink

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

of insanity. As a university student, Strindberg came across Swedenborg and thought him utterly “daft.”<sup>16</sup>

Thirty years later his reading of Balzac’s novel led him to read Swedenborg in earnest. Strindberg recorded the precise date: March 29, 1897. Why such attention to the date? Because he believed that it was his reading of Swedenborg that saved his sanity. Oddly enough, it was not Swedenborg’s descriptions of heaven that gave him such a measure of peace—but his descriptions of hell. How could depictions of hellish landscapes possibly bring anyone a sense of peace, we might well ask. Michael Meyer, Olle Hjern, and other Strindberg critics have argued that it was during this emotional crisis that Strindberg identified with Swedenborg’s descriptions of hell. In these he recognized Klam, the very town where he was living, with its manure heaps and dark woods, as descriptions of his own internal landscape; his anguished state of his mind. In his autobiographical book, *Inferno*, Strindberg asserts: “We are already in hell.”<sup>17</sup> Olle Hjern offers the following explanation of how visions of hell could have actually lifted Strindberg’s depression:

Reading Swedenborg brought Strindberg a tremendous liberation from depression. He had been harassed by visions and by what Swedenborg describes as infestations of evil spirits; now that Strindberg had a spiritual explanation of these experiences, they were no longer threatening to him.<sup>18</sup>

In other words, he found reassurance that seeing infernal visions did not automatically mean that he was mad any more than it had for Swedenborg. Furthermore, by reading about spiritual vastations that occur in the spiritual world after death, Strindberg concluded that he was already being vastated right here on Earth; he was already facing his inner demons. He rationalized that since things could not possibly get worse for him, they

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Meyer, *Strindberg* (New York: Random House, 1985), 21.

<sup>17</sup> August Strindberg, *The Inferno*, trans. Claud Field (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1913), 147.

<sup>18</sup> Olle Hjern, “The Influence of Emanuel Swedenborg in Scandinavia,” in *Emanuel Swedenborg: Essays for the New Century Edition on His Life, Work, and Impact*, ed. Jonathan S. Rose, et. al. (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2005), 161–162.

could only get better. Having seen his torment in this context, he could now derive hope from Swedenborg's descriptions of heaven.

Lastly, as we recall that this year marks the 250th anniversary of the publication of *Heaven and Hell*, I'd like to comment on the impact that this book—and other works from the Writings—had on one of my countrymen, Dr. León Calleja. It is both a sad and a joyful story that Don Rose recently brought to my attention. An article that appeared in May, 1910, in *New Church Life*, describes Dr. Calleja as “the first Mexican receiver of the Doctrines in the world.”<sup>19</sup> In 1895 the physician, who was then forty-five years old and had become an ordained minister in the Methodist church in Mexico, had read *Heaven and Hell*. That changed his life. From then on he devoted his life to spreading the New Church in Mexico through the creation of reading groups, a small newspaper, and the translation of the writings from Latin into Spanish. He maintained an active correspondence with New Churchmen in the United States, particularly with the Convention Church in Boston. He was encouraged to keep up the good work. But his pleas for financial aid were largely ignored. His manuscripts, which he bound in brown paper and mailed off to Boston, remained sealed, stored away, and forgotten. When the Swedenborg School of Religion morphed into the Swedenborg House of Studies at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley's campus, Calleja's works were found in a cardboard box by a young theological student.

The student, who is now the Reverend Carla Friedrich, Convention pastor in San Diego, discovered the manuscripts and a long paper trail of joy, entreaty, hope and betrayed hope. In one of her email messages to me, Carla Friedrich aptly sums up Dr. Calleja's correspondence: “The letters tell a heart wrenching story of effort and yearning.” This was a man with a clear purpose; a man who continued his mission against all odds. Between the years 1910 and 1920 Mexico was plunged in its epic Revolution. I can tell you that it was cataclysmic. More than a million Mexicans died, most of them from starvation as a result of the violent upheaval. The times and the needs of his own family of eight, forced Calleja to have to ask for funding in order to keep his New Church newspaper running. He sent

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<sup>19</sup> “The New Church in Mexico,” *New Church Life* (May 1910): 300.

copies of the paper that he had printed at his own expense to various New Church organizations in the United States. (This when Mexico was on the very brink of revolution). Writing to a number of American New Churchmen about the *Heraldo de la Nueva Era* (The Herald of the New Age), Dr. Calleja made a modest proposal, which I'll read without editing his English:

What I ask from you is to contribute *at least one cent*, in this manner: *every time* when you will meet with the members of your league or association or church (for services) you kindly will ask them to give you 'at least one cent from each of you, for the missionary work in Mexico,' and you will take the trouble of sending me every month the collected money, by a postal draft. Your money will help me for paying expenses of my paper, which I freely circulate and for other expenses, because I intend to form a Reading Circle and also a Congregation or a Church. Bear in mind that the Lord will guide both yourself and myself in this noble task, and that He says, "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek and ye shall find, knock, and it shall be opened into you. . . ." May the Lord bless our own efforts! Fraternaly yours.<sup>20</sup>

Little came of his request. Yet he wrote in December 20, 1909 to Mr. Lloyd A. Frost of Boston:

Dear Sir and brother,

With your esteemed favor of the 11th I received your check for \$5.00 with which Mr. Philip W. Carter contributed toward the expenses of the first no. of my paper, 'New Era Herald' of which I took the pleasure sending you yesterday six copies, as for your suggestion. I am very much grateful for this gift, both to you and to Mr. Carter, the same as to the Rev. Goddard.

He concludes his letter apologetically, "Please excuse my bad English, and believe me yours truly in the Faith of the New Jerusalem." Dr. L.E. Calleja.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> León Calleja, correspondence. Consult Calleja archive in the Swedenborg House of Studies at the Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, CA.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

He was to receive little else across the years. Were his fellow New Churchmen in the United States put off by the upheavals in Mexico? Did they doubt his abilities on the grounds that he was not ordained in the New Church? Or did his American readers only see the errors in his English and miss the sincerity of his words? When he moved his family to San Antonio, under the impression that his translation efforts were finally going to be funded, he discovered that once again there would be no help, and that the state of Texas would not allow him to practice medicine since it did not recognize the medical degree that he had earned in Spain as a young man. Unable to earn a living, he was forced to return to Mexico. He died in the year 1935, his efforts unappreciated, his works unpublished. And yet the very fact that he could continue to translate during all those many years, alone, without support, strongly suggests that this was a labor of love in the truest sense, and *that* has its own rewards. Sadly, his translations of the Writings lay forgotten for decades. Then in the year 2003 all that changed with Carla Friedrich's discovery. This invites us to ponder the workings of divine providence.

Why were the Calleja translations allowed to be forgotten? Why have they been recovered now?

The Rev. Mark Perry, Dave Simpson, and others are raising money and awareness to publish the Calleja translations. They sent me the full translation of *Heaven and Hell*. Like all such projects, it needs further editing, but it *is* beautiful.

I'd like to leave you with an image of the title page as it will appear in print. I'd also like to read to you a paragraph that is familiar to all readers of the Writings—the last paragraph from Swedenborg's own introduction to *Heaven and Hell*, so that you may hear the sounds of this most special revelation in a Spanish translation that will be a joy to read.

Los arcanos revelados en las siguientes páginas se refieren al cielo y al infierno y también a la vida del hombre después de la muerte. El miembro de la iglesia en nuestros días escasamente conoce algo acerca del cielo y el infierno o acerca de su vida después de la muerte, aunque estas cosas se describen en la Palabra, y muchos de ellos, nacidos dentro de la iglesia, se rehusan creer en ellas, diciendo para sí: "Quién ha venido del otro mundo a contarnos tales cosas?" Por lo mismo, este espíritu de negación

especialmente prevalece en los que tienen mucha sabiduría mundana, que infecta y corrompe al de sencillo corazón y al que tiene una fe sencilla. Para impedir este mal, se me ha concedido asociarme con los ángeles y hablar con ellos como un hombre habla con otro hombre, también ver lo que hay en los cielos y también en los infiernos, y esto por trece años; también por lo que allí he oído y visto se me permite ahora describirlo, con la esperanza de que la ignorancia sea iluminada y la incredulidad disipada. Esta revelación inmediata es permitida al presente, porque esto es lo que significa el Advenimiento del Señor.

May we all have the blessing of our own joyous readings. Thank you. □