

## IMAGES AND DREAMS FROM AN INVISIBLE WORLD: SWEDENBORG AND YEATS

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Countless impressions of Emanuel Swedenborg's writings by the literary world span the long period from the second half of the eighteenth to the twentieth century to the present.<sup>3</sup> Reasons for this impressive literary output are found in several factors, ranging from the significance of the images and symbols contained in his highly detailed descriptions of an invisible world, to the philosophical, moral and religious meaning of his ideas concerning the human soul and the life after physical death. What is most surprising is that he used a kind of non-literary and non-poetical language, as many authors, since the early reception of his writings in Europe have noted. Johann Gottfried Herder, in a short essay on Swedenborg, published in 1802 in his periodical *Adrastea* (with the title "Emanuel Swedenborg, der größte Geisterseher des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts," that is, "Emanuel Swedenborg: The Greatest Spirit-Seer of the Eighteenth Century"), described his style as "monotonous" and even "tiring" and "not at all musical." He adds, that "one often wishes that Swedenborg had been a poet, to set all this in motion, or put it in order, like Dante," but Swedenborg "remains, however, a sincere writer of prose, a repetitive storyteller."<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in 1850, Emerson affirms that "his books have no melody, no emotion, no humour, no relief, to the

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3. There are very many studies on the influence of Swedenborg on modern and contemporary writers and poets. A noteworthy few of these are *Swedenborg and His Influence*, edited by E. J. Brock, Bryn Athyn: New Church, 1988; *Philosophy, Literature, Mysticism: An Anthology of essays on the thought and influence of Emanuel Swedenborg*, edited by Stephen McNeilly, London: The Swedenborg Society, 2003 as well as *In Search of the Absolute: Essays on Swedenborg and Literature* (Journal of the Swedenborg Society, Vol. 3), edited by Stephen McNeilly, London: The Swedenborg Society, 2004.

4. Johann Gottfried von Herder, 'Emanuel Swedenborg: The Greatest Spirit-Seer of the Eighteenth Century', *Studia Swedenborgiana*, Vol. 14 (2005), No. 2, s. p., <http://www.baysidechurch.org/studia/default.asp?ArticleID=208&VolumeID=54&AuthorID=74&detail=1>. Last access: 5/25/2019.

dead prosaic level. In his profuse and accurate imagery is no pleasure, for there is no beauty. We wander forlorn in a lack-lustre landscape."<sup>5</sup>

Similar judgments are not exceptional in the history of Swedenborg's reception, although an amazing number of poets, writers, thinkers, artists have been somehow affected by his writings. At the beginning of the twentieth century, William Butler Yeats was among those writers whose work was influenced by Swedenborg, and one can notice this 'influence' in his poetry and in essays alike.<sup>6</sup> In 1914 Yeats composed *Swedenborg, Mediums and the Desolate Places* (published a few years later, in 1920), where he defined Swedenborg as a "forerunner" of the Romantic movement, despite a style and spirit far removed from being Romantic.<sup>7</sup> For Yeats, Swedenborg gave expression to the deepest manifestations of his soul, his mental state, and his spirituality by means of powerful images, that can be considered very close to those of a Romantic. The evocative power of Swedenborg's representations of heaven and hell lies in the fact that he drew on an infinite variety of images of the natural world, meticulously collected during his life as a natural philosopher and mineralogist. These images gave a visible and tangible form to manifestations of an inner unconscious for the soul or, in other words, to an invisible "world of spirits," to which, according to Swedenborg, the souls of all human beings belong. For these reasons his imagination was similar to that of poets and artists; he believed that he could establish a bridge between the outside (sight, sensitive perception) and the inside (the movements of the soul, spiritual activity, moral values)

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5. R. Emerson, *Representative Men: Seven Lectures*, London: G. Routledge, 1850, p. 87.

6. Yeats began studying Swedenborg in the late 1880s and quoted his name often in his *Autobiographies*, London: Macmillan, 1956, in connection with the names of other "visionaries" like Boehme and Blake (Ibid, p. 161, 254), or George Russell (Ibid, p. 242) or other Northern poets and writers like Strindberg and Ibsen (*Ivi*, p. 541). On Yeats and Swedenborg, see in particular H.R. Bachchan, *W.B. Yeats and Occultism: A Study of His Works in Relation to Indian Lore, the Cabbala, Swedenborg, Boehme and Theosophy*, foreword by T.R. Henn, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1965; S.M. Islam, "Gyres and Spirits: An Exploration of Some Parallels between W.B. Yeats and Emanuel Swedenborg," PhD. Thesis, Queen's University (Kingston, Ont), 1981; K. Raine, *Yeats the Initiate: Essays on Certain Themes in the Writings of W.B. Yeats*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1986; R. Barone, "Il poeta della visione e la visione del poeta: Yeats, Swedenborg e l'immaginazione irlandese," *Hyphos*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1987), pp. 30–38, where the author analyses Yeats's interpretation of Swedenborg's theosophical doctrines.

7. W.B. Yeats, *Swedenborg, Mediums and the Desolate Places*, in *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland*, edited by Augusta Gregory, Putnam, New York–London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1920, pp. 197–211. On Swedenborg and the Romantic culture see J. Roos, *Les aspects littéraires du mysticisme philosophique et l'influence de Boehme et de Swedenborg au début du romantisme: William Blake, Novalis, Balanche*, Strasbourg: Heitz, 1953; E. Benz, *The Mystical Sources of German Romantic Philosophy*, Allison Park: Pickwick, 1983.

and provide the latter, in its complexity and with its many nuances, a concrete existence.

### 1. THE ROMANTIC ABYSS

The evocative landscapes depicted by Swedenborg in his *De Coelo et inferno* (*Heaven and Hell*, 1758), the countless worlds revealed in his eight volume *Arcana Coelestia* (*Heavenly Secrets*, 1749–1756), the description of the infernal places of *De Vera Christiana Religio* (*The True Christian Religion*, 1770) did not seem to Yeats too far from the sublime natural landscapes that attracted and affected the Romantics. Hell, for Swedenborg, was the place where spirits wandered "in their desert places" in the company of "birds of night, such as bats and owls, wolves, leopards, tigers, rats, and mice," and again of "poisonous creeping things of every kind, as dragons and crocodiles."<sup>8</sup> If those infernal landscapes were provided with vegetation, this was a mix of "brambles, nettles, thorns, and thistles, as well as poisonous plants"; but even these plants were destined to disappear and "then nothing is to be seen but heaps of stones, and marshes in which frogs croak."<sup>9</sup> These scenes arose in Swedenborg's mind from the images he had taken from fifty years of study of the world of nature in its most diverse aspects, from mineralogy to the human physiology. Through these images, he gave a materiality and visibility to a very subtle and invisible world, by its nature otherwise unattainable. He described it in great detail as if it were before his eyes, affirming, in this sense, the possession of powerful inner vision. "An intense fire," says Swedenborg, "rises from the hells where love for oneself rules," and "a flickering one from the hells where love of the world rules." This scene is very similar for him to what happens on earth "after a conflagration" or in "an active furnace," or even, in another case, "a hot bath."<sup>10</sup> It is clear in this way how his previous activity as a mineralogist and Assessor for the Swedish Council of Mines had provided him with those images with which he described the spiritual world. Again, in *De*

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8. E. Swedenborg, *Vera christiana religio, continens universam theologiam novae ecclesiae*, Amstelodami 1771, en. tr. *The True Christian Religion, Containing the Universal Theology of the New Church*, trans. By E. Dick, London: Swedenborg Society, 1950, §78.

9. *True Christian Religion*, §78.

10. E. Swedenborg, *De coelo et ejus mirabilibus, et de inferno, ex auditis et visis*, London: J. Lewis, 1758, en. tr. *Heaven and Hell*, trans. by G. Dole, New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 2010, §571.

*Coelo et Inferno*, Swedenborg confirms that "in the spiritual world, the world where spirits and angels live, things look much the same as they do in the natural world where we live – so similar that first glance there seems to be no difference. You see plains there, mountains, hills, and cliffs with valleys between them; you see bodies of water and many other things that we find on earth."<sup>11</sup> What marks the difference is their origin, since "they all come from a spiritual source, so they are visible to the eyes of spirits and angels but not to our eyes because we are in a natural world."<sup>12</sup>

Despite the diversity of literary output by the Romantics, Swedenborg seemed to anticipate, according to Yeats, the sensitivity of Romantic the poets such as William Blake and Samuel Coleridge. From his writings we realize, says Yeats, that "he treads upon this surface by an achievement of power almost as full of astonishment as if he should walk upon water charmed to stillness by some halcyon; while his disciple and antagonist Blake is like a man swimming in a tumbling sea, surface giving way to surface and deep showing under broken deep."<sup>13</sup> To Yeats, Blake was a key figure in English pre-Romanticism, while Swedenborg still belonged to the age of cold and abstract reason. However, they both dealt with boundless inner worlds, a feature typical of the Romantic era. Blake and Swedenborg were both visionaries, but profoundly different from one another: a pedantic and patient scientist on the one hand; a restless artist and poet on the other. Despite these differences, it is evident to Yeats that they shared a deep spirituality, a poetic sensitivity and an extraordinary evocative power, manifesting itself in quite different ways. Blake's distinctive feature was his instinct for representing religious depth in symbolic language and in both concrete and sensitive forms, as in the popular and mythical tradition. Swedenborg did the same, but only when in an otherworldly state: only under special conditions did he show an imagination equal to that of children and artists. For this reason, Yeats did not fail to note Blake's ironic and "paradoxical violence" towards Swedenborg, in his parody of Swedenborg's work, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.<sup>14</sup>

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11. Ibid, § 582.

12. Ibid.

13. Yeats, *Swedenborg, Mediums*, p. 201.

14. W. Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* [1790–1793] and a Song of Liberty, London: The Florence Press, 1911. Cf. Yeats, *Swedenborg, Mediums*, p. 201. On Yeats and Blake, see the works of L. Marvel, "Blake and Yeats: Visions of Apocalypse," *College Literature*, Vol. 13, No.1 (1986), 95–105; A. Antonielli, *William Blake e William Butler Yeats: Sistemi simbolici e costruzioni*

Because of his "cold abstract style," Swedenborg may at first be regarded as far from Romantic sensitivity; but the depth and the effectiveness of the images he used do bring him into the sphere of the Romantic Movement. In the middle of the eighteenth century he was able to give voice to an unconscious world, or, in Yeats's words, to unify the conscious and the subconscious "as in that marriage of the angels, which he has described as a contact of the whole being."<sup>15</sup> It is the power of his images depicting life and death that explains the great success of his writings on many levels. Many followers, both in the field of literature and of the arts, feed on these ideas and images, driven in their search for access to unattainable worlds – those of life after death and the deepest life of the soul. As Yeats points out, although Swedenborg "belongs to an eighteenth century not yet touched by the Romantic Revival" and he was not willing to get lost in the contemplation of those sublime and terrifying landscapes, he feels "horror amid rocky uninhabited places, and so believes that the evil are in such places while the good are amid smooth grass and garden walks and the clear sunlight of Claude Lorraine."<sup>16</sup> This horror, however, was completely dissimilar from Romantic yearning. In Swedenborg there was still a strong conviction that reason was responsible for controlling passions and maintaining a balance between the forces of the soul. Swedenborg did not like to indulge his images; he fought against the loss of self-control but was beckoned by a deeper consciousness. He did not spontaneously evoke the deepest abyss of the soul as with the Romantics. He succumbed to them because of a vivid imagination that, at different points in his life took over his rational faculty. The distance between Swedenborg and Romantic poets and painters was thus both stylistic and emotional. The prosaic style of Swedenborg's detailed descriptions did not mark out the soul of a poet but testified to his previous "preoccupation with stones and metals," that is, his office as the "Assessor of mines to the Swedish Government."<sup>17</sup> The effectiveness of his writings did not lie in his language or in his poetic art, but in the way he was able to express his psychological states and moral intent.

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*poetische*, Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2009 (especially on the second part of the first chapter, Antonielli analyses the influence of the alchemical tradition and cabbala, of Boehme and Swedenborg on Blake's work).

15. Yeats, *Autographies*, p. 244.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 199.

17. Yeats, *Swedenborg, Mediums*, p. 198.

The spiritual landscapes of *De Coelo et Inferno*, mirroring as they do scenes in the natural world and tending to the sublime, were certainly significant for a poet like Coleridge and seemed to anticipate his work to some degree. In *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1800), Coleridge defined the work of the poet and the importance of intuition, in a way that is reminiscent of Swedenborg's words:

The poet in his lone yet genial hour  
Gives to his eyes a magnifying power:  
Or rather he emancipates his eyes  
From the black shapeless accidents of size—  
In unctuous cones of kindling coal,  
Or smoke upwreathing from the pipe's trim bole,  
His gifted ken can see  
Phantoms of sublimity.

Coleridge was an admirer of the Swedish visionary, as he declared in a letter to his friend James Gillman dated November 2, 1824, and he had evidently been nourished by those landscapes and places of the soul that were the fruit of Swedenborg's imagination.<sup>18</sup> In *Sibylline Leaves* and *Kublai Khan or, a Vision in a Dream* he painted, just as Swedenborg before him, sacred rivers, endless caves a sea without sun (sunless) and without life (lifeless), hills of ancient forests, and gardens with sinuous streams, immersed in a "romantic abyss."<sup>19</sup>

## 2. ANCIENT AND MODERN BELIEFS

Swedenborg was not simply a kind of precursor of Romantic leanings, but a mediator between ancient philosophical, mystical, mythological and religious thought and the modern times. He tried, like ancient philosophers such as Plato and Simplicio, Thomas Aquinas and Macrobius, to describe

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18. *Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Ernest Hartley Coleridge, 2 vol., London: W. Heinemann, 1865, vol. 2, p. 730. See also H.N. Morris, *Flaxman, Blake, Coleridge and Other Men of Genius Influenced by Swedenborg*, London: New Church Press, 1915.

19. Cf. S.T. Coleridge, "Kubla Khan: A Vision," in *Christabel: Kubla Kahn, A vision; The Pains of Sleep*, London: J. Murray, 1816, p. 55.

the universe by means of vortical movements and geometric symbols, such as the spiral and the double cone. Yet according to Yeats, Swedenborg had not sufficiently exploited those fundamental geometric figures that he had used in his explanation of natural reality, to give further strength and metaphysical effectiveness to his speculations on the supernatural world. In his mystical writings, again, according to Yeats, we find only brief allusions to the spirals, without any development of their complex meaning and symbolic value. For this reason Yeats felt the need to reread Swedenborg's scientific writings, such as the *Principia Rerum Naturalium* (1734), where he found the author's construction of the universe before his so-called "mystical turn."<sup>20</sup> In *Principia*, Swedenborg described the "physical reality, the universe as a whole, every solar system, every atom" as fundamentally based on geometrical figures, the most important of which is the symbol of the double cone, highly significant for Yeats himself.<sup>21</sup> This figure includes "two opposite poles, each with a conical shape" and is repeated at the various levels of nature, creating in this way a kind of unitary structure of reality. Yeats analyzed the *Principia* with the purpose to go a little further than the intentions of its author and search for those symbols, correspondences, geometries that might act as a key to Swedenborg theosophical works.

The rational, logical, and geometric explanation in Swedenborg's philosophy of nature provided a solid structure to the narratives, rich in images, concerning the world of spirits in his writings published after 1745. The supernatural reality of that world would have remained largely unattainable without the use of the geometry and symbolism that made accessible the stories of that world. What geometry and images made possible was the representation of the invisible or, in other words, the visualization, by means of external signs, of an innermost reality.

The double cone, indeed, was to Yeats the most suitable geometric figure to represent the correspondence between inside and outside, that is, between the spiritual and the natural world, the one being the perfect mirror of the other. This figure shows two faces of the same coin, one inverse to the other, as a symbol of mirroring and complementarity as

20. E. Swedenborg, *Principia rerum naturalium*, Dresden and Leipzig: Heckel, 1734. On Yeats's library see E. O'Shea, *A Descriptive Catalogue of W.B. Yeats's Library*, New York: Garland, 1985, pp. 182, 296. Yeats refers to *Principia* in his essays on the "Great Wheel," included in *A Vision*, cf. *A Critical Edition of Yeats's 'A Vision' (1925)*, ed. by George Mills Harper and Walter Kelly Hood, London: MacMillan, 1978, p. 124.

21. *Ibid.*



well as of a reversal, or opposition, in a paradoxical contrast giving rise, in some particularly sensitive people, to fatal outcomes. The two cones or gyres that develop in opposite directions, while constituting the same dynamic unity, represent, so wrote Yeats in a letter to Ethel Mannin of 20 October 1938, "the conflict of two states of consciousness, beings or persons which die each other's lives, live each other's death."<sup>22</sup> The reinterpretation of Swedenborg's visions through the geometric symbols he used in his scientific treatises was reasonable, because these symbols could possibly provide a key to understanding the concurrence (and reversal) of inside and outside and higher and lower, as well as unconscious and conscious, which characterizes the human condition.

In ancient and esoteric writings from Plato forward, this attempt to represent the inside by means of external images and symbols was often based on the idea of an inward-outward correspondence. Swedenborg provided a new way to interpret these correspondences and his contribution was considered, by Yeats, an interesting middle point in the history of thought.

In Swedenborg's theosophical works, Yeats found a world of images, a mixture of dreams and visions, that promised to make manifest the most intangible darkness of the soul and to establish a connection between this life and life in the other world. In his youth, Yeats also attentively read Swedenborg's *Spiritual Diary* (1749–1756), a work in many volumes that he had admittedly and inexplicably forgotten.<sup>23</sup> In this diary, Yeats found a philosophical system that was congenial to his ideas concerning experiences related to the post-death state, and the communication with a world of spirits and with ghosts. Through the fusion of European – and above all Irish – popular beliefs and nineteenth-century occultist literature both American and French, Yeats was trying to elaborate a unified theory of all concepts relating to visions and the evocation of spirits. He drew on ancient Greek literature and medieval and renaissance traditions, thus arriving at modern times and to Swedenborg. Despite the countless variations that had characterized popular beliefs and philosophical conceptions from period to period and from country to country, Yeats was persuaded of a common ground connecting these phenomena, begging the unavoidable question, to which Swedenborg had also responded, of the possibility for people to

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22. Quoted in C. Thomas, "Knowledge and Embodiment in Yeats," *South Central Review*, Vol. 4 (1987), No. 4, pp. 53–60; here at p. 53.

23. Yeats, *Swedenborg, Mediums*, p. 197.



understand death. According to Yeats, those popular beliefs of the past had re-emerged during the Enlightenment, in a new shape provided by Swedenborg, together with and notwithstanding, the supremacy of the "abstract reasoning of the learned."<sup>24</sup> Swedenborg revealed in his writings the existence of "a world of spirits" characterized by "a scenery like that of the earth, human forms, grotesque or beautiful, senses that knew pleasure and pain, marriage and war, all that could be painted upon canvas, or put in stories to make one's hair stand up."<sup>25</sup> His position between the arid and abstract reason typical of his time, and "romantic" elements, such as the creative imagination, the poetry, the symbolism and the religious sensibility more typical of the following decades, qualified the eighteenth-century visionary as a key figure to recover the ancient folk narratives, connecting them to both Romantic sensitivity and the new spiritualist tendencies of the early twentieth century.

The Cambridge Platonists are the main sources for Yeats's access to English translations of ancient Greek and Latin literature. Filtered by authors such as Henry More and Ralph Cudworth, the ideas of "Plotinus and Porphyry and Plato and from later writers, especially Synesius and John Philoponus, with whom the Platonic School came to an end in the seventh century" arrived in the twentieth century, together with the English translations of the works of Paracelsus and Cornelius Agrippa.<sup>26</sup> In these philosophical sources consistent with the Platonic tradition, attention toward the role of imagination and the notion of a spiritual body is integral to the investigation of the inmost depth of the soul and its state after death of the body.

A recurrent topic in these sources, is the resemblance between the state of death and that of sleep and dreams. Synesius explained how the spiritual body, after physical death, could assume any form, just as our fantasies take shape during sleep.<sup>27</sup> He recalled the ancient oracles, who "have likened the state after death to the images of a dream" and attributed to dreams "a divinatory power."<sup>28</sup> Says Synesius: "In dreams, one is a conqueror, we walk, we fly. Imagination lends itself to all; what law forbids a sleeper

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24. Ibid, p. 198.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid, p. 207.

27. Synesios, *On Dreams*, En. trans. by Isaac Myer, Philadelphia 1888.

28. Yeats, *Swedenborg, Mediums*, p. 208.

from rising above the earth upon wings surer than those of Icarus, from excelling the flight of eagles, from soaring above the celestial spheres? We perceive the earth from afar, we discover a world which even the moon does not see. We can talk with the stars, mingle with the invisible company of the gods who rule the universe."<sup>29</sup> Thus, a dream offers the chance to test the infinite possibilities of the soul and to cover, without obstacle, infinite distances and times.

Also, in Agrippa's *De Occulta Philosophia*—another source frequently mentioned by Yeats—death was considered analogous to dreams.<sup>30</sup> He referred to spiritual entities that he called *lemurs*, or *hobgoblins* (the English translation of the Latin word), that is, the souls of dead, people endowed with human passions. In Latin mythology, the *lemures*, or *larvae*, were creatures of the darkness, spirits of the night, souls of the people who suffered a violent death and could not rest in peace but were forced to wander in a limbo forever. Their lamentations flee from impassive minds and are perceived only by sensitive people, such as children and women, of whom the *lemures* are not afraid. Very often, the *lemures* are the protagonists of a drama, tortured by flames or by monsters, as in a nightmare. Agrippa depicted them as people who, during this life, were dominated by madness (*phrensie*) or by a melancholic temperament (melancholic distemper). They were those who, frightened by terrible things seen in dreams, lived in continuous torment, as if their dreams and fantasies had really happened in reality. Orpheus referred to these souls as the "people of the dreams," insisting on the bond between dreams and death. The most significant thing, in all these concepts and beliefs, is that although spirits have no material bodies, they can take on a certain aeriform consistency, and have representations, sensations and passions very similar to those of the living, perhaps even more intense.

The affinity between Agrippa's and Swedenborg's description of the spirits of the dead attracted Yeats's attention during his attempt to reconstruct a unified theory concerning these doctrines. Swedenborg depicted heaven and hell with a strong coherence and methodological rigor, thus offering Yeats a valid tool to understand popular beliefs, ancient philosophical doctrines, and esoteric concepts. According to Swedenborg, the state immediately after death resembles a dream, and is the condition in which "the soul lives a life

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29. Synesios, *On Dreams*, p. 42.

30. E.C. Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia*, James Freake, London 1651.

so like that of the world that it may not even believe that it has died."<sup>31</sup> Yeats found similar ideas in Swedenborg's sources, in particular the Cambridge Platonist Henry More, who maintains that "there are good dreams among the air people."<sup>32</sup> Like Swedenborg after him, More used analogical thought to describe what is imperceptible and concealed from the senses. In the first volume of *Arcana Coelestia* (the only one of the eight volumes of this work that Yeats kept in his library, although this does not mean that he ignored the others), Swedenborg stated in paragraph 959: "One night I awoke from sleep and heard around me spirits who had wanted to ambush me while I lay asleep. Soon drifting off, I had a nightmare but then woke up again, and suddenly, to my surprise, found some scourging spirits at hand. They inflicted bitter punishment on the spirits who had plotted against me in my sleep, by giving them a kind of body—a visible one—and a physical sensation and then torturing them by violently knocking their limbs back and forth."<sup>33</sup>

Again, in *Arcana Coelestia*, § 994, Swedenborg used the analogy with a dream to explain what he had "seen and heard" from spirits; just as in dreams, his visions were characterized by an internal sight, which he declared to be the same that one undergoes after physical death, that is, in the absence of a coarse material body. Thus, the spirit acquires a very fine substance, a spiritual body, and is able to change its form in the same way images in our dreams continually change. More maintained that the images of spirits were made of an aeriform substance, emanating from the body, which creates a sort of luminous cloud. The spirit shapes this cloud, which condenses and shrinks on the basis of its feelings. It is not a matter of defined forms, like those of the natural world, but of a barely recognizable form, only a hint of a form, continuously shaped and reshaped by the spirit's imagination, as happens according to our fantasies during a dream.

Following Philoponus, More described the modeling and remodeling of these forms by means of fantasy and explained the attempt of the soul to manifest itself outside by means of the power of its imagination. The mediation of a *daimon*, a mediator, was, for these authors from Philoponus

31. Yeats, *Swedenborg, Mediums*, p. 198.

32. *Ibid.*

33. E. Swedenborg, *Arcana Coelestia, quae in scriptura sacra, seu verbo Domini sunt, detecta. Hic primum in Genesi. una cum mirabilibus, quae visa sunt in mundo spirituum, et in coelo angelorum*, J. Lewis, London 1749–1756, En. transl. *Secrets of Heaven*, tr. by Lisa Hyatt Cooper, West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 2008, Vol. II, p. 7.

to Swedenborg, an essential element to describe the manifestation of what is interior and immaterial of a spirit. The importance of images and mediums ensured Yeats the right to establish a connection between the thought of these authors of the past and the spiritualistic tendencies of more recent times, in which spiritual sessions were made possible by the presence of a medium or vehicle. Yeats traces in Swedenborg and in authors prior to him the notion of "animal spirits" which function as vehicles for the soul. In *The Immortality of the Soul*, More quoting from Yeats, stated, "we have within us an 'aery body' or 'spirit body' which was our only body before our birth as it will be again when we are dead and its 'plastic power' has shaped our terrestrial body as some day it may shape an apparition and ghost."<sup>34</sup> The human mind is "not nourished from meats and drinks from the belly but by a clear and luminous substance that redounds by separation from the blood."<sup>35</sup>

In his *Oeconomia Regni Animalis* (1740–41) Swedenborg expressed similar ideas on the basis of a concept he called "the doctrine of series and degrees."<sup>36</sup> He explains how a communication between inert matter and spirit is possible by means of the notion of a spiritual body, that constitutes the philosophical foundation of its following descriptions of the life after death. Blood is nothing but the most corporeal part of the soul; within it, a spirituous fluid, transparent and very thin, acts with pure and spiral-like movements. This fluid, which is, in turn, the most spiritual part of the body, is obtained by dividing the particles of red blood into smaller ones, and these in turn into even smaller transparent particles.<sup>37</sup> Although Yeats did not have at his disposal Swedenborg's writings concerning human physiology, where one also finds explicit references to More's thought, to the Paracelsian tradition of the *archeus*, and to other authors of the Platonic tradition, he does not hesitate to recognize Swedenborg as a kind of 'heir' to these traditions. An heir of the

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34. Yeats, *Swedenborg, Mediums*, p. 208.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 204.

36. E. Swedenborg, *Oeconomia regni animalis, anatomice, physice, et philosophice perlustrata*, 1740–1741, en. tr. *The Economy of the Animal Kingdom, Considered Anatomically, Physically, and Philosophically*, tr. by A. Clissold and J.J.G. Wilkinson, London: W. Newbery, 1845, repr. Bryn Athyn: Swedenborg Scientific Association, 1955, Vol. I, § 46. On the doctrine of series and degrees see F. Stengel, *Aufklärung bis zum Himmel: Emanuel Swedenborg im Kontext der Theologie und Philosophie des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011; L. Follasa, *L'economia della natura e il respiro del mondo: La filosofia della natura di Swedenborg tra Herder e Schelling* (1770–1810), PhD Thesis, Jena: Thüringer Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek, 2014.

37. See for instance E. Swedenborg, *Economy*, Vol. I, p. 120.

eighteenth century, standing between the alchemical, cabbalistic and Platonic traditions on one hand, and a rational survey of human physiology on the other. In the middle of the eighteenth century, he attempted to provide an explanation of the interaction of between the soul and body. He based his research on the empirical observations of several scholars (from Harvey to Malpighi, from Boerhaave to Leeuwenhoek, Willis, and Steno), as well as on various metaphysical and alchemical concepts, attempting all the while to banish all obscure and hidden arguments from philosophy and science with abstracted and enlightened reason.

Swedenborg, describing the spiritual world, testifies to the "power of the mind" and the "images in the memory."<sup>38</sup> The souls of the deceased resemble the images in their minds, from their representations and their internal states. For this reason, both Swedenborg's paradise and hell are constantly changing and for each individual. Every spirit, on the basis of their specific interiority and individuality (which is not diminished by death) continually shapes their own form and the form of what they see. Each form their own paradise or hell in the same way the imagination shapes our dreams. Swedenborg's heaven and hell, says Yeats, "are built always anew and in hell or heaven all do what they please and all are surrounded by scenes and circumstances which are the expression of their natures and the creation of their thought."<sup>39</sup> Exterior and interior, sight and representation correspond. In the course of his journeys through the spiritual world, Swedenborg could see and hear concretely the inner activity of souls: "The garments of all befit minutely their affections, those that have most wisdom and most love being the most noble garmented, in ascending order from the shimmering white, through garments of many colors and garments that are like flame, to the angels of the highest heaven who are naked."<sup>40</sup>

In this manner Yeats explains the phenomena of modern mediums and their spirit sessions, based on the idea that a spirit assumed forms resembling those of the mental images of the participants. Visual thinking, memories and emotions play a pivotal role for spirits, whose minds seem always weak and tired. "Should the dogs bark," says Yeats "a man who knows the language of our dogs may be able to say if they are hungry or afraid or

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38. Yeats, *Swedenborg, Mediums*, p. 198.

39. *Ibid*, p. 199.

40. *Ibid*, p. 200.

glad to meet their master again."<sup>41</sup> Swedenborg's idea on this point appears to be slightly different, since the spirits, according to him, would lead a perfect spiritual life precisely because they are free from the heaviness of the body. In reality, during the process of manifestation, of mediation, and therefore of incorporation, those excellent faculties that characterize spirits and souls are lost—in line with a Platonic conception of the relationship between matter and spirit. For Swedenborg "spirits' powers of sensation are much more highly developed than when they lived in the body, as is their gift for thinking and speaking. These abilities are so much greater that they can hardly even be compared."<sup>42</sup>

In 1920, the year of the publication of the essay on Swedenborg, Yeats composed the poem *All Souls' Night*. The poem's main theme is the evocation of the souls of the dead through the formula "I call . . ." The poem is published as an epilogue to the collection of essays *A Vision*, in the 1925 edition:

Midnight has come and the great Christ Church bell,  
And many a lesser bell, sound through the room;  
And it is All Soul's Night  
And two long glasses brimmed with muscatel  
Bubble upon the table. A ghost may come;  
For it is a ghost's right,  
His element is so fine  
Being sharpened by his death,  
To drink from the wine-breath  
While our gross palates drink from the whole wine.<sup>43</sup>

Spiritual beings have bodies of such a subtle and special kind that they don't even need coarser senses like touch or taste; they experience the inebriation of wine directly, inhaling its fumes through their nostrils. For Yeats, Swedenborg is not only a source of poetical inspiration, closely related to the Romantic authors, but also provides philosophical explanations and precise depictions of an invisible world. He represents an enduring link between ancient beliefs and modern thought. □

41. Yeats, *Swedenborg, Mediums*, p. 205.

42. Swedenborg, *Arcana Coelestia*, Vol. 1, § 321.

43. Yeats, *A Vision*, p. 253.