Book Review

Medicine, Mysticism and Mythology: Garth Wilkinson, Swedenborg and Nineteenth-Century Esoteric Culture, Peet, Malcolm, The Swedenborg Society, London (2018) (Ninth title in a Swedenborg Society series of studies exploring the influence and impact of Emanuel Swedenborg on the history of ideas.), 464 pp., ISBN: 978-0-85448-205-4 (HARDBACK),
For purchase:
Bryn Athyn Cathedral Bookstore: bookstore@bacathedral.org
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The Swedenborg Society of London has a particular knack for publishing beautiful books. A recent example of this is Malcolm Peet's *Medicine, Mysticism and Mythology* (2018). But it is more than just a beautiful volume; it is a welcome contribution to our understanding of the important life of James John Garth Wilkinson (1812–1899). Peet, a retired consultant psychiatrist and medical professor, also holds a degree in Western Esotericism. With a focus on spirituality, he developed an interest in Swedenborg, in the greater context of Swedenborg's influence on Nineteenth-Century esoteric culture.

Known primarily to most as simply an early translator of Swedenborg's physiological writings, Peet reveals Garth Wilkinson to be a man who did far more than that to promote Swedenborg's spiritual-natural paradigm in the nineteenth century. Author of some twenty-five works on a wide range of topics, Wilkinson was a constant seeker of practical applications for the spiritual principles he found in Swedenborg's works.

Dismissing the orthodox medicine of his day as "scientism," he embraced homeopathy for what he saw as its application of correspondence to a vitalistic medical paradigm. He believed Swedenborg's science of reasoning upwards from empirical observation to a "higher science" to be at work in the mesmerism of his day. Although he reversed his course in later years, he was also an early enthusiast of spiritism, seeing what he thought was the truth of Swedenborg's visions borne out in the ostensible visitations of spirits. The driving force behind Wilkinson's ideas was his faith in Swedenborg's writings as a rational doorway into the various manifestations of spirit in nature.

Everywhere, it seemed to Wilkinson, there was the collision of blind, materialistic science with the Divine Human as the archetype of creation. And everywhere he looked, he saw how the adoption of Swedenborg's paradigm might bring this struggle to a proper end. His medical practice and his many other interests were ordered by Swedenborg's system of end, cause and effect in all things. The universe was not the random, accidental result of matter in motion of the materialists. His universe was an animated whole, connected at all points and interactive with the Creator, its final cause.

Among Wilkinson's natural talents was his ability to connect and communicate with the intelligentsia of his day. His instincts led him not just to fellow physicians and scientists, but to the prominent writers and artists of Nineteenth-Century London. Among his many friends and correspondents in the literary world were Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thomas Carlyle, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Charles Dickens, Robert Browning, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Coventry Patmore, and George MacDonald. His greatest friend was American Swedenborgian thinker Henry James senior. Of note is Wilkinson's formal introduction of artist and poet William Blake to English society, by publishing the first type-set edition of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience*. Many believe that this prescient act lifted Blake from a lifetime of artistic obscurity.

But there is more. To his grand sweep of Wilkinson's intellectual era and orbit, Peet adds a rich biographical history of Wilkinson's mentor, Charles Augustus Tulk. One of the early New Church's most inscrutable figures, Tulk is little known, misunderstood by most, and reviled by an obstinate few who still fear his insinuation of idealism into Swedenborg's spiritual paradigm. Perhaps there is something to their concern. On page 51 Peet explains that,

> Tulk's essential thesis was that the natural world is mediated through the mind of man, and therefore the state of nature depends upon the spiritual state of man. This relates not only to individuals, but to humanity in general, because the natural world is a compound of all human minds.

In support of this assertion, Peet offers this from Tulk:

> Though every sentient mind contributes its portion, it is not a separate portion. It is linked together and blended with the sensations of others, producing the

> appearance of a Place which we share in common with others. The sphericity of the Earth, every human being, thinking in the same Natural Plane, contributes.[141,142]

Peet goes to great lengths to introduce us to this shadowy figure, whose mentor was the Rev. John Clowes, who introduced Coleridge to Blake, and Blake to Wilkinson, and who introduced just about everyone in that circle of London artists and writers to the works of Emanuel Swedenborg. Who knew of Tulk's enormous influence on the early New Church in England? Who knew that his tendency to idealism was not his alone, but from the influence of Clowes? Now we do. And now we also know that Garth Wilkinson was a central figure in all this energy and activity. Peet has done New Church scholarship a great favor with this side-trip into the life of Charles Augustus Tulk.

Medicine Mysticism and Mythology is one of those rare books that is not only delightful to read, but which also serves as a reference book thereafter. Not exactly encyclopedic, it nonetheless serves as a major contribution to New Church scholarship in the area of Swedenborg's science and philosophy. □

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141. Charles Augustus Tulk, letter to his 'pupils', 12 September, 1832, in a bound hand-written volume, "'Tulk's Continuation of Spiritual Christianity and Correspondence', in Swedenborg Society Archive A/9.

142. It is impossible to ignore the parallels between this thinking and the implications of contemporary quantum theory, which, by proposing that consciousness, not matter, is the primary 'stuff' of the universe, points in a very similar direction. Tulk's "appearance of a Place which we share in common with others," sounds a lot like the 'monistic idealism' of quantum wave theory. Who knows? Maybe Tulk was right.

143. Reuben Bell holds B.S. and M.S. degrees in Zoology from the University of Tulsa, and a Doctor of Osteopathy from the Oklahoma State University College of Osteopathic Medicine. He is board certified in Osteopathic General Practice and Integrative Holistic Medicine. He was Associate Professor of Biology while attending seminary at the Bryn Athyn College of the New Church in Pennsylvania, where he earned a Master of Divinity degree and was ordained into the Church of the New Jerusalem. He was Associate Professor of Family Medicine and Director of Medical Humanities at the University of New England College of Osteopathic Medicine in Biddeford, Maine, where he was also Adjunct Associate Professor in the College of Arts and Sciences, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies. He has been a practitioner of Geriatric Medicine and end-of-life care, and continues to practice Traditional Osteopathy. He earned a Ph.D. in Theological Studies from the Graduate Theological Foundation in association with Oxford University, Christ Church College. He is pastor of the Church of the New Jerusalem in Bath, Maine.