

## **NORMAN NEWTON, POLYMATH, POET AND DRAMATIZER OF MYTH<sup>113</sup>**

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David Richard Beasley<sup>114</sup>

“The Soul, or Rational Psychology” (n.d.): 434. An excerpt from NORMAN NEWTON, POLYMATH, POET AND DRAMATIZER OF MYTH. In this lengthy article, Richard Beasley confirms the title polymath for Norman Newton, a man who simply cannot be put into a single scholarly category. Newton’s treatment of Swedenborg’s cosmology reveals a comprehensive background in not only Swedenborg’s science, but in modern quantum science for comparison. And this from a man of the Arts! In this short excerpt we get a taste for the significance of Newton’s *The Listening Threads*.

### **SWEDENBORG, THE MASTER**

Since the philosophy of Swedenborg was fundamental to Newton’s outlook on the world, we should touch upon certain aspects. Swedenborg’s major work, *Principia* (1734) argues that the source of all existence is the Infinite. He defines “matter” as arising from serial aggregations of components differing in complexity of arrangement but not as to substance. This conception of a connected series led to the theory that creation originated from a single, mathematical point, the simplest unit of nature. Therefore matter is a “binary formulation of two types of simple entities, one flowing and one static, reciprocally interrelated.” These dimensionless first natural points produce finites, “whirls of energy” that spiraling amongst themselves form the first series of finites. Creation proceeds in a cascade of energy-filled entities compounded in levels of increasing complexity, the units on each successive level being compounded formations of units on the previous

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113. “The Soul, or Rational Psychology” (n.d.): 434. An excerpt from NORMAN NEWTON, POLYMATH, POET AND DRAMATIZER OF MYTH, David Richard Beasley, in *The Montréal Review*, November 2022. Article is used with permission by Mr. Beasley. See after the article for information on a new book by Mr. Beasley.

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level. The finite is connected to the infinite within the infinite itself. Finite human reason can never know the nature of this infinite nexus but one can accept that it is the Logos, “Son of God”, who is not another infinite but at one with the finite.

Series and Degrees—There is nothing in the visible world that is not a series and in a series. There are a successive series of entities in every degree or level of created things. Each degree and the series of entities that comprise it is formed of aggregations of units from the next higher degree. The human being is the lattermost end in the whole grand series of all created things, ranging from mineral to plant to animal. Thus the human being is the “microcosm of the macrocosm.”

His theory of correspondences was important to Newton in his study of myth. A knowledge of how all things are structured in series and degrees makes possible a rational psychology, a science of the psyche based on a knowledge of the ratios or relations between the various interconnected levels within the human soul, mind and body. He called these ratios correspondences. A particular facial expression corresponds to the higher level of electrochemical brain activity that caused it, and this specific brain activity corresponds in turn to yet higher level of thought-process that is within both the brain activity and facial expression. Everything corresponds to something on higher levels, thus as a relation of cause to effect.

### THE LISTENING THREADS; THE FORMAL COSMOLOGY OF EMANUEL SWEDENBORG<sup>115</sup>

Newton’s erudite book compares the natural philosophy of Swedenborg to a stream of thought running from Saint Augustine and Ramon Lull to Hegel and his disciples and followers, including Karl Marx. “Marxist logic,” he wrote, “sometimes throws a greater light on the cosmology of Swedenborg than Western thought because of its dialectic method.” What brings Swedenborg into this stream is his “transformation of logical categories into dynamic cosmological ones, always in a completely Christian context.” Newton’s aim is to trace a link between Swedenborg’s *Principia* and his correspondences, which has a bearing on religions.

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115. 1. Newton, Norman, *The Listening Threads: The Formal Cosmology of Emanuel Swedenborg*, Swedenborg Scientific Association, Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania, 2000

In a chapter entitled “Towards the Doctrine of Correspondences” Newton examines the philosophical background to the doctrines of poetic correspondence. First he decries the spiritualists’ claim that Swedenborg linked matter to spirit, which expresses itself in symbols: “He becomes part of an eruption of every kind of occultist and symbolic system, or rather of fragments of systems: cabalism, symbolic alchemy, seventeenth-century Rosicrucianism, Alexandrian gnosticism, magical or truly philosophical Neoplatonism and neo-Pythagoreanism and new versions of Alexandrian and Renaissance misconceptions of the ‘wisdom of the Egyptians and Chaldeans’. There are forms of symbolic mathematics but they owe more to the magical tradition than to Swedenborg.”

Surprisingly Newton rejects the claim of literary critics that Swedenborg influenced the poetic spirit. The theory of “poetic correspondences” is an underground movement, found in the letters and occasional journalism of the poets themselves:

For these poets, the major intellectual currents of the age were represented by the growth of a materialist, capitalist and scientific establishment appealing to hard logic, and by the increasing domination of intellectual life by the bureaucracies of universities and state school systems. They judged these trends to be anti-poetic in the extreme. Science, in particular, would have nothing to do with any theory of correspondences, whether Swedenborgian or not. It would be naturalistic prose, not poetry, which would claim to be scientific. Academic literary canons would move from dead classicism to a prettified naturalism with barely a nod to poetic correspondences. Worse yet, the establishment had swallowed German idealism in one great gulp, and Hegel had become the philosophical bulwark of the Prussian state.

What this meant was that there was no coherent world view, now that Hegel was gone, to which a theory of universal correspondences could be attached, unless it was the philosophy and theology of the real Emanuel Swedenborg (that is, not the absurd illumine and cabalist of the secret societies). Yet this virtually demanded complete religious conversion. It is naively thought that poets are more spiritual than scientists and philosophers, because they are not so cursed with intellectual pride. But there is also a pride of the imagination, which the new poetic theory, overturning the old psychology, elevated above the reason. Poets accept Christianity no

more easily than rationalist intellectuals, because Christianity demands a recognition that the un-regenerated imagination is corrupt. The greatest and most ruthlessly honest recognized the corruption of the imagination; they could see it in themselves. Baudelaire certainly did, as did Rimbaud; but the first could only waver tentatively to and away from the Roman Catholicism of his mother, and the second gave up poetry entirely, to embrace the vigorously amoral life of a gunrunner in Africa. Furthermore, the rational aspect of poetry, always vitally present up to the eighteenth century, was scorned by the romantic avant-garde at least publicly (some were acutely rational in secret). Didacticism and philosophizing were certainly to be found in the popular poets of the time, but the advanced spirits, those whom our age thinks of as its poetic ancestors (Hugo and Tennyson need not apply), had little use for them. Poets were not supposed to think consecutively, except in their off-hours, when they wrote criticism. Shelley, who knew more about logic and classical poetic theory than he admitted, had said in his *Defence of Poetry* that "Reason respects the differences and the imagination the similitudes of things" and that "Reason is to the imagination as the instrument is to the agent." If this is so, and arguably it is so in poetry, then the two are still related. It does not matter which is superior to the other or which includes the other. For if a theory of correspondence is not also logical it cannot be universal.

There is a hidden factor in all this, for which some nineteenth-century Swedenborgians themselves must bear the blame. This was the peculiar notion, held by many of them, that the science of correspondences was something like an easy code which made the believer the master of all knowledge, that it was a key which fitted all locks, and which enabled any earnest student of the Writings to unfold the inner meanings of not only the Bible but ancient mythologies as well. Generally, they were misled by a failure to distinguish between logical categories and living forms; in extreme cases one found them manipulating "Love" and "Wisdom" as if they were mere counters on some abacus ordered on a binary principle. In this error they resembled, though less conspicuously, certain rash Lullists of earlier times and Hegelians of their own. To outsiders this appeared both presumptuous and silly—sometimes innocently blasphemous when Swedenborgians were expounding Scripture. Applied to the study of ancient mythologies, this pseudo-method could result

in simplifications as grotesque as were to be found among those who tried to demonstrate that all myths were forms of astronomical code.