

## Strange New World

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Those who suspect that Kant's philosophy is, at its core, a mystical worldview, yet encounter skepticism from virtually the entire academic community, need to read Gottlieb Florschütz's monograph *Swedenborg and Kant: Emanuel Swedenborg's Mystical View of Humankind, and the Dual Nature of Humankind in Immanuel Kant*, tr. George F. Dole, Swedenborg Studies, No. 2 (West Chester, Pennsylvania: Swedenborg Foundation, 1993), paper, \$4.95.<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) was a highly accomplished Swedish philosopher, scientist, and inventor who, in 1744, at the age of 56, embarked on a second career as a visionary and theologian, who claimed, among other things, that the Last Judgment had already happened and that his writings constitute the Second Coming of the Word. Swedenborg's most famous work is the *Arcana Coelestia*, published in eight large quarto volumes between 1749 and 1756, which consists of a symbolical interpretation of every single word and phrase in the books of Genesis and Exodus, interspersed with "Memorable Relations" detailing Swedenborg's spiritual journeys to heaven, hell, and the intermediate world of spirits, where he conversed with angels, demons, and the spirits of the inhabitants of other planets. After his death, Swedenborg's English followers founded a church based on his teachings known as the New Church or the Church of the New Jerusalem, and the New Church soon spread to the New World. There are three distinct sects of the New Church in America today, two of them headquartered in Bryn Athyn Pennsylvania, a Swedenborgian community just North of Philadelphia graced with a spectacular Gothic cathedral and a number of palatial mansions built by the Pitcairns, the family of Pennsylvania industrialists who founded the community. Swedenborg has influenced the homeopathic medicine movement, as well as such literary artists as Blake, Strindberg, Baudelaire, Dostoevsky, Yeats, Borges, and Milosz, and such philosophers as Schelling, Emerson, William James, C.S. Peirce, and Kant. To discover Swedenborg is to discover that the world is much larger, and much stranger, than one might have suspected.

To the modern disenchanted mind Swedenborg seems an unlikely influence on any philosopher, much less the sober Kant. But in 1762 and 1763, Kant undertook extensive researches on Swedenborg's most famous clairvoyant feats: the affairs of the Stockholm Fire, the Lost Receipt, and the Queen's Secret. The Stockholm Fire affair took place on July 19, 1759 in Gothenburg, which is 300 English miles from Stockholm. There Swedenborg astounded the town by clairvoyantly reporting that a fire had broken out in Stockholm in the Südermalm (the southern suburb). He then reported on the progress and the extinction of the fire, as well as the damage it caused, and the details of his reports were later confirmed by mounted couriers, who had been dispatched from Stockholm to Gothenburg to report on the fire. The affair of the Lost Receipt took place sometime in the Spring of 1761. Madame de Marteville, widow of Count Louis de Marteville, the Dutch Ambassador to Sweden, who died on April 25, 1760, had been served with a bill by a goldsmith for a silver service her husband had acquired before his death. The widow was certain that the bill had already been paid but could find no receipt, so she asked

Swedenborg to contact the spirit of her dead husband about the matter. Swedenborg reported that her husband's ghost had told him that the receipt would be found in a secret drawer in a cabinet in the Ambassador's room. The widow followed Swedenborg's instructions, discovered the secret drawer, and found the receipt inside it. Finally, the affair of the Queen's Secret refers to a series of events that culminated on November 15, 1761. The Queen in question was Louisa Ulrica (1720-82) Queen of Sweden, the sister of Frederic the Great of Prussia (1712-86) and the wife of Adolphus Frederick (1710-71), Duke of Holstein-Gottorp and King of Sweden from 1751-71. There are many versions of the affair of the Queen's Secret, some of them quite different, but most of them agree on the following facts. Sometime in November of 1761, Queen Louisa Ulrica asked Swedenborg to contact the spirit of her younger brother, Prince Augustus William, (b. 1722), Crown Prince of Prussia from 1744 to his death on June 12, 1758. After an indeterminate period of time, Swedenborg returned on November 15, 1761. In the company of her court, Swedenborg conveyed a message to the Queen from her dead brother. Swedenborg relayed the message in such a way that only the Queen could hear it, either by whispering it in her ear or by taking her aside from the assembled courtiers. The visible effect of the message was, however, apparent to all. The Queen was thunderstruck, turned pale, and nearly fainted. She claimed that only God and her brother could have known the secret Swedenborg had revealed to her.

Kant spent a great deal of time and trouble in researching these strange events. He wrote letters to a Danish friend and former student who had heard the details of the Queen's Secret; he then sent a letter directly to Swedenborg in the care of an English merchant with business in Stockholm; finally, Kant employed a second English merchant, a close friend with extensive business interests in Sweden, to interview Swedenborg himself, as well as witnesses to his clairvoyant feats in both Stockholm and Gothenburg. Kant summarizes his researches in his letter to Charlotte von Knobloch of August 10, 1763, where he states that he is quite convinced of the genuineness of Swedenborg's clairvoyant powers. He also mentions how he was awaiting the arrival of copies of Swedenborg's books with great anticipation. The tone of Kant's remarks about Swedenborg change drastically, however, in *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer, Explained by Dreams of Metaphysics*, Kant's 1766 book on Swedenborg, which is filled with mocking and derisive comments on the Swedish visionary. Yet the surviving student notes on Kant's lectures on metaphysics tell a very different story. Kant discussed Swedenborg's account of the Spirit World in his unit on rational psychology for thirty years, from 1763 to 1793, and here the tone of Kant's remarks are respectful, and even at times complimentary.<sup>2</sup>

Florschütz's monograph establishes Swedenborg's influence on Kant simply by a straightforward comparison between Kant's statements - especially in the notes on his lectures on metaphysics - and Swedenborg's parallel teachings. The parallels are impressive, particularly in matters discussed under the rubric of "rational psychology," and most particularly in discussions of the state of the soul after death. Florschütz explains away the negative tone of the *Dreams* book simply by claiming that Kant changed his mind for awhile. He does not explore the possibility suggested by the interesting fact that Kant's *public, published* comments on Swedenborg are negative, but his *private* comments are positive: namely, the possibility that in *Dreams* Kant is simply *dissembling* his interest in Swedenborg in order to avoid the censorship and persecution that could be expected from

an endorsement of Swedenborg's ideas. Florschütz also opens himself to the objection that Kant, in his lectures on metaphysics, does not necessarily speak for himself, but instead dialectically plays many positions off of one another, while keeping his own views in the background. Furthermore, Florschütz focuses only on issues of rational psychology and does not deal with the many parallels between Swedenborg's and Kant's accounts of the moral life. Finally, the reader will find Florschütz's argument hard to follow on the first reading. Overall, the monograph is more suggestive than conclusive, and serves merely as an introduction to Florschütz's dissertation. All criticisms aside, however, Florschütz's work is still the place to start for a serious examination of the relationship between Kant and Swedenborg.

Florschütz's monograph is only one of a series of increasingly substantial monographs in the "Swedenborg Studies" series published by the Swedenborg Foundation. These volumes are a treasure trove for those wishing to trace the influence of mystical and occult strands of thought in the modern world. The most important of these monographs include *Sampson Reed: Primary Source Materials for Emerson Studies*, ed. George F. Dole, preface by Sylvia Shaw, Swedenborg Studies, No. 1 (West Chester, Pennsylvania: Swedenborg Foundation, 1992), paper, \$6.95, which consists of four seminal essays of Sampson Reed (1800-1880), an enthusiastic follower of Swedenborg whose 1826 book *Observations on the Growth of the Mind* is one of the founding documents of American Transcendentalism and had an immense impact on Emerson in particular. Reed's works are now very difficult to come by, so this volume is an indispensable addition to the library of anyone interested in Transcendentalism in general and Emerson in particular. The most substantial volume in the series thus far is Henry Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, tr. Leonard Fox, Swedenborg Studies, No. 4 (West Chester, Pennsylvania: Swedenborg Foundation, 1995), paper, \$9.95, which contains two densely scholarly and richly suggestive essays in which Corbin (1903-1973), one of this century's most distinguished Islamists, systematically lays out the remarkable correspondences between Swedenborg's account of the Spirit World and his symbolic exegesis of the Bible and the works of Sufi and Isma'ili mystics. Not only is this volume an extremely valuable addition to the English-language literature in comparative religion and hermeneutics, it goes far beyond the realm of mere scholarship: it stimulates the imagination; it opens new worlds. The book is also quite beautifully designed. It deserves a clothbound printing so it can have a durable place in the growing library of Corbin translations. The most recent instalment in the Swedenborg Studies series is D.T. Suzuki, *Swedenborg: Buddha of the North*, tr. Andrew Bernstein, Afterword by David Loy, Swedenborg Studies, No. 5 (West Chester, Pennsylvania: Swedenborg Foundation, 1996), cloth, \$16.95, paper, \$11.95, which consists of a short book and a short essay on Swedenborg by Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki (1870-1966), the world-renowned scholar of Zen Buddhism, who was also a student of Swedenborg's writings and one of their principal translators into Japanese. Unlike the Corbin essays, however, the works translated here do not delve deeply into Swedenborg or Buddhism; nor do they offer anything more than sketchy and tantalizing comparisons; instead, they are fairly elementary accounts of Swedenborg and are primarily valuable as historical documents. The Afterword by David Loy, however, offers a much more substantial comparative treatment of Swedenborg and Buddhism, whetting one's appetite for an entire book on the subject. Like the Corbin volume, the Suzuki volume is strikingly designed; unlike the Corbin volume, it is available in both cloth and paperback. With

future volumes planned on Swedenborg and Schelling and on Swedenborg and the Kabbalah, the Swedenborg Foundation has inaugurated a noble venture in scholarly publishing.

The Swedenborg Foundation also publishes books aimed at a popular market. Chief among these is Helen Keller's *Light in My Darkness*, ed. Ray Silverman, foreword by Norman Vincent Peale (West Chester, Pennsylvania: Swedenborg Foundation, 1994), paper, \$9.95, a new edition of Keller's 1927 volume *My Religion*, edited by Ray Silverman, who has done much to unobtrusively tidy up Keller's rhapsodic but rambling prose, something that Keller's blindness prevented her from doing herself. Silverman has also augmented the volume with Keller's other writings on Swedenborg. *Light in My Darkness* is a moving work, valuable for the insights it gives into the mind of a remarkable human being; it is also a useful introduction to Swedenborg, not only because it sets out many of his basic teachings, but also because its intensely personal nature helps one to understand Swedenborg's appeal. Those curious readers who are daunted by Swedenborg's immense body of work and bogged down by the standard translations, which are mechanical and Latinate, should begin with an anthology of Swedenborg's *Conversations with Angels*, ed. Leonard Fox and Donald L. Rose, tr. David Gladish and Jonathan Rose (West Chester, Pennsylvania: Swedenborg Foundation, 1996), paper, \$12.95, which consists of crisp, readable new translations of some of Swedenborg's most interesting spiritual memorabilia, culled from his books *Conjugal Love*, *Apocalypse Revealed*, and *True Christian Religion*. Also useful is Robert H. Kirven's *Angels in Action: What Swedenborg Saw and Heard* (West Chester, Pennsylvania: Swedenborg Foundation, 1994), paper, \$8.95, a work which summarizes Swedenborg's visions of heaven, hell, and the world of spirits in a warm, personal, and accessible style. All of these works are characterized by a direct, sometimes achingly sincere, testimonial style which, unlike the more impersonal style of the scholarly volumes, can momentarily disarm even the most hostile skeptic and allow him to imagine what it is like to live in their strange new world.

## Endnotes

1. One should also consult Florschütz's doctoral dissertation, *Swedenborgs verborgene Wirkung auf Kant: Swedenborg und die okkulten Phänomene aus der Sicht von Kant und Schopenhauer* (University of Kiel, 1991), which has been serialized in an English translation by Kurt Nemitz and J. Durban Odhner as "Swedenborg's Hidden Influence on Kant," in seven issues of *The New Philosophy: The Journal of the Swedenborg Scientific Association*, vols. 96-99 (January-June, 1993 to January-June, 1996).

2. For a complete account of Kant's researches into Swedenborg's clairvoyant powers, see my Ph.D. dissertation: Gregory R. Johnson, *A Commentary on Kant's Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* (The Catholic University of America, 1997). For complete translations and detailed commentaries on the discussions of Swedenborg in Kant's lectures on metaphysics, see Gregory R. Johnson, "Kant on Swedenborg in the *Lectures on Metaphysics*: The 1760s-1770s," *Studia Swedenborgiana* 10, No. 1 (October 1996): 1-38 and "Kant on Swedenborg in the *Lectures on Metaphysics*: The 1780s-1790s," *Studia Swedenborgiana* 10, No. 2 (May 1997): 11-39.