

# DRAWING ON THE LIVING CENTRE: THE CREATIVE SPIRIT AND EMANUEL SWEDENBORG

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## *Introduction*

The focus of my paper is on the relationship of William Blake, Honoré de Balzac, and Jorge Luis Borges, to the spirit of creativity found in the religious works of Swedenborg.<sup>1</sup> In his religious writings, Swedenborg reveals the ‘living centre,’ or ‘Life itself,’ to be ‘the one human God-man, from whom all things come, whose Divine essence is love and wisdom.’<sup>2</sup> The Lord God Jesus Christ is also the one with whom all things were created to return and be conjoined.<sup>3</sup> Human beings have a special ability to

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<sup>1</sup> In the address on Saturday, February 3<sup>rd</sup>, during the Sixth International RLA Conference, music, paintings and sculptures of other artists touched by Swedenborg’s vision of the living centre were presented and discussed. They were as follows: Richard Yardumian (1917-1985) *Cantius A nimae et Cordis*; Gillian Bedford (1967- ) *Creation*; Martha Gyllenhaal (1947- ) *A View of Heaven* ; William Blake (1757-1827) Frontispiece of *Jerusalem, Los in the battle for Albion, Glad Day* ; George Inness (1825-1894) selected landscapes; Hiram Powers (1805-1873) *Eve Tempted and Greek Slave*; Nishan Yardumian (1947-1986) *Noah’s Ark, Descent from the Cross, Bethlehem, N. C. Wyeth’s Orchard*; Dennis Duckworth (1911- ) *Evils of Adultery, Married Love*; Tommy Hoglund (19- ) *Meditation*.

<sup>2</sup> Swedenborg, Emanuel, *Divine Love and Wisdom*. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1995. (numbers 4, 23, 28).

<sup>3</sup> While in many religious traditions union or merger with the Divine is the desired goal of eternal life, in the Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, the end state is one of conjunction. The key feature of this state is the preservation of identity of those who are conjoined. It is a state which emphasizes reciprocity and mutuality. The concept of conjunction assumes the possibility of eternal human creativity. Such creativity mirrors the infinite creativity of the Lord Jesus Christ, who as ‘life itself’ is creativity itself.

be conjoined with God, according to Swedenborg, because from the beginning they were endowed by him with the gifts of freedom and rationality. These gifts mirror the love and wisdom of God, and thus everyone has the capacity to draw on the living centre and creatively return it to Him. Drawing on his love and wisdom they, too, are artists. As he says in *Arcana Coelestia* (*Heavenly Secrets*),

In thought and in the faculty of judgment lie hidden all the arcana of art and analytical science, and this could not possibly be the case unless celestial (heavenly) and spiritual things within were coming forth, flowing in, and producing all these things.<sup>4</sup>

To seek the living centre one moves in the realm of the sacred that dwells both within every individual and in the natural world without.

*Swedenborg's Teachings on Creativity and Art*

Swedenborg teaches in *Heaven and Hell* that in the after life, the world we inhabit is a world that springs from our own mind. It is a product of our loves and is shaped by truths that we hold dear:

Things that arise in the heavens do not arise in the same way as things on earth. In the heavens, everything comes into being from the Lord in response to the deeper natures of the angels.... Since all the things that are responsive to angels' deeper natures also portray them, they are called representations. Since they vary depending of the state of the deeper natures for angels, they are called appearances, even though the thing that are visible to angels' eyes in the heavens and are perceived by their other senses appear and are sensed just as vividly as

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<sup>4</sup> Swedenborg, Emanuel, *Arcana Coelestia*, West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1997, (number 1495:3).

thing are for us on earth, in fact far more clearly, crisply, and perceptibly. The appearances that arise in heaven in this way are called real appearances because they do actually come into being.<sup>5</sup>

Imagine Blake, or Balzac, or Borges, reading this idea and then reflecting on the worlds they could create. Swedenborg's teachings seem to elevate the world of the mind and its creativity to wondrous new heights. As Christopher Bamford says in his review in *Parabola* of the new translation of *Heaven and Hell*,<sup>6</sup>

Reading Swedenborg, we begin to understand what it is to be conscious beings in a conscious universe. By this, I mean a universe of consciousness, made up of worlds of consciousness, inhabited by beings of consciousness. The visible, material world is but the fringe of the invisible worlds or, to put it slightly differently, that outer world we see is but the edge of an immense, many-mansioned interiority. The material world lies surrounded by the world of spirits and is situated between heaven and hell. Whither we go, where we are, in life or after death, angels or humans, depend on us. We go where we choose to go. This universe is complex, filled with levels. Swedenborg's descriptions are intense, phenomenological, and, it must be said, charming.<sup>7</sup>

The artist takes his or her own world of consciousness and materializes it for others to see, or hear, or touch, thus allowing them to apprehend and appreciate it. Swedenborg sacralizes this process by suggesting its heavenly and

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<sup>5</sup> Swedenborg, Emanuel, *Heaven and Hell*, West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2000, numbers 173 and 175.

<sup>6</sup> Swedenborg Foundation.

<sup>7</sup> Bamford, Christopher, Review of *Heaven and Hell*, West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2000, in *Reviews in Parabola*, Fall 2001, p.94.

spiritual origins. To illustrate this he wrote: 'Such is the architecture of heaven that you would say art is in its art; and no wonder because the art itself is from heaven.'<sup>8</sup> He also wrote that 'all imitation of Divine things from man is done from art.'<sup>9</sup>

While no one has yet developed a comprehensive theory of art which lies within Swedenborg's teachings on correspondences, imagination, creativity, and art, it is clear that one could be constructed.<sup>10</sup> And its very possibility touched the souls of men like Blake, Balzac and Borges. Swedenborg spoke their language and thus, he not only legitimated their artistic endeavours, he almost made them divine.

*Blake and the spirit of creativity in Swedenborg*

There is no question that Blake was influenced by the revelations of Emanuel Swedenborg. On this point there is general agreement. What is frequently debated, however, is how much influence did Swedenborg's writings have and did they only influence a portion of his work, or can their influence be found throughout his creative life? Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-1793), seen as a satire of Swedenborg's own *Heaven and Hell* (1758) has been a significant contributing factor in the debate. What is factually known about Blake's involvement with Swedenborg's writings should be sketched.

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<sup>8</sup> Swedenborg, Emanuel, *Heaven and Hell*, West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2000, (number 185).

<sup>9</sup> Swedenborg, Emanuel, *Arcana Coelestia*, West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1997, (number 10286).

<sup>10</sup>See E. Bruce Glenn, *The Arts: An Affectational Ordering of Experience*, Bryn Athyn, PA: The Academy of the New Church, 1993. While it is not a comprehensive theory or philosophy of art from a Swedenborgian perspective, it does attempt to address questions that are theoretical and philosophical in nature.

Morton D. Paley, in an article about Blake's connections to Swedenborg, summarises the facts. Blake owned and annotated three books written by Swedenborg. They are *Heaven and Hell*, *Divine Love and Wisdom* (1763), and *Divine Providence* (1764). He refers to two others to such an extent that it can be assumed that he read them: *Earths in Our Universe* (1758) and *True Christian Religion* (1771). It is known that Blake and his wife attended the first General Conference of the New Jerusalem Church in London, April 13-17, 1789. This is known because they signed the Conference Minute Book and in doing so assented to the forty-two theological propositions drawn from the writings that established the faith of the New Church.<sup>11</sup> These facts are significant because only thirteen books annotated by Blake survived, and these three represent a significant proportion of them. Furthermore the meeting of the General Conference is the only meeting of any organization that Blake is known to have attended.<sup>12</sup> While there is little doubt that Blake distanced himself from the organized Swedenborgian Church, he did not abandon his friendships with known Swedenborgians, such as the well-known sculptor, John Flaxman, and the philanthropist Charles Augustus Tulk.

He also makes two positive references to Swedenborg in the first decade of the nineteenth century, in 1809 in *A Descriptive Catalogue*, and in his work on *Milton* (1804-1810). In the 'Descriptive Catalogue', Number VIII, 'The Spiritual Preceptor' (now lost) is described: 'The subject is taken from the visions of Emanuel Swedenborg, Universal Theology [True Christian Religion], No. 623. The works of this visionary are well worthy the attention of Painters and

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<sup>11</sup> Paley, Morton D. 'A New Heaven is Begun: Blake and Swedenborgianism,' in Harvey F. Bellin and Darrell Ruhl, *Blake and Swedenborg: Opposition is True Friendship*, New York: Swedenborg Foundation, Inc. 1985, p.16.

<sup>12</sup> Paley, 1985, p.16.

Poets; they are foundations for grand things.’’<sup>13</sup> These words written well over a decade since the publication of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, show a continuing interest in Swedenborg. As the noted Blake scholar, Kathleen Raine, says,

No lapsed Catholic thinks like a Protestant, still less like a positivist, and in the same way, while Blake’s attitude to Swedenborg may have changed, perhaps more than once, the mark of Swedenborgian doctrine and symbolism went deep.<sup>14</sup>

Looking at the Blake annotations to Swedenborg’s writings provides a glimpse into what Blake found in Swedenborg that attracted him and resonated with his own views. His note in *Heaven and Hell* is brief. In the margin near number 513, Blake notes ‘See N 73 Worlds in Universe for account of Instructing Spirits’ (E591) and (HH 588). As listed in Paley, Blake’s notes to *Divine Love and Wisdom* are more extensive. He makes eight annotations. He also makes eight annotations to *Earths in Our Universe*. In *Divine Love and Wisdom*, next to Swedenborg’s ‘spiritual idea’ in paragraph 7, Blake writes ‘Poetic idea.’ Next to paragraph 10, where Swedenborg writes about the reception of ‘Love and Wisdom from the Lord’ in angels, Blake writes: ‘He who Loves feels love descend into him & if he has wisdom may perceive it is from the Poetic Genius which is the Lord (E 592).’<sup>15</sup>

One of Blake’s main interests is in the relationship between the spiritual and natural worlds, in general and between spiritual and natural man in particular. While Swedenborg

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<sup>13</sup> Raine, Kathleen, *The Swedenborgian Songs*, in Harvey F. Bellin and Darrell Ruhl, *Blake and Swedenborg: Opposition is True Friendship*, New York: Swedenborg Foundation, Inc. 1985, p.70.

<sup>14</sup> Raine, 1985, p.70.

<sup>15</sup> Paley, 1985, p.18.

emphasizes the distinct nature of these two worlds, which are joined together by means of correspondences; Blake, in reading Swedenborg, seems to fasten on their connections. When Swedenborg in *Divine Love and Wisdom* # 40, states that the human mind has difficulty in seeing beyond appearances when investigating causes, and can do so only when the understanding is in spiritual light, Blake notes 'This man can do while in the body.'<sup>16</sup> Again in paragraph 257 when Swedenborg states, that a man may come into divine wisdom when he dies, and 'may come into it by laying asleep the sensations of the body...', Blake comments: 'This is while in body / this is to be understood as unusual in our time but common in ancient.'<sup>17</sup> Blake is seeking to confirm his sense that spiritual enlightenment can occur during life in this world. He did agree with Swedenborg, however, that such enlightenment and vision was more prevalent in ancient times.

This pattern of selective agreement with the teaching of Swedenborg seems to have persisted throughout Blake's life. His borrowing from Swedenborg's system of correspondences is most clearly visible in his early works, *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, but they seem to persist to the end of his life.

### *Balzac and the Spirit of Creativity in Swedenborg*

Do you know why I have come back to Swedenborg after vast studies of all religions, and after proving to myself, by reading all the works published within the last sixty years by the patient English, by Germany, and by France, how deeply true were my youthful view about the Bible? Swedenborg undoubtedly epitomizes all the religions--or rather the one religion--of humanity. Though forms of worship are infinitely various, neither their true meaning nor their

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<sup>16</sup> Paley, 1985, p.18.

<sup>17</sup> Paley, 1985, p.18.

metaphysical interpretation has ever varied. In short, man has, and has had, but one religion... .

Any man who plunges into those religious waters, of which the sources are not all know, will find proofs that Zoroaster, Moses, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus Christ, and Swedenborg had identical principal and aimed at identical ends. The last of them all, Swedenborg, will perhaps be the Buddha of the North.<sup>31</sup>

In the nineteenth century, the French literary giant and creator of the *Comédie Humaine*, Honoré de Balzac, like Blake, constructed a whole (enormous) world in which the drama between good and evil could be played out. Like Blake, he drew upon the religious writings of Emanuel Swedenborg to help him create and structure that world. Balzac forged his genius almost as an act of sheer will. He wrote for over ten years without much notice or acclaim. He cranked out endless pages of pulp fiction. This was his training in his craft. This is perhaps similar to Blake who worked for seven years as an apprentice, learning the lines and sinew of the human form. In Balzac's case there was fire in the forge, but the words produced were either too brittle or too soft. His early work did not have eternal qualities.

Balzac yearned for greatness, and during the period he said, 'Sans génie, je suis flambé!'<sup>32</sup> It is unclear precisely when he had contact with Swedenborg's religious vision, but it was towards the end of his long apprenticeship. His first recorded mention of Swedenborg was in *Les Postcrits*,

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<sup>31</sup> Saintsbury, George. 'Introduction and Brief Biography' to *The Human Comedy: Introduction and Appendix*, <ftp://sailor.gutenberg.org/pub/gutenberg/etext/99/hciaa10.txt>

<sup>32</sup> Saintsbury, 'Introduction and Brief Biography,' p.1.



published in the *Revue de Paris* in May of 1831.<sup>33</sup> In this reference he lists Swedenborg among a variety of mystics and Illuminati who have maintained a “branch of ancient philosophy, whose purpose is something frightening and gigantic.”<sup>34</sup> Just as it is unclear when he first knew of Swedenborg, it is unclear precisely what he read. In his 1832 ‘Lettre à Charles Nodier’ that was also published in the *Revue de Paris*, he states that “you will find the complete works of Swedenborg, Madame Guyon, St. Teresa, Mademoiselle Bourignon, Jacob Boehme, etc. rebound by our friend Thouvenin, on a special shelf in my library.”<sup>35</sup> Karl-Erik Sjöden, whose article supplied the citations above, nonetheless questions the extent of Balzac’s acquaintance with Swedenborg, in part, because he believes that the extensive material used in *Seraphita* concerning Swedenborg and his doctrines were taken from *the Abregé des Ouvrages d’ Emanuel Swedenborg*, published in Strasbourg in 1788. While it is possible that this was the extent of his familiarity with Swedenborg, it is conceivable that time constraints while writing led him to use the *Abregé* rather than make his own summary. Deadlines were always nipping at Balzac’s heels and they feed into his rather frantic, fast-paced style of writing. I am not currently in a position to decide how deeply Balzac delved into Swedenborg, but it is clear that he read him shortly before his break through as an author. And as late as his 1842 introduction to the *Comédie Humaine*, he states that ‘the only possible religion is Christianity... à propos of Swedenborg’s doctrines, how there has never been but one religion since the world began.’<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Sjöden, Karl-Erik, ‘Swedenborg in France,’ published in *The New Philosophy*, Erland J. Brock, ed. Vol. C, No. 1&2, January-June 1997, p.550.

<sup>34</sup> Sjöden, 1997, p.550.

<sup>35</sup> Sjöden, 1997, p.549.

<sup>36</sup> Balzac, Honoré de, ‘1842 Introduction to the Human Comedy,’ <ftp://sailor.gutenberg.org/pub/gutenberg/etext99/hciaa10.txt> (5).

Balzac, like Blake, did not incorporate pure, unprocessed Swedenborg into his work. He, too, used Swedenborg to lend veracity to his own vision. Balzac tells us that

the idea of the *Comédie Humaine* was at first a dream: One of those impossible projects which we caress and then let fly; a chimera that gives us a glimpse of its smiling woman's face, and forthwith spreads its wings and returns to a heavenly realm of phantasy.<sup>37</sup>

The idea originated in a comparison between Humanity and Animality. This is a very Swedenborgian project. Swedenborg writes often about the fact that human beings are born natural and must become spiritual. To become spiritual is to subordinate our inborn animal nature to an acquired heavenly one. As he says in *Marriage Love*,

Man is born viler than the beast, without any knowledge or wisdom to guide him, and that if the individual does not learn social and heavenly ways from others and from the Lord's Word, he remains viler than the beast.<sup>38</sup>

Balzac echoes this when he says, 'for does not society modify Man, according to the conditions in which he lives and acts... The social state... is nature plus society.'<sup>39</sup> It is Balzac's purpose in the *Comédie Humaine* to present to the reader the 'infinite variety of human nature' not for its own sake, to merely catalogue good and evil, but to investigate 'the causes of these social effects, [to] detect the hidden sense of this vast assembly of figures.'<sup>40</sup> This is a novel and unique approach to understanding our fundamental constitution. It is neither Catholic, Protestant, nor Enlightened, but Swedenborgian.

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<sup>37</sup> Balzac, 1842, (1).

<sup>38</sup> Swedenborg, Emanuel, *Conjugal Love*, London: Swedenborg Society, 1953, (number 350).

<sup>39</sup> Balzac, 1842, p.2.

<sup>40</sup> Balzac, 1842 p.5.

1831 is the year Balzac's fortunes changed. It is also the year he first mentions Swedenborg. The shift took place with the publication of *La Peau de Chagrin* and the *Comédie Humaine* began to acquire some of the first building-blocks of its grand, very human design, although Balzac's sense of its form was still a few years away.

The story of Raphaël de Valentin, the young protagonist of the novel, shows Swedenborgian traces. It portrays the struggle between life and desire. The fulfilling of desire shrinks the life. This struggle described in Swedenborg is between natural desire and the wisdom of eternal life. Possession of the Ass's skin gives Raphaël the power to achieve his every passion, but, as Balzac tells us, it does not 'provide the knowledge of how to use it.'<sup>48</sup> Balzac informs us, 'The exercise of Will consumes us, Power destroys us, but Knowledge leave our feeble constitution in a constant state of calm.'<sup>49</sup> The secret, says the old shopkeeper to Raphaël, is to hoard one's energy, to invest one's life, not in the senses, which grow dull, not in the heart, which can be broken, but in the mind.<sup>50</sup>

How can one prefer the disasters of your frustrated desires to the sublime faculty of summoning the universe to appear before the mind's eye, the immense delight of moving without the trammels of Time or the chains of Space, of embracing all things, seeing all things, leaning on the ramparts of the world to interrogate the other spheres, to listen to God?<sup>51</sup>

As Balzac's latest biographer, Graham Robb states, '*Louis Lambert* is not just a philosophical treatise on the Swedenborgian idea of internal and external being, the

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<sup>48</sup> Robb, 1994, p.177.

<sup>49</sup> Robb, 1994, p.178.

<sup>50</sup> Robb, 1994, p.178.

<sup>51</sup> Robb, 1994, p.179.

coexistence of the angel and the brute, revealed by certain psychic phenomena like telepathy and telekinesis. In line with *La Peau de Chagrin* and *Le Chef-d'Oeuvre Inconnu*, it develops the notion that 'Thought destroys the Thinker.'<sup>54</sup> It is also a novel as Robb says, 'which seems to be an eye-witness account of life in the spiritual sphere.'<sup>55</sup>

It also recasts one of the famous stories about Swedenborg's psychic abilities, in which he helped a Countess learn the location of a missing receipt that would relieve her from paying a debt her dead husband had already paid. Swedenborg learned the place of the receipt by speaking with the woman's husband in the spiritual world. In *Louis Lambert* the receipts are for a suit, and an apparition of his dead mother tells Louis' grandfather where they might be found.<sup>56</sup> These psychic experiences led Louis to Swedenborg, and to the project of his life. It should be pointed out that *Louis Lambert* is an autobiographical account of Balzac's early years, psychic experiences and passions, as well as a philosophical statement. As Balzac writes:

This event, under his father's roof and of his own knowledge, when Louis was nine years old, contributed largely to his belief in Swedenborg's miraculous visions, for in the course of that philosopher's life he repeatedly gave proofs of the power of sight developed in his Inner Being. As he grew older, and as his intelligence was developed, Lambert was naturally led to seek in the laws of nature for the causes of the miracle, which in his childhood, had captivated his attention.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Robb, 1994, p.202.

<sup>55</sup> Robb, 1994, p.202.

<sup>56</sup> Balzac, 1899, p.210.

<sup>57</sup> Balzac, 1899, p.210.

Louis devoted his life to seeking these laws and in the process become more spiritual than natural. He *becomes* detached from his body, but according to his wife, ‘When he speaks, he utters wonderful things.... To other men he seems insane; to me living as I do in his mind, his ideas are quite lucid. I follow the road his spirit travels; and though I do not know every turning, I can reach the goal with him.’<sup>58</sup>

The novel ends as Lambert’s wife shares with the inquirer and the reader, what she has ‘been able to preserve from oblivion.’<sup>59</sup> The list of ends with the statement: ‘Above all is God; he is the Unit.’<sup>60</sup> These fragments of Lambert’s surface from the bottom of the abyss. They form the outer limits of Balzac’s world. He is perhaps better known for his all too human or earthy portraits of French life. But France is only the raw material he uses to depict human life, his aim was to write universal, eternal truths. In order to do so, he needed angelic beings to set the stage for him. For as Louis Lambert’s wife is quoted at the end of the novel: ‘His heart was mine; his genius is with God.’<sup>61</sup>

The works of Swedenborg in *Louis Lambert* and *Séraphita* allow Balzac to testify that his ‘genius is with God.’ And thus, the *Comédie Humaine* is a project with divine aspirations.<sup>62</sup> The characters are drawn from both heaven and hell, and they show the inner and outer man, the angel and the brute.

In this project we see Balzac engaged in an effort very similar to Blake’s to show the struggle for the human soul. And like Blake we see in Balzac, despite all his worldly appearances, a naïve man. As Eveline Hanska, the woman

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<sup>58</sup> Balzac, 1899, p.264.

<sup>59</sup> Balzac, 1899, p.265.

<sup>60</sup> Balzac, 1899, p.273.

<sup>61</sup> Balzac, 1899, p.274.

<sup>62</sup> As Robb writes in his biography of Balzac, With Eveline Hanska Balzac could now not just write works that would be sublime, they would be divine. P.226.

who was eventually to be his wife, wrote to her brother about him, after their first meeting:

He is gay and cheerful and lovable just like you... Balzac is a real child; if he likes you, he tells you so with the candid openness of that age when one has yet to learn that words are for disguising one's thoughts... When one sees him, it is hard to imagine how so much knowledge and superiority could go hand in hand with so much freshness, grace and childlike naivety in heart and mind.<sup>63</sup>

*Borges and the Spirit of Creativity in Swedenborg*

Taller than the others, this man  
Walked among them, at a distance,  
Now and then calling the angels  
By their secret names. He would see  
That which earthly eyes do not see:  
The fierce geometry, the crystal  
Labyrinth of God and the sordid  
Milling of infernal delights.  
He knew that Glory and Hell too  
Are in your soul, with all their myths;  
He knew, like the Greek, that the days  
Of time are Eternity's mirrors.  
In dry Latin he went on listing  
The unconditional Last Things.

To my knowledge nothing has been written about Swedenborg and Jorge Luis Borges. I was originally drawn to Borges because of his wonderful essay on Swedenborg, written in 1975. He wrote, 'the doctrine of correspondences has led me to mention the Kabbalah. As far as I know or remember, no one has investigated this intimate affinity [between Swedenborg and the

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<sup>63</sup> Robb, 1994, p.241.

Kabbalah].<sup>64</sup> Borges makes reference to Swedenborg throughout his adult life. In the works I have read he mentions them for the first time in 1929, when he is thirty years old. In an essay entitled 'The Duration of Hell', it is clear that he is already very familiar with Swedenborg. He writes,

Whether Hell is fact of natural religion, or only of revealed religion, I find no other theological assumption as fascinating or powerful. I am not referring to the simplistic mythology of manure, roasting spits, fires, and tongs, which have gone on proliferating in the depths, and which all writers have repeated, to the dishonor of their imaginations and their decency.<sup>65</sup>

The reference to Swedenborg is in a footnote to the last quoted sentence. He said,

Nevertheless, the amateur of hells would do well not to ignore these honorable infractions: the Sabian hell... Swedenborg's hell, whose gloom is not perceived by the damned who have rejected heaven.<sup>66</sup>

Certainly, at this point, he was familiar with *Heaven and Hell*. This brief note indicates that he grasped one of the essential features of Swedenborg's hell and he has a perspective on it. It is possible that this familiarity was longstanding. Borges' father was a psychology professor, and William James was one of his favorite authors. James, the author of *The Variety of the Religious Experience*, was the son of Henry James, a singular American Swedenborgian philosopher. Borges also makes numerous insightful references to *True Christian Religion*, and *Divine Love and Wisdom*.

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<sup>64</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis, *Selected Non-Fictions*, Eliot Weinberger, ed., New York: Penguin Books, 1999, p.456.

<sup>65</sup> Borges, 1999, p.49.

<sup>66</sup> Borges, 1999, p.49.

His last reference to Swedenborg is written in 1985, just a year before his death.<sup>67</sup> Thus, his public conversation about Swedenborg took place, at least over a forty-six year period. Borges was an amazingly erudite man, and there is no doubt that he had equally long conversations about other notable minds. But Swedenborg seems to have particularly intrigued him. I think it was, because he wrote about things at the edge of our human knowledge and at the frontier of human existence. Borges was drawn to Swedenborg, I believe, because he wrote with clarity and conviction about the living centre. Borges, himself, seems to have moved in and out of such conviction over his life time, but he was fascinated by the search to know and understand it. This is clear in his poem about Swedenborg and it is equally evident in his essay about him.

What attracted Borges to Swedenborg was the fact that their minds reflected on similar topics, their thoughts sought out similar worlds. Borges' essays and stories reflect a profound interest in human life, beyond the surface and the taken for granted reality of everyday life. Swedenborg had reflected on topics that were vital to Borges, and he provided creative and insightful solutions to them. Borges, for example, was perplexed about time and eternity and their relationship to our identity. He was fascinated about death, heaven and hell, the internal reality of human life. Swedenborg spoke easily about these things.

Borges also refers to Swedenborg in 'A History of Eternity.' He wrote,

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<sup>67</sup> When Borges was lecturing at Penn State University in Pennsylvania in 1984, he asked to be taken to two sites in the state. One was Pennsylvania's Crystal Cave, a place he had visited before and which he wished to 're-experience.' The other was the Swedenborgian Cathedral in Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania. This vignette was published in *New Church Life* October 1995, 465-466.



For the Christian, the first second of time coincides with the first Second of creation, a fact that spares us the spectacle (recently contributed by Valéry) of a vacant God reeling in the barren centuries of eternity before. Emanuel Swedenborg, (*Vera Christiana Religio* 1771) saw at the outer limit of the spiritual orb an hallucinatory statue depicting the voracious inferno into which are plunged all who 'engage in the senseless and sterile deliberations of the condition of the Lord before creation.'<sup>68</sup>

In a book review of Sir William Barrett's *Personality Survives Death*, he wrote,

The other world described by Sir William Barrett is no less substantial than that of Swedenborg or Sir Oliver Lodge. The first of these explorers, *De Coelo et Inferno* (1758) reported things in heaven are brighter, more solid, and more numerous than those on earth, and that there are streets and avenues. Sir William Barrett corroborates these facts and speaks of hexagonal houses made of brick and stone. (Hexagonal... is there an affinity between the dead and bees?)<sup>69</sup>

In his essay 'On Oscar Wilde' he wrote that: 'Wilde is nearly always right.' He gives as an example, the following from *De Profundis*, '...that there is no man who is not, at each moment, all that he has been and will be. The statement is not unworthy of León Bloy or Swedenborg.'<sup>70</sup> This is a constant theme in the works of Borges himself, as is the idea that 'only when you accept your circumstances do you get to see the point where every act in the whole history of the cosmos come together.' As is illustrated in

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<sup>68</sup> Borges, 1999, p.131.

<sup>69</sup> Borges, 1999, p.182.

<sup>70</sup> Borges, 1999, p.315.

the story 'El Aleph.'<sup>71</sup> This too, is an insight that resonates with Swedenborg.

In his essay on 'Emanuel Swedenborg, *Mystical Works*' Borges begins the essay by applying Voltaire's definition of Charles XII of Sweden, as 'the most extraordinary man who had ever lived on earth' to the king's subject Swedenborg instead.<sup>72</sup> Borges saw Swedenborg as a mystic

who energetically and lucidly traveled through this world and others. No one accepted life more fully, no one investigated it with such passion, with the intellectual love, or with such impatience to understand it. No one was less like a monk than that sanguine Scandinavian who went farther than Eric the Red.<sup>73</sup>

Borges admired Swedenborg because 'he rejected asceticism.' He admired him because 'he wrote in clear unequivocal prose,' and 'unlike other mystics, he avoided metaphor, exaltation, and vague and passionate hyperbole.'<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, Swedenborg shows hell, not through the vague words of an ecstatic trance, but with

the verbosity of the explorer or geographer describing unknown lands.... Like Emerson or Walt Whitman, he believed that 'arguments convince no one,' and that merely stating a truth is enough for those who hear it to accept it. He always avoided polemic. There is not a single syllogism in his entire work, only terse and tranquil statements.<sup>75</sup>

Borges defends Swedenborg against two possible conjectures of incredulous readers. First, that he was an

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<sup>71</sup> Borges, 1999, p.242.

<sup>72</sup> Borges, 1999, p.449.

<sup>73</sup> Borges, 1999, p.449.

<sup>74</sup> Borges, 1999, pp.449-451.

<sup>75</sup> Borges, 1999, p.452.

impostor, and second that he was mad. If Swedenborg attempted to deceive, says Borges, why did he write almost all of his works anonymously? And against the accusation of insanity, he presents Swedenborg's thirty years of labor, writing clearly and methodically with no sign of frenzy.

Borges also notes that Swedenborg does not use the art or poetry of Dante to convince us of his vision.

The Heaven and Hell of his doctrines are not places, although the souls of the dead who inhabit and, in a way, create them perceive them as being situated in space. They are conditions of the soul determined by its former life. Heaven is forbidden to no one; Hell is imposed on no one. The doors, so to speak are open.<sup>76</sup>

Toward the end of his essay, Borges provides the reader with a brief but tender review of the doctrines. The summary is at once general and specific. It introduces Swedenborg and Borges' particular appreciation of him. He describes Swedenborg's heavens, and the angels who live there, who are heavens in themselves. He shows the Lord as the sun of heaven and the source of the heat and light experienced by the angels. Given Borges' craft, it is not surprising that he describes the language, speech, and books of the angels. He is intrigued by the loving openness of heaven. As he says, 'Good will and the love of God are essential; external circumstances are not.'<sup>78</sup>

It is not surprising therefore that Borges is delighted that Swedenborg values intelligence as well as righteousness. He reminds us that Blake, too, appreciated that particular quality of Swedenborg's heaven, as well as its artistic dimension. And of course, he acquaints us with his delight in the doctrine of correspondences. And so in a sense we

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<sup>76</sup> Borges, 1999, p.453.

<sup>78</sup> Borges, 1999, p.455.