

his inept predecessors far behind, I shall not have the temerity to declare that my translation surpasses the others. Nor have I neglected them; I have consulted and profited from the version by Francisco Alexander (Quito, 1956), which still strikes me as the best, though it often falls into an excess of literalness which we may attribute to reverence or perhaps to an overreliance on the Spanish-English dictionary.

Whitman's language is a contemporary one; hundreds of years will go by before it becomes a dead language. Then we will be able to translate and recreate him in all freedom, as Jáuregui did with the *Pharsalia*, or Chapman, Pope, and Lawrence with the *Odyssey*. In the meantime, I see no other possibility but a version like mine, which wavers between personal interpretation and a resigned rigor.

One thing comforts me. I recall having attended, many years ago, a performance of *Macbeth*; the translation was every bit as shaky as the actors and the paint-caked set, but I went out onto the street shattered by tragic passion. Shakespeare had come through, and so will Whitman.

[1969]

[EA]

### Emanuel Swedenborg, *Mystical Works*

Of another famous Scandinavian, Charles XII of Sweden, Voltaire wrote that he was the most extraordinary man who had ever lived on earth. The superlative mode is imprudent, as it tends less toward persuasion than a mere fruitless polemic, but I would like to apply Voltaire's definition, not to Charles XII, who was a military conqueror like many others, but rather to the most mysterious of his subjects, Emanuel Swedenborg.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his famous lecture of 1845, chose Swedenborg as the prototype of the mystic. The word, while accurate, runs the risk of suggesting a man apart, a man who instinctively removes himself from the circumstances and immediacies we call—I'll never know why—reality. No one is less like that image than Emanuel Swedenborg, who energetically and lucidly traveled through this world and the others. No one accepted life more fully, no one investigated it with such passion, with the same intellectual love, or with such impatience to understand it. No one was less like a monk than that sanguine Scandinavian who went farther than Erik the Red.

Like the Buddha, Swedenborg rejected asceticism, which impoverishes and can destroy men. Within the boundaries of Heaven, he saw a hermit

who had sought to win admittance there and had spent his mortal life in solitude and the desert. Having reached his goal, this fortunate man discovered that he was unable to follow the conversation of the angels or fathom the complexities of paradise. Finally, he was allowed to project around himself a hallucinatory image of the wilderness. There he remains, as he was on earth, in self-mortification and prayer, but without the hope of ever reaching heaven.

Jesper Swedberg, his father, was an eminent Lutheran bishop, and a rare conjunction of fervor and tolerance. Emanuel was born in Stockholm at the beginning of the year 1688. From early childhood, he thought about God and eagerly talked with the clerics who frequented his father's house. It is significant that above salvation through faith, the cornerstone of the reform preached by Luther, he placed salvation through good works, as an irrefutable proof of the former.

This peerless, solitary man was many men. He loved craftsmanship: in London, as a young man, he worked as a bookbinder, cabinetmaker, optician, watchmaker, and maker of scientific instruments; he also made engravings for the maps on globes. All of this, as well as the study of the various natural sciences, algebra, and the new astronomy of Sir Isaac Newton, with whom he would have liked to have talked but never met. His applications were always inventive: he anticipated the nebular theory of Laplace and Kant, designed a ship that could travel through the air and another, for military purposes, that could travel beneath the sea. We are indebted to him for a personal method for determining longitude and a treatise on the diameter of the moon. In Uppsala around 1716, he founded a scientific journal with a beautiful title, *Daedalus Hyperboreus*, which lasted for two years. In 1717, his aversion to the purely speculative caused him to refuse a chair in astronomy offered him by the king. During the reckless and almost mythical wars waged by Charles XII—wars that turned Voltaire into an epic poet, author of the *Henriade*—he served as a military engineer. He invented and constructed a device to move boats over a stretch of land more than fourteen miles wide. In 1734, his three-volume *Opera Philosophica et Mineralia* appeared in Saxony. He wrote good Latin hexameters and was interested in English literature—Spenser, Shakespeare, Cowley, Milton, and Dryden—because of its imaginative power. Even if he had not devoted himself to mysticism, his name would be illustrious in science. Like Descartes, he was interested in the problem of the precise point where the soul is connected to the body. Anatomy, physics, algebra, and chemistry in-

spired many other detailed works which he wrote, as was usual at the time, in Latin.

In Holland, he was impressed by the faith and well-being of the inhabitants. He attributed this to the fact that the country was a republic: in kingdoms, the people, accustomed to adulating the king, also adulate God, a servile trait that could hardly please Him. We should also note, in passing, that in his travels Swedenborg visited schools, universities, poor neighborhoods, and factories; and he was fond of music, particularly opera. He served as an assessor to the Royal Board of Mines and sat in the House of Nobles. He preferred the study of the Holy Scriptures to that of dogmatic theology. The Latin translations did not satisfy him; he studied the original texts in Hebrew and Greek. In a private diary, he accused himself of monstrous pride: leafing through the volumes that lined the shelves of a bookstore, he thought that he could, without much effort, improve them, and then he realized that the Lord has a thousand ways of touching the human heart, and that there is no such thing as a worthless book. Pliny the Younger wrote that no book is so bad that there is nothing good in it, an opinion Cervantes would recall.

The cardinal event of his human life took place in London, on a night in April 1745. He himself called it the "discrete degree" or the "degree of separation." It was preceded by dreams, prayer, periods of doubt, fasting, and much more surprisingly, by diligent scientific and philosophical work. A stranger who had silently followed him through the streets of London, and about whose appearance nothing is known, suddenly appeared in his room and told him that he was the Lord. He then entrusted to Swedenborg the mission of revealing to mankind, then sunk in atheism, error, and sin, the true and lost faith of Jesus. The stranger told him that his spirit would travel through heavens and hells and that he would be able to talk with the dead, with demons, and with angels.

At the time, this chosen one was fifty-seven years old; for another thirty years more, he led a visionary life, which he recorded in dense treatises written in a clear and unequivocal prose. Unlike other mystics, he avoided metaphor, exaltation, and vague and passionate hyperbole.

The explanation is obvious. The use of any word presumes a shared experience, for which the word is the symbol. If someone speaks about the flavor of coffee, it is because we have already tasted it; if about the color yellow, because we have already seen lemons, gold, wheat, and sunsets. To suggest the ineffable union of a man's soul with the divinity, the Islamic Sufis found

themselves obliged to resort to marvelous analogies, and to images of roses, intoxication, or carnal love. Swedenborg was able to refrain from this kind of rhetorical artifice because his subject matter was not the ecstasy of an enraptured and swooning soul but rather the detailed description of extraterrestrial, yet precise, worlds. To allow us to imagine, or begin to imagine, the lowest depth of Hell, Milton speaks of "no light, but rather darkness visible." Swedenborg prefers the exactitude and ultimately—why not say it?—the verbosity of the explorer or geographer describing unknown lands.

As I dictate these lines, I feel the reader's incredulity blocking me like an enormous wall of bronze. Two conjectures strengthen that wall: deliberate imposture on the part of the man who wrote such strange things, or the influence of a sudden or progressive madness. The first is inadmissible. Had Swedenborg intended to deceive, he would not have resorted to the anonymous publication of a good part of his work, as he did for the twelve volumes of his *Arcana Coelestia*, which did not avail themselves of the authority that might have been conferred by his illustrious name. We know that in conversation he did not attempt to proselytize. 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. (I am referring, of course, to his mystical treatises.)

The hypothesis of madness is equally unavailing. If the writer of *Daedalus Hyperboreus* and *Prodromus Principiorum Rerum Naturalium* had gone mad, we would not have had from his tenacious pen the later publications of thousands of methodical pages, a labor of almost thirty years that have nothing in common with frenzy.

Let us consider his coherent and multiple visions, which certainly contain much that is miraculous. William White has acutely observed that we docilely surrender our faith to the visions of the ancients, while tending to reject or ridicule those of the moderns. We believe in Ezekiel because he is exalted by the remoteness of time and space; we believe in St. John of the Cross because he is an integral part of Spanish literature; but we do not believe in William Blake, Swedenborg's rebellious disciple, nor in his still-recent master. What was the exact date when true visions ended and were replaced by apocryphal ones? Gibbon said the same about miracles.

Swedenborg devoted two years to the study of Hebrew in order to examine the Scriptures directly. I happen to think—it must be understood that this is the no doubt unorthodox opinion of a mere man of letters and

not of a scholar or theologian—that Swedenborg, like Spinoza or Francis Bacon, was a thinker in his own right who made an awkward mistake when he decided to adapt his ideas to the framework of the two Testaments. The same had occurred with the Hebrew Kabbalists, who were essentially Neoplatonists, when they invoked the authority of the verses, words, and even the letters and transpositions of the Bible in order to justify their system.

It is not my intent to expound the doctrine of the New Jerusalem—the name of the Swedenborgian church—but I would like to consider two points. The first is his extremely original concept of Heaven and Hell, which he explains at length in the best known and most beautiful of his treatises, *De coelo et inferno*, published in Amsterdam in 1758. Blake repeated it, and Bernard Shaw vividly summarized it in the third act of *Man and Superman* (1903), which tells John Tanner's dream. Shaw, as far as I know, never spoke of Swedenborg; it may be supposed that he was inspired by Blake, whom he mentions frequently and with respect; nor is it impossible to believe that he arrived at the same ideas on his own.

In a famous letter to Can Grande della Scala, Dante Alighieri notes that his *Commedia*, like the Holy Scriptures, may be read four different ways, of which the literal is only one. Overwhelmed by the beauty of the poetry, the reader nevertheless retains the indelible impression that the nine circles of Hell, the nine terraces of Purgatory, and the nine heavens of Paradise correspond to three establishments: one whose nature is penal; one, penitential; and another—if this archaicism is bearable—premier. Passages such as "*Lasciate ogni speranza, vol ch'entrate*" [All hope abandon, ye who enter here] reinforce that topographical conviction made manifest through art. This is completely different from Swedenborg's extraterrestrial destinies. The Heaven and Hell in his doctrine 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, imposed on no one. The doors, so to speak, are open. Those who have died do not know they are dead. For an indefinite period of time, they project an illusory image of their usual surroundings and friends.<sup>2</sup> At the end of that period, strangers approach. The wicked dead find the looks and manners of the demons agreeable and quickly join them; the righteous choose the angels. For the blessed, the diabolical sphere is a region of swamps, caves, burning huts, ruins, brothels,

<sup>2</sup>In England, there is a popular superstition that we do not know we are dead until we realize that we have no reflection in the mirror.

and taverns. The damned are faceless or have faces that are mutilated and atrocious, but they think of themselves as beautiful. The exercise of power and mutual hatred is their happiness. They devote their lives to politics, in the most South American sense of the word: that is, they live to scheme, to lie, and to impose their will on others. Swedenborg tells how a ray of celestial light once fell into the depths of Hell; the damned perceived it as a stench, an ulcerated wound, a darkness.

Hell is the other face of Heaven. This exact opposite is necessary for the balance of Creation. The Lord rules over it as he does over the heavens. The balance of the two spheres is necessary for free will, which must unceasingly choose between good, which emanates from Heaven, and evil, which emanates from Hell. Every day, every moment of every day, man is shaping his eternal damnation or his salvation. We will be what we are. The terrors or anxieties of dying, which usually appear when the dying person is frightened and confused, are of little importance.

Whether or not we believe in personal immortality, it is undeniable that the doctrine revealed by Swedenborg is more moral and reasonable than that of the mysterious gift obtained, almost by chance, at the final hour. For one thing, it leads to the practice of a virtuous life.

There are countless heavens in the Heaven Swedenborg saw, countless angels in each heaven, and each angel itself is a heaven. They are ruled by a burning love of God and neighbor. The general shape of Heaven (and of the heavens) is that of a man or, what amounts to the same thing, of an angel, for angels are not a separate species. Angels, like demons, are the dead who have passed into the angelic or demonic sphere. A curious trait, suggestive of the fourth dimension, and one which was prefigured by Henry More: the angels, wherever they are, always face the Lord. In the spiritual sphere, the sun is the visible image of God. Space and time only exist in an illusory manner; if one person thinks of another, the second is immediately at his side. The angels converse like people, with words that are spoken and heard, but the language they use is natural and need not be learned. It is common to all the angelic spheres. The art of writing is not unknown in heaven; more than once, Swedenborg received divine communications that seemed to be handwritten or printed, but he was unable to completely decipher them, for the Lord prefers direct, oral instruction. Regardless of baptism, regardless of the religion professed by their parents, all children go to heaven, where they are taught by the angels. Neither riches, nor happiness, nor hedonism, nor worldly life is a barrier to entering heaven. Poverty is not

a virtue, nor is misfortune. Good will and the love of God are essential; external circumstances are not. We have already seen the case of the hermit who, through self-mortification and solitude, made himself unfit for heaven and was forced to give up its delights. In his *Treatise on Conjugal Love*, which appeared in 1768, Swedenborg said that marriage is never perfect on earth because the intellect predominates in men, and the will in women. In the celestial state, a man and a woman who loved each other will form a single angel.

In the Apocalypse, one of the canonical books of the New Testament, St. John of Patmos speaks of a heavenly Jerusalem; Swedenborg extended that idea to other great cities. Thus, in *Vera Christiana Religio* (1771), he writes that there are two extraterrestrial Londons. When men die, they do not lose their character. The English preserve their private intellectual manner and their respect for authority; the Dutch continue to engage in commerce; Germans are weighted down with books, and when someone asks them a question, they consult the appropriate volume before answering. Muslims are the most curious case of all. Because the concepts of Mohammed and religion are inextricably intertwined in their souls, God provides them with an angel who pretends to be Mohammed to teach them the faith. This is not always the same angel. Once, the real Mohammed appeared before the community of the faithful, said the words, "I am your Mohammed," and immediately turned black and sank back into the hells.

In the spiritual sphere there are no hypocrites; each person is what he is. An evil spirit ordered Swedenborg to write that the demons delight in lying and committing adultery, robbery, and fraud; they equally enjoy the smell of corpses and excrement. I am abridging this episode; the curious reader may consult the last page of the treatise *Sapientia Angelica de Divina Providentia* (1764).

Unlike those described by other visionaries, Swedenborg's Heaven is more precise than earth. Shapes, objects, structures, and colors are more complex and vivid.

In the Gospels, salvation is an ethical process. Righteousness is fundamental; humility, misery, and misfortune are also praised. To the requirement of righteousness, Swedenborg adds another, one that had never been mentioned by any theologian: intelligence. Let us again recall the ascetic who was forced to recognize that he was unworthy of the theological conversation of the angels. (The countless heavens of Swedenborg are full of love and theology.) When Blake writes, "The fool shall not enter into Glory, no

matter how holy he may be," or "Strip yourselves of sanctity and clothe yourselves in intelligence," he is merely minting terse epigrams from Swedenborg's discursive thought. Blake also affirms that, besides intelligence and righteousness, the salvation of man has a third requirement: that he be an artist. Jesus Christ was an artist because he taught through parables and metaphor, and not through abstract reasoning.

It is not without some hesitation that I will now attempt to outline, in a partial and rudimentary fashion, the doctrine of correspondences, which for many is central to the subject we are studying. In the Middle Ages, it was thought that the Lord had written two books: one which we call the Bible and the other which we call the universe. To interpret them was our duty. I suspect that Swedenborg began with the exegesis of the first. He conjectured that each word of the Scriptures has a spiritual sense and came to elaborate a vast system of hidden meanings. Stones, for example, represent natural truths; precious stones, spiritual truths; stars, divine knowledge; the horse, the correct understanding of the Scriptures but also its distortion through sophistry; the Abomination of Desolation, the Trinity; the abyss, God or hell; etc. (Those who wish to pursue this study may examine the *Dictionary of Correspondences*, published in 1962, which examines more than 5,000 examples in the sacred texts.)

From a symbolic reading of the Bible, Swedenborg went on to a symbolic reading of the universe and of us. The sun in the sky is a reflection of the spiritual sun, which in turn is an image of God. There is not a single creature on earth that does not owe its continuing existence to the constant influence of the divinity. The smallest things, Thomas De Quincey—who was a reader of Swedenborg—would write, are secret mirrors of the greatest. Thomas Carlyle would state that universal history is a text we must continually read and write, and in which we, too, are written. The disturbing suspicion that we are ciphers and symbols in a divine cryptography, whose true meaning we do not know, is prevalent in the works of Léon Bloy, and was known to the Kabbalists.

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. In the first chapter of the Scriptures, we read that God created man in his own image and likeness. This statement implies that God has the shape of a man. The Kabbalists who compiled the *Book of Creation* in the Middle Ages declared that the ten emanations, or *sefirot*, whose source is the ineffable divinity, may be conceived of as a kind of tree or as a man, the Primordial Man, Adam Kadmon. If all things are in God, all things will be in man, who



is His earthly reflection. Thus, Swedenborg and the Kabbalah both arrive at the concept of the microcosm: man as either the mirror or the compendium of the universe. According to Swedenborg, Hell and Heaven are in man, who equally contains plants, mountains, seas, continents, minerals, trees, herbs, flowers, thorns, animals, reptiles, birds, fish, tools, cities, and buildings.

In 1758, Swedenborg announced that, the year before, he had witnessed the Last Judgment, which had taken place in the world of the spirits on the exact date when faith was extinguished in all the churches. The decline began when the Roman Church was founded. The reform initiated by Luther and prefigured by Wycliffe was imperfect and in many ways heretical. Another Last Judgment also takes place at the moment of each man's death and is the consequence of his entire life.

On March 29, 1772, Emanuel Swedenborg died in London, the city he loved, the city in which, one night, God had entrusted to him the mission that would make him unique among men. Some accounts remain of his final days, of his old-fashioned black velvet suit, and of a sword with a strangely shaped hilt. His way of life was austere: coffee, milk, and bread were his only nourishment. At any hour of the night or day, the servants would hear him pacing in his room, talking with his angels.

Sometime around 1970, I wrote this sonnet:

### Emanuel Swedenborg

Taller than the rest, that distant  
 Man would walk among men, faintly  
 Calling out to angels, speaking  
 Their secret names. What earthly eyes  
 Cannot see he saw: the burning  
 Geometries, the crystalline  
 Labyrinth of God, the sordid  
 Whirling of infernal delights.  
 He knew that Glory and Hades  
 And all their myths are in your soul;  
 He knew, like the Greeks, that each day's  
 The mirror of Eternity.  
 In flat Latin he catalogued  
 Whenless whyless ultimate things.