

"EMANUEL SWEDENBORG": SOME COMMENTS

Kurt Simons, Ph.D.

Foote-Smiths and Smith's¹ attempt to explain Swedenborg's revelation as a mental aberration is perhaps unique in the history of such attempts in being both evenhanded, and indeed even respectful, of its subject as well as clearly representing the result of a fairly extensive study of both Swedenborg and his theology.

One noteworthy aspect of this analysis is its demonstration, albeit unwitting, of the difficulty of arriving at a diagnosis of insanity, of distinguishing just where the dividing line lies between thought or behavior that is appropriate to a situation and that which is inappropriate and hence abnormal. The problem is compounded by the fact that, if a revelatory experience did in fact take place, it could only be measured against the standard of revelatory experience, not simply the experience of everyday life. Indeed, the issue is even more complicated than that if Swedenborg's statements are correct that his revelation was qualitatively different, in involving his rational mind, from that of all previous revelations.²

One temporal lobe epilepsy (TLE) characteristic cited by Foote-Smith and Smith is a trance state. Revelation, if there is such, is by definition a paranormal state, and it certainly seems likely that it would distract the revelator's attention from external, worldly things—as in a trance. But a particularly unusual aspect of Swedenborg's claimed revelation is that he states that he received much of it in a state of full wakefulness, when he appeared to be behaving perfectly normally to bystanders, some of whom were eminent people.³

¹ Elizabeth Foote-Smith and Timothy J. Smith. Historical note. "Emanuel Swedenborg." *Epilepsia* 37:2 (1996): 211–218, reprinted in this issue.

² O. Odhner, "The divine inspiration of Emanuel Swedenborg." *New Church Life* 100 (1980): 191–195, 256–264; F.L. Schnarr, "Dreams, visions and sleep." *New Church Life* 100 (1980): 289–294, 349–355, 404–410, 447–454, 496–498.

³ C.O. Sigstedt, *The Swedenborg epic. The life and works of Emanuel Swedenborg*. (Bookman Associates: New York, 1952). Reprinted (London: The Swedenborg Society, 1981).

Foote-Smith and Smith also mention “double thought.” The Swedenborgian scholar Hugo Odhner once pointed out that

When Swedenborg records how he perceived spirits insinuating contrary thoughts and emotions into him, how could it be otherwise than that an experience of “double personality” would ensue! When spirits caused the sensations of pains or pleasures in various parts of his body, the apparent results would be symptoms like those of hypersthenia or exaggerated or imagined sensations.⁴

Citing both trances and double-thought as symptoms also creates something of a logical problem: either revelation comes while “asleep” to this world, as in a trance state, or while awake, when what Foote-Smith and Smith characterize as “double thought” occurs. If both behaviors are considered aberrant, then there would appear, by definition, to be no “normal” channel available for revelation—creating the logical necessity that revelation is not normal, and hence merely a mental aberration!

Returning to Foote-Smith and Smith’s list of symptoms, “mental confusion and memory loss” would appear a difficult pair of criteria to apply to an individual whose theological writing alone is not only of extraordinary size, scope, and detail, but highly organized and containing, as Hartley pointed out,⁵ a great deal of cross-referencing. Continuing down the symptom list, an individual having a religious revelation might be expected to have a “deepening” of emotion, feel euphoric on occasion (moderated in Swedenborg’s case, as Foote-Smith and Smith in fairness point out, by his focus on humility), and have a feeling of “divine guidance” certainly. Although Foote-Smith and Smith cite “humorlessness [and] sobriety” as two characteristics of TLE patients, they themselves quote Count von Höpken’s characterization of Swedenborg as in fact being serene, contented, and “generally pious, sober, dignified, measured

⁴ H.Lj. Odhner, “Emanuel Swedenborg. The relation of his personal development to his work as a revelator.” *New Church Life* 85(1965): 7.

⁵ S. Noble, *An Appeal in behalf of news of the eternal world and state, and the doctrines of faith and life held by the body of Christians who believe that a New Church is signified (in the Revelation, chap. XXI) by the New Jerusalem: including answers to all principal objections*. London (10th ed.): 1881, 237.

and tranquil.” They also themselves dismiss the hypermoralism and abnormal sexual interest TLE characteristics, and for the aggression characteristic only cite doctrinal passages critical of other churches in the *Summary Exposition*—while not mentioning the far more voluminous teachings throughout the Writings about charity. (Furthermore, Foote-Smith and Smith fail to note that the *Summary Exposition* was in part written in the first place as a response to far more virulent attacks by those who sought to have Swedenborg’s books destroyed and his readers condemned as heretics.)

Religiosity, with “deep religious beliefs,” hardly seems inappropriate behavior for a religious person, revelator or not, and a new religious presentation would by definition be idiosyncratic. (Of note here, however, is that while Foote-Smith and Smith observe that Swedenborg “prophesied” that a church based on his teachings would arise, and that one did, they do not point out how unusual—and non-messianic—it is in the history of avowed revelators for the revelator not to attempt himself to found a new religious movement or organization.) Finally, Swedenborg certainly does stand convicted of “hypergraphia”—in the company, however, of scholars of voluminous written output throughout history!

More complexly, there are the problems of interpretation that arise from lack of familiarity with the full scope of Swedenborg’s life, work and context, already noted in this issue’s editorial. For instance, Foote-Smith and Smith cite as one symptom that Swedenborg experienced “loss of consciousness,” on the evidence of the *Journal of Dreams*, n. 51 passage they quote in which Swedenborg says that he fell asleep after experiencing shuddering. In fact, Swedenborg was well aware of the difference between fainting and sleeping, and he would not have described a fainting spell or loss of consciousness as falling asleep. (His word for a loss of consciousness was *delirium*, often translated “swoon.”) In the passage in question here, Swedenborg merely says that he fell asleep at night.⁶ Similarly, Foote-Smith and Smith classify Swedenborg’s revelatory writing as “automatic.” As noted above, Swedenborg contends that his revelatory experiences—unlike the in-fact “automatic” writing of the biblical

⁶I am grateful to Rev. John Odhner for pointing this out.

revelators—involved his rational thought in an unprecedented way, and specifically a unique interaction of the Lord with his understanding as well as will. This of course may still not sound like the exercise of free will. However, even with the voluminous explanations of Swedenborg’s writings, to understand the existence of free will in any context is difficult if there is the assumption that the universe is guided in its operation from the galactic to the subatomic by God’s Providence. As a senior clergyman once observed to this writer, “If we could understand free will, we wouldn’t have it.” So explaining the operation of free will in the context of Swedenborg’s revelatory process becomes only one small piece of the larger free will question—a question perhaps ultimately answerable only by that fundamental of any religion, faith.

In conclusion, while the Foote-Smith and Smith article, again, points up the difficulty in arriving at a diagnosis like TLE—especially two centuries after the fact—their article does raise an intriguing question: Swedenborg’s writings have a good deal to say about the two sides of the brain—i.e. the location of the temporal lobes—and their relation to the understanding and will (*Arcana Coelestia*, ns. 641, 644, 3884, 5725, *Heaven and Hell*, n. 251, *Divine Love and Wisdom*, n. 384). For instance,

On one occasion when the interior heaven was opened to me and I was talking to the angels there I was allowed to observe the following activities there...On this particular occasion I perceived four activities taking place, the first being into the brain at the left temple. This was a general activity involving the organs of reason, for the left side of the brain corresponds to the rational powers or those of the understanding, but the right to affections or the will. (*Arcana Coelestia*, n. 3884)

The deluge of evil desires affects the will part of the mind and right side of the brain, whereas that of falsities affects the understanding part, with which the left side of the brain is connected. (*Arcana Coelestia*, n. 5725)

(It should be noted that the right-left correspondence holds for all the other paired organs and sections of the body as well, such as the heart, lungs, limbs, eyes, nostrils, etc. [*Divine Love and Wisdom*, n. 384].) As with all other processes of the created universe, revelation by definition pro-

ceeds according to the laws of order applicable to it. Is it thus possible that some of the physiologic mechanisms involved in TLE are also involved in the more external ultimates of the brain utilized in the revelatory process, and so of help to more fully understand the operation of that process? Correlates of TLE with the near-death experience have also been proposed,⁷ again suggesting a connection of these loci in the brain with mechanisms involved in awareness of the other world. In summary, the TLE "connection" with Swedenborg's experiences suggested by Foote-Smith and Smith may in the last analysis be useful, not for being a correct or incorrect interpretation per se of those experiences, but rather for coming to better understand the operation of the correspondential spiritual-natural "connection" in revelation. □

⁷ J.C. Saavedra-Aguilar, J.S. Gómez-Jeria, "A neurobiological model for near-death experiences." *Journal of Near-Death Studies* (1989): 7: 205–222; J.F. McHarg. Comments on "A neurobiological model for near-death experiences." *Journal of Near-Death Studies* (1989): 7: 229–231.