

“HENRY MAUDSLEY ON SWEDENBORG’S MESSIANIC PSYCHOSIS”: SOME COMMENTS

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A number of aspects of Dr. Johnson’s article on Henry Maudsley’s views of Swedenborg (Johnson 1994) seem worthy of comment:

1. Dr. Johnson states that the first edition of Maudsley’s *Pathology of Mind* “provoked violent criticism of himself and an angry response from Swedenborg’s disciples” and that, as a consequence, “all reference to Swedenborg’s psychosis” was omitted from the 1895 edition because “Maudsley had presumably submitted to the pressures of Swedenborg’s followers” (Johnson 1994). Dr. Johnson cites no basis for this assertion, however, and no mention is made of the matter in Lewis’s (1951), Collie’s (1988) or Turner’s (1988) biographies of Maudsley, nor in Maudsley’s (1988) autobiography.
2. Dr. Johnson (1994) states that Maudsley based his views on White’s (1867) biography of Swedenborg. Since only the White biography is cited by Dr. Johnson, it appears that that was the basis for Dr. Johnson’s biographical summary of Swedenborg as well, although nowhere cited as such. Current contemporary major biographies and reference material concerning Swedenborg (e.g. Sigstedt 1952, Toksvig 1948, Woofenden 1988) are not mentioned. The omission may be significant, since these more recent sources would have made clear a pattern of possible bias. To begin with, White’s case is largely based on a single source, the statement of the innkeeper Brockmer, made decades after the purported incidents took place, and a partial and perhaps nearly complete fabrication (Sigstedt 1952, Toksvig 1948, Talbot, this issue). (It appears likely that Brockmer had grievances based on critical remarks in Swedenborg’s work of his [Brockmer’s] religious sect, and due to Swedenborg having left his lodging amidst charges that Brockmer tampered with Swedenborg’s papers [ibid.].) Then the Swed-

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ish clergyman Mathesius, the promulgator of Brockmer's statement—and cited by Maudsley—also appears to have been hostile to Swedenborg's teachings, if not Swedenborg personally (*ibid.*). (Perhaps significantly, Mathesius himself later became insane [Sigstedt 1952, Talbot, this issue].) And, finally, White himself appears to have been biased in this version of his Swedenborg biography, an apparent reprisal for White's being dismissed from his position at the Swedenborg Society publishing house (Sigstedt 1952, Woofenden 1988). Indeed, as Collie (1988) points out, Maudsley's acceptance of White's account was surprisingly—for Maudsley—credulous.

It is unfortunate that Dr. Johnson did not at least consult the account of a contemporary of White's, that of Ireland (1889), which was expanded from a *Journal of Mental Science* article. Ireland was already aware of the possible biases of both the Brockmer report and White biography.

3. Dr. Johnson states that Swedenborg had a conviction "that he was the Messiah and the second advent of the Lord Jesus Christ." Maudsley was more cautious in his characterization of Swedenborg in this respect (Maudsley 1869b). Swedenborg himself was in fact at some pains to emphasize that the second advent lay in the ideas he claimed were revealed to him, but that he personally was but an authoring instrument, in a role analogous to that of the biblical Gospel writers (e.g. *True Christian Religion*, n. 779). See further comments on this matter in Talbot (this issue).
4. For an individual whose life was as widely known and documented in his own time as Swedenborg's, and who had such a voluminous published output, placing such evaluative emphasis on a single questionable piece of data such as Brockmer's report seems methodologically questionable. Maudsley (1869a,b), as well as Ireland (1889), at least attempted to come to grips with the full extent of Swedenborg's life and publications. Dr. Johnson's coverage, on the other hand, is so restricted that it fails to cite not only current biographical literature but even the second half of Maudsley's article (Maudsley 1869b). This latter omission is perhaps noteworthy in that it is in the second half that Maudsley acknowledges merit in some of Swedenborg's ideas and changes to a more evenhanded treatment of Swedenborg's char-

acter than in the first half. For instance, Maudsley at one points says Swedenborg

...has throughout his writings produced such a mass of sound criticism and instructive commentary as constitutes an important contribution to a practical system of Christian ethics. He is inconsistent, he contradicts himself, he puts forward strange and quite unacceptable doctrines; still his clear sincerity, and the marvellous powers which he frequently displays in his exposition of the Scriptures call forth irresistibly a feeling of admiration, and almost constraint, not a belief in his spiritual pretensions, but an acquiescence in Emerson’s description of him as a colossal soul, “one of the mastodons of literature.” (Maudsley 1869b, 427)

5. What may be most unfortunate, however, about Dr. Johnson’s uncritical citation of Maudsley is that it bypasses an opportunity to reflect on the enigma of Maudsley himself, a nominal atheist who “denounced introspection and metaphysics, yet he constantly returned to the metaphysical problem of the mind-body problem, which fascinated him.” (Lewis 1951) Indeed, in some places in his writing, such as the chapter on “Natural and Supernatural Religion” in *Natural Causes and Supernatural Seemings* (1887) or the conclusion of the second half of Maudsley’s Swedenborg paper (Maudsley 1869b), Maudsley sounds at times like a supportive critic or even apologist for orthodox Christianity. If he had such an orientation, it would explain in part his aversion to Swedenborg, whose writings are critical of some of Christianity’s basic tenets.

In conclusion, it seems worth reemphasizing that Swedenborg’s reports have always presented practitioners of what Maudsley’s generation referred to as “mental science” with a basic dilemma. In Ireland’s words,

A slight study of the subject ought to convince one, that either Swedenborg was subject to delusions and hallucinations, or that his pretensions to commune with the dead and his claim to announce a new revelation were really founded on the truth. To admit the latter view would entail the admission of the truth of a new religion...If any one, dissatisfied with

these explanations, wishes for a third one, I, for my part, have no idea what it may be. (Ireland 1889, 2)

Indeed, Swedenborg himself was well aware of this dilemma of interpretation, as Maudsley (1869b) acknowledges, and as is illustrated in the report of Gjørwell (the assistant librarian at the Royal Library in Stockholm) of an interview with Swedenborg, in which Swedenborg “spoke with perfect conviction, laying particular stress upon these words: ‘All this, I see and know without becoming the subject of any hallucinations and without being a fanatic...’” (quoted in Sigstedt 1952, 314).

Since Swedenborg’s claims, like those of other avowed revelators, lie beyond the bounds of testability of the scientific paradigm, no final answer to this dilemma of interpretation can be determined from that paradigm. Careful and dispassionate characterization of the dilemma, however, such as in Ireland’s (1889) essay, the chapter on the subject in Toksvig’s (1948) biography, and, we hope, the present issue of this journal, may help illuminate the matter for individual reflection. In Maudsley’s words,

Neither science nor philosophy has yet apprehended all things that are in heaven and earth, and it is always well, therefore, to examine without prejudice, rather than to suppress with hasty violence, any novel opinions, however strange and incredible they may seem. The history of the progress of knowledge is a history of the incredible becoming credible, of the strange being found true. (Maudsley 1889b, 430)

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