

An Angle of Vision

The Seer in Contemporary Perspective

HOW FAST CAN INFORMATION BE TRANSMITTED? PEOPLE WONDERED. Can you in some sense be present at two places at the same time? It is still there, the Sahlgren House at Norra Hamngatan in Sweden's harbor city, Gothenburg, where Emanuel Swedenborg was having dinner on Thursday, 19 July 1759, when suddenly he had a vivid vision of a conflagration in Stockholm—405 kilometers away as the birds and airplanes fly—the flames drawing nearer and nearer his home in the Maria parish at Södermalm. The host William Castel and the fifteen guests were alarmed, reports say, and the news spread rapidly in the city producing deep concern, because in those days fire brigades were almost helpless and emergency meant catastrophe. At about 8 PM Swedenborg with relief reported that the fire had halted at the third door from his house. The next day he was summoned to the Masonic provincial governor Johan Fredrik von Kaulbars, who was worried by the rumors, to give a detailed account of the course of events, a statement that was shortly corroborated point by point by a Stockholm news dispatch that arrived by the regular stagecoach, the fastest means of communication at the time. All this is evidenced in contemporary documents. The huge city fire is well known in historical records, being one of the worst in eighteenth-century Stockholm, where it destroyed Maria Magdalena Church and three hundred wooden houses.

There are two elements that are particularly noteworthy in this singular communication—the difference in speed, and even more, the widespread consternation immediately produced. There seems to have been no lack of confidence and credence. Swedenborg was taken at his word.

The event was apparently very notable, too. It was not only the talk of the harbor city but would be reported all over Europe. In Gothenburg, Swedenborg was to get his first followers, later creating a great stir and a religious lawsuit that would upset everyone, including the visionary. Antoine-Joseph Pernety, librarian of Frederick the Great, collected testimonies, as did the theologian and oculist Johann Heinrich Jung-Stilling, a friend of Goethe and Herder, and a councilor of Charles Frederick, Grand Duke of Baden. The Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant, who never left his Königsberg, commissioned an English merchant named Green to visit Swedenborg, to order his exegetic work *Arcana Coelestia* (eight volumes purchased for seven pounds sterling), and to collect all available witness reports. In the years to come, much was to be told about Swedenborg's strange faculties. There were many extraordinary incidences, particularly in the 1760s. Like diviners and mediums still today, he was asked to tell the whereabouts of lost things. An old neighbor of his, the disheartened widow Madame de Marteville in the Van der Nootska Palace at Södermalm, who had wrongly received an urgent reminder to pay a debt and could not find the verification among the belongings of her late husband, was such a client in straits. Swedenborg did not disappoint her, or anyone, although he always played down such doings, all done by courtesy and not worth mentioning, he thought.

At times, when there was imminent danger, he acted on his own initiative, however. At another dinner in Gothenburg, he abruptly and insistently urges the manufacturer Bolander to leave for his cloth mills, where a piece of cloth had commenced to burn near the furnace, which threatened the whole factory. But even in small, everyday matters he gave a helping hand to friends. An evening at his follower Johan Rosén's in the same city, the party begins to argue about a certain book, and Dr. Rosén then regrets that he has no copy, whereupon Swedenborg feels obliged to put in—"not here, but in the attic," which settles everything. In most cases, Swedenborg preferred to keep things to himself. Jung-Stilling, in a 1762 conversation with Swedenborg in Amsterdam, suddenly finds the man he is talking to deeply distracted and unreachable, and after continual asking the latter very reluctantly announces: "At this hour Tsar Peter III died in jail"! Heir to the thrones in both Sweden and Russia, Peter died in custody at the castle of Ropsha on 17 July.

Swedenborg inspired curiosity as well as fear, since he seemed to know more than he possibly could—and definitely more than he should! In his presence, it was difficult to keep secrets. He left most of these things out of accounts because he considered them unimportant and also somewhat embarrassing. He had an important message from a higher source and wanted no focus on his own assumed and much-talked-about ability to make out various things and pick up certain data; or trace lost receipts and such trifles. . . . Was there no gratitude in this world?

Did he have a sixth sense? people asked. Closely examined, many of the reported cases of extrasensory perception or clairvoyance could be viewed as instances of telepathy or, to put it differently, thought-reading or mind-reading. If we study his early works carefully, we can appreciate thought-transference as the lengthened shadow of sympathy or the extended range of empathy. He obviously observed early this strange gift, with such astonishment witnessed by so many people around him, and as always he sought for an explanation. After all he was the man who wanted to know! In his paper *On Tremulation* (1717) he had observed how easily we can enter into the thoughts of other people and know what they are up to, since all life consists of vibrations, and accordingly minds can resonate in harmony as one string can vibrate in resonance with another if they are tuned in the same key. For this reason people can be in rapport at long distances. The spirits of life can travel through space-time. His friend and colleague Christopher Polhem happily agreed and had developed the same idea in his thoughts on the nature and habitat of spirits, *Tankar om andarnas varelse*.

But there is something else we ought to consider to understand what was happening. Emanuel Swedenborg was lucky to be a male, a bishop's son, and a metropolitan nobleman. Gifted countryside women with such alleged supernatural skills and undertakings were still charged and put on trial for witchery. Cases of second sight, such as seeing what was happening in a distant place, had brought people up before the court. At the solemn churches, sovereign clergy spouted fire-and-brimstone caveats. His relative and academy colleague Carolus Linnaeus, who fought against superstition in his own mind and indeed believed in divine retaliation and severe punishments, was keenly aware of the fate of his great-grandfather's mother, who had been burned at the stake. Carolus and Emanuel lived in an age where fabulous animals and ogres were still realities and the Earth largely unknown. When Swedish prisoners of war in Siberia discovered a mammoth tusk, it was taken to be either the Biblical monster Behemoth, mentioned in the Book of Enoch, or the horn of a unicorn. At their old-fashioned university at Uppsala, founded in 1477

by the Pope's consent, the fantastic Rudbeckian worldview was still lingering, and the annals of archaic times and Old Testament history merged with Swedish antiquity, the Scandinavian Peninsula being connected with Eden and Atlantis. That was part of their background and the mindset of the time.

The circumstance that the seventeenth-century-born Emanuel in the course of his life gradually advanced into the Age of Reason and the Era of Enlightenment may have contributed to dispel some contextual illusions, but the change did not make life much easier for spiritually-minded people, mavericks, occultists, or the esoteric. On the contrary, a new kind of witch-hunt replaced the old one, and in his native country Swedenborg was one of the many preys. He was grouped with alchemists, mesmerists, magnetizers, tricksters, treasure-seekers, exorcists, and somnambulists. Scoffing Royal Academy member Mr. Kellgren deplorably set the mark with lasting consequences and had the laugh on his side for hundreds of years, in coquettish rococo lampoons—*Madness Does Not Make You a Genius*—dismissing the man as a loony nitwit and a conceited fool. The guffaw was so loud that it can still be caught in the quiet alleys of his old hometown, where the Swedish Academy resides. Is it surprising that laughter has been connected with evil?

Hell was near, but Swedenborg knew his way about and was never in fear. Sometimes the ground was getting too hot around him, but he kept cool. There were places to go and printers of anonymous books, no questions asked. Secret friends, too, men and women of influence, including royalty, and all the loyal craftsmen that lodged him. His needs were humble, and he remained amiable and confident, usually expressing himself in moderate terms. Indeed he had strange stories to tell, but his reputation as a clairvoyant attracted more attention for the simple reason that this peculiar power could be seen in action. It could be tested, and there was an answer-book available on this side of the grave! To others, as to him, *seeing is believing*. The stories of the beyond were accounts of what *he* had “heard and seen,” not *they*. That was the major difference.

He convinced the senator, Royal Chancellor Anders von Höpken, that death is as trouble-free as drinking “a glass of water” and consequently nothing to be anxious about, but Höpken advised Swedenborg to omit the “memorable relations” from his works, since they made them less believable, that is, verifiable. After all, they lived in our time, the age of empiricist reasoning. However, Count Höpken advised the king to introduce the Swedenborgian faith in Swedish colonies—if there were to be any—since its rational creed made people unafraid of the end and new beginning. On one occasion, but just once, he also testified to his countryman's strange feat as a go-

between of the dead, an achievement that had shocked the queen and the court, perhaps the whole government. Did Swedenborg, the citizen of arcane knowledge, have access to state secrets, too?

In the secret proceedings of the so-called Exegetic-Philanthropic Society, the first Swedenborgian association ever, circulated in a country where there would be no religious freedom until 1860, the former premier Anders von Höpken later observed:

Swedenborg was one day at a court reception. Her Majesty asked him about different things in the other life and finally whether he had seen or had talked to her brother, the Crown Prince of Prussia. He answered no. Her Majesty then requested Swedenborg to inquire about him and to remember her to him, which Swedenborg promised to do. I doubt whether the Queen meant anything serious by it. At the next reception, Swedenborg again appeared at court; and as the Queen was in the so-called white room, surrounded by her Ladies of Honor, he entered gently and slowly approached Her Majesty, who no longer remembered the commission she had given him eight days ago. Swedenborg not only greeted her from her brother but also gave her his apologies for not having answered her last letter; he also wished to do so now through Swedenborg, which he accordingly did. The Queen was taken aback and said: "No one, except God, would know this secret!" The reason why she never adverted to this before was that she did not wish anyone in Sweden to consider that during the war with Prussia she had carried on a correspondence within a hostile country. Her Majesty exercised the same caution during her last visit to Berlin. When she was asked about this episode, which had been made public in a German publication, she dodged the question. (Memorandum of 9 Feb. 1784, trans. A.H.)

Still, his contemporaries found it easier to accept the psychic than the theosophist. That is true also of the philosopher Immanuel Kant, who in his enquiry into the mysteries reported from Sweden took pains to collect and ascertain all facts available in the Swedenborg case. When I read his disrespectful treatise *Träume eines Geistersehers* [*Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*] and even more the earnest truth-seeking account of Swedenborg in his private letter to Ms. Charlotte von Knobloch, I am struck by the similarities between his assiduous and acidulous approach and that of the detective invented by the spiritualist Conan Doyle: only facts speak! Kant concludes that data are insufficient to prove the veracity of Swedenborg's so-called *memorabilia*, his eyewitness reports from the other side. It is easy to feel Kant's disappointment when he finds it necessary to refuse the claims of the mystic, since he does want to know: *sapere aude*, "dare to know" was

to become his motto. However, he perceived that all observation passes through human lenses, for which reason he looked upon knowledge as relative and subjective. Consequently, Kant becomes a skeptic in the sense that he does not deny the possibility of supernatural things, but he asks for objective evidence. He concentrates his researches on this world, focuses on Swedenborg's remarkable extrasensory perception, and scrutinizes every source to find out the truth behind all the stories about the man's strange feats. In doing so, he assembles such a collection of double-checked witness reports that Kant has supplied posterity with the most compelling and persuasive collection of examples ever put together in the history of psychical research and parapsychology. If the existence of clairvoyance or telepathy were ever proved, Kant did it!

Likewise, the Swedish contemporaries were amazed by the oracle. Swedenborg's theology, for long published anonymously abroad, known only by the secret spirits in his garden and the angels of heaven to whom he talked in his chamber, in the street, or in his stateroom at sea, were more delicate matters. His major research project, outlined in *De Infinito* and the aim of the unfinished series of volumes entitled *Regnum Animale* (*The Kingdom of the Soul*), empirically and sensibly to demonstrate the immortality of the soul—*ut ipsis sensibus animae immortalitas demonstretur*—was precisely the proof that the surrounding world in bewilderment was looking for when his deep-sounding approach by means of scientific investigation came to a close and was succeeded by the revelations that answered all his questions. The readers had access to his accounts, not to his experiences. The skeptic Kant concluded his treatise by encouraging some patience regarding the eternal life: just wait a little and you will see for yourself when you get there! Why all this haste? Death is a beaten track and the inevitable destiny of all. In the meantime, cultivate your garden and make the best of your talents, since your virtue probably determines your fate in the future world (*in der künftigen Welt*)! That is Kant's final advice, affirming the hereafter and suddenly expressing himself in tune with Swedenborg's doctrine of life.

This last sentence touches the core of all Swedenborg's concepts: it is what you do, not what you believe, that counts! In a sense, this was the most world-shattering idea in his theology—downgrading the importance of faith, the focal point always being works, a decent life. "The Lord's church is with all in the whole world who live in goodness" irrespective of what religious creed (*The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine*, paragraph 246). As things turned out, Kant's refutation of metaphysics was to serve as a basis for a new metaphysics, the very foundation of the Romanticism of the next

century, when the Swedenborgian movement flourished and its thoughts spread worldwide, but that is another story.

Again, this makes us understand even more clearly why Swedenborg did not want any focus on his own person, on his own powers, or psychic phenomena, which tended to overshadow everything else, and which he didn't want to talk about and never mentioned in his writings. Contrary to this, eyewitness reports abound, as we have seen. The sad result, from his point of view as well as *sub specie aeternitatis*, was that people tended to believe in what he could show rather than what he could report. They asked for miracles, as people asked Jesus and (in vain) Mohammed, whereas Swedenborg maintained that miracles are invisible and continuous. Add to this the fact that the supernatural was penalized and banned, and the depth of the conflict becomes obvious and broadens into an abyss.

He never became a doubting Thomas, but all the misunderstanding surrounding him was enough to drive him or anyone into despair. This can sometimes be read between the lines. In late letters to Ludwig IX, the Landgrave of Hesse-Darmstadt, and to his minister, who gave him a hearing, he highlighted that he did not perform *miracles* but propounded *memorabilia*, things worth remembering (pleading letters written in Amsterdam in July 1771). Mostly he turned the other cheek. He always refused to get into polemics and disputes or even defending himself, although he was often publicly attacked and ridiculed, but to his correspondents, the tone could be importunate. And, in a way, he in these letters adduced the proof that Kant was everywhere looking for and which was the reason for Kant's many inquiries: he confirmed that the affair with the queen of Sweden, etc., was based on contact with the world of spirits, and thus the former confirmed the latter.

The Reverend Samuel Noble remarked that the stories did indeed prove that Swedenborg had the privilege of conversing with spirits and angels. The politician Christopher Springer, who had escaped life imprisonment and moved abroad, was shocked at Swedenborg's insight into the secret peace talks between Sweden and Prussia, his intimate knowledge of Springer's connections with the Russians, and of his unwieldy private dealings with Prime Minister Claes Ekeblad, all these things reported to Swedenborg by the dead. So, this civilian did indeed have access to state secrets. They belonged to heavenly secrets heard and seen, *ex auditis et visis*.

In Gothenburg, the most substantial outcome of his theological work was the small circle of adherents that gradually formed in the seaport. This eventually brought a crisis where the doctrines as well as the visionary were in the balance. His close neighbor at Södermalm, Carl Robsahm, whose family helped to rebuild the Mary

Magdalene Church after the fire, recalled in his memoir: “During the Diet of 1769 a cunning stratagem was planned by some members of the Clergy, by which Swedenborg was to be summoned before a court of justice and after the first examination to be declared a man who had lost his reason by religious fads and fancies, whom it was at any rate dangerous to leave in freedom and who therefore ought to be confined in an asylum. As soon as a certain Senator, Swedenborg’s friend, heard about this, he wrote him a letter in which he disclosed the scheme and advised him to leave the country. This made Swedenborg very sorrowful, and going straight away into his garden he fell upon his knees and in tears prayed to the Lord and asked what he should do; whereupon he received the comforting assurance that nothing evil should befall him—as was the case.” At that crucial moment the ending of his mission and his life was very near. There was to be a continuation, however, and a clandestine following too.

PERSPECTIVES SHIFT CONTINUOUSLY, and our altering mirrors distort the picture. All these stories, all these people, and all these occurrences should be viewed and judged in historical and social context, but we are all as shackled, bound hand and foot, as ever Loki, Prometheus—or even Clio, the Muse of history, since we are children of an era and cannot free ourselves from the times. My own words are of such mythical and fleeting stuff. Considering the most basic bias, my inescapable viewpoint in the passage of time, I am thinking of the perceptive historian Geoffrey Barraclough, who in his *History in a Changing World* concluded that all historical writing is contemporary history. On the other hand, if future readers will smile at our misapprehensions, they should be compassionately reminded that they will share our fate. But when I am finishing this essay, I receive a call of distress from an unknown young Swedenborg reader who, under suspicion of religious whim, has been locked up for compulsory institutional care. *The times they are a-changin’*, the itinerant refrain reads, but I wonder.

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