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‘FRAMING SWEDENBORG’:

OCTAVIUS BROOKS FROTHINGHAM

and the epistemological problematic of ‘immediate revelation’

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Development is God's method in the education of the race. Whatever in religion is destined to endure must be the offspring of the past. It must be related to the old by natural descent. It must come as Christianity came, by providential agencies springing from the bosom of the Church and working in its name, and not by come-outers acting of the Church from without. All the reformers of the Church hitherto, all who have contributed anything effectual to correct its errors, to enlarge its views, to quicken its zeal, - Luther, Fox, Swedenborg, Wesley, Channing, - have been disciples and preachers of that faith which they have helped to new-mould and reform.

– F.H. Hedge, from: *Antisupernaturalism in the Pulpit*, address delivered to the alumni of Harvard Divinity School, 1864.

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All things in nature are beautiful types to the soul that can read them;
Nothing exists upon earth, but for unspeakable ends,
Every object that speaks to the senses was meant for the spirit;
Nature is but a scroll; God's hand-writing thereon.
Ages ago when man was pure, ere the flood overwhelmed him,
While in the image of God every soul yet lived,
Every thing stood as a letter or word of a language familiar,
Telling of truths which now only the angels can read.

– Christopher Pearse Cranch, 'Correspondences' (1839), first two stanzas.

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"I have sometimes spoken with angels about heavenly dwelling-houses, and said to them that hardly any one upon earth believes that angels have need of such accommodation; some because they have no sensible proof of the fact; others because they do not know that angels are men; others still because they believe that the angelic heaven is the visible vault overhead; and inasmuch as this vault appears empty, and they suppose angels to be ethereal creatures, they conclude that angels live in the ether. Besides, as they are ignorant of everything spiritual, they have no conception how such things can exist in the spiritual world as exist in the natural. The angels replied that this was no news to them…"

– excerpt from Swedenborg's *De Cœlo et Inferno* (1758).

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Truth exists for us in layers. There are truths of the letter and truths of the spirit; there is truth to fact, and truth to fancy; there is truth to the individual soul, and truth to the public conscience; there is truth to the heart, to the moral sense, to the spiritual intuition; but it will not do to charge lack of truthfulness upon anybody simply because he does not hold the same opinion with ourselves.

– O.B. Frothingham, *Recollections and Impressions* (1891).

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INTRODUCTION

Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772)[1] was an eighteenth-century Swedish scientist who worked and published extensively on a broad range of scientific subjects in his day: from physics and chemistry to biology to astronomy. However, although Swedenborg can be appreciated as an Enlightenment polymath, he is generally regarded as a 'mystic'. At the peak of his career, in 1743 when he was in his early fifties, he experienced a profound existential crisis that sparked a long period of visions and 'spiritual encounters'. Maybe Swedenborg's existential crisis occurred not quite by accident at the time of the First Great Awakening that swept Protestant Europe and the English-speaking British colonies in America as from the 1730s and 1740s. All the same, for the remainder of his life his writing was dedicated to what he perceived to be 'spiritual travels', 'angelic encounters', and 'celestial communications'.

Swedenborg's theological writings have had a profound and lasting impact, and his legacy has been an inspiration to a broad spectrum of alternative spiritual currents and movements, especially in America. Historian of religion Leigh Eric Schmidt explains:

> *In the mid-1740s, after long years of scientific inquiry, Swedenborg experienced a religious awakening that transformed him from natural philosopher to seer. Out of his newly opened spiritual sight came a vast array of writings: visionary commentaries opening up the spiritual sense of biblical texts as well as detailed reports on his grand tours of heaven and hell. Swedenborg took the Christian and occultist fascination with hidden correspondences to a new level of empirical exactness; everywhere Swedenborg turned he discovered mystical signs of the invisible world beyond the visible. … Even more mysterious was his self-reported ability to "converse with angels and spirits in the same manner as I speak with men," and it was his memorable relations of things seen and heard in the celestial world that especially garnered him a significant readership. By the 1840s, his posthumous fame had made him the most influential 'mystic' in the United States.*[2]

In an American newspaper article from June 1882, Octavius Brooks Frothingham (1822-1895) presents a wholly different image of Swedenborg. Frothingham rejects any mystical interpretations of Swedenborg's visionary theology in favour of an approach of his writings from a philosophical

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[1] For a biography on Swedenborg, see for example: Inge Jonsson, *Emanuel Swedenborg*. (New York: Twayne, 1971); Cyriel O. Sigstedt, *The Swedenborg Epic: The Life and Works of Emanuel Swedenborg*. (New York: Bookman Associates, 1952); Signe Toksvig, *Emanuel Swedenborg: Scientist and Mystic* (New York: Yale University Press, 1948); Larsen, R. (ed.), *Emanuel Swedenborg: A Continuing Vision*. (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1988).

[2] Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*, 45.

angle. Frothingham pleads his case for Swedenborg as a philosopher and social reformer.[3] In his article titled 'Swedenborg', published in *The North American Review*, he addresses the problem of the origins of Swedenborg's teachings, namely that these are derived from visions, and hence, do not have a 'legitimate' basis.

Frothingham opens by acknowledging Swedenborg's value as a scientist. However, despite Swedenborg's many achievements in the natural sciences, "his eminence in the scientific world is but dimly and grudgingly recognized. How shall this be explained? The honours that were tendered to him, the admission of his vast services by contemporaries, only make the riddle more perplexing".[4] The riddle that Frothingham points to – the fact that Swedenborg's name does not spark wide and wholehearted acclaim – is heightened by the fact that 'disciples' of Swedenborg make great efforts to spread the doctrines of their teacher.

Frothingham is careful to distinguish between Swedenborg and 'Swedenborgianism'; the latter refers to the ideas that were disseminated by the General Convention of the Church of the New Jerusalem that had established itself in 1817. According to Frothingham, "whatever our views respecting Swedenborg, Swedenborgianism, as a form of religious institution, has outlived its excuse for being".[5] But the fate awaiting the ecclesiastical organisation of Swedenborgians is shared. "The New Jerusalem church ranks among so-called liberal churches, whose future is extinction. All churches are fast becoming liberal, and in proportion as they follow that tendency, as churches they pass away".[6] Frothingham goes on to argue that other religious and philosophical phenomena of the era, such as Transcendentalism, Fourierism, Brook Farm – which will be explained below[7] –, either have come to an end or are on the wane. And so, he asks: "Why should Swedenborgianism, the other branch of the same vine, survive?"[8]

The question, however, seems rhetorical. Frothingham finds answers in the power of Swedenborg's thoughts, their "accord with the natural instinct of the heart".[9] But he expresses severe concerns at Swedenborg's claims to receiving his revelations through conversations with

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3 Frothingham, *Swedenborg*, 613.

4 Frothingham, *Swedenborg*, 600.

5 Ibid., 602.

6 Ibid., 608.

7 'Transcendentalism' is clarified in Chapter 1, pp 13-15; an explanation of 'Fourierism' and 'Brook Farm' can be found on page 32.

8 Frothingham, *Swedenborg*, 602. Actually, 'Swedenborgianism' in America did survive, albeit barely. Today, several historically related Christian denominations that developed as a result of Swedenborg's writings have assembled under the name 'The New Church'. Its branches comprise of the Swedenborgian Church of North America (also known as the General Convention), the General Church of the New Jerusalem, the Lord's New Church Which Is Nova Hierosolyma, and the General Conference of the New Church in Great Britain. In 2000, total membership was less than 10,000.

9 Ibid., 602.

angels and spirits. The fact that Swedenborg ascribes his ideas to divine revelation as well as his appeal to 'celestial communications' with the help of angels and spirits rather weakens their force. "The seraphic quality of the revelation turns the so-called 'proof' into an impertinence. The claim to 'angelic' authentication is really a drag on the doctrine".[10]

Interestingly, in the article Frothingham declares himself to have been a Swedenborgian thirty years earlier, "simply on account of his sympathy with certain ideas", even though at the time he had never read any of Swedenborg's books.[11] How did Frothingham hear of these 'ideas'? Could he be referring to Ralph Waldo Emerson's book *Representative Men* that was published in 1850 in which Swedenborg is portrayed as the archetype of the 'mystic'? In the article by Frothingham, however, Emerson is criticized with respect to his portrayal of Swedenborg. "If Mr. Emerson's verdict is final, Swedenborg's day is done. But if there is yet another word to be said, it may be to the effect that the seer has transcended his limitations and opened an original path for thought".[12] The person most qualified to expose this 'path' would be Henry James Sr, "the only man who has dug out a secret treasure of thought worthy to be kept".[13]

Scope and Terminology

Intrigued by the article I felt a host of questions come up. Who was Octavius Brooks Frothingham, and what urged him to write an article on Swedenborg? Why did he opt for an alternative interpretation of Swedenborg's teachings? To what extent did Frothingham's background as a Unitarian minister play a role in his assessment of Swedenborg? What was his relationship with Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Transcendentalist movement? Why did Frothingham favour the interpretation of Swedenborg's teachings by Henry James Sr? And, finally, can Frothingham's objections to a 'mystical' interpretation of Swedenborg be situated in the broader perspective of the field of Western esotericism? Combining these questions led me to the formulation of a central research question:

> *What does Frothingham's article on Swedenborg of June 1882 in the North American Review tell us about nineteenth-century American religious liberalism in relation to the epistemological problematic of 'immediate revelation'?*

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[10] Frothingham, *Swedenborg*, 602.
[11] Ibid., 605.
[12] Ibid., 615.
[13] Ibid., 609.

In Christianity, 'revelation' is a complex topic that may be approached from many different angles. In general, 'revelation' is understood to mean the revealing or disclosing of truth or knowledge by the divine. Basically, 'revelation' is a form of communication in which God reveals Himself or His divine will to the world of human beings. Traditional modes of divine communication that hold a prominent place in Christian traditions are religious texts, most notably the Bible – whether considered as inspired by God or as divine dictation. From the perspective of divine immanence, God is understood to reveal himself through Nature or the material world of objects. Furthermore, 'revelation' may take the form of a divine-human encounter in which Deity reveals Itself through direct contact. This mode of communication often occurs by way of visions or voices. Also, the divine may be present in the encounter directly or indirectly through an intermediary or agent, like an angel or spirit. Moreover, 'revelation' can relate to the process of divine revealing itself as well as to the outcome of the process.

This thesis addresses the topic of direct revelation as a form of divine-human encounter from the perspective of epistemology: how to know? How to know whether the experience is 'real'? How to know whether the revelation is 'true'? The problem involved in claims of 'revelatory experiences' is epistemological certainty – how to confirm or deny the validity of such a claim. Hence, the scope of this thesis can be formulated as a contribution to the historiography of a problem – known as *Problemgeschichte* in Max Weber's terms – specifically, the problem of 'revelation' as a source of direct, experiential knowledge. Hereafter we will refer to this type of revelation as 'immediate revelation'. Central is the claim to 'immediate revelation' by Emanuel Swedenborg and the epistemological problematic that this claim involved – as perceived by O.B. Frothingham.

My aim is not to trace an intellectual or theological development, rather I have selected a moment in time – 1882 – from where I am looking outward in all directions; backwards to obtain an understanding of how Frothingham arrived at his position; sideways to possible influences by Emerson and the elder James; and forwards to see what may have emerged as consequence or impact.

Recapitulating: this thesis aims to address the epistemological problematic of 'immediate revelation', set against the liberal religious landscape of nineteenth-century America. My point of entry will be the interpretation of the theological writings of Emanuel Swedenborg by Octavius Brooks Frothingham, with a special focus on influences by Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and Henry James Sr (1811-1882). Ultimately, I hope to situate this thesis in the broader perspective of the field of Western esotericism.

On Method and Sources

As indicated, the 1882 article by Frothingham will serve as the springboard for the exploration of the nineteenth-century American liberal religious landscape. Hence, my research is source-driven rather than theory-driven. However, theoretical reflection is implicit in the selection and interpretation of my sources, and inherent to the historical-critical analysis of my findings.

With respect to sources on the origins and development of American Unitarianism and Transcendentalism, a selection of primary and secondary historical sources will present a cross section over time. As Frothingham has been lauded as the historian of Transcendentalism as well as the biographer of several of its leading New England intellectuals, his books serve as primary sources of which I have made ample use. Transcendentalism in particular has inspired extensive scholarship, and I have been forced to restrain myself in the selection of additional sources. Selected were reputable authors, such as Dorrien, Howe, Hutchison, Miller, Persons, Wilbur, Wright.

While there is an abundance of scholarly material available on Emerson and his intellectual development, this is not the case with respect to his essay 'Swedenborg'. However, I was fortunate to find a dissertation by Kenneth Kurtz[14], describing Emerson and his intellectual development with respect to the conception and writing of *Representative Men*. Although Kurtz approaches the topic from a specific angle, his study is still very suitable for the purpose of this thesis. Two more dissertations – by Richard Kenneth Silver[15] and Robert H. Kirven[16] – help to shed light on the liberal religious 'milieu' in which Swedenborgianism as an institutional religion emerged and on the responses that Swedenborg's claims to 'revelation' invoked. Finally, approaches by Antoine Faivre, Wouter Hanegraaff and Kocku von Stuckrad will be instrumental in navigating the field of Western esotericism.

Structure of this thesis

From my brief review of Frothingham's article I have distilled three main directions for further research, formulated as subquestions. 1) How did Emerson arrive at his choice for Swedenborg as the archetype for the 'mystic' in *Representative Men*? 2) Why did Frothingham opt for a different interpretation of Swedenborg – a philosopher and social reformer rather than a mystic? And, on what grounds does Frothingham favour the interpretation by Henry James Sr over Emerson's? 3) How can we account for Frothingham's uneasiness with the 'angelic origins' of Swedenborg's

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[14] Kurtz, K., *The Sources and Development of Emerson's Representative Men*. Yale University, 1947.

[15] Silver, R.K., *The Spiritual Kingdom in America: The Influence of Emanuel Swedenborg on American Society and Culture, 1815-1860.* Stanford University, 1983.

[16] Kirven, R.H., *Emanuel Swedenborg and the Revolt against Deism*. Brandeis University, 1965.

theology? Consequently, the structure of this thesis is based on three main chapters, allowing for a chronological build-up of my argument.

The first chapter will cover the first half of the nineteenth century, concisely sketching notable religious movements and ideas of this era – Unitarianism, Transcendentalism, American Swedenborgianism. From there I will extensively address and discuss the essay 'Swedenborg' in the book *Representative Men* (1850) by R.W. Emerson. The relevance of Emerson's essay lies in the manner in which his portrayal of Swedenborg – the Emersonian 'frame' of Swedenborg as the archetypical mystic – has shaped perceptions in general, and of O.B. Frothingham in particular.

The next chapter will introduce Octavius Brooks Frothingham and the transformation of his beliefs over time. It will again address elements in the 1882 article, and discuss Frothingham's critique of Emerson. Also, it will provide a brief introduction of Henry James Sr as a nineteenth-century Swedenborgian. More importantly, this chapter will identify the particularity involving the claim to 'immediate revelation' by Swedenborg.

In the last chapter my findings will situated in the broader perspective of the field of Western esotericism through a brief discussion of the approaches of Faivre, Hanegraaff, and Von Stuckrad. By addressing questions as to what extent Swedenborg's claims to 'immediate revelation' can be articulated as an epistemological problem, and how this 'problem' can be positioned in a broader perspective, I will shift the focus from religious liberalism to Western esotericism. Although this may seem like a strange move – somewhat 'incongruously', as Frothingham would put it – the purpose of this paradigm shift is to illustrate Frothingham's participation in the discursive realities of nineteenth-century America that go beyond the 'textbook descriptions' – as argued by Hanegraaff.

CHAPTER 1 'FRAMING SWEDENBORG'

In his book *Representative Men*, published in 1850, Ralph Waldo Emerson chose Swedenborg as the archetype for the 'mystic'. How did he arrive at this choice? Answering this question starts in the first half of the nineteenth century when Unitarianism has gained a stronghold in Boston and environs. Focusing on New England's Unitarian intellectuals we see the emergence of Transcendentalism, inspired by Emerson and his contemporaries. Meanwhile Swedenborg's thought has begun to settle in antebellum America. Next, this chapter addresses the circumstances in which the essay 'Swedenborg' as part of *Representative Men* was conceived as the archetypical 'mystical' frame.

1.1 The heterodox enclave of New England Unitarianism

In the first half of the nineteenth century – after the War of 1812 – America went through a period of immense economic, social and political change. During this time American religion also experienced profound changes. The Second Great Awakening had set off a pietistic spark in Calvinism that ignited an evangelical, revivalist movement. Protestant hegemony, however, was affected by the influx of Irish Catholic immigrants in the 1840s; their growing numbers posed a threat to the Congregational churches in America.[17] Early industrialization in the North contrasted with the cotton plantation economy in the Southern states that relied heavily on slave labour, turning slavery and abolition into polarizing topics.

In New England Protestant Calvinist orthodoxy had been challenged by Unitarianism. Historian and Unitarian minister Earl Morse Wilbur (1866-1956) characterized Unitarianism by its devotion to three leading principles: "first, complete mental freedom in religion rather than bondage to creeds or confessions; second, the unrestricted use of reason in religion, rather than reliance upon external authority or past tradition; third, generous tolerance of differing religious views and usages rather than insistence upon uniformity in doctrine, worship or polity".[18]

Wilbur has done extensive research on the degree to which American Unitarianism built on the legacy of Polish Socinianism, Transylvanian Unitarianism, and the British Unitarian tradition of Joseph Priestley (1733-1804) and Theophilus Lindsey (1723-1808). Although he traces the origins of Unitarianism through Socinianism and its antecedents in Europe, to most historians – including Wilbur – Unitarianism in America is understood to be of indigenous origin, largely independent in its earliest development of similar tendencies in European Christianity.[19]

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17 Silver, *The Spiritual Kingdom in America*, 11.

18 Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism: Socinianism and its Antecedents*, 5.

19 Wright, *The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America*, 6.

Instrumental in Unitarianism's formative years were Harvard-educated Puritans who gradually absorbed Enlightenment ideas over the course of the eighteenth century. In 1805, with the appointment of Unitarian Henry Ware as the Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard, these 'liberals' broke sharply with the more 'orthodox' Congregationalists, sparking a period known as the Unitarian Controversy in which Congregational churches grew more divided, and Unitarianism became the new "unofficial orthodoxy of Boston and its environs".[20]

At this point the question may be justified as to the relevance of the religious liberalism of a small intellectual elite at a specific geographical location. Daniel Walker Howe (1937-) stresses the fact that Harvard Unitarianism "occupied a tiny heterodox enclave in a Trinitarian Protestant nation".[21] Perry Miller (1905-1963), however, as discussed by Howe, refers to "the *representative* quality" [italics by Miller] of the New England mind, arguing that "the intellectual development of New England from its beginning through the early part of the nineteenth century provides historians with a 'laboratory' for the study of 'the relation of thought or ideas to community experience'".[22]

1.2 American Swedenborgianism and the New Church in Antebellum America

Swedenborgianism – both in its institutionalized form and as a philosophical 'school' – responded to the reform sentiment that dominated American intellectual life in the 1830s, 1840s and 1850s.[23] In 1784, Swedenborg's thought had been brought to the United States by James Glen, a planter from Demerara.[24] In Philadelphia, New York, Baltimore, Boston and later Cincinnati, reading groups of Swedenborg's works were formed, attracting socially and economically prominent citizens.[25] The Swedenborgianism that sprouted from these early communities was not quite identical with the theories and doctrines, as formulated by Swedenborg. Rather, it was "Swedenborg Americanized to fit both the cultural and personal needs of a literate and often wealthy segment of the American middle class".[26]

In Boston, a so-called Swedenborgian 'New Church' was established involving a group of Harvard Divinity School students that also included Harvard professor of Law Theophilus Parsons (1797-1882), and Sampson Reed (1800-1880) whom we will meet later on. Although the New Church attracted but a small following, many Americans came into contact with Swedenborg's works. In his

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[20] Prothero, 'Introduction', in: Carole Tonkinson (ed.), *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation*, 6.
[21] Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience. Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805-1861*, 6.
[22] Ibid., 22.
[23] Silver, *The Spiritual Kingdom in America*, 1.
[24] Located in the Guianas, Demerara (Dutch: Demerary) at the time was a Dutch colony. When in 1781 the Dutch decided to support the American revolutionaries against the British, the colony came under British occupation from 1796 to 1802. In 1814 the colony was formally ceded to Britain by the Netherlands.
[25] Silver, *The Spiritual Kingdom in America*, 45.
[26] Ibid., 50.

lifetime Swedenborg published over one hundred books, all of them written in Latin. The translation of these works into English and their subsequent publication in the United States was extremely uneven. For the most part the early works on mechanics, metallurgy and cosmological theory were ignored. Among the scientific works only the *Economy of the Animal Kingdom*, in which Swedenborg presents a physical theory of evolution in an attempt to account for the variety of animal life on earth, was well known to the American public. Of his theological writings, by far the most popular was *Heaven and Hell* (1758); other works that were readily available and widely read were the first volume of the *Arcana Cœlestia* (1748) and the last comprehensive summary of Swedenborg's thought, *The True Christian Religion* (1771).[27] Consequently, despite his "sometimes colorful but generally rather flat style [that] is off-putting to many readers"[28], over time Swedenborg's writings affected a diverse group of Americans from different social strata: from an elite group of New England intellectuals to thousands of common workers.[29]

Central to Swedenborg's philosophy is the so-called 'Doctrine of Correspondences' which posits an ontology of relations between the things or concepts in the spiritual realm and their manifestations in the natural world or physical realm. Faivre explains:

> *Swedenborg presented his visions using images and figures that constitute a type of descriptive, even realistic, geography of the celestial spheres, of the 'spiritual' worlds. His work greatly contributed to disseminate to a wide audience the idea of universal correspondences that, from Nature to humanity and from humanity to God, appear as an indefinite series of intermediaries. In the natural world, any object, even the most minor, 'corresponds' to something that partakes of a higher order of reality, without solution of continuity*.[30]

American Swedenborgians focused meticulously on learning the meaning of these 'correspondences' that were supposed to assist in uncovering deeper meanings in the Bible. Their most remarkable achievement in this respect were the *Dictionaries of Correspondences* of which nine editions were produced between 1841 and 1891.[31]

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[27] Silver, *The Spiritual Kingdom in America*, 21n31.
[28] Faivre, *Western Esotericism: A Concise History*, 55.
[29] Silver, *The Spiritual Kingdom in America*, 23.
[30] Faivre, *Western Esotericism*, 55.
[31] Silver, *The Spiritual Kingdom in America*, 65n45.

1.3 Swedenborg and the emergence of Transcendentalism

Harvard had rendered Boston and environs into a hotspot of Unitarianism, forcing orthodox Calvinism into retreat. In due course, however, the rational faith of the Harvard Unitarians was contested by the Transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker (1810-1860). On July 15, 1838 Emerson, having recently left the Unitarian ministry, urged Harvard Divinity School graduates to turn their attention away from 'historical Christianity' and 'acquaint men at first hand with Deity'.[32] For, Unitarian ministers, according to Emerson, were 'corpse-cold', and Unitarianism's Divinity School was an 'ice-house'.[33]

Extensive scholarship has dedicated itself to the uncovering of the influences that shaped Transcendentalism.[34] This thesis is too short to present an overview of these debates. However, general consensus finds that the Transcendentalists were at least influenced by the British Romanticism of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), by Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) – particularly his ideas on 'the heroic in history' that strongly influenced Emerson as we shall see –, and by French philosopher Victor Cousin (1792-1867) and his theory of 'eclecticism' in relation to the immediacy of 'truth by intuition' – which in my opinion amounts to a theory of 'anything goes'.

From a philosophical angle, arguably, I find that Transcendentalism can be characterized by 1) a positivist, intuitionist epistemology, 2) an ethic based on individualism and self-reliance, and 3) monistic idealistic metaphysics. By way of elaboration I argue that, if we approach Transcendentalism through Immanuel Kant's 'transcendental anthropology' – Kant's main questions involving the theory of human nature – firstly, we find an epistemology that combines a Comtean positivist position (stipulating that information derived from sensory experience, interpreted through reason and logic, is the exclusive source of all authoritative knowledge) with an intuitionist position that asserts that divine truths can be known intuitively. Secondly, Transcendentalism's moral philosophy is based on individualism and self-reliance, especially in opposition to religious authority; no other moral standard than the individual's own shall guide his actions. Lastly, fundamental ideas on the nature of reality are formulated as an ontological doctrine of divine immanence, based on an amalgam of monistic metaphysics and philosophical idealism.

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[32] McKanan, *Unitarianism, Universalism, and Unitarian Universalism*, 17.

[33] Prothero, 'Introduction', in: Carole Tonkinson (ed.), *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation*, 6.

[34] The fact that Transcendentalism has inspired extensive scholarship can be partly attributed to the fact that Emerson and his Transcendentalists figure rather prominently in the canon of American literature. The question whether Transcendentalism should be considered a literary rather than a religious movement has been addressed by Miller. In his book *The Transcendentalists: An Anthology* (1950), Miller argues that American Transcendentalism as an influential school of thought among New England writers in the mid-1800s, was primarily a 'religious demonstration'.

Although the Transcendentalist worldview would on the outside "seem like a mass of wild opinions"[35], Frothingham informs us that Transcendentalism "had a creed and a definite one".[36]

> *It was something more than a reaction against formalism and tradition, though it took that form. It was more than a reaction against Puritan Orthodoxy, though in part it was that. It was in a very small degree due to study of the ancient pantheists, of Plato and the Alexandrians, of Plutarch, Seneca and Epetictus, though one or two of the leaders had drunk deeply from these sources. Transcendentalism was a distinct philosophical system. Practically it was an assertion of the inalienable worth of man; theoretically it was an assertion of the immanence of divinity in instinct, the transference of supernatural attributes to the natural constitution of mankind*.[37]

Hence, as a movement for religious reform, running through Transcendentalism was "the belief in the Living God in the Soul, faith in immediate inspiration, in boundless possibility, and in unimaginable good".[38]

In his analysis 'From Edwards to Emerson' (1940), Miller finds that Transcendentalism has its roots deep in the pietistic strain of New England Puritanism.[39] Howe posits that Transcendentalists wanted to 'reinject a sense of piety into the old religion' without restoring the doctrines of total depravity and original sin.[40] In order to succeed, they needed a new sense of religious spirituality that, Silver argues, was partly provided by Swedenborg.[41] Or more accurately put: provided through Transcendentalists' contacts with American Swedenborgians.

Both Swedenborgians and Unitarians were an upper middle class, elite group of rational, religious liberals for whom Swedenborg's teachings provided answers to the prevailing crisis in society. After all, Swedenborg was also a thorough anti-Calvinist, criticizing a variety of doctrines from predestination to infant damnation to the Trinity. Also, Swedenborg saw heaven and hell as mind states, open to all who sustained their love to God and to their fellow men, independent of church affiliation. Moreover, "Swedenborg's dismissal of external miracles, while preserving room for

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35 Frothingham, *Transcendentalism in New England*, 137.
36 Ibid., 135.
37 Ibid., 136.
38 Ibid., 137.
39 Miller, 'From Edwards to Emerson', in: Lawrence Buell (ed.), *Ralph Waldo Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993.
40 Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience*, 1970.
41 Silver, *The Spiritual Kingdom in America*, 105n46

indirect internal experiences of the divine, jibed with Transcendentalist intuitions".[42] Silver elaborates:

> *The Transcendentalists believed that Swedenborg's doctrines supported their own idealist philosophy. Swedenborg, then, was only one more weapon in the Transcendentalist revolt against Lockean sensationalism. Because he supported a spiritual view of reality and stressed the ethical dimension of the natural life, his philosophy was perfectly adapted for Transcendentalists like Christopher Pearse Cranch, Margaret Fuller and Ralph Waldo Emerson*.[43]

Summarizing we find that Transcendentalism 'borrowed' from the Americanized Swedenborgianism of the era the notion of 'correspondences', a turn towards spirituality, and the emphasis on the ethical responsibility of the individual man.

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On May 20, 1838, two months before his famous Divinity School Address, Emerson's Transcendental Club gathered in the old parsonage of Unitarian minister Caleb Stetson (1793-1870) in Medford, Massachusetts, in order to discuss the topic of 'mysticism'. Besides Emerson and Stetson, notable Transcendentalists like Theodore Parker, Jones Very (1813-1880), George Ripley (1802-1880), and Amos Bronson Alcott (1799-1888) were present. Schmidt marks this occasion as the birth of mysticism in America.[44] But was it? Earlier we have seen how Swedenborgianism manifested itself in antebellum America. Now we move to Emerson's encounter with Swedenborg's ideas, and the circumstances that led to the conception of his essay 'Swedenborg; or, the Mystic' in *Representative Men*.

1.4 Introducing Emerson's *Representative Men*

Representative Men, published in 1850, was conceived as a result of a series of biographical lectures that Emerson gave in 1835 and 1836. The first essay discusses the role played by 'great men' in society; the six following essays describe the virtues of the men Emerson considered emblematic of a particular virtue or function. His choice of characters are Plato, or the Philosopher; Swedenborg, or the Mystic; Montaigne, or the Skeptic; Shakespeare, or the Poet; Napoleon, or the Man of the World;

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[42] Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 45-46.
[43] Silver, *The Spiritual Kingdom in America*, 89.
[44] Schmidt, *Restless Souls*, 29.

and Goethe, or the Writer – presented in the book in that order. Of the six representatives Napoleon and Goethe are understood to impersonate specific historical periods, whereas Plato, Swedenborg, Montaigne and Shakespeare represent 'timeless' men. Of the latter four, Plato and Swedenborg are understood to be representatives of men in search of 'ultimate spiritual truth'.[45]

The reception of *Representative Men* at the time was not wholly favourable. Cornelius Conway – C.C. – Felton (1807-1862), at the time professor of Greek literature and later president of Harvard University, described Emerson's essays as "attempts to set forth qualities of character [rather] than to represent characters". "They are like the study of an artist, who has painted portions of his picture on separate bits of canvas, and then, instead working them together under the inspiration of a general idea, stitches the sundered members as chance may arrange them".[46] In 1929, Clarence Paul Hotson found that for his essay 'Swedenborg' in *Representative Men* Emerson relied heavily on 'the first notable biography' of Swedenborg, namely *Life of Swedenborg* by Nathaniel Hobart that had appeared in 1831. He also demonstrates how Emerson took excerpts from J.J. Garth Wilkinson's article in the *Penny Cyclopaedia*, XXIII, 39.[47] At the time, apparently, the 'borrowing' had gone unnoticed. For, in general the critical reception of the book in the early 1850s was limited, and the criticism voiced was mostly from a sectarian perspective.[48]

In view of Emerson's vast literary achievements *Representative Men* seems superficially to be a minor work – of biographical rather than philosophical interest. However, not surprisingly, Kurtz finds that *Representative Men* is "one of Emerson's most central statements, and represents a larger body of his lecture and essay material than perhaps any other single subject".[49] Kurtz argues that *Representative Men* presents the whole of Emerson's thought from a particular point of view, namely his concept of the nature and function of great men. Moreover, Kurtz posits, Emerson's idea of the hero is essential to understanding Emerson's general thought.[50]

Kurtz has analyzed Emerson's ideas on the nature and function of great men in relation to God and to society, showing these can be related to the important influences of aforementioned Victor Cousin and Thomas Carlyle. However, with respect to the literary influences that may have shaped Emerson's theory of the hero, Kurtz emphasizes that Emerson "not only borrowed but

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45 Kurtz, *The Sources and Development of Emerson's Representative Men*, 16. According to Kurtz, Montaigne is the personification of 'Man probing as active intellect', while Shakespeace is 'Man reacting to the afflications and circumstances of mundane existence'.

46 Felton, *Review of Emerson's Representative Men*, 522.

47 Hotson, *Emerson's Biographical Sources for 'Swedenborg'*, 45. The extent to which Emerson copied and rephrased parts of Hobart's and Wilkinson's work would by today's measure probably lead to an accusion of plagiarism – although Emerson, according to Hotson, "in making Hobart's and Wilkinson's statements his own improved considerably upon their style".

48 Kurtz, *The Sources and Development of Emerson's Representative Men*, 417.

49 Ibid., 21.

50 Ibid., 10-11.

assimilated material, so that it became indistinguishable from his own thought". He was "an intuitive, self-developing and rather undisciplined mind, with a strong bias of his own", and "not concerned with other men's systems of ideas". Furthermore, in tracing sources in Emerson's reading, there is the problem of "determining whether in fact he read given passages".[51]

1.5 Sources for the essay 'Swedenborg, or the Mystic'

Kurtz identifies three sources through which Emerson became familiar with Swedenborg's doctrines: 1) the writings of Sampson Reed and other leaders of the Swedenborgian movement in Boston from 1820 to 1840; 2) the book *The True Messiah* by Guillaume Oegger (1790-1853), a French Catholic priest turned Swedenborgian; and 3) the writings of Swedenborg himself.

Reed was a Harvard student, graduating several years before Emerson. Instead of attending the Divinity School, Reed found himself attracted by the Swedenborgian New Church in Boston, and became of its main figures through his contributions to its periodical *The New Jerusalem Magazine*. Reed also belonged to Emerson's Transcendentalist Club. Emerson was particularly influenced by Reed's book *Observations on the Growth of the Mind* that was published in 1826.[52]

Through Reed, Emerson was introduced to Swedenborgian doctrine, a fact that Emerson was unaware of for years. Although Reed never claimed to be anything but an interpreter of Swedenborg, Emerson regarded Reed as a genius in his own right and an original thinker.[53] In fact, Emerson held Reed in such high esteem that when he finished his essay 'Nature' in 1836, he compared his work to Reed's *Growth of the Mind*, as if this had been his model and source of inspiration.[54] By 1838, however, Reed had fallen from favour. Emerson had begun reading Swedenborg's works first hand, and realized that Reed was voicing Swedenborgian ideas. The discovery apparently was much to his chagrin. As Reed and Emerson grew apart, so did their respective Swedenborgian and Transcendentalist communities.

In 1835 Emerson discovered the work of Guillaume Caspar Lencroy Oegger, a French Catholic priest who became a Swedenborgian around 1826. In 1829 Oegger published *Le Vrai Messie*. The manuscript of an English translation by Elizabeth Palmer Peabody (1804-1894) in 1835 circulated in the Transcendentalist milieu. Emerson's interest in Oegger predominated during the period in which he worked on 'Nature' – it is no coincidence, therefore, that the 'French philosopher' that Emerson mentions in 'Nature' refers to Oegger.[55]

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[51] Kurtz, *The Sources and Development of Emerson's Representative Men*, 66-67.
[52] Ibid., 216.
[53] Ibid., 217.
[54] Ibid., 218.
[55] Ibid., 225.

Recapitulating, Kurtz demonstrates that as early as 1821 Emerson was familiar with Swedenborg's central ideas through Reed. However, Emerson did not read any of Swedenborg's own works until 1835, the same year in which he discovered Oegger. "Up to 1836, Emerson appears to have derived his knowledge of Swedenborg's doctrines almost wholly from secondary sources".[56] Moreover, Emerson never read anything from Swedenborg in the Latin in which he wrote it. This raises the question to what extent Emerson was able to distinguish between Swedenborg's own ideas and the interpretations by Reed, Oegger, and members of the New Jerusalem Church.

As from 1841, while getting deeply into Swedenborg's own writings[57], Emerson got an ever lower opinion of the Swede – first he degraded him to the level of 'Moses and the Calvinists' which in view of Emerson's criticism of Calvinist orthodoxy is rather low, next he accused him of bigotry and being nothing but 'a poor Lutheran', until finally he called him a 'quack' who offered 'mere people's theology' – literalist, pragmatical, and 'a little narrow'. Ultimately, Swedenborg – in Emerson's words – "narrows the Scripture of nature to the wretched answers of the Swedish catechism".[58]

But, what triggered Emerson's increasing resentment of Swedenborg? And why, if his opinion of Swedenborg was so low, did he choose him as the archetypical 'mystic' in his *Representative Men*? The answer is found in two objections and a match.

1.6 Emerson's dilemma: two objections and a match

So, why did Emerson choose Swedenborg as one of his 'representative men'? Silver explains rather thinly: "Of all the men in the recent ages, only Swedenborg stood eminently for the translation of nature into thought".[59] And, "In Emerson's view, Swedenborg was a poet of the soul. He was the master of metaphor and analogy".[60] Apparently, Silver explains the choice for Swedenborg in his mode of expression. But what does it mean? What is a 'poet-translator' – and of the 'natural' into the 'spiritual', at that? And how does this relate to 'mysticism' that Swedenborg is supposed to represent? Are 'mystics' primarily engaged in poetic translations? Somehow, Silver's statement seems to raise more questions than it answers.

In Kurtz we find a more elaborate explanation. Arguably, Emerson became interested in Swedenborg in order to solve his problem of the relation between the domains of the moral and the material. We have seen that Swedenborg connects the natural and spiritual realms – the material

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[56] Kurtz, *The Sources and Development of Emerson's Representative Men*, 230.

[57] Emerson carefully read and annotated Swedenborg's *The True Christian Religion* (1771), *Divine Love and Wisdom*, *Economy of the Animal Kingdom*, the first volumes of the *Arcana Coelestia* (1748) and *Apocalypse Revealed*. In: Silver, *The Spiritual Kingdom in America*, p21n31.

[58] Kurtz, *The Sources and Development of Emerson's Representative Men*, 233-236.

[59] Silver, *The Spiritual Kingdom in America*, 103.

[60] Ibid., 98.

world and the moral sense – through his doctrine of correspondences. In Swedenborg Emerson found someone "who could speak with authority of scientific law, while making it explain a higher law".[61] In fact, his interest in science distinguishes Emerson's preoccupation with Swedenborg from his equally strong interest in the metaphysics of Plato. For, in Kurtz's words: "Plato arrived at transcendentalism through observation of the laws of thought, Swedenborg through the laws of things, and Emerson was interested in both".[62]

However, while Emerson thought of Swedenborg as a scientist, he also saw in him a mystic in the tradition of Jacob Böhme (1575-1624) – including his own language of 'Swedenborgese'.[63] Kurtz elaborates – by comparing Emerson's approach to Swedenborg and to Plato:

> *Mysticism appears in the fact that Swedenborg had perceived the truth of his basic proposition by intuition and defended it on the grounds that it was a revelation. But Emerson shows more interest in the doctrine than in Swedenborg's mystic experiences as such. As he presents them, Plato and Swedenborg gave the same message: reality is one and is spiritual in its nature. The two men differ in that Swedenborg simply asserted the validity of his insight, illustrating it with fantastic stories of trips to heaven and hell and with almost equally fantastic elucidations of natural phenomena, which Emerson gravely applauds; while Plato, who as Emerson noted said the same thing, substantiated his perception by logic and analysis, which Emerson also applauds as 'the science of sciences'.*[64]

In other words, Swedenborg and Plato both arrive at defining and explaining the nature of the material realm in terms of – and in accordance with – the 'spiritual' or the moral sentiment. The difference is that Plato arrives at his conclusions through reasoning, whereas Swedenborg's insights are the result of mystic, intuitive experiences. And, as Swedenborg's mystical experiences appear similar to those of Böhme, Emerson declares it a match. Hence, Plato is decreed the 'philosopher', whereas Swedenborg gets the label 'mystic'.

But, what had triggered Emerson's resistance toward Swedenborg in the first place? The first objection deals with the fact that Swedenborg's philosophy challenged Emerson's conception of reality. Silver states: "For Emerson, unlike for Swedenborg, a hierarchical universe could not be reconciled with an ontological monism, for if he accepted the existence of a hierarchical universe, he

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61 Kurtz, *The Sources and Development of Emerson's Representative Men*, 225.
62 Ibid., 226.
63 Ibid., 233.
64 Ibid., 244.

would have to sacrifice his own belief in immediate intuition and direct experience".[65] In my own words: Swedenborg in his writings had postulated a spiritual realm, inhabited by angels and spirits. However, his basic concept of reality was one of ontological monism, much like Platonic realism. The Swedenborgian universe is a hierarchical construct with various spiritual layers and levels of heaven and hell. For Emerson, however, the entire universe is contained in the natural realm; his concept of reality necessarily excludes the postulated existence of a spiritual or celestial realm. Moreover, the idea of a hierarchical universe threatened Emerson's belief in immediate intuition and direct experience. For Emerson the divine was found within, in man's inner spirit – to be found through intuition and to be experienced in man's inner moral sense. Swedenborg's ontological monism clashed with Emerson's epistemology of immediate intuition and self-reliance. Even worse, the postulate of intermediaries between man and God, between the natural and the spiritual or moral, would reduce man's sense of individual responsibility.[66] Evidently, this issue raises immediate questions with respect to the position of Christ in Emerson's philosophical system. Unfortunately, the scope of this paper does not allow for further elaboration.

The second objection involves Emerson's view of Swedenborg's thought as 'rigid'. Silver points to a study by Sherman Paul that traces the influence of Swedenborg on Emerson. In *Emerson's Angle of Vision: Man and Nature in the American Experience* (Cambridge, MA, 1952) Paul argues that "while Emerson accepted the nature/spirit correspondence of Swedenborg, he objected to the rigidity of Swedenborg's thought." Silver observes that Paul, although he has not read any of Swedenborg's works, accepts Emerson's view of the Swede, whereas he [Silver] tends not to. Silver questions Emerson's qualification of Swedenborg's thought as 'rigid', for he finds Swedenborg far more flexible and organic in his correspondences than either Emerson or Paul indicates. So, Silver argues, "The important question is, why did Emerson misrepresent Swedenborg on this point?"[67] If I understand Silver's argument correctly, he finds that, while Emerson accepted the content of Swedenborg's thought on correspondences, he objects to the 'rigidity' of it. But what does 'rigid' mean? That Swedenborg's correspondences theory was complete, consistent – uncompromising perhaps, to the point of leaving little space for 'manipulation'? And how do you reject the 'rigidity' of a thought system that otherwise qualifies as valid? Needless to say, there are excellent studies on Emerson and his intellectual development that admittedly I have not read, and it is not my intention to question his character or his literary or philosophical achievements. However, the question that Silver raises – and I echo here – remains a valid one: why did Emerson misrepresent Swedenborg?

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[65] Silver, *The Spiritual Kingdom in America*, 111.
[66] Ibid., 112.
[67] Ibid., 88-89n1.

1.7 Reviewing Emerson and his essay, using quotations as illustrations

Studies on Emerson have shown that while he was very negative about Swedenborg in his private journals, in his lectures and essays he gave praise. Silver notes that "it was almost as if Emerson presented one public view of Swedenborg that supported his own position and another less flattering private appraisal of the Swedish mystic".[68] After reviewing some of Emerson's sources and development in relation to *Representative Men*, I concur that Silver's observation seems accurate.

There is a strong ambivalence to Emerson's portrayal of Swedenborg as the 'mystic' in *Representative Men*. At times Emerson saw Swedenborg as a poet, an engineer, a theoretical scientist, a Calvinistic theologian, a transcendental philosopher with extraordinary synthesizing capacities like Plato, and a mystic. "In the essay Emerson does not present him primarily in his title role of mystic, but rather as scientist, theologian, or writer of bad fables. The essay is chiefly a critique of Swedenborg's doctrines, and an attempt to place him in relation to other great intellects – particularly to Plato, in the metaphysical realm, and, in the physical world, to the great scientists from Aristotle to Descartes and Linnaeus".[69]

Emerson credits Swedenborg with the development of a moral philosophy that adheres to natural theology, naming him 'the last Father in the Church'. Swedenborg promotes religion as an ethical way of life – much to Emerson's liking, as the following quote illustrates.

> *Swedenborg styles himself, in the title-page of his books, 'Servant of the Lord Jesus Christ'; and by force of intellect, and in effect, he is the last Father in the Church, and is not likely to have a successor. No wonder that his depth of ethical wisdom should give him influence as a teacher. To the withered traditional Church, yielding dry catechisms, he let in nature again, and the worshipper, escaping from the vestry of verbs and texts, is surprised to find himself a party to the whole of his religion. His religion thinks for him, and is of universal application. He turns it on every side; it fits every part of life, interprets and dignifies every circumstance. Instead of a religion which visited him diplomatically three or four times, – when he was born, when he married, when he fell sick, and when he died, and for the rest never interfered with him, – here was a teaching which accompanied him all day, accompanied him even into sleep and dreams; into his thinking, and showed him through what a long ancestry his thoughts descend; into society, and showed by what affinities he was girt to his equals and his counterparts; into natural objects, and showed their origin and meaning, what are friendly,*

[68] Silver, *The Spiritual Kingdom in America*, 108.
[69] Kurtz, *The Sources and Development of Emerson's Representative Men*, 243.

and what are hurtful; and opened the future world, by indicating the continuity of the same laws.[70]

However, while Emerson is impressed with Swedenborg's 'depth of ethical wisdom', he draws into question the nature of his experiences in the 'spirit realm'. Emerson voices his suspicions that Swedenborg suffers from delusions of grandeur or mental imbalance.

In his fifty-fourth year these thoughts held him fast, and his profound mind admitted the perilous opinion, too frequent in religious history, that he was an abnormal person, to whom was granted the privilege of conversing with angels and spirits; and this ecstacy connected itself with just this office of explaining the moral import of the sensible world. To a right perception, at once broad and minute, of the order of nature, he added the comprehension of the moral laws in their widest social aspects; but whatever he saw, through some excessive determination to form, in his constitution, he saw not abstractly, but in pictures, heard it in dialogues, constructed it in events. When he attempted to announce the law most sanely, he was forced to couch it in parable. Modern psychology offers no similar example of a deranged balance.[71]

An 'abnormal person', 'deranged' – Emerson does not hold back in the articulation of his doubts as to the mental condition of Swedenborg. On the other hand, the echo of nineteenth-century terminology may strike us as harsh today – especially in an essay that is intended to portray a 'representative', a hero of the time –, whereas these qualifications may have resonated differently then. In this respect, it should be noted that the 'modern psychology' that Emerson refers to, looks nothing like today's science of psychology. In the nineteenth century the psyche was only first being discovered, and mental processes were often understood in theological concepts. The point to take away from this quotation, however, is the fact that Emerson does not view Swedenborg's claims to conversations with angels and spirits as a problem, but rather as the result of an 'excessive determination to form'; Swedenborg's 'constitution' was apparently geared to generate 'pictures and dialogues'.

The next excerpt illustrates not only Emerson's advanced style of writing but also his tendency to 'obscure' his thought.

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[70] Emerson, *Representative Men*, 439.
[71] Ibid., 437.

> *[Swedenborg's] fastens each natural object to a theologic notion; – a horse signifies carnal understanding; a tree, perception; the moon, faith; a cat means this; an ostrich, that; an artichoke, this other; and poorly tethers every symbol to a several ecclesiastic sense* [sic]. *The slippery Proteus is not so easily caught. In nature, each individual symbol plays innumerable parts, as each particle of matter circulates in turn through every system. The central identity enables any one symbol to express successively all the qualities and shades of real being. In the transmission of heavenly waters, every hose fits every hydrant. Nature avenges herself speedily on the hard pedantry that would chain her waves. She is no literalist*.[72]

In this evaluation of Swedenborg's theory of correspondences, Emerson resorts to irony – almost to the point of insult. But in the end he seems to get carried away, only to loose himself in obscurity.

It would be possible to give many more examples of Emerson's ambivalence in his portrayal of Swedenborg. For the purpose of this thesis I will, however, constrain myself and present one last quotation that will serve as a final assessment of 'Swedenborg the Mystic', as formulated by Emerson.

> *The genius of Swedenborg, largest of all modern souls in this department of thought, wasted itself in the endeavour to re-animate and conserve what had already arrived at its natural term, and, in the great secular Providence, was retiring from its prominence, before western modes of thought and expression. Swedenborg and Behmen both failed by attaching themselves to the Christian symbol, instead of to the moral sentiment, which carries innumberable christianities, humanities, divinities in its bosom*.[73]

Clearly, Emerson regards Swedenborg as an intellectual man who unfortunately worked on the wrong project. He was 'wasting his genius' in an attempt to revive a theology, and to a lesser extent an institution, that had outlived its days. Swedenborg's 'vice' was clinging to Christianity in his teachings, whereas he should have opted for an individualist, ethical approach. In other words: Swedenborg was a brilliant but misguided fool – like Jacob Böhme for that matter. And so, it would seem that we have finally arrived at Emerson's definition of the 'mystic'.

1.8 Recapitulating: on narratives, framing and Emersonian ambivalence

Recapitulating we find that, although Emerson has reserved a place for Swedenborg in his gallery of *Representative Men*, he seems to do so reluctantly and with apprehension. Emerson approaches

[72] Emerson, *Representative Men*, 438-9.
[73] Ibid., 447.

Swedenborg alternately as a scientist, a theologian, a 'wanting' poet and, occasionally, a delusional mind. Arguably, in Emerson's view Swedenborg is the scientist and philosopher without a sound rational footing for this philosophical system. And so, he portrays Swedenborg by means of a contrast to Plato – an unfavourable contrast because of Swedenborg's claims to the 'revelatory' character of his experiences as a result of which Emerson conclusively labels him a 'mystic'.

Earlier we have found that Emerson's evaluation of Swedenborg hinged in part on indirect sources, while he was in the habit of diffusing his own thought with those of others and obscuring his sources. Based on the above, Emerson's 'mystical' qualification of Swedenborg seems to rest on a thin foundation – arguably, his likeness to Böhme. Or rather: the similarity of their experiences of direct divine revelation.

Emerson's intuitivist philosophy did not have a problem with 'mystical experiences' as a road to direct knowledge of the divine. But he did have a problem with Swedenborg's philosophical system. The doctrine of correspondences was qualified as 'rigid' which may have been a deliberate misrepresentation. And Emerson could not agree to an ontology that included a hierarchical universe; the postulate of a spiritual realm could be relegated to 'imagination', but the idea of mediators between man and God was too much. Emerson's 'god within' could not tolerate this type of obstruction.

Conclusively, we find that in America at the mid-nineteenth century Ralph Waldo Emerson was instrumental in the articulation of a narrative in which Swedenborg is portrayed as a 'mystic', thereby either creating or contributing to the reinforcement of a 'mystical frame'.

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In 'The Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson'[74] Theodore Parker presents an extensive review of the body of Emerson's writings up to 1850. With respect to *Representative Men* Parker finds that it is 'the best critique' of Swedenborg that has so far appeared; Emerson appreciates but does not exaggerate his excellence.[75] Interestingly, Frothingham also criticizes Emerson's portrait of Swedenborg, but not on the same grounds as Parker – as we shall see in the next chapter.

[74] Published in *The Massachusetts Quarterly Review*, III, (March, 1850), 200-255.
[75] Kurtz, *The Sources and Development of Emerson's Representative Men*, 395.

CHAPTER 2 OCTAVIUS BROOKS FROTHINGHAM

This chapter will introduce Octavius Brooks Frothingham and present a brief sketch of the transformation of his beliefs over time. In addition, we will discuss Frothingham's argumentation in the 1882 article, and his critique of the Emersonian 'frame' of Swedenborg. Also, this chapter will present Henry James Sr as a nineteenth-century Swedenborgian, and Frothingham's assessment of the position of the elder James. Central to the chapter are two questions. Why did Frothingham opt for a different interpretation of Swedenborg – a philosopher and social reformer rather than a mystic? And, on what grounds does Frothingham favour the interpretation by Henry James Sr over Emerson's? More importantly, this chapter will articulate the epistemological problematic involving the claim to immediate revelation by Swedenborg.

2.1 Introducing Octavius Brooks Frothingham

Octavius Brooks Frothingham[76] was typically an adept of the New England of Emerson. Over time, however, he became drawn to the more radical interpretation of Transcendentalism by Theodore Parker whom he also considered a close personal friend.[77] Born in Boston on November 26, 1822 as the son of a prominent Unitarian minister, young Octavius grew up in a liberal Christian milieu. Following in his father's footsteps, he graduated from the Harvard Divinity School in 1846. The next year, on March 23, Frothingham married Caroline Elizabeth Curtis (1825-1900), daughter of a wealthy merchant family in Boston. On January 27, 1850 their only child, a daughter named Elizabeth 'Bessie' Bowditch, was born.

His first position as pastor brought him in 1847 to the North Unitarian Church in Salem where he would stay for eight years. During his Salem ministry Frothingham started writing, contributing in particular to *The Christian Examiner*, a liberal journal that was influential in Unitarian circles. Frothingham established himself as an authority in Biblical criticism in the German tradition of F.C. Baur and the Tübingen School. It was Parker who introduced Frothingham to this school of radical theology. Parker, who was a staunch abolitionist, also played a major role in Frothingham's theological 'radicalization' that eventually led to a break with his congregation.

On Sunday June 4, 1854, Frothingham denounced from the pulpit the rendition of a runaway slave named Anthony Burns in Boston. Four years earlier the Fugitive Slave Act had been passed, stipulating that upon capture escaped slaves were to be returned to their masters; officials and

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[76] Unless otherwise indicated the information in this short biography is based on the book *Octavius Brooks Frothingham, Gentle Radical* (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1977) and the article 'Who Was Octavius Brooks Frothingham?', in *The New England Quarterly* (1970), both by J. Wade Caruthers.

[77] Frothingham, *Recollections and Impressions 1882-1890*, 134.

citizens of free states were forced to cooperate fully in this law. In what is now known as his 'Anthony Burns' sermon Frothingham fulminated against a Christian faith that had subverted the injunction of Christ to love one another. He attacked the rampant sectarianism, the blind defence of dogma, and the insistence on belief rather than kind expressions of love and brotherhood. The church had become hollow, and its rituals meaningless. Frothingham's position in these early years was a foreshadowing of the ethical approach to faith that he would develop in his later years.

Inevitably, the commotion that was caused by the 'Anthony Burns' sermon led to the parting from his Salem congregation, and in 1855 Frothingham moved with his family to a ministry in Jersey City. In 1859, on the brink of war, he moved again, this time to the Third Unitarian Congregational Church in New York City.

2.2 From radical Unitarianism to Free Religion

"Then came the war. Though its physical aspect – the loss of treasure and of blood – was most affecting, I cannot but think that its mental and moral aspect has been underrated. Its whole justification lay in its moral character, and I must believe that full justice has never been done to those who were obliged to stay at home and uphold this feature. The preacher of the Gospel of Peace had as much as he could do to overcome the horrors of war; and the preacher of Righteousness was engaged all the time in promoting the cause of justice. They who went to the front had the excitement of battle, the pleasures of camp-life, the assistance of comradeship, the comfort of sympathy. The preacher had none of these."[78] And so, when in 1865 the Civil War was over, Frothingham found himself 'spent and aged'.

After the Civil War Frothingham did not associate himself with Transcendentalism anymore, and he convinced his congregation to detach from the Unitarian denomination, changing its name to the Independent Liberal Church. As a Unitarian minister at the time that Unitarianism was challenged by Transcendentalism, he had appealed in his sermons both to the brain and to the heart. Increasingly, however, his sermons would reflect a bold religious radicalism. And often he expressed his concern about the sectarian spirit that was so anchored in Christianity that it prevented the human race of ever achieving a common ground of ideas and a spirit of brotherhood.

During his twenty years in New York Frothingham developed a theological vision, a synthesis of elements of Deism, Transcendentalism, and Darwinism with an overlay of the Puritan spirit. In a gross oversimplification and foregoing many of his finer theological and social subtleties, Frothingham's radical ethical religious vision can be characterized as follows: traditional Christianity was to be severely criticized for its ecclesiastical, dogmatic, rigid orthodoxy. The Christian faith

[78] Frothingham, *Recollections and Impressions*, 106.

desperately needed modernizing, and Frothingham searched for new interpretations, questioning old symbols, finding new meanings and truths in the emancipation of human nature. Evolutionary theories sparked his thinking as to the intellectual and ethical progress of mankind. He supported the thought that the forces of nature and society were in conjunction, working together progressively to a humanistic ideal. The key to progress was human effort, for, in Frothingham's view ethics and truths grew out of human experience. He named his newly emerging theism a 'religion of humanity', in accordance to his view of religion as a universal truth transcending time and place. His radical liberal theological vision, a 'free religion' in every sense, was laid down in his *Religion of Humanity* (1872).

In the second half of the nineteenth century Frothingham had become the undisputed leader of a radical-ethical movement in Unitarianism in America. He helped reinterpret much of the Christian dogmas in terms of modern scientific, literary, and historiographical knowledge. And so, in May 1867, when a group of religious liberals assembled on Memorial Day, Frothingham was elected to become the first president of the newly formed Free Religious Association (FRA), a position that he held until 1878. The FRA was founded as a result of the growing dissatisfaction of 'radical Unitarians' to organize a national convention of Unitarian churches. Fear of denominational conformity led to the foundation of the FRA that decidated itself to promoting a rational, nonsectarian approach to religion. The radical Unitarians who formed the FRA were a diverse group, consisting on the one hand of idealistic Transcendentalists – such as David A. Wasson (1823-1887), Samuel Johnson (1882-1882) and Samuel Longfellow (1819-1892) – who stuck to their intuitive epistemology. On the other hand, there was a younger, more rationalistic segment led by Frothingham and Francis E. Abbot (1836-1903) whose orientation was more directed towards the social positivism of Auguste Comte (1798-1857).[79]

2.3 Parker and the Swedenborgian mode of thinking

Being part of the theological discourse at the time, Frothingham was more than adequately equipped to cover the narratives of the era. He became one of Transcendentalism's first historians, composing a series of works on the movement and its leaders. Most notable in this respect is *Transcendentalism in New England* (1876) that is still highly valued as a standard work. He also wrote biographies of notable contemporary Unitarian clergymen, such as William Henry Channing (1810-1884) and his own father Nathaniel Langdon Frothingham (1793-1870) as well as of abolitionist and politician Gerritt Smith (1797-1874) and his friend and member of his congregation George Ripley (1802-1880).

[79] Cashdollar, *European Positivism and the American Unitarians*, 502.

His first major historical biographical work, how could it be otherwise, was his *Life of Theodore Parker*, published in 1874.

Dorrien identifies Theodore Parker as "the first American to approach theology from a standpoint deeply informed by German theology, philosophy, and historiocritical scholarship"; "he is the pivotal figure in the Unitarian tradition, the one from whom its neo-Christian and humanistic tradition both derive".[80] If Emerson was Transcendentalism's poetic leader, Theodore Parker was without a doubt its spiritual father. In my research I found multiple intersections in the lives of Frothingham and Parker that this thesis regrettably cannot address. Important, however, is Parker's influence on Frothingham's early conception of Swedenborgian thought which Frothingham associated with 'mysticism'.

To Frothingham, theories of evolutionary advancement were crucial in understanding the intellectual and ethical progress of mankind. At the same time, he tried to 'synthesize' evolution as a scientific given with his prior transcendental view of the intuitive, *a priori* mode of thought. "As a transcendentalist he believed God was within man and nature; as an evolutionist he was sure all the forces of nature and society were working toward a progressive, humanistic end".[81] He never fully rejected theism, and hence, never fully accepted a – reductionist – position that viewed science as the only key to reason. However, rather than coming from some transcendent God, 'truth' or 'supreme wisdom' was to be found within the human mind. Central to his notion of progress were human effort and human experience as the basic requirements for a truthful, ethical lifestyle.

In addition, however, Frothingham was influenced by 'the Swedenborgian mode of theological thinking'. Parker had introduced him to the thought of Emanuel Swedenborg "who led Parker himself and many of his followers in Frothingham's generation to be inclined toward the intuitional, inner light approach to spiritual knowledge".[82] In September 1861, Frothingham wrote an article 'Mystics and their Creed' for the *Christian Examiner*, in which he reviewed the two-volume compendium *Hours with the Mystics* (London, 1856) by Robert Albert Vaughan (1823-1857).[83] In his review he equated 'mysticism' with Transcendentalism. "It was the philosophy of Parker and Emerson, he thought, which emphasized the indwelling God, the spirit of Christ and not the man, and the Pantheistic view that God was in nature."[84] And so we find that, while Frothingham's radically changing beliefs towards a rational, ethical 'free religion' rejected any speculations involving a

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[80] Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion 1805-1900*, xvii.
[81] Caruthers, *Octavius Brooks Frothingham, Gentle Radical*, 76.
[82] Ibid., 76.
[83] Published in *Christian Examiner*, Vol. 73, 1861.
[84] Caruthers, *Octavius Brooks Frothingham*, 63.

supernaturalist ontology, he remained supportive of the possibility of an intuitive knowledge of the divine.

2.4 The 1881 controversy: 'Has O.B. Frothingham recanted?'

Health problems forced Frothingham to retire from his New York ministry in 1879, when he was 57 years old. Back in Boston, after a trip to Europe with his wife and daughter, a public debate arose over an alleged change in his religious views. In an interview in the *New York Evening Post* of November 12, 1881 under the caption 'Radical Thought', Frothingham was quoted to have lost trust in the validity of his thoughts. He was sceptical about the future of 'free religion', as it seemed to lead to nothing, and independent religious congregations, such as his own ministry in New York and earlier Theodore Parker's in Boston, had failed to live up to his expectations.[85] The article sparked a controversy as to whether Frothingham had become disillusioned with 'free religion'. Had he first repudiated Transcendentalism, and did he now, in turn, reject the validity of rationalism? In short, the question on everyone's lips was: Has O.B. Frothingham recanted?[86]

The *New York Times* followed up with an editorial, titled 'From Rationalism to Rome', in which Frothingham was given credit for his sincerity in his sermons. However, the accusation of his having changed his religious views was flatly repeated. He was even charged with being drawn to Catholicism, as Frothingham had favourably noticed the ability of the Catholic clergy to hold on to their congregations. "He has given up belief in the infallibility of his own reason", was the patronizing editorial comment.[87] Despite the fact that many of Frothingham's fellow clergymen came to his defence, the controversy of his alleged recantation did not subside. On Sundays from pulpits all over the land, the 'failure' of free thought, the death of liberalism, was memorized.[88]

Frothingham himself kept a dignified silence. His natural scepticism and his capacity for self-criticism were seen as a sign of his total denial of previous positions. However, his frosty exterior in conjunction with his impeccable New England background was only an effective but outward façade. "It had always been Frothingham's way, indeed a part of his heritage, to proceed as if he was right but be sure there was a chance he was wrong. He doubted as he believed, his beliefs subjected always to the scrutiny of his own skepticism. He was a believing skeptic".[89]

He spent the winter months of 1881 and 1882 at the Vendome Hotel in Boston, after the controversy had died down, at least for a while. And so, after his beliefs had been questioned widely

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[85] Caruthers, *Octavius Brooks Frothingham*, 190.
[86] Ibid., 189.
[87] Ibid., 191.
[88] Ibid., 193-4.
[89] Ibid., 195.

in a very public arena, Frothingham retreated to his hometown – preparing himself to write the article 'Swedenborg' to which we now direct our attention.

2.5 Polemics and perceptions: Frothingham's 1882 article revisited

'Swedenborg', the article by Frothingham under review, was published in June 1882 in *The North American Review*.[90] It was written, however, much earlier, during Frothingham's first winter in Boston. This detail is important in view of the fact that Emerson passed away in April 1882, as this means that the article – including Frothingham's critique of Emerson – was written before Emerson's demise. In the article Frothingham presents a critical overview of the American liberal religious landscape in the second half of the nineteenth century. Central to his message is his assessment that religious liberalism is dead – to the extent that liberal churches are in decline. In view of this deplorable situation he questions the validity and viability of Swedenborgianism – as an institution and as a philosophy.

In view of the fact that Frothingham was a biographer, his portrayal of Swedenborg is of interest. He characterizes Swedenborg as "outwardly, an old-fashioned man, simple, child-like, unsophisticated, uncritical, ingenuous, believing; an impersonal, unambitious, devout man; a seer rather than a thinker; not a reader of many religious books, or deferential to the writers of books; an interior, brooding man, unconscious of much that went on in the intellectual world about him, and so far as is known, independent of contemporary assistance".[91] Although Frothingham seems somewhat mistaken on the Swede's intellectual awareness of the outside world, remarkable is the reference to Swedenborg's supposed indifference to the 'writers of books'. First of all, Silver remarks that in all of his scientific work Swedenborg never actually performed any experiments or engaged in dissections on his own. "His theories were derived entirely from a close study of the empirical findings of other scientists", implying he must have read massively.[92] Moreover, although speculative, this observation could also point to Emerson – given that he was a famous author in 1882. Was Frothingham covertly commenting on Emerson's notoriety? If so, then a passage later in the article may be applicable to Emerson too. Here Frothingham advises some people to best leave Swedenborg alone, for they would not understand him "even if they can read him". He points specifically to the 'cool eclectic', the 'careless quidnunc in the world of letters', the 'knowing adept in the special peculiarities of the

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[90] Caruthers, *Octavius Brooks Frothingham*, 198. Caruthers argues that 'Swedenborg' was the first in a series of four articles. He informs that two more articles appeared in the *North American Review*, 'Criticism of Christianity' and 'Democracy and Moral Progess', while 'Some Phases of Idealism in New England' was published in *Atlantic Monthly*. All three articles were published in July 1883. In view of the time gap and the subject matter, in my opinion, 'Swedenborg' should be considered as a separate essay.

[91] Frothingham, *Swedenborg*, 605.

[92] Silver, *The Spiritual Kingdom in America*, 27.

'schools'', and the 'quick-witted critic of other mens's ideas'.[93] Arguably, these descriptions may easily refer to Emerson, disguised as an insider's joke. But again, this is speculative.

Fact is that Frothingham openly challenges Emerson when he states

> *Mr. Emerson puts him [Swedenborg] among the mystics, ranking him somewhat incongruously with Socrates, Plotinus, Porphyry, Behmen, Bunyan, Fox, Pascal, Guion; speaks of him as the most remarkable example of the introverted mind that has appeared in modern times; says: 'To a right perception, at once broad and minute, of the order of nature he added the comprehension of the moral laws in their social aspects', and assigns him a place long vacant among the law-givers of mankind. At the same time he places him below Behmen, accuses him of believing in devils, charges him with circumscribing the divine benignity, makes much of his Hebraic limitations, and declines to say wherein his peculiarity consists. With such an opinion it is not strange that Mr. Emerson sometimes doubts whether his books will be long read, whether his great name will not 'turn a sentence'*.[94]

Frothingham highlights the ambivalence in Emerson's portrayal of Swedenborg. Is it in jest that he points to a concern that Emerson may have articulated with respect to the sustainability of his literary fame? Unfortunately, I have not been able to locate the reference 'turn a sentence' in Emerson's works nor as a kind of English idiom. It is rather striking, however, that Frothingham mentions Emerson's concerns on 'his great name' in view of Kurtz's argument with respect to Emerson's development of a great man theory. Of course, in view of Emerson's demise two months prior to publication, Frothingham's observation could be regarded as particularly abrasive; hence, my earlier remark about the timing of the writing of the article.

Evidently, Frothingham did not agree with Emerson's evaluation of Swedenborg. Instead, he found a strong message in Swedenborg's teachings that resonated with his own ethical 'religion of humanity', and that to a large extent seems to correspond with the position of Henry James Sr.[95] James was a theologian of Irish decent and a Swedenborgian since the mid-1840s. Only shortly before, he had published *The Secret of Swedenborg, Being an Elucidation of His Doctrine of the Divine*

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[93] Frothingham, *Swedenborg*, 614.

[94] Ibid., 615. Evidently, Socrates, Plotinus, and Porphyry are well-known philosophers from Greek and Roman ancient worlds. Other names in the quotation refer to German mystic Jakob Böhme (1575-1624), Scottish puritan preacher John Bunyan (1628-1688), English founder of the Society of Friends, also known as Quakers, George Fox (1624-1691), and French mystic Jeanne Marie Bouvier de la Motte, aka Madame Guyon (1648-1717). French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) is known to have left a 'mystical' posthumous message, usually referred to as his 'Mémorial'.

[95] Incidently, Henry James Sr. is also known as the father of philosopher and founder of the psychology of religion William James, novelist Henry James Jr., and diarist Alice James.

Natural Humanity (1869) and *Society: the Redeemed Form of Man, and the Earnest of God's Omnipotence in Human Nature* (1879) – the latter publication 'Affirmed in Letters to a Friend' which was a popular literary style at the time. Earlier James had shown an interest in Brook Farm, a social experiment in communal living at West Roxbury, Massachusetts, that lasted from 1841 to 1847. Brook Farm was the brainchild of Transcendentalists George Ripley and his wife Sophia, based on their interpretation of the utopian socialist philosophy of Charles Fourier (1772-1837), also known as 'Fourierism'.

As a contributor to *The Harbinger*, the journal of Fourierism in America of which George Ripley was the editor, and in his later books, James presented Swedenborg as a social reformer who spoke metaphorically of what would happen if man accepted the responsibility for changing society.[96] He is quoted by Frothingham to have "studied those writings profoundly, acknowledging their dumb, illogical, inarticulate, in some respects futile and fatuous, character, but impressed by their 'calm, translucent depths' of wisdom, and finding infinite satisfaction in the 'seer's' answer to life's eternal questions. He discovered in Swedenborg an astonishing penetration of thought, suggestions which pierce to the core of truth and open worlds of speculation which he himself perhaps failed to explore, a system of philosophy outlined and sharply indicated,…."[97] It seems likely that James' publications on Swedenborg had reached Frothingham. However, I have not been able to find any direct relations or common denominators between them, besides their shared interest and optimist outlook in religious reform as a road to social improvement.

2.6 Swedish seer turned social reformer: 'Swedenborg, the Radical'?

As discussed, Frothingham's religious views can be summarized as anti-dogmatic, anti-sectarian, ethical, and inclusive towards other religions and other sources of divine inspiration – elements that he finds in Swedenborg's writings. All throughout the article Frothingham is torn between his aversion to the New Church and its followers and the attraction of Swedenborgian thought. With his fine subtlety he notes that 'sectarians are seldom philosophical', and this is particularly valid for Swedenborgians who cherish a sectarian spirit of 'exclusiveness and formalism'.[98] Swedenborg himself, however, did not promulgate such sectarianism, on the contrary; his principles "cast discredit […] on all ecclesiastical organizations claiming to embody the spiritual, regenerating, creative, divine life".[99]

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[96] Silver, *The Spiritual Kingdom in America*, 102-103.
[97] Frothingham, *Swedenborg*, 609.
[98] Ibid., 610.
[99] Ibid., 611.

His most avid supporters, according to Frothingham, overlook the philosophical importance of Swedenborg's doctrines. For, Swedenborg's ideas are 'extremely radical', implying "nothing less than a complete revision of theological articles in the interest of anti-preternaturalism, or the utter abdication of Satan as a prince potenate [sic], or substantial existence in the world".[100] Interestingly, of the two issues that he mentions that would induce 'complete theological revision' – anti-preternaturalism and the negation of evil as substantive – he only continues with the latter to illustrate his point. He argues that all of the different branches in the Christian church in some form or other adhere to a theory of evil as an 'independent, demonic, self-subsisting dominion', engaged in incessant warfare against Deity, in which clergymen are its ordained champions, the sacraments its appointed 'channels of grace', and the Bible its revealed communication to mankind. "The sects differ in the explanation they give of these points, but under some form they are held. Not to hold them under any form is to discard the Christian peculiarity, and lapse either into 'naturalism' or 'idealism'.[101] In Swedenborg's teachings, by contrast, evil is not given independent existence or agency outside of the divine purpose.

From Swedenborg's main principles, Frothingham infers that the notion of the Fall is mistaken, and that Swedenborg's claim that 'the Lord's love is the salvation of the whole human race' effectively means that any distinction between 'sheep and goats' is to be abolished.[102] Religion in Swedenborg's philosophy becomes "a purely spiritual thing", based on "charity, and belief built upon charity".[103] But, whereas Emerson had 'spiritualized' religion, Frothingham 'ethicized' it. And in this sense too, he finds himself drawn to the 'revolutionary' character of Swedenborg's teachings – "little short of a new gospel"[104] – and he interprets these as a blueprint for social reform.

> *That Swedenborg's conception of the regenerate condition of man – in other words, of the spiritual consummation, or full completion of the divine life – is the vision of a perfect human society on earth, a pure spiritual democracy, is so plainly intimated, so frequently suggested, and follows so closely on his other cardinal propositions, that to establish it by quotation would be a superfluous labor. Such a conclusion must be drawn from his primary doctrines of*

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100 Frothingham, *Swedenborg*, 610.

101 Frothingham, *Swedenborg*, 610-11.

102 Frothingham, *Swedenborg*, 611. Frothingham's observation refers to the 'Parable of the Sheep and Goats' found in Matthew 25:31-46. In this parable Jesus explains his views on man redeemed and saved, and man condemned and lost. The sheep are those that act on charity – feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, tending to the sick, and so forth –, the goats are those that do not. Hence, salvation awaits the sheep, damnation the goats. In general, the controversy attached to this parable involves the notion of 'salvation by good works' versus 'salvation by faith alone'.

103 Frothingham, *Swedenborg*, 611.

104 Frothingham, *Swedenborg*, 602.

creation, and the divine purpose in regenerating man. The perpetual insistence on charity as the soul of faith implies it. [105]

The moral nature of humanity, the abolition of evil as a independent principle; the anti-dogmatic, inclusive and ethical character of 'true religion'; it is easy to see how Swedenborg's ideas would resonate with Frothingham's 'religion of humanity'. In addition, the 'regenerate condition' of mankind taps directly into his evolutionary thinking of man as a progressive being. Frothingham who devoted much of his thinking to synthesizing science and religion, finds that Swedenborg moved from scientific to theological thought in one smooth move, "simply proceeding from one form of communication to another – from the world of matter to the world of spirit, always holding the same clue to knowledge, namely: the doctrine of divine immanence".[106] In fact,

regarded as a philosophy, the thoughts of Swedenborg penetrate to the roots of monotheism…. Swedenborg, while admitting that all life is from the Lord, thus maintaining that there is but a single absolute principle in the universe, – while frankly allowing that the Lord turns evil into good, thus abolishing evil as a thing, – does preserve the substantial facts of consciousness, and build [sic] *upon them a structure in which the intellect can live without resentment or compromise. This is an honest, sincere, humble attempt to satisfy the demands of the rational nature, without recourse to theological subtleties.*[107]

Frothingham qualifies Swedenborg's writings as a unique combination of 'dullness beyond description and wisdom beyond estimate'.[108] The social implications of his philosophy, however, may not have been Swedenborg's goal *per se*. Moreover, Frothingham suggests that Swedenborg himself may not have understood the importance of his teachings. Swedenborg "may have prophesied deeper things than he was aware of, standing on some Pisgah height and, from far, descrying the promised land he was not permitted to explore".[109] Swedenborg is 'a philosopher of the infinite', a 'mystery, as insoluble as ever', a 'seer, not a thinker the genesis of whose thought may be traced in some antecedent school'. "His mental roots have not thus far been found. He has been accused of echoing Jacob Boehme, but without evidence; he appeals to no parentage among men."[110] It puzzles

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[105] Frothingham, *Swedenborg*, 612.
[106] Ibid., 601.
[107] Ibid., 614.
[108] Ibid., 609.
[109] Ibid., 613. The 'Pisgah height' in the quotation refers to Mount Pisgah in Deuteronium 34: 1-4, the mountain on which Moses stood to see the promised land which he was not allowed to enter.
[110] Ibid., 615.

Frothingham – to the point of uneasiness – that Swedenborg's thought cannot be traced to 'mental roots', to a 'rational' forbearer.

Ultimately, however, Frothingham is troubled by the fact that Swedenborg ascribes his insights to 'divine revelation'. In an articulation that could be qualified as 'mystical' he states:

> *At all events, there are the declarations. They may mean much or they may mean little. If they mean little, their sense is exhausted, taken up, and appropriated by modern 'liberal' churches. If they mean much, one must go outside of Swedenborgianism for their explanation. For, in this case, they contain a system of philosophy which approaches from a new direction the profoundest problems of being – creation, consciousness, freedom*.[111]

So, there it is. A *caveat* – with respect to 'declarations' by Swedenborg. What could it possibly mean?

2.7 On the 'declarations'

My initial 'hunch' as to the meaning of the 'declarations' was that these would have to refer to Swedenborg's claims to communications with angels and spirits. On second thought, however, I realized that 'declarations' could point to something entirely different. In trying to find support for my assumptions I have formulated a number of alternative possibilities: 1) witness statements to three so-called 'anecdotes' of assumed psychic abilities in Swedenborg – as narrated by Kirven[112], 2) historical third-party responses to Swedenborg's postulates, and 3) Swedenborg's self-confessed 'memorabilia'.

Firstly, associated with Swedenborg are the 'anecdotes', three stories that are alleged to be records of actual events, meant to illustrate and confirm extraordinary psychic abilities in Swedenborg. The first one is 'The Queen's Secret' in which in 1762 Swedenborg reportedly told the Queen of Sweden a secret that he could only have learned about through communication with her deceased brother. The second, 'The Lost Receipt', recounts how in 1761 Swedenborg assisted a widow in finding an important receipt that was hidden by her late husband. Swedenborg supposedly learned the hiding place by communicating with the deceased. The last one, 'The Stockholm Fire', is very famous, as it involves a tragic event that left over 2,000 people homeless. On Thursday July 19, 1759 a great fire swept over Stockholm, while Swedenborg was about 400 km away at a party in Gothenburg. Despite the fact that at the time news from Stockholm would take at least two to three

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111 Frothingham, *Swedenborg*, 613-614.

112 Kirven, *Emanuel Swedenborg and the Revolt against Deism*, 50-51. The 'anecdotes' are three stories that were made into *causes célèbres* by Immanuel Kant who wrote favourably about them in his *Brief an Fräulein von Knobloch* (presumably written in 1763), and subsequently negated their veracity in his *Träume eines Geistersehers, erläutert durch Träume der Metaphysik* (1766).

days to reach Gothenburg by messenger, Swedenborg kept the party informed of the course of the fire, even disclosing an exceptional level of detail on how the disaster unfolded.

The veracity of each of these anecdotes is supported by statements of witnesses that declare their endorsement – hence 'declarations'. However, although possible, this explanation does not seem plausible. Even more farfetched is a second alternative in which the 'declarations' point to statements made by third parties. Historical literary research shows that Swedenborg's theological writings generated several positive and negative responses, especially after his death. For example, Reverend G. Beaumont published *The anti-Swedenborg: Or a **declaration** of the principal errors and anti-scriptural doctrines contained in the theological writings of Emanuel Swedenborg* (1824); another example is Gabriel Andrew Beyer who wrote *A **declaration** respecting the doctrines taught by Emanuel Swedenborg* (1829) [emphasis added in both titles]. As demonstrated, whether favourable to Swedenborg or not, these and other responses bear the word 'declaration' in their titles – hence, my assumption. However, I will readily agree that this explanation is not very likely, as Frothingham would undoubtedly have mentioned the authors in his article.

The third and most likely option is that by 'declarations' Frothingham points to the descriptions of encounters with angels, devils, and spirits – remarkable occurrences that Swedenborg referred to as 'memorabilia'. *Apocalypse Revealed* (1766, Latin title: *Apocalypsis Revelata, in Qua Deteguntur Arcana Quae Ibi Praedicta Sunt, et Hactenus Recondita Latuerunt*) was the first book in which Swedenborg added these memorable accounts of his visionary experiences. The descriptions are often vivid narratives of spiritual encounters placed at the end of a chapter. Last but not least, I found proof to support this assumption. By chance, while digging through different translations of Swedenborg's work I found a quote from his book *Secrets of Heaven* (1749-1756, Latin: *Arcana Coelestia, Quae in Scriptura Sacra, seu Verbo Domini Sunt, Detecta*; consisting of eight volumes) that speaks for itself. In the latest translation from 2010 the quote reads

> *I realize many will claim that no one can talk to spirits and angels as long as bodily life continues, or that I am hallucinating, or that I have circulated such stories in order to play on people's credulity, and so on. But none of this worries me; I have seen, I have heard, I have felt.*[113]

However, looking at a translation from 1837, the quote is much more 'revealing'.

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113 Swedenborg, *Secrets of Heaven*, 68. [translation of 2010, West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, by Lisa Hyatt Cooper.]

> *I am well aware that many persons will insist that it is impossible for any one to converse with spirits and angels during his life in the body; many, that such intercourse must be mere fancy and illusion; others, that I have invented such relations in order to gain credit; whilst others will indulge doubts and scruples of different sorts. All these objections however are of no weight with me; for I have seen, heard, and had sensible experience of what I am about to* ***declare****.* [114] [emphasis added]

Swedenborg 'declares' – and it is quite a statement, indeed. Therefore, we may assume with confidence that the 'declarations' mean the 'celestial communications', the 'spiritual encounters', Swedenborg's claims that he 'has seen and has heard', and his reluctance to write these experiences off to visions, dreams, or other acceptable forms of altered states of consciousness. No, Swedenborg insists that his experiences are 'real', and it is precisely his insistence – by way of 'declarations' – that seems to present a problem to Frothingham.

2.8 Recapitulating: from mystical narrative to metaphysical discourse

In the previous chapter we have seen that Emerson labelled – 'framed' – Swedenborg as a 'mystic'. He is not troubled by Swedenborg's visions, for he relates these to intuition – in his view an epistemologically accepted manner of accessing divine truth. In fact, he approaches Swedenborg as an intellectual – in a (negative) contrast to Plato. Emerson explains his mystical characterization of Swedenborg on Swedenborg's own accounts of divine encounters – in view of his assumed likeness to Böhme and other 'bona fide' mystics in a broad historical range. Emerson's problem with Swedenborg is with the doctrine of correspondences, which he finds too rigid. And he cannot deal with the postulate of a hierarchical universe, for this would exclude the possibility of individual responsibility.

Frothingham, on the other hand, although he repeatedly acknowledges an internal logic to Swedenborg's philosophy, has difficulty overcoming the revelatory origins of his doctrines. In the 1882 article he refers to the 'spiritual monism' of Swedenborg's philosophy that 'saves us from pantheism'. The fact that Swedenborg's philosophy did not involve a supernaturalist ontology, correlates with Frothingham's rationalism. As we have seen, his problem with Swedenborg is his claim to 'immediate revelation'. He acknowledges the radical, revolutionary nature of Swedenborg's theological philosophical system, and seems to embrace the emphasis on charity 'and belief built on

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[114] Swedenborg, *Arcana Coelestia*, 68. [translation of 1837, London: James S. Hodson, full title: *Arcana Coelestia, The Heavenly Arcana which are contained in the Holy Scriptures or Word of the Lord unfolded, beginning with the book of Genesis, together with wonderful things seen in the world of spirits and in the heaven of angels.*]

charity' as a road to social, ethical reform. But he struggles with the claim to immediate, empirical revelation.

Although Frothingham explains the mystical characterization of Swedenborg through Swedenborg's own 'declarations' of divine encounter, he resolutely rejects Emerson's interpretation. He proposes to approach Swedenborg as a scientist, which makes sense in view of Frothingham's lifelong fascination with the synthesis of science and religion. As said, Frothingham's problem is not with Swedenborg's philosophy or theology, but with his 'declarations' – the revelatory origins of Swedenborg's thought. Hence, we find that whereas Emerson contributed to a narrative on Swedenborg – the narrative of the 'mystic' –, Frothingham seems engaged in a discourse on metaphysics.

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Arguably, as a young minister Frothingham had embraced the Swedish 'mystic' at the time of Transcendentalism's heyday. But upon closer inspection at the end of his career he finds himself troubled by Swedenborg's 'declarations'. 'They may mean much or they may mean little' – he mutters. But clearly they make him very uneasy. Why?

CHAPTER 3 THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL PROBLEMATIC OF 'IMMEDIATE REVELATION'

Central to the last chapter is the question of how to account for Frothingham's aversion to the 'angelic origins' of Swedenborg's theology? This discussion is situated in the broader perspective of the study of Western esotericism through a brief review of the approaches of Faivre, Hanegraaff, and Von Stuckrad. By addressing questions as to what extent Swedenborg's 'mysticism' can be articulated as an epistemological problematic of revelation, and how this problematic can be positioned in a broader perspective, we move our focus from religious liberalism to Western esotericism. First, however, we will look into the nature of Swedenborg's revelatory claims. From there, we will situate Swedenborg's philosophy in a historical intellectual movement known as the Revolt against Deism.

3.1 The nature of Swedenborg's claim of '*immediata revelatio*'

We have seen that the 'declarations' by Swedenborg which Frothingham talks about are statements of experiences that Swedenborg declares as 'real'. But what is the nature of this claim? With respect to his experiences of spiritual encounters, Swedenborg places these in the category of 'revelation' (*revelationes*) as opposed to 'predictions' or 'prophecies' (*prophetiae*) which refer to his ideas on God and the divine purpose toward Creation. Moreover, these experiences were 'sensible revelations' (*revelatio sensibiliter fiebat*), expressing the fact that they involved the physical senses which at the time was understood to include the faculty of reason. The 'sensible revelations' were distinct from other varieties of revelation, such as automatic writing or verbal inspiration, which Swedenborg claimed also to have experienced; therefore, the difference was clear to him. "Further, in contradistinction to that revelation which he said is universally accessible through proper reading of the Bible, his experiences of seeing and conversing with spirits and angels constituted 'immediate revelation' (*immediata revelatio*)".[115]

Even Swedenborg realized that his claim to 'immediate revelation' by means of sensible experience in the spiritual world was hard to accept. However, despite his repeated assurances as to the validity of his experiences, he did not say much about the underlying idea – the 'actualized possibility of such a mode of knowing' – nor did he venture any explanation on how this way of accessing knowledge was even possible.[116] Kirven has coined the term 'empirical revelation' to denote the distinctive idea involving Swedenborg's claim that these psychic experiences were

[115] Kirven, *Emanuel Swedenborg and the Revolt against Deism*, 18.
[116] Ibid., 20.

revelatory, and that the revelation he was commissioned to transmit to the world was received in and through these experiences.[117] To understand the full extent of the claim Kirven elaborates:

> *It was not just that Swedenborg had 'experienced' revelation (a sense in which all revelation must necessarily be called empirical); the point was that Swedenborg claimed to have received revelation, not through visions or voices for which he was a mere amanuensis, but in and through psychic experiences – experiences which he recorded, but also interpreted, and whose data he regarded as methodologically compatible with all empirical data, and of equal truth value with the data of sense perceptions*.[118]

In other words: Swedenborg's claim of 'immediate revelation' – or 'empirical revelation' as Kirven calls it – was understood as being epistemologically equivalent, and systematically compatible, with all empirical perceptions.

3.2 Situating Swedenborg in the Revolt against Deism

In his dissertation *Emanuel Swedenborg and the Revolt against Deism* (1965) – under the supervision of Herbert Marcuse[119] – Robert Kirven has investigated historical responses to Swedenborg's philosophy. He situates Swedenborg in an intellectual movement that is known as the Revolt against Deism. Deism was the product of Enlightenment thinking in the early eighteenth century. Stimulated by groundbreaking advances in the natural sciences during the so-called Scientific Revolution in seventeenth-century Europe, Deism emerged as a theological approach that can be characterized by philosophical rationalism, rooted in natural theology and favouring human reason over divine revelation as a source of knowledge.

As Deism had abandoned all speculation on the ontological existence of supernaturalist realms, the Revolt against Deism acknowledged that a return to supernaturalism was inconceivable. Hence, alternative responses to Deism had to be in accord with modern advances in science, systematically adequate, and convincing without appeal to tradition as an authority. According to Kirven, Swedenborg was 'seriously affected by Deism', as a result of which he 'participated in the Revolt against Deism, but was not determined by it'.[120] He finds that

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[117] Kirven, *Emanuel Swedenborg and the Revolt against Deism*, 20.
[118] Ibid., 21.
[119] German-American philosopher, sociologist and political theorist Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979) is associated with the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory.
[120] Kirven, *Emanuel Swedenborg and the Revolt against Deism*, 3.

> *Swedenborg's personal revolt against Deism was essentially an expansion of the deist concept of religion, on the grounds of his conviction that Deism was not religious enough to be an adequate system of religious thought. His expansion was primarily in the direction of including mystical, or spiritual, concepts in his system of thought; he tried to make this inclusion consistent with his own inclination towards Rationalism and scientific method*.[121]

In view of the nature of Swedenborg's claim to 'immediate revelation', as we have seen, his ideas presented a radical challenge to systematic thought, giving rise to feelings of anxiety. For, "the assumption that psychic and physical data could be considered together, if taken seriously, would have threatened the philosophy of being, of knowledge, and of God…"[122] With a tongue-in-cheek reference to Immanuel Kant, Kirven likens the radical impact of Swedenborg's ideas to a Copernican Revolution. But surely, this is no laughing matter. For the anxiety involved in Swedenborg's ideas invoked a response, particularly through Kant, that furthered the philosophical search in the opposite direction.

> *By epitomizing the problems of epistemological certainty (since Kant's best efforts could neither confirm nor deny the truth of Swedenborg's claim), it provided the negative stimulus for the establishment of boundaries which would confine knowledge within the limits of certainty. Delineation of those boundaries in the Critical Philosophy excluded revelation and psychic perception from philosophy,…*[123]

A 'negative stimulus for the establishment of boundaries' is an eloquent way of saying that Swedenborg's claim to immediate or empirical revelation was rejected by the ruling philosophers' class. In other words, knowledge that cannot be confined within the limits of certainty – more specifically: knowledge that is obtained through revelation and psychic perception – was to be 'rejected'. And this – the notion of 'rejected knowledge' – brings us straight to Wouter Hanegraaff and the field of Western esotericism.

3.3 From religious liberalism to Western esotericism

Shifting our focus from religious liberalism to Western esotericism may seem like a big step – effectively a quantum leap. But is it? Over the past two decades, the field of 'Western esotericism' has been hotly debated among contemporary scholars in most Western societies. But what is

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121 Kirven, *Emanuel Swedenborg and the Revolt against Deism*, 16.
122 Ibid., 24.
123 Ibid., 313.

understood by 'Western esotericism', and how to approach this field? As the scope of this thesis does not allow for an extensive treatment, I will present a brief overview of the approaches to Western esotericism by Antoine Faivre (1934-), Wouter Hanegraaff (1961-), and Kocku von Stuckrad (1966-). Where possible and applicable I will relate their positions to their assessment, classification or categorization of Emanuel Swedenborg.

As the first scholar to define Western esotericism as a field of interdisciplinary academic study, Faivre posits that the object of 'modern Western esotericism' is a construct that can be identified on the basis of four fundamental characteristics. Firstly, the *idea of universal correspondences* involves the existence of symbolic connections between different – visible and invisible – levels of reality in the universe. Moreover, besides being a constellation of correspondences, the *idea of living Nature* suggests that the cosmos is permeated with invisible yet active forces that work together as one living organism. Thirdly, the *role of mediations and of the imagination* are complementary notions that provide the possibility of exchanges between different levels of reality, e.g., the idea that knowledge is revealed by spiritual authorities such as gods, angels, spirits. Finally, the *experience of transmutation* is related to the experiential character that is associated with esoteric phenomena, usually pointing to a spiritual path to inner metamorphosis.[124] In addition, Faivre suggests two more characteristics that are not intrinsic, yet can be identified frequently; these involve a *practice of concordance* that tends to posit common denominators *a priori*, and the *idea of transmission* stipulating the importance of initiation.

In studying esotericism, Faivre proposes to approach the subject matter 'historico-critically', making sure to avoid confusion with respect to terminology and definitions, and being cautious of the residual influence of theological models or presuppositions, especially of the Christian kind.[125] Despite these cautions, however, in his historical overview of esoteric currents in Europe, titled *Western Esotericism: a concise history* (2010), Faivre classifies Swedenborg without further ado as a representative of a theosophical tradition that was started by Jacob Böhme. Unreservedly, Faivre views Böhme as the 'founder' of Christian theosophy, an 'esoteric' current that displays the characteristics enumerated above but also possesses three characteristics that serve to specify its originality within the esoteric landscape. These 'distinguishing' traits of Christian theosophy are somewhat nebulously described as 1) speculations on the God-Humanity-Nature triangle, 2) direct access to higher worlds – the mystical experience of *Zentralschau*, in Böhme's terminology –, and

[124] Faivre, *Western Esotericism*, 12.
[125] Ibid., 19-20.

3) the primacy of the mythical which relates to the privileging of mythical elements in texts, most notably Genesis, the vision of Ezekiel and the Apocalypse.[126]

In the articulation of this theory Faivre argues that a common denominator of those currents referred to as 'esoteric traditions' was a specific 'form of thought' (*forme de pensée*). Moreover, currents and movements that make up the category of Western esotericism can only exist as the products of specific historical and cultural conditions.[127] Nevertheless, the eighteenth-century 'enlightened scientist' Swedenborg is understood by Faivre to fit the model of Christian theosophy as set by Böhme over a century earlier. Arguably, Swedenborg did have 'mystical' experiences and some of his book titles mention the word 'apocalypse'. Very unsatisfactory with respect to Faivre's paradigm, however, is the fact that his approach ignores the particularity of Swedenborg's thought with respect to his postulates on the nature of reality and the way in which these shaped his doctrine of correspondences.

Von Stuckrad formulates a critique of the Faivre paradigm by arguing that Faivre extrapolated his typology from a specific phase in modern religious history and thereby excluded other aspects from the outset. Faivre's theoretical approach is limited to Renaissance Hermeticism, philosophy of nature, Christian Kabbalah and Protestant theosophy, resulting in an integrative model of the 'esoteric' that systematically combines several traditions and disciplines. Essentially, however, according to Von Stuckrad, it is a typology that is based on the idea of what 'esotericism' should be, not what it is.[128]

By contrast, Von Stuckrad proposes to use an analytical model that proceeds from the idea that religious pluralism has always been a historical reality in Europe, thereby regarding not only Christianity, Judaism and Islam but also many European polytheisms as established elements of European culture.[129] From this perspective, Von Stuckrad aims to demonstrate that a discursive structure is operational in Western intellectual and cultural history. His focus is directed towards 'continuities and breaks' in specific historical contexts, looking for what he describes as 'esoteric fields of discourse'.[130] Put in a nutshell, Von Stuckrad argues that "esoteric discourse in Western culture is an analytical framework that helps to identify genealogies of identities in a pluralistic competition of knowledge".[131]

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126 Faivre, *Western Esotericism*, 41-42.

127 Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe. Esoteric Discourse and Western Identities*, 46.

128 Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge*, 4-5.

129 Ibid., 5.

130 Ibid., 9.

131 Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, 64.

If I understand Von Stuckrad correctly, his approach is based on the deconstruction and analysis of 'fields of esoteric discourse' in order to uncover a Wittgensteinian family tree of Western esoteric movements and phenomena that are rooted in Europe's cultural history. The focus should be directed to 'continuities and breaks' in these discourses. However, prior to discursive analysis, the question arises with respect to the identification of the 'fields of discourse' in question. How to determine what constitutes 'esoteric discourse' – especially from a historical perspective? And what would Von Stuckrad's approach entail with respect to Swedenborg?

3.4 Von Stuckrad's dialectic of 'concealment and revelation'

As said, Van Stuckrad introduces an analytical model that aims to describe the dynamic and processuality of 'identity formation', as well as the discursive transfers between religions and societal systems. In my own words: religious phenomena and currents relate to one another in ways that make it possible to identify and examine similarities and differences, both among themselves and within the societies that they are – or were, from a historical perspective – part of. Von Stuckrad places these relationships in the broader context of 'fields of esoteric discourse'. In *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (2010) he discusses several of these esoteric discursive fields in more detail, specifically conveying his interest in what he calls 'Discourses of Perfect Knowledge'.[132]

Von Stuckrad argues that when people – like Swedenborg – claim a superior wisdom in regard to competing interpretations of the universe and its history, they claim a 'vision of truth' that is 'totalizing' in nature: the claim to superior knowledge is like a master key, unlocking the answers to all other questions of mankind. This idea of higher knowledge is linked to a discourse of secrecy, because, according to Von Stuckrad, "the dialectic of concealment and revelation is a structural element of secretive discourses".[133] In opposition to Von Stuckrad, I argue that in some form or other claims of 'higher knowledge' can be viewed as part of any religious tradition – whether 'esoteric', liberal or traditional. Von Stuckrad, however, supports his argument by looking at two modes of gaining access to 'perfect knowledge' – mediation and experience.[134]

Mediation involves mediators such as angels, intermediate beings or superior entities, often described as the source of esoteric knowledge. Visions belong to the category of experience. A vision indicates the process of revelation, which may also involve ascension to higher dimensions of reality, through meditation, trance, or drug-induced altered states of consciousness. "Mystical experience has repeatedly been described as an individual encounter with the divine by means of dissolution of

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132 Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, 59-60.
133 Ibid., 61.
134 Ibid., 63.

boundaries, be they physiological, categorical, or emotional."[135] For, in a discursive analysis it is not the content or nature of religious experiences that is at stake, but the fact that people claim them, according to Von Stuckrad. Although I understand the purport of his argument, Von Stuckrad does not provide adequate answers to questions with respect to the nature of such claims to higher knowledge.

Furthermore, Von Stuckrad qualifies Böhme and Swedenborg as examples of 'totalizing' claims to knowledge in religious contexts. Indeed, we find both modes of gaining access to 'perfect knowledge' – mediation and experience – in Swedenborg's claims. However, having identified Swedenborg as possibly engaged in a discursive strategy involving a 'dialectic of concealment and revelation', how does this help us in understanding Frothingham's objections to Swedenborg's claims?

3.5 Hanegraaff's notion of 'rejected knowledge'

So far, we find ourselves with Faivre's integrative model that essentially proposes a substantive approach to 'esotericism' on the one hand, and Von Stuckrad's analytical, discursive model on the other.[136] Addressing discursive structures in historical perspective allows for a more nuanced analysis and interpretation of the past and the present, says Von Stuckrad. But what then is the discursive structure at the time of Frothingham? In what kind of discourse did he engage?

A third – and more satisfying – approach is offered by Hanegraaff who points to the dominance of the traditional pillars of European and American cultural identity: normative religions of Judaism and Christianity, rational philosophy, and modern science. He posits that conventional thinking about Western culture excluded discourses about 'esotericism' or 'the esoteric' that were also part of the religious landscape. Hanegraaff argues that 'esotericism' vanished almost completely from accepted intellectual discourse – and standard textbook narratives – in the wake of the Enlightenment.

> *[T]he field that we now call Western esotericism may be described as the chief casualty of academic specialization after the eighteenth century. What initially sets it apart is its modern status as 'rejected knowledge': it contains precisely everything that has been consigned to the dustbin of history by Enlightenment ideologues and their intellectual heirs up to the present, because it is considered incompatible with normative concepts of religion, rationality and science. Imagined as the radical counterpart of everything that educated people are expected to take seriously, the consensus among mainstream intellectuals after the eighteenth century*

[135] Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, 72.
[136] Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge*, 11.

was that this domain should better be avoided and ignored in academic discourse rather than being dignified by detailed study and analysis of its ideas and their development.[137]

As a result, Hanegraaff's model of 'esotericism' can be defined as: 1) set apart by mainstream religious and intellectual culture as the 'other' by which it defines its own identity, and 2) characterized by a strong emphasis on specific worldviews and epistemologies that are at odds with normative post-Enlightenment intellectual culture. Central to his position is the notion of 'rejected knowledge', referring to non-rational, direct knowledge of an experiential nature, and often involving alterations of consciousness.

In his articulation of Western esotericism as 'rejected knowledge' Hanegraaff concludes that "this notion is grounded (perhaps surprisingly) in the virulent polemics of early modern Protestant thinkers around what many of them saw as a continuous tradition of pagan heresy that had begun in very ancient times and continued until the present". These polemics ultimately resulted in a persistent dualism. "The idea of a sharp dualism between 'science and superstition' or 'reason and unreason', is essential to our concerns". [138]

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As we have seen, in his 1882 article on Swedenborg Frothingham struggles with the claim of 'immediate revelation', despite the appeal of the anti-dogmatic, anti-sectarian, ethical and inclusive character of Swedenborg's philosophy. Certainly, we may distinguish the contours of a dualism between 'reason and unreason', between 'science and superstition' – as argued by Hanegraaff. However, instead of engaging in 'virulent polemics' here is a man of integrity struggling with the nature of Swedenborg's 'declarations' – his claim to '*immediata revelatio*'. The question seems justified if there could be more to Frothingham's story than processes of 'rejection' as the result of a 'persistent dualism'. So, let's take a closer look at what Hanegraaff means when he points to 'Protestant polemics'.

3.6 Hellenization of Christianity and anti-apologetic Protestant 'polemization'

Central to Hanegraaff's argument is the idea that 'esotericism' as a separate field of critical historical research was generated in the seventeenth century, first by Jacob Thomasius (1622-1684), and subsequently by Ehregott Daniel Colberg (1659-1698) – both Lutheran theologians –, based on their uncovering of the influence of Hellenistic philosophy on early Christianity, the so-called 'Hellenization

[137] Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 13.
[138] Hanegraaff, *The Globalization of Esotericism*, 64.

of Christianity'. Their 'anti-apologetic' approach – from a spirit of Protestant reform – eventually led to a sharp distinction between three domains: 1) Christian faith based exclusively on the biblical message, 2) rational philosophy based upon the legitimate but limited capacities of the human intellect, and 3) everything else – which meant any kind of pagan religion as well as infiltrations of pagan religions in Christianity.[139]

A central concern, particularly of Colberg's, was the fight against Protestant heterodoxy. Colberg described 'platonic-hermetic' Christianity as two-faced: focused on mystical interiority and 'enthusiasm' on the one hand, and on occult 'sciences' such as alchemy, astrology and magic on the other.[140] In this respect Hanegraaff points specifically to the theosophical teachings linked to Paracelsus (1493/94-1541), Valentin Weigel (1533-1588), Böhme and Rosicrucianism.[141] It should be noted in passing that these theosophical currents are sixteenth-century and early seventeenth-century movements, whereas Swedenborg does not arrive on the scene until the eighteenth century.

Hanegraaff argues that the concept of Western esotericism that concerns itself with a specific series of historical currents involves a referential corpus of texts. In this sense, he regards Colberg's *Platonisch-Hermetisches Christenthum* (1690/1) as the landmark book that sparked the study of Western esotericism as a specific domain of research. "Colberg's book is the first one, to my knowledge, that includes essentially all the historical currents nowadays regarded as central to 'Western esotericism'; and at least as important is the fact that it does so not randomly, but on the basis of a clear theoretical concept. Anti-apologeticism has a compelling internal logic, according to which large areas of Western religion have to be defined as manifestations of pagan/biblical syncretism."[142]

Hanegraaff convincingly demonstrates how the emergence of 'esotericism' is found in anti-apologetic Protestant 'polemization'. I fully agree that this historical development narrative is imperative in understanding and shaping perceptions as to the field of the 'esoteric' today. Whereas much more could be said on this fascinating topic, unfortunately the scope of this thesis does not allow for further elaboration. More importantly with respect to our subject matter, however, are the questions that remain open with respect to Swedenborg. If Hanegraaff locates the 'birth' of Western esotericism in the conceptualization of a basic referential corpus of texts by Protestant theologians in the second half of the seventeenth century, then where does Swedenborg fit in? What about a connection to Böhme? And even more pressingly, how to account for Frothingham's struggle with Swedenborg's claims?

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139 Hanegraaff, *The Birth of Esotericism from the Spirit of Protestantism*, 209-10.
140 Ibid., 210-11.
141 Ibid., 210.
142 Ibid., 211.

3.7 Explaining Frothingham's struggle through 'esoteric innovation'

Frothingham's uneasiness with respect to Swedenborg's claim of '*immediata revelatio*' cannot be explained from his background as a Unitarian minister who developed into the spokesman of 'free religion'. Although his liberal religious beliefs changed – 'radicalized' – over time, he never abandoned the concept of 'divine revelation'; in fact he expanded the concept to include historical 'revelations' of other faith traditions. Moreover, even as a free religionist Frothingham supported the Transcendentalist notion of 'intuitionism', of a religiously motivated way 'inwards', of the idea of 'knowing God by knowing thyself' – as part of his belief that humanity is a carrier of the divine.

The problem that Frothingham is faced with, in my opinion, is that Swedenborg's revelatory experiences seem to involve an epistemology that comprises a supernaturalist ontology – while at the same time denying this. For, Swedenborg postulates a spiritual world that is in accordance with reason but not in an empirical sense. In the simplest terms: Swedenborg's postulate on the nature of reality comprises both the finite and the infinite, whereby the finite is represented by the physical and the infinite by the psychic or spiritual. And it presents a clear and immediate problem: for, how can this be? And what would it entail?

Hanegraaff informs us of an 'esoteric innovation' by Swedenborg. He is critical of the discursive model by Von Stuckrad, as he considers it limited by the scholar's own interests that function as a filter.[143] However, Hanegraaff agrees to the importance of recognizing discontinuities and differences with respect to historical currents, ideas and practices that fall in the category of Western esotericism.[144] One such discontinuity can be related to Swedenborg, who, we know, was an eighteenth-century intellectual – unlike Böhme. Swedenborg presented, as Hanegraaff puts it, the spiritual world as wholly separate from, and at the same time in perfect harmony with, a material world that answered to the laws of post-Cartesian physics, whereby everything in the material world reflects or corresponds to the spiritual world by divine design. Swedenborg's worldview was, in short, an excellent example of 'esoteric innovation'.[145]

Hence, Hanegraaff does not align Swedenborg with Böhme. Instead he identifies a core text that is part of a process of Protestant 'polemization' in the eighteenth century, namely Immanuel Kant's *Träume eines Geistersehers, erläutert durch Träume der Metaphysik* (1766). Hanegraaff has done extensive research on the dynamics and complexities of Kant's response to Swedenborg's visionary theology, and I regret that this thesis is too short to get into the details of the Swedenborg-Kant casus. However, I will highlight Hanegraaff's position that Kant did not so much disagree with Swedenborg as that he – for multiple reasons – felt compelled to ridicule and disqualify Swedenborg

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143 Hanegraaff, *The Power of Ideas: Esotericism, Historicism, and the Limits of Discourse*, 255.
144 Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 119.
145 Ibid., 126.

from further intellectual discourse.[146] From this Hanegraaff concludes that Kant's *Träume* has contributed massively to the polemical demarcation of 'esotericism' from – 'official', in Hanegraaff's words[147] – domains of philosophy, theology, and science.

The Swedenborg-Kant casus seems to resonate with the reluctance that Frothingham displayed in his treatise of Swedenborg in 1882. Remember Frothingham's articulation on the importance of the 'declarations': 'if they mean much' – meaning if Swedenborg's claim is accepted as valid – 'they contain a system of philosophy which approaches from a new direction the profoundest problems of being – creation, consciousness, freedom'.[148] We found a similar caution with Kirven: "the assumption that psychic and physical data could be considered together, if taken seriously, would have threatened the philosophy of being, of knowledge, and of God…"[149] And so we find that the stakes are high. While Kant felt compelled to ridicule Swedenborg, Frothingham is willing to state the issue – and acknowledge the impossibility to formulating an answer to it.

3.8 Recapitulating: on the epistemological problematic of 'immediate revelation'

In the 1882 article Frothingham struggles with Swedenborg's claim of 'immediate revelation'. Despite the appeal of the anti-dogmatic, anti-sectarian, ethical and inclusive character of Swedenborg's thought Frothingham is troubled by his claims to the 'angelic origin' of his writings. We have found that this aversion cannot be explained by Frothingham's beliefs. As a result we have shifted our focus from religious liberalism to Western esotericism.

Hanegraaff's notion of 'rejected knowledge' as the foundation for the modern study of Western esotericism helps to understand the polemical dynamics involved from a historical perspective. Frothingham struggles with the claims of 'immediate revelation' by Swedenborg. However, instead of engaging in 'virulent polemics' here is a man of integrity struggling with the nature of Swedenborg's 'declarations' – his claim to '*immediata revelatio*'. The question seems justified if there could be more to the story than processes of 'rejection' as the result of a 'persistent dualism'.

The nature of Swedenborg's claim can be articulated as an 'esoteric innovation' – as coined by Hanegraaff. This 'innovation' makes sense in view of Swedenborg's place in history, especially when situated in the eighteenth-century intellectual movement known as the Revolt against Deism. Swedenborg's postulate of a spiritual world that is in accordance with reason but not in an empirical sense, sparked a polemical response from Kant in 1766, furthering the process of Protestant

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146 Hanegraaff, *Swedenborg en de andere Kant. Over de droom van de Rede en de geest(en) van de Verlichting*, 17-18.
147 Hanegraaff, *The Birth of Esotericism*, 211.
148 Frothingham, *Swedenborg*, 613-614.
149 Kirven, *Emanuel Swedenborg and the Revolt against Deism*, 24.

‘polemization’, and contributing to a discourse of ‘persistent dualism’ between reason and ‘irrationality’. However, the issue that Kant tries to ‘mystify’ is recognized and acknowledged by Frothingham.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis we have met Octavius Brooks Frothingham, a New England religious liberal. In retrospect we find that his theological development mirrored the times. As a young minister Frothingham aligned himself with Unitarianism and Transcendentalism. Over time he became progressively more radical in his approach to faith and religion. After the Civil War, he detached himself from Unitarianism, and developed a radical, ethical 'religion of humanity'. By 1874 he had become one of America's foremost advocates of 'free religion'. Frothingham can be characterized as a preacher, a scholar, an intellectual, and a prolific writer. Most of his three hundred and eleven sermons were published and widely circulated. Typically, in his sermons and essays Frothingham would use orthodox symbolism in order to advance radical groundbreaking ideas. He paired a gentle manner to an uncompromising intellect and a fiery spirit. In the spring of 1879 he was forced to retire from the Independent Church because of a creeping paralysis. Two years later, he returned to Boston where he passed on November 27, 1895, the day after his seventy-third birthday.

This thesis addresses the topic of revelation as a form of divine-human encounter from the perspective of epistemology. Central is the claim to 'immediate revelation' by Emanuel Swedenborg and the epistemological problematic that this claim involved – as perceived by Frothingham. My research has been guided by the research question:

> *What does Frothingham's article on Swedenborg of June 1882 in the North American Review tell us about nineteenth-century American religious liberalism in relation to the epistemological problematic of 'immediate revelation'?*

Highlighting the main elements from the 1882 article we find: (a) In Frothingham's assessment all liberal churches are fastly becoming exinct, including the New Church. Although his tone is mild, Frothingham observes that religious liberalism seems to have reached the end of its rope. (b) To his surprise Frothingham finds that Swedenborg's philosophy harmonizes with his own anti-dogmatic, anti-sectarian, ethical and inclusive 'religion of humanity'. Moreover, Frothingham interprets Swedenborg's philosophy as even more 'radical', offering both a spiritual monotheism that 'saves from pantheism', as well as a blueprint for social reform. (c) Therefore, Swedenborg had best be approached as a philosopher and a social reformer. Frothingham resolutely rejects the Emersonian 'frame' of Swedenborg as a mystic. (d) Although Frothingham acknowledges an internal logic to Swedenborg's philosophy, he struggles with his claim to '*immediata revelatio*', the 'angelic origins' of his revelations – specifically the 'declarations' that carry the potential of a complete revision of the philosophical status quo.

The above has led to the following observations and conclusions:

(1) Frothingham's struggle with Swedenborg's claim to 'immediate revelation' cannot be explained from his background as a Unitarian minister who developed into the spokesman of 'free religion'. Although his liberal religious beliefs changed – 'radicalized' – over time, he never abandoned the concept of 'divine revelation'; in fact he expanded the concept to include historical 'revelations' of other faith traditions. Moreover, even as a free religionist Frothingham supported the Transcendentalist notion of 'intuitionism', of a religiously motivated way 'inwards', of the idea of 'knowing God by knowing thyself' – as part of his belief that humanity is a carrier of the divine.

(2) Likewise, Frothingham's struggle cannot be explained from the field of Western esotericism, nor from a prevailing dualism between 'reason and unreason', which may even have involved peer pressure in view of the alleged 'recanting' of his belief shortly before the writing of the 1882 article. Clearly, Frothingham does not engage in a dialectic of 'secret knowledge', as Von Stuckrad proposes. And he seems unaffected by Protestant 'polemizations'. Shifting our focus from religious liberalism to Western esotericism has, however, helped to uncover the dynamic behind Frothingham's struggle which can be related to the nature of Swedenborg's claim to 'immediate revelation'. In particular, the historicist approach by Hanegraaff and his notion of 'rejected knowledge' were instrumental in identifying the issue at stake, convincingly demonstrating how the emergence of 'esotericism' can be related to anti-apologetic Protestant 'polemization'.

(3) Ultimately, Frothingham's struggle must be explained from the problem of 'immediate revelation' – meaning the specific nature of Swedenborg's claim which involves assumptions on the ontological status of spiritual versus material reality, and the epistemological status of psychic versus physical perceptions. Put differently: in his 'revelatory experiences' Swedenborg relates the physical to the psychic, linking reason to consciousness, mixing the worlds of 'thinking and touching' and of 'feeling and awareness'. But, in doing so, he threatens the philosophical status quo.

(4) Interestingly, Hanegraaff finds that "the entire reservoir of 'rejected knowledge' became an object of intense fascination for Romantics and other critics of the Enlightenment during the 19th century, precisely *because* of its perceived alterity vis-à-vis socially dominant models of science and rationality".[150] Among those Romantics we may find Emerson and the American Transcendentalists, explaining the nascent interest in 'mysticism' in nineteenth-century New England. In his portrayal of

[150] Hanegraaff, *The Globalization of Esotericism*, 67 (italics by Hanegraaff).

Swedenborg as the archetypical 'mystic' Emerson likens him to Böhme, a 'frame' that may have affected Faivre, Von Stuckrad and others – but one that is fully rejected by Frothingham.

(5) The nature of Swedenborg's claim – his 'esoteric innovation', as coined by Hanegraaff – makes sense in view of his place in history, especially when situated in the eighteenth-century intellectual movement known as the Revolt against Deism. Swedenborg's postulate of a spiritual world that is in accordance with reason but not in an empirical sense, sparked a polemical response from Kant in 1766, furthering the process of Protestant 'polemization', and contributing to a discourse of 'persistent dualism' between reason and 'irrationality'.

(6) Evidently, no judgment is possible as to the validity of Swedenborg's claim to 'immediate revelation', simply because the nature of the claim precludes objective demonstration or refutation. In 1766 Kant recognized the complex dynamics involved in Swedenborg's 'declarations'. He felt compelled to ridicule Swedenborg, not in the least because he was concerned about his academic reputation. In 1882, over a century later, Frothingham is confronted with the same issue. But he is more brave than Kant, and displays more integrity – typical for a New England religious liberal.

Some final remarks on Spiritualism

In my research I had anticipated to find a discursive relation – in terms of a dialogue of opposition or conflict – between Unitarians and Spiritualists with respect to their interpretations of Swedenborg. Although this turned out not to be the case, I did find a slight connection between Spiritualism and the Free Religious Association. Spiritualism is understood as "a religious movement emphasizing the belief in survival after death, a belief spiritualists claim is based upon scientific proof, and upon communication with the surviving personalities of deceased human beings by means of mediumship".[151] The origins of Spiritualism in America are often related to specific events in 1848: "…when the sisters Maggie and Katie Fox started communicating with spirits through rappings in their house at Hydesville, New York".[152] The success of the Fox sisters seemed to inspire other mediums, and by the mid-1850s spiritualism had gained a considerable popularity.

"The Civil War made Spiritualism a religious phenomenon of the first importance. The pretension of its mediums to prove the reality of the spiritual world by scientific methods gave a pseudo-rationalistic flavor to a faith having little else of a positive character in common with

[151] Lewis, *Odd Gods: New Religions & the Cult Controversy*, 337.
[152] Ibid., 339.

rationalism."[153] Free religionists, however, saw in Spiritualism a manifestation of the craving of the popular mind for the supernatural, and they invited the Spiritualists to share the work of the FRA. Besides their joined rejection of Christian orthodox dogmas on salvation, redemption, heaven and hell, both groups shared a 'millennial hope' – eschatological speculations involving the doctrine of the end times: Spiritualists simply founded their beliefs on spirit communications, the Free religionists projected faith in a humanistic millennium on earth.[154] As far I have been able to discover, the cooperation did not yield any significant results from a religious reform perspective.

Epilogue

Although I have thoroughly enjoyed working on this thesis, I will have to admit that the 1882 article 'Swedenborg' by O.B. Frothingham is not really a good analysis of Swedenborg nor is it well written. Certain paragraphs are very confusing, especially when Frothingham engages in exegetical exercise, nor does he succeed in explaining some of Swedenborg's concepts, e.g., the idea of heaven as the 'maximus homo', the supreme man. Moreover, the article seems to contain a painful mistake in the reference to 'F.H. Channing' (on page 602) – which is likely to refer to either F.H. – Frederic Henry – Hedge (1805-1890) or William Ellery Channing (1818-1901). Still, all is forgiven in view of the integrity that Frothingham displayed, both in the development of his ethical religious beliefs over time and in his honest approach to Swedenborg's thought.

So much more could be said about 'mystical' elements in Transcendentalism, about Frothingham and his 'religion of humanity', about Swedenborg's theological writings that turned out to be a *mer à boire*. But the scope of this thesis is limited. In his article Frothingham proposed that Henry James Sr would the person most qualified to 'dig out a treasure of thought worthy to be kept' with respect to Swedenborgian teachings. Unfortunately, whereas Emerson had passed in April, the elder James died in December, both in 1882 – the year the article was published.

In his *Recollections and Impressions* Frothingham declares how he always loved the sonnet 'To Night' by Joseph Blanco White (1775-1841).[155] He goes on to explain how he never appreciated its full significance until he developed the scientific view that succeeded the transcendental, and he began "to walk by knowledge, steadily and surely, but not buoyantly any more".[156] Upon reading this

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153 Persons, *Free Religion: An American Faith*, 103-4.

154 Ibid., 104-5.

155 Blanco was a Spanish Catholic priest who entered and abandoned several positions, institutions, and faiths during his lifetime. During the French invasion he left Spain and emigrated to England where he became an Anglican minister. Later he abandoned Anglicanism in favour of Unitarianism. From: Fernández, J., 'A Life of Readings, the Readings of a Life: Joseph Blanco White', *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* 24.2 (May 1, 1990): 121-142.

156 Frothingham, *Recollections and Impressions*, 137-8.

poem I was struck by its appropriateness – in more ways than one – to the subject matter in this thesis. And so, by way of closure –

Mysterious Night! when our first parent knew
Thee from report divine, and heard thy name,
Did he not tremble for this lovely frame,
This glorious canopy of light and blue?
Yet 'neath a curtain of translucent dew,
Bathed in the rays of the great setting flame,
Hesperus with the host of heaven came,
And lo! Creation widened in man's view.
Who could have thought such darkness lay concealed
Within thy beams, O Sun! or who could find,
Whilst fly and leaf and insect stood revealed,
That to such countless orbs thou mad'st us blind!
Why do we then shun death with anxious strife?
If Light can thus deceive, wherefore not Life?

* * * * *

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