

Tore Ahlbäck

Olof Lagercrantz is one of the foremost contemporary Swedish men of letters. He has produced "a dozen biographies and essays in which he tells with originality about notable authors: among others Gunnar Ekelöf, Agnes von Krusenstjerna, August Strindberg, Dante, James Joyce, Joseph Conrad and Marcel Proust. He has studied the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg during recent years." Lagercrantz' book about Swedenborg came out in the summer of 1996 under the title of *Dikten om livet på den andra sidan*.

Olof Lagercrantz is not a scientist but an author. I have nonetheless decided to address some questions to him in an essay within a scientific context for the following reasons:

1. I am interested in finding out how a notable author succeeds in a hand to hand struggle with Swedenborg;

2. I do not deny the possibility that a notable author might give impulses and ideas to a scientist who may not always be as notable;

3. I propose that this can be valid to an especially high degree in the area of science of religion, where the requisite of an empirical theory of knowledge is obligatory despite the fact that much, incredibly much of what takes place in the area of religion is played out behind the exterior of human behavior, and thereby is not susceptible to intersubjective control;

4. My final point of view is scientifically-speaking more questionable. I perceive Swedenborg as an exceptionally gifted person and perhaps one to whom the word genius can be applied. Consequently I have nothing against mediating points of view on Swedenborg which have their source in a person who shares with Swedenborg a burden of giftedness much more than I, especially since the person in question (as I myself), although from the point of view of time lives a quarter of a millenium later than Swedenborg, yet in the same country, of the same culture, and, as controversial as it may be, belonging to the same social stratum.

The book *Dikten om livet på den andra sidan* presents Swedenborg's manifesto as follows:

I come to read Swedenborg's work as a poem about a strange country and unfamiliar mores. In the nearly thirty years before his death, Swedenborg worked out this "poem", which demanded all his powers and is one of the

greatest monuments of thought possessed by Western literature. It contains an infinite store of wisdom about humankind and about the passions which shake and shape it. But it is foremost an utopia, inscribed upon the other side of the grave, of a more valuable life, made possible by our earthly limitations being the echo of the spirit world.

When Lagercrantz says that he shall read Swedenborg's work as a poem he means that he intends to deal with it as belonging to an intra-worldly context, in the same way that a scholar of religion would do. When he proposes that it is dealing with an utopia, he offers a classification which is by nature of the same kind as a scholar of religion would produce: Swedenborg's spirit realm belongs to the genre of utopian concepts which belong to the broader set of messianism or millennialism. As such Lagercrantz for the time being shows that he has gone far on the same road that scholars of religion have always traveled. But there is something else: Lagercrantz says that Swedenborg imparts "an infinite store of wisdom about humankind". This is an evaluation of which a scholar of religion may not make himself guilty. An author, by contrast, may do so and my own interest in Lagercrantz is based on the fact that I wish to grasp his evaluation of Swedenborg, in order to clarify what it is which motivates one to sit at the feet of Swedenborg. I shall not enter further into how Lagercrantz arranged his exposition of Swedenborg, other than to note that he takes the dream book as his point of departure; nor shall I touch the method Lagercrantz uses, other than to remark that he is not bound by the reigning empirical theory of knowledge and therefore can produce much more of interest than a conventional scholar.

Emanuel Swedenborg (29/01/1688 - 29/03/1772) experienced a religious crisis in 1744 at the age of 56. During this year, more precisely from March 24 to October 1744, he wrote a dream journal, of which Lagercrantz says "I believe our literature, perhaps the literature of the whole world, does not possess another such document" (Lagercrantz 1996: 16).

Lagercrantz states outright that he cannot explain the state of Swedenborg during the time in which he wrote the dream journal. On this point he is in the same position as the scientific investigator. Lagercrantz notes that during the period of the dream journal Swedenborg met Jesus two times, in dreams. The first occasion was in the night between the sixth and seventh of April 1744 in the Hague and the second occasion was in April 1745 in London. Lagercrantz interprets the scientific researchers' evaluation of this meeting with Jesus in the following way: "In our Christian world superstition is bound up in everything to do with Jesus so that there is no place left for healthy reason. The two

encounters with Jesus have become part and parcel of a myth detrimental to the view of Swedenborg in later generations. Now and again certain scholars, among them Martin Lamm, have compared Swedenborg's encounters with Jesus to St. Teresa's visions of Christ and consigned him to the mystics" (Lagercrantz 1996: 19-20).

The basis of Lagercrantz' opinion in this question is doubtless that he came to the conclusion that Jesus in fact was not a necessary element in the scheme of salvation, a matter to be seen in more detail later. The notion that Jesus does not take a central position, is consequently one of the most important discoveries of Lagercrantz in my opinion, along with the perception that Swedenborg changed a search for immortal fame from the arena of natural sciences to the religious.

When Lagercrantz presents Swedenborg's writings in the *Spiritual journal* (*Andliga dagboken*) he remarks: "Spirits reveal themselves to Swedenborg in a never-failing stream. It is not that he steps into their world himself to seek contact. Some spirits wish him well and others ill. One often fails to understand why he calls spirits what other people would experience as impulses, temptations, and oddities of the kind which people our inner scene every hour" (Lagercrantz 1996: 23). From the point of view of Lagercrantz, other people, and even scholars of religion, what Swedenborg calls spirits are experienced as "impulses, temptations, and oddities of the kind which people our inner scene every hour". But Swedenborg calls them spirits, and as Lagercrantz remarks, that is something we do not always understand. At this point is found the difference between an empirical and religious interpretation of reality. My interest in Lagercrantz depends precisely on the fact that he has in principle the same outlook on Swedenborg as a scholar of religion, but because of his background and his different way of examining Swedenborg may well produce something of scholarly interest which a scholar could not come up with himself.

I note here by way of parentheses that on a visit to the display of the Swedenborgian Society of Sweden at the book and library fair in Gothenburg from October 30 to November 2, 1997, I asked some questions about Lagercrantz' book, which was on display. In answer, the attendant Björn Sahlin, remarked that the book is read a great deal, but that the members of the society did not appreciate that fact that Lagercrantz dealt with Swedenborg mainly as a poet and not as a person chosen of God to reveal the truth, God's truth.

On several occasions Lagercrantz brings up Immanuel Kant's book about Swedenborg, *Träume eines Geistersehers*, which appeared in 1766, and in

which Kant diagnoses Swedenborg as more or less insane. Lagercrantz points out that Kant was influenced by a number of tales going around about how Swedenborg conversed with the dead, while Kant could find no evidence of life after death in *Arcana Coelestia*. Lagercrantz reacts against this. (From the point of view of the study of religions it is naturally not relevant to take a position on the question of factuality, but nonetheless a scholar of religion does so as well through his demand for intersubjective control). Lagercrantz sees Kant's evaluation to depend on ignorance and superficiality. He says that Kant's criticism of Swedenborg is analog with the attempt to show in the case of Jonathan Swift that his giants do not exist and that therefore *Gulliver's travels* are "falsifications". "Because Kant starts out on the basis of the anecdotes about conversation with the dead, he follows a false scent and arrives where a good share of people still are today" (Lagercrantz 1996: 27).

In spite of that, Lagercrantz has understanding for those who like Kant pose the question of factuality. He says that when the reader finds no evidence of the existence of the spirit world, it is easy to suggest that Swedenborg writes as he does under the influence of hallucinations, automatic writing or insanity. Lagercrantz quotes the explanation of Martin Lamm (whom he characterizes as the foremost Nordic authority on Swedenborg). "Swedenborg's revelations of spirits are 'objectivized manifestations of his own world of thought, an unconscious continuation in dreams and hallucinations of his conscious speculation'" (Lagercrantz 1996: 26). Lagercrantz appreciates Lamm's explanation, but prefers to replace the words "dreams" and "hallucinations" with "poetification." In so doing he changes Lamm's explanation in a truly radical way.

Lagercrantz' own position is thus as follows. He considers it irrelevant to pose the question of factuality, that is, whether what Swedenborg transmits in his writings is true or false, whether it corresponds with reality or not. "Discussion around the reality behind Swedenborg's spirit world can and should in my opinion cease. Swedenborg may contend that what he perceives is truth and tell his friends about spirit visitations. Such mixing of the poetical and reality is met with in the history of literature. For the reader it is all the same, for the words which he follows on his way to understanding seem real to him, whether or not they are "false" or "true". What the reader wants is an inner structure, hidden within the opus, and nothing more" (Lagercrantz 1996: 28). This appears to be an acceptable opinion, in the context of literary analysis, but is it so in the context of science of religion?

Lagercrantz claims that mixing of the poetical and reality is found in the

history of literature. What about in the history of religions? The answer is that it is also found there, but not necessarily to a greater extent than in the history of literature. The question now is: can I as a scholar of religion accept Lagercrantz' position? To consider that it is irrelevant whether Swedenborg himself believed that what he wrote and presented as the truth that God Himself had given him as a task to make known. And in its place to limit myself to attempting to find "an inner structure, hidden in the opus", that is, in Swedenborg's writings. I suppose I can do so. In so doing I no longer pose the question whether Swedenborg's spirits exist, a question I had not posed earlier either, since ascertaining the existence of spirits is not a scientific task. Nor do I pose the question of whether Swedenborg himself believed in the existence of spirits, angels and such-like, but merely note that he wrote about them as if he believed they existed.

I once wrote a monograph about a German messiah, Oskar Ernst Bernhardt, who founded the so-called Grail Movement. One of my research goals was to try to ascertain whether he himself believed in his message (the background was that he was sentenced to four years imprisonment for fraud). I naturally failed to show anything about Bernhardt's alias Abdruschin's inner beliefs. I have difficulties even when I ask myself what I in fact believe, when it comes to existential questions. I consider Lagercrantz' view of how he intends to investigate Swedenborg as fruitful also from a science of religion perspective, to study Swedenborg's text "as a poem about a strange country", as a "utopia, inscribed upon the other side of the grave." There are of course other possibilities and Lagercrantz remarks: "Those who consider this utopia something truly to exist will not relinquish their right to do so. Dreams of everlasting life are part of our human condition" (Lagercrantz 1996: 28).

The Poet Emanuel Swedenborg and his Poetry

I have already summarized Lagercrantz' point of departure in his study of Swedenborg. I shall now look more closely at how he carries out his program and whether I as a scholar of religion can learn something further from his way of working.

Lagercrantz spends a good deal on Swedenborg's Bible interpretation. Swedenborg begins with the assumption that the Bible is the Word of God, but considered that it had to be read as a cipher. For Lagercrantz, who is a modern interpreter of texts, Swedenborg's methodological point of departure, that is that a poeticized Bible held hidden meanings, is not controversial. If there is anything controversial in his method, it is that Swedenborg "[...] it must be admitted, practices thought on the basis of the hidden language in absurdum.

He separates himself from everyone else by his radical demands. The hidden meaning of the word applies to every episode, every name of place or personage, every word and even every letter" (Lagercrantz 1996: 45). Lagercrantz has seen that Swedenborg considers every image before Christ as a type. They are figuræ and one sees a pattern: the theme is man's becoming god, the climax of which is that God appears as man, Jesus Christ. Lagercrantz comments: "Such a concept of interpretation is fruitful as applied to every earthly poet, but also produces results from God's book because despite its variety it appears within a long common tradition" (Lagercrantz 1996: 46). This shows how Lagercrantz goes about just what he has promised, he intends to examine Swedenborg's writings as a poetical text.

But Lagercrantz has several problems with Swedenborg's Bible interpretation. He considers it more or less an impossibility to wade through *Arcana Coelestia*. He notes that Swedenborg made long alphabetical lists of words and episodes in the Old Testament and quite simply created his own concordance. Since the text is written by God every word has a meaning and this meaning thus has a constant celestial correspondent. Swedenborg looks up in his concordance and takes note of all the places where a word he is investigating appears. Lagercrantz comments on this as follows: "It is possible that someone who more or less knows the Bible by heart, and many such existed in Swedenborg's time, can appreciate the value of the word lists from one Bible book to another and be stimulated by the variety of combinations. There is research on Proust that works in the same spirit and which will turn out to be dead as stone once Proust's novels are no longer read" (Lagercrantz 1996: 48). Lagercrantz is quite simply irritated that Swedenborg time and again asks angels for advice when he is not able to ascertain for himself the inner or celestial meaning and will have it that the reader loses the possibility of following Swedenborg's reasoning with his own judgment. When Swedenborg asks advice from angels it is he himself who gives the response in the angels' mouth, but it is Lagercrantz' purpose to show that Swedenborg's celestial meanings are sometimes inexplicable: A tree represents knowledge of the good and the true, a sheep means lack of love. But when we are compelled to accept such an interpretation a tree in our imagination withers and sheep lose their wool" (Lagercrantz 1996: 49).

Lagercrantz contends many times that Swedenborg's ambition to find a celestial meaning for every word turns his texts into a wilderness of words, in which there exist hard to find oases of "fortunate and grand results". The reason "he is so little cunning" according to Lagercrantz at least to some ex-

tent is the fact that Swedenborg writes without contact with the reader. As Lagercrantz points out: "He scatters his best things in presentations like catalogues so that the reader is obliged to wander about enormous word wildernesses before he comes to a refreshing oasis" (Lagercrantz 1996: 164).

Lagercrantz is faithful to a science of literature terminology throughout the book. When he wishes to explain that Swedenborg considered the Old Testament God as a horrible dictator belonging to the past he says: "In Swedenborg's interpretation the Bible is cleansed from its barbarity and becomes a novel of evolution with Jesus as the final goal" (Lagercrantz 1996: 54). Lagercrantz is especially sympathetic to Swedenborg's concept of God because it is not based on a "supernatural revelation". God stepped down in the man Jesus, was crucified, which means that Jesus became divine throughout. "Jesus is God." Lagercrantz suggests that "Swedenborg's Jesus can be met and understood by anyone". Swedenborg avoids the idea that Jesus died for our sins, he immediately accepted his own sins, which he thereby overcame. If Jesus did not die for our sins, then there is no redemption either. Swedenborg does not believe in any redemption, and neither does Lagercrantz, who now waxes lyrical:

To call Swedenborg's God the power which makes a human being strive to raise himself out of the uniquely material and see a new, deeper fellowship. Let man be a cathedral filled with streaming light which God has once kindled. Put in place of God the thinkers', mystics', poets', composers', the political dreamers' and every human being's longing for something that transcends time and death or at least invites to relative solidarity and justice, and you are confronting Swedenborg's religion. Jesus as a being which within himself seeks to bring about an inner voice is a true human in which dwells the divine and not in the sacrificial death on the cross. The human who so strives is our God. It matters not what we call him. But he exists and according to Swedenborg he is present on all sides" (Lagercrantz 1996: 56).

It is evident that it is not only Swedenborg's god that appears here, but also in some sense Lagercrantz'. This is demonstrated also by the fact that we are not dealing in Lagercrantz with a reader of Swedenborg who is in principle negative, rather more the opposite. Lagercrantz refers in this context to Ernst Bloch and makes the point with appreciation that he also holds the opinion that humankind must save himself, and he retrieves this opinion also from Swedenborg. One might have expected that Lagercrantz would have associated with gnosticism here, both in what applies to the gnostic model for the creation of man and for the means of salvation, but he does not. On the other

hand he points out that it is not his intention to place Swedenborg in his historical context from the point of view of ideas and religion, but it is rather his "task to investigate Swedenborg as he confronts me at this point in time. I ask what and not how and why" (Lagercrantz 1996: 57).

Swedenborg's view of divine providence also receives unreserved support from Lagercrantz, that is Swedenborg's thought that man sees divine providence uniquely from the perspective of looking back and never beforehand. On this Lagercrantz says: "This is a teaching which speaks directly to me and is in accord with my experiences" (Lagercrantz 1996: 72).

Lagercrantz gives Swedenborg high marks as a depicter of hell. He things that Dante's hell, *Inferno*, is more generalized and pedagogically organized than Swedenborg's, but that Swedenborg is more inventive. Lagercrantz indeed notes that Swedenborg is less susceptible to crime than Dante, he presents Swedenborg as a family son as compared with Dante. A problem with the concept of hell is indeed that it is found in the middle of a word wilderness: "Swedenborg's descriptions of hell are scattered throughout volumes of tens of thousands of pages. He is like an artist, a hopeless waster, who plants diamonds in dark rooms and oases impossible to blunder into" (Lagercrantz 1996: 145).

Lagercrantz touches on the problem as it concerns disobedience and punishment: disobedience applies to the short time of earthly life, but punishment attaches to the sinner during the eternity which follows upon death. Within the Theosophical Society this is a very popular argument in favor of belief in reincarnation. Lagercrantz does not follow this line of argument: "It can seem cruel that a brief time on earth determines our fate in eternity" (Lagercrantz 1996: 141). He also knows that some of Swedenborg's followers have tried to interpret Swedenborg to have thought of the possibility of climbing out of hell after a time and after receiving instruction, a sort of Swedenborgian purgatory.

Lagercrantz also produces criticism of Swedenborg as a person. The criticism is of two sorts. On one hand he finds a lack of empathy and mercy in Swedenborg, and on the other he contends that Swedenborg evinces a thoroughgoing if hidden ambition for fame. In one place this double criticism appears in the same context. Lagercrantz has remarked that Swedenborg did not need Jesus in the worship he described among people in other places in the universe. In Lagercrantz' words: "That true empathy which does not regard opinion and party is missing in him. That is one of the reasons why the man Jesus is foreign to him. Swedenborg will gladly have Jesus replaced by a

more concrete and precise person, himself perhaps" (Lagercrantz 1996: 148). While Lagercrantz gives an account of one of Swedenborg's descriptions of hell, in which fifty people sit in a room, eyes gleaming with greed, claiming to own everything in the whole country, each and every one of them; they are insane and know it, but they assume that they will be cured on leaving the room, he says: "One of them may be Swedenborg himself, although his ambition for fame does not attach itself to gold" (Lagercrantz 1996: 147). A parallel to this expression is found in the context of Swedenborg's doctrine being presented to Socrates, Xenophon and their disciples. Swedenborg's doctrine is well received.

Swedenborg thus legitimates his teaching by ancient authorities and celebrates a fine triumph. His writings are full of successes of this type, easily won since every step in the spirit world reinforces his words. In this he reminds one of an author who waited exactly one hundred years after his death to be born, that is, Marcel Proust. Proust's novel *A la recherche du temps perdu* is plastered with scenes of promotion. The young Proust arrives at a fine hotel with a provincial grandmother and is ignored by the manager. But immediately there enters a woman of incredible wealth and nobility, the grandmother's classmate and near friend. The scene changes miraculously, the manager bows and Marcel turns into a prince. "Proust's novel is built on such scenes. An irrepressible ambition for honor constantly tries to free itself. It is the same with Swedenborg" (Lagercrantz 1996: 161).

Swedenborg describes a father on the other side who is informed that his children, also the newly dead, had caused great harm in life. The father is not disturbed at all to have to forego the company of his children. Swedenborg comments on this saying that it will be necessary to send the whole pack of thieves down below. Lagercrantz' commentary is: "This is a far, far cry from Jesus' parable of the prodigal son" (Lagercrantz 1996: 165).

Lagercrantz says that it is both tragic and comical that Swedenborg should poke fun at one of his contemporaries and one of Sweden's foremost persons of culture and poets, Johan Henric Kjellgren. Kjellgren wrote a celebrated poem "One owns not a genius since one is crazy" in which he places Swedenborg on the list of the insane and treats him as a fool. He knows that Swedenborg also wrote essays in natural science but he evaluates them in the following vein: they should rather testify of "a reminder of what he taught than of an explanation to what he thought" (Lagercrantz 1996: 110). Lagercrantz believes that Kjellgren's doggerel on the face of it served Swedenborg's cause: "He was for generation after generation a mystery and this disdain gave his name an in-

creased luster. Nothing is so powerful as a victory denied and trampled upon.” (Lagercrantz 1996: 111).

My final impression of Lagercrantz’ study of Swedenborg’s writings beginning from the view that they are “like a poem about a strange country and unfamiliar mores” is very positive, and it is my intention to try this angle of attack myself, and also to benefit from these perceptions definitely not of the scientific type which Lagercrantz has exposed and which I have in part examined. I contend that Lagercrantz’ study has a large heuristic value, but it remains to examine the possibility of giving his discoveries a stronger scientific basis.

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