

York: Oxford University Press. (See review by H. H. Bauer (1996), *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 10, 429–430.)

Kant on Swedenborg: Dreams of a Spirit-Seer and Other Writings edited by Gregory R. Johnson and translated by Gregory R. Johnson and Glenn Alexander Magee. Swedenborg Foundation, 2002. xxvi + 214 pp. \$19.95. ISBN 0-87785-310-X.

In his account of his conversations with Goethe, Eckermann records a story he was told by the valet of the great German writer and thinker. According to Christoph Sutor, in 1783 Goethe once rang for him in the middle of the night: "Listen," he said, "there is an earthquake going on, or there will be." The next day, the ladies at the court of Weimar mocked this prediction: "*Höre! Goethe schwärmt!*," they said, "Goethe is dreaming." A few days later, the news arrived that part of Messina had, on the night of Goethe's warning, been destroyed by an earthquake (Eckermann, 1998).

This story reads like a replay of the famous incident a quarter of a century or so earlier of Swedenborg and the great fire of Stockholm. Then, in 1759, Emanuel Swedenborg experienced a vision of a great conflagration in the capital city while he was staying in Gothenburg; miles away, Stockholm burned. The response of many of Swedenborg's contemporaries to his experience was identical to that of the court ladies in Weimar to Goethe's—both sets of "visions," "intuitions," call them what you will, were regarded as examples of *Schwärmerei*, a term sometimes translated as "dreaming" or "raving," sometimes as "fanaticism" or "enthusiasm" (the German term derived, as Coleridge pointed out, from the swarming of bees) (Watson, 1965). The case of Swedenborg and the great fire provoked the interest of no less a figure than Immanuel Kant, at that time a university lecturer who had yet to attain his full professorship in logic and metaphysics (and the reputation for being the Copernicus of philosophy). He invested in Swedenborg's multi-volume work on the "heavenly mysteries contained in the sacred scriptures," the *Arcana coelestia* (1749–1756), and went on to write a book about the notion of the spirit-world expounded by Swedenborg.

According to Bertrand Russell (1983), Kant's *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, published anonymously in Königsberg in 1766, is "a curious work." One of Kant's most important biographers and interpreters, Ernst Cassirer, spoke of "the strange and unfamiliar tone in which it was written," for far from being "a theoretical scrutiny of metaphysics and its main propositions," the text displays "a reflective humor," which "sports playfully with all its concepts and divisions, with its definitions and distinctions, with its categories and its logical chains of conclusions. (Cassirer, 1981)." And one of the work's most recent commentators has described it as "uncanny" (*unheimlich*; Ménard, 1990). In his new edition of the text, Gregory R. Johnson calls it "Kant's strangest book," and his introduction and commentary succeed in showing just how

strange it really is. His edition is, however, also enriched by extracts from other works, including his lectures, where Kant mentions or discusses Swedenborg, and an appendix containing examples of the reception of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* in the form of letters to Kant or contemporary reviews—all these help contextualize the work itself, locating it firmly in the eighteenth-century debate on metaphysics and the problem of *Schwärmerei*. (Johnson acknowledges his debt to Rudolf Malter's German edition, published by Reclam in 1976, which contained similar explanatory and contextual material, much of which has remained, up until now, untranslated. And Johnson generously concedes that it would be hard to justify a new translation of *Dreams* itself, were it not for the fact that the excellent translation in the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, by David Walford and Ralf Meerbote, is not inexpensively available.) For Johnson, *Dreams* is a work that, for all its jokey presentation, deserves to be taken seriously: it communicates, he claims in his introduction, "a positive metaphysical teaching" (p. xvi). Furthermore, Kant's mature critical philosophy is, he avers, "best seen" as "a synthesis of Rousseauian and Swedenborgian elements"; the influence of Leibniz, as well as of Hume who, as Kant famously put it, awoke him from his dogmatic slumbers, is seen by Johnson primarily in terms of Kant's elaboration of "difficult technical questions," once his "basic vision was already in place" (p. xx). In other words, Johnson subscribes to the view that Kant's philosophy possesses an esoteric, as well as an exoteric dimension, and that Kant maintained a belief in the "spirit-world," even though he had attacked such a view in *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*. After all, did not Kant tell Moses Mendelssohn that "I think many things with complete conviction and to my great satisfaction that I will never have the courage to say" (cited p. 83)?

Now, it is true that Kant displayed an interest in the oddities of the day, what we might call the "X Files" of the eighteenth century. For instance, in *Dreams* he alludes, albeit dismissively, to the Beast of Gévaudan, a mysterious and ferocious animal which allegedly terrorized the inhabitants of the Massif Central in the 1760s—"any rational man can see that an African beast of prey would not run around the forests of France," was Kant's caustic comment (p. 45)—and in 1764 he investigated the case of the so-called Goat Prophet, the name applied to the fifty-year-old Jan Komarnicki who wandered around the fields outside Königsberg with his cattle, sheep, and goats, accompanied by a young boy (the case became the occasion for his "Essay on the Sicknesses of the Head" [1764]). Then again, it is also true that the critical philosophy is not without its darker moments, as when Kant acknowledges in the First Critique (1781) that there perhaps remains "a common but to us unknown root" of "the two stems of human cognition, sensibility and understanding" (A 15/B 29), or when he describes the schematism of the understanding (by means of which categories are mapped onto sensory intuition) as "a hidden art in the depths of the human soul" (A 142/B 181). Yet close attention to the text of *Dreams*, as well as to those supplementary texts provided in this edition, suggests that the distance between

Kant and Swedenborg is, in fact, much larger than Johnson would have us believe. For Kant's case against Swedenborg is ultimately a moral one.

In philosophical terms, Kant is working within the "double government methodology" he inherited from Leibniz, and is waging a "methodological crusade" against "surreptitious concepts," that is, philosophical concepts derived through inference, not abstraction (Butts, 1986). As Kant wrote to Moses Mendelssohn, "we must decide whether there are not real boundaries established by the limits of our reason or rather of the experience than contains its data" (cited p. 86). And in his lectures, Kant pondered the impossibility of the soul, as a spiritual member of the other world, being seen and appearing "in the visible world through visible effects" (*Metaphysics L₂*, cited p. 92). So it is hardly surprising that, in the concluding section of *Dreams*, Kant writes: "If certain alleged experiences cannot be brought under any law of sensation accepted by most human beings and are thus only proved an irregularity in the testimonies of the senses (as it is, in fact, with the ghost stories going around), then it is advisable simply to call it quits" (p. 62). *Metaphysics*, in other words, is redefined as the defining of the limitations of reason.

What concerns Kant above all, however, is the moral effect of these "ghost stories": knowledge of a spirit-world is not just "impossible," it is "unnecessary," and while, for Kant, the conviction of an existence after death may be "necessary as a motivating reason for a virtuous life," the question of the genuineness of apparitions of departed souls amounts to no more than "idle curiosity." Moreover, there lies a danger in such curiosity because, in Kant's view, it can distract us from the true path of virtue; because the human heart "contain[s] immediate moral commands," there is no need, "in order to act in accordance with [our] vocation here," to "set up the machinery in another world" (p. 63). What matters, Kant argues, is "moral faith," which "alone and only is appropriate to [the] true aims" of humankind (p. 63). Some twelve years after the publication of *Dreams* the lectures on metaphysics drove home the message even more clearly. True, Kant called Swedenborg's thoughts on the existence of the spiritual world "sublime" (not exactly a compliment in the eighteenth century, however); but again, as well as engaging with the epistemological problems of "intuiting" the existence of dead souls, he concluded that "it is totally unsuitable for us here to worry too much about our destiny in the future world," that "providence has closed off the future world to us," and that "the chief matter is always morality" (p. 93). Rightly, Johnson points to Kant's avowed intention in the First Critique to "deny *knowledge* in order to make room for *faith*" (B xxx; cf. "Introduction," p. xx), but this is precisely the point: for Kant there can be no knowledge of the spirit-world, only a belief in it; and because, in his view, such a pretence to knowledge may be detrimental to morality, and may even be detrimental to it, we would do well not to bother with it. As Kant put it at the end of his lectures, "if the concepts of God and the other world did not hang together with morality, they would not be useful" (p. 93, translation modified). That Kant maintained a belief in God was,

of course, Heinrich Heine's contention in his *On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany* (1834–1835), where he satirically portrayed Kant as having killed off God in the First Critique, only to bring Him back in the Second, in order not to upset his faithful servant, Lampe; while Goethe colourfully accused Kant of having “wantonly smeared” his “philosophical house-coat” in *Religion Within the Bounds of Reason Alone* (1793) with “the shameful blot” of the notion of radical evil, “so that the Christians can also be lured into kissing its hem.”¹ In the twentieth century, Friedrich Nietzsche denounced Kant in *Twilight of the Idols* in the severest possible terms—as “a cunning Christian” (Hollingdale, 1968). Yet Kant's God, very much a God of the philosophers, is entirely different from Swedenborg's conception of the deity, and there is no equivalent in Kant's life to the kind of mystical conversion experience Swedenborg underwent in London in 1745.

As Johnson points out, there is a vast literature that challenges the “received view,” represented by Kuno Fischer, of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* as no more than a satire on Swedenborg; among these “skeptics who suspect Kant's professions of scorn for Swedenborg are not the whole story” are Hans Vaihinger and Eduard von Hartmann (p. xii; and see the deservedly long endnote 10, pp. 149–151). One name is, however, missing from the list, and the omission is significant. For the chief figure who popularized what could be called a “spiritualist” reading of Kant was Carl du Prel (1839–1899), the author of *Philosophy of Mysticism (Philosophie der Mystik)*, 1884, and himself a spiritualist. In 1889 du Prel published an edition of Kant's lectures on psychology, which included an introductory essay entitled “Kant's Mystical Worldview,” in which he proposed, based on his reading of those lectures and of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, a direct line of continuity between his spiritualist beliefs and Kantian philosophy (du Prel, 1889). Without going quite so far, Johnson (2001) stands in much the same tradition when he recapitulates the view, elaborated in his doctoral dissertation, that Swedenborg's teachings anticipate the critical philosophy in several important respects, including the ideality of time and space, Kant's account of the world as a “kingdom of ends,” and his moral teaching (p. xviii). Johnson sees Kant's reading of Rousseau, the impact of which was so great that the philosopher forgot to undertake his regular walk through Königsberg, as having provided Kant with a set of “pragmatic arguments” that allowed him “to embrace the content of Swedenborg's visions but discard his enthusiasm” (p. xx). Is there such a thing, however, as Swedenborg without *Schwärmerei*?

As suggested above, there is good reason to take issue with Johnson's interpretation of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*; but the edition is, in itself, an excellent one, and although the translation, undertaken jointly by Johnson and Glenn Alexander Magee, is sometimes close to Walford's in the *Cambridge Edition*, it is slightly more colloquial, and is eminently readable. Nor is Johnson entirely on the wrong track: as the philosopher Hans Leisegang remarked, Kant's rhetorical deployment of conventional biblical and theological metaphors runs the risk

of making him appear close to those who profess mysticism, despite his increasingly vigorous condemnation of *Schwärmerei* (Leisegang, 1949). Equally, Johnson is not wrong in seeking to pin down the wider impact of Swedenborg in Western culture: Blake, for instance, was an attentive reader; William James read him, as did his brother, Henry; and he was an important influence on Strindberg, as well as on the French symbolists, including Baudelaire and Valéry. Goethe once described the so-called “magus of the North,” Johann Georg Hamann—a similarly mystically inclined writer who, like Swedenborg, underwent a conversion experience during a stay in London²—as “the brightest head in his time,”³ and Hamann's impact on the German *Sturm und Drang* movement and, later, German Romanticism was profound. Likewise, we should not rush to discount the cultural significance of Swedenborg, but we should also be careful to recognize where he exercised an influence (and, if so, to what extent) and where he did not.

PAUL BISHOP

University of Glasgow

Glasgow, Scotland, UK

p.bishop@german.arts.gla.ac.uk

Notes

- ¹ See Goethe's letter of 7 June 1793 to Johann Gottfried and Karoline Herder.
- ² Just as Swedenborg's conversion led him to interpret the Bible, particularly Genesis and Exodus, as an allegory of human spiritual development, so Hamann came to read the Bible, and, in fact, all history and nature, in allegorical terms.
- ³ See Friedrich von Müller's account of his conversation with Goethe on 18 December 1823 (Woldemar von Biedermann [ed.]. [1909–1911]. *Goethes Gespräche*, [Vol. 3], Leipzig: Author, p. 50).

References

- Butts, R. (1986). *Kant and the Double Government Methodology: Supersensibility and Method in Kant's Philosophy of Science*. Dordrecht/Boston/Lancaster: D. Reidel, pp. 70–73, 95.
- Cassirer, E. (J. Haden, trans.). (1981). *Kant's Life and Thought* [1918]. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, p. 78.
- Coleridge, S. T. (G. Watson, ed.). (1965). *Biographia Literaria* [1817]. London and New York: Dent/Dutton, p. 16.
- David-Ménard, M. (1990). *La Folie dans la raison pure: Kant lecteur de Swedenborg*. Paris: J. Vrin, p. 73.
- du Prel, C. (Ed.). (1889). *Immanuel Kants Vorlesungen über Psychologie: Mit einer Einleitung "Kants mystische Weltanschauung."* Leipzig: Ernst Günther.
- Eckermann, J. P. (J. Oxenford, trans.). (1998). *Conversations of Goethe*. New York: Da Capo Press, p. 22.

Heine, H. (1911–1915). *Werke* (Vol. 7). Leipzig: Insel, pp. 308–309.

Johnson, G. R. (2001). *A Commentary on Kant's Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*. Doctoral dissertation, The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC.

Leisegang, H. (1949). "Kant und die Mystik". *Philosophische Studien*, 1, p. 16.

Nietzsche, F. (R. J. Hollingdale, trans.). (1968). *Twilight of the Idols/The Anti-Christ*, trans. Harmondsworth: Penguin, p. 39.

Russell, B. (1984). *A History of Western Philosophy* [1946]. London: Unwin, p. 678.

Kant on Swedenborg: Dreams of a Spirit-Seer and Other Writings edited by Gregory R. Johnson, translated by Gregory R. Johnson and Glenn Alexander Magee. Swedenborg Foundation, 2002. xxvi + 214 pp. \$19.95. ISBN 0-87785-310-X.

Over the last 30 years the traditional interpretation of Kant has come under increasing scrutiny. According to the traditional interpretation, Kant's philosophy establishes a two-fold distinction between things-as-they-appear and things-as-they-are-in-themselves. Some things—the *ding an sich*, freedom, God, the soul—are noumenal and some things—particular manifestations of chocolate cake and sub-Saharan snakes—are phenomenal. With the possible exception of freedom, the noumenal constitutes a realm of things that cannot be known and the phenomenal constitutes a realm of things that can be known. There is thus a strict separation or boundary line between these two realms. The traditional interpretation is also characterized by an exclusively moral explanation of religion and theology. If the Kantian paradigm provides any rational justification for religion and theology, if it allows for anything intelligible to be thought or said about God, such affirmations can only be made, says the traditionalist, on the basis of Kant's practical philosophy.

Gregory Johnson's new book, *Kant on Swedenborg: Dreams of a Spirit-Seer and Other Writings*, joins a chorus of recent books challenging traditional assumptions about how to understand Kant's philosophy. Emerging from his own dissertation research on Kant's infamous pre-critical essay "Dreams of a Spirit-Seer" (henceforth "Spirit-Seer"), Johnson's book combines the fruit of his research with substantial translations of most of Kant's writings relevant to the debate over the meaning and importance of his encounter with the work of Emanuel Swedenborg. (Swedenborg, of course, is famous for his contributions to numerous fields of inquiry—from science and politics to philosophy and mysticism.) Also in Johnson's book are a number of other documents, including important letters written by Kant's friends and acquaintances related to this issue. Taken together, Johnson's commentary on the current debate surrounding Kant and Swedenborg and translations of relevant, but not often read, material provide an important and useful contribution to the field of Kant scholarship.

Kant on Swedenborg is divided into four parts. The first is the "Introduction" wherein Johnson spells out the significance of the book in the ongoing process of researching and interpreting the philosophy of Kant. This involves familiarizing the reader with the central features of the debate surrounding Kant