



GTU

Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology

Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology

Volume 7, Issue 1

ISSN 2380-7458

Borsch-Rast Lecture 2021

Looking at the Earth with a Language of Things: Emanuel Swedenborg and the American Environmental Imagination

Author(s): Devin P. Zuber

Source: *Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology* 7, no. 1 (2021): 62-83.

Published by: Graduate Theological Union © 2021

Online article published on: December 30, 2021

Copyright Notice:

This file and its contents are copyright of the Graduate Theological Union © 2021. All rights reserved. Your use of the Archives of the *Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology* (BJRT) indicates your acceptance of the BJRT's policy regarding the use of its resources, as discussed below:

Any redistribution or reproduction of part or all of the contents in any form is prohibited with the following exceptions:

- You may download and print to a local hard disk this entire article for your personal and non-commercial use only.
- You may quote short sections of this article in other publications with the proper citations and attributions.
- Permission has been obtained from the Journal's management for exceptions to redistribution or reproduction. A written and signed letter from the Journal must be secured expressing this permission.

To obtain permissions for exceptions, or to contact the Journal regarding any questions pertaining to further use of this article, please email the Managing Editor at bjrt@ses.gtu.edu.

The *Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology* aims to offer its scholarly contributions free to the community in furtherance of the Graduate Theological Union's mission.

Looking at the Earth with a Language of Things: *Emanuel Swedenborg and the American Environmental Imagination*

Devin P. Zuber

*Graduate Theological Union
Berkeley, California, U.S.A.*

The 4th Borsch-Rast Lecture, 2021 Graduate Theological Union

The Borsch-Rast Book Prize and Lectureship is named after Frederick H. Borsch and Harold W. Rast. Borsch was Dean and President of the Church Divinity School of the Pacific until 1981, and Rast was founding director and editor of Trinity Press International. The Prize honors a book written by a GTU alumnus/a or faculty member that exemplifies excellent scholarship and presents a new perspective on religious or theological texts or issues, and the laureate is invited to deliver a lecture at the GTU. Dr. Devin P. Zuber, Associate Professor of American Studies, Religion, and Literature at the GTU, was awarded the fourth annual Borsch-Rast Book Prize and Lectureship for his 2019 monograph, *A Language of Things: Emanuel Swedenborg and the American Environmental Imagination* (University of Virginia Press). In his award-winning book, Dr. Zuber examines the impact that Scandinavian scientist-turned-mystic Emanuel Swedenborg made on American culture, literature, and approaches to nature. By tracing the ways that Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Muir, and Sarah Orne Jewett, among others, responded to Swedenborg, Dr. Zuber illuminates the complex dynamic that came to unfold between the religious, the literary, and the ecological in nineteenth-century culture.

Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology, Vol. 7, No. 1
© 2021 by the Graduate Theological Union

So, with today being April 22nd, it is Earth Day, of course—a token day of attention to our swiftly tilting planet, a holiday whose inception is caught

up in the affective response to the iconic images of the blue marble earth that circulated in 1972 and became instrumental and iconic for environmental justice struggles (fig. 1). In a very real way, the making of Earth Day is unthinkable without the kind of cultural work that the circulation of this image, taken from the American spaceship Apollo 17, came to inculcate, as the work of Finis Dunway and Ursula Heise has established.¹ Earth Day is thus a kind of art day, where we can recall the ability of the aesthetic to augment broader public conversations around the political—to offer new ways of imagining the world and our place in it.

But not to view this world with rose-colored glasses in 2021, let's be honest about where we stand some 51 years after the first earth day was commemorated (and an important critical discourse has emerged around that original "blue marble" image, and its embeddedness within the imperial logics of space exploration and American exceptionalism). Here in California, today, Governor Gavin Newsom announced the declaration of major drought emergencies in counties across the state, including Sonoma north of me here in Berkeley, which is unprecedented, in year after year of amplifying wildfire effects caused by climate change. "We overstate the word historic," Newsom said at a press conference held in the arid basin of the dried-out Lake Mendocino, "but this is indeed an historic moment."² Yet the unprecedented has become almost commonplace to anyone who has lived through the past few years here; from 2018's lethal wildfires in Paradise, to that strangest of days only last year when the dome of wildfire smoke was so thick above the bay that it turned San Francisco into an orange, hazy simulacrum of the Blade Runner film franchise (fig. 2).

"It's so apocalyptic!" everyone seemed to say on that day, if you happened to be in the Bay, and the commonplaceness of that expression underscored the persistent ways we continue to cast environmental and planetary collapse in explicitly theological terms, even in the most secular of contexts: this is perhaps the most acute hubris of the Anthropocene, if

¹ See Finis Dunaway, *Natural Visions: The Power of Images in American Environmental Reform* (Chicago University Press, 2005), and Ursula Heise, *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 22-28.

² See Gabrielle Canon, "California Faces another Drought as Lake Beds Turn to Dust," *The Guardian*, May 30, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/may/30/california-drought-water-shortage-photo-essay> (accessed December 15, 2021).

that is the term we want to use to describe our new man-made geological era we are cascading the planet into.³ Apocalypse in its etymological and religious roots, of course, is not so much the penultimate end times but the revelation of things as they are, the uncovering—a revelatory revealing—of things as they actually are. So much of our contemporary environmental rhetoric remains committed to this kind of apocalyptic—a scientific information dump of data that we bury our heads in the sand to avoid cognizing. Rising water levels, shrinking glaciers, increased temperatures, deforestation, the sixth great extinction of species: we all have our own litanies of facts and figures to recite, when we think of this.

We must not flinch away from the ethics of seeing what our species has done and is continuing to wreak on the planet in the name of development and free markets and progress. But is tallying all this information enough? The fact that fifty-one years after Earth Day's inception we are planetarily worse off in many ways than we were decades ago should signal an attenuation of the efficacy of all this data on its own to augment and change opinion in the public sphere. We have continued under a kind of delusion that all we have needed is more rational inputs, the amplification of more scary facts to jolt collective common sense into action. In this public sphere of opinions and legal regimes since the Enlightenment, religion has tended to be sidelined in the conversation, privatized and interiorized, or allowed to engage only under certain constraints: that it be well-behaved, reasonable, not overly emotional, and function as a force of disciplinary self-regulation.

Science was notably on display today, too, during congressional hearings held via Zoom about fossil fuel subsidies and the current Biden infrastructure plan. Facing Congress, the young Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg was eloquent and crystal clear: this is a now or never moment that far transcends the particularities of the Biden administration and will have consequences for generations of children to come. "Listen to the science," pleaded Greta, once again.

³ For a useful survey of the uses (and abuses) of a theologically-derived notion of apocalypse in environmental discourse, see Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 85-107.

If the present is so fraught with consequence, how do we understand the past that brought us to this moment? Perhaps our moment of the Anthropocene even undoes the very idea of history itself; this is the contention of the Indian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, known to many of us here, who argues that we now carry a kind of geological force as an entity capable of self and planetary annihilation—and this lethality undoes the foundational epistemes of history-writing as a field of meaning-making, where humanity's self-agency has occupied center stage. The *geos*—the deep time of the earth, the millennial evolution of species—is now cross-hatched into the history of the human.⁴

In my book, *A Language of Things*, I return to the not so well-known figure of another Swede, Emanuel Swedenborg, who lived between 1688 and 1772, to investigate paths not taken by modernity, and to recover several moments in the emergence of environmental consciousness in a North American context that complicate the normative story about science and the secular. My book is, I hope, less a history of influence—for sticking only with questions of influence keeps us bound to notions of progress, and the telos of a civilizing march of ideas, *forwards ho!*—and more an attempt to rethink paths less travelled by way of insights provided by contemporary thinking in what we sometimes call, loosely, the New Materialisms.

Swedenborg's visionary theology, I argue, came to operate as an agent of re-enchantment for a group of American authors and artists who are associated with the appearance of an environmental imagination in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This “translator of nature into thought,” as the Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, is a forgotten, vital source for a current of proto-ecological ideas that streamed out of Concord Transcendentalism into the broader, rippling circles of conservation and preservation that mark the emergence of both modern American political environmentalism, and forms of non-institutional “dark

⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Winter 2009): 197-222. For a response to Chakrabarty from the perspective of religious studies, see Lisa Sideris, “Anthropocene Convergences: A Report from the Field” in Robert Emmett and Thomas Lekan, eds. “Whose Anthropocene? Revisiting Dipesh Chakrabarty's ‘Four Theses,’” *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society* 2016, no. 2 (Rachel Carson Center, Ludwig Maximilians University of Munich): 89-96.

green” nature religion and spirituality.⁵ But—and this is a big but—Swedenborg's legacy is also embedded within attempts to discern the Anthropocene. His career as a leading Scandinavian natural scientist led to formative contributions in geology, crystallography, and mineralogy. The practical implications of this work, summarized in his mechanistic magnum opus, the *Opera Philosophica et Mineralia* (1733-1734), led to innovations in smelting technology and the extraction of metal ores from the earth. James Watt, inventor of the steam engine in the 1760's—the machine that veritably generated the Industrial Revolution—was but one of several savants who adapted and used material from Swedenborg's *Opera Philosophica*. Watt's steam engine has been cited as a harbinger marking the advent of the Anthropocene and our carbon-based civilization. Swedenborg, thus, stands not only as a natural philosopher of the Enlightenment whose ideas are constitutive to modernity's mechanism, but as a mystic, he also stands as the creator of an organicist theosophy that imbued later forms of Romantic ecology that were resistant to the Industrial Revolution. These antinomies in Swedenborg are paradoxes we continue to live with today.

For Emerson, John Muir, Sarah Orne Jewett, and the other writers and painters who are discussed in my book, Swedenborg's ideas enabled an immanent cosmology that made nature “vibrant,” in Jane Bennett's sense of the term, an enchanted “language of things,” as it was coined by Sampson Reed, an early Swedenborgian Romantic.⁶ In some cases, to engage with this tutelary language of nature, to attempt to descry and translate it into essays, poems, and paintings that would all adequately “correspond”—a signal term for Swedenborg, as we shall see—between inner and outer, between the fact of feeling in perception and the phenomenal richness of experience outside of ourselves, inculcated early

⁵ See the discussion of Swedenborg and the Swedenborgians in Catherine Albanese, *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonquin Indians to the New Age* (Chicago University Press, 1990), 110-134. See also Bron Taylor's discussion of Emerson, Muir, et al, as foundational religious figures in *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 42-54.

⁶ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); the title of Bennett's more recent *Influx and Efflux: Writing Up with Walt Whitman* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020) paraphrases a moment in Whitman's “Song of Myself” (1855) that draws on Swedenborg's notion of immanent flows of influx and efflux between the spiritual and the natural.

American environmental impulses to conserve and preserve.⁷ Flawed as much of these Romantic nature movements now seem in critical hindsight, reifying as they did an arbitrary divide between nature and culture, it nevertheless valuably underscores the symbiotic relationship between the space of aesthetics and the political realm of legal action. The weak governmental response to the present environmental crisis is, if anything, a colossal failure of the imagination—of the imaginary, to be more precise, as a collective social practice.⁸ We sorely need not only better international climate legislation, but more kinds of art and literature that can disrupt and challenge our habits of thinking and broaden the capacity to re-imagine relationships with the natural world.

But not just any kind of art would seem capable of doing this. We are currently deluged by various forms of self-labeled environmental art and eco-literature that, much like certain strands of environmentalist political discourse, operate under the sign of urgency with a kind of didactic, ethical imperative that views the essence of the aesthetic experience to be one of receiving more facts and figures, more apocalyptic doom and gloom to better shock the complacent public into some kind of action. This approach in contemporary environmental aesthetics is a sort of “slap upside the head,” in the words of the philosopher Timothy Morton, “throwing out factoids and statistics in information dump mode...making ecological experience, ecological politics and ecological philosophy utterly impossible.”⁹ Morton has been keen to emphasize how the function of art is ultimately not to create a kind of one-to-one correlation with facticity, but to rather open up strange and ambiguous relationships that decenter our sense of ourselves, and who we are. “When I love an artwork,” writes Morton,

⁷ The “fact of feeling” turn-of-phrase is indebted to Joan Richardson, whose work on Swedenborg in American literature is foundational for my *Language of Things*. Richardson, *A Natural History of Pragmatism: The Fact of Feeling from Jonathan Edwards to Gertrude Stein* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), esp. 7-8.

⁸ Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987); Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁹ Timothy Morton, *All Art is Ecological* (London: Penguin Books, 2021), 23.

it is as if I am in some strange kind of mind meld with it, something like telepathy, even though I ‘know very well’ (or do I?) that this thing I am appreciating isn’t conscious, isn’t sentient, isn’t even alive...it’s like finding something in me that isn’t me: there is a feeling in my inner space that I didn’t cook up myself, and it seems to be sent to me from this ‘object’ over there on the gallery wall.¹⁰

In spite of Morton’s own professed antipathy here for the “violence” of monotheisms that he locates in what he calls the foundational “agro-logistics” of civilization with their transcendental sky-gods (from the Babylonians onwards), these drifting, weird states of (inter)subjectivity that an artwork can open up within us end up sounding an awful lot like some of the “weirder” dimensions of religious experience, especially as influentially characterized by William James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1903)—a (still) foundational text for the comparative study of religions and twentieth-century religious psychology, penned by someone who happened, perhaps not so very uncoincidentally, to be the son of one of the most notable American readers and interpreters of Swedenborg in the 19th century, Henry James Sr.¹¹ The states of ineffability, transience, and noetic feeling which James locates at the heart of the mystic’s transporting ecstasy are akin to the decentering strangeness of the (environmental) art experience delineated by Morton. Perhaps rather than badgering our guilty selves with data dumps of more bad news (though, certainly, we still need an anchoring of the statistical and projective provided by the frontiers of climate science, to be sure), this opening-up, transformative feeling enabled by certain kinds of art—our creaturely connections and felt relations to the more-than-human world that draw us out of our selves—is part of what needs to be done when we face the climate calamity and cognize its claims of ethical urgency. Not so much more of a *doing*, in the sense of creating more busying and hurrying, with the capitalistic logics of

¹⁰ Ibid., 95.

¹¹ William James’s influential typologies of mystical experience are found in the 15th and 16th lectures of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Routledge, 2004), 294-333. On the impact of Swedenborgian ideas on William James and the subsequent development of Pragmatism, see Paul Jerome Croce, “Mankind’s Own Providence: From Swedenborgian Philosophy of Use to William James’s Pragmatism,” *Transactions of the Charles Pierce Society* 43, no. 3 (2007): 490-508.

(hyper)productivity and ensuing forms of exhaustion, as the philosopher Byung-Chul Han has diagnosed, but a slowing down in order to open up ignored conduits of feeling and affect.¹² Art can be a mode of getting entangled, in other words an aesthetic *tarrying*—what multispecies theorist Donna Haraway has called a means for “staying with the trouble” of the Anthropocene (or, as Haraway prefers to call it, the Cthulucene).¹³ Considering some of the strange, queer baggage that Swedenborg inevitably brings to the table—his conversations with angels, the telepathy, the trances, and other forms of mystical ecstasy—these might actually, from this perspective, end up offering viable points of departure for an American tradition of nature writing and ecological aesthetics.

Some of these antinomies and paradoxes found in Swedenborg echo in the figure my book opens and closes with—Johnny Appleseed, and Appleseed’s more recent invocation in fiction by Richard Powers and the graphic novelists Noah van Scriver and Paul Buhle.¹⁴ Towards the end of the eighteenth century, John Chapman, aka “Johnny Appleseed,” began his westward peregrination towards the Mississippi through the still-then frontier of the Ohio River valley. A committed pacifist and vegetarian, dressed in motley homespun rags and reputedly walking through the rough woods in his bare feet, Appleseed came to be revered by local native Americans as a medicine man of great power. In addition to leaving his namesake seeds at the homes of various families he would stay with, Chapman occasionally left behind books and pamphlets by and about Swedenborg. “Good news, right fresh from Heaven!” Chapman is said to have announced to the strangers he met on the frontier, as he excitedly shared the pages of Swedenborg’s mystical theology with them. In the earliest known visual representation of Chapman known to exist (fig. 3), a drawing from an 1862 history of Midwestern pioneers, Chapman stands barefoot in the woods, his left hand cradling a young apple sapling. Tucked into his homespun overalls, a large bulky book peaks above the waistline—

¹² Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society* (Stanford University Press, 2015).

¹³ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

¹⁴ See Richard Powers, *The Overstory: A Novel* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019); also see Paul Buhle and Noah van Sciver, *Johnny Appleseed: Green Spirit of the Frontier* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2017).

seemingly incongruous with the rustic character of everything else in the image that denotes a frontier or wilderness context. This book is likely meant to denote one of Chapman's beloved Swedenborg volumes, already by this point an indelible part of the growing Appleseed legend. As the writer Michael Pollan puts it, Appleseed's "Swedenborgian beliefs must have lit up the whole landscape—the rivers and trees, the bears and wolves and crows, even the mosquitoes—with a divine glow...Chapman's mystical teachings veer about as close to pantheism and nature worship as Christianity has ventured."¹⁵

My book attempts to trace a set of ideas that Appleseed and others encountered in Swedenborg which, I argue, resonate with certain strands of the so-called New Materialisms afoot in contemporary philosophy and the Environmental Humanities today. The immanent influxes and flows of energy and divine love that animated the landscape, seen through a Swedenborgian scrim, lent an agency and animacy to nature and the other-than-human world came to glow with a kind of numinous quality, producing strange affects of wonder and awe. While this could lend itself to privileging a site of individualized spiritualized perception—we might think of the famous moment in Ralph Waldo Emerson's inaugural *Nature* essay (1836), where he becomes a transparent eyeball on the Boston commons, part or particle of God, a moment satirized by his friend Christopher Pearse Cranch in this funny sketch (fig. 4)—it could also form shared imaginaries about places and spaces that led to critical legal interventions on behalf of an imperiled nature. We find this acutely in the entanglement of Swedenborgian ideas around the emergence of the Sierra Club in the 1890's, perhaps the first, for better and for worse, modern environmental organization in the United States—pictured here, for example, is John Muir's annotations to a Swedenborgian text about the spiritual semiotics of the natural world, a desire to grasp a language of things, not of man (fig. 5). John Muir's close friend, the Swedenborgian landscape painter William Keith, in whose painting studio the Sierra Club has some of its first meetings, painted the so-called wilderness of California in his canvases in a way analogous to Muir's wilderness prose: imbuing the landscape with

¹⁵ Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's Eye View of the World* (New York: Random House, 2002), 35.

spiritual revelation and a numinousness. This painting was one of several by Keith that Muir displayed in the United States Capitol building during congressional hearings about the Hetch Hetchy Valley; whether that spectacular valley was to be dammed for its water or kept as a national park and part of Yosemite (fig. 6). The valley was ultimately condemned and dammed, of course, and the failure of these spiritualized landscapes to adequately testify before Congress perhaps indicts the inefficacy of arguments about beauty in our environmental politics. We are not to save the planet by beautifying it.

These paintings, and Muir's ecstatic prose extolling the wilderness of Hetch Hetchy and Yosemite that accompany them, beautiful as many still find them today, also exhibit a serious ideological blind spot: an inability, literally, to envision the lives of indigenous peoples that had called these areas home for millennia. When Muir traipsed into the Yosemite area for the first time—a trip later recounted in his environmental classic, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (1911)—he felt he had discovered a lost Eden, a landscape that seemed to map the biblical garden and paradise so important for the Judeo-Christian tradition. Muir could not see the careful ways the Miwok Awaneechee had practiced proscribed burns and forest gardening there for generations—if it seemed like a paradisaical and manicured lawn, it was because it was, in a sense. Instead, Muir's early encounters in the Sierra of indigenous peoples followed the typical racism of his day: he couldn't see, he wrote, how they could "belong" in the landscape.

My book is thus, I hope, also an anatomy of some of the dangers that inhered to this Romantic language of things dilating out of Swedenborgian theology, how its spiritualizing vectors that sanctified the landscape could also cloak, and in some cases, abet and construct the genocidal violence of the colonial frontier. While these paintings and the early Sierra club writings are important moments for understanding how cultural imaginaries could be augmented and changed by new spiritual attitudes towards the natural world and a resistance towards seeing nature simply in terms of material extraction, or as a "dead and disenchanted world," à la Max Weber, they are also inevitably caught up in what W.J.T. Mitchell has

called the “dreamwork of imperialism” in the images and aesthetics of the American west.¹⁶

When we acknowledge this entanglement, what do we do, in our contemporary moment, when we find ourselves lured and beckoned by the beauty of the natural world? While my project is very much the province of literary history and ecocriticism, we might cite the oft-referenced data provided by the Pew Center on the growing demographic of the spiritual but not religious (SBNR) and the Nones—who might be disenchanted by organized religion but still find a form of meaningful spiritual presence outdoors, in nature. Here along the beaches and mountains of Northern California, when we find ourselves immersed and transported by our setting, is this simply the helpless imposition of a cultural construct we are to be suspicious of, or put “scare quotes” around? For a long time, aesthetic experience in the west has been a container for what was deemed impermissible by organized religion—excessive states of ecstasy, wonder, sublime terror, the emotional extremities of mysticism—and it is no surprise that a heterodox liminal figure like Swedenborg found his most immediate reception not in the halls of traditional theology and religious establishments, but rather among a generation of young Romantic artists and writers, like the rebellious William Blake, who wanted to buck the deadening yoke of an Enlightenment Rationalist project. With these European germinated ideas transplanted to an American soil, how do these spiritual technologies for seeing and ways of feeling navigate a continent so riven by slavery and settler-colonial violence? Can we ascribe to nature anything like the spiritual, its panoramas and the picturesque, without some hedging disclaimer, and sensitivity to the land amid still very serious questions of appropriation?

Perhaps. I’m hoping, at the least, that my book might suggest some lost opportunities and missed conversations and create a place for a kind of speculative historiography, or contrapuntal what if’s. What if John Muir hadn’t cavalierly dismissed the Mono Piate with casual racism, or the Awawanechee, and sat down to learn from them about their plant wisdom and forest cultivation? It might have worked to undo the human

¹⁶ W.J.T. Mitchell, “Imperial Landscape,” in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago University Press, 2002), 9-10.

versus culture dialectic that runs through what we call the “trouble with wilderness” in Muir and other post-Transcendentalist works. After all, the concept of the spiritual is not exclusively the domain of the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation and its post-secular reverberations into the present. Much contemporary indigenous art and cinematography is premised on a non-western understanding of the land as alive, filled with agency and invisible spiritual presences. Although I do not discuss this work in my book, I would like to supplement the spiritualized landscape paintings by Keith and George Inness that I address in my book with work by the contemporary artist Francisco Huichaqueo Pérez. I want to give a shout-out here to my brilliant former student, Dr. Yohana Agra Junker, who is now teaching at Claremont School of Theology, for introducing me to this material: another case of how writing my book and the thinking around it was so enriched by the space of the GTU classroom and various conversations on Holy Hill. Pérez is from the Mapuche, an indigenous group in Chile and Argentina that has faced horrible conditions under colonialism, continuing up to the present day. Huichaqueo Pérez’s films and art often deliberately attempt to inculcate, in his words, “the spiritual instinct before reason.”¹⁷ The forests, rivers, and landscapes that populate his films are haunted both by the horrors of colonial violence, but also ghostly energies and often fleeting moments of beauty—flowers drifting on the surface of water, figures dancing against the silhouette of a blue sky.

In the end, if we are to continue translating Emanuel Swedenborg’s “language of things” out of its Romantic eighteenth- and nineteenth-century contexts into our contemporary moment of planetary crisis and climate change, my book wishes for ways this can be done in deeper and better dialogue with the visions and voices that come from the ground where his work was once sprinkled, like Johnny Appleseed’s plant seeds. Appleseed’s Swedenborgianism is part of his enduring weirdness, constituting a sort of Americana that thrives in its liminal relationship to mainstream orthodoxies—be they cultural, economic, or religious. For the

¹⁷ Stephen N. Borunda, “Mapuche Cosmvision and the Cinematic Voyage: An Interview with Francisco Huichaqueo Pérez,” *Media+Environment* 1, no. 2 (November 22, 2019): <https://mediaenviron.org/article/10788-mapuche-cosmovision-and-the-cinematic-voyage-an-interview-with-filmmaker-francisco-huichaqueo-perez-english-version> (accessed December 10, 2021).

bright and bold cover of Buhle and van Sciver's graphic novel *Johnny Appleseed: Green Spirit of the Frontier*, van Sciver has sketched Appleseed lounging on the forest floor, avidly reading a book—again, as with the first image of Appleseed from 1862, an indication of the centrality of Swedenborg's texts for Appleseed's nature-mysticism (fig. 7). This more recent literary instantiation of Appleseed presents his vision as “part of an appeal to what Lincoln called the ‘better angels’ of an American destiny,” as Buhle puts in the Introduction:

Chapman's imagined society would foreswear violence in any form, look upon all people as equals but also the animal kingdom as fellow creatures deserving kindness and dignity. It would be far less materialistic, and its members would wish to meet nature more as wanderers than conquerors.¹⁸

The vestiges of Appleseed's ecological presence in the Midwest also provide the crucial backdrop for key characters in Richard Powers's saga of environmental activism, the much-lauded *The Overstory* (2018), which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2019. After undergoing a near-death experience where tree-beings appear to have been summoned into her consciousness, Olivia Vandergriff embarks on a quixotic road trip to give her young, drifting life more meaning. She unexpectedly finds it in the parking lot of a giant Walmart-like box store in Indiana while sleeping in her car:

It's Indiana, 1990. Here, five years is a generation, fifty is archeology, and anything older shades off into legend. And yet, places remember what people forget. The parking lot she sleeps in was once an orchard, its trees planted by a gentle, crazed Swedenborgian who wandered through these parts in rags and a tin pot cap, preaching the New Heaven and extinguishing campfires to keep from killing bugs. A crackpot saint who practiced abstinence while supplying four states with enough fermentable apple mash to keep every pioneer American from nine to ninety half crooked for decades.¹⁹

¹⁸ Buhle and van Sciver, *Johnny Appleseed*, “Introduction” (no page number).

¹⁹ Powers, *The Overstory*, 161.

Sitting in her bedraggled car, the spirits of Appleseed's trees manifest themselves to Olivia as "beings of light," in a moment of lyrical transfiguration:

They're everywhere, unbearable beauty, the way they were the night her heart stopped. They pass into and through her body. They don't scold her for forgetting the message they gave her. They simply infuse her again. Her joy at their return spills over, and she starts to cry. They speak no words out loud. Nothing so crude as that. They aren't even *they*. They're part of her, kin in some way that isn't yet clear. Emissaries of creation—things she has seen and known in this world, experiences lost, bits of knowledge ignored, family branches lopped off that she must recover and revive. Dying has given her new eyes.²⁰

This crucial moment in the novel suggests how the roots of modern American environmental activism were often grounded in older forms of religious epiphany—moments of radical self-transformation and conversion. Olivia's vision is the fully mystical, apophatic sort of experience that William James anatomized in the *Varieties of Religious Experience*, where an encounter with the numinous anchors a noetic truth felt and cognized in the body. By placing Appleseed's seedlings as these transcendent "beings of light" that lead to Olivia's subsequent involvement in tree-sits and acts of (un)civil disobedience, Powers indicates how Swedenborg's entanglement with American forms of dark green nature spirituality can produce tangible actions and measurable results in the wider public sphere.

A Language of Things traces a diverse body of writers and artists who followed in the originary wake of Appleseed and, like him, found within Swedenborg's immanent theology the seeds for their environmental imagination. They did not always transpose Swedenborg's correspondential theories or models of influx into the same keys, but they demonstrate, nevertheless, a consistency of attention to rendering the natural world and the other-than-human in numinous forms—as "vibrant

²⁰ Ibid., 163.

matter” (Jane Bennett)—in ways that could counter the prevailing, growing assumption that nature was simply a bunch of random stuff, “out there,” waiting to be extracted into the profit-based logic of markets and emergent global capitalism. Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Muir, William Keith, George Inness, and Sarah Orne Jewett all certainly held different views about modernity (and how to make money through their art or writing); and yet, when my book’s chapters are collectively taken together, I hope their collective aesthetic engagements with Swedenborg form a consistent pattern around the vitality of what William James would later call “the religious sentiment,” demonstrating its rich capacity for filling and shaping environmental imagination.

Bibliography

- Albanese, Catherine. *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonquin Indians to the New Age*. Chicago University Press, 1990.
- Bennett, Jane. *Influx and Efflux: Writing Up with Walt Whitman*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020.
- . *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Borunda, Stephen N. “Mapuche Cosmovision and the Cinematic Voyage: An Interview with Francisco Huichaqueo Pérez.” *Media+Environment* 1, no. 2 (November 22, 2019): <https://mediaenviron.org/article/10788-mapuche-cosmovision-and-the-cinematic-voyage-an-interview-with-filmmaker-francisco-huichaqueo-perez-english-version> (accessed December 10, 2021).
- Buhle, Paul, and Noah van Sciver. *Johnny Appleseed: Green Spirit of the Frontier*. Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2017.
- Canon, Gabrielle. “California Faces another Drought as Lake Beds Turn to Dust.” *The Guardian*, May 30, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/may/30/california-drought-water-shortage-photo-essay> (accessed December 15, 2021).
- Castoriadis, Cornelius. *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. “The Climate of History: Four Theses.” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Winter 2009): 197-222.
- Croce, Paul Jerome. “Mankind’s Own Providence: From Swedenborgian Philosophy of Use to William James’s Pragmatism.” *Transactions of the Charles Pierce Society* 43, no. 3 (2007): 490-508.
- Dunaway, Finis. *Natural Visions: The Power of Images in American Environmental Reform*. Chicago University Press, 2005.
- Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

- Han, Byung-Chul. *The Burnout Society*. Stanford University Press, 2015.
- Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulucene*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016.
- Heise, Ursula. *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
- James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. "Imperial Landscape." In *Landscape and Power*, edited by W.J.T. Mitchell, 5-34. Chicago University Press, 2002.
- Morton, Timothy. *All Art is Ecological*. London: Penguin Books, 2021.
- Pollan, Michael. *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's Eye View of the World*. New York: Random House, 2002.
- Powers, Richard. *The Overstory: A Novel*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019.
- Reed, Sampson. *Observations on the Growth of the Mind*. Chicago: Meyers & Chandler, 1867.
- Richardson, Joan. *A Natural History of Pragmatism: The Fact of Feeling from Jonathan Edwards to Gertrude Stein*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Sideris, Lisa. "Anthropocene Convergences: A Report from the Field." In Robert Emmett and Thomas Lekan, eds. "Whose Anthropocene? Revisiting Dipesh Chakrabarty's 'Four Theses,'" *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society* 2016, no. 2 (Rachel Carson Center, Ludwig Maximilians University of Munich): 89-96.
- Taylor, Bron. *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010.
- Taylor, Charles. *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.



Figure 1. *The Blue Marble*, Nasa/Apollo 17 Crew (1972). Photograph. Public Domain (Wikimedia CCO)



Figure 2. *View of Oakland from Panoramic Hill*. September 9, 2020. Photography by the Author



JOHNNY APPLESEED.

Figure 3. Drawing of John Chapman, aka Johnny Appleseed, from *A History of the Pioneer and Modern Times of Ashland County* (1862). Public Domain (Wikimedia CCO)

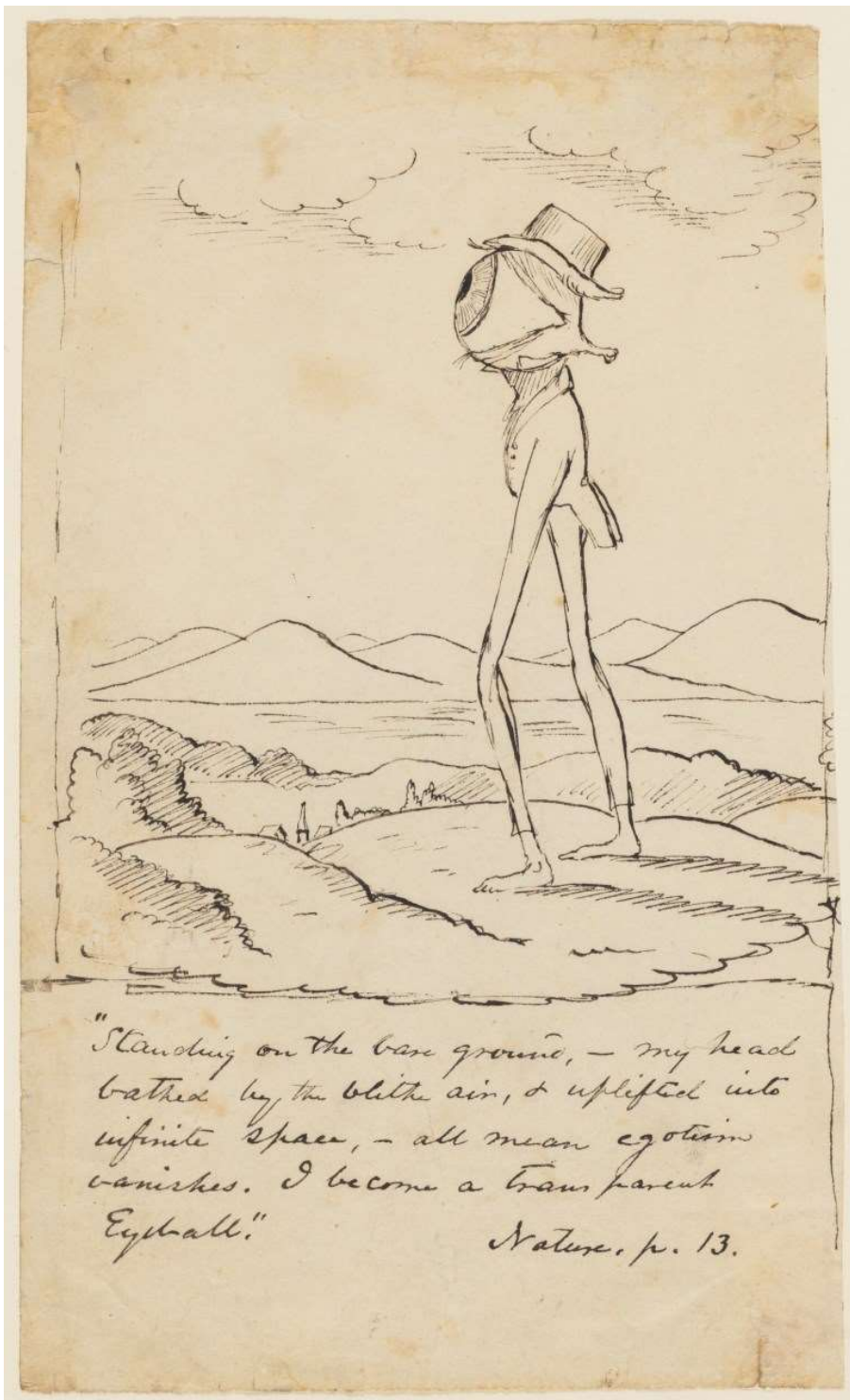


Figure 4. Christopher Pearse Cranch, *Standing on the Bare Ground, - my head bathed by the blithe air, & uplifted into infinite space, - all mean egotism has vanished. I become a Transparent Eyeball* [caricature after Emerson's *Nature*] (c. 1837-39), from *Illustrations of the New Philosophy*. Houghton Library, Harvard University. MS Am 1506. Public Domain

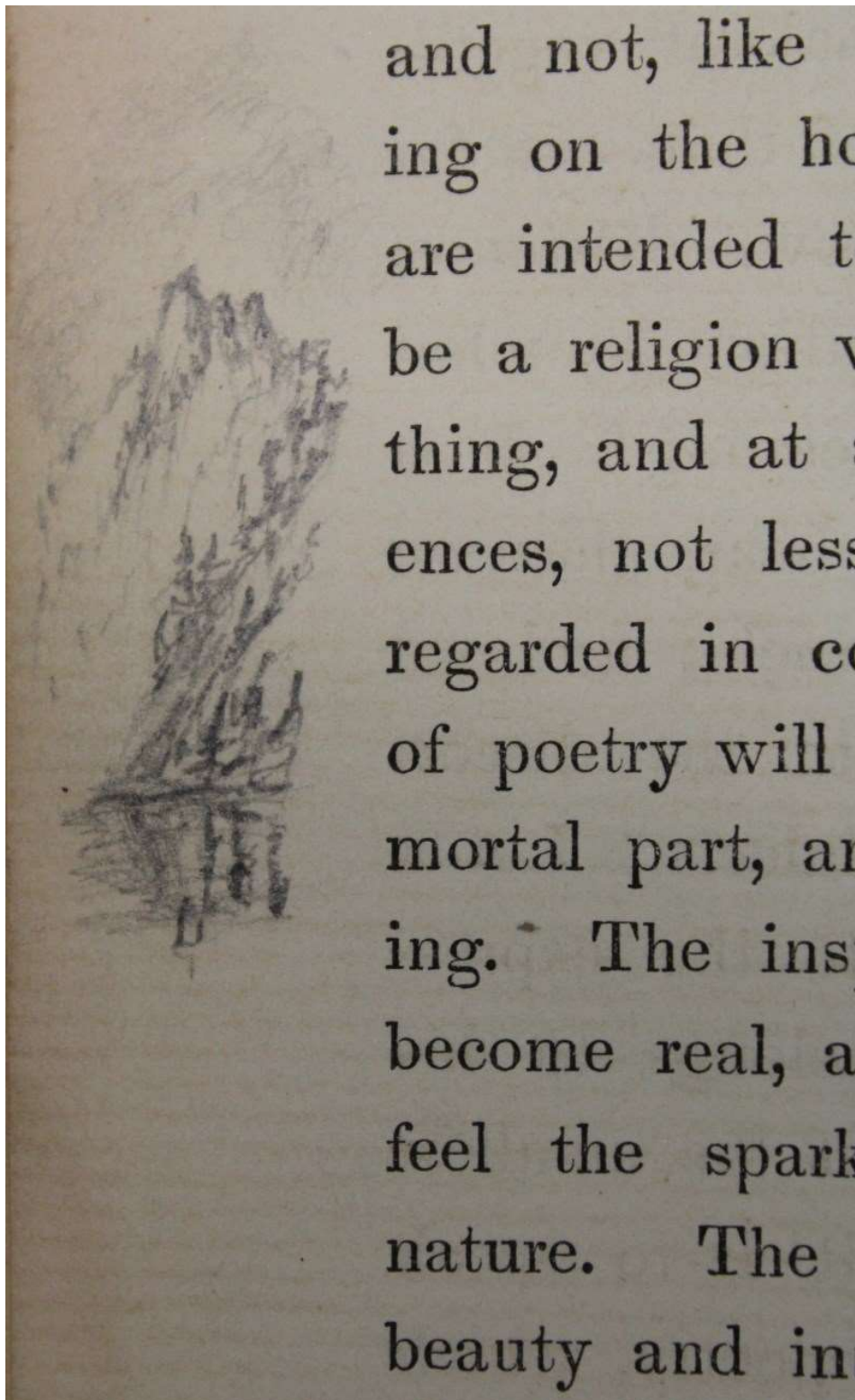


Figure 5. John Muir's marginalia to Sampson Reed, *Observations on the Growth of the Mind* (Chicago: Meyers & Chandler, 1867). Collection of the John Muir Archive, University of the Pacific. Photograph by the Author



Figure 6. William Keith, *Hetch Hetchy Side Canyon I*, ca. 1908. Oil on canvas, 55.8 cm (22 in) x 71.1 cm (27.9 in). Collection of the De Young Museum, Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco. Public Domain (Wikimedia CCO)

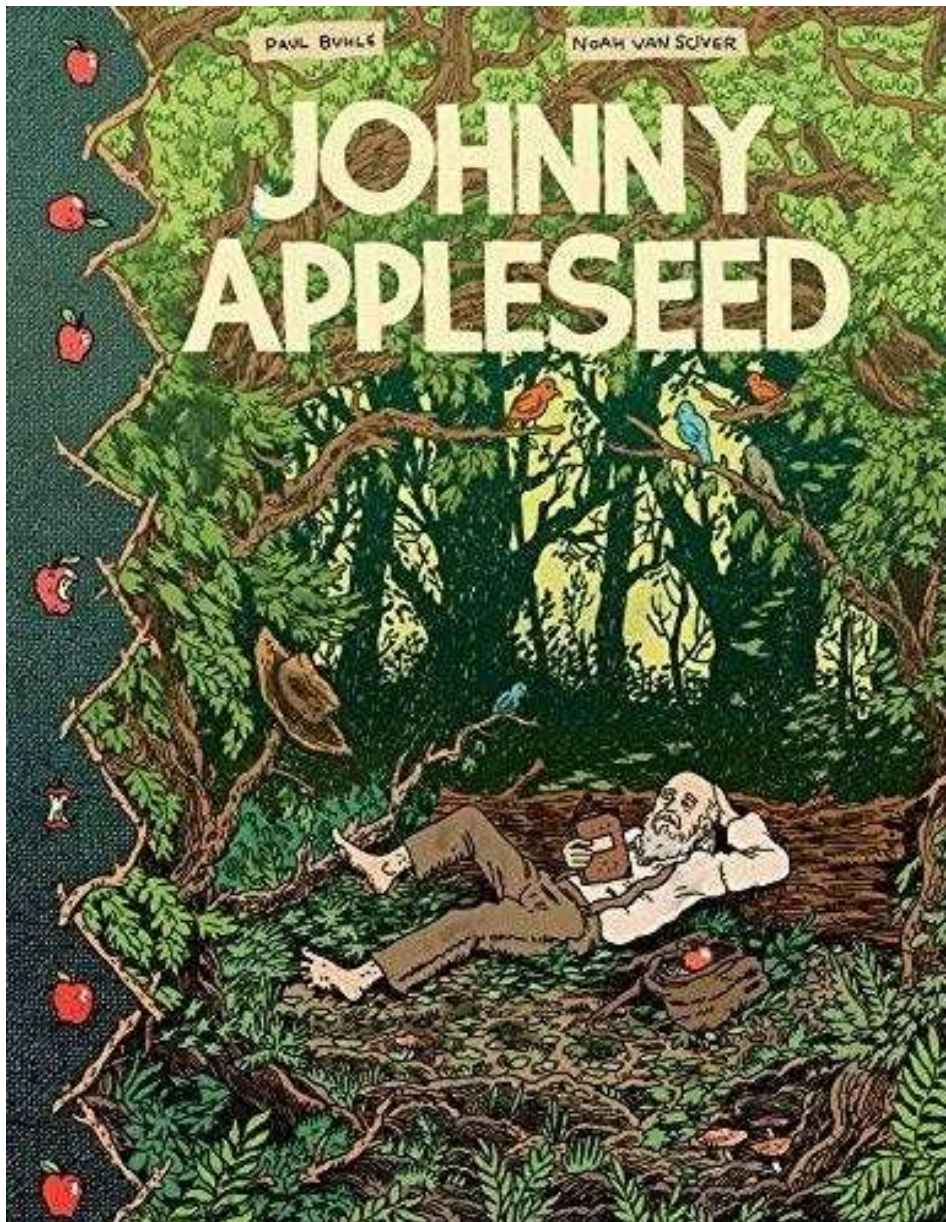


Figure 7. Noah Van Sciver, Titlepage to *Johnny Appleseed: Green Spirit of the Frontier* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2017). (Image reproduced with kind permission of Paul Buhle and Noah van Sciver)