



GTU

Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology

Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology

Volume 7, Issue 1

ISSN 2380-7458

Book Review

A Language of Things: Emanuel Swedenborg and the American Environmental Imagination

by Devin P. Zuber

Author(s): Jeremy Sorgen

Source: *Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology* 7, no. 1 (2021): 193-199.

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.

Nussbaum, and Mosha to crystallize “the goal of education as nurturing the humanity of the students and by extension humanizing the world we inhabit so that life—both human and nonhuman—can flourish” (203).

While there are some portions of the book that could use some ironing out in case of a future reprint—for instance, overlapping material that becomes redundant at times (127), as well as a section that inadvertently associates the Kakuma and Daadab refugee camps with Nigeria even though they are in Kenya (120)—these are ultimately minor issues in an otherwise exceptional work. On the whole, Hinga has given the global community a priceless gift and immense resource in this seminal text—one that will hopefully go a long way in informing best practices in seeking to harness deep theological scholarship as a tool for much-needed social transformation, both in Africa and beyond.

Mwaambi G. Mbûûi is a PhD student in the Theology & Ethics Department at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA, with research interests around constructive African public theology, liberative ethics, African sage/folk philosophy, African Traditional Religion/s and the arts as conduits of positive social transformation.

- Δ -

A Language of Things:

Emanuel Swedenborg and the American Environmental Imagination

By: **Devin P. Zuber**

Publisher: **University of Virginia Press (Charlottesville, Virginia, U.S.A.)**

Year: **2019, Pages: 266 pp.**

ISBN: **9780813943510**

Price: **\$29.50**

Reviewed by: **Jeremy Sorgen, University of California, Berkeley**

Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology, Vol. 7, No. 1

© 2021 by the Graduate Theological Union

At a moment when the American conservation movement is grappling with its ties to and possible complicity with environmental injustices and the still nascent environmental humanities are searching for ways to foster a more-than-human appreciation for landscapes of all kinds, Devin Zuber offers us a deep theological history of the American environmental imaginary in his book *A Language of Things*. Most strikingly, he traces the environmental thought of such luminaries as Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Muir, Sarah Orne Jewett, and George Inness to the bizarre yet electrifying theological visions of an eighteenth-century Swedish mystic, Emanuel Swedenborg, who nonetheless casts an outsized influence over nineteenth-century American environmental arts and letters.

A Language of Things establishes several familiar tropes of American environmental thought in Swedenborg's seminal writings and persuasively argues for their relevance to contemporary debates in posthumanism. For our constructive purposes, Zuber demonstrates how Swedenborg's unique combination of capacious theological imagination and scientific sensibility offers resources that exceed the limitations of current eco-theologies and new materialisms. As certain environmental legacies are being challenged and others are being built, Zuber's incisive and well-balanced ecocritical study of the animating spirits of American environmentalism will give point and direction to these important debates.

Swedenborg himself is an enigma. Scholars have not known quite what to do with the rationalist savant who made several considerable scientific discoveries and innovations in the fields of chemistry, metallurgy, and cosmogony before making a radical turn, late in life, to a surprising blend of ontotheological speculation and outlandish nature science. The result was, to say the least, heretical. Swedenborg reported casual chats in the afternoon with angels and demons, while following sophisticated excursions into soteriology and eschatology. This led to a distinct and esoteric kind of Neoplatonism that distinguishes him from the cool rationalism of his younger contemporary, Kant, as well as the more vibrant theologies of animists and new materialists. The resulting panentheism, as Zuber notes, so evenly splits the difference between transcendent divines and inert material (which can in fact be interpreted as cartoon inversions of each other) that it is too delectable not to ask: what would have happened

had Swedenborg been ascendent instead of Kant in theophilosophical discourse over the past two centuries? What are the possible entailments of this alternative Enlightenment?

A Language of Things takes these questions on a whirl through the pantheon of Swedenborg's best-known nineteenth-century intellectual and artistic offspring: Ralph Waldo Emerson; John Muir; painters William Keith and George Inness; and novelist Sarah Orne Jewett. Zuber relates how each seems to be inspired by Swedenborg's novel approach to the outdoor divine, where forest groves and alpine meadows are not only a feast for the senses, but also a place to refine one's senses and commune with higher orders of being.

It is no coincidence that they are artists rather than intellectuals merely who would appropriate Swedenborg's work. Aesthetics remains a space of play and possibility, of experiment and empirical indeterminacy, of rude and protean forms—all that comes prior to the march of reason and its distillations of data into science. This penchant for aesthetics—for visionary and poetic excess even—is part of what made Swedenborg ripe for proto-pragmatists like Emerson, who cared less for system than for discovery and invention. In a pragmatic sense, in the free play that ignites what Charles Sanders Peirce called “abduction,” it is wrong to counterpose Swedenborg's scientific and mystic periods. Swedenborg's later and much derided speculations on divine matters only probe deeper into what his early research could not wring from nature through rationalist methods.

Much of *A Language of Things* also works in this aesthetic mode, finding resonances and tracing rays of relation, filling gaps in the written record with hints of marginalia, informed conjecture, and just-so stories. Like biblical verse, the gaps become spaces of intrigue, creative connection and imagination, until the stories acquire a luminous grandeur. This is not to deny what is undeniably rich ecocritical history reflecting immense learning across disciplinary fields. I mention Zuber's aesthetics to draw attention to what might be otherwise overlooked among the studious details.

It is difficult, I am sure, to convey what must have come as revelation to the nineteenth-century forebears of the American conservation movement. To this end, Zuber's book displays a remarkable performative

aspect, not only tracing lineages and unearthing subtle connections, but also preparing the reader's mind to conjure the ethos of the moment and to find their own correspondences. The term "correspondence" is the lynchpin of Swedenborgian theology which connotes the transmutation of nature into a kind of sacred script, a tableau accessible to minds that are properly attuned. Similarly, Zuber paints a tableau of Swedenborg's nineteenth-century "ecology of influence" that helps us understand both what made his thinking such fertile soil for emerging environmental thought as well as the aesthetic origins that continue to be, as Eugene Hargrove points out, its lasting legacy today. Sometimes Zuber helps his reader along by digging into words, exposing their Latinate or, as the case may be, Nordic origins in order to capture more completely the range of resonances. Or he meditates, ekphrastic-like, on a painting by Inness of a heron taking flight at dusk or at dawn, giving the reader a feel for "visual reenchantment" that begins to breakdown form and image on the way to more spiritual vision (162). These episodes, woven into the narrative, set up their own correspondences, sharpening the reader's acuity the way the master craftsman sharpens their tools. The caress of images and words, the attention and lingering care, effectively communicates a foretaste of augmented perception, which is the key to what Swedenborg's early American readers found so profoundly fascinating in his prose. And it is today what environmental ethicists expend so much of their labor trying to evoke.

Against this backdrop of esoteric and ecstatic ontotheological vision (at once empirical and other-worldly) and its imaginative appropriations in American arts and letters, *A Language of Things* distills the social-cultural setting in which American environmentalism first took wing. A major upshot of the work is that it lays bare both the religious and aesthetic beginnings of the U.S.-based environmental movement, the strange hotbed of intellectual and artistic ferment in which the ecological conscience, toward which many still aspire, was formed. Pre-Leopold, pre-Carson, and even pre-Thoreau, Whitman, and Emerson, *A Language of Things* traces the bizarre genealogy of much mainstream environmental consternation back to a lone Swedish mystic whose singular brand of non-institutional worship has scarcely been appreciated.

Zuber avers that Swedenborg offers untapped resources for recent developments in posthumanist thought. Correspondences are moments of affinity and ecstatic relation between the human and more-than-human, yet also exceed the discrete individuality that materialisms often connote. Quick to find moments of exotic kinship among Swedenborg's interpreters, Zuber argues convincingly that Swedenborg's panentheism affords points of departure for changes in ontological priority. And where vibrant matter is concerned, Zuber finds new possibilities by querying where this vibrancy might come from. Indeed, there is something still mechanically Newtonian when the cosmos reduces to actants and their relations, even when these actants tend to oscillate. A turn toward Swedenborg's notion of "influx," the ceaseless flux of the divine through nature, may offer more ontological flexibility than "matter" or even "assemblage" ever could.

These engagements with posthumanist thought, however, remain understated, suggestive rather than analytically drawn out. Although the different ontotheological starting points of Swedenborgian thought seem initially promising, Zuber refrains from demonstrating how an enterprising political or environmental theorist might profit by adopting these conceits. On the one hand, this may seem like a minor point since it does not detract from the ecocritical substance of the study, which is to exposit Swedenborg for the American environmental imagination that emerged in his wake. Yet Zuber's relatively thin engagement with the question of how Swedenborg's thought can contribute to current debates in the environmental humanities leaves the broader value of Zuber's study undecided.

This problem is compounded when we recognize that the American conservation movement to which Swedenborg contributed is increasingly contested terrain among environmentalists as a particularly white form of environmentalism. While Zuber underscores complexities in Swedenborg's own environmentalism, describing how for example the family fortune that enabled Swedenborg to devote himself to the scientific occupations of the leisure class was built on copper extraction at Falun, Zuber never entertains whether this biographical detail troubles the status of Swedenborgian-style environmentalism.

Swedenborgian environmentalism sustains a close connection with environmental aesthetics. From the rugged wanderings of John Muir in the

Sierra Nevada to Aldo Leopold's famous conversion moment after shooting a wolf, ecological consciousness arises as a function of the aesthetic beauty of wilderness, a beauty often untouched by human hands. Commentators have begun to question the nature/culture divide and other features of the distinct cultural imaginary that this environmental ethic enshrines. There is, however, the practical question about whether this basic recipe for change in environmental outlook works. What resources of hope and resistance does environmental aesthetics offer in response to industrial capitalism? It strikes me that, for Swedenborg, there was no contradiction between years crawling through the space of extractive capitalism *par excellence* and the environmental sensibility he would later develop. Perhaps then a complete appreciation of his legacy would include discussion of the aesthetic limits of mainstream conservationist ethics.

A Language of Things makes an invaluable addition to understanding the aesthetic origins of the American conservation movement, yet it should make us question if and how aesthetics offers us the path to environmental salvation. One problem for aesthetics is how to appreciate what we do not find beautiful that nonetheless holds ecosystemic value. A problem that is more interesting still, I think, is whether environmental ethics, insofar as it relies on aesthetics, truly offers political society the balm it so desperately needs.

Zuber begins his book with Walter Benjamin's parable about Klee's angel caught in the crosswinds of history. Zuber introduces this allegory to buttress a point about the ethical demand of writing under the inexorable conditions of the Anthropocene. It might also be worth recalling another of Benjamin's clairvoyant warnings when in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" he suggests that fascism works by aestheticizing our own destruction. My question is this: should revealing the complicity, or at least the congruence, of extractivism and Swedenborgian aesthetics give us reason to repudiate environmental imaginaries and the associated ethics that Swedenborg inspired?

These questions call on us to reckon with the historical origins and present purposes of American environmentalism. To this end, Zuber's book makes a formidable contribution to ecocritical scholarship on Emerson, Thoreau, Muir, Jewett, and Inness—as well as several other lesser-known

figures—providing in unparalleled detail the “deep story” of the American environmental imaginary, which now must forever include the name of Emanuel Swedenborg. Posthumanist and new materialist thinkers will find ample provocation for further research, and ecotheologians will discover a new companion for rethinking American religious experience. Scholars working in the environmental humanities will find in this work deeper sources of our own environmental thinking and, likely too, that they have unwittingly embodied one or more of Swedenborg’s after-worldly voices and incarnations.

Jeremy Sorgen is a Postdoctoral Fellow in Environmental Science, Policy, and Management at the University of California, Berkeley. His research links environmental ethics with the concerns and contexts of environmental justice. He is currently working on a book that reimagines environmental ethics as a place-based and policy-oriented collaborative endeavor, and he is researching the impact of California’s land-use policies on Indigenous Tribes.

- Δ -

Political Theology of the Earth:

Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public

By: **Catherine Keller**

Publisher: **Columbia University Press (New York, New York, U.S.A.)**

Year: **2018, Pages: x + 229 pp.**

ISBN: **9780231189910**

Price: **\$28.00**

Reviewed by: **Matthew R. Hartman, Graduate Theological Union**

Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology, Vol. 7, No. 1

© 2021 by the Graduate Theological Union

As climate chaos grows and democracies appear to teeter on the edge of collapse, feeling helpless—and hopeless—only seems natural. Any kind of