Devin Zuber has really done something spectacular with this work. He not only provided a serious and engaging account of the reception of Emanuel Swedenborg’s ideas within the early environmental movement, he also pushes toward a current reevaluation of Swedenborg’s thought in consideration of speculative realism and the emerging constellation of research named new materialism. To argue against the anthropocentric, the view that takes the natural world as being simply the storehouse of available resources to be utilized by human beings, is taken for granted in much of modern ecological discourse, and yet Zuber helps us to appreciate the immense amount of intellectual work that lay behind this position, and the place that Swedenborg had in bringing it about. As Zuber succinctly states in the introduction, ‘Swedenborg matters, this book posits, as his ideas formed part of a habitus of perceiving the more-than-human world that shaped efficacious environmental ethics’ (8). To imagine differently is a profound accomplishment and Zuber gives Swedenborg a great deal of credit in helping the American environmental movement to achieve this enormous feat. Swedenborg, whom Emerson said was the ‘translator of nature into thought,’ may not be popularly considered a father of the American environmental movement, but I wonder if it will be possible for later authors examining this tradition to ignore his impact.

Zuber’s approach to Swedenborg also provides a framework for overcoming the marginalization that surrounds many esoteric thinkers. To live with the insights that others have gleaned from Swedenborg allows Zuber the room to bring this conversation forward and push into areas not typically covered in the large bibliography of Swedenborgian studies. It is a critical engagement with an esoteric source which does not fall solely within the realm of historical studies, and is more substantive than the simple diagnostic approach, in which scholars merely identify esoteric dimensions or elements of a given thinker. Zuber also avoids the tradition of Swedenborgian interpretation going back to Kant’s Träume eines Geistersehers, which attempts a pathological diagnosis of Swedenborg. In an interesting side-note Zuber mentions Konstantin Rauer’s book Wahn und Wahrheit: Kants Auseinandersetzung mit den Irrationalen of 2007, which argues that the origins of Kant’s critique of metaphysics comes out of his attempt to make sense of Swedenborg.

The central historical aim of Zuber’s work involves resituating Swedenborg’s thought in the broad corpus of American environmental writing, and landscape painting during the nineteenth century. The American “religion of
which had its origin in the work of the New England Transcendentalists is fairly well known, and Zuber’s work tells this story with remarkable richness, however he goes beyond charting out this lineage and speaks to the role that Swedenborg’s ideas had in the formation of early ecologically-minded organizations.

A central component of Swedenborg’s revelatory writing was that the natural world was a living manifestation of the will of God with every object in the natural world as a correlating part of God’s revelation. Seeing the natural world as imbued with these divine significances was something that followed early American conservationists, and as Zuber so rightly shows, it was an essential element in coming to see the natural world as having significance in its own right, as the living breathing message of God. Thus, when Zuber leaves the transcendental writings of Emerson and Thoreau to speak about John Muir, we get a sense of how important Swedenborg’s revelations were for people who loved the natural world.

Muir is a particularly fascinating character in the story of American conservation. Muir was without doubt the most popular naturalist of the nineteenth century, and his writings about the Western United States created a flurry of interest in conservation. Muir would meet president Theodore Roosevelt at what is today Yosemite, and make some of the central arguments that would lead Roosevelt to establish America’s national parks. Muir was one of the initial founders of the Sierra Club, which tellingly had some of its earliest meetings in the Arts and Crafts style San Francisco Swedenborgian Church. Zuber, to my knowledge, is one of the first to highlight Muir’s engagement with Swedenborg, and he makes a compelling case that one of the intellectual streams that fed Muir’s adoration of the natural world came from the fact that he shared Swedenborg’s belief in its ability to communicate the will and love of God.

No Sierra Landscape that I have seen holds anything truly dead or dull or what in manufactories is called rubbish or waste; everything is perfectly clean and pure and full of divine Lessons. This quick, inevitable interest attaching to everything seems marvellous until the hand of God becomes visible; then it seems perfectly reasonable. (104).

William Keith, Muir’s friend for over 30 years, was much more explicit in his Swedenborgian interpretation of the natural world, and his famous landscape paintings were designed to inspire the mind to seek out the divine sources that formed the majestic natural world within oneself. This “influx,” Swedenborg’s term which Zuber discusses in light of Wouter Hanegraaff’s study on Swedenborg and that is present within every element of the natural world, is also ubiquitous within the soul, and in experiencing nature we experience physical manifestations of the divine. Or said more succinctly by another Swedenborgian
painter that Zuber quotes, George Inness, ‘God all space fills’ (131). Sarah Orrne Jewett, a fairly successful nineteenth-century novelist also discussed within the work, makes use of Swedenborg’s doctrine of correspondences in her novels, using visual images from her Maine surroundings to elucidate spiritual principles.

The notion of a spiritual vitality that underlies the physical is not shared solely by writers of the nineteenth century: Zuber discusses how Deleuze and Guattari’s infamously complex “Body without Organs,” which has been utilized extensively in new materialism, bears some resemblance to Swedenborg’s concept of the macrocosm. As it would be far too afield to discuss the details of this particular argument, it will suffice to point out its presence in the book.

The value of this book for scholars of esotericism, I believe, is very consequential in that it helps us push forward the boundaries of the discipline and makes possible readings available of many topics which might be currently conceived as outside of our disciplinary canon. Ecological thought is assumed, as many other intellectual spheres, to be comfortably out of reach for scholarship on esotericism, and Zuber shows just how wrong such an assumption might be. Esotericism is pervasive and this book, in the vein of James Webb, helps us to argue just that. At its core, this book is a thoughtful account of how various writers and thinkers used Swedenborg’s theology and revelation to reconceive the natural world, as something beyond the utilitarian or the strictly materialistic. In this it is remarkably successful. Indeed, it is difficult for me to imagine that the implications of Zuber’s book could be easily ignored by historians of the conservation movement or those of naturalism in general. If I did have any complaint, it would be that I wished the book would have gone further down many of the fascinating sidetracks that are referenced in the work. However, this at the very least opens the way for other scholars to take up some of the points that Zuber raises, which is no small gift.

Dell Rose
University of California Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA, USA
delljospehrose@gmail.com