In his writings on love and marriage, eighteenth-century visionary Emanuel Swedenborg asserts that conjugal love can take one of two trajectories and unite either the good with the true or else the false with the evil; participants in such unions are bound for heaven or hell respectively. Marriage is divinely ordained, and the union of God and the church stands as the ideal union to which humans should aspire. Reporting from his mystical visits to a heaven resonating with Neoplatonic overtones in which the lower and higher worlds mirror each other, Swedenborg’s writings intimate that the image of God is reproduced in the mating couple, a recreation of the primal androgyne, when male and female he created them.1 Caught between the representation of the genders as dual and of married love as a single entity, Swedenborg recapitulates his contemporary and later influential distress about whether to see love through binary oppositions or as a process of achieving wholeness. The conflict of how to perceive conjugal love continued, in Swedenborg’s legacy, in his pervasive influence on the American renaissance.

Swedenborg’s writings were the primary theological touchstone for the American articulation of Spiritualism, a religious movement begun in 1848 and characterized by some contemporary scholars as the more exoteric branch of American hermeticism.2 Modeling their ideas on

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1 There has been a great deal of scholarly speculation about the influence of the kabbalah on Swedenborg’s thinking; while it is clear that Swedenborg would have access to both Jewish and Christian kabbalistic writings, it remains speculative whether he was indeed influenced at all by kabbalah. In “Emanuel Swedenborg, the Jews, and Jewish Tradition,” Wouter Hanegraaff concludes that there has not yet been proven any direct connection between Jewish writing and Swedenborg’s thought. Furthermore, according to Hanegraaff, any resemblances can be more aptly accounted for by the more general transmission of Neoplatonic ideas.

2 All thoughtful commentators on Spiritualism question the precise “creation” of this movement, since phenomenologically similar events had been happening in Europe and America since time immemorial. However, I maintain the use of the traditional dating because it serves handily as a reference when people could self-identify as believers, which I think is particularly important given the often shocking nature of political
the recently developed telegraph, Spiritualists proposed that continuing communication between the living and the dead was not only possible, but was the logical—and empirical—outcome of the technologies of the day. With the telegraph, photography, and later the telephone providing instant and invisible communication across space, Spiritualists simply noted that space went up to heaven as well as across to the territories. With refinements on the Mesmeric trance state, mediums (most often women) became the living instrument of communication between the living and the dead. And like contemporaneous discussions of electricity, Spiritualists held their discovery to be scientifically true, even if not yet well understood.

Contact with the dead disclosed that heaven resembled the familiar landscapes of earth, with neighborhoods, churches, schools, and social occasions, in essence a sanitized version of the ethos of the time. The dead participated in the fascination with technology as well as the burgeoning populism of the new middle class, and like many contemporaneous religious movements both Spiritualists and the spirits reflected a cultural celebration of the ideals of democracy. Spiritualism proposed that people retained all of their individual characteristics at death and therefore wished to maintain their relationships with those on earth. The spirits of the dead also retained their earthly flaws and were not made perfect upon entrance to heaven, but rather were subject to errors and mistakes in the afterlife.

Spiritualists were also notable for espousing progressive and frequently radical political reforms on nearly every front. In addition to their important contributions to Abolition and women’s rights, they also embraced a wide gamut of liberal platforms, from improving the condition of prisons to relatively arcane calls for phonetic spelling and more congenial underwear. As Ann Braude has ably demonstrated, Spiritualism also sounded the death knell for wide-spread American Calvinism and particularly its policies of infant damnation. By providing grieving mothers with what was understood to be empirical proof of the continued existence of their children in heaven, the movement

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and theological claims the Spiritualists made. For a discussion of Spiritualism as the “exoteric” branch of the occult “church” in America, see Godwin, _The Theosophical Enlightenment_, Chapter Ten, especially 188. Both Versluis and Godwin give some credence to the later claims by more hard-line occultists that Spiritualism was seeded or perhaps even masterminded by occult adepts to prepare society for future hermetic truths. See Godwin, o.c., 197–200.

3 Braude, _Radical Spirits_, Chapter 2.