Chapter 77

Traditionalism in Sweden

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Traditionalism or *philosophia perennis* (the perennial philosophy) is in Sweden closely connected with a small number of writers and artists. Their works have without exception been printed in small editions and have reached a restricted number of readers. Only the artist Ivan Aguéli (1862–1917) has become known to a broader audience, but this fame arose after his death and is connected to his work as a landscape painter, not as a thinker and esotericist. Only two writers in the period after Aguéli became reasonably well-known traditionalist thinkers. As this chapter will show, the concept of *philosophia perennis* has been understood in very different ways by Aguéli and those who succeeded him.

Ivan Aguéli

Ivan Aguéli’s fluid identity can remind one of the vague figures and landscapes that he depicted in his paintings. His family name was not Agéli but Agilli, his first name was Johan Gustaf, not Ivan. On the surface, he seemed to be a failure, a man who lived in perpetual poverty and was largely met with incomprehension. His biographer Bengt Lagerkvist describes him as a ‘poste restante person, living without a fixed address’ (quoted from a brochure presenting Aguéli written by Bengt Lagerkvist, member of the board of the Ivan Aguéli Society).

In 1890 Aguéli arrived in Paris, where he installed himself as a bohemian on the Boulevard St Michel. He was regularly seen in the company of a Mme Huot, known as “La dame du silence” or the Silent Lady, an eccentric who roamed the streets of Paris at all hours dressed in ragged Renaissance dresses, but also frequented the same circles as Cézanne, Gauguin, and van Gogh. He was aesthetically attracted to Anarchism, and wrote that ‘Anarchism is a thing of beauty. It is certainly the most beautiful thing in our sordid times. Imagine a sunset and a sunrise at the same time. The grand, conscious, calm heroism of the dynamitards; the revenge of the victims of culture; the dreams of utopians,
intuition, and artists. This may be a pale shimmer, but it contains the first rays of the new sun’ (letter to Richard Bergh, quoted in Gauffin 1940: 101).

Aguéli’s sympathy with the socially marginalised and his fascination for radical politics nearly cost him his life. He was put on trial together with other suspected criminals, charged with having planned an armed revolt. During his time in prison, he began to develop his ideas on art as related to an infinite or transcendent dimension. He explains in a letter that ‘I speak with the utmost reluctance of what is modern or ancient in art, for in my opinion true art like religion is outside of time [extra temporel]’ (Gauffin 1940: 114).

Aguéli returned to Stockholm from Paris, and after having borrowed a copy of Baudelaire’s *Les fleurs du mal* from the Swedish Royal Library, and inspired by the message in these poems that the inner and outer dimensions of life correspond to each other, he began to explore related concepts in the doctrines of Emanuel Swedenborg. His ideas on art now began to incorporate such ideas as the correspondence of landscapes with states of the soul, and that elements in a landscape painting that appear distant to the viewer correspond to lofty principles whereas lower principles correspond to what appears close to the viewer (Gauffin 1940: 160–161).

Aguéli at the time described his longing to produce a pure and spiritual art, but appeared to be incapable of making this vision come true: for several years, he did not produce a single painting. These years can be seen as a spiritual crisis, for in 1898 Aguéli took the then extremely unusual step of converting to Islam. A year later, he travelled to India to learn more about the teachings of the Buddha (Gauffin 1940: 167–168).

His conversion to Islam compelled him to change his identity and name once again, now calling himself Abd Al-Hadi Aqhili, (i.e., Aguéli, Servant of the Guide). His conversion did not stop him from harbouring Anarchist sympathies. During a procession that took place before a bullfight in Paris on 4 June 1900, Aguéli fired shots at two bullfighters, wounding one of them. He was imposed a fine and a suspended sentence. His writings from this time reveal little of these dramatic incidents, and his focus remained on religious questions. He reflects on his faith in Allah and concludes that there are points of contact with other monotheistic religions, resulting in a universal kind of belief with “fanatical” moral demands towards oneself.

In 1902, Aguéli was initiated into a Sufi brotherhood, the Shadhiliyya. From now on, he was prepared to formulate his religious vision in writing. He lived in Egypt for the next ten years, and wrote works that he hoped would contribute to a greater understanding between European and Arab peoples. He returned to Stockholm in 1911, left again for Egypt in 1913, painted prolifically from then on, but remained a nomadic being who tragically lost his life in a