The Arcanes of the World. Symbols and Mystical-Allegorical Exegesis in Emanuel Swedenborg’s *De Cultu et Amore Dei*

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**Preliminary Considerations**

Among the numerous writings of the Swedish scientist, philosopher and visionary Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), *De cultu et amore Dei (The Worship and Love of God, 1745)* appears to divide the author’s intellectual development and production in two phases, a “scientific” phase (1720–1745) and a “theosophical” one (1745–1772). It is a very complex work, especially from the philosophical and linguistic point of view, in which the author combines allegorical visions and poetic-literary metaphors, drawn from both classical and modern canons, and symbolic structures that can be referred to a theological, mystical and esoteric background, and also many elements deriving from his previous scientific studies. For this reason, we can analyse this writing along different interpretative lines, in order to bind many different points of view into a single vision. The scientific elements play a predominant role, as they provide a solid structure to the Swedenborgian philosophical system of nature; the multitude of symbols, metaphors, allegories and metonymies contribute to create a very complex literary backdrop merging scientific topics with theological and philosophical themes. From this point of view, the work offers a case study to measure the function of these elements in a seventeenth-century context.

Images such as the cosmic egg, the primordial state of nature, the Edenic tree of life and even the egg from which the first man Adam was born, are but a few examples of the many symbolic representations in this Swedenborgian work. They are ascribable, in general, to the esoteric tradition, but take on in

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1 F.M. Crasta wrote the ‘Preliminary considerations’, the first paragraph (‘Mythical and mechanistic cosmogenesis’) and the ‘Final considerations’; L. Follesa wrote the second (‘Primordial forms of life’), the third (‘Transformation and metamorphosis’) and the fourth (‘Adam, the only-begotten’).

De cultu a heuristic, pedagogical and representative function. In a very particular way, Swedenborg strives to weld these images to the scientific knowledge of his time, and this is what makes his work so peculiar. The origins of the distant past of the Earth and humanity do not only recall the literary topoi and myths of the collective imagination of the West; they take on an additional meaning with the new acquisitions of science.

Through the employment of scientific knowledge, Swedenborgian descriptions address two levels of signification, one mythical-poetic and the other epistemological. He thus enables us to think about the question of the origins in naturalistic terms. This is particularly useful thanks to the adoption of a two-tiered logic: that of scientific explanations and that of thinking with images. In this way, different “alphabets” are effective in narrating the myths about the origin of the world and of life on earth, including also the birth of the primordial couple.

From a chronological point of view, De cultu, published about a decade after the publication of Opera philosophica et mineralia (1734), is a work of transition. It was written between Swedenborg’s “naturalistic” period (Principia rerum naturalium, 1734; De Infinito, 1734; Oeconomia regni animalis, 1740–41; Regnum animale, 1744–45), and the further phase, where he researched a new form of spirituality, typical of works such as Arcana caelestia (1749–1756) or Vera christiana religio (1771).

The main aim here is to analyse the presence, in the text of Swedenborg, of a double level of communication, poetical-literary on the one side and scientific on the other. The intention is to consider a few passages in the text where the intersection of the two approaches is evident and to show how scientific literary tradition and innovation intertwine.

One of the most meaningful symbols here is that of the cosmic egg, because it enables us to capture more explicitly the intersection between different interpretative lines. We shall analyse it at first within the cosmological discourse, namely in connection with the Cartesian mechanistic tradition; then, with regard to the complex of mythic traditions to which this symbol is related. From this second perspective the image will be studied also in connection with the generation of life and the birth of man, as an intermediate element between Infinite and finite, light and darkness.

1 Mythical and Mechanistic Cosmogenesis

In the De cultu, Swedenborg tries to add a poetic and visionary dimension to the cosmology of Cartesian vortexes, which he described in a previous work (Principia rerum naturalium, 1734), following the typical canons and expressions of