

In Search of the Human Soul: An Interview with Vincent Roy-Di Piazza

Vincent Roy-Di Piazza, postdoctoral associate at the University of Oxford, discusses his research into Swedenborg's interests in soul-body interaction and plurality of worlds, and his own journeys into Swedenborg scholarship.

VINCENT ROY-DI PIAZZA IN CONVERSATION WITH JAMES WILSON

Vincent Roy-Di Piazza is a historian of science, medicine, religion and Scandinavia. He was the inaugural recipient of a Swedenborg Society scholarship in 2018, becoming a D.Phil. candidate at Linacre College, University of Oxford, where his research focused upon the relationship between soul and body in the works of Emanuel Swedenborg. He recently defended his thesis at Oxford, titled 'Homo Maximus: Emanuel Swedenborg and the Interaction of Soul and Body' (2022).

In May 2019, Vincent co-organized the *Swedenborg and the Body: Anatomy, Alcohol and the Soul* symposium at Swedenborg House, delivering his paper '*Demonstretur animae immortalitas*' on the results of his doctoral research. Born in France and educated in Italy, France, Denmark and England, Vincent received a multi-disciplinary education, encompassing English and Nordic studies, religious studies, and history of science. He is also a classically trained singer and a graduate of the Conservatoire de Musique in Paris.

Vincent's wider research interests include the relationship between science and religion during the early modern period, Scandinavian history, and Swedenborg's global influence and posterity. He has published articles on Nordic science during the Great Northern War (in *Études Germaniques*, 2021) and on Swedenborg's contribution to the plurality of worlds debate (in *Annals of Science*, 2020).

He is currently working on an introduction to the Swedenborg Society's new edition of Swedenborg's 1758 work *De Telluribus* (previously known in English translations under various titles, including *Worlds in Space, Other Planets* or *Earths in the Universe*).

Your academic background spans literature, history, religion, science, philosophy and music—where did your interest in Swedenborg originate?

I discovered Swedenborg during my first year of a bachelor degree in Nordic Studies at the Sorbonne. I was browsing the Nordic library there and my eyes stumbled upon a copy of Swedenborg's *Apocalypsis Revelata*. What an intriguing title! At the same time, I was learning music in Paris and

you be able to give a précis of your doctoral research and of how Swedenborg's ideas on this subject changed (or didn't change) across his lifetime?

Swedenborg saw himself as a restorer of lost knowledge, who addressed the Cartesian corpus.

He indeed showed a lifelong interest in soul-body interaction, a research project from which many of his key ideas emerged, both in his philosophical and theological writings. The topic

was one of the most contested issues of the Enlightenment, and featured a wide range of applications in fields as varied as anatomy, chemistry, taxonomy, theology, epistemology, economics and politics. It is therefore unsurprising that someone as intellectually curious as Swedenborg developed a lifelong engagement with this crucial and multi-faceted topic.

Swedenborg's interest was, right from the start, linked to an intense questioning about the nature of physical matter and spiritual essence; non-verbal forms of communication, such as the representation of emotions on the face; the nature of life after death, and the hope of restoring prelapsarian faculties, that is, the state

which mankind experienced before the Fall.

Swedenborg explored various mechanistic soul-body systems, although, overall, he remained consistently Cartesian. The originality of his mature model is that he merged Cartesian dualism with a Neoplatonic model of discrete 'degrees' informed by Christian Wolff's physico-theology. His final solution to the question, published less than three years before his death, asserted that the problems raised by Cartesian dualism would vanish if intermediary degrees could be taken into consideration.

Far from being an abstract technical problem,



Vincent, after successfully passing his doctoral thesis in Oxford, September 2022.

had become fascinated by human coordination between mind and body; why it is that some people seem to possess extraordinary abilities to perform music, arts or sports. I discovered that Swedenborg had written an extensive yet relatively overlooked body of work on how the soul and body relate to each other. I started to research it and eventually got hooked. Since then, Swedenborg has remained my main focus of academic research and it has been quite a fascinating journey.

Swedenborg's writings on soul-body interaction span almost his entire literary career—would

he reasserted until his last days the importance of soul-body for emphasizing the interdependent relationship between Scripture and exegesis, between Christ and God, between charity and faith. As a theologian, Swedenborg also postulated the anthropomorphic organization of the whole spiritual universe, a doctrine which he called *Homo Maximus*, or ‘the Grand Man’, providing an original twist on a still-widespread set of ideas of Man seen both as a microcosm and as made in the image of God.

Swedenborg’s famous concept of ‘correspondence’ summarizes well the evolution of his intellectual development on the topic: first used loosely as an anatomical concept to describe certain aspects of soul-body interaction, ‘correspondence’ was then used by Swedenborg as an approach to biblical exegesis, before becoming a key concept of his late anthropomorphic cosmology. This eventually allowed him to merge his anatomical, exegetical and cosmological interests into a unified whole.

After his death in 1772, the doctrine of correspondences found a lasting success in occultist, spiritualist and Romantic milieus (although very few actually read Swedenborg directly). This success contributed to his long-lasting posterity!

Your research looks at works Swedenborg produced across several decades of his life. Does it frustrate you when people talk of a ‘pre- and post-illumination’ Swedenborg, or a ‘scientific’ and a ‘theological’ categorization of his work?

The term ‘illumination’ in English carries a potentially negative connotation, which evokes religious enthusiasm (both terms—*illumination* and *enthusiasm*—used to be pejorative in Swedenborg’s time) and, therefore, I think the term lacks the neutrality ideally needed in academic research, unless it is used as an actor category.

I am less bothered by the ‘scientific’ versus ‘theological’ categorization, as long as we acknowledge it is a mere shortcut, something to distinguish between Swedenborg’s first career as a natural philosopher and his later refashioning as an exegete and prophet.

Notwithstanding the anachronistic character of the term ‘scientific’ in the eighteenth century, we can note that Swedenborg wrote theology during his 30-year career at the Bureau of Mines (his first theological manuscript *De Fide in Christum*, was written in 1733); and as a full-time theologian he also produced a handful of non-theological treatises.

More than 100 years ago, the Swedish scholar Martin Lamm convincingly showed in his classic study *Emanuel Swedenborg: The Development of His Thought* (1915, translated into English in 2000) how the divide between these categories had traditionally been amplified by Swedenborg’s religious followers, in order to emphasize the importance of his divine revelation.

In my opinion, an element in this divide that often gets overlooked is Swedenborg’s retirement

from the Bureau of Mines in 1747. The usual narrative of his religious calling has often been that he went through a defining revelation that saw him abandon natural philosophy to focus on a divine mission to reveal the lost meaning of Scripture. But as I show in my thesis, this process took place over several years, and Swedenborg’s late career shift as a full-time theologian only became possible because he was forced to retire early by his hierarchy. His comfortable financial situation subsequently allowed him to devote himself to the growing spiritual questioning he had been experiencing for more than a decade.

So from a scholarly perspective, a more neutral and factual way to speak about Swedenborg’s change of priorities around that time could be to talk about ‘pre-retirement’ versus ‘post-retirement’. But it is just my opinion!

Pre-retirement Swedenborg often writes in his letters and travel journals of visiting libraries and of studying other writers, do you think that practice tails off after his retirement from the Bergscollegium (the Royal Swedish Bureau of Mines), or is it simply that he doesn’t record such information as rigorously? Does Swedenborg’s concern with contemporary thought and learning diminish after he retires?

I think it is important to acknowledge that Swedenborg’s priorities and goals changed, although the key factor in my view is that by the time of his retirement, Swedenborg had already formed an opinion about most of the philosophical and doctrinal subjects he dealt with in his late theology.

However, he still remained aware of the latest theological developments and controversies, as between the lines, his theological publications touched upon current debates, and/or were written with certain target audiences in mind, in the hope that this would help to spread his ideas more effectively.

You have recently been investigating the discourse of the plurality of worlds and Swedenborg’s fascinating 1758 publication *De Telluribus*. How does that book fit in with the rest of Swedenborg’s works and where does it stand in relation to other writers on the subject of life on other planets?

I think this little book occupies a central (yet often overlooked) place in Swedenborg’s writings! He himself wrote that it ‘contained great secrets understood by very few’. *De Telluribus in mundo nostro solari* (*Earths in our solar system*) was a short compilation of conversations with extraterrestrial spirits in the afterlife, first recorded in his *Spiritual Diary* and then published in his milestone work *Arcana Caelestia*.

It has long been considered as Swedenborg’s ‘strangest work’, and has often been a source of debates and controversy among Swedenborg’s followers to this day.

In my article ‘Ghosts from other planets’, published in the journal *Annals of Science* (2020),

I move past these tensions by showing that *De Telluribus* was meant to present Swedenborg’s theology in a shorter, colourful format, focusing on his popular spiritual experiences and through a fashionable topic at the time. During the early modern period, there was indeed a large consensus among the learned on the existence of extraterrestrials.

In my view, Swedenborg’s *De Telluribus* merged for the first time the codes of two popular genres commonly treated side-by-side: literature on cosmic pluralism (that is, the existence of life on other planets), and dialogues of the dead (i.e., philosophical dialogues with personified voices from the past). Through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, both genres usually had a satirical dimension.

Yet, Swedenborg made a clear truth-claim about his conversations, which engaged his credibility as a divinely inspired exegete. How could Swedenborg rely on fictional codes, while also claiming that they were real?

I argue that Swedenborg did so through his ‘doctrine of dynamic representations’ in the afterlife. Extraterrestrial spirits appeared to him according to the literary conventions of his time, because in the afterlife, he contended that appearances are partially shaped by the memories of the viewer. Through this, Swedenborg claimed that his accounts were not fictional, although they were influenced by literary tropes associated with fiction and philosophical satire, which allowed him to formulate ironical criticisms with renewed strength.

Unfortunately, this argument was not acknowledged by his readership, who were confused in the first place by the unclear structure of *De Telluribus*, and left wondering whether these accounts were a particularly creative form of allegorical satire, genuine claims of conversations with extraterrestrial spirits, or the product of a deluded mind. It was an editorial failure, but remains one of the most original treatises on the plurality of worlds written during the early modern period.

Swedenborg was very much part of an international ‘Republic of Letters’ in the eighteenth century, travelling around Europe, reading and conversing with writers from many different countries—do you feel you are in a similar world to his, 300 years later?

I do think there is a continuity of practice with the scholarly world of today—provided we rename it the ‘Republic of Emails’! There is a great sense of exchange and community amongst scholars around the world, which echoes this ideal and transcends borders remarkably.

Your MA thesis studied Swedenborg’s travels—which place that Swedenborg visited would you most like to visit yourself and why?

In 2019, I became fascinated with Swedenborg’s trip to Venice in 1738, about which he left very few notes in his diary, and I went there to try to find out what he had done, what he had seen, and what he had visited.

I had previously lived and studied in Venice for a year in 2012, and it is a truly extraordinary city for which I feel a deep personal attachment. I just keep coming back there, and will probably continue to do so—until I die or until the city sinks!

Swedenborg made several trips to France during his lifetime, primarily to Paris, where you have spent much time living and studying. Is he a well-known name in contemporary French academia?

Yes, although it is primarily through the lens of nineteenth-century French literature. Swedenborg was one of the most quoted authors in literary, occultist and spiritualist milieus in nineteenth-century France, mainly through translated compendia summarizing his doctrines. This conferred upon him a fascinating aura and earned him the nickname of *Le Prophète du Nord* ('Prophet of the North'). His literary influence can be traced across various French writers, such as the poets Gérard de Nerval (*Aurélia*), Charles Baudelaire ('Correspondances') or the novelist Honoré de Balzac (*Séraphita*).

What is the reaction of other scholars in Oxford when you tell them what your research specialty is?

Usually, excitement and curiosity. Swedenborg is a multifaceted, colourful and major figure relevant to many growing trends in historical scholarship. Although Swedenborg himself has an undeniably singular profile, as a subject of academic study I believe he also has a lot of potential to challenge current scholarly understandings about the development of Swedish science and of the religious Enlightenment.

In the course of investigating Swedenborg's intellectual and personal circles, have there been any of his contemporaries that you wish you could spend more time researching or writing about?

It is a long list! But I think I would be most interested to look into Swedenborg's little-known relationship to his cousin-by-marriage Carl Linnaeus (1707-78). Despite being his junior by twenty years, it was Linnaeus who nominated Swedenborg to the Swedish Royal Academy of Sciences. They both had an interest in anatomy, the Saami, animals, plants, seeds and taxonomy. Although Linnaeus was much more sceptical than Swedenborg on a number of topics concerned with the supernatural, they both shared private criticisms about the dissolute morals of the political elites of their time, and eventually became the two most famous Swedes in Europe during the eighteenth century.

Tell us about your musical practice—what is your favourite repertoire? Is there any crossover with your current academic interests?

As a tenor soloist, I have performed in operas by Purcell, Mozart, Humperdinck and Ravel, and as a chorister in operas by Mozart, Rossini and

Mascagni. In Oxford I sang in the chapel choirs of the university.

I would love to build more links between my research and my practice of classical music. Swedenborg was famously quite an opinionated opera aficionado: he wrote that Italian opera made French singing and dancing look like 'mere child play', while his ideas on music, vibration and harmony remain largely understudied.

Finally, how has the Swedenborg Society scholarship helped you?

In 2018 I became the first recipient of a Swedenborg Doctoral Scholarship. This allowed me to crucially support my doctoral studies at Oxford and to unlock further British Research Council funding, which meant my thesis became fully funded.

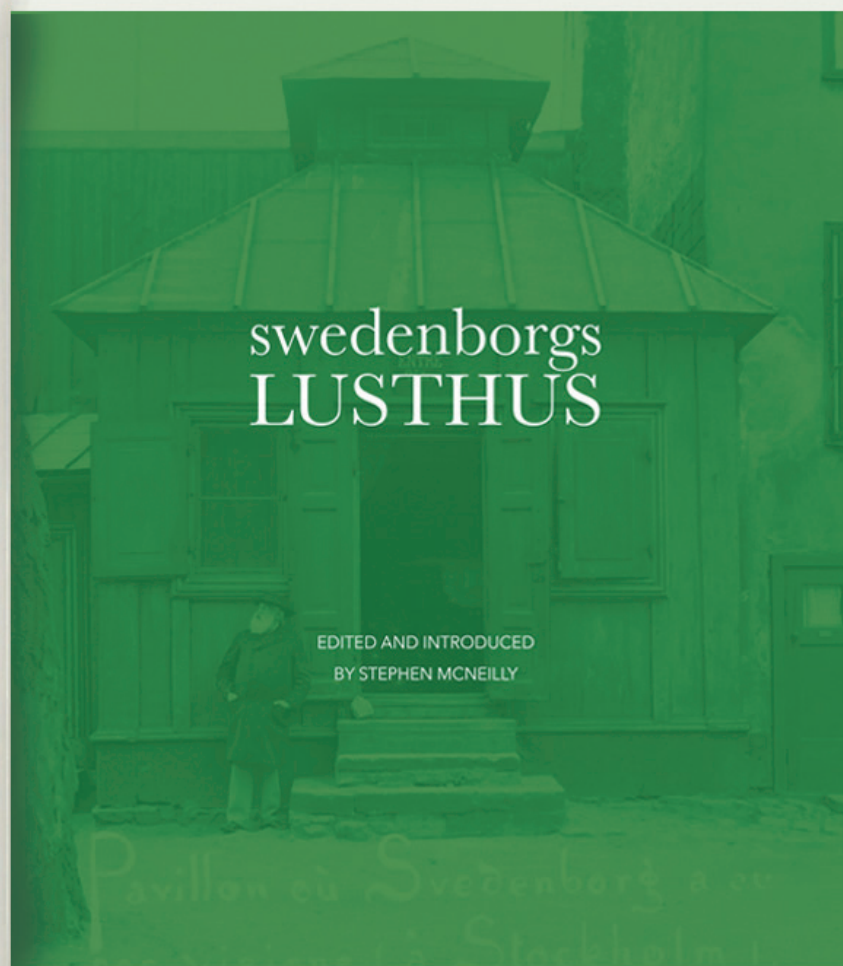
The Scholarship has allowed me to grow as a researcher, to benefit from the Society's archival

resources and from the precious expertise of its librarians and editors. It also helped me to organize academic events around Swedenborg, to publish peer-reviewed articles about my research, and to raise awareness about Swedenborg's historical significance as a whole.

It has been an amazing opportunity that I am extremely grateful for. I believe it is the right kind of initiative to support new generations of scholars in producing fresh academic research on Swedenborg. ■

● VINCENT ROY-DI PIAZZA is a postdoctoral associate in history at the University of Oxford. He recently defended his D.Phil. thesis at Oxford, titled 'Homo Maximus: Emanuel Swedenborg and the Interaction of Soul and Body' in 2022, and was the first recipient of a Swedenborg Doctoral Scholarship from the Swedenborg Society. Follow him on Twitter: @Roy-Di Piazza

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