

# PEACE and Swedenborg

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 05 Nov 2000

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Adam Stephanides — 05 Nov 2000, 12:52

I came across a story by Swedenborg--apparently an excerpt from one of his mystical-theological books--in an anthology. It's only a page long, but the parallels with PEACE are startling.

When the theologian Melancthon (an early Lutheran theologian) dies, he is "provided with a house deceptively like the one in which he lived in this world." As a result, he doesn't know he's dead and continues writing theology. Because he never mentions charity, believing faith is sufficient for salvation, his clothes and surroundings supernaturally deteriorate. Eventually he finds that "the other rooms [of his house] no longer matched those of his old house in the natural world." Ultimately he is taken to be "a servant of demons."

In less than a page, we have four strong parallels: unawareness of death, the lifelike house, writing, and the appearance of strange rooms in the house. There are a couple of other episodes which may have parallels in PEACE too. One of the strange rooms Melancthon finds in his house is full of people who praise him, "but since some of the visitors were faceless and others seemed dead he ended up hating and distrusting them." This reminds me of part five where Weer gets praise, which he distrusts, from people who seem faceless or dead. And earlier, for his denial of charity, Melancthon was "transported ... to a kind of workhouse, where there were other theologians like him." He returns after a few days, and "tried hard to convince himself" that it was just a hallucination. This might be regarded a parallel to the visit to Van Ness, especially if you believe that the visit is real and the other patients are also after-death souls (which, incidentally, I don't).

Did Wolfe know this story? I don't know. The anthology in which I saw it, THE BOOK OF FANTASY, was actually co-edited by Borges; but this anthology was not translated into English until 1988. And I don't recall Wolfe ever mentioning reading Swedenborg. Nor do I know if the story was ever summarized in some more accessible source.

Not everything in the story is (obviously) paralleled in PEACE. And I'm not arguing that Weer is literally going through what Melancthon did. But given all the parallels that do exist, it would be quite a coincidence if Wolfe's portrayal of Weer's afterlife wasn't influenced by Swedenborg's story, consciously or unconsciously.

--Adam

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Tony Ellis — 07 Nov 2000, 10:07 · follows Adam Stephanides

Adam Stephanides wrote:

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Borges includes this story in his collection *A Universal History of Infamy*, published in 1954, so it's pretty much a dead cert that Wolfe knew it.

The parallels are quite striking, aren't they? Well spotted.

Does anyone know if Borges' version is a straight retelling of the original, or if there are any subtle changes?

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