

Notes

A FORMERLY UNTRACED COMMENT BY 'COLERIDGE' IN AN ARTICLE BY W. B. YEATS, AND ITS ORIGIN IN COVENTRY PATMORE'S WRITING

In an article whose final form was published in 1893 as part of *The Celtic Twilight* (and then excluded from subsequent editions), W. B. Yeats makes a bold statement in relation to how the wisdom of Irish folklore is rooted in visions of a spiritual world:

Why should Swedenborg alone have visions? Surely the mantle of Coleridge's 'man of ten centuries' is large enough to cover the witch-doctors at any rate. There is not so much difference between them. Swedenborg's assertion, in the *Spiritual Diary*, that 'the angels do not like butter,' would make admirable folk-lore.¹

The reference is made in the context of what was originally a review of Douglas Hyde's *Beside the Fire* in the *National Observer* for 28 February 1891 entitled 'Irish Folk Tales',² and was here reprinted as the essay 'The Four Winds of Desire' (1893), with minor changes from the original.³ The comparison with witch-doctors—which here can also mean peasant mystics—stems from Yeats's reading of Swedenborg's *Spiritual Diary* when preparing his three volume edition of *The Works of William Blake* with Edwin J. Ellis, which he also published in 1893.⁴ Yeats's comparison of such people to Swedenborg is inspired by a

passage in the Swedish mystic's text, in which the celestial angels, whom Swedenborg meets in one of his visions, create a trick when he is eating butter so that the smell of the food rises from his mouth up into his nostrils, which shows him that 'the spiritual angels hold butter in aversion'.⁵ More generally, the comparison is made to illustrate the matter-of-fact and humorous nature of the visionary element in Irish folklore, which is celebrated throughout his own *The Celtic Twilight*.

The above source has been identified by Warwick Gould and Deirdre Toomey in their scholarly edition of Yeats's *Mythologies* (2005). However, neither scholar has located the origin of the phrase 'man of ten centuries', as a description of Swedenborg in Coleridge's writing. Nor have John P. Frayne and Madeleine Marcheterre in their updated edition of Frayne's *Uncollected Prose* of 1970, *Early Articles and Reviews* (2004) for the Scribner series of *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, when editing the essay in its original, review form.⁶ Coleridge wrote copiously about Swedenborg, discussed him in the *Table Talk*, and annotated volumes of his works in marginalia that are available in the British Library, but nowhere does the phrase 'man of ten centuries' appear.

However, the phrase is not an invention of Yeats's own and does exist in several previous texts by other writers. The very first is *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country* of February 1857, in a piece by the mysteriously initialled 'C. P.', which praises Swedenborg's peculiar genius before providing a short biography drawn from James John Garth Wilkinson's *Emanuel Swedenborg: a Biography* (1849). C. P. begins his article as follows:

It is impossible in the present state of mental science and religious philosophy, to arrive at any quite satisfactory theory of Emanuel Swedenborg. This inexplicability would of itself render him an interesting phenomenon in an age which understands, so well as ours does, that the proper study of mankind is man; but there are other and better reasons why all persons professing to be 'well informed', should

¹ W. B. Yeats, 'The Four Winds of Desire', in Warwick Gould and Deirdre Toomey (eds), *Mythologies* (Basingstoke and New York, 2005), 462–72, at 466.

² Hyde's book is a collection of his own translations of Irish folk tales into English, using both written and oral sources - Douglas Hyde (ed and trans), *Beside the Fire: a Collection of Irish Gaelic Folk Stories* (additional notes by Alfred Nutt) (London, 1890).

³ In the original article, the first two sentences to the above-quoted passage are slightly different, being as follows: 'And why should Swedenborg monopolise all the visions? Surely the mantle of Coleridge's "man of ten centuries" is large enough to cover the witch-doctors also.' The third and fourth sentences are exactly the same as in the later version of the text—'W. B. Yeats 'Irish Folk Tales', *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats IX: Early Articles and Reviews*, John P. Frayne and Madeleine Marcheterre (eds) (New York, 2004), 124–27, at 127.

⁴ *The Works of William Blake: Poetic, Symbolic and Critical*, 3 vols, Edwin J. Ellis and W.B. Yeats (eds) (London, 1893).

⁵ *The Spiritual Diary of Emanuel Swedenborg*, George Bush and Revd. John H. Smithson (trans) (London 1883) I, 368–69. Cited in Gould and Toomey 2005, 471, n. 24.

⁶ Frayne and Marcheterre 2004, 533, n. 21.

have given at least a passing glance to this extraordinary personage - the 'man of ten centuries', as Coleridge has called him, and has thereby made unexamining ridicule of his life and writings simply impertinent.⁷

The apologia for discussing Swedenborg as a serious figure is facilitated by Coleridge's presumed description, not present in Wilkinson's own text, which would seem to indicate the belief that Swedenborg was of a kind who only appears once in a thousand years. The article then proceeds to praise Swedenborg's influence on other great minds—Coleridge, Flaxman, Blake etc.—and his powers as a psychologist, before repeating the phrase 'man of ten centuries' a few paragraphs later, when describing how the mystic's genius was to reunite us with truths we had known in childhood, but which we had since forgotten.⁸

C. P. takes particular delight in exploiting his anonymity. He informs the reader, that "'we" may confess to having done queer things' which includes reading 'six or seven of the fifty or sixty of Swedenborg's octavos, each of which is a good week's work'.⁹ However, as little as one month later (March 1857), *The New Churchman* (a magazine published by the Swedenborg Society) intuits in an article reacting to C. P.'s piece that the initialled author is most probably the poet Coventry Patmore.¹⁰ This article—really a review—entitled 'The Press and Swedenborg', repeats the supposed Coleridgean term 'man of ten centuries' (without mentioning that C. P.'s article was obviously their own source for this) as proof of Swedenborg's importance, before then turning attention to the *Fraser Magazine* piece itself. It applauds the author's appreciation of Swedenborg, but criticizes some of C. P.'s interpretations of the mystic, such as Swedenborg's presumed liking for the Anglican Church.¹¹ Another anonymous article of March 1857, entitled 'Emmanuel Swedenborg and Fraser's Magazine', for *The*

Intellectual Repository, and New Jerusalem Magazine (similarly associated with the Swedenborg Society), quotes copiously from the original essay, including the introductory paragraph containing the description of the Coleridge-attributed 'man of ten centuries', and is happy with much of the article's praise. However, like *The Newchurchman* it disagrees with C. P.'s belief that Swedenborg's opinions are close to those of the Anglican Church.¹² In April of the following year the *National Review* picks up on the phrase without referring directly to either the article in *Fraser's Magazine*, or the other two articles, and declares that '[we] will not go so far as Coleridge, who called him the "man of ten centuries".' This is owing to all the other brilliant men, including Dante and Shakespeare, who could be labelled in such a way.¹³ The *National Review* then proceeds to detail Swedenborg's life and major ideas, quoting mainly from Wilkinson's biography, in what is a quite substantial article for the uninitiated. Reacting one month later (May 1858), *The Monthly Observer and New Church Record* (another journal dedicated to Swedenborg's teachings) also published an article now repeating much of *The National Review's* own piece, and mentioning what it deemed to be its unacknowledged indebtedness to the earlier essay in *Fraser's Magazine*. Like *The Newchurchman*, they also surmise that the writer of that originary piece, C. P., must surely be Coventry Patmore, and further remark that the author of the later essay in the *National Review* does not esteem Swedenborg quite as highly 'as Coleridge, who called him the "man of ten centuries", nor as Mr Patmore, who has adopted the encomium'.¹⁴ All assume that Coleridge was the originator of the phrase, and not C. P., despite the fact that it is nowhere to be found in Coleridge's own writings.

That the *Fraser's Magazine* author was indeed Coventry Patmore can be proven by the fact that Patmore employs this phrase many

⁷ C. P., 'Emanuel Swedenborg', *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country*, LV: CCCXXVI (February 1857), 174–82, at 174.

⁸ *Fraser's Magazine*, February 1857, 175.

⁹ *Fraser's Magazine*, February 1857, 174.

¹⁰ Anon., 'The Press and Swedenborg', *The Newchurchman: Devoted to the Exposition and Defence of the Doctrines of the New Church as Revealed in the Writings of Swedenborg*, III (March 1857), 27–29, at 27.

¹¹ *Newchurchman*, March 1857, 28.

¹² Anon., 'Emanuel Swedenborg and Fraser's Magazine', *The Intellectual Repository, and New Jerusalem Magazine* (March 1857), 116–21, at 120–1.

¹³ Anon., 'Art IV – Swedenborgiana', *The National Review*, VI (January and April 1858), 336–59, at 336.

¹⁴ M. A. N., 'The "National Review" on Swedenborg', *The Monthly Observer and New Church Record* (May 1858), 151–6, at 152.

years later in *The Rod, the Root, and the Flower* (1895), his defence of both spiritualism and Catholicism (to which he had by then been converted). He disparages the presumed advances of modern science, repeating the praise for Swedenborg which he had earlier shown in the *Fraser's Magazine* essay:

We have had only one psychologist and physiologist - at least, only one who has published his knowledge - for at least a thousand years, namely, Swedenborg ('the man of ten centuries,' says Coleridge), and he, Mr Huxley may perhaps think it sufficient to answer, was mad!¹⁵

Since he reproduces the earlier belief that Swedenborg could be defined as a superlative psychologist, and then defines the label as meaning that the Swedish mystic was like only one such man in 'at least a thousand years', we see that Patmore must indeed have been C. P.

However, since this book was published in 1895, some years after Yeats first used the phrase 'Coleridge's "man of ten centuries"' in 1891 and then in 1893, and since the *Fraser's Magazine* essay and other articles of the late 1850s were probably too obscure for Yeats to have consulted, we are still left with the question as to what physical text Yeats himself read so as to recycle the phrase. The likelihood is that he looked at Rudolph Leonhard Tafel's appraisal of Swedenborg from 1867, *Emanuel Swedenborg as a Philosopher, and Man of Science*. Tafel was the most prolific translator and editor of the mystic's works for the Swedenborg Society, and Yeats certainly consulted his translations in preparing his book on Blake: indeed Yeats possessed one such of Tafel's renderings in his own personal library.¹⁶ At the beginning of the book, in a chapter entitled 'Swedenborg in Advance of his Age', Tafel reproduces several excerpts from earlier works praising the mystic, in the form of

numbered passages, including a quotation from Coleridge's *Literary Remains* Vol. IV defending Swedenborg as a genius unjustly vilified as passage number 5.¹⁷ Passage 8 is comprised of the first two and a half paragraphs of the piece in *Fraser's Magazine*, which uses the encomium 'man of ten centuries' in the introductory paragraph,¹⁸ although Tafel stops short of quoting the second instance of the phrase a page later in that article, which Patmore had then employed to define Swedenborg's peculiar genius. It is very likely that Yeats first noted the phrase in Tafel's text, its import perhaps reinforced by the proximity to Coleridge's own words on Swedenborg, although would not have realized that the passage had been penned by Patmore (Tafel does not reproduce the initials 'C. P.'). Coincidentally, Yeats went on to buy Patmore's own edition of *Biographia Literaria* some few years later.¹⁹

A question arises as to whether Patmore himself simply invented the phrase or not. There is the strong possibility that he did not, and that his source was entirely oral and his own father, who had been an acquaintance of Dr Gillman, Coleridge's landlord and carer at Highgate. P. G. Patmore passed on to Dante G. Rossetti the claim by Gillman that Geraldine, in Coleridge's poem *Christabel*, was originally intended by the poet to have been a man in disguise, with the Preraphaelite painter in turn passing this idea on to John Hall Caine in a letter.²⁰ Thus, it is possible that P. G. Patmore had elicited other information from Gillman about Coleridge's private utterances, whether spurious or genuine, and that Coventry Patmore's own belief that Coleridge described Swedenborg as the 'man of ten centuries' derives from this same oral source.

Finally, whether it was indeed either Coleridge himself who had described Swedenborg as the 'man of ten centuries', or Gillman, P. G. Patmore, or Coventry Patmore who had first invented the

¹⁵ Coventry Patmore, *The Rod, the Root, and the Flower* (London, 1895), 95–96.

¹⁶ The volume which Yeats possessed was *Angelic Wisdom Concerning the Divine Love and concerning the Divine Wisdom*, J. J. Garth Wilkinson and Rudolph L. Tafel (trans) (London, 1883). Catalogued as No. 2048 in Wayne K. Chapman, 'Something that I read in a Book': *W. B. Yeats's Annotations at the National Library of Ireland, I: Reading Notes* (Clemson SC, 2022), 382. It is heavily annotated in Yeats's own hand (382–91), and was originally given to Yeats as a present by his co-editor, Edwin J. Ellis.

¹⁷ Rudolph Leonhard Tafel, *Emanuel Swedenborg as a Philosopher and Man of Science* (Chicago, 1867), 4. Three copies of this book are to be found in the British Library, where Yeats conducted most of his research when young, and when preparing his edition of Blake's *Works* (1893).

¹⁸ Tafel 1867, 5.

¹⁹ Matthew Gibson, *Yeats, Coleridge and the Romantic Sage* (Basingstoke and New York, 2000), 179. See also Chapman 2022, 119.

²⁰ J. Hall Caine, *Recollections of Dante G. Rossetti* (Toronto, 1883), 154, 158.

phrase and then attributed it falsely to Coleridge, there is still a yet earlier source from which any one of them most likely developed it. That is Henry Fox, Lord Holland, who defended Napoleon in the House of Lords as the ‘greatest man of ten centuries’ (date uncertain but before 1821).²¹ That the great emperor might have provided the model of description for what becomes in Patmore’s writing the great mystic and ‘psychologist’ Swedenborg

(1857, 1895), and finally in Yeats’s writing the witch-doctor or peasant mystic (1891, 1893), is perhaps something of an irony.

MATTHEW GIBSON

University of Macau, China

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²¹ Richard Rush, *Memoranda of a Residence at the Court of London, Comprising Incidents Official and Personal, from 1819 to 1825* (Philadelphia, 1845), 350. Since the remark was made as part of a speech in the House of Lords, there were likely to have been other sources for the statement available to Coleridge, Gillman or P. G. Patmore. Rush’s own entry, when he repeats this comment, is dated 15 November 1820.