



## 'Ghosts from other planets': plurality of worlds, afterlife and satire in Emanuel Swedenborg's *De Telluribus in mundo nostro solari* (1758)

Vincent Roy-Di Piazza

To cite this article: Vincent Roy-Di Piazza (2020): 'Ghosts from other planets': plurality of worlds, afterlife and satire in Emanuel Swedenborg's *De Telluribus in mundo nostro solari* (1758), *Annals of Science*, DOI: [10.1080/00033790.2020.1817557](https://doi.org/10.1080/00033790.2020.1817557)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00033790.2020.1817557>



© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



[View supplementary material](#)



Published online: 20 Sep 2020.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 109



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

# 'Ghosts from other planets': plurality of worlds, afterlife and satire in Emanuel Swedenborg's *De Telluribus in mundo nostro solari* (1758)

Vincent Roy-Di Piazza

Linacre College, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

## ABSTRACT

In 1758 in London, Swedish natural philosopher and mystic theologian Emanuel Swedenborg published *De Telluribus in Mundo nostro Solari* (*Earths in our solar system*), a treatise on the plurality of worlds and life on other planets. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, these topics formed a heterogenous literary genre which encompassed theology, astronomy, philosophy and satire. In *De Telluribus*, Swedenborg made detailed claims of communication with extraterrestrial spirits in the afterlife, through which he sought to spread his theology to new audiences. The paper will explore the role of *De Telluribus* in Swedenborg's career, explain its content and analyse its polarized reception. It will show that *De Telluribus* combined for the first time the literary codes of two popular genres during the period, namely those concerning the plurality of worlds and the dialogues of the dead. By doing so, the paper revises current scholarly understanding of Swedenborg by showcasing him as a versatile yet ill-fated recombiner of literary genres. More broadly, the paper will shed light upon previously unnoticed eighteenth-century literary interactions along with a wider overview on the reception of themes such as the plurality of worlds, mysticism and satire in Scandinavia and Germany.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 24 January 2020

Accepted 24 August 2020

## KEYWORDS

Emanuel Swedenborg;  
plurality of worlds; extra-  
terrestrial life; mysticism;  
dialogues of the dead; satire;  
travel literature

## Contents

1. Introduction
2. Content of *De Telluribus*
  - (a) Swedenborg's first treatise in the 'post-Christian Age'
  - (b) Structure, editing and a missing planet
  - (c) Travelling and illusions of time and space
  - (d) Swedenborg's dual status: observer and 'citizen of both worlds'

**CONTACT** Vincent Roy-Di Piazza  [vincent.roy-dipiazza@history.ox.ac.uk](mailto:vincent.roy-dipiazza@history.ox.ac.uk)

 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.1080/00033790.2020.1817557>

This article has been republished with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

- (e) Patterns in descriptions of spirits from other planets
  - (f) Appearances in the afterlife, satire of Earthlings and technology of writing
3. Literary context
    - (a) Swedenborg and the plurality of worlds debate
    - (b) *De Telluribus* in the context of plurality of worlds and *dialogues des morts* literature
  4. Reception of *De Telluribus*
  5. Concluding remarks

## 1. Introduction

In 1758, Swedish natural philosopher, parliamentarian and mystic theologian Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) published *De Telluribus in Mundo nostro Solari*, a compilation of eleven conversations with extra-terrestrial spirits from solar and extra-solar planets. The book resulted from a strategic shift in publishing and sought to present Swedenborg's theological doctrines on a shorter, colourful format through the popular topic of cosmic pluralism. In a context where Swedenborg struggled to increase his readership and to reinvent himself as an agent of spiritual change, *De Telluribus* represented a non-fictional synthetic attempt to summarize his theology to new audiences, by compiling a series of extra-terrestrial accounts previously published across the eight volumes of his milestone theological work *Arcana Coelestia* (1749–1756). By doing so, *De Telluribus* also aimed to represent Swedenborg's contribution to the plurality of worlds debate, whilst espousing most of the literary codes of the genre.

However, despite Swedenborg's intent to craft *De Telluribus* as a fashionable, shorter and appealing presentation of his theology, the stitched nature of the book significantly undermined the clarity of the argument across fourteen heterogeneous parts compiled together with superficial editorial changes. In contrast to its much more successful follow-up *De Coelo et ejus Mirabilibus et de Inferno*, *De Telluribus* was not structured thematically, but instead followed an idiosyncratic succession of conversations with spirits related to various planets.

*De Telluribus* met with wide negative reception several years after its release, and this polarized reception directly stemmed from debates surrounding Swedenborg's growing fame as a seer in Sweden and Germany. Yet, this fame also attracted many to Swedenborg's writings. As the article will show, the subsequent dismissal of *De Telluribus* primarily originated from Swedenborg's most controversial and divisive theological views, such as his rejection of both *sola fide* and vicarious atonement, his anti-Trinitarianism and his Biblical exegesis. These doctrines partly led to the inconclusive trial of 'Swedenborgianism' for heresy in Sweden a decade later in 1769, triggered by Swedenborg's own nephew, bishop Peter Filenius of Linköping (1704–1780).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless,

---

<sup>1</sup>See Alfred Acton, *Letters and Memorials of Emanuel Swedenborg*, ed. by Alfred Acton, 2 vols (Bryn Athyn: Swedenborg Scientific Association, 1948, 1955), II (1955), p. 689.

Swedenborg's accounts about the afterlife attracted much more public interest than his theological doctrines, which only directly concerned the Lutheran church of Sweden. When not motivated by *ad hominem* rejections of Swedenborg himself as a seer, reactions to Swedenborg's claims were actually far from being unequivocally negative. Despite their extraordinary character, Swedenborg's accounts raised considerable popular fascination at all levels of society and were far from being merely discarded as the product of a deranged mind. As the article will show, Swedenborg's *memorabilia* were most often interpreted by his target readership as ingenious allegorical satire or as genuine experiences of communication with the dead. These experiences were either attributed to divine election or desirable extraordinary powers, in a context where ghost stories still had a wide popular appeal.<sup>2</sup>

The book has remained a source of disagreements and debate among Swedenborg's followers up to the present day, and has often been labelled as 'Swedenborg's strangest work'.<sup>3</sup> The later dismissal of *De Telluribus* was prompted by 'literal' readings of the book which became especially strong (and problematic) among Swedenborg's religious followers during the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> Such readings failed to acknowledge or subscribe to Swedenborg's complex argument about the dynamic nature of all perceived representations in the afterlife, which, as the article will argue, represents one of the boldest arguments of the book. The ambiguity of Swedenborg's statements on this question was aggravated further by the absence of a centralized part clearly presenting Swedenborg's views on the matter.

Nevertheless, despite its non-linear argumentative structure, *De Telluribus* remains one of the most original treatises on the plurality of worlds of the early modern period. It showcases Swedenborg as a versatile recombiner of genres, merging characteristics of fashionable literary forms such as plurality of worlds literature, dialogue of the dead, travel literature, philosophical satire and theological critique. The eleven conversations exhibit an astonishing number of descriptive details whilst several accounts are answering each other in entertaining and remarkably consistent ways.

More broadly, the reception of *De Telluribus* reflects evolving trends within the plurality of worlds debate in eighteenth-century Sweden and Germany. It also provides new evidence for the intersection of cosmic pluralism with other underrated literary genres, such as dialogues of the dead. The article will show that it was not uncommon for these genres to be treated side by side, and

---

<sup>2</sup>See Laura Sangha, 'The Social, Spiritual and Personal Dynamics of Ghost Stories in Early Modern England', *The Historical Journal*, 63:2 (2020), 339–59.

<sup>3</sup>See Kurt Nemitz, 'What has God revealed?', *Swedenborg study* (1976) <<http://www.swedenborgstudy.com/articles/life-on-planets/kn76.htm>> [accessed 8 July 2020]. See also Lamm (note 52), 212.

<sup>4</sup>See, e.g. Roy Nicholls, 'Are the Planets named mistakenly?', *Swedenborg Study* (1977). <<http://www.swedenborgstudy.com/articles/life-on-planets/kn77.htm>> [accessed 8 July 2020] and Karin Childs, 'Life in our Solar System', *New Church Life*, 1997, 467, <<http://www.swedenborgstudy.com/articles/life-on-planets/kc97.htm>> [accessed 8 July 2020].

moreover, that Swedenborg became the first to actually combine them together, in an ingeniously critical way. The debates surrounding Swedenborg's claims as a seer also reveal a broader shift in the perception of mysticism in Protestant Germany and Scandinavia during the 1760s. Although Swedenborg's mystic claims quickly lost ground as an epistemologically credible and legitimate foundation for reliable philosophical knowledge as exemplified by Kant's *Träume eines Geistersehers* from 1766, the reviews of *De Telluribus* and the broader case of Swedenborg's controversial fame distinctly show how mysticism remained a topic of growing popular fascination in Northern Europe during the second half of the eighteenth century.

Swedenborg's *De Telluribus* has begun to experience a renewal of interest among historians in recent years.<sup>5</sup> However, *De Telluribus* has long proven to be a source of challenges, debate and problematic analyses in contemporary scholarship.<sup>6</sup> The paper will present new evidence and contextualization resolving these issues, and will consequently argue that *De Telluribus* constitutes a pivotal case-study to understand the argumentative strategies of Swedenborg's theological works as a whole. By doing so, the paper will demonstrate how a fresh analysis of *De Telluribus* provides new insights into hitherto unnoticed interactions between literature, theology, mysticism and astronomy during the second half of the eighteenth century.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Content of *De Telluribus*

### (a). Swedenborg's first treatise in the 'post-Christian Age'

The debate on the plurality of worlds was a multi-faceted topic during the early modern period, encompassing astronomy, physics, philosophy and theology. Over the course of his long career (1716–1747) as an *Assessor* at the *Bergscollegium*, the College or Board of Mines of Sweden, Emanuel Swedenborg made contributions to all those disciplines, theology excepted. Swedenborg wrote several works on astronomy. His first manuscript from 1717, entitled *En Ny Theorie om Jordens Afstannande* (*A New Theory concerning the Retardation of the Earth*) served as a preparation for his first published work devoted to astronomical matters. *Om Jordenes och Planeternas Gång och Stånd* (*About Motion*

<sup>5</sup>See particularly David Dunér, 'Swedenborg and the Plurality of Worlds: Astrotheology in the 18th Century', *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*, 51:2 (2016), 450–79 (pp. 458–65) and Mats Barrdunge, 'En andeskådare i upplysningstid', *Tidningen Kulturen*, 2 (2019).

<sup>6</sup>In Michael J. Crowe, *The Extraterrestrial Life Debate 1750–1900: The Idea of a Plurality of Worlds from Kant to Lowell* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), Crowe gave an analysis of Swedenborg's *De Telluribus* which failed to identify the use of irony nor the satirical overtones of his accounts. A similar view about the absence of irony and satirical modes of expression was wrongly repeated further in Dunér (note 5) 454, who stated that Swedenborg's *De Telluribus* provided accounts 'without the slightest irony'.

<sup>7</sup>In the case of Swedenborg's original form of mysticism, the term will refer to the latter's claims of unlimited access to the different planes of heaven, hell and the 'spiritual world', but also of constant communication with deceased spirits and angels and occasional communication with Christ. See, e.g. Acton (note 1), II, 626 and 739. For Swedenborg's first claim of communication with Christ, see Lars Bergquist, *Swedenborg's secret* (London: The Swedenborg Society, 2005), pp. 165–67. For later claims, see Acton (note 1), II, 759.

and *Position of the Earths and Planets*), his second such work, was published in Swedenborg's home province of Skara in 1719.<sup>8</sup>

Swedenborg's next work about astronomy was *Principia Rerum Naturalium* (*The First Principles of Natural Things*) published in Leipzig in 1734, in three richly engraved volumes. In this work Swedenborg detailed the principles of his vortical theory and of a nebular hypothesis which anticipated Kant and Pierre-Simon de Laplace by two decades.<sup>9</sup> In a section entitled 'On the diversities of worlds', Swedenborg briefly discussed the possibility of life on other planets and the variety of forms it might take, although he quickly dismissed these considerations as mere 'conjectures':

If however, in these earths we could suppose the existence of an animal kingdom of the same kind as our own, then we must also suppose it subject to the same contingencies, changes, modes and series, through which it must pass to arrive at the same perfection; but since we cannot presume that, in these respects, all other worlds are absolutely similar to our own, so we cannot presume them to be tenanted by a precisely similar race of living creatures. Let us however proceed from conjectures to realities.<sup>10</sup>

However, it was only at the end of the 1740s that Swedenborg explicitly engaged with the plurality of worlds debate, which discussed the nature of life on other planets. By Swedenborg's time the plurality of worlds debate intensified through a conjunction of factors including, but not limited to, the popularization of the heliocentric model, geographical expansion through the discoveries of the New World, technological developments in astronomy, theological tensions raised by the Reformation and the widespread popularity of the *littérature de voyage*.<sup>11</sup> Stories of travel in space to other worlds became a specific type of literature often associated with travelling exploration, theological reflection and philosophical satire.<sup>12</sup>

In 1747, Swedenborg retired at fifty-nine from his position of *Assessor* at the *Bergscollegium* in order to work on theology. His major eight-volume theological work, to which he referred and quoted heavily in most of his later books, was published anonymously in London from 1749 to 1756 and entitled *Arcana*

<sup>8</sup>For a detailed summary of Swedenborg's early astronomical views, see Dunér (note 5) 450–79 (pp. 458–65).

<sup>9</sup>Dunér (note 5), 467.

<sup>10</sup>Emanuel Swedenborg, *The Principia or the First Principles of Natural Things*, 2 vols (Bryn Athyn: Swedenborg Scientific Association, 1988), II, p. 241.

<sup>11</sup>See Steven J. Dick, *Plurality of Worlds: The Origins of the Extraterrestrial Life Debate from Democritus to Kant* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982), Steven J. Dick, 'A Historical Perspective on the Extent and Search for Life', in *Exploring the Origin, Extent, and Future of Life: Philosophical, Ethical, and Theological Perspectives*, ed. by Constance M. Bertka (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 167–85, Karl S. Guthke, *Der Mythos der Neuzeit: Das Thema der Mehrheit der Welten in der Literatur und Geistesgeschichte von der kopernikanischen Wende bis zur Science Fiction* (Bern, Switzerland: Francke, 1983), Crowe (note 6), Michael J. Crowe, *The Extraterrestrial Life Debate, Antiquity to 1915* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008) and Michael Crowe, 'William Whewell, the Plurality of Worlds, and the Modern Solar System', *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*, 51:2 (2016), 431–49, Mark Brake, 'On the Plurality of Inhabited Worlds: A Brief History of Extraterrestrialism', *International Journal of Astrobiology*, 5 (2006), 99–107, and Dunér (note 5); For examples of explicit parallels between the New World and extra-terrestrial worlds, see Cyrano de Bergerac, *Histoire Comique des Etats et Empires de la Lune* (Paris: Charles de Sercy, 1657) p. 11 and Christian Huygens, *Cosmotheoros sive de terri coelestibus* (The Hague: Adrianum Moetjens, 1698) §23.

<sup>12</sup>Dunér (note 5) 451.

*Coelestia* (*Secrets of Heaven*).<sup>13</sup> It contained an exegesis of the reportedly long-lost inner spiritual meaning of the books of Genesis and Exodus, completed at the end of each chapter by what Swedenborg called *memorabilia*, that is, memorable episodes worthy to be remembered and told.<sup>14</sup> The *memorabilia* were accounts of conversations with dead spirits and angels reportedly experienced by Swedenborg in his explorations of the afterlife.<sup>15</sup> They were intended to be understood in relation to hermeneutic passages, although they sometimes loosely related to the exegetical points made. Swedenborg did not claim they were ‘visions’ (*visiones*), although they were subsequently received and commonly referred as such by his readers.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the best efforts of Swedenborg and of his London publisher John Lewis, the eight volumes of *Arcana Coelestia* sold poorly.<sup>17</sup> In order to increase readership and sales, Lewis advised Swedenborg to shorten the length of *Arcana Coelestia*, divide it into parts and to partially translate them into English.<sup>18</sup> Sales remained unsatisfactory after those changes, and Swedenborg conceived his five follow-up books of 1758 as shorter extensions of doctrinal points and experiences already presented in *Arcana Coelestia*, with a greater focus on his popular *memorabilia*.<sup>19</sup>

*De Telluribus* was the first result from this shift in publishing strategy. It was the first work published by Swedenborg after *Arcana Coelestia*, and the first to be released in the ‘post-Christian Age’, a new era which began after Swedenborg claimed to have witnessed the Last Judgment in the spiritual world during the year 1757. This event was to be heralded in his writings and was presented as the advent of the ‘New Jerusalem’ described in *Revelation* 21:1–2.<sup>20</sup>

It was not a piece of original work, but a seventy-two page-long compilation of texts bound together, containing all but one of the extra-terrestrial encounters published in the last three volumes of *Arcana Coelestia*. *De Telluribus* required a minimum amount of publishing work from Lewis and Swedenborg, and presented the latter’s contribution to the debate on the plurality of worlds, a topic which was

<sup>13</sup>Emanuel Swedenborg, *Arcana Coelestia*, 8 vols (London: John Lewis, 1749–1756). For an English edition of reference, see Emanuel Swedenborg, *Secrets of Heaven: The New Century Edition*, trans. by Lisa Hyatt Cooper, 15 vols (West Chester, PA: The Swedenborg Foundation, 2008–2015).

<sup>14</sup>See *A lexicon to the Latin text of the theological writings of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772)*, ed. by John Chadwick and Jonathan Rose (London: The Swedenborg Society, 2010) p. 267.

<sup>15</sup>In Swedenborg’s first manuscripts recording his mystical experiences in the 1740s, the *memorabilia* were first referred to as *experientiae spirituales*, ‘spiritual experiences’. See Norman Ryder, *A descriptive bibliography of the works of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772)*, 6 vols (London: The Swedenborg Society, 2010–), II (2012), p. 120.

<sup>16</sup>For reference to Swedenborg stating that his *memorabilia* are not visions, see *Arcana Coelestia* (note 13) §1885.

<sup>17</sup>One of the few and most famous buyers of *Arcana Coelestia* was the philosopher from Königsberg Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). See Immanuel Kant, *Träume eines Geistersehers* (Königsberg: Johann Jacob Kanter, 1766) and for an English translation, *Dreams of a spirit-seer and other writings*, ed. and trans. by Gregory R. Johnson (West Chester, PA: The Swedenborg Foundation, 2002), pp. 40, 49–50.

<sup>18</sup>See Acton (note 1), II, 509–11.

<sup>19</sup>See particularly Swedenborg’s works *De Telluribus in mundo nostro solari, quae vocantur planetae* (London: John Lewis, 1758), *De Coelo et ejus mirabilibus, et de inferno* (London: John Lewis, 1758), and *De Ultimo Judicio et de Babylonia destructa* (London: John Lewis, 1758). The two other works released by Swedenborg this year were *De Equo albo de quo in Apocalypsi, Cap: XIX* (London: John Lewis, 1758) and *De Nova Hierosolyma et ejus doctrina coelesti: ex auditis e coelo* (London: John Lewis, 1758). On publication order, see note 24.

<sup>20</sup>See, e.g. *De Ultimo Judicio* (note 19).

experiencing a fresh burst of interest at the time.<sup>21</sup> Extracted and compiled in *De Telluribus*, the *memorabilia* about extra-terrestrials scattered through *Arcana Coelestia* became a unified and self-standing literary object of its own.

### **(b). Structure, editing and a missing planet**

As a book, *De Telluribus* was internally divided in two, both in content and presentation. The solar planets were treated first, in the following order: Mercury, Jupiter, Mars, Saturn, Venus and the Moon. The criteria according to which these planets are treated is at first unclear, and differs from the order in *Arcana Coelestia*, where Venus is between Mercury and Mars, whilst in *De Telluribus* Venus is moved after Saturn.<sup>22</sup> Planets of the solar system are indeed not analysed according to their proximity to the sun, nor do they reflect the chronological succession of Swedenborg's spiritual experiences.<sup>23</sup> Neither are they classified according to the length of the accounts, although the three shorter accounts of Saturn, Venus and the Moon are effectively grouped together at the end. However, the order does reflect a clear symmetrical spiritual hierarchy, which progresses like a spiritual voyage ascending from the travelling spirits of Mercury to the higher spirits of Jupiter, up to the highest spiritual world of Mars. Then the succession 'descends' with the lower worlds of Saturn, the spirits of Venus and the Moon. At the end of the last solar account of the Moon, an eighth part deals with the theological reason behind God's unique incarnation on Earth as Jesus Christ, along with its purpose and benefits for the whole universe. This idiosyncratic ordering was the result of Swedenborg's editorial intervention.<sup>24</sup> It was specific to *De Telluribus* and was not kept in Swedenborg's follow-up work *De Coelo et ejus Mirabilibus et de Inferno*.

The most striking difference between the accounts in *Arcana Coelestia* and *De Telluribus* lies in the omission of one extra-solar account between the two works. Six extra-solar planets are mentioned in *Arcana Coelestia*, whereas in *De Telluribus*, there are only five. The fourth extra solar planet in *Arcana Coelestia* was suppressed by Swedenborg, whilst the subsequent planets were substituted. The fact that Swedenborg deleted a previously published account without

<sup>21</sup>See, e.g. Voltaire (François-Marie Arouet), *Le Micromégas de M. de Voltaire* (London: John Robinson, 1752) and Immanuel Kant, *Allgemeine Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels* (Königsberg: Johann Friedrich Petersen, 1755).

<sup>22</sup>The differences between Swedenborg's *Spiritual Diary*, *Arcana Coelestia* extra-terrestrial accounts and *De Telluribus* were listed in a rare study from the 1950s published in Latin and reedited in 1980 by Lisa Hyatt Cooper, *De Telluribus in Universo, cum parallelismis ex operibus ejusdem auctoris Arcana Coelestia & Diarium Spirituale ob ab Emanuele Swedenborg* (Bryn Athyn: The Academy of the New Church Press, 1980).

<sup>23</sup>Ten years earlier in the first volume of his unpublished *Spiritual Diary*, Swedenborg recorded his accounts with spirits in the following order: Jupiter (§519) Mercury (§1415) Venus (§1441) and Saturn (§1513). See Emanuel Swedenborg, *The Spiritual Diary*, 5 vols (Bryn Athyn: The Academy of the New Church, 1977–8) I.

<sup>24</sup>Although *De Telluribus* was listed by Swedenborg as the first work composed after his *Arcana Coelestia*, in later years Swedenborg came to present *De Telluribus* as last to be read among his five works of 1758, which some scholars called the 'presentation order'. On the hypothesis of 'composition' versus 'presentation' order, see *Editor's preface* by Jonathan Rose and Stuart Shotwell, in Emanuel Swedenborg, *The Shorter Works of 1758: The New Century Edition*, ed. by Jonathan Rose and others (West Chester, PA: The Swedenborg Foundation, 2018).

mention, acknowledgment nor explanation provides further evidence of his growing awareness for his preferred audiences. Whilst the initial impulse for suppressing an account may have originated from practical reasons related to binding formats and questions of length, the fact that Swedenborg chose to delete an entire account also underlines his desire to publish what he perceived as the most doctrinally consistent and rhetorically efficient *memorabilia*. Statements on the missing planet were not redistributed in other accounts of *De Telluribus*, nor in any of Swedenborg's subsequent treatises.

A conjunction of factors indeed sets the suppressed account at odds with the others. First, Swedenborg wrote that he did not 'travel' towards those spirits, but instead they directly 'came to him' in contrast with the eleven other extra-terrestrial *memorabilia*. Second, because of the uncertain and controversial origin of the spirits described.<sup>25</sup> Swedenborg seemed to push the boundaries of his extensive engagement with extra-solar planets when he wrote in *Arcana Coelestia* that the group of spirits were from an Earth among the lesser stars, 'beneath and near the Milky Way' (*et quod situs ejus esset inferius juxta viam lacteam*).<sup>26</sup> In the middle of the eighteenth century, asserting the existence of an extra-galactic planet was a highly controversial statement, likely to attract a wide rejection among Swedenborg's learned readers. Galileo was the first astronomer to observe that the Milky Way's band of light was actually made of individual stars in 1610, yet until the 1920s and Edwin Hubble's discovery of the Cepheid variable V1 star, most astronomers believed that the Milky Way contained all the stars of the universe.<sup>27</sup> Finally, the suppression was not mentioned by Swedenborg in his list of corrections after print send to the publisher, which indicates that the move was deliberate and indeed due to Swedenborg himself.<sup>28</sup>

This evidence revises a first aspect of current scholarly understandings of the book: the question of order, editing and structure provides new insights into Swedenborg's active role in refining his *memorabilia* in consistent ways. *De Telluribus* was strategically assembled with specific Latin-reading audiences in mind: Swedish and German theologians, scholars from the university of Uppsala and literary circles of the Swedish and German nobility with an interest in astronomy.<sup>29</sup>

### **(c). Travelling and illusions of time and space**

According to Swedenborg, information contained in *De Telluribus* about the plurality of worlds derived from his explorations of the afterlife. In order to build a consistent framework for these claims, Swedenborg summarized for

<sup>25</sup>The uncertainty surrounding the origin of those spirits was noted by Swedenborg's followers. See, for example, 'revealed knowledge of the planets' ed. by W. B. Caldwell, *New Church Life Magazine* (1950), 119–25 (p. 123).

<sup>26</sup>See *Arcana Coelestia* (note 13) §10589.

<sup>27</sup>See Michael Hoskin, 'The Milky way from antiquity to modern times', in *The Milky Way Galaxy; Proceedings of the 106th Symposium, Groningen, Netherlands*, ed. by Hugo Allen and others (Springer: New York, 1983), pp. 11–24.

<sup>28</sup>See Acton (note 1), II, 524: *De Telluribus in Universo Errata Typographica*.

<sup>29</sup>See part on Reception.

his readers the nature of the *mundo spirituali*, the ‘world of spirits’, or ‘spiritual world’, within his broader ontological scheme of the *Maximus Homo*, the ‘Grand Man’. However, Swedenborg did not express these views in a centralized part of the book. Instead, they were scattered and reformulated through each of the fourteen different parts of *De Telluribus*, as a direct consequence of how the treatise had been assembled. These views introduced to Swedenborg’s audiences how information could rationally be accessed about beings from most distant worlds in space, beyond death, cosmos and time.

Structurally, the heavens in Swedenborg’s system are literally shaped like a macrocosmic human body, called *Maximus Homo*. Spirits and angels ‘correspond’ to certain of its parts, such as organs and spiritual-mental states.<sup>30</sup> All of these have different functions and significations in its macrocosmic physiology.<sup>31</sup> These relationships depend on the spirits’ beliefs, actions and evolving spiritual development beyond death. Swedenborg did not quote any authors when he expressed his doctrines about the *Maximus Homo*. Yet, his methodical associations between planets, organs and faculties were fully in line with a long tradition of Neoplatonic works, such as Plutarch’s dialogue *De facie quae in orbe lunae apparet* and the influential *Encyclopaedia* of Johann Heinrich Alsted in 1638. In a closer Swedish context, Swedenborg’s analogical connections are highly redolent of Georg Stiernhielm’s *Monile Minervae* in 1652 and of Andreas Samuel Pii’s *Disputatio Philosophica Parallelismum Microcosmi et Macrocosmi Breviter delineans* in 1711.<sup>32</sup> These ontological relations all echoed Swedenborg’s previous anatomical works and his researches on particular organs.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, when Swedenborg assessed the relationships between extra-terrestrial spirits, specific organs and physiological functions, the claim that he felt a sensation in the according part of his own body as confirmation constitutes a much more original development.<sup>34</sup> These sensations *de facto* exemplified the direct relationship of Man as an abridged functional version of *Maximus Homo*.

Within this scheme, Swedenborg’s spiritual world acts as an intermediary plane of existence between heavens and hells, where the souls of the dead dwell during variable number of years. The world of spirits has the appearance of the natural world. It has cities, houses, furniture, theatres and gardens just like the natural world.<sup>35</sup> There they progressively acknowledge that they are dead,

<sup>30</sup>The spirit world, the heavens and the hells are described on various occasions as ‘spiritual states’, states of being and cognition with the appearance of places. See, e.g. *De Coelo* (note 19), §193.

<sup>31</sup>Lunarians have relation to the ensiform or xiphoid cartilage (§111). Spirits from the first exoplanet are related to the spleen (§132). Spirits from the second exoplanet to sight and ‘keenness of vision’ (§140), spirits from the third exoplanet ‘to the left knee’ while appearing ‘on the plane of the head’ (§156), etc.

<sup>32</sup>See Hans Helander, *Neo-Latin Literature in Sweden in the Period 1620–1720. Stylistics, Vocabulary and Characteristic Ideas* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2004), p. 439.

<sup>33</sup>See, e.g. Emanuel Swedenborg, *Regnum Animale*, 3 vols (I–II: the Hague: Adrianum Blyvenburgium, 1744, and III: London: J. Nourse and R. Manby, 1745), I. For a list of all organs covered by Swedenborg in these volumes, see Ryder (note 15), II, 42–4.

<sup>34</sup>See *De Telluribus* (note 19) §88, 95, 107–08, 132, 140.

<sup>35</sup>See, e.g. *De Coelo* (note 19), §582.

reflect on their beliefs and actions and undergo ‘vastations’, viz. purification exercises to either ascend to the heavens or descend into hell. Swedenborg intended to make a clear distinction between his views of the spirit world and the Roman catholic concept of purgatory, which he presented as a ‘diabolical’ ‘Babylonish’ invention with the sole purpose of ‘extorting believers on their deathbeds’.<sup>36</sup> In the spirit world, the dead are said to be often struck when realizing they are not disembodied ghosts. They have fully functioning bodies, made of ‘spiritual substance’, a more ‘perfect’ form of matter. In a typical Neoplatonic fashion, Swedenborg saw physical substance as ultimately deriving from the spiritual and representing its grosser counterpart in the natural world. Spirits feel, perceive, think, work, eat, sleep and breath in the spirit world, in a more ‘functional’ and ‘spiritual’ manner than during their former earthly life. However, all these are ultimately illusions from the dead’s previous life, represented through the faculty of imagination.<sup>37</sup>

Though there is no space nor time in the spirit world, illusions of spatiality, movement and temporality prevail among spirits, in a distinctive Cartesian fashion where the spiritual is seen as a form of matter devoid of physical extension. Swedenborg’s views on space and time do not only feature Cartesian characteristics, but also reminiscent aspects of the ancient philosophy of Parmenides of Elea, whom Swedenborg’s quoted via Malebranche’s *De Veritate* in his philosophical notebook from the 1740s.<sup>38</sup> Swedenborg’s perceptively determined nature of the spiritual world through representations also echoes several aspects of the philosophy of George Berkeley, whom Swedenborg also briefly reviewed in his notebook.<sup>39</sup>

According to Swedenborg, the illusions of time and space in the spiritual world are most difficult to overcome: even when spirits are aware of their illusory nature, they still commonly think that they ‘move’, travel in space and perceive the passing of time. Nevertheless, spirits actually group themselves in conglomerated ‘societies’ or ‘spheres’ from which they never technically ‘move’.<sup>40</sup> Whenever spirits wish to ‘travel’ somewhere or meet with other spirits, they ‘modify their interior states’ (*per mutationes status interiorum*) and think and align themselves to become alike other spirits they wish to see.<sup>41</sup> By doing so they have the impression of moving, and seemingly feel the passing of time whilst the process is completed. Swedenborg claimed that for him, this process lasted from two hours up to two days when he met with extra-solar spirits.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>36</sup>See Emanuel Swedenborg, *Vera Christiana Religio*, 2 vols (Amsterdam, [n.pub.], 1771) §475.

<sup>37</sup>See, e.g. *Spiritual Diary* (note 23), §355, §3173 and *Arcana Coelestia* (note 13) §6008.

<sup>38</sup>See Emanuel Swedenborg, *A Philosopher’s Notebook*, trans. and ed. by Alfred Acton (Bryn Athyn: Swedenborg Scientific Association, 2009), pp. 394–95.

<sup>39</sup>See Swedenborg (note 38), 372.

<sup>40</sup>On the concept of ‘spheres’ in Swedenborg’s theology, see Chadwick and Rose (note 14) 431.

<sup>41</sup>*De Telluribus* (note 19), §138.

<sup>42</sup>See *De Telluribus* (note 19), §128, §138, §168.

In these passages, Swedenborg introduced the distinction between temporality (the actual existence of time) and duration (the illusory perception of time passing) in the spiritual world. Similarly, in terms of spatiality, the appearances of planets at a certain place in the afterlife are nothing more than retrospective representations drawn from memories.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, planets in the afterlife remain invisible to most spirits, as the dead can have no perception of a physical world they have no memory of, and cannot normally consociate with mortals originating from a world they did not know.<sup>44</sup>

#### **(d). Swedenborg's dual status: observer and citizen of both worlds**

By summarizing his ideas on the functional nature of the spiritual world in *De Telluribus*, Swedenborg presented himself as a unique observer, namely a man divinely chosen to simultaneously experience the afterlife and the vicissitudes of life on Earth. The implications of this miraculous dual state were numerous and served Swedenborg's argument in multiple ingenious ways. Most significantly, they put him in a privileged position to reflect upon the societies from Earth and in space.

In *De Telluribus* Swedenborg made a distinction between three main types of accounts: those that he supposedly directly saw and therefore had the strongest authority; those shown to him by spirits; and those which he was told about. Apart from those testimonies, Swedenborg claimed he was able to formulate the laws of the spiritual world and establish the illusory nature of time and space by drawing on three sources of authority.

First, Biblical passages mentioning interactions between mortals, the dead and angels.<sup>45</sup> Building on those passages, Swedenborg concluded that communication with spirits used to be common on Earth during Biblical times, although it was now rare because of mankind's general lack of faith.<sup>46</sup> Swedenborg then asserted that communication with the dead was still common across the universe, especially in more spiritually advanced worlds.<sup>47</sup>

Second and as seen previously, Swedenborg incorporated his views about the eschatological spiritual decline of mankind within a widespread set of Neoplatonic ideas he called *Maximus Homo*, a micro–macro relationship between man's physical body and the broader structure of the universe.

Third, the general laws underlying Swedenborg's afterlife were governed by Cartesian principles, such as the lack of physical extension of the spiritual

<sup>43</sup>*De Telluribus* (note 19), §42 and *Arcana Coelestia* (note 13) §7247.

<sup>44</sup>*De Telluribus* (note 19), §42, §47.

<sup>45</sup>In *De Telluribus* (note 19), §160, Swedenborg mentions Abraham, Sarah, Lot, the inhabitants of Sodom, Manoah and his wife, Joshua, Mary, Elizabeth and 'the prophets in general'. See also in *De Telluribus* (note 19) §159, Swedenborg's use of Luke 24 :39.

<sup>46</sup>*De Telluribus* (note 19), §160. Swedenborg retraced the closure of mankind's spiritual senses to the emergence of lie, which physically diverted the reception of divine influx in the brain, from the cerebellum to the cerebrum (§88).

<sup>47</sup>See *De Telluribus* (note 19), §71 and §160.

world and a critical stance on illusions of temporality and spatiality drawn from corporeal senses.

In this cosmological narrative, the spiritual opening of Swedenborg's senses by the end of 1745 was presented as a gift which allowed him to perceive those limitations and restore his human spiritual faculties to a former state of closeness to the divine. This meant that Swedenborg claimed he experienced the same state as the souls in the spirit world, despite the fact that he was still alive.<sup>48</sup> Swedenborg in fact declared he was a 'citizen' of both worlds at the same time, which reportedly meant his soul was simultaneously in the natural world and the spiritual world.<sup>49</sup>

As a consequence of his dual state, Swedenborg recounted that many spirits thought he was one of them, although they had difficulties in understanding which kind of spirit he exactly was.<sup>50</sup> Spirits would also see the natural world through Swedenborg's eyes, feel and perceive the earthly reality through his natural senses as with every mortal.<sup>51</sup> This 'dual nature' played a central part in Swedenborg's self-fashioning as a prophet and became a crucial element of his stance.<sup>52</sup> Swedenborg wrote further it was a cause of great joy when first witnessed by the spirits and angels in the afterlife, although after 'some months' spirits became used to him, and quite humorously 'lost interest' in his person.<sup>53</sup>

### **(e). Patterns in descriptions of spirits from other planets**

Swedenborg consistently asked the same questions through the different accounts and wished to discuss recurring topics, such as: how and which God do you worship? In which kind of habitations do you live? In which social organization? What is your diet? Which kind of clothes do you wear? How many wives do your men take? Do you believe in life after death? Prevalent themes discussed include the sciences from Earth, the word under written form, revelation happening on Earth and the visible form of God. Swedenborg frequently challenges the spirits and often educates them through the book. Through these conversations, Swedenborg exposed his views upon various natural philosophical theories such as instincts in animals (§96), his climatic theory of warmth and heat (§45) and the propagation of sound in air (§87).

<sup>48</sup>See *Spiritual Diary* (note 23), I, §130.

<sup>49</sup>See *De Telluribus* (note 19), §135.

<sup>50</sup>See, e.g. *Arcana Coelestia* (note 13), §10808, *De Telluribus* (note 19), §170.

<sup>51</sup>*De Telluribus* (note 19), §135.

<sup>52</sup>Swedenborg's 'dual state' has been a source of fascination for scholars with an interest in mental illness, who retrospectively diagnosed Swedenborg with either temporal-lobe seizures, epilepsy and/or various forms of schizophrenia. See, e.g. Karl Jaspers, *Strindberg, Van Gogh, Swedenborg et Hoelderlin* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1953), J. Johnson, 'Henry Maudsley on Swedenborg's messianic psychosis', *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 165 (1994), 690–91, and for an overview: Mario Poirier, 'Le mystère Swedenborg: raison ou déraison?', *Santé mentale au Québec*, 28:1 (2003), 258–77. In 1915, great Swedish scholar Martin Lamm indulged in similar then-fashionable psychologizing. See Martin Lamm, *Swedenborg and the development of his thought* (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation Publishers, 2000), pp. 208–14.

<sup>53</sup>See *De Telluribus* (note 19), §135.

In contrast to openly fictional plurality of world treatises, Swedenborg was preoccupied by the consistency of his accounts, which touched upon his credibility as a divinely chosen herald of the post-Christian Age. Swedenborg repeatedly reminded his readers why communication with the spiritual world had ceased on Earth, how these communications took place and how he could claim to have travelled for days in a universe devoid of time and space.<sup>54</sup> Swedenborg even went so far as explaining how his speculative measurements of planet's circumference, orbital period and sidereal rotation were deduced thanks to reference points taken in the natural world, because the spiritual world is devoid of geometrical space (§167). Furthermore, several non-consecutive accounts are related to each other and explain themselves mutually across *De Telluribus*, reinforcing interdependence between the *memorabilia*.<sup>55</sup>

Swedenborg described extra-terrestrial spirits as mostly anthropomorphic, vegetarians, close to nature, living in autonomous family units, away from society and the corruptive influence of centralized governments. This composite description echoes contemporary depictions of the *bon sauvage* preserved from the nefarious influence of civilization in travelling literature of the time, such as in Michel de Montaigne's *Essais* and Denis Diderot's *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville*. Swedenborg's own library contained several books belonging to the genre, namely *Voyages aux Côtes de Guinée et en Amérique* (1719) from an anonymous author called 'M. N\*\*\*', and Thomas Herbert's *Relation du voyage de Perse et des Indes Orientales* from 1663.<sup>56</sup> Approximately half of the extra-terrestrial spirits described by Swedenborg live naked with no sense of shame, in a fashion reminiscent of Earth's Edenic time and redolent of contemporary descriptions of indigenous people.

Physically, the spirits were usually described through four characteristics: the shape of their bodies (including form and size), their face, their clothing and their gait. The size and shapes of the inhabitants are not proportionate to the effects of gravitation described by Newton in the inverse square law, but rather to assigned virtues or significance attached to their characteristics, with a particular focus on the face, which relates to truth, expression of emotions and communication.<sup>57</sup> Swedenborg presented himself as being able to either communicate in verbal or internal speech with the spirits, the latter internal being a non-verbal mode of communication favoured by angels (§169). Reinforcing parallels with Earth's primordial past, some extra-terrestrial spirits such as from the fifth exoplanet were said to live in eternal spring due to the shorter length of their year, a theory already exposed in Swedenborg's early astronomical work *Om Jordenes* from 1719.

Most extra-terrestrial spirits were said to live in closer relationship to God than on Earth, sometimes with frequent and direct intercourse with the living,

---

<sup>54</sup>See, e.g. *De Telluribus* (note 19), §1, §123, §125, §127, §138.

<sup>55</sup>See, e.g. *De Telluribus* (note 19), §68, §72 and §154; §83 and §149; §93 and §162.

<sup>56</sup>See Bergquist (note 7), 'Contents of Swedenborg's Library', 469–82.

<sup>57</sup>See Dunér (note 5), 472.

such as spirits of Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, the third and fourth exoplanets. These interactions were said to mirror the former spiritual closeness which Earthlings enjoyed during most ancient times. According to Swedenborg, extra-terrestrial spirits mainly worship God in a unitarian and monotheistic way, albeit with varying worshipping practices.<sup>58</sup> Idolatry, a common sin through the universe, results from a failure of worshipping God under his visible embodied human form, at the expense of false saints, erroneous trinitarian representations of God (§158) or ugly statues (§142). Some extra-terrestrial spirits did not worship God directly, but angelic entities which assumed a divine form to allow effective worship to happen according to their spiritual faculties (§130). Through those accounts, it is clear the question of extra-terrestrial worship was used by Swedenborg to tackle the issues of idolatry, salvation, sainthood and atonement in a fashion typical of plurality of worlds and travel literature.

Several statements contained in *De Telluribus* and drawn from *Arcana Coelestia* foreshadowed later central doctrinal developments of Swedenborg's theology, such as venereal love and marriage, treated in his self-standing controversial book on the matter in 1768, *Delitiae sapientiae de Amore Conjugiali*. Extra-terrestrial spirits in *De Telluribus* are said to be all monogamous and to reject polygamy, although prostitutes exist on certain planets, such as on the fourth exoplanet.<sup>59</sup> On these topics, extra-terrestrial societies effectively functioned as mirrors for Earthlings, and provided points of comparison for the sins upon Earth. In Swedenborg's system, closeness to the divine constitutes the sole relevant spatial criterion, therefore it is no wonder most spiritually low Earthlings cannot access spiritual truths, as their lack of faith translates with further remoteness and spatial estrangement in the afterlife.

Finally, in a fashion reminiscent of typical arguments of plenitude, Swedenborg stated that every moon and planet in the universe shelters life, although God was born as Christ under human form solely on planet Earth, for the sake of the whole universe.<sup>60</sup> In this view, although Earth was not cosmographically nor physically the centre of the universe anymore, in Swedenborg's *De Telluribus* it remained a centre of key theological importance in God's immense creation. In this perspective, Swedenborg contrasted the relativism induced by Copernican heliocentrism with a unique theological significance and spiritual role for Earth within the universe.

#### **(f). Appearances in the afterlife, satire of Earthlings and technology of writing**

The complex literary nature of *De Telluribus* escapes any obvious classification based on fiction or non-fiction. It is not the only work of Swedenborg in this

---

<sup>58</sup>*De Telluribus* (note 19), §69, §91, §98–99, §103, §107, §150–51, §153–54, §175.

<sup>59</sup>*De Telluribus* (note 19), §103, §134, §147, §178.

<sup>60</sup>See Dunér (note 5), 475.

case.<sup>61</sup> Yet, *De Telluribus* is a particularly interesting work to reflect upon the culturally mediated nature of Swedenborg's *memorabilia*. Swedenborg had a clear truth-claim about them, which was supposed to discard any satirical interpretation of his work. This is particularly clear in *De Telluribus*, where Swedenborg's *memorabilia* read like narrativized explanations about the nature of the afterlife. What spirits know and how they appear partially result from a perceptive process between the observer and the observed, between Swedenborg himself and the spirits he supposedly talked to.<sup>62</sup> In Swedenborg's 'philosophy' of the afterlife, spirits share the memories of their mortal observers.<sup>63</sup> Their appearance is also partially determined by mental representations from these observers. As a result, Swedenborg's *memorabilia* constitute narrativized 'spatiotemporal representations' of a plane structurally devoid of time and space.<sup>64</sup>

This acknowledgement of the dynamic perceptive nature of representations in the afterlife constitute, I argue, the most original and daring argument of *De Telluribus*. It is also a key element to understand how the *memorabilia* allowed Swedenborg to use irony and apparently espoused the codes of literary satire, while at the same time claiming to not be satirical, nor mere personifications of Swedenborg's doctrines through prosopopoeia. Swedenborg's accounts about dead Jesuits harassing extra-terrestrials though the universe with false beliefs are for instance not short of satirical overtones (§61). Yet Swedenborg's accounts of spiritual 'travels' were not meant as an allegorical nor literary subterfuge to undertake a philosophical voyage like in Kircher's *Itinerarium Exctaticum* (1656) or a mere satire like in Bergerac's *Histoire Comique des États et Empires de la Lune* (1657), even though *De Telluribus* actually espoused most of the literary codes of the genre. Considered retrospectively, the argument of appearances in the afterlife provides a remarkable justification for the culturally mediated and subjectively determined representations of Swedenborg's extra-terrestrial spirits, which are so typical of early modern works about the plurality of worlds.<sup>65</sup> More generally, it sheds light upon an underrated aspect of the complex relationship between form, style, register and content in all of Swedenborg's *memorabilia*.

<sup>61</sup> Apart from Swedenborg's other theological works, see also Swedenborg's allegorical-political poems *Festivus Applausus* and *Camena Borea* (1715) and the 'Scheringsson manuscript', better known as his so-called *Dream Diary* (1743). See Emanuel Swedenborg, *Festivus Applausus in Caroli XII in Pomeraniam suam adventum*, edited, with introduction, translation and commentary by Hans Helander (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1985), Emanuel Swedenborg, *Camena Borea*, edited, with introduction, translation and commentary by Hans Helander (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1988), and Lars Bergquist, *Swedenborg's Dream Diary*, trans. by Anders Hallengren (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation Publishers, 2001).

<sup>62</sup> See, e.g. *Arcana Coelestia* (note 13) §5858, and *De Telluribus* (note 19), §73, §52, §106, §160.

<sup>63</sup> The expression 'heavenly philosophy' of Swedenborg ('*Himmliche Philosophie*') is from the German theologian Christoph Friedrich Oetinger (1702–1782). See part on Reception and note 104.

<sup>64</sup> See Johnson (note 17), xvii–xviii.

<sup>65</sup> For obvious similarities between extra-terrestrial descriptions in *De Telluribus* and other works, see particularly Francis Godwin, *The Man in the Moone* (London: John Norton, 1638), Bergerac's *Histoire Comique des États et Empires de la Lune* (note 11) and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (London: Benjamin Motte, 1726).

In a similar fashion to *littérature de voyage* and fictional narrativized works on cosmic pluralism, looking at non-Earthling spirits allowed Swedenborg to better criticize what spirits from Earth were like, usually by casting ridicule on them. Earthlings were usually the privileged targets of Swedenborg's irony, who depicted their vices, lack of genuine faith and unwillingness to abandon erroneous beliefs.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, Earthlings are repeatedly presented as disturbing and nefarious beings who not only are the spiritually lowest souls in the universe, but also preach, harass and infest higher spiritual beings from other worlds.<sup>67</sup> Swedenborg's use of irony becomes particularly obvious in the following accounts, which appear strikingly similar in tone to other contemporary literary works on the plurality of worlds: Mercurians cannot stay in the presence of Earthlings and 'run away' if they see them (§20). Swedenborg's report that his communication with Martians was disturbed by Earthlings who became insane because of the 'spiritual truths' communicated by Martians (§89). Earthlings mocked Saturnians' wish to die when they were feeling led astray from God (§98). Spirits from the fourth exoplanet were confused by Earthlings who tried to persuade them of believing in 'three Gods' and of 'speaking of three but thinking of one' (§158). A temporarily resurrected priest from Earth tried to preach a reluctant couple of naked extra-terrestrials from the fourth exoplanet (§162). Trinitarian missionaries from Earth harassed spirits from the fifth exoplanet before being cast in hell (§169). Earthling spirits mocked Jovian's gait and had lascivious thoughts after seeing them naked (§56). Jovians were annoyed by Jesuit spirits and thought they were the 'worst possible spirits who could exist' (§61). Of course, criticisms of Jesuits were a trope in Swedenborg's Protestant context, but the account also allowed Swedenborg to expose his deep concerns about science used to promote erroneous beliefs and leading to the worship of nature and atheism. This aspect had been a long concern for Swedenborg since his work *De Infinito* in 1734.<sup>68</sup>

Writing was the medium through which Swedenborg sought to reveal the lost spiritual sense of Scripture, a mission supposed to be the main reason for the final divine opening of his senses in 1745. Building on John 1:1, Swedenborg claimed the technology of writing literally allowed God to become the material word, a 'secret' which he claimed was understood by very few.<sup>69</sup> The role assigned to the scriptural art and medium becomes clear when put in perspective with Swedenborg's Protestant emphasis on the theological importance of the printing revolution, along with the theological significance of the practice and gift of writing. Swedenborg himself praised the invention of typography, which he celebrated in a Latin paronomasia as 'the art that forms speech not

---

<sup>66</sup>See, e.g. *De Telluribus* (note 19), §61, §163.

<sup>67</sup>*De Telluribus* (note 19), §56, 61, §89, §98, §158, §163, §169.

<sup>68</sup>Emanuel Swedenborg, *On the Infinite and the Final Cause of Creation* (London: The Swedenborg Society, 1992), p. 18.

<sup>69</sup>*De Telluribus* (note 19), §122.

with the mouth, but with copper' (*'Artis, quae format non ore, sed aere loquelas'*).<sup>70</sup> This emphasis echoed Swedenborg's more specific interests in universal language and primordial alphabets, such as Hebrew and Egyptian hieroglyphs.<sup>71</sup> In Swedenborg's view, writing had been brought by God to mankind as a religious technology to encode spiritual truths, a technology which permitted a certain mode of manifestation of the divine and maintained the possibility of permanent revelation in a spiritually declining world. This technology allowed the Word to be transcribed, preserved and transmitted to generations of Earthlings for thousands of years, despite the fact that like many of his contemporaries, Swedenborg considered only part of the Christian canon to have a genuine divine origin.<sup>72</sup> This written mode of manifestation of the divine was therefore said to allow revelation to happen 'permanently' on Earth (§136).

The idea that more spiritually advanced beings would not need books nor writing, and that they would even have difficulties understanding such a concept is a recurring theme in *De Telluribus*. The statement is best exemplified by Mercurians, who wander through the universe exploring people's memories (§6) and are said to have difficulties understanding the mere concept of what a book is (§28). This allows Swedenborg to dissert that writing is related to memorization, and that the faculty of memory represents an estrangement from a more interior and direct form of spiritual knowledge. Earth's superior technological development therefore appears as an expression of its inferior spiritual abilities. The more spiritually advanced the extra-terrestrial beings are, the more the discrepancy between them and Earthlings fuels a broader criticism about the dangerous materialism of science.

### 3. Literary context

#### (a). *Swedenborg and the plurality of worlds debate*

Speculations about life on other planets was not an uncommon nor illegitimate question to explore during Swedenborg's time. Many accounts, from natural-philosophical and astronomical speculation to theology or philosophical satire, would claim visits to other planets.<sup>73</sup> According to Swedish scholar

<sup>70</sup>See Emanuel Swedenborg, *Ludus Heliconius and other Latin poems*, edited, with introduction, translation and commentary by Hans Helander (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1995) pp. 82–83. Swedenborg celebrated the invention of typography with a poem published in Leipzig in 1740: *In praeconium inventionis typographiae* in a volume commemorating the tercentenary of the invention of typography by Gutenberg. See Ryder (note 15), I, 447.

<sup>71</sup>For evidence of Swedenborg's interest in Hebrew, see, e.g. *Spiritual diary* (note 23), I, 420, the posthumously published *On the Sacred Scripture or the Word of the Lord*, trans. by John Chadwick (London: The Swedenborg Society, 1997) §3:9, §4:14, §33, *De Coelo* (note 19) §260, and *Vera Christiana Religio* (note 36), I, §278. For evidence of Swedenborg's lifelong interest in hieroglyphs, see, e.g. Inge Jonsson, *A Drama of Creation: Sources and Influences in Swedenborg's Worship and Love of God* (West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation Publishers, 2004), pp. 32–4, and Acton (note 1), II, 684–85.

<sup>72</sup>See *Arcana Coelestia* (note 13) §10325.

<sup>73</sup>See, for example, Johannes Kepler, *Somnium* (Frankfurt: Sagani Silesiorum, 1634), Godwin, *The Man in the Moone* (note 65), Athanasius Kircher, *Itinerarium Ecstaticum* (Rome: Vitalis Mascardi, 1656) de Bergerac, *Histoire Comique*

David Dunér, Swedenborg read Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle's *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (1686) and it seems probable that he also read Christian Huygens' posthumous *Cosmotheoros* from 1698.<sup>74</sup> Christian Wolff, whom Swedenborg admired as a natural philosopher but rejected later as a theologian, published his *Elementa Matheseos Universae*, a five-volume book in which the third volume, *Elementa Astronomiae*, dealt with the life on other planets through logical inferences.<sup>75</sup> In Swedenborg's close Swedish context, William Derham's *Astro-Theology or a Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* from 1713 was translated into Swedish in 1735.<sup>76</sup> Two disputations were defended in the 1740s at Uppsala on the hypothesis of life on other planets.<sup>77</sup> Christopher Polhem, Swedenborg's close collaborator and famous Swedish inventor, described exploratory travels to the moon made in spirit by a Saami in a fashion typical of the stories attached to the extraordinary powers of Saami in Sweden since the Middle Ages.<sup>78</sup> Conjointly to the release of Swedenborg's extra-terrestrial accounts in *Arcana Coelestia*, Immanuel Kant published *Allgemeine Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels* (1755) where the philosopher from Königsberg speculated on the characteristics and intelligence of inhabitants of the solar system in relation to the size and the climate of planets, in a manner reminiscent of Huygens's *Cosmotheoros*.

Swedenborg was not the first person to claim to have accessed information about other worlds in space through angels. In *Itinerarium Ecstaticum* (1656), an exploration of the solar system dedicated to the Swedish Queen Christina, Athanasius Kircher claimed that an angel named 'Cosmiel' had taken Kircher's literary alter ego 'Theodidactus' to explore the planets and life in the solar system, in a state of ecstasy induced by the harmonies of music.<sup>79</sup> Huygens attacked what he deemed as Kircher's 'product of his own fancy and thought', although he did not attack the claim that an angel had taken Kircher on a journey, but rather what he considered as unreasonable statements insufficiently grounded in astronomical science.<sup>80</sup> Much like in *Itinerarium Ecstaticum*, travels to space and other worlds were frequently said to be inspired by God, such as in Cyrano de Bergerac's *Histoire Comique des États et Empires de la Lune* (1657).<sup>81</sup> Swedenborg knew of Bergerac's unfinished and posthumously published sequel

---

*des Etats et Empires de la Lune* (note 11), Ludvig Holberg, *Nicolai Klimii Iter Subterraneum* (Copenhagen: Jacob Preuss, 1741), Voltaire, *Micromégas* (note 21). One can also mention in antiquity, Lucian of Samosata, *Alethe Diagemata / Verae Historiae*. in *Lucian. Works* trans. by A. M. Harmon (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, 1913) and during the Renaissance, Giordano Bruno, *De l'infinito universe et mondi* (Venice, [n. pub.], 1584). For a wider overview, see Crowe 1986 (note 6).

<sup>74</sup>See Dunér (note 5), 453.

<sup>75</sup>We know Swedenborg had the second volume of Wolff's *Elementa* in his library, however we have no evidence about the third volume. See Bergquist (note 7), 481.

<sup>76</sup>Dunér (note 5), 454.

<sup>77</sup>Dunér (note 5), 453.

<sup>78</sup>Dunér (note 5), 453. See also Helander (note 70), 203.

<sup>79</sup>Carlos Ziller Camenietzki, 'L'Extase interplanétaire d'Athanasius Kircher: philosophie, cosmologie et discipline dans la compagnie de Jésus au XVIIe siècle', *Nuncius* 10 (1995) 3–32.

<sup>80</sup>Huygens (note 11), §102–03.

<sup>81</sup>de Bergerac (note 11), 4.

to the book, *Histoire Comique des États et Empires du Soleil* (1662) which he mentioned in his philosophical notebook via a quote from Leibniz's *Epistolae* about the nature of the soul and possible forms of extra-terrestrial bodies.<sup>82</sup>

Because of the central theological implications of the debate, it was not surprising that Swedenborg, who re-defined himself as a theologian trained in the natural sciences, positioned himself on the problem. He did so from the theological perspective he had been working on since the mid-1740s. Thanks to his new self-fashioning as a theologian with unlimited access to the spiritual world and the spirits of the dead, Swedenborg was now able to answer former inquiries held during his career as an *Assessor* at the *Bergscollegium*.

### **(b). De Telluribus in the context of plurality of worlds and dialogues des morts literature**

Swedenborg was not alone in speaking to the dead in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, nor was he alone in linking the themes of *postmortem* conversation and travel to other worlds in space.<sup>83</sup> One hundred years before *De Telluribus*, Swedish linguist and poet Georg Stiernhielm (1598–1672) published *Astropoeticus* (1658), an allegorical poem written partly in Latin and other languages, which depicted and extolled the deeds of Swedish king Charles X Gustavus (1622–1660). *Astropoeticus* relied heavily on anagrams and allegorical transpositions of modern facts into classical figures and references, and various European countries were disguised under celestial constellations or classical deities, exemplifying the supposedly cyclical nature of history and the constant ongoing conversation between classical and seventeenth century voices.<sup>84</sup> Swedenborg was an admirer of Stiernhielm and probably thought he was a relative of the great Swedish poet.<sup>85</sup> Swedenborg's early poetic works (1714–1715) share many stylistic similarities with Stiernhielm's *Astropoeticus*, and show how the mastery of allegorical poetics (*involucra, variatio sermonis*) commonly permitted one to conceal philosophical and satirical subtext under astronomical and classical mythological references.<sup>86</sup>

In France, the popular *dialogue des morts* genre staged conversations between the living and the dead by turning protagonists in satirical personifications of their ideas.<sup>87</sup> In 1683, Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle published *Nouveaux*

<sup>82</sup>See Swedenborg (note 38), 283.

<sup>83</sup>In *De Telluribus* (note 19), the dead mentioned are not all anonymous and references are made to the spirits of Christian Wolff and Aristotle in §38, in a fashion typical of *dialogue des morts* literature.

<sup>84</sup>Helander (note 61), in *Camena Borea*, 19.

<sup>85</sup>Swedenborg purchased Stiernhielm's annotated copy of Plotinus's *Enneads* at an auction in 1705 during his university years at Uppsala (1699–1709), see Bergquist (note 7), 477. At the time the Swedenborg and Stierna families were thought to be related by a common ancestor, although the connection later proved to be based on a confusion between two unrelated homophones. See Anita Hjelte-Björklund, 'Emanuel Swedenborg – från bergsmansrötter till andesfärer', *Släktforskarens Årsbok 2019* (Malmö: Exakta, 2019), 8–27.

<sup>86</sup>See Helander (note 61), in *Festivus Applausus*, 33–4.

<sup>87</sup>From the end of the seventeenth to the end of the eighteenth century, approximately two hundred *dialogues des morts* were published in France. See Lise Andries, 'Le Dialogue des Morts au XVIIIe siècle', *Compte-rendu de séance*

*Dialogues des Morts*, a series of philosophical and ironical conversations between deceased spirits of ancient and modern figures. Three years later in 1686, Fontenelle published his famous *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes*, which used the theme of the plurality of worlds to similarly reflect on contemporary society. Voltaire equally relied on both genre in 1752 with *Micromégas*, a philosophical story about two extra-terrestrial giants coming to Earth, and in 1765 with the *post-mortem* conversation set in the Elysian fields *Lucien, Erasme et Rabelais aux Champs-Élysées*.

In England, Jonathan Swift published the highly successful *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) translated in Swedish in 1745 by parliamentarian Olof Bidenius Renhorn. *Gulliver's Travels* was a travel story to new worlds grounded in the *littérature de voyage* genre, in which 'Lemuel Gulliver' described the island of *Glubbudubdrib*, an island of magicians and necromancers where the inhabitants conversed with famous historical figures and philosophers from the past.

All these works share common classical references in the *Nekrikoi Dialogoi / Dialogi Mortuorum* from Lucian of Samosata (120–180), who himself treated both subjects of life on other planets and conversations with the dead. Apart from the *Nekritoi Dialogoi*, Lucian wrote *Alethe Diegemata*, famously known in Latin as *Verae Historiae*, a classic adventure story about a travel to the Moon and Selenites which inspired many early modern adaptations, such as Montesquieu's *Histoire Véritable* (1730–1738).

Going further in exploring the links between the world of the dead and the worlds in space, the traditional view that hell was in the subterranean world was challenged by astronomical developments in the eighteenth century. Scholars such as William Whiston considered hell to be a comet, a belief shared by Leibniz in his *Theodicée* (1710).<sup>88</sup> In 1741, Danish historian, philosopher and playwright Ludvig Holberg published *Nicolai Klimii iter Subterraneum* (1741) a story where exploration of the Earth's subterranean world led to an inhabited planet orbiting in space around the Earth's inner sun, effectively linking the underworld with planetary exploration.

As we have seen, dialogues with beings from outer space and with spirits of the dead were two long-established strategies commonly used to explore poetic imagination in allegorical terms whilst criticizing society. Those works narratively exemplified the *querelle des anciens et des modernes* and the encounters with indigenous people from *littérature de voyage*, through narratives, personifications and allegorical references. Although the two themes were

---

<sup>n</sup>4, *projet Agon Sorbonne*, (2011). <<http://www.agon.paris-sorbonne.fr/en/ressources-en-ligne/comptes-rendus/les-dialogues-des-morts-au-xviii-siecle#1>> [accessed 12 July 2019], Lise Andries, 'Querelles et dialogues des morts au XVIIIe siècle' *Littératures classiques*, 81 (2013), 131–46. See also *Commemorating Mirabeau: Mirabeau aux Champs-Élysées and other texts*. ed. by Jessica Goodman, 58 (Cambridge, UK: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2017), and Pujol, Stéphane, *Le dialogue d'idées au dix-huitième siècle* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2005).

<sup>88</sup>See Rebecca Esterson, *Secrets of heaven: allegory, Jews, the European Enlightenment and the case of Emanuel Swedenborg* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Boston, 2017), pp. 27–28.

commonly treated side by side, Swedenborg was the first author to merge them both in his *Arcana Coelestia* (1749–1756), and then in *De Telluribus* in 1758 as a self-standing literary work.

#### 4. Reception of *De Telluribus*

*De Telluribus* was largely ignored upon its anonymous publication in 1758. However, several years after its original release the book enjoyed a retrospective reception linked to Swedenborg's fame as a spirit-seer in Sweden and Germany. Swedenborg's reputation as a mystic grew first with the partial break of his anonymity in Sweden in 1758 and its subsequent widespread public acknowledgment by 1760.<sup>89</sup> It was also amplified by Swedenborg's extensive correspondence, and his laborious efforts in sending his theological works to foreign learned men across Europe from 1756 until his death.<sup>90</sup> In the years following the release of *De Telluribus*, a succession of extraordinary events attributed to Swedenborg became popularly discussed in German and Swedish aristocratic circles. These sensational episodes were the so-called 'Stockholm fire' on 19 July 1759, the 'lost receipt' of Madame de Marteville (1760) and the 'deceased brother's secret' (1761) of Swedish Queen Louisa Ulrika (1720–1782).<sup>91</sup> In 1759, Swedenborg reportedly had a 'vision' during a dinner with many guests in Gothenburg about a fire taking place in Stockholm, four hundred kilometers away. To the reported astonishment of the guests and local governor, the fire was confirmed the next day and had stopped just three doors away from Swedenborg's house, as foreseen by Swedenborg at the dinner. In 1760, Swedenborg helped Madame de Marteville, the widow of a Dutch ambassador, to successfully find a lost receipt after asking the spirit of her late husband. In 1761, the Swedish queen Louisa Ulrika asked Swedenborg to provide a proof of his gift by communicating with her late brother Augustus William. Swedenborg subsequently revealed a 'secret' to the queen which, according to her, could have only been known by her late brother. The latest episode, which was subsequently confirmed by Swedenborg himself, proved instrumental in securing royal protection and recognition of Swedenborg's status as a genuine seer.<sup>92</sup> In a letter to Charlotte von Knobloch on 10 August 1763, Immanuel Kant admiratively presented the three episodes as 'confirmations' of Swedenborg's gift, while the Stockholm fire episode had, according to Kant, 'the greatest evidential force of all and really deprives all conceivable doubt of excuse'.<sup>93</sup> Three years later, Kant's opinions about Swedenborg had drastically shifted, in a move to counter rumours of his enthusiasm about Swedenborg's doctrines and claims.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>89</sup>See Johnson (note 17), xxiv.

<sup>90</sup>See Acton (note 1), II, 528–29.

<sup>91</sup>For developed accounts of these episodes, see Bergquist (note 7), 269–73.

<sup>92</sup>See Acton (note 1), II, 652–53.

<sup>93</sup>See *Letter from Kant to Charlotte von Knobloch* in Johnson (note 17), 10:45–10:47, 68–70.

<sup>94</sup>See Johnson (note 17), xiii–xiv, xxiv.

In the year 1766, Swedenborg's reputation as a mystic reached new audiences in Germany and Switzerland, a fact reflected in the letters received and sent by him at the time.<sup>95</sup> This new exposure was further increased by the release of Kant's critical essay *Träume eines Geistersehers* (winter 1766) which played an important role in spreading Swedenborg's controversial fame as a spirit seer in the German speaking countries.<sup>96</sup> However, Swedenborg was already an object of great 'public attention' at Uppsala before the publication of Kant's essay, and his fame in the German speaking countries also anticipated Kant's polemical publication.<sup>97</sup> Part of the success of *Träume* resulted from the fact that Kant attacked an already famous and controversial figure.

In the summer of 1766, Swedish pastor Nicholas Collin (1746–1831) then a student at the University of Uppsala, met Swedenborg at his home in Stockholm.<sup>98</sup> Collin's written testimony shows that Swedenborg's authorship of books such as *Arcana Coelestia* was widely known and that his theological books were available for consultation at Uppsala's university.<sup>99</sup> According to Collin, Swedenborg's doctrines were unknown among the public in Sweden while his fame as a seer was much discussed, especially in Stockholm.<sup>100</sup> Collin stated that although Swedenborg's astronomical doctrines were 'not understood' by most clergy and laity, they still found 'many admirers' due to the popularity of astronomical science in Sweden at the time; after all, the first Swedish observatory was built in Uppsala in 1741, whilst the Stockholm observatory was completed by the *Kungliga Vetenskapsakademien* in 1753.<sup>101</sup> According to Collin, Swedenborg's astronomical doctrines proved particularly popular among 'female minds' and 'the learned' who 'imparted its most pleasing theories'.<sup>102</sup> The 'pleasing' literary character of Swedenborg's descriptions was further emphasized by the German poet and botanist Johann Christian Cuno (1708–1783) in a letter from 8 March 1769, yet in a much harsher tone. Cuno suggested Swedenborg was spreading his theological books in vain, and that his *memorabilia* were widely mocked either as 'fantasies' or considered as 'ingenious poetic fictions'.<sup>103</sup>

In 1770, *De Telluribus* was translated for the first time, into German, by the Lutheran clergyman from Württemberg Friedrich Christoph Oetinger (1702–1782) who corresponded with Swedenborg during six years from 1765 to 1771.<sup>104</sup> Oetinger dismissed Swedenborg's exegesis, but believed in his mystical accounts of the afterlife, which he extracted from *Arcana Coelestia* and released

<sup>95</sup>See Acton (note 1), II, 608–09.

<sup>96</sup>See Johnson (note 17), xi, xvi, and Acton (note 1), II, 641, *Letter from Lavater to Swedenborg*, 24 August 1768.

<sup>97</sup>See Johnson (note 17), xi.

<sup>98</sup>See Alfred Acton, *Academy Collection of Documents about Emanuel Swedenborg* ed. by Alfred Acton, 9 vols. (Bryn Athyn, The Academy of the New Church), IX (1770–1773), p. 423.

<sup>99</sup>See Acton (note 98).

<sup>100</sup>Acton (note 98).

<sup>101</sup>See Acton (note 98), 424.

<sup>102</sup>See Acton (note 98) 424.

<sup>103</sup>See Acton (note 1), II, 651–52.

<sup>104</sup>See Friedrich Christoph Oetinger, *Swedenborgs und anderer Irrdische und Himmlische Philosophie* (Frankfurt and Leipzig, [n. pub.], 1762) and Acton (note 1), II, 606–07.

as a compilation in 1762, entitled *Swedenborgs und anderer Irrdische und Himmlische Philosophie*. On 22 December 1770, a five-page review was published in the German journal *Neue Critische Nachrichten* in Greifswald.<sup>105</sup> The review concluded that Oetinger's translation was of poor quality and that *De Telluribus* read like a satirical novel. The ambiguous position of Oetinger was criticized, as the Lutheran clergyman rejected Swedenborg's theological doctrines but praised the value of his descriptions of the afterlife. Swedenborg's macrocosmic doctrine of the *Maximus Homo* was dismissed further with harsh irony and compared with the writings of Jakob Boehme (1575–1624) while Swedenborg's exegesis was labelled as fully '*metaphorisch*'.<sup>106</sup> The criticism seemed directed towards both Swedenborg and Oetinger, as the latter was also known to be a follower of the doctrines of Jakob Boehme.<sup>107</sup> On 28 June 1771, Oetinger praised Swedenborg for courageously describing his 'visions' in *De Telluribus*, and for not being 'afraid of disgrace and scoffing'.<sup>108</sup> However, in the same letter Oetinger reaffirmed he did not subscribe to Swedenborg's Biblical exegesis and furthermore disagreed with much of the theological doctrines expressed in *De Telluribus*.<sup>109</sup> But this rejection was still not seen as a condemnation of Swedenborg's value as a seer:

Though I have rejected much in your book [De Telluribus] I yet have not made your gift contemptible by it, but rather have exalted it. You have honestly given evidence before the wicked world. [...] For this, the Holy God will reward you abundantly.<sup>110</sup>

The ambivalent position of Oetinger was not uncommon among Swedenborg's admirers. Many were left to reconcile their rejection of Swedenborg's theological views with their fascination for his extraordinary claims and reputation. The study of Swedenborg's correspondence shows how, at the peak of his fame, Swedenborg received demands from across Sweden, Germany and Switzerland to contact deceased figures to settle theological disputes, or to bring comfort to mourners by contacting deceased relatives.<sup>111</sup> Others tried to test Swedenborg's abilities by sending him ciphers to be solved through the help of spirits.<sup>112</sup> Last but not least, figures such as Swiss physiognomist Johann Kaspar Lavater (1741–1801) and the Landgrave of Hesse-Darmstadt Louis IX (1719–1790) asked Swedenborg whether he could teach them how to converse with spirits.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>105</sup>The expression 'ghosts from other planets' is taken from this review, which can be accessed in German in Acton (note 98), 4–9.

<sup>106</sup>For reference to the review, see Acton (note 98) 4–9.

<sup>107</sup>See Acton (note 1), II, 606.

<sup>108</sup>See Acton (note 1), II, 763–64.

<sup>109</sup>See Acton (note 1), II, 763–64.

<sup>110</sup>See Acton (note 1), II, 763–64.

<sup>111</sup>For reference to Swedenborg being asked to contact dead relatives, see, e.g. Acton (note 1), II, 643, 757–59 and Acton (note 98), 419. For help in resolving theological disputes through contact with the dead, see Acton (note 1), II, 628.

<sup>112</sup>For reference to the cipher, see Acton (note 1), II, 687–88.

<sup>113</sup>For reference to Lavater's request about how to obtain the same gifts, see Acton (note 1), II, 643. For Swedenborg's correspondence with landgrave Louis IX, see Acton (note 1), II, 736–38. For further correspondence between Swedenborg and the landgrave, see 745–47, 751–57.

It is clear from those accounts that the reception of *De Telluribus* remained confined to reactions about Swedenborg's claims to be a spirit-seer. Thus, as I argue, Swedenborg's theology may certainly have been dismissed by many, but not his *memorabilia*. These, though fantastic and richly detailed, were accepted by many that found his theological positions difficult to swallow.

The rejection of Swedenborg's theological works increased after the publication of Kant's essay in 1766 and aggravated further after the Swedish trial of 'Swedenborgianism' and Swedenborg's disciples, the Swedes Gabriel Beyer (1721–1779) and Johan Rosén (1726–1773) in 1769. *De Telluribus* was subsequently received either in the light of Swedenborg's debated fame as a mystic theologian, or as an ingenious fiction praised for its poetic, entertaining and apparent satirical elements, whilst the original literary context in which the treatise had been composed slowly waned.

## 5. Concluding remarks

For most of his career as a self-proclaimed religious reformer, Swedenborg's theological message was overshadowed by his fame as a seer. This situation arose as Swedenborg resorted to rely upon his increasingly popular *memorabilia* to spread his theological doctrines. *De Telluribus* was Swedenborg's first book to be solely composed of *memorabilia*, and the first to be published after what he saw as the 'end of the Christian Age' in 1757, a new era ushered by his religious writings. This article has shown the experimental nature of *De Telluribus* in Swedenborg's corpus, along with the unique place it held within his career. Many of the intended goals of *De Telluribus* failed upon its release. Swedenborg's fine arguments about appearances in the afterlife, along with his ambiguous distinctions between *memorabilia* and *visiones* did not resist the wide publicity of his sensational claims. As shown by this article, they contributed later to numerous misunderstandings among Swedenborg's followers and scholars about the nature of Swedenborg's 'visions'. Perhaps conscious of these limitations, Swedenborg came to refer to *De Telluribus* as last to be read among his 1758 works, and described it as containing many secrets understood by very few. Nevertheless, the book provides a fascinating window into Swedenborg's theological development, the refining of his editorial strategies and his re-fashioning as an exegete and reformer with prophetic claims.

The polarized reception of *De Telluribus* led it to be retrospectively categorized either as an 'ingenious allegorical fiction' reading like satire, a narrativized 'philosophy' about the afterlife, genuine accounts about extra-terrestrial spirits or as the strange product of a formerly trained mind now unable to distinguish fantasies from reality. However, the paper has demonstrated how these reactions to *De Telluribus* fell along the lines of opinions about his status as a seer, and how this status was in turn challenged by Swedenborg's divisive theological doctrines. Despite the controversial nature of his theology, Swedenborg became one

of the most popular mystics of the second half of the eighteenth century. From 1758 onwards, Swedenborg's fame spread steadily across Scandinavia, Germany, Switzerland, France and England, as attested by his correspondence, translations by followers and the reviews of his works. The heresy trial of Swedenborgianism in 1769 against two of his disciples demonstrates the determination of the Swedish Lutheran Church to stop the diffusion of Swedenborg's doctrines. At the same time, the trial demonstrated the influence of Swedenborg and the credit he enjoyed among many high-ranking figures of the Swedish and German aristocracy.

As I have argued, despite its non-linear and non-thematical structure, *De Telluribus* represents a remarkable case study to understand Swedenborg's theology and views about the afterlife as a whole. One of the most original and underrated arguments of *De Telluribus* lies in its reflection on the nature of representations in the afterlife. Swedenborg presented the use of literary codes and iconographical references as a contingent result of any description of the spiritual world. In this perspective, the accounts of extra-terrestrials in the afterlife were shaped by Swedenborg's knowledges and memories, precisely because of the mutually dynamic nature of all perceived representations in the afterlife. Such an idea had the potential to reinforce Swedenborg's critique of the spiritual decadence of the inhabitants of Earth. Indeed, thanks to such a doctrine Swedenborg could claim his *memorabilia* were not fictional, even when they displayed irony and satirical overtones, in contrast to openly satirical writings about the plurality of worlds such as in Godwin, De Fontenelle, Huygens or Kircher. Such a point appears central to understand the intended articulation between literary form and doctrinal content in the treatise, although Swedenborg's argument was widely ignored and/or misunderstood by his readership. As shown by this paper, this innovative argument allowed a complex and original entanglement of genres, but also permitted Swedenborg to formulate theological criticism with renewed strength.

Swedenborg also ought to be credited for his bold engagement with the topic of extra-solar planets, and for being the first in his *Arcana Coelestia* to explicitly postulate the existence of exoplanets beyond our galaxy. The paper has shown how the removal of this controversial statement from *De Telluribus* highlighted Swedenborg's editorial concerns, along with his growing awareness of target readerships in order to spread his ideas. This article has also highlighted the overlooked literary connection between *dialogues des morts* conversations and plurality of worlds travels. Moreover, the paper has argued how *De Telluribus* represented an attempt to recombine the codes of these two genres which were commonly treated side by side. By doing so, Swedenborg's *De Telluribus* contributes to reshape our perception of the creative boundaries of mysticism across Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century, along with its intersection with literature, satire, astronomy and theological critique.

## **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.