

CHAPTER ONE



Politics, Magic, and Language: Swedenborgianism in the Works of Alphonse-Louis Constant, a.k.a. Eliphas Lévi

In Europe and North America, the fortunes of Swedenborgianism in the secular world are above all bound up with the semantics of a single word, “correspondences.” Although, as Inge Jonsson has shown, the term has a complicated history both in Swedenborg’s own intellectual development and in English and French tradition, in nineteenth-century everyday and literary English and French, “correspondences” took on a new sense: the word came to designate potential meanings suggested by the existence of an allegorical language of nature which, it was believed, Swedenborg had explained in a series of exegetical works.¹ And yet it seems that few people actually read the works of Swedenborg, which makes the association of “correspondences” with allegory something of a paradox: for conventional notions of allegory presuppose a one-to-one relationship among signs and referents that presupposes a kind of key.² The widespread association of “correspondences” with allegory and with a cult about which most people knew very little suggests a kind of impossible figure, an allegory in which the necessary key had been lost or at least shunted to one side.

French interpretations of the word often focus on the work of the poet Charles Baudelaire, whose uses of the term in his prose works appear in connection with references to the work of Fourier, Hugo, Delacroix, and Wagner and seem to tie it to major developments in French and European aesthetics. Discussions of the aesthetic significance of the word in the poet’s work, however, most often take as their subject a sonnet which—fortunately—names no sources, but bears the name “Correspondances.” (The poem is reproduced in the appendix.)

What could Baudelaire have meant by this title? What is its significance for the development of his or Symbolist poetics in general?

Clearly, the poem makes no doctrinal references, and even its evocation of an allegorical temple of nature is problematic, for the temple emits only occasionally “de confuses paroles.”³ Readings of the poem most often

situate Baudelaire's use of the term between tradition and innovation: if the poem harks back to Romantic notions of an allegory of nature, it uses this context in order to suggest how language might function to *evoke* meanings that are sensuous and resonant.⁴ Although some interpretations of the sonnet "Correspondances" make passing reference to a much longer poem published in the 1840s and entitled "Les correspondances," none attempts to link Baudelaire's use of the word "correspondances" or references to Swedenborg to the context of contemporary esotericism. Critics claim quite rightly that "Les correspondances" is aesthetically inferior to Baudelaire's work.⁵ The poem, they argue, has more to do with the outmoded aesthetics of Romanticism than with the innovative aspects of Baudelaire's work. And yet the longer poem and its author, who called himself abbé Constant at the time of its publication in the 1840s, but changed his name to Eliphas Lévi at the beginning of the next decade, belonged to a flourishing popular culture in which Swedenborgianism, Mesmerism, and other esoteric cults played important roles.

Recent work in French cultural history has focused on this context and its importance in transformation of French politics and culture during the decade following the French Revolution. If, in the late eighteenth century, political outsiders often turned to the doctrines of Swedenborg and Mesmer in order to imagine new, more inclusive, social orders, their attempts were echoed in the years surrounding 1830 and 1848 by successive groups who were also eager for enfranchisement. Some historians—notably Robert Darnton—have emphasized the element of repetition in the transmission of esoteric and pseudoscientific ideas in nineteenth-century France; for Darnton, references to Mesmer and Swedenborg in the 1840s and 1850s represent a degeneration of the faith in reason and progress that made the Revolution of 1789 possible. Other historians, however, have noted how Parisian artisans and workers transformed elements of the popular culture of the Ancien Régime so that it became a vehicle for the creation and expression of class solidarity.⁶ But however they view the class affiliations of the popular pseudoscience and esotericism in mid-nineteenth-century Paris, historians generally agree that, in this context, the theories and practices of French occultists were almost always charged with political meanings and agendas.

The author of "Les correspondances," Alphonse-Louis Constant or Eliphas Lévi, played a particularly important role within the context of French popular esotericism and pseudoscience, for he published widely on both esotericism and politics during the decades surrounding 1848. Moreover, his work is of particular interest in suggesting some of the cultural resonances of the word, because, in addition to this poem, Constant/Lévi included summaries of some of Swedenborg's doctrines in more general considerations of magic and occultism.

In turning to the little-known poem, "Les correspondances," and situating it in the work of its author, who transformed himself from the religious socialist, abbé Constant, into a specialist on magic and occult traditions, *mage*, Eliphas Lévi, we can see a missing dimension of the meaning of the title of Baudelaire's sonnet, "Correspondances." For during the decades surrounding 1848, the word played a key role in the increasingly stratified contexts of popular and elite cultures in France. Before 1848, it pointed to the utopian desires of those who would take to the barricades, desires which seemed to conform to the dreams of the most isolated individuals. After 1848, it suggested a universal language underlying all aspects of experience, a language that designated the collective and universal elements in apparently idiosyncratic dreams and that was both all-engulfing and open-ended in its evocation of a future that could not be named.

1. Two Names, One Career: From Alphonse-Louis Constant to Eliphas Lévi

Who was Alphonse-Louis Constant, or Eliphas Lévi as he later called himself? Historians have often taken him at his word and presented two very different interpretations of his work and its significance. One focuses on the eclectic synthesis of Christian and socialist doctrines in the works he wrote in the 1840s and signed as Constant. The other presents him as the historian of magic and esoteric tradition, Eliphas Lévi.⁷ Despite his change of name and apparent direction in his work, however, there is a fundamental continuity in Constant/Lévi's production, a continuity he had good reasons to deny during the years following 1848. For this reason, I shall use the combination of both names when referring either to his career as a whole or to his activities after he changed his name in 1853.

Born in 1810, Alphonse-Louis Constant was 35 when "Les correspondances" was published as part of a collection of poems and songs entitled *Les trois harmonies*.⁸ Sent to school at a seminary by his father, a shoemaker who could not afford to educate his son in any other way, Constant studied to become a priest, but was forced to leave the seminary in 1836, after he had become involved with a young female student. Having no other means of earning a living, however, Constant was forced to beg the Church for some sort of employment, and it accorded him a humiliating position as a school monitor. The incident was to leave a lasting mark on Constant's emotional life and work, for he was to speak out time and again against the Church's insistence on celibacy for the clergy and its denigration of women; one sees, even in works written after 1848 in which he emphatically affirmed the importance of the authority of the Catholic Church, marks of a profound ambivalence that seems to have its roots in

an education he detested and a calling that forced him to choose between a relatively comfortable life and his erotic and emotional needs.

In 1841–42, Constant had spent eight months in the prison at St. Pélagie for what the court found to be the incendiary politics of his book, *La Bible de la liberté*, published in 1841. And it was here, he tells us, that he first read Swedenborg. His first impressions, he writes in a work published in 1845, were less than enthusiastic:

Cette lecture ne fit pas d'abord sur moi toute l'impression qu'elle devait faire par la suite; je le trouvais obscure, diffus et singulier, pour ne pas dire davantage. Ce n'est que par une connaissance plus approfondie de son système et surtout de sa base philosophique, que j'ai pu en apprécier l'immense sagesse. (*Le livre des larmes* 60)

During the 1840s, he published several more books which attempted to merge his eclectic socialist ideas with his unorthodox Christianity. One of these publications was *L'émancipation de la femme*, generally attributed to his friend Flora Tristan although the extent of Constant's authorship is unknown.⁹ At the end of the decade, however, a second imprisonment convinced him to abandon writing about politics, a decision he announced in his *Le testament de la liberté* of 1848, which concludes:

Maintenant notre oeuvre sociale est terminée, et nous ne demanderons pour elle ni indulgence ni sévérité. Nous avons écrit ce que nous dictaient notre intelligence et notre coeur; nous avons accompli un devoir, et nous trouvons que c'est pour nous une récompense suffisante. (219)

Earlier, in a song which Constant had published in *Les trois harmonies*, the writer points to the experiences that prompted his decision. Set to the music of “De la treille de sincérité,” this work describes the author's imprisonment, but ends with the evocation of a double betrayal:

Comme de cette illustre engeance
Je prenais les affronts gaîment,
Bientôt leur sublime vengeance
M'en punit assez noblement.
De mes lettres interprétées
La police leur a fait part;
Mes phrases sont interceptées
Et je suis déclaré mouchard.

Je renonce à la politique
Et je dénonce à la chanson

La république
Et la prison.

Pour leur conter mon infortune,
Lorsqu'enfin je m'en vis sorti,
Je vais retrouver sur la Brume
Les gens de mon ancien parti.
Mais quelqu'un me dit à l'oreille
Que les deux meneurs principaux
Venaient de s'engager la veille
Dans les gardes municipaux,

Je renonce, etc.

Moreover, in 1853, Constant took on the *nom de plume* Eliphas Lévi or Eliphas Lévi Zahed, which, he claims, in a note tucked away in chapter 13 of the first part of *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie*, is the Hebrew translation of Alphonse-Louis Constant. This claim certainly suggests that the author saw the two names and the identities they suggested as continuous—and wanted to make this intention clear to readers persistent enough to read past the introduction and opening chapters.¹⁰ Perhaps the name change also reflects Constant/Lévi's desire to assume a new identity after his wife left him that year. Whatever the reasons for the change of name and apparent direction in his writing, it is misleading to take Constant/Lévi at his word that his writing after 1848 marked a distinct break with that preceding the revolution. For although he had good reasons—above all, fear of reimprisonment—to hope that certain people would believe that he had abjured politics for good, he not only continued to produce a few works on explicitly political themes, but he also scattered significant references to contemporary society in his later esoteric works, references that link occult practices to the political beliefs and desires of the apparently isolated and unworldly author.

In 1855, for example, Constant/Lévi, an admirer of Béranger, composed an unflattering musical portrait of the emperor, which he called "Caligula."¹¹ The song landed him in prison a third time. He was able to extricate himself by composing a second song, "L'Anti-Caligula," which convinced Louis Napoléon that the first version, however insulting, was not sufficient reason to imprison its author.

Constant/Lévi lived until 1876, eking out a meagre existence in a se-

ries of rented rooms in Paris. Never achieving the kind of public literary success he desired, he did have a devoted following that included some more successful Parisian artists and writers, as well as those interested in occult matters. The exact nature of Constant/Lévi's political and religious beliefs and allegiances is difficult to ascertain. Although he was never able to make a complete break with the Church that had treated him so harshly during his youth or, after 1848, to speak or write directly concerning his political views, remarks scattered throughout all his writings suggest that he maintained a critical stance to the religious and political status quo. Eliphas Lévi Zahed, in other words, is a translation in more than words of Alphonse-Louis Constant.

2. Constant/Lévi's "Les correspondances"

Constant's most often quoted work, "Les correspondances," was first published in 1845 in a collection of poems and songs entitled *Les trois harmonies*.

It is significant that Constant/Lévi was a songwriter and admirer of the tradition of French revolutionary songs. While "Les correspondances" is not listed as a song, many of the other works in the collection were; it is at any rate a poem which lends itself to being read aloud and which, unlike many poems that followed in the tradition of Baudelaire's "Correspondances," could be understood when read aloud.¹²

In contrast to Baudelaire's sonnet, Constant's "Les correspondances" is a long and diffuse poem, one hundred octosyllables divided into ten stanzas of ten lines. The "correspondances" of the title refer to a divinely inspired language of nature we are aware of in dreams, reveries, and moments of faith and inspiration. Thus the poem opens with an evocation of sleep:

Quand succombent nos sens débiles
 Aux enchantements du sommeil,
 Le pinceau des songes mobiles
 Présentent à l'âme un faux réveil.

And goes on to compare waking experience, in turn, to a kind of dream:

En dormant nous rêvons la vie,
 Mais la veille, au temps asservie,
 N'est qu'un rêve d'éternité.

But the concluding stanza asserts that any believing individual is capable of perceiving both the Word of God and the unchanging mirroring relationship between nature and heaven:

Mais que l'âme simple et fidèle
 En attendant l'agneau vainqueur,
 Ecoute, active sentinelle,
 Le verbe de Dieu dans son coeur:
 Car toute pensée extatique
 Est comme une onde sympathique,
 Où se reflète l'univers;
 Et l'âme, à soi-même attentive,
 Comme le pêcheur sur la rive
 Peut contempler les cieus ouverts.

If the "âme humble et fidèle" echoes the Christian commonplace that the meek are especially close to God, the characterization of isolated consciousness as "une onde sympathique,/ où se reflète l'univers" evokes a more sophisticated conception of the relation of consciousness to the world. In his unpublished "Avertissement du *Gars*" of 1828, for example, which is often regarded as a sketch for *Louis Lambert*, Balzac had depicted the consciousness of his isolated and uneducated novelist as a Leibnizean "miroir concentrique de l'univers." (8:1675) Although Constant could not have known this particular text, his characterization of Swedenborg's work elsewhere does seem to lean extensively on Balzac's work, and his presentation of Swedenborg in his *Histoire de la magie* is preceded by a discussion of Leibniz.¹³

The middle stanzas of the poem, however, point beyond the ordinary dreamer's intuitions to an imagined history in which originally transparent relations between earthly phenomena and their cosmic meanings were lost, only to be partially restored through the coming of the Messiah. The third stanza, for example, explains:

Formé d'invisibles paroles,
 Ce monde est le songe de Dieu;
 Son verbe en choisit les symboles,
 L'esprit les remplit de son feu.
 C'est cette écriture vivante,
 D'amour, de gloire et d'épouvante,
 Que pour nous Jésus retrouva;
 Car toute science cachée

N'est qu'une lettre détachée
Du nom sacré de Jéhova.

Constant's characterization of "correspondances" as a language of nature, the significance of which was lost when humankind fell from grace, repeats a widespread Romantic commonplace. Allusions to such a lost language, often called a "hieroglyphic" language, occur in the work of many European writers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In French literature, such references are often tied to a vision of the ideal organization of society. For the conservative political theorists Bonald and Maistre, for example, the opacity of contemporary everyday language represents a corruption as inevitable as the social decadence they see everywhere in post-Revolutionary French society: only a return to the authoritarian structures of the past, including the Church, can restore order and coherence to human institutions. In the work of writers sympathetic to the Revolution, on the other hand, the notions that nature had a history and could be understood as a kind of language pointed towards the invention of a society based on a kind of natural culture.¹⁴

References in nineteenth-century French writings to a language of nature are so widespread and so tied to the political beliefs of writers that it is absurd to pretend that they originate in the work of any one individual. In the first half of the nineteenth century, however, many writers do credit eighteenth-century esotericism for refocusing attention on the social significance of a language of nature.¹⁵ Within this context, an allusion to "correspondances" would almost certainly refer back to Swedenborg as one of many eighteenth-century visionaries whose work called attention to a kind of hieroglyphic language of nature whose meaning had been lost, but might be restored again through a program of individual and general reform. For, as we shall see in chapters 2 and 3, this was the one doctrine that was consistently emphasized in popularizations of Swedenborg's work, both by Swedenborg himself and by others.

In choosing as the title of his poem the term *correspondances*, then, Constant points to the continuing importance of the notion of a language of nature in the 1840s in France. Moreover, to a far greater extent than Baudelaire's sonnet, "Les correspondances" echoes earlier works in French literature—poems by Vigny and Lamartine, as well as Balzac's evocation of a Swedenborgian language of nature in *Louis Lambert* (1832–35). But if the poem's "lateness" marks it as a popularizing imitation of earlier models, "Les correspondances" also bears witness to the fact that by the 1840s the notion of a language of nature had come to play an important role in the formulation of the interests and desires of people who would take to the barricades in 1848.

3. Echoes of "Les correspondances" in Constant/Lévi's prose

Like Baudelaire's "Correspondances," Constant/Lévi's poem makes no direct reference to Swedenborg or to any specific set of esoteric, pseudo-scientific, or theological doctrines. He did, however, discuss Swedenborg and his doctrines in a work published the same year, *Le livre des larmes*, as well as in the entries on allegory and mysticism in his *Dictionnaire de la littérature chrétienne* of 1851 and his *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie*, first published in 1856 and 1857, and his *Histoire de la magie*, first published in 1860.

Significantly, Constant quotes "Les correspondances" in its entirety in the entry on allegory in his compendious *Dictionnaire de la littérature chrétienne*, published in 1851, still under the name Alphonse-Louis Constant.¹⁶ In this eclectic and ambitious work, articles on literary genres and concepts, such as allegory, the marvellous, and style, stand side-by-side with entries on recognized French Catholic writers: Maistre, of whom he writes with ambivalent respect; Chateaubriand, who receives a generally favorable notice; and Lamartine, who is the object of the author's scorn. There is no entry for Balzac, although he is mentioned in connection with Swedenborg in the entry on "Les mystiques" and the entry on the novel, which discusses the dangers inherent in novel reading: it destroys one's faith in authority. There is, however, a long entry on the historical Faust and his literary progeny, which harks back to the tradition that the original Faust was a printer, a model, perhaps, for Constant, who was to self-consciously attempt to transform himself into a magician of the printed word in the years following the publication of the *Dictionnaire de la littérature chrétienne*.

The section of "Allégorie" which discusses "Les correspondances" and the term *correspondances* in relation to the allegorical tradition is, then, one of two passages which discuss Swedenborg or his doctrine of correspondences at some length. It is significant that there is no entry under his name. Discussion of the unorthodox Christian and his doctrines are inserted into entries on more orthodox matters.

The entry "Allégorie," which draws on an unnamed source or sources, traces the history of allegory from the beginnings of western culture through the present. The discussion of *correspondances*, however, forms part of a psychological explanation of the origins of allegory in the individual's perceptions of the harmonies of nature.

Il existe donc dans la nature, entre les pensées et les formes, entre les choses visibles et les choses invisibles, entre les relations physiques et les relations morales d'abord, puis entre les choses corporelles elles-

mêmes, à divers degrés de lumières et de beauté, ainsi qu'entre les choses spirituelles prises séparément à divers degrés d'élévation vers Dieu, selon l'ordre hiérarchique, il existe, disons-nous, des harmonies réelles et des correspondances essentielles antérieurement à toute poésie, la poésie n'étant d'ailleurs que le sentiment de ces correspondances et de ces harmonies, dont la prophétie supérieure à la poésie sera la révélation.

And then, after quoting his poem in its entirety, Constant proceeds to compare *correspondances* to the hieroglyphics of the Egyptians, to which we might turn for a better understanding of the nature of allegory than the traditions of Christianity are able to provide:

Ce symbolisme naturel de tous les êtres créés paraît avoir été la pensée dominante des anciens Egyptiens, et avoir présidé à l'invention de l'écriture hiéroglyphique. Les Egyptiens se piquaient aussi, comme on sait, d'expliquer les songes en y appliquant les règles d'allégorie, et supposaient par là ces règles tellement peu arbitraires, qu'elles agissaient d'elles-mêmes sur nous comme les nombres vivants de Pythagore. (61)

The association of Swedenborgianism and the doctrine of correspondences with a universal language which can be intuited by the most isolated of minds but which was first discovered by the Egyptians and other non-western cultures figures throughout Constant/Lévi's works, from *Le livre des larmes* on. In his writings of the 1850s, the role of the Egyptians is eclipsed by that of the cabalists and other occult traditions, but the general significance of the notion of a universal language of nature remains unchanged.

The discussion of Swedenborg inserted in the entry entitled "Les mystiques" also emphasizes the importance of *correspondances*: it even provides a short glossary of the Swedenborgian meanings of some phenomena. But this passage also suggests the emotional attraction of Swedenborgianism for Constant, who had been excluded from the Church and the living it provided by the vow of celibacy it demanded, for Swedenborgianism affirmed the importance of sexual love—on earth, as well as in heaven.

Le mysticisme de la philosophie moderne est emprunté surtout aux livres du Suédois Swedenborg, visionnaire célèbre, dont la doctrine forme un vaste et complet système [sic] assez analogue à ceux de l'école d'Alexandrie. Swedenborg est ennemi de la virginité, et affirme qu'il n'y a de chasteté possible que dans le mariage; il nie que l'homme puisse mériter et démeriter, et veut que chaque âme, après la mort, se fasse un ciel ou un enfer de la sphère de son amour. Il ne reconnaît pas d'autres anges que

les âmes des justes; mais les âmes, selon lui, ayant été créées par couples, doivent se réunir dans le ciel où, contre l'enseignement exprès de Notre-Seigneur, il permet encore des mariages et une génération spirituelle à la vérité, mais faite à l'image et à la ressemblance de nos générations de la terre. Il parle de trois mondes superposés: le divin, le spirituel et le naturel, et fait consister la révélation en une communication perpétuelle entre ces trois mondes, dont toutes les formes expriment la parole du Verbe, selon ses trois mondes, dont toutes les formes expriment la parole du Verbe, selon ses trois degrés de signification divine, spirituelle et humaine. Le bien, c'est l'harmonie entre les trois mondes; la parole de Dieu, c'est l'expression de cette harmonie. Ainsi le vrai exprime le bien, parce que le bien c'est le vrai manifesté dans l'ordre, etc., etc.

Aux yeux de Swedenborg, toutes les formes visibles ont des significations spirituelles et divines, et cette analogie, qui se reproduit de monde en monde, est ce qu'il appelle les correspondances. Nous en signalerons ici quelques-unes prises au hasard soit dans les *Arcanes célestes*, soit dans la *Clef Hiéroglyphique des arcanes*. (895–96)

This summary leads directly to a kind of glossary, a long list of “correspondences,” of which I reproduce the beginning:

Correspondances ou analogies

Les animaux signifient les affections: Jardin et paradis, l'intelligence et la sagesse; les arbres, les perceptions et les connaissances; les aliments, les choses qui nourrissent la vie spirituelle; le pain, toute bonté qui nourrit la vie spirituelle de l'homme. (895–96)

Constant's closing comments indicate both his impatience with this kind of “hieroglyphic key” and his sense of the limitations of Swedenborg's doctrines:

Nous n'en finirons pas, si nous voulions indiquer toutes les autres. Les ouvrages de Swedenborg offrent un singulier mélange de raison et de folie, de poésie et de pauvreté. Son système est parfaitement lié; il a des idées qui éblouissent et qui séduisent au premier abord, mais ses visions fatiguent le bon sens des lecteurs, et il semble mystifier souvent la curiosité naturelle de l'esprit humain. C'est un savant ridicule et un fou sublime.

M. de Balzac, celui de tous les écrivains modernes qui a possédé au plus haut degré la faculté de l'analyse, a résumé assez complètement, dans les trois nouvelles qui composent son livre mystique, le système de Swedenborg, auquel il ajoute un peu du sien.

Jacob Boehm [sic], Pascalis Martinès [sic] et Saint-Martin ont été, après Swedenborg, les illuminés les plus célèbres. (898)

The entries in the *Dictionnaire de la littérature chrétienne* are not the last texts by Constant/Lévi to hark back to “Les correspondances.” A curious passage in Constant/Lévi’s late work, *La science des esprits* (1865), also echoes the poem, as well as the author’s interpretations of its linguistic context. Several of the texts included in this somewhat hotchpotch collection hark back to Constant’s works of the 1840s, especially his *La dernière incarnation: légendes évangéliques du XIXe siècle* of 1846, which contains a “légende” entitled “Le poète mourant,”¹⁷ but the section in question, entitled “La mort d’un poète,” suggests a melancholy distance to the earlier affirmation of the value of the intuitions of the solitary individual. The opening of this section captures the sermon-like tone of much of this collection:

La mort d’un poète

Il y avait donc en ce temps-là un jeune homme qui, de bonne heure, avait écouté dans son âme l’écho des harmonies universelles.

Or, cette musique intérieure avait distrait son attention de toutes les choses de la vie mortelle, parce qu’il vivait dans une société encore sans harmonie.

...

Ses jours passait dans un long silence et dans une profonde rêverie; il contemplait avec d’étranges extases le ciel, les eaux, les arbres, les campagnes verdoyantes; puis ses regards devenaient fixes, des magnificences intérieures se déployaient dans sa pensée et l’emportaient encore sur le spectacle de la nature. Des larmes alors coulaient à son insu le long de ses joues pâles d’émotion, et si l’on venait lui parler, il n’entendait pas. (474–75)

The young man, contemplating suicide, encounters a stranger who preaches to him the true meaning of poetic reverie, which must be joined to a life of service and social responsibility:

Sache que l’esprit d’harmonie, c’est l’esprit d’amour que j’annonçais au monde sous le nom du consolateur.

...

Jusqu’à présent tu n’as fait de la poésie qu’en rêves et en paroles, mais le temps est venu de faire de la poésie en actions! Car tout ce qui se fait par amour de l’humanité, tout ce qui est dévouement, sacrifice, patience, courage et persévérance, tout cela est sublime d’harmonie, c’est la poésie des martyrs! (479)

This work makes a solitary reference to Swedenborg, linking his work to the kind of contemplative reverie that almost caused the downfall of the

young man. If this passage is less preachy, its characterization of the visions of Swedenborg and other mystics and utopians as hallucinations implies a critical distance to their works:

Goethe avait étudié la Kabbale, et l'épopée de Faust est sortie des doctrines du Sohar. Swedenborg, Saint-Simon et Fourier semblent avoir vu la divine synthèse kabbalistique à travers les ombres et les hallucinations d'un cauchemar plus ou moins étrange, suivant les différents caractères de ces rêveurs. Cette synthèse est en réalité ce que la pensée humaine peut aborder de plus complet et de plus beau. (125–26)

La science des esprits was published after the triptych of works on magic for which “Eliphas Lévi” is best known: *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie*, *L'histoire de la magie*, and *La clef des grands mystères*. In its affirmation of the importance of action, this work turns back to the works of the 1840s, the years before Constant renounced politics and changed his name. The parables recounted in this late and uneven work suggest that a preoccupation with language and contemplation can only lead one astray, that the individual should use them as points of departure for a life that is oriented towards the community.

The works on magic, however, tell a somewhat different story.

4. Magic, Politics, and Duplicity: Constant/Lévi's *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie*

Constant/Lévi's three most famous books on magic were published between 1856 and 1861. *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie* first appeared in two volumes in 1856 and 1857, and was subsequently reissued in 1861 with a new preface. The second work in the series, *L'histoire de la magie*, was first published in 1860, and the third, *La clef des grands mystères*, in 1861. In all three books, Constant/Lévi elaborates the theory and practice of a highly personal magical system based, he says, on the cabala, and he consistently represents the theories of other writers, including Swedenborg, as inferior to those of the Jewish mystical tradition. Moreover, references to Swedenborg and his doctrines do not suggest that Constant/Lévi had read more of his works: they are schematic and often inaccurate. The Swedenborgianism of the books on magic serves the author's own interests; a few key elements are incorporated into what looks like a highly personal, eclectic, magical system designed to justify the empowerment of the author as a magus whose words are not only true, but also capable of

transforming the world. But one might question whether Constant/Lévi did more with *any* of the esoteric theories he cites.

A. E. Waite notes that he seems to have known relatively little of the work of Guillaume Postel, whom he often cites in these books, and argues that the errors in the Hebrew quotations indicate that Constant/Lévi's knowledge of the cabala was similarly limited. (*Transcendental Magic*, xiv) I would suggest that Constant/Lévi, living an isolated and marginal existence in rented rooms in Paris and lacking the livelihood and access to research facilities of an academic scholar, drew on a somewhat superficial and unscholarly familiarity with a wide variety of esoteric texts in order to work out his own magical system, a system based, like the late work of Swedenborg or the cabala, on the notion of an absolute language. In contrast to the poem "Les correspondances" and its echoes in the *Dictionnaire de la littérature chrétienne* and *La science des esprits*, however, Constant/Lévi's interest in language has shifted away from its relation to traditional allegory, from the potential of the meekest and most isolated individual to intuit harmonies in nature and tradition *that are already there*, to the ability of the initiate to control and manipulate language in such a way that it might transform the world around him.

There are echoes of Constant/Lévi's earlier work in the three books on magic which suggest that his reading of Swedenborg may have influenced his understanding of magic and language in some fundamental way. A passage, for example, in *Dogme et rituel* sets forth a theory of three worlds that is highly reminiscent of popularizations of Swedenborgianism, although triadic structures were so common in nineteenth-century culture that it would be impossible to trace the origins of this passage with any certainty. Constant/Lévi himself emphasizes the parallel between the theories of Swedenborg and his own triadic notion of the structure of experience, for he introduces his theory of corresponding worlds with a reference to Swedenborg:

L'empereur Julien, dans son hymne au roi Soleil, donne une théorie du ternaire qui est presque identiquement la même que celle de l'illuminé Swedenborg. (1:142)

Moreover, the link between Constant/Lévi's system and the doctrines of Swedenborg seems to be reinforced by the use of the verb *correspondre* in the passage that follows:

Les trois mondes *correspondent* ensemble par les trente-deux voies de lumière qui sont les échelons de l'échelle sainte; toute pensée vraie *correspond* à une grâce divine dans le ciel, et à une oeuvre utile sur la terre. Toute grâce de Dieu suscite une vérité et produit un ou plusieurs

actes, et réciproquement tout acte remue dans les cieus une vérité ou un mensonge, une grâce ou un châtement. Lorsqu'un homme prononce le tétragramme, écrivent les cabalistes, les neuf cieus reçoivent une secousse, et tous les esprits se crient les uns aux autres: Qui donc trouble ainsi le royaume du ciel? Alors la terre révèle au premier ciel les péchés du téméraire qui prend le nom de l'éternel en vain, et le verbe accusateur est transmis de cercle en cercle, d'étoile en étoile et de hiérarchie en hiérarchie.

Toute parole a trois sens, toute action une triple portée, toute forme une triple idée, car l'absolu correspond de monde en monde avec ses formes. . . . (1:144; my emphasis)

The use of *correspondre* in this passage echoes "Les correspondances" and its interpretations elsewhere in Constant/Lévi's work. Here, as well, the word points to a static series of vertical analogies or relationships hidden beneath the surfaces of appearances. But in the books on magic, this series is presented as only the point of departure for the magician's rituals, for his own manipulations of the absolute language hidden in nature. In Constant/Lévi's own words, it forms part of the dogma, rather than the ritual, of magic. But even the first, theoretical, volume of *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie* indicates that Constant/Lévi's view of the relationship of the absolute language of the magician or visionary to ordinary language and experience has changed since the mid-1840s. The situation of the solitary individual in "Les correspondances" suggests that visionary harmonies repeat the structures of the visible world, that *correspondances* are fundamentally representational. In *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie*, the relationships among language, visionary experiences, and the world are called into question. The words of the dreamer or visionary may be, as Constant/Lévi writes concerning Swedenborg, mere hallucinations, and the doctrines based on them, absurdities.

Constant/Lévi seems unaware of the attempts to establish a Swedenborgian Church in France or even perhaps of the English Swedenborgian Church. He cannot imagine what a Swedenborgian liturgy would be like:

Dans l'école d'Alexandrie, la magie et le christianisme se donnent presque la main sous les auspices d'Ammonius Saccas et de Platon. Le dogme d'Hermès se trouve presque tout entier dans les écrits attribués à Denis l'Aréopagite. Synésius trace le plan d'un traité des songes, qui devrait plus tard être commenté par Cardan, et composé d'hymnes qui pourraient servir à la liturgie de l'église de Swedenborg, si une église d'illuminés pouvait avoir une liturgie. (1:71; my emphasis)

The Swedenborg of *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie* is fundamentally misguided. If his theories parallel those of other, sounder, mystical or

esoteric traditions, such as the cabala (1:95) or the work of Jacob Boehme or Saint-Martin (1:95), or even the Emperor Julian (1:142), they are based on hallucinations, as one passage, which may well draw on the representation of *Erdgeister* (literally “earth spirits”) in Goethe’s *Faust*, suggests:¹⁸

Les esprits élémentaires sont comme les enfants: ils tourmentent davantage ceux qui s’occupent d’eux, à moins qu’on ne les domine par une haute raison et une grande sévérité.

Ce sont ces esprits que nous désignons sous le nom d’éléments occultes.

Ce sont eux qui déterminent souvent pour nous les songes inquiétants ou bizarres, ce sont eux qui produisent les mouvements de la baguette divinatoire et les coups frappés contre les murailles ou contre les meubles; mais ils ne peuvent jamais manifester une autre pensée que la nôtre, et si nous ne pensons pas, ils nous parlent avec toute l’incohérence des rêves. Ils reproduisent indifféremment le bien et le mal, parce qu’ils sont sans libre arbitre et par conséquent n’ont point de responsabilité; ils se montrent aux extatiques et aux somnambules sous des formes incomplètes et fugitives. *C’est ce qui a donné lieu aux cauchemars de saint Antoine et très probablement aux visions de Swedenborg; ils ne sont ni damnés ni coupables, ils sont curieux et innocents.* (2:76; my emphasis)

Moreover, Constant/Lévi’s understanding of Swedenborg’s visions implies that, even when they are true, they are somewhat grotesque. Two passages present Swedenborg as a visionary who perceived human beings in animal shapes that represented their true nature:

La forme de notre corps sidéral est conforme à l’état habituel de nos pensées, et modifie, à la longue, les traits du corps matériel. C’est pour cela que Swedenborg, dans ses intuitions somnambuliques, voyait souvent des esprits en forme de divers animaux. (1:278)

More specifically, he was apt to see them as sheep:

Or, la métempsycose, qui a été souvent mal comprise, a un côté parfaitement vrai: les formes animales communiquent leurs empreintes sympathiques au corps astral de l’homme, et se reflètent bientôt sur ses traits, suivant la force de ses habitudes. L’homme d’une douceur intelligente et passive prend les allures et la physionomie inerte d’un mouton; *mais, dans le somnambulisme, ce n’est plus un homme à physionomie moutonne, c’est un mouton qu’on aperçoit, comme l’a mille fois expérimenté l’extatique et savant Swedenborg.* Ce mystère est exprimé dans le livre cabalistique du voyant Daniel par la légende de Nabuchodonosor changé en bête, qu’on a eu le tort de prendre pour une histoire réelle

comme il est arrivé de presque toutes les allégories magiques. (2:200; my emphasis)

And like the legend of Nebuchadnezzar's transformation, the writings of Swedenborg need to be interpreted by someone initiated into the secrets of magic and its lore: the uninformed are likely to take hallucinations literally.

The introduction to the 1856 edition of *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie* divides the work into two parts which only partly correspond to the two volumes of the work. The first, Constant/Lévi writes, presents the dogma or the *clavicule* of magic; and the second, its *grimoire*. Although, as the scattered references to Swedenborg suggest, discussions of the theory of magic and language occur in both volumes, the second volume is distinguished from the first by its inclusion of a series of rituals or spells the properly initiated magician might cast. It is here that Constant/Lévi puts into practice a theory of language that is performative, rather than representational, a theory that is only intimated in his discussions of esoteric and mystical doctrines elsewhere in *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie*.

If almost all the references to Swedenborg and Swedenborgianism tie these doctrines to interests in allegory and representation that Constant/Lévi had moved away from by 1856, one remarkable passage does link Swedenborg to a new aesthetic in French poetry. A section of the original introduction to *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie* cites Swedenborg as one of the ancestors of the concept of a "Book with unbound leaves," a Book that would capture the totality of nature in a language as precise as mathematics:

Un autre livre existe encore; mais celui-là, bien qu'il soit en quelque sorte populaire et qu'on puisse le trouver partout, est le plus occulte et le plus inconnu de tous, parce qu'il contient la clef de tous les autres; il est dans la publicité sans être connu du public; on ne s'avise pas de le trouver où il est, et l'on perdrait mille fois son temps à le chercher où il n'est pas si l'on en soupçonnait l'existence. Ce livre, plus ancien peut-être que celui d'Hénoch, n'a jamais été traduit, et il est écrit encore tout entier en caractères primitifs et sur des pages détachées comme les tablettes des anciens. Un savant distingué en a révélé, sans qu'on l'ait remarqué, non pas précisément le secret, mais l'antiquité et la conservation singulière; un autre savant, mais d'un esprit plus fantastique que judicieux, a passé trente ans à étudier ce livre, et en a seulement soupçonné toute l'importance. C'est, en effet, un ouvrage monumental et singulier, simple et fort comme l'architecture des pyramides, durable par conséquent comme elles; livre qui résume toutes les sciences, et dont les combinaisons infinies peuvent ré-

soudre tous les problèmes; livre qui parle en faisant penser; inspirateur et régulateur de toutes les conceptions possibles; le chef-d'oeuvre peut-être de l'esprit humain, et à coup sûr l'une des plus belles choses que nous ait laissées l'antiquité; clavicule universelle, dont le nom n'a été compris et expliqué que par le savant illuminé Guillaume Postel; texte unique, dont les premiers caractères seulement ont ravi en extase l'esprit religieux de Saint-Martin, et eussent rendu la raison au sublime et infortuné Swedenborg. Ce livre, nous en parlerons plus tard, et son explication mathématique et rigoureuse sera le complément et la couronne de notre consciencieux travail. (1:68–69)

This is one of several passages in *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie* that points strikingly forward to aspects of Mallarmé's poetic system, most obviously to his formulation of the project of a total Book with detachable pages.¹⁹ Elsewhere, too, Constant/Lévi's evocation of the situation of the poet as god-like—both conjure up the stars—suggests the thematic structure of some of Mallarmé's most famous poems.²⁰ Most significant, however, I think, is the parallel between the situations of the two men and their views of language: both were isolated individuals able to imagine themselves as transforming their small worlds, the interiors of rented rooms in Paris, through their manipulations of a language viewed as absolute, as precise in its harmonies as mathematics or a finely tuned musical instrument, and fundamentally evocative, or, to use an anachronistic term, performative.

This passage, which links the doctrines of Swedenborg to the project of a total Book based on an absolute language, suggests the tenuous but important link between the reception of Swedenborgianism in France and the development of a new poetics there in the second half of the nineteenth century. Swedenborg appears as a distant ancestor to a theory of language that might renew and transform a social world characterized by injustice, censorship, and the isolation and suppression of writers of genius. Moreover, as Constant/Lévi's later writings on magic, his *Histoire de la magie* and the second, 1861, preface to *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie*, show, Swedenborgian doctrines were also important for the associations they carried with the French revolutionary tradition.

There is much in the two later books on magic, *L'histoire de la magie* and *La clef des grands mystères*, that repeats material developed in the far more original *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie*. Yet between 1856, when volume one of *Dogme et rituel* first appeared, and 1861, which saw the publication of the last work in the series, *La clef des grands mystères*, as well as a second edition of *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie*, Constant/Lévi's views changed and developed in at least two respects. One biogra-

pher notes that in 1859 he began to frequent the French spiritualists, Henri Delaage and a Doctor Rozier.²¹ In fact, the works Constant/Lévi published in 1860 and 1861 reflect recent developments in French spiritualism: the passages in *L'histoire de la magie* on nineteenth-century magic, the descriptions of séances in *La clef des grands mystères*, and even the new preface to the second 1861 edition of *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie* suggest a greater interest in, as well as knowledge of, this context.

At least two of the later works, *L'histoire de la magie* and the new preface to *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie*, also bear witness to an increased awareness of the political history and implications of magical doctrines. Since the 1861 preface to *Dogme et rituel* suggests how Constant/Lévi has developed some of the implications of the earlier work, I turn first to this text before discussing the far longer and more complex *Histoire de la magie*.

5. Language, Mesmerism, and Charisma: The Preface to the 1861 Edition of *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie* and *L'histoire de la magie*

In his introduction to his English translation of *L'histoire de la magie*, A. E. Waite writes of a kind of double agenda in Constant/Lévi's works on magic.²² Nowhere does that double agenda seem more evident than in the 1861 preface to *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie*, although, unfortunately, Waite chooses not to include it in his translation, because he feels it is superfluous.²³ The opening paragraph notes the increased importance of spiritualism in the contemporary world of magic:

Depuis que la première édition de ce livre a été publiée, de grands événements se sont accomplis dans le monde, et d'autres plus grands peut-être encore sont à la veille de s'accomplir.

Ces événements nous avaient été annoncés comme d'ordinaire par des prodiges: les tables avaient parlé, des voix étaient sorties des murs, des mains sans corps avaient écrit des mots mystérieux, comme au festin de Balthasar. (1)

This is, however, the sole reference to spiritualism in the new introduction. Constant/Lévi proceeds to develop, more clearly than in the body of the text itself, his notion that language (*le Verbe*) is action. His argument begins in terms that echo the opening of Goethe's *Faust*, the proclamation of the protagonist that "Im Anfang war die Tat," which, in turn replays a controversy regarding the translation of the Biblical Hebrew.²⁴ Constant/

Lévi's extended and often very wordy argument opens in sermon-like terms:

Jésus, dit l'Évangile, était puissant en oeuvres et en paroles; les oeuvres avant la parole: c'est ainsi que s'établit et se prouve le droit de parler. Jésus se mit à faire et à parler, dit ailleurs un évangéliste, et souvent, dans le langage primitif de l'écriture sainte, une action est appelée *un verbe*. Dans toutes les langues, d'ailleurs, on nomme VERBE ce qui exprime à la fois l'être et l'action, et il n'est pas de verbe qui ne puisse être suppléé par le verbe *faire*, en diversifiant le régime. *Dans le principe était le Verbe*, dit l'évangéliste saint Jean, Dans quel principe? Dans le premier principe; dans le principe absolu qui est avant toute chose. Dans ce principe donc était le Verbe, c'est-à-dire l'action. (5)

But if the beginning of the argument seems merely to develop and clarify some of the implications of the rituals of magic for the isolated individual discussed in the edition of 1856 and 1856, its ending ties the identification of language and action to questions of solidarity and recent French politics:

Le Verbe divin et le Verbe humain, conçus séparément, mais sous une notion de solidarité qui les rendait inséparables, avaient dès le commencement fondé la papauté et l'empire: les luttes de la papauté pour prévaloir seule avaient été l'affirmation absolue du Verbe divin; à cette affirmation, pour rétablir l'équilibre du dogme de l'Incarnation, devait correspondre dans l'empire une affirmation absolue du Verbe humain. Telle fut l'origine de la Réforme, qui aboutit AUX DROITS DE L'HOMME. (19)

Yet Constant/Lévi proceeds immediately to identify the tradition of the rights of man with Napoleon, as well as the Reformation. (19) And then eventually with the authority of the Catholic Church. (40)

To speak of duplicity here would be to understate the net of contradictions Constant/Lévi weaves. For not only does Napoléon stand as the inheritor of the revolutionary tradition of the Reformation, but he also represents the right of universal suffrage, and, even more significantly, is on several occasions set in opposition to both anarchy and the anarchism of Proudhon:

L'instinct des peuples se conforme en cela même à la logique des idées, et deux fois le suffrage universel, placé entre l'obscurantisme et l'anarchie, a deviné la conciliation de l'ordre avec le progrès, et a nommé Napoléon. (27)