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The Ghost Sonata: Poison and Vision

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English translation, Neil CHARLTON

Abstract

The plays of August Strindberg shook up drama to represent the process of destruction of meaning and its residual content. While in traditional drama transcendent meaning was an essential part of the play, in Strindberg, this meaning — an aspect that guarantees unity and coherence — is suspended. Thus, his chamber plays were gradually be stripped of their instrumental and dramatic conventions: there is virtually no situation, action, conflict or psychological depth to the characters. Specifically, *The Ghost Sonata* shows a clear loss of referentiality, from outside to inside, as we advance through its three movements, opening a trend towards subjectivism. The information provided is skewed and the perception of reality, from another point of view, causes a strangeness of the everyday, as well as suspicion about the makeup of modern identity.

The objective of this article is, therefore, to provide a hermeneutic reading of *The Ghost Sonata* to endeavour to understand which elements produce this disarticulation with respect to the drama of his time, and how these processes are still present in today's dramaturgy.

Keywords: Strindberg, subjectivism, identity, referentiality, illusion

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The Ghost Sonata: Poison and Vision

Although we are considering a playwright who wrote an immense amount of work more than a hundred years ago, if the Performing Arts Conference on Strindberg held at the Institut del Teatre on 9 October 2019 was entitled "I am a contemporary!", it is because his work continues to challenge us and shows us a dislocation that has not yet been adjusted or resolved. In fact, we could say that in the late 19th century and, particularly, in the early 20th, the plays of August Strindberg shook up the drama of the time — eminently customary, naturalistic or symbolist — to represent the process of destruction of meaning and its residual content. While in traditional drama transcendent meaning was an essential part of the play — for example, through the revelation of essence through anagnorisis and, therefore, the still possible recognition of one's own identity —, in Strindberg, this meaning — an aspect that guarantees unity and coherence, both of the plot and the adventure — is suspended. Thus, his chamber plays, written in 1907, would gradually be stripped of their instrumental and dramatic conventions: there is virtually no situation, action or psychological depth to the characters, and it is not always easy to distinguish the conflict. Specifically, *The Ghost Sonata* (1907) shows a clear loss of referentiality, from outside to inside, as we advance through its three movements, opening a trend towards subjectivism, predominant during the 20th century and it seems also the 21st. Similarly, the information provided is skewed and the perception of reality, from another point of view, causes a strangeness of the everyday in the Kafkaesque manner,[1] as well as suspicion about the makeup of modern identity.

The objective of this article is therefore to undertake a hermeneutic reading of *The Ghost Sonata*[2] to endeavour to understand which elements

1. In the 4 May 1915 entry of his *Diaries*, Kafka writes: "In a better state because I read Strindberg (Separated). I don't read him to read him, but rather to lie on his breast. He holds me on his left arm like a child. I sit there like a man on a statue. Ten times I almost slip off, but at the eleventh attempt I sit there firmly, feel secure, and have a wide view."

2. The play excerpts are taken from *Plays, Fourth Series*, by August Strindberg, translated by Edwin Bjorkman, 1916, Charles Scribner's Sons.
There are also some references to the translation by Michael Robinson, in the volume *Miss Julie and Other Plays* (1998).

that produce this disarticulation with respect to the drama of his time, and how these processes are still present in today's dramaturgy.

"...the first and second stories of a modern corner home"

As soon as we start reading *The Ghost Sonata*, we are surprised by the *dramatis personae*: THE OLD MAN, THE STUDENT, THE MILKMAID (AN APPARITION), THE CARETAKER'S WIFE, THE DEAD MAN, THE LADY IN BLACK, THE COLONEL, THE MUMMY... It is clear that this list bears no relation to the type of character in the naturalistic drama that had emerged strongly a few years earlier and that presented complex beings from a psychologising point of view.

In *The Ghost Sonata*, most characters do not have names, except for the two servants — JOHANSSON and BENGTSSON — and THE OLD MAN HUMMEL, who seem to have an objective perception of events and provide a reliable point of view,[3] at least at first. Not explicitly revealing their names is especially significant, as it means not being able to distinguish or identify each character as an individual subject. From the middle class perspective, the servants occupy a clearly substitutable place, they are a function and, therefore, it is surprising that here it is the other way around: the other characters occupy the *function* place, and are linked to a trade or very generic traits, that is, as typical characters — THE CARETAKER'S WIFE, THE YOUNG LADY or THE DANDY. However, there are other quite unsettling cases that undermine all expectations: THE MILKMAID (AN APPARITION), THE DEAD MAN or THE MUMMY take us to unrealistic territories or, at least, to scenarios where one has to mistrust the visible in a *real* world. Another character that is hard to define, THE OLD MAN HUMMEL, the "master of ceremonies", is considered as the *narrator* who is able to see people just as they are, who knows everything that happens and has happened because he can slip between the walls. To complicate matters further, Strindberg added THE CARETAKER'S WIFE to the list of *dramatis personae,*[4] a character that never appears in the play, and few editions mention THE BEGGARS, the motley group that follows HUMMEL'S "war chariot", creating an utterly grotesque scene.

The first stage directions of the play also provide important details: "*The stage shows the first and second stories of a modern corner home.*" Unlike the beginnings of most plays of the time, we are not immediately placed in a middle class interior. We are outside, in a scene on the street, although in front of a house full of elements (doors, windows and a snooping mirror) that emphasise the threshold between the inside and outside. At first, the house does not seem to marry up with the title of the play and we cannot yet intuit any relationship to it. However, we do recognise the prototype middle class house and are offered the tools to decode what we see realistically. We are situated — we do not get lost — although we lack all the information, since we only have access to what we see from a restricted position, from a

3. The servants will be the characters who provide more distanced and reliable information — if this is possible in *The Ghost Sonata* — about what is happening. A good example is the scene where the ghost dinner is described.

4. According to Michael Robinson, Strindberg did not add THE MILKMAID or THE COOK probably in error (Strindberg, 1998: 308).

certain perspective ("*a corner*").[5] Therefore, it follows that no conclusions can be drawn because the *text tells us* that not everything can be known. We are not talking, therefore, about belonging from an omniscient point of view. Realising this, the audience/reader can no longer feel like the voyeur of the realistic drama, dominating the whole vision from the easy comfort of distance, and this offers little consolation, as it evidences something very contemporary: we have lost control of everything that happens; we cannot see everything; our judgement can only be partial. Thus, as subjects that look/listen, we also experience dislocation.

Following the stage directions, we read: "*A green bench stands on the pavement in front of the house,*" from where THE OLD MAN observes. However it later says that the windows of the Round Room "*at the corner face the street in front of the house, and at the corner look on to the suggestion of a side-street running towards the back*." The crossroads, as a possibility to follow four different paths, may indicate a lack of a single way, where possible vanishing points multiply.

In terms of weather, *The Ghost Sonata* starts with a splendid day: "*It is a bright Sunday morning*" and the beginning of the first act marks what seems to be an idyllic moment: "*When the curtain rises, the bells of several churches are heard ringing in the distance*" (Strindberg, 2017: 185), together with other audible sounds: "[...] *A steamship-bell is heard outside. Then the silence is broken fitfully by a few bass notes from the organ in the nearest church*." Sunday[6] is not a day when you are subject to habit and routine; rather, the state of leisure allows you to enter into subjectivity and these sounds in the distance allow you to wander in this state. However, against this seemingly idyllic impression, we find something serious: the white sheets on the windows that, according to Swedish custom, indicate that someone in the house has died. Indeed, at the start of Act I, it says: "*The doors of the entrance are wide open, and on the lowest step of the stairway stands the dark lady. She does not make the slightest movement*." The sight of the mourning woman and the white sheets lowers the tone, and death finally becomes the protagonist of the scene.[7]

From what has been said, it may seem obvious that we are in a realistic framework, but very significant events that cannot be explained through realism are beginning to affect the play. It is therefore impossible to continue the interpretation in the usual way or by using the indications that the play can provide mimetically, as a copy of reality, of what there is, like a *tranche de vie*.

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5. Also in *Miss Julie* (1888), the information provided about scenery — in the case of this play, the kitchen — is incomplete, as the general vision is skewed.

6. Let's remember that THE STUDENT was born on a Sunday and THE OLD MAN chooses him, it seems, for this reason alone, recognising him by the colour of his eyes. According to popular belief, a child born on a Sunday has supernatural powers and can, for example, see the dead (Strindberg, 1998: 309).

7. Although it may go unnoticed, there is an unexplained death in every act of the play.

The world as illusion

Like Ibsen, if we think in terms of dramatic production, Strindberg began by writing plays on historical subjects[8] and, like Ibsen, treated contemporary subjects realistically, as in *The Father* (1886). According to Michael Robinson, unlike Ibsen — who continued to explore the possibilities of the theatrical form that had evolved since *A Doll's House* with metronomic continuity —, Strindberg produced his plays irregularly and, after writing plays of psychological naturalism throughout the 1880s, gave up theatre for several years, to disconcert audiences and critics with the first part of *The Road to Damascus* (1898), in which he imposed a radically innovative dramaturgy that seemed to make a decisive break with the success achieved previously with *Miss Julie* (Strindberg, 1998: *viii*).

In any case, *The Ghost Sonata* is the play that most consistently — and innovatively — reflects one of Strindberg's main themes: the world as illusion (Ekman, 2000: 110), in the sense of deception, of mirage, and which becomes more and more present — and evident — in the post-*Inferno* plays. Of course, this has important effects in terms of performing it in a drama. In *Storm* (1907), Strindberg had already shown that you could dispense with sensorial perceptions, with the exterior, in favour of an interior contemplation, and in *Burnt House* he had demonstrated, with implacable negativity, the moral mirage that that implied. In *The Ghost Sonata* Strindberg explores these ideas in a final scene with a denouement that makes a complete break with anything hitherto seen in European theatre, even introducing an eastern philosophical element by referring directly to Buddhism. This poses a problem from a strictly theatrical/performing point of view. The feeling of losing one's footing in a kind of state of nirvana has often been related to the influence of his avid reading of Schopenhauer, and in *The World as Will and Representation* (1818) the philosopher describes this world as the realm of chance, error and madness. Thus, *The Ghost Sonata* features themes and motifs that appear in chamber plays written slightly earlier, but adding an element of 'vampirisation' (Tornqvist, 1982: 185), of 'demonisation', as expressed by Ekman, that is much more intense (Ekman, 2000: 110-111). Hence it is obvious to refer to the absurd element that imbues the various categories of the play faced with the difficulties of providing a coherent meaning.

In the famous *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961), Martin Esslin argues that an absurd element par excellence in literary works is that provided by dreams, and argues that the first playwright to stage the world of dreams from a modern perspective was Strindberg. For the British critic, the three parts of *The Road to Damascus* (1898-1904), *A Dream Play* (1902) and *The Ghost Sonata* (1907) are masterful representations of dreams and obsessions and, of course, direct forerunners of Theatre of the Absurd (Esslin, 1967: 342), while also having a strong impact at the time.

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8. *Master Olof* (1872), for example, is the first in a series of dramas about Swedish history. Michael Robinson believes that Strindberg's contribution was the most important to the genre since Schiller (Strindberg, 1998: *viii*).

In Strindberg's last chamber plays, the motif of the dream — which reveals all that is hidden, nocturnal, unconscious — appears in the form of real events, but presented in such a way that they look like a dream. The playwright himself wrote in the "Preface" preceding *A Dream Play* (1902):

> As he did in his previous dream play *Till Damaskus*,[9] so in this one the author has tried to imitate the disconnected but seemingly logical form of the dream. Anything may happen; everything is possible and probable. Time and space do not exist. On an insignificant background of reality, imagination designs and embroiders novel patterns: a medley of memories, experiences, free fancies, absurdities and improvisations.
>
> The characters split, double, multiply, vanish, solidify, blur, clarify. But one consciousness reigns above them all–that of the dreamer; and before it there are no secrets, no incongruities, no scruples, no laws. There is neither judgment nor exoneration, but merely narration. And as the dream is mostly painful, rarely pleasant, a note of melancholy and of pity with all living things runs right through the wabbly tale. Sleep, the liberator, plays often a dismal part, but when the pain is at its worst, the awakening comes and reconciles the sufferer with reality, which, however distressing it may be, nevertheless seems happy in comparison with the torments of the dream (Strindberg, 2014).

In *The Ghost Sonata*, the presence of the nightmare is also deliberate. Anything can be explained in the world of dreams, and spatiotemporal referentiality does not exist, at least from a logical perspective. On this "insignificant background of reality" (Strindberg, 2014), the Swedish playwright experiments with new models. The basis of the dream implies that there is no judgement, but narration, and in it all the inconsistencies of a dream are mixed, which becomes a nightmare, a world of ghosts, no less terrible or less real. Thus, from *The Road to Damascus*, in general, and in *The Ghost Sonata,* in particular — here with total potency —, there is a shift from the objective reality of the external world — from the outside, from the superficial, from appearance — to the unconscious, to the subjective reality of the inner state of consciousness; that is, to the remnants of what we might call *essence*. This movement would mark the turning point between the traditional and the modern, between what can be faithfully performed and the projection, now of an expressionist nature, of mental realities (Esslin, 1967: 342). Therefore, the character of THE STUDENT, to some extent, is surrounded by emanations of his mental state, of archetypal figures, very far from the naturalistic characters portrayed with great psychological depth that respond to the objectifiable, the visible. In this respect, Strindberg's characters are one dimensional, we do not get to know them well or have information about their lives, or this is provided to us drop by drop; in addition, the information provided is contradictory, ambiguous, biased and confusing. The central scene of the ghost dinner at the Colonel's house becomes, therefore, a stripping back of another magnitude, and we are astonished to see how the respectable characters become dust. In a clear Kafkaesque prefiguration we perceive the horror of the

9. *The Road to Damascus* (1898-1904).

ordinary, and in the only possible silence of its inhabitants, the only audible sounds are those of rats and beetles.

According to Esslin, it is especially significant — and paradoxical — that the treatment of (psychological) subjectivism manifested in Strindberg's chamber plays results from a development of naturalism, with his desire to portray objective reality, and then to show that this description of the real is the least important part. If "the world of *The Ghost Sonata* is a charnel-house of guilt, obsessions, madness and absurdity" (Esslin, 1967: 343), in this play Strindberg wants to show that the sensorial world is not only painful, but also unreliable. Our senses sabotage us, and therefore the visible, which seems objective and through which we think we can know the world, is unreliable.

In fact, the title of the play itself already indicates this by alluding to two senses: sight (*ghost*) and hearing (*sonata*) (Ekman, 2000: 111). This produces a certain uneasiness, partly through the use of the term *ghost*, but also, precisely, through the disconcerting fusion of the two senses. Strindberg speaks of the illusion of the senses as the deception of the procedure through which we know the real, and therefore it is interesting to see how dramatic reality shows — regardless of its (in)coherence — the sensorial world.

In *The Ghost Sonata*, the physical contact of the characters is especially significant. The first example, at the beginning of Act I, is central and shows how a simple physical gesture is symbolic: the cleaning of THE STUDENT'S eyes by THE MILKMAID, which is also related to another sense, sight. THE STUDENT's need to clean himself, clear his vision is, at the same time, the result of an incident that takes place before the start of this first scene: "[...] my hands have touched wounds and corpses." The motifs presented work in opposition and THE MILKMAID scene contrasts with another in the same act in which THE STUDENT takes THE OLD MAN's hand, after he says to him:

> THE OLD MAN: Will you please move the chair a little, so that I get into the sunlight? I am always cold. You see, the blood congeals when you can't move about.... Death isn't far away from me, I know, but I have a few things to do before it comes.... Just take hold of my hand and feel how cold I am.
> THE STUDENT: I should say so! (*He shrinks back*)
> THE OLD MAN: [...]
> THE STUDENT: Let go my hand! You are taking all my strength! You are freezing me! What do you want of me?

These details show that even though the play begins within an identifiable framework, we are not in an ordinary world, even though it may seem so. Here the main subject of death and vampirism — or the presence of blood — already appears from this Faustian pact between THE OLD MAN and THE STUDENT. Although, apparently, the old man tries to help the boy, he sucks all the energy from him, in a scene that is inexplicable according to logic.[10]

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10. Moreover, in Act II, in contrast and in an inversion of roles, THE MUMMY turns THE OLD MAN into a parrot by touching his back. As we can see, all the examples have no cause-effect relationship.

Vision against sight

To understand how sight works in opposition to the idea of vision in *The Ghost Sonata*, we first need to analyse the aforementioned scene from Act I, in which for the first time we find THE STUDENT with THE MILKMAID and THE OLD MAN, since the information provided seems erroneous, both between the characters on stage and between the stage and the audience. The play begins without words: THE LADY IN BLACK is still, standing; THE CARETAKER'S WIFE is watering the bay tree. These elements are not problematic from a realistic point of view. Neither are they in the case of THE OLD MAN, who is sitting in a wheelchair, reading the newspaper. THE MILKMAID enters the stage and goes to the fountain. She washes and looks in a mirror. The action is silent. The stage direction indicates that there should be about two minutes of silence before THE STUDENT enters. Several characters are on stage and a dialogue is expected. The reader/audience begins, impatiently, to wait for some kind of exposition. However, what comes is just the opposite: an erratic dialogue that confuses even more. The characters in the scene react with terror to the *presence* of another character on two occasions: *seeing* is problematic. THE OLD MAN understands that THE STUDENT sees (*can* see) someone (THE MILKMAID) that he, at the same time, cannot see, and thinks the young man is mad. On the other hand, we know that THE MILKMAID is a vision. How do you perform a vision? In addition, she seems terrified to see the boy and we are not given any indication as to why, either now or in the whole play; in this respect, and as a clearly modern feature, the whole play is full of points of indeterminacy. Therefore, the audience — and especially the reader — cannot deduce the presence/evidence of the character/vision. A vision appears but is not part of the contingent world. Thus, the question is about how this scene allows one to think, right at the start of the play, that sight is misleading, false or problematic. From the theatrical point of view, the audience will have to confront a doubt: to what extent is it possible to trust what is seen?

The sense of sight is clearly emphasised when THE STUDENT asks THE MILKMAID the wash his inflamed eyes. As we have seen, this cleansing of the gaze has a highly symbolic meaning: from now on, the play will speak of misleading, disorienting visions; but also of the pain of vision, of seeing clearly, and THE STUDENT prepares for this in a kind of baptism. At the same time, we can find elements that show this refractory reality: THE OLD MAN's glasses, THE MILKMAID's mirror, windows and doors as mirrors/thresholds: windows that close, curtains that go up, the neighbour who looks through the snooping window-mirror to avoid being seen, without realising that everyone sees her, etc. (Ekman, 2000: 113).

If we pay attention to the words used in the text, the verb *to see* appears over one hundred times in *The Ghost Sonata*.[11] It is used in all possible senses (*see*, *understand*, *contemplate*) and through all types of synonyms. THE OLD MAN says he had "seen" THE STUDENT since he was young, that "I had had my eyes on you" for a long time, he asks him to go to see what they do at the

11. This is significant if we bear in mind that we are talking about a short play of around forty pages.

opera, etc. We find a sceptical and ironic tone with BENGTSSON's "that remains to be seen!" (Müssener cited in Ekman, 2000: 214). It also seems relevant that the song that ends Acts II and III includes ways of seeing in the first two verses: "Seeing the sun, it seemed to my fancy / That I beheld the Spirit that's hidden." In this respect, according to Ekman, this use in the hymn may explain the dramatic progression of the play. The first "to see" means "to look"; in the second case, the verb has definitively separated itself from the observation of empirical reality: from looking at what is there to having an impression that leads to contemplation (Ekman, 2000: 114), and this is a recurrent motif, not only in the chamber plays but in the post-*Inferno* plays in general. There is another suggestive example, when THE OLD MAN asks THE STUDENT: "Have you noticed this house?" and THE STUDENT answers: "Yes, I have been watching it" and then explains that he passed by the house when the sun was shining on the windows[12] and he imagined all the beauty and luxury there might be inside. Apparently this is the description of the impression of a specific event, an event that will be overshadowed when we understand that, in reality, THE STUDENT was blinded by the sun's rays. What is symptomatic here is that Strindberg makes illusion or blindness a concrete phenomenon and, paradoxically, this legitimises the distrust of reality.

Even if seeing the house produces obfuscation, not seeing it clearly, THE STUDENT possesses the ability to subdue reality under moral scrutiny, especially in Act III. Before that, he himself says he is clairvoyant as he is a child born on a Sunday. When the play begins, THE STUDENT had just saved a child from a collapsing house[13] and says that he was guided by some sort of intuitive perception. So vision is linked to the illogical, unexplainable, unrepresentable. As well as being able to see THE MILKMAID, later THE STUDENT can also see how THE DEAD MAN "wrapped in winding sheets, comes out of the entrance." In both cases, only the audience can also experience this clairvoyance, a clairvoyance that entails a loneliness, an isolation from the outside world to contemplate a deeper reality. Act I concludes with another vision: once again THE MILKMAID, with the difference that THE OLD MAN can now also see her, reminding him of a past crime. For the audience, the fact that THE OLD MAN HUMMEL can see her on this occasion indicates a capricious character, the arbitrariness of sensorial perceptions

Moreover, it should also be noted how in Act I the information provided in the dialogues is also undermined through oppositions. In the first scene, THE LADY IN BLACK talks to THE CARETAKER'S WIFE and a stage direction says: "*the old man listens, but the audience hears nothing.*" In another moment, JOHANSSON talks "*inaudibly*" to THE OLD MAN, whose response we hear, secretly, by chance, in a half dialogue we have to reconstruct. In another moment, THE DANDY says to THE LADY IN BLACK: "Follow me this way, or they'll hear what we are saying. (*They go toward the advertising column and continue*

12. In Michael Robinson's translation: "I walked past here yesterday, when the sun was shining on the windows" (Strindberg, 1998: 225).

13. This is another recurrent motif in Strindberg: houses that collapse or burn.

their talk inaudibly)" (Strindberg, 2017: 195). The question as to the meaning of including this incomplete information is crucial.

The fallibility of language

If Act I takes place outside, in Act II the action takes place inside the house, specifically in the Round Room which is visible from the outside, and in Act III in a room further inside this interior. The whole play therefore represents an itinerary from this outer space — social, diurnal and solar — to an increasingly inner space — dark, of subjectivity —, which, in parallel, affects the journey of the visible to the invisible, with a result of lesser to greater relevance.

In terms of space, the fact that we are in the Round Room means that the absence of angles suggests a difficulty in orienting oneself precisely and also a certain claustrophobia, accentuated because the interior can be visible from the street. In *The Dance of Death*, Strindberg had already provided directions about an "*Interior of a round tower of a granite fortress.*" This feeling of captivity and confinement is especially accentuated when it is revealed that they have the lady of the house *stored* in a cupboard, behind a papered door.[14] The audience is given no explanation for this strange situation; in fact, according to the servants, this is attributable to a rarity or possible extravagance of a well-to-do family. The servant BERGSTON says: "Well, you see, a house gets mouldy when it grows old, and when people are too much together, tormenting each other all the time, they lose their reason." The stage directions indicate that there are curtains that can be drawn and undrawn over the marble statue, an Apollonian statue presiding over the room, surrounded by palm trees and bathed in the sun, and representing the beauty of the lady of the house, THE MUMMY, when she was young. There is also another physical element that prevents us from seeing a concrete and definitive action, a screen, which is always placed in front of someone who is about to die. Therefore, the arrangement of what could be recognised as a typical middle class interior shows an isolation of the characters and their inability or unwillingness to communicate, as well as some peculiarities that take it away from what we might expect and that give it a grotesque character — THE MUMMY lives in the cupboard — or absurd character — placing a screen in front of death.

Indeed, Act II picks up on themes and motifs present in Strindberg's earlier plays but, once again, turns them around, parodying them and degrading them into grotesque material. According to Ekman, one of those motifs is disappointment (Ekman, 2000: 118). JOHANSSON says that he had always dreamed of entering that house, that he imagined a paradise, and later finds that nothing is what seemed to be. THE MUMMY lives in the cupboard because her eyes cannot stand the light and she wants to avoid seeing and being seen, just like THE FIANCÉE. The conversation between THE COLONEL and THE OLD MAN revolves around being and seeming: THE COLONEL is not what

14. Door disguised by the decoration.

he seems; everything he is and possesses is a house of cards. The scene with THE MILKMAID looking at herself in the mirror in Act I is picked up in Act II, when THE OLD MAN looks at himself trying to arrange his wig, a sign of false identity: the mirror thus becomes an instrument of unmasking. Another obvious motif is physical and mental deterioration: THE OLD MAN is disabled and THE MUMMY thinks she is a parrot.[15]

Given all this, THE STUDENT seems to have vanished in Act II. We know that between Act I and II he has gone to listen to Wagner's *Valkyrie*. This opera is mentioned six times in the play and numerous studies have asked why, specifically, this piece by Wagner. In those years, Strindberg expressed great hostility to the German composer's work and so it is unlikely that he would structure his drama around the composer's work.[16] For the critic Lindström, it is more interesting to think that THE STUDENT was exposed to a maximum amount of sound for hours, to a music that Strindberg described in the first of his memoirs *Blue Books* (*Blå Böcker*, 1907-1912) as "cavalry music (trumpets and timpani), composed by a 'music representative of evil'"[17] (cited in Törnqvist: 2000: 51).

In any case, listening is important in this second act, an act that, paradoxically, is characterised by muteness. Speaking of the ghost dinner, BENGSTON explains: "The usual spook supper, as we call it. They drink tea and don't say a word, or else the Colonel does all the talking. And then they munch their biscuits, all at the same time, so that it sounds like the gnawing of a lot of rats in an attic." The dialogues, long and revealing, would be typical of the drama that Strindberg seems to parody here, and lowers these subjects to the category of rodents. This quote also indicates that other sounds emerge from the silences, in the absence of conversation, of communication: the bell to call the servants or the ticking of the ornamental clock that will be heard when there is silence on stage, after THE COLONEL has tried in vain to start a conversation. In this context, THE OLD MAN pays tribute to silence, as more honourable than language — something that is false in him —: "I prefer silence. Then thoughts become audible, and we can see the past. Silence can hide nothing-but words can. I read the other day that the differentiation of languages had its origin in the desire among savage peoples to keep their tribal secrets hidden from outsiders." THE OLD MAN HUMMEL play acts and, of course, although there is reason to speak — it is a social event, a dinner — no one does, and HUMMEL's monologue on telling the truth is interrupted five times by long silences. THE OLD MAN finally pays attention to the ticking of the clock: "Do you hear that clock ticking like the deathwatch hidden in a wall? Can you hear what it says?—'It's time! It's time!'" Language has been

15. This grotesque pair undoubtedly anticipates aspects of contemporary drama, such as surrealism, expressionism, the Theatre of the Absurd or, in particular, the plays of Beckett.

16. In contrast, *The Ghost Sonata*, as an example of a chamber play, is structured in the musical form of the sonata and, specifically, the *Sonata for Piano No. 17 in D minor*, known as "The tempest", and *Piano Trio No. 4, in D major*, called "The ghost trio", both by Beethoven.

17. A collaborator of Strindberg, Claës Lundin, published a history, *Oxygen och Aromasia*, which described experiments with smells and argued that Wagner had a harmful effect on the ear: "[...] Humanity was for a long time deaf, stone deaf, and the ear was finally regarded as a superfluous limb" (Ekman, 2000: 121).

penetrated by dramatic sounds. Words merge with sounds and undermine verbal function.

The dramatic tension increases when, in an inversion of roles, THE MUMMY stops the clock and delivers a monologue against a total silence, in which she accuses THE OLD MAN HUMMEL of the same kind of deception that he has accused the others of. After making him imitate a parrot and a cuckoo clock — "Cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo!" says an overshadowed HUMMEL, deprived of language and any sign of humanity —, THE MUMMY orders him, hypnotically,[18] to hang himself with a rope. The Mephistophelian OLD MAN HUMMEL obeys unthinkingly.[19] How have we gone from a middle class interior in a naturalistic drama, where one socialises and, thanks to language, truth is revealed, to a world where language is reified to the repetition of a parrot? Strindberg thus presents creatures devoid of independent self-expression, who only repeat sounds emitted by others: pure copy, echo. This unsettling element, distrust of language, is shown a little earlier in a comical way when THE MUMMY-parrot chats, babbles and whistles, and her dialogue with BENGSTON becomes a caricature of any exchange of ideas: "Polly must be nice now. Then she'll get something good. Pretty polly!". The parrot mimics the human voice, but the people around the parrot mimic the way the parrot speaks. In the history of drama, a descent into nonsense like this had hitherto been unimaginable.

Poison and intoxication of the senses

In this progression, Act III is, without a doubt, the most disorienting: the action — if we can speak of action — is inside an intimate space: THE YOUNG LADY's room, about which all we know is that it is full of flowers — hyacinths — and that there is a Buddha on whose lap stands the stem of a shallot. While in the two previous acts the unrealistic elements were presented in a seemingly realistic framework — or recognisable as realistic — in the third act the lack of referentiality is now almost total. The world has faded and this is the atmosphere in which young people find themselves.

This act, clearly experimental precisely because of the impossibility of being realistic — although it is based on a language, at times, even of an old-fashioned epigonal romanticism —, has been interpreted in various ways. In *Theory of Modern Drama* (1956), Peter Szondi argues that the third act is a failure:

> The third act had to fail because, with no epic support, it could not generate dialogue of its own. In addition to the episodic figure of the Cook, who, surprisingly, prolongs the thematic figure of the "vampiric" Hummel, without adopting his formal function, the girl and the student are the only supports and, both bewitched by the house of ghosts, can no longer free themselves of it to return to the dialogue. This conversation interrupted by silences, monologues, prayers, erratic and desperate, this cruelly failed end of an exceptional play, is

18. Strindberg was very interested in the use of hypnosis and in this period began using it as a dramatic resource.

19. In *Miss Julie* something similar happens with Jean's knife, which shows the same process of blind domination over the other, although the procedure in *The Sonata* is far more demonised.

> only explained by the transitory situation that characterises this dramaturgy: the epic structure is already here, but covered by the theme and, therefore, at the service of the development of the action (Szondi, 1956: 43; trans. 1988).

When Szondi talks of "epic support" he is referring to HUMMEL, who Strindberg kills in the second act and to whom Szondi attributes the function of epic presenter, one who in the first act observes the whole house, who is able to see and know everything, and whose role he considers anticipates the epic drama. However, Jean-Pierre Sarrazac's position is reasonable when he concludes that Strindberg is never lacking in dramatic naiveté, but "qu'il a maintenu la possibilité de cette dualité du personnage: à la fois dramatique et épique, intérieur et extérieur, souffrant et observant" (Sarrazac, 2012: 220). Undoubtedly, Act III also features a new language, not objectified, through the insertion of dramatic, epic and lyrical fragments. Otherwise, if the different acts of *The Ghost Sonata* show how the senses confuse and alienate, here the two young people will be intoxicated: THE STUDENT will be stunned by the smell of the hyacinths and THE YOUNG LADY will talk about the food served by the cook, dividing the character of HUMMEL with the same vampiric characteristics.

According to classical mythology, the young Hyacinth accidentally died at the hands of Apollo when he threw a disc at him, and from his blood rose the flower that bears his name. According to Ovid's version, Apollo's tears at the death of his friend fell on the flower, which became a sign of mourning. The hyacinth was present at funerals and the arrival of spring and thus showed how death gives way to rebirth; following this tradition, early Christianity regarded the flower as the symbol of Jesus Christ. Strindberg was very interested in syncretism and had a solid knowledge of botany, a subject read about voraciously. Therefore, it would be naïve to think that the room full of hyacinths has an unambiguous meaning. THE STUDENT succumbs to the fragrance of the flowers and makes clear a lack of control of the senses: "I love it above all other flowers. [...] Their fragrance, powerful and pure as the winds of early spring, which have passed over melting snow—it seems to confuse my senses, to make me deaf and blind, to crowd me out of the room, to bombard me with poisoned arrows that hurt my heart and set my head on fire!" At the end of the act, the fragrance becomes poison, and beauty, illusory.

There are several works that deal with Strindberg's relationship with aromas, always linked to their ability to enchant, to cast spells. His letters also show his interest in works by Hans Christian Andersen, E.T.A. Hoffmann and Goethe, especially *Faust*, where aromas and smells are the protagonists. In the case of Faust, the character links smell with intoxicating love and, in this sense, we must think of the role of the cook, grotesque and evil (Ekman, 2000: 127). The links with Hoffmann have been extensively studied and are quite clear. *Der Goldene Topf* (*The Golden Pot*) describes, from a realistic setting, visions and moments of ecstasy under the stimuli of a variety of drinks and smells,[20] and Strindberg also talks of *The Devil's Elixir*: "I am now reading Hoffmann's *Die Elixire des Teufels* and feel that every word is

20. He also includes human characters that talk like parrots in his short stories.

true,"[21] a "Devil's elixir" that the cook is holding when she enters the young man's room, saying to them: "You take the sap out of us, and we out of you. We keep the blood for ourselves and leave you the water — with the colouring!" Strindberg thus specifies his interest in Hoffmann: "Hoffmann saw the supernatural as something completely natural and thereby rescued poetry (atmosphere)."[22] Strindberg found a certain consolation in the German author's attitude towards the supernatural, as would later happen in his readings of Swedenborg. In *The Ghost Sonata*, Strindberg, like Hoffmann, therefore offers a tension between the innocent and the alienating, which ends up confused and where elixirs/smells and potions/drinks become poisons that, according to Ekman, distance young people from equanimity.

In this respect, THE COOK, who appears in this third act, like THE OLD MAN HUMMEL, sucks all the nutritious juices from the food to provide those in the house with only sinews swimming in water. BENGSTON'S monologue about HUMMEL describes him as a parasite in his home, where he always drank all the broth, just like THE COOK. The descriptions of the food are unpleasant — they are poisons —, and they affect a moral element, already presented/displayed in the two previous acts: falsification. Water, a vital nutrient, no longer has the same function here as at the beginning of the play, when it appeared as an act of offering. In fact, the play begins with water gushing from the fountain. THE MILKMAID drinks it, tastes it, washes in it, touches it, and looks at her reflection in it: it is linked to three senses as a sign of life. This is described by Strindberg as a particularly long action. The development of the motif will go from an element of life to an image of immobility and decomposition. As in all the chamber plays, the motifs are repeated, but vary: first, THE MILKMAID gives water to THE STUDENT and waters and bathes his eyes; then, THE CARETAKER'S WIFE waters the bay tree, a symbol of honour, but before that she had been polishing the golden brass of the door, a symbol of appearance. At the end, water reappears in the final monologue, when THE STUDENT says: "To keep silent too long is like letting water stagnate so that it rots. That is what has happened in this house." Stagnant water becomes the expression of destruction.

As we have seen, in Act II it seems as if Strindberg had radically rejected the communicative possibilities that drama traditionally offered and ends with THE STUDENT reciting the version of an Icelandic song, *The Song of the Sun*, while THE YOUNG LADY accompanies him on the harp. Music and poetry have replaced conventional language: "What is the use of talking, when you can't fool each other anyhow?" complains THE YOUNG LADY. The dialogue that opens Act III also cannot be said to respond to a functional language. After dealing with the communicative impossibility of a fossilised language, Strindberg made an attempt at renewal through a dialogue that tends towards different types of monologues, both lyrical and expressive. Thus, flowers — hyacinths and the shallot flower — are the initial subject of a dialogue that is

21. In a letter written on 17 September 1896.

22. In a letter to Henning Berger of 10 December 1906. In different letters Strindberg mentions Hoffmann, having his complete works, as a source of inspiration: "What I aimed at was a fairy or fantasy piece in the present with modern houses" (cited in Robinson, 1998: 312).

closer to contemporary poetry, or poetic drama, than to a possible turn of the century dialogue. The lyrical dialogue is followed by one consisting of questions and answers, in contradiction to the monological tendency of Act II, about the young lady's difficulties with the servants and the lack of food. At the end of the act, the conversation is interrupted by THE STUDENT's monologue, as a religious prayer (that invokes both Christ and Buddah, showing his characteristic syncretism). The change in trend is confusing, especially with the subsequent and unexpected death of the girl, which we recognise because it calls for the presence of the screen. The room is full of flowers and a harp symbolysing the immaterial, the beyond. The fact that the harp does not sound when played by THE STUDENT could imply a break with a possibility of transcendence. In fact, when the harp sounds again, at the end of the act, it does so without anyone playing it, in an impersonal way: "*The strings of the harp begin to hum softly*" (Strindberg, 2017: 219). In the same moment, the scene changes radically: "*The whole room disappears,*" says the stage direction, and Arnold Böcklin's painting *Isle of the Dead* is revealed as a phantasmagorical backdrop: "*Soft music, very quiet and pleasantly wistful, is heard from without*." The elements that characterise conventional drama, dialogue and scenery are replaced by an invitation to contemplate the evocative painting, which exists in our real world, and with which Strindberg was obsessed. The world is madness and illusion, a world from which we must free ourselves. The characters, then, live in a purgatory or Kama-Loka, while they wait, until *Isle of the Dead* appears. What kind of journey is the end of *The Ghost Sonata*? Does Strindberg end up restoring the distinction between the real and the imaginary? Are we truly following the path of the painting?

Verbal language, which seems inadequate and inoperative here, is replaced by pictorial and musical language that refers us to a new conception of theatre, like chamber music transposed to drama: an intimate action, a significant motif, treated in a sophisticated manner, as defined by Strindberg himself. In any case, *The Ghost Sonata* articulates the notion of the world as an illusion through a sceptical treatment of the capacity of language to convey the truth, to unmask it. The fallibility of language shows the tension between the sensorial world — painful and untrustworthy — and the shift towards a subjective projection that, despite being intoxicated by poison and deception, will reveal the faculty of sight of a student born on a Sunday.

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