

¶ Hans-Göran Ekman, *Villornas värld. Studier i Strindbergs kammarspel*. Hedemora: Gidlunds, 1997. 285 pp., ill. ISBN 91-7844-252-4.

Much attention has been paid to Hans-Göran Ekman's study *Klädernas magi* [The Magic of the Clothes, 1991] on the thematic use of clothing and costume in Strindberg's drama. In his latest book, *Villornas värld. Studier i Strindbergs kammarspel* [The World of Illusions: Studies in Strindberg's Chamber Plays] Ekman pursues this investigation of themes and motifs, now focusing on the role of the five senses in the chamber plays (*Thunder in the Air*, *The Burned Site*, *The Ghost Sonata*, *The Pelican*), all written in 1907. The study investigates these plays against the background of Strindberg's lifelong interest in the physiology of the senses: Do children see the world upside down? Could a woman's senses ever equal those of a man? Is my inner eye my true one? What is a ghost? These are some of the questions on which Strindberg reflects.

Ekman stresses the importance of intertextuality in the chamber plays, and points out the surprising fact that, in spite of the international fame of these plays, they are usually studied in isolation, rather than as the thematic suite they constitute in reality. *Villornas Värld* is a first attempt at a more unified analysis of the chamber plays. As in his former study, Ekman does not deal only with dialogue but also with settings and stage directions, for Strindberg's drama must not be limited to the spoken word. Ekman insists that Strindberg's drama is not "intellectual" but "physical".

The book falls into two parts. The first part deals with the period before the Inferno ("Sinnenas värld" [The world of the senses]) and the period of the post-Inferno plays preceding the chamber plays ("Återkomsten" [The return]), and forms a lengthy "introduction" of 100 pages. Here Ekman gives a detailed and thoroughly documented chronological analysis of Strindberg's use of the allegory of the five senses throughout his literary and dramatic work. In the second part, each of the four chamber plays is analysed separately, following a similar schema but focusing on different senses depending on the character of each play. The author's aim is to permit these different analyses to be

read independently. *The Ghost Sonata* is analysed in detail, especially its often-criticised third act. More than thirty illustrations, informative notes referring to letters and manuscripts, a rich bibliography, and an index of names and works, contribute to the usefulness and pleasure offered by this study to anyone with a special interest in the motifs of the chamber plays or in Strindberg's works in general.

The title of the book, "The World of Illusions", refers to a philosophical notion deriving from Plato and Schopenhauer, amongst others, and first mentioned by Strindberg in *Svarta Fanor* (*Black Banners*), although it figures in his projects and notes long before then. It is also the title of one of the essays in *A Blue Book*, where it stands for what Strindberg called "denna villornas och dårarnas värld" (this world of illusions and fools). Ekman describes the origins and development of this aspect of Strindberg's personal philosophy from his early writings and the naturalistic period, through the Inferno crises, the influences from occultism, theosophy, and oriental thought, until its final manifestation in the post-Inferno plays, integrating a personal symbolism and pre-expressionism.

Ekman argues that Strindberg's personal crises reflect a fundamental relationship between his guilt complex and his tortured senses. From being a believer in the five senses, enjoying them in every natural way, as reflected in the joyful experience of nature and the seasons in *The Red Room*, Strindberg comes to reject them in favour of a search for wisdom and an inner vision. At first, he is merely possessed by his own senses and by a scientifically oriented curiosity concerning their nature, as reflected in *Antibarbarus*, in his *Occult Diary*, in his many articles on this subject, like "Sensations détraquées", and in the general interest in hypnotism and the like that he shared with his time. But he is progressively overwhelmed by the discovery of their illusory character. At the end of his life, he finally comes to deny human nature and the physical world as a whole. Only through ratiocination is he able to keep control over a world so threatening to him in its very inconstancy.

But Strindberg's fascination with the senses is not limited to philosophy and science; it also has a moral and religious aspect. In *The Black Banners*, where Strindberg exposes his view of the world as "rot-

ten”, where people betray and deceive each other, the senses are not only illusory, but people use them *against* each other in order to manipulate and hurt. Certain sensations are experienced as profoundly hostile: sounds such as the music of Wagner are a torture; the perfume of flowers is turned into poison, depriving people of their self-control; odours indicate an evil character; a frequent motif is that of someone getting something in his eye, troubling his view and intellect; and the mere touch of someone like the Old Man in *The Ghost Sonata* who grips the Student’s hand can be mortal.

Strindberg finally seems to come to believe that our senses are incomplete and false instruments of perception. Nature is false, treacherous and nothing in this physical world is reliable. Consequently, even human language becomes an insufficient instrument of communication. Like Maeterlinck, Strindberg comes to prefer silence, which is apparent in the chamber plays, but, as Ekman underlines, the use made out of silence, as an instrument of manipulation or of mystification, has nothing or little to do with the positive conception of silence in Maeterlinck’s writings. Rather, it springs from the influence of Swedenborg, the theory of “correspondences”, and cabalistic thought. The Student in *The Ghost Sonata* testifies to the existence of a sixth sense: as a “Sunday’s child” he can see what is concealed to others and has access to the “world between the worlds”.

In analysing the four chamber plays, Ekman’s focus moves between the different senses according to a sometimes confusing schema. In *Thunder in the Air* and *The Burned Site* he focuses on a systematic analysis of sight, hearing, smell, and touch. Motifs such as colours, eyes, certain gestures, and the recurring metaphor of a window acquire symbolic status. Ekman pays attention to Strindberg’s inventive experiments with theatrical dialogue, the use of the telephone on stage, and the creation of the modern notion of “disturbed dialogue”. In *The Ghost Sonata*, sight dominates the first act, hearing the second, and smell, taste, and the components of water and matter the third. *The Pelican*, finally, is dominated by the elements of food and fire, by the sensations of warmth and cold associated especially with the senses of taste and touch.

The philosophy of the chamber plays is also reflected in their vo-

cabulary, where the frequency of words associated with the five senses and the theme of the illusion of the world is remarkable. Words like “see”, “seem”, “appear”, “look like”, and their various synonyms are important components in the creation of the metaphor of the senses, a field still offering scope for a multitude of studies. Another interesting point that is developed is the increasing destructiveness, the “demonisation” of intrigue and motifs, that Ekman observes in the chamber plays; from the more realistic character of *Thunder in the Air*, and to a certain extent *The Burned Site*, to the fantastic and macabre elements of *The Ghost Sonata*, to the final catastrophe of *The Pelican*. A question that Ekman raises, but does not discuss, is the possible influence of the notion of “devastation” in Swedenborg’s writings and the interpretation of the four chamber plays as a theosophical allegory.

Ekman continually points us to possible analogies and sources of influence. He argues that Strindberg’s art is more associative than synthetic, and that he rarely makes symbolic use of the motifs. Nor does Strindberg use the synesthesia so frequently used by the symbolists of his time, for he regards the confusion or mixing of different senses as a sign of mental illness, and therefore to be avoided.

The complexity of the subject and the richness of the treatment mean that *Villornas värld* is not the kind of study to which justice can be done within the scope of a brief review. At first glance, the many threads laid out by Ekman create a sometimes tangled impression, and risk confusing the reader seeking simple lines to follow. A purely thematic structure, focusing only on the motifs and detecting their presence systematically in the different plays, might have been easier to follow. On the other hand, the present structure means that the analysis of each play can be read separately, and this is a very useful feature given that this book will probably become a reference work to be consulted regarding specific plays and influences.

Some readers may regret the refusal to discuss symbolic interpretations and wish to consider issues of cause and effect. From an interpretative or psychoanalytic point of view, the motifs that are here seen as final constituents of the text are indications of a deeper complexity, symptoms of the mental state of its author, conscious or subconscious,

or of the society he lives in. Many of the motifs can be considered both universal and representative symbols at that time. Given the juxtaposition of Strindbergian thought with theosophy, Hinduism, Buddhism, and the tradition of occultism at the turn of the century, there is much scope for further study of such things as the Jungian dualism of spirit and matter, or the elements of the chakras reflected in the “demonisation” of the chamber plays.

The great contribution of this book, besides its many valuable references, lies in its permitting a complete view of the motifs related to an essential theme in Strindbergian post-Inferno drama. It is interesting to follow the impressions from the Inferno, transposed into dramatic motifs within the creative process. Another of this book’s charms is that it brings out the importance of Strindberg’s stays in Paris and the possibility that he might there have discovered and reflected on pieces of art representing the traditional allegory of the Five Senses. Ekman proposes that Strindberg may have seen such works as the tapestries of *La Dame à la licorne* at the Musée de Cluny, or the famous *Coupe des sens*, representing the five senses, at the Musée de la Céramique at Sèvres. Curiosity or coincidence perhaps, but the possibility of an influence as well as the fascinating illustrations capture the reader. So does the beautiful cover representing the decadent spirit of the “The Hyacinth Room”, a much appreciated painting by Roj Friberg.

*Villornas värld* is a goldmine to anyone seeking a complete investigation of the theme of the five senses in the chamber plays. It will no doubt contribute to our interest and understanding, if not necessarily our sympathy, with Strindberg’s view of the world as consisting of “illusions and fools”.

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