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GÖRAN STOCKENSTRÖM

“His Former Dream Play *To Damascus*”

The term “dreamplay” has been used in Strindberg-criticism with varying connotations and has frequently been applied to several of the post-inferno plays to signify a conscious distortion of reality. The two plays taken as models in a great many countries are *Ett drömspel* (A Dream Play) and *Till Damaskus* (To Damascus). I quote a representative description from Louis Broussard in his *American Drama*:

Strindberg abandoned the photography of realism, the dramatic sequence of events, for a stream of consciousness in terms of stage symbols whereby the surface of life becomes disjointed, scattered, as in a dream, to suggest the inner reality which lies beneath that surface.¹

Defined in negative terms as a departure from realism the structural principle of causal interrelation between character, incident, and action is seen to give way to new patterns, characterized by a repetition and variation of theme closer to music than drama. The embodiment of psychic forces and projection of abstract ideas take the place of imitation of external facts. The transformation of the very metaphors of language into symbolic images and happenings on the stage by the use of primarily scenic arrangements is seen as the essence of the so called “dreamplays”.

In dramatic criticism after Strindberg, in particular with reference to the German expressionists, the term “dreamplay” has developed into a concept that signifies a play that attempts to transform aspects of the dream process into theater using figures of speech in interaction with existing scenic means of expression. In general this “genre” conforms to an epic pattern where a series of stations, thematically repeated and diversified scenic images substitute a logical plot based on conflict. This absence of conflict and genuine antagonists determines a pageant struc-

LOUIS BROUSSARD, *American Drama* (1962), p.5. Cf also WALTER H. SOKEL, *Der literarische Expressionismus* (1959), p.42 ff.

ture which makes the protagonist serve as an existential example, a paragon, while the other dramatic figures become not so much characters as functions in his mission or suffering. The roots of this kind of play extend beyond Strindberg, however major his influence was.

The term “dreamplay” was coined by Strindberg himself and first used in reference to his own dramas in the Preface to *A Dream Play* (1901):

In this dream play, as in his former dream play *To Damascus*, the Author has sought to reproduce the disconnected but apparently logical form of a dream. Anything can happen; everything is possible and probable. Time and Space do not exist; on a slight groundwork of reality, imagination spins and weaves new patterns made up of memories, experiences, unfettered fancies, absurdities and improvisations.

The characters are split, double and multiply; they evaporate, crystallise, scatter and converge. / — — — / ²

Strindberg’s idea to have the term “dreamplay” signify a certain type of drama originates from his conscious reworking of his dramatic materials to give it the appearance of a dream. The most obvious parallels are created through the manipulation of time, room and properties on the stage. The action moves from timelessness, back and forth between moments in time; seasons intermingle and a whole life span is reduced to a few moments. Just as confusing and seemingly illogical is the journey in space between the purely symbolic or mythological and the real. Properties remain the same but shift in their outward meaning. Characters appear and vanish through the settings. One scene is melted into the next and at times the dramatist uses simultaneous settings producing surrealistic montage by a method of juxtaposition of incongruous elements. This point-counterpoint technique is carefully contrived to augment the central theme of human suffering and phenomenal complexity which the dialogue exhibits. There is a conscious distortion in the use of language as well as scenic elements. Of the latter lighting and sound are given a special eminence at times fused together but more often used in opposition. The dramatist plays games with both our visual and aural memory as he conditions us on what to expect and then reverses. The detailed parallel to a dream functions on a number of levels in the play and is orchestrated in its visual and auditory aspects in such a manner as to establish on the sensory level of its

² Samlade Skrifter (1920–25), XXXVI, p.215, *A Dream Play*, in: Six Plays of Strindberg, ed. Elizabeth Sprigge (1955), p.193

audience the experience that life itself is a dream to make lucid the underlying theme of the play. The title of the play and Strindberg's use of the term "dreamplay" is from this perspective unequivocal.

The form of *A Dream Play* has received considerable attention in dramatic criticism and has been elaborated in great detail by a number of Strindberg scholars. In our century its form foreshadows the principles of montage in modern film with its juxtaposition of subjective and objective vision and has influenced elements in the plays of the German expressionists, Brecht and Eugene O'Neill as well as the techniques of the French absurdists. One of the latter, Antoine Artaud, states early: "Strindberg's *A Dream Play* belongs to the repertoire of an ideal theatre, as one of those model plays whose staging is for a director the crowning achievement of his career", and concludes with the proclamation that "it is in terms of *mise en scène*, regarded not merely as the degree of refraction of a text on the stage but as the point of departure of all theatrical creation, that the ideal language of the theatre will evolve".³ The roots of many stylistic developments in 20th century drama are traced back to Strindberg and he is inevitably characterized as a "modernist" like Baudelaire in his search for new forms of expression to concretize in terms of theatre his vision of man and the world.

The term "dreamplay" is by Strindberg reserved for not only *A Dream Play* but also *To Damascus*. Having finished *To Damascus* in March of 1898 Strindberg sent his script to his publisher with the following remark: "Härmed en pjes om hvars värde jag icke har en aning. Finner du den god, så kasta in den till teatern. Finner du den omöjlig, så göm den i Gernandts kassaskåp. (Enclosing a play the merit of which I have no idea. If you find it good, send it to some theatre. If you find it impossible, hide it in the safe of the Gernandt's Publishing House.)"⁴ This is indeed a somewhat remarkable commentary to a text that has since on many occasions been hailed as the unsurpassed origin of all expressionistic drama. After Geijerstam's and other's enthusiastic reactions to the play Strindberg seems to have become convinced of its artistic merits and two months later it is described in an entirely different manner: "Jag har nemligen slutat af en stor pjes i fem akter, det

³ ANTOIN ARTAUD, *The Theatre of Cruelty*, in: *The Theatre and its Double* (1976), p. 246

⁴ Letter to Gustav af Geijerstam 8 March 1898, *Brev*, XII, p. 272

bästa jag skrivit och som ingifvit mig och mina vänner som läst den stora förhoppningar. Som det är en ny genre, fantastiskt och lysande som Lycko-Per men spelande i nutid och med full verklighet bakom, / — — — /(For I have finished a great play in five acts, the best one I have ever written giving myself and my friends who have read it great expectations. As it is a new genre, fantastic and brilliant like Lucky Pehr but taking place in the present based on real experiences / — — — /)”⁵ In order to describe its structure to his children an obvious point of reference was his earlier saga drama, *Lycko-Pers resa* (Lucky Pehr, 1881). The episodic form of *To Damascus* looks undeniably back to both the sequential tableaux of the medieval drama and Goethe’s *Faust* as well as the romantic drama of pilgrimage and quest. Its five act structure can also be traced to an Aristotelian pattern with the inevitable peripety at the middle of the third act in the Asylum-scene where the protagonist’s change from ignorance to insight determines the ensuing action. The roots of the play in Strindberg’s religious crisis during the preceding years are obvious. The conversion theme had by now been dealt with in autobiographical terms in his novel *Inferno* (1897), in short story form in *Legends* (1898) and finally in monodramatic form in the fragment *Jakob brottas* (Jacob Wrestles, 1898) directly preceding the dramatization in the winter and spring of 1898. The complex episodic structure of the play with its mirror-inversion of the scenes and daring innovative technique originates from the dramatist’s struggles to translate his private world of inner experiences in terms of drama on the stage. It is not surprising that Strindberg was himself uncertain as to the success or failure of his attempt. In the late spring Strindberg is already in progress to capitalize on his “success” with a continuation, *To Damascus II* (1898), utilizing essentially the same theme and technique and he now proclaims his earlier play as the origin of a new dramatic genre. In the preface to *A Dream Play* this same genre is called “dreamplay” with special reference to its genesis in *To Damascus*.

The idea that life itself has the character of a dream and that the real nature of reality is spiritual is immediatly emphasized by the Stranger (Den Okände) in the opening scene of the play:

After all, I am a writer. In spite of my congenital melancholy I have never been able to take anything really seriously, not even my own great sorrows. And there are moments when I doubt that life is any more real than my novels.

⁵ Letter to Karin, Greta, Hans Strindberg 24 May 1898, *Brev*, XII, p. 311

/ — — — / It's not death I'm afraid of, but lonesomeness. In my loneliness I meet someone. I don't know whether it's myself or someone else. All I know is that in the midst of my loneliness I'm not alone. The air thickens, congeals, certain presences begin to take shape, invisible but tangible, and possessing a life of their own.

/ — — — / For some time now I've noticed everything. Not as before, when all I saw was objects and movements, forms and colors. No, now I see meanings and connections. Life which was all nonsense before, now begins to make sense. Where I formerly saw only chance and chaos I now see plan and purpose.⁶

This elaboration, incongruous as it might seem at this stage in relation to the Stranger's subsequent development in the play, is nevertheless necessary from a dramaturgical viewpoint. The audience must be made aware that reality as they perceive it in the play can not be understood in positivistic terms. It is rather "någonting halvverkligt, en serie visioner, frammanade av någon i medvetet syfte (something half-real, a series of visions, conjured by someone and with a conscious purpose, S.S.28, p.235)."

The Stranger's terse lines sum up and reflect Strindberg's own interpretation of reality as it emerged from the Inferno-crisis. The strange events of the preceding years were part of reality. They had neither been the handiwork of human persecutors, nor of evil spirits. It was the disciplinary spirits on the orders of the Eternal One (Den Evige) who had tortured him. In spite of everything, he was not insane. The notions that these powers were well-meaning and that suffering was an atonement had long loomed in the author's mind. It was the confirmation of the existence of a benevolent providence that had a liberating effect. Strindberg's strong feelings of guilt could again be pushed into the background and the older notions of a meaningful and coherent universe were gathered around new dramatic patterns legitimized by among others the Swedenborgian teachings about spirits and the spirit world.⁷

Lamm, the first scholar to analyze this process of change, speaks from a religious perspective about the relationship "Strindberg och makterna (Strindberg and the powers)".⁸ This last term was Strind-

⁶ S.S., XXIX, p.9 f, *To Damascus* in: *The Genius of the Scandinavian Theater*, ed. Evert Sprinchorn (1964), p.284 f. Hereafter quoted as S.S. and E.S.

⁷ Cf GÖRAN STOCKENSTRÖM, *Ismael i öknen* 1972, pp.86–106.

⁸ MARTIN LAMM, *Strindberg och makterna* (1936), p.14 ff. Cf GUNNAR BRANDELL, *Strindbergs Infernokris* (1950), pp.130 ff.

berg's favorite expression and was used for the first time in the spring of 1897 with reference to the idea of the Eternal One and his disciplinary spirits as upholders of the moral order of the universe. The term "makterna (powers)", it should be noted, has a more neutral connotation than "andar (spirits)" which is the usual conceptual term found in the private entries of *Ockulta dagboken* (Occult Diary, 1896–1908). Later scholars have employed different conceptions according to their own particular points of departure. The complex analysis of the inferno crisis has been one of complementary approaches where one cannot speak of an absolute dialectical opposition but rather of questions of nuances and accents. To describe Strindberg's altered viewpoint I have myself preferred the term "mystik (mysticism)" not in the conventional sense of unio mystica, i.e., the experienced ascent and absorption into the Godhead, but in reference to the other main current within mysticism, as defined by e.g. Joseph Maréchat in his *Etudes sur la Psychologie des Mystiques* (1937/38), namely the intellectual-speculative tradition. Swedenborg himself could serve as an exemplary representative of this tradition. It is also a term that Strindberg applies to himself on a number of occasions. This is one example from the inferno-years:

Tycker du ej Elias, i alla fall att lifvet vid vår ålder börjar te sig på ett annat sätt än förr, att en viss ingripande hand emellanåt röjes, och att bakom de s.k. naturliga förklaringarne äfven, derjemte (!) andra förefinnas.

Jag som fört dagbok (och nattbok öfver drömmarne) sedan ett år, och lagt märke till allt är blifven som du vet "mystiker". De naturliga förklaringarne godkänner jag såsom exoteriska populäreplikationer, men bakom dessa ligger de esoteriska...

(In any case, Elias, don't you think that life at our age begins to appear otherwise than before; that a certain intervening hand is disclosed from time to time, and that even behind the so called natural explanations, there are others to be found.

For a year, I have taken note of everything and kept both a diary and a nocturnal book of dreams, and, as you know, I have become a "mystic." I approve of the natural explanations as exoteric accounts for the public, but behind these lie the esoteric truths.)⁹

That life is a dream was no longer conceived as a merely poetic figure by Strindberg. The transformation of the very basis of reality made him constantly reflect on the half-real nature of existence. Visions and dreams assume an even greater importance for him, and he has kept a faithful record in the *Occult Diary*. His careful annotations concern

⁹ Letter to Anders Eliasson 28 October 1896, *Brev*, XI, p. 369

time, his own physiological state and the contents of the dreams. His distinctions between different types of dreams and visions reflect his extensive readings in the area of the subconscious.¹⁰ Strindberg coined the expression “andliga somnambuler (spiritual somnambulists, S.S.28, p.280)” to stress this duality and in a letter to Axel Herrlin, himself an authority on the subconscious, Strindberg wrote in the spring of 1898: “Ja, hvad är detta? Hvem ger oss dessa iscensättningar, och i hvad avsigt? Ega de realitet? Fins ett helvete utom detta? (Yes, what is this? Who produces these strange stagings and with what intentions? Are they real? Is there a hell beyond this?)”¹¹ Existence achieves thus the character of a drama being staged by powers beyond our control.

To describe and differentiate this surreal quality of nature Strindberg employs time and again the concept of half-reality. At times comparing it to the Swedenborgian visionary states, “detta halfreela tillstånd som ej är vision eller hallucination, utan motsvarar hvad Swedenborg kallar föras af anden (that half-real state that is not vision or hallucination, but corresponds to what Swedenborg calls transported by the spirit)”, on other occasions referring it to the occultist ideas about somnambulism, reincarnation and the astral plane.¹² The following reflection from the same time period as *To Damascus* is elucidating: “Det är tydligt, att makterna bliva strängare ifråga om sedligheten. Och märk så moderna de ha blivit. Inga drömmar, inga syner, eftersom folk icke fäster sig vid sådant. Nej, istället hela iscensättningar av fulländad realism, saker utbredda till åskådande, och där man inte kommer långt med resonemang (It is evident that the powers become stricter in questions of morality. And how modern they have become. No dreams or visions, since people don't pay attention to such things. No, instead of these are whole stage-productions of complete realism, things spread out for observation, and where you don't get very far with a discussion)”.¹³ In *To Damascus* the Stranger also emphasizes that it is not hallucinations but “little, recurring events, real ones (S.S.29, p.100, E.S., p.302)”, that persecute him. It was this sense of concreteness in Strindberg's understanding of reality, its fundamentally half-real nature notwith-

¹⁰ Cf G.STOCKENSTRÖM, pp.97 ff.

¹¹ Letter to Axel Herrlin 10 March 1898, *Brev*, XII, p.273

¹² Cf GUNNAR BRANDELL, *Strindbergs Infernokris* (1950), pp.97–113

¹³ S.S. XXVIII, p.285

standing, which distinguished him from the German expressionists and many others. An epigram from the Talmud, often quoted by the dramatist, expresses this attitude: “Om du vill lära känna det osynliga, så iakttag med öppen blick det synliga (If you would like to know the invisible, then observe the visible with open eyes)”.¹⁴

In both *To Damascus* and *A Dream Play* life has a character of a dream. The core experience of the protagonist in *To Damascus* is directly referred to as “a bad feverish dream (en feberdröm)”: “. . . I lay there and saw – like a panorama – my whole life unroll before me, from childhood through youth and all the way up to . . . and when the roll ended, it began all over again . . . And all the time I could hear a millwheel turning and the millstone grinding . . . And I can still hear it . . . I can even hear it now.” (Ibidem). The meaning of the Stranger’s nightmare is explained by the Mother with reference to on the one hand the functioning of pangs of conscience on the other to punishment in the hands of the Invisible One and his serving spirits.

This haunting dream is recreated in the most spectacular scene of the play, The Asylum (Asylen), positioned as the turning point in the circular composition of the drama. In terms of the religious symbolism the asylum scene is a dramatization of the religious awakening, alluded to in the title *To Damascus*, i.e., Saul’s conversion and transformation to Paul, midway on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus. The idea of an “asylum” or prison refers to those who like the Stranger are mad or in religious terms obsessed by evil. Scenically this is allegorized by a painting representing Michael slaying the Evil One. Whenever the protagonist tries to avert his eyes from the horrifying images out of the past, that surround him, his glance is ineluctably riveted to the face of the Archangel. In line with this religious set up the asylum is at the same time described as a cloister named “The Good Help (Den Goda Hjälp)”, alluding to Christ’s act of atonement. The same motif is illustrated by the Stranger’s inability to accept even the slightest token of mercy and emphasized prior to that through the news about his attempt to tear down the cross of Christ.

The characteristics of the haunting dream are stressed in Strindberg’s stage directions:

At a long dining table to the left THE STRANGER is sitting alone, dressed in a white hospital gown, and with a bowl in front of him. At the table to the right are sitting the

¹⁴ O.D., *Dagbok från 1896 till . . .* (Frontispiece). Cf STOCKENSTRÖM, p. 158 f.

PALLBEARERS IN BROWN from the first act; THE BEGGAR; A WOMAN IN MOURNING with two children; A MAN who resembles the Doctor but is not he; THE MADMAN'S DOUBLE; DOUBLES OF THE FATHER AND THE MOTHER; THE BROTHER'S DOUBLE; THE PARENTS of the 'prodigal son', and others. All are dressed in white but over their white gowns they are wearing gauze costumes in various colors. Their faces are waxen and deathly white. Their whole appearance and their gestures are ghostlike. (S.S.29, p.89, E.S., p.332)

With the help of costuming, make-up and gestures the dramatist indicates that the participants in this ghost-supper are those already dead and the doubles of those still living. All these spectres from the past are materializations of guilt from the protagonist's point of view and parade before him as in a nightmare. The coloring, the movements and the use of gauze accentuate the dreamlike quality and remind us of similar annotations of dreams in the *Occult Diary*. The Stranger imagines that he sees them as in a mirror and does not know if it is visions out of a dream or reality. To his question concerning their nature the Abess answers: "Om ni menar verkliga, så äga de en förfärande realitet (If you mean are they real – yes they're terrifyingly true.)"¹⁵ It is this inner reality of crime and guilt that Strindberg fashioned into visual concrete dramatic form. One by one the ghosts in this scene mirror the past crimes of the protagonist. The unconscious fear and anxiety of the Stranger is expressed in scenic symbols, which assume the characteristics of a haunting dream. Even when an inner reality is suggested in a dream-like fashion Strindberg never loses his realistic focus and becomes abstract.

The central action of the asylum scene consists of the unmasking of the protagonist. Crimes and guilt are unveiled by the Confessor who reads aloud the voluminous contents of the Stranger's Book of Sins. One after another, the guilt-loaded images step forward and confront the impenitent sinner in interaction with all the victims surrounding him. The course of event is musically accompanied by the requiem "Dies irae, dies illa". In the chant the idea of the book of sins is introduced:

Liber scriptus proferetur
In quo totum continetur
Unde mundus judicetur
Judex ergo cum sedebit
Quidquid latet apparebit
Nil inultum remanebit

The written book will be brought forth
In which everything is contained
From which the world will be judged
Thus when the judge is seated
There will emerge manifest anything that
lies hidden
Nothing will be left unpunished

¹⁵ S.S., XXIX, p.91, E.S., p.333.

(S.S.29, p.93 f, E.S., 335)

Crime after crime is unveiled in the metaphysical unmasking of the protagonist which culminates with the reading of the Deuteronomic curse to the unrepentant sinner. At the same time the total burden of guilt is represented by the Stranger's victims who form a chorus repeating: "Förbannad (Cursed shalt thou be!)"'. In religious language the scene concludes with the moment of awakening, affirmed by the protagonist's question about the possibility of salvation. Even if the Stranger's journey is not ended by far, it is still the turning point that makes him into a religious seeker in the second half of the play. Image, character, movement, dialogue and sound are orchestrated into a unified metaphor for the stage in order to produce the configuration of an inner psychological process. Strindberg's term "skamdefilering (march of shame)" captures the inherent dramatic vein of this unmasking scene.²⁶

Characteristic of the aesthetic structure in the asylum scene is a technique of repetition similar to the pangs of conscience of the nightmare. This repetitive technique is in many ways the dramaturgic principle of the play. Each of the scenes in the first half of the play has been constructed so as to repeat and dramatically represent the protagonist's guilt in the present. From this perspective, the figures of the drama are seen to function consciously or unconsciously as doubles in relation to the Stranger. The ordinary laws of psychology do not apply and their function is thus of a metaphysical nature. This is also true with respect to the reflection of physical reality; the notes from a funeral march, the withering Christmas rose, the sound from the deathwatch beetle and the rumbling mill, the cloud formations and the chilling wind, the profile of the werewolf in the flowers on the wallpaper, the pattern in the tablecloth or the rocks in the ravine. The Stranger asks himself time and again:

What's going on? Who's persecuting me? You tell me your husband is sympathetic toward me, and I'm sure he is, but he can't open his mouth without torturing me. Every word he spoke stabbed me like a needle. – God, there's that funeral march again! I can really hear it! . . . And there's the Christmas rose again. . . Why does everything have to keep coming back again and again? Corpses and beggars and fools and madmen and whole lives and childhood memories. . . (S.S.29, p.45, E.S., p.333)

In this manner Strindberg succeeds to mirror the guilt of the protagonist and project it in the world around him. The "march of shame"

¹⁶ Letter to Gustav af Geijerstam 15 November 1897, *Brev*, XII, p.212

of the asylum scene is from that viewpoint only a spectacular summation of the “ghosts” from the earlier scenes of the play. This relation could be described as that of a Chinese box, where the asylum scene encloses, so to speak, the lesser boxes. The character of dream in the asylum is scenically indicated and it is apparent to an audience that the characters are, in fact, materializations of the Stranger’s guilt. Not so in the earlier scenes where the starting point is an identifiable reality of some kind or other that is transformed into the surreal. The ordinary laws of logic, space and time are withdrawn and it is on this level that the parallel to the dream is most apparent in the play.

The strange experiences of the protagonist make him continuously question the nature of existence. Is it a “fairy tale” or something he has “read” or “dreamt”? The terrifying dreams of night transform during day to the panorama of his life forever unrolling before his eyes. The Stranger has visions and hallucinations but for the most time he feels persecuted by “little recurring events”. The protagonist ponders if life is a dream or the dreams themselves reality. The Stranger draws in the sand with his cane the name of a Lady he has just christened and whose identity he has created. He draws again and this time a new Doppelgänger appears in the shape of a Beggar repeating his philosophy word for word. He writes in the sand a third time and this time the buried corpse incorporating his own life story is introduced by the pallbearers in brown.

That appearances are deceptive is confirmed by their answer to his question concerning the colour of their dress: “To us in our ignorance we are in black. But if you, Sir, insist, then it’s brown for you (S.S. 29, p. 25, E.S., p. 294)”. Reality is subjective and transforms for the beholder in the manner of dreams. For the eyes of the Stranger the Christmas rose, a symbol of salvation, is changed into its opposite a mandragora, the flower of evil. The sunlit rose room transforms to an ice cellar and the view of the beautiful countryside changes likewise to a dismal poorhouse with a crazy old woman. Screams, darkness and trembling trees reflect the fall of the Stranger and the Lady. Physical nature itself is produced and created from spiritual sources and the evil of the protagonist is constantly projected in the world around him. When he demands cadavers, the Doctor immediately produces a leg and an arm. Asking for ghosts the madman Caesar appears, mirroring the same perverse ambition to change the universe and incarnating parts of his

past life. Characters and physical settings change from the first to the second half in correspondence with the transformation of the protagonist. Characters double and multiply. The Stranger mirrors himself in the Beggar and soon thereafter he is himself transformed into a beggar. When the two meet again, missions reversed, the Beggar steps into the role of Christ and the Stranger into that of Saul. Life has definitely the character of a dream on a number of levels in *To Damascus*, and the roots of Strindberg's technique in *A Dream Play* are to be found here. In the latter play, life is as a dream, the aesthetic object being to create within the audience that same feeling. In *To Damascus* this aspect is secondary, even if a similar feeling is created through the strange and bizarre perceptions of the protagonist.

The "modernistic" idea to conceive of a play as a dream structurally is also present in *To Damascus*. Strindberg writes: "Tid kan endast bestämmas genom före och efter; 'nu' är obestämbart; möjligen kan 'nu' sägas vara gränsen emellan eller syntesen af förflutet och tillkommande. (Time can only be defined by before and after; 'now' is undefinable; 'now' can possibly be said to be the boundary between or the synthesis of the past and the coming)." ¹⁷ In both *To Damascus* and *A Dream Play* Strindberg has used a symbolic frame to define the 'now' of the dramatic action. In the opening and closing scene of *To Damascus* the Stranger sits on a bench drawing in the sand with his cane. In the final instance, the repetition of the same action receives the following commentary:

DAMEN (in). Vad gör du?

DEN OKÄNDE. Jag skriver i sanden; (fortfarande).

(The Lady entering). What are you doing?

The Stranger. Writing in the sand. (Still at it.)

(S.S. 29, p. 133, E.S., p. 359)

By means of scenic repetition and careful placement and use of the word "still (fortfarande)" Strindberg establishes the journey of the play within the mind of his protagonist. All that has transpired during the undefinable "now" was the Stranger's own drawings in the sand. After the curtain rises in *A Dream Play* the Glazier (Glasmästaren) and the

¹⁷ *Tid och Rum*, draft to *A Dream Play*, Royal Library's Strindberg-collection, carton 3, file 2. Cf E. HAGEN, *The Concept of Time in A Dreamplay*, unpublished M. A. thesis, University of Minnesota.

reflection as in the first half. If people and things in the first half were projections of the protagonist's evil, the second half is marked by a successive harmonization analogous to the Stranger's inner change. The Mother is altered, the Beggar steps into the role of Christ and the Stranger is reunited with the Lady. The Christian symbolism assumes an ever more prominent significance and the journey is concluded by the church door in expectation of "new songs (nya sånger)". The outer movement of the action has its thematic analogue in the three stages – illusion, unmasking, resignation – which are passed through in the conversion process. The scenic composition of the play is certainly an attempt on the part of the dramatist to give a structural expression of its central theme. In the same manner the dream functions as the central structuring element in *A Dream Play*.

In the spring of 1898 Strindberg offered the following oft quoted characterization of his play in a letter to Geijerstam:

Ja, det är nog en dikt med en förfärande half-realitet bakom sig. Konsten ligger i kompositionen, som symboliserar Gentagelsen, Kierkegaard talar om; handlingen rullar upp sig framåt mot Asylen; der törnar den emot udden och så spjernas det tillbaka, pilgrimsfärden, baklexan, oppätningarne; och så börjas nytt på samma plats der leken slutar och der den började. Du kanske ej märkt huru scenerierna rulla upp sig baklänges från asylen som är ryggen i boken hvilken sluter sig och sluter in handlingen. Eller som en orm den der biter sig i stjerten.

(Yes, it is no doubt a poem with a terrifying half-reality behind it. The art lies in the composition, which symbolizes the Repetition (Gentagelsen) Kierkegaard speaks about; the action unfolds toward the Asylum; there it strikes the point and kicks back, the pilgrimage, the repeated lessons, the repeated swallowings. So the game begins anew in the same place where it ends and where it had begun. Perhaps, you didn't notice how the scenes coil up backward from the asylum like the back of a book which closes itself and encloses the action. Or like a serpent that bites itself in the tail.)¹⁸

Strindberg's description, "a poem of terrifying half-reality", refers to the roots of the play in his religious crisis and as a consequence of that his changed interpretation of reality. The transformation of its very basis made him reflect on the half-real nature of existence, and out of this follows the parallel to the dream, conscious or unconscious, in the text. Strindberg substantiates that the circular composition and the inversion of the scenes are to be understood as a structural expression of its theme. The dramatist also stresses the unique position of the asylum scene as the point of departure for his dramatization of the

¹⁸ Letter to Gustav Geijerstam 13 March 1898, *Brev*, XII, p. 279 f.

religious core experience, alluded to in the title of his play. To characterize the structure and principle of composition he refers us to the concept of Repetition, “Gjentagelsen” in Kierkegaard. Is it then possible to find the solution in the latter’s philosophy?

Nils Åke Sjöstedt in his study of Kierkegaard’s influence on Swedish literature rejects any connection with the religious and ethical categories in Kierkegaard’s concept of “Gjentagelse” and points, instead, to the “unfolding of the past” which is what is specifically Strindbergian in the concept.¹⁹ In the latter sense it is also used by Strindberg synonymously to “ödeläggelse (devastation)”, e.g., “Helvetet eller Paradiset: Ödeläggelsen=Gjentagelsen: Weltmühle (Hell or Paradise: Devastation=Repetition: World Mill)”.²⁰ The last item in the equation refers to the mill in *Sólarljóð* or the *Song of the Sun* which stands at the entrance to the kingdom of the damned and grinds the evil ones into smithereens of black matter. This concept of the World Mill goes back among others to Viktor Rydberg’s *Undersökningar i germanisk mytologi, 1–2 (Investigations into Germanic Mythology 1886–89)*, and emerges for the first time in Strindberg’s *Inferno*. There it functions as an alternative designation for the Swedenborgian devastation in Strindberg’s interpretation. It is associatively linked with the latter through the march of shame motif, analogous to the repetition of guilt of the nightmare. The danicism “gentagelse” seems to incorporate this meaning better than any corresponding Swedish term. Does Swedenborg offer any more insight than Kierkegaard or is it rather an example of how freely Strindberg appropriates ideas for his own artistic purposes?

The dramatic principle of *To Damascus* and, in particular the Asylum scene, is summarised in the following annotation from his working drafts in the form of a ‘reminder’: “ödeläggelsen: det förflutna försiggår omigen men nu (devastation: the past takes place again but now)”.²¹ The term “devastation (ödeläggelsen)” is a concept from Swedenborg’s theosophy, referring to a central tenet in his doctrine of the spiritual world. After death men are transported to the spiritual world or the lower earth. After their arrival the appearance of the

¹⁹ NILS ÅKE SJÖSTEDT, *Sören Kierkegaard och svensk litteratur* (1950), p. 248 ff. Cf STOCKENSTRÖM, pp. 96 f and 308 ff.

²⁰ *Légendes de Ma Vie*, RLS 9 (3)

²¹ Small page from notebook, RLS 9 (3)

newly fledged spirits remains unaltered and they can still conceal their thoughts and feelings as they could in life. Therefore many believe they continue to reside in earthly existence. When after a while the external condition is unveiled by the internal one, the human spirits can no longer hide their thoughts. As feature after feature is stripped away, all hypocrisy dissolves, and the exterior is transformed into a mirror image of the interior condition. The ultimate objective of this differentiation of spirits is to unmask the person's true self, so that there emerges a complete correspondence between the outer appearance and the inner reality. It is not a question of judgement in the usual sense, for to Swedenborg God is absolute love. Rather than submitting to judgement, the evil and the good spirits unite with their equals by their own free will in order to be finally dispatched to one of the different societies in heaven or hell.

Strindberg perceived devastation to be identical to the scourges visited upon him during the Inferno crisis and interpreted the process as one of moral purification, to which he had been exposed through the Eternal One and his "powers": "This feeling of woebegoneness often occurs about the fortieth or fiftieth year. It is the balancing of books at the solstice. The whole past is summed up, and the debit-side shows a plus which makes one despair. Scenes of earlier life pass by like a panorama, seen in a new light; long-forgotten incidents reappear even in their smallest details. The opening of the sealed Book of Life, spoken of in Revelation, is a veritable reality. / — — — / Swedenborg calls this natural process the 'devastation' — of the Evil."²²

The motif of unmasking occupies a pivotal position in the spiritual world of Swedenborg, here carried out by angels who scrutinize the faces and bodies of the dead. All thoughts and actions are inscribed in the inner memory, the so-called "Book of Life". The course of events was extremely dramatic in the case of the unrepentant, when all crimes and guilt from their past lives were resurrected and paraded before their eyes to the minutest detail.²³ These "disclosures (uppdagningar)" or "unveilings (afslöjningar)" are described in *En blå bok* (A Blue

²² S.S., XLVI, p.33 f; CLAUD FIELD, *Zones of the Spirit* (1913), p.40 f.

²³ Cf Emanuel Swedenborg, *De coelo et de inferno*, § 462 and 463 = *Heaven and Its Wonders and Hell*, trans. F.Bayley (New York: Dutton, 1909), 239. Cf STOCKENSTRÖM, p.82 ff.

Book) and the article, *Huru man blir Swedenborgare* (How to become a Swedenborgian):

Well, Swedenborg has in his Hell a disrobing chamber into which the deceased are conducted immediately after their death. There they lay aside the dress they have had to wear in society and in the family. Then the Angels see at once whom they have before them. / — — — / sin and evil leave traces behind them, but that these are not apparent in the human face until old age. Subsequently, in the disrobing room on the other side, they look as if they had been thrown through a magnifying glass on a white screen. / — — — / a great man, the nation's greatest son, is instructed to step into the throne room (the stripping room). Dressed in his doctor's frock and bedecked with the medals of his orders, the newcomer is called upon to occupy his place under the throne-sky. Then the nation comes to greet him with speeches; the great one is invested with crown and mantle and with the sound of drums and trumpets he is proclaimed a king. Then the scene begins to alter itself. The crown becomes a saucepan, the royal mantle a white sheet, the laurel wreath is thrown into the beef stew like bay leaves, the orders become contrary signs. The nation evaporates before his eyes and the great one sits alone in a solitary closet.²⁴

These dramatic defilements of shame and transformations are summed up by Strindberg in the expression: "Lifvet drar förbi (Life draws past)."²⁵ All things considered, Strindberg had associated this sequence of events with a well-known psychological phenomenon, the so-called life-review, i.e., the panoramic overview of the past observed in the moments prior to death. In Swedenborg, however, this process is more closely associated with the biblical "Doomsday Book" – a conception, moreover, which is found in similar form in many religions. The Swedenborgian pattern for the last reckoning with existence is transposed from the spiritual world to human life here and now. This was in and of itself consistent with the dramatist's view: "Menniskorna äro reinkarnationer, och jordelifvet ett purgatorium, eller inferno. Swedenborgs beskrifning på helvetet är komplett lik jordelifvet (Human beings are reincarnations, and life on earth a purgatory or inferno. Swedenborg's depiction of hell is identical to life on earth)."²⁶

It is the boldness of raising dead people and regretted crimes unto the same plane as the present that gives the half-real quality of the

²⁴ S.S., XLVI, pp. 49 f, 114; FIELD, pp. 60, 130; *Huru man blir Swedenborgare*, RLS 11 (refers to Sven Hedin). Cf EMANUEL SWEDENBORG, *Arcana coelestia*, § 943 = *The Heavenly Arcana Disclosed*, Rotch Edition, 1907, II, 96. Cf STOCKENSTRÖM, pp. 154 ff.

²⁵ Cf STOCKENSTRÖM, p. 82 f and STOCKENSTRÖM, *The Journey from the Isle of Life to the Isle of Death: The Idea of Reconciliation in the Ghost Sonata*, *Scandinavian Studies* 50, 1978, p. 139 ff.

²⁶ S.S., XLVI, p. 60 f; FIELD, p. 68 f.

dream to scenes such as the one from the *Asylum*. In this and similar unmasking scenes Strindberg could draw upon ideas and structures from the Swedenborgian spirit world, which had stimulated him as a writer. The Swedenborgian concept “ödeläggelsen (devastation)” is used in his own subjective interpretation to incorporate these structures and ideas. Given the basic assumption that each dramatist has a vision that he or she seeks to concretize in terms of language, the playwright can not simply rely on language and dialogue but must also employ existing scenic means of expression, e.g. setting, properties, lighting, music, sound effects, groupings, the actor’s individual expression, mime, gestures, movements, hair-style, make-up, costume and tone of voice. The *Asylum* scene has served to illustrate this basic relationship between vision and dramatic metaphor. Its technique of unmasking being directly related to Strindberg’s interpretation of the devastation theme. In the course of action it was seen to be the crystallizing moment drawing upon a number of scenic elements repeated earlier in the play. The different scenic means of expression being fused together to create a stratified scenic image charged with thematic significance. It did not consist of spoken dialogue alone. The haunting setting of the *Asylum* was there with the *Stranger* as its focal point, the stage properties in constant interaction with his changing perceptions. Costuming, make-up, gestures, movements and the use of the ghosts as a chorus contributed all to the impact of this central dramatic metaphor. In the postinferno dramas the unmasking-, the transformation- and march of shame motifs become vehicles to visualize the difference between appearance and reality from a metaphysical viewpoint. For *To Damascus* the devastation motif has undoubtedly implications for both the technique and the structure of the play. The style in the *Asylum* scene is representative for a number of similar scenes in the postinferno plays, characterized in general as ‘expressionistic’ and related in its historical importance to many developments in the theatre in our century. The term coined by Strindberg, “hexscener (witch-scenes)”, is an excellent evocation of their style, real and surreal at the same time.²⁷ Sometimes the dramatist indicates their nature to an audience by means of the setting or by defining them as haunting dreams in the dialogue. This was true of the *asylum* scene which is stylistically

²⁷ Letter to Gustaf af Geijerstam 15 November 1897, *Brev* XII, p.212.

differentiated from the other scenes in the play. A similar scene from the second act of *Carl XII* (Charles XII, 1901), when the dead Siberian soldier appears with his bludgeon to unveil the guilt and crime of the king is defined in the text as a dream. In *Spöksonaten* (The Ghost Sonata, 1907) on the other hand part of the dramatic effect is achieved by confronting the audience with a world of living dead and apparitions in the mutual unmasking of the ghost supper. This general interpretative problem could be illustrated by a comparison between the printed version of the introductory ghost banquet in *Svarta fanor* (Black Banners, 1907) and one existing in manuscript, probably to be included in the *Götiska rummen* (Gothic Rooms, 1904). The printed version can be read simply as an intense naturalistic depiction of human materialism and depravity. In the other instance Strindberg's aesthetic intention is to create the impression of a spiritual reality by more expressionistic means.

Kurt Aspelin offers the following commentary to this general problem: "Diktarens swedenborgska korrespondenslära förutsatte en verklighetsuppfattning, där alla ting svarade mot djupare andliga realiteter och dessutom kunde tjäna som tecken för jagets moraliska och religiösa uppfostran. I dramer som *Ett drömspel* och *Stora landsvägen* gestaltades en sådan världssyn i dramatiska metaforer, där det fysiska och andliga lät sig översättas till varandras språk i ständigt nya, allt mer komplicerade symbolrelationer. Dessa symbolers tolkningsdjup är verkligen 'oändligt' eftersom någon *definitiv* tolkning strängt taget aldrig låter sig fastställas. (The poet's Swedenborgian doctrine of correspondences presupposed a conception of reality, where all existing things corresponded to profound spiritual realities and apart from that could serve as signs for the moral and religious education of the ego. In plays such as *A Dream Play* and *The Great Highway* such a vision of the world is created in dramatic metaphors, where the physical and the spiritual can be translated in one another's language in ever new, ever more complicated symbol relationships. These symbols' possible interpretation is, indeed, 'fathomless' since no *definitive* interpretation can strictly speaking ever be established)." ²⁸

In Strindberg's theater an experimental paradigm of supernatural origin is displaced to a natural frame of reference and reconstituted

²⁸ KURT ASPELIN, *Teaterarbete* (1977), p.327 f.

within traditional experience. In this process of reinterpretation Strindberg developed radically new modes of organizing experience, new ways of seeing the outer world, and a new set of relations of the individual to himself, to nature, to history, and to his fellow men. Many of the distinctive and recurrent elements in Strindberg's vision of man and the world derive from supernatural ideas and concepts. As such these structures are constantly mirrored in his art. An analysis of Strindberg's mystical vision or in general terms his ideas is thus necessary in order to formulate a corresponding synthesis concerning his dramatic art. Aspelin cautions any critic attempting to describe Strindberg's theatrical aesthetics regardless of approach or method against mistaking his or her traditional ways of organizing experience for the conditions of reality applicable to Strindberg's postinferno plays. His theater aesthetics during this symbolistic period violated the accepted rules governing the relationship between the stage and the audience to such an extent that it should take a gifted person of the theater like Reinhardt to prove in the 1910's the extraordinary possibilities of Strindberg's "dream-plays" and chamber plays.

To clarify his supranaturalistic intentions Strindberg points himself time and again to Swedenborg and the number of references to his doctrines in his prose is strikingly large. Count Max explains in *Götiska rummen* (The Gothic Rooms, 1904) that – "Man läser icke Swedenborg, man undfår honom, eller undfår honom icke. Man kan endast förstå honom, om man upplevt detsamma som han (You do not *read* Swedenborg, you are receptive to him, or you are not receptive to him. You can only understand him, if you have experienced the same as he)".²⁹ This viewpoint is decisive for Strindberg's interpretation of his own conversion which was in turn the upshot of the March experience 1897, in which Swedenborg played a pivotal role. It was Swedenborg who had saved him from the madhouse according to his literary portrayal of the conversion in *Inferno*, *Legends* and *Jacob Wrestles*. In a highly idiosyncratic interpretation of Swedenborg's spiritual teachings, Strindberg imagined he had found an explanation for all the horrors and scourges which had afflicted him as well as his brothers-in-misfortune in Lund and Paris. In the *Occult Diary* exceedingly diverse phenomena are interpreted as symbolic signs and in this way all the

²⁹ S.S., XL, p.269

fearful experiences could be given a “natural” explanation. The spirit world, which Swedenborg assigned to a supernatural sphere of existence, was for Strindberg transposed to the here and now. Even in Strindberg’s social realistic novels *The Gothic Rooms* and *Black Banners* the same theme is analyzed from a historical perspective, again with reference to the same central ideas in Swedenborg’s theosophy. The new writing, itself a creative force, should be understood in light of the spiritistically inspired view of the world which was the end product of the Inferno crisis. If reality seemed like a dream, half-real in nature and at times staged and manipulated by spiritual forces, then neither actions nor human relationships could any longer be defined in positivistic terms and be explained by ordinary cause-effect relationships.

Strindberg’s religious philosophy appears in more systematic form in *A Blue Book*, which occupies a central position in his rich 20th century production. Its existence in several earlier versions gives ample evidence that this plan had been entertained from the mid 1890’s. His stated purpose then for his intended occult natural philosophy had been to investigate “det oändliga sammanhanget i den stora oredan (the infinite context of the great disorder)”, while in 1907 his aim had become to prove “axiomet om Guds existens (the axiom of God’s existence)”.³⁰ Finished in manuscript with the working title “Brevarium (Breviary)” in 1906 it is referred to by Strindberg as “en Swedenborgsk fuga med preludier (a Swedenborgian fugue with preludes)”.³¹ By this the author was most likely alluding to the central themes from Swedenborg which are repeated and varied at regular intervals throughout the manuscript. This radical formal principle was modified somewhat at the request of the publisher necessitating a revision of the breviary form. Both the reaction of his contemporaries and the findings of later research indicate that Strindberg’s artistic intentions were not effective means for producing the desired goal. The choice of a musical principle of form did not fit well for a work that Strindberg wanted to advertise as a revival tract for people. To this end, Strindberg had offered to subsidize a popular edition at the rate of one crown per book and he pondered establishing a foundation of “kristna,

³⁰S.S., XLVI, p. 7

³¹Letter to Emil Schering 24 November 1906, *Bonniers Archives*

teosofer och Swedenborgare (Christians, theosophists and Swedenborgians)".³² The book published in 1907 titled *A Blue Book*, dedicated to Swedenborg and heralded as a work of divine election, was characterized by the author now as "mitt lifs syntes (my life's synthesis)", now as "mitt testamente till menniskorna (my testament to mankind)".³³

Strindberg's relationship to Swedenborg is of an intensely personal and at the same time subjective nature. He often quotes "Swedenborg's korrespondenser (Swedenborg's correspondences)" as "nyckeln till min metod (the key to my method)".³⁴ The authentic meaning of the doctrine of correspondences in the Swedenborgian system, where everything natural is a shadow image of something spiritual and spiritual reality only the reflected image of the original ideal in heaven, was something that did not overly concern Strindberg. To try and relate Strindberg's conception to the abstract speculation behind the doctrine of correspondences is futile. The connection between Baudelaire's universal analogies and Swedenborg's system is equally tenuous, although the doctrine of correspondence was a departure point. What remains of the doctrine after being transformed for poetic purposes by Strindberg and Baudelaire is the conviction that the world and humanity reflect spiritual reality.

The difference between the two is nevertheless considerable. For Baudelaire and the symbolists the idea of correspondences remained abstract and general while Strindberg forged his mystical vision of man and the world out of actual experience and in close dependence on concrete reality. In his art it resulted in a brand of symbolism peculiar his own with no direct counterpart regardless of the many obvious parallels to the fin-de-siècle literature. The decisive difference has to do with the Inferno-crisis and the part it played in Strindberg's personal and artistical development. It was an evolution on scientific and religious lines in many ways parallel to that of Swedenborg. For both the rigorous language of natural science ultimately did not suffice to evoke the inner truth that was concealed beyond the visible forms of nature. The constant interest of Baudelaire and the symbolists in aesthetic innovations of the most varied kind played a subordinate role for

³² Letter to Karl Börjesson 2 September 1907, RLS

³³ Letter to Emil Schering 25 June 1908, BA; S.S., XLVI, p. 404 ff. Cf Letter to Richard Bergh 1 November 1907 and O.D., 22 August 1906

³⁴ Cf STOCKENSTRÖM, p. 70 ff.

Strindberg. The 'dream-structure' in both *To Damascus* and *A Dream Play* reflects in many ways reality as he perceived it and was after all secondary to him.

Bearing this distinction in mind it was, however, thanks to the very same extreme subjectivism that Strindberg became the first modernist in the theater. The psycho-expressionism of *To Damascus*, the existential closed stage-room of *Dance of Death*, the radical mise en scène of *A Dream Play*, the distortion of reality toward the grotesque in the *Ghost Sonata* are examples of elements in Strindberg's dramas that have influenced important developments within the theater in our century among different schools of drama such as the expressionists, the existentialists and the absurdists. Through his conversion Strindberg incarnates many of the radical changes that occurred at the turn of the century. In his case the transformation of the very basis of reality during the Inferno-crisis, the perception of its half-real nature, its dream-like quality and its in essence spiritual character put him in line with similar developments in the art and literature of the period, all in various degree and way representing what might be termed a dissolution of the very perception of reality.

For the impressionistic painters, e.g., reality tended to become fleeting impressions on the retina of the eye, but it proved difficult at times to differentiate between sensation and illusion. To the symbolists of a later era on the other hand only the self was real, while the external world appeared as a continuous stream of dreamlike impressions emanating from the ego itself. In a similar vein many schools of philosophy asserted that what is termed reality only exists to us and that the world is in fact only an idea in our consciousness. Schopenhauer, e.g., insisted that it was a projection of our will, by that referring to our blind urge for survival Reality in itself, if it ever existed, was for time eternal hidden behind a veil. Many physicists contributed through their atomic theories in a similar manner to undermine the popular belief concerning the actual nature of reality. The study of the unconscious mind eventually led into different types of occultism and transcendental mysticism, whereby the contact with "true" reality was established not through observation but through intuition, contemplation or ecstasy.

Strindberg lived a number of years in Paris at the height of the symbolist school and knew several of its prominent representatives,

painters, writers, occultists etc. There are a number of indications on his part of an awareness and understanding of the symbolist principle of artistic creation, not in imitation of but rather in defiance of reality. Even if any direct influence has been hard to prove, a number of examples are found in Brandell, among others Gauguin, who offers the following aesthetic prescription in letters to a friend in 1888: “Do not copy too much from nature, art is an abstraction; take away from nature by weaving in dreams and consider your imagination. / — — / By arranging lines and colours I achieve a symphony, a harmony that does not correspond to anything real in the true sense of that very word. They do not express anything directly but they shall make you think of music without the help of ideas or images, quite simply through the mystical correspondence between our thought and such compositions in lines and colours.”³⁵ It is seldom, if ever, possible to analyze the complicated web of causes and effects that determine in its entirety what is often called the “Zeitgeist”. Neither it is an easy task to define the vision of the individual, nor the complex relationships between the individual and his time.

There is no critical consensus or one method of explanation of Strindberg’s vision and what many critics have called his “drömspel-dramatik (dreamplay-dramaturgy)”. There have been a number of different approaches or to speak metaphorically wedges that critics have used to drive to the heart of Strindberg’s dramatic art. In suggesting any one avenue of explanation you must necessarily draw a line that has the form of a keyhole. Those of you looking through that keyhole must determine whether the wedge used hits the center and so doing elucidates the whole. Modern drama often represents man, severed from an earlier religious, metaphysical and transcendent context, and dismayed by the fact that all his actions seem only to inspire an insoluble anguish. When Strindberg on the other hand portrays life’s apparently meaningless course and its senseless cruelty, the depiction of its half real-nature and absurdity is always supplanted by a mystical perspective.

³⁵ G. BRANDELL, pp. 204–230. Cf Letter to E. Shuffenecker 14 August 1888 in *Lettres de Gauguin*, ed. M. Malingue 1946, p. 134.