The Mold of Writing
For Emelie and Alice
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Erik van Ooijen

The Mold of Writing
Style and Structure in Strindberg’s
Chamber Plays
Abstract

Erik van Ooijen (2010): The Mold of Writing. Style and Structure in Strindberg’s Chamber Plays. Örebro Studies in Literary History and Criticism 10, 216 pp. The thesis examines the five plays published by August Strindberg under the label of Chamber Plays: Stormy Weather, The Burned Lot, The Ghost Sonata, The Pelican (all 1907), and The Black Glove (1909). It takes its point of departure in a particular aspect of Strindberg’s way of writing as he actually describes it himself: during the act of deliberate composing, a productive fever tends to emerge bringing an element of chance to the work. The thesis defines the effect produced by this “fever” as the tension generated between, on the one hand, structure or form, and, on the other hand, style or writing. These concepts are associated with a tradition, primarily in French literary theory, which pays attention to what is described as a friction between the general linguistic aspect of literature (genres, recurring and recognizable patterns) and the individual aspect (the peculiar and idiosyncratic style of an author embodied in his material habitus). Thus the ambiguity found in the thesis’ title: the “mold” alludes partly to the stereotypes or matrices of language, partly to the “fungi” that, according to Strindberg, could be considered an adequate image for writing; the poetic work, says Strindberg, grows like mold from the author’s brain.

Theoretical questions, primarily of a formal and interpretational nature, are continuously discussed since one of the main points is that the Strindbergian way of writing restricts what kind of interpretation may be given his works. The eventual contrast between form and interpretation is, furthermore, related to a general theme developed throughout the Chamber Plays concerning the meaning of life. It is stressed that the five plays show distinct formal and thematic differences; thus, a separate chapter is dedicated to each of them. The chapter on Stormy Weather examines the structural use of focus and the hierarchy of character-functions related to the centering on a protagonist. The Burned Lot is discussed from the concept of a ruin to describe how a multitude of conflicting forms come together to produce a fragmentary result. The Ghost Sonata is described in terms of simulation: while Strindberg alludes to certain dramatic patterns, he also distorts them whereby new effects are created. The chapter on The Pelican explores the temporal flow of the play and how it relates to writing. The thesis ends with a discussion of The Black Glove and its relation to the preceding Chamber Plays and also to the Strindbergian oeuvre. The concept of weed is used to distinguish a recurring element in Strindberg’s work as well as in his worldview. Throughout the thesis, the discussion is consistently related to previous studies and commentaries on the plays.

Keywords: August Strindberg, chamber play, literary form, writing, focus, ruin as form, simulation, speed, weed as form
Abstract


The thesis examines the five plays published by August Strindberg under the label of Chamber Plays: Stormy Weather, The Burned Lot, The Ghost Sonata, The Pelican (all 1907), and The Black Glove (1909). It takes its point of departure in a particular aspect of Strindberg’s way of writing as he actually describes it himself: during the act of deliberate composing, a productive fever tends to emerge bringing an element of chance to the work. The thesis defines the effect produced by this “fever” as the tension generated between, on the one hand, structure or form, and, on the other hand, style or writing. These concepts are associated with a tradition, primarily in French literary theory, which pays attention to what is described as a friction between the general linguistic aspect of literature (genres, recurring and recognizable patterns) and the individual aspect (the peculiar and idiosyncratic style of an author embodied in his material habitus). Thus the ambiguity found in the thesis’ title: the “mold” alludes partly to the stereotypes or matrices of language, partly to the “fungi” that, according to Strindberg, could be considered an adequate image for writing; the poetic work, says Strindberg, grows like mold from the author’s brain.

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In Strindberg’s fifth Chamber Play, the aging philosopher makes a final effort to find the meaning of life, buried, he presumes, in his heap of fading manuscripts. All he finds is, however, that the documents are no longer in order, that his secret cipher has been all mixed up, and that his glasses have been switched for new ones. It is the *tomte*, the domestic trickster in Swedish folklore, who has played a friendly trick on him! Through this jest, the philosopher is finally able to find what he was after, albeit in a way different from what was expected: the meaning of life is not hidden away somewhere but right before your eyes.

My work, too, has been guided by some very friendly tricksters, mixing up my manuscripts and switching my glasses for new and better ones. My supervisor, Lars-Åke Skalin, always lets his sincere critique be accompanied by generous advice. My assistant supervisor, Göran Rossholm, has been a scholarly role model since my time as a student. As important has been the higher seminar in comparative literature at Örebro University – thank you for treating even my wildest fantasies with critical attention. Greger Andersson’s feedback was indispensable during the final stages of my work. Ulrika Göransson made sure that work is always entertaining.

I am greatly indebted to the various fora where I have had the opportunity to present unfinished texts and thoughts: thank you, the members of the Nordic Network of Narrative Studies and the participants in the events arranged by the network; the seminars in narratology and aesthetics at Stockholm University; the Center for Narratological Studies at the University of Southern Denmark; and the philological faculty at the University of Gdansk.

Henning Kofoed went over my English and suggested several improvements – whatever idiosyncrasies still remain are, of course, my own. Svengunnar Ryman helped me out with a botanical question. Sten Wistrand provided a great illustration for the cover.

Most important of all are you – Emelie and Alice. You showed me that there is more to life than moldy books, and I dedicate my work to you, with love.

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when necessary, to the earlier critical edition, *Samlade Skrifter*. References to the *Kammarspel* are provided in parentheses in the main text. When I provide my own translation of a secondary source, the Swedish original is given in a note. Since Strindberg’s letters have been published in chronological order in *August Strindbergs brev*, edited by Torsten Eklund and Björn Meidal, I refer to them only by date.
1. Introduction: Strindberg and the Mold of Writing

“I believe the old man is decrepit!
His speech is simple, smells of mold,
his memory fails from time to time,
he is not certain about himself.”
A. S.¹

Entering through a winder: An introductory example

The present thesis focuses on the five plays August Strindberg published under the title “Chamber Plays”: Stormy Weather (Oväder), The Burned Lot (Brända tomten), The Ghost Sonata (Spök-sonaten), The Pelican (Pelikanen, all 1907), and The Black Glove (Svarta hanksken, 1909). Just like the other Chamber Plays, The Ghost Sonata – the third and best-known play – provides several expositional and dramaturgical oddities which have certainly puzzled commentators. Take for instance the way in which The Old Man hints at his intricate relationship to the Student, or rather to the late father of the latter. This appears as a key moment plot-wise, since it is what sets off the following set of actions and events: by reference to his former affiliation to the Student’s family, the Old Man is able to engage the Student in a deep-seated grudge against the residents of an apartment house. Together they infiltrate the house: the Old Man in order to debunk his adversaries, the Student in order to gain wealth and love. The connection is established by the particular way of pronouncing a word – the inclination to say “funster” rather than “fönster” (“winder” rather than “window”, as some English translators have it²):

THE OLD MAN. Now listen, – – – I believe I have heard that voice – – – as a youth I had a friend who couldn’t say “window” [“fönster”] but said “winder” [“funster”] – I have met only one person who pronounced it like that, and that was him; the other one is you – are you by any chance related to Arkenholz, the wholesaler?
THE STUDENT. He was my father. (p. 167)

Out of context, the passage certainly seems like a theatrically efficient way of exposing a secret relationship; we recognize the use of a peculiar characteristic trait to signal a secret relationship as a familiar technique of exposition. The passage could consequently be considered to be compositionally motivated: it is simply needed for the development of the plot. But what strikes commentators – and translators – as odd is the haphazard way in which Strindberg uses this dramaturgical formula: above all, the Student never utters the word “winder” at all. The compositionally motivated detail thus remains nonintegrated and local in relation to the work as a whole. The question then is how we are to understand such a passage as it occurs in such a context, and how we should best describe its aesthetical function, effect and significance.

Egil Törnqvist has, throughout his work, presented the most elaborate and thorough study of Strindbergian drama, and for this reason his approach is entitled a fuller examination. He notes, when going over several English translations of the play, that most translators, “assuming that Strindberg has been careless”, amend the text, either by adding explicit instances of idiosyncratic speech to the Student’s lines (in one version he stammers) or by making the Old Man’s comments less specific.3 As an alternative approach, Törnqvist suggests that the Old Man could be considered as commenting upon the Student’s pronunciation in general, as the latter may previously have mispronounced not “winder” but similar words in a similar fashion, even though the dramatic text is never specific on this point; but the proposal is quickly rejected on the basis that even such a consistent use of idiolect would seem “absurd since this was, and still is, standard Stockholm pronunciation”.4 Instead of regarding the passage as a sign of authorial carelessness, Törnqvist suggests that we should consider it a prime example of Strindberg’s “habit of thinking in metaphoric terms”:5 thus he concurs with Evert Sprinchorn’s interpretation that the passage portentously alludes to a later description of the Old Man as “a thief who enters through windows to steal human souls”; already here, Sprinchorn suggests, “we see him as he first steals into the Student’s life by means of a ’window’".6 Hans-Göran Ekman, on the other hand, suggests that the function of the line may simply be to draw our attention to the

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3 Törnqvist, *Strindberg’s The Ghost Sonata*, p. 62.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., p. 61.
windows in the scenographic background as they illustrate the obstacles of communication that run through the play as one of its central themes.\(^7\)

I would suggest that these interpretational proposals in attempting to answer the question of “how to motivate” the passage could also be considered to provoke the question “why motivate at all?”: they prompt us to ask ourselves in what way our understanding of the text, which as such may strike us as meandering and out of joint, would benefit from a construct of textual connections of symbolic significances displaying how it all sticks together according to some ingenious plan. The critically trained scholars among us may look with suspicion upon the translators’ habit of rectifying the author to compensate for his in comprehensibility, but does not Törnqvist’s suggestion, too, strike us as an attempt to amend for Strindberg’s compositional carelessness – not by altering the actual text of the play, of course, but by adding a new hermeneutical level that will demonstrate how the play is coherently structured after all, if you just know how to read it properly?

If we are to squeeze the “winder”-passage into a significant context I would suggest that we leave the model of metaphoric intricacy as it neglects an important aspect not only of the way the play under consideration is put together but of Strindberg’s practice as a writer. We could for instance see it as an example of a typically Strindbergian theme revolving around sudden recognition or the intuitive and haphazard discovery of correspondences and relationships bordering on a sort of abductive mysticism. In that case, we would suggest that the passage while appearing strange in isolation will become significant in relation to the context of the authorship. The theme not only runs through Strindberg’s fictional works but reoccurs even more prominently in his theoretical works on natural philosophy, science and theology; take for instance his botanical paradigm called “plant psychology”, or the study of botanical kinships through what the author calls the “personal characteristics” of plants, their “habitus, temperament, way of being, that which cannot be expressed by or defined with words”.\(^8\) As a case in point, Strindberg mentions his sudden discovery of the close relationship between two species of trees of different class by the way they both “as if tired rested their branches upon the ground”, and comments: “It was like when in life some person


through some gesture exposes his kinship to somebody else.”⁹ In this sense, the passage could be said to gain its significance from being a variation on a common element in the imagery of Strindberg’s world view: it demonstrates the author’s way of thinking about the world.

But we could go even further in suggesting that the “winder”-passage demonstrates Strindberg’s own habitus, temperament, or way of being as an author, and that we recognize it according to a particularly Strindbergian mode of writing drama that really relies more on authorial carelessness than intricate metaphors. What I find interesting about this dramatic mode which is especially prominent in the Chamber Plays is neither plot nor metaphor but a peculiar tension between what I will call, on the one hand, dramaturgical structure and, on the other, literary style: Strindberg’s work is characterized by a playful friction between form and writing. The fact that the composition may strike us as haphazard does not in this case necessitate intricate interpretations but rather an attentiveness towards the productive potential of the haphazard element involved in the act of writing: instead of seeking to hermeneutically unveil symbolic coherence by producing random interpretations, I would like to pay attention to the ability of the writer to produce a randomness of forms. A similar approach was, I believe, central to early literary narratology, which not only sought to replace interpretation with the study of forms, but also, and more importantly, the way forms were transformed by the specific styles or idiosyncrasies of particular authors.

The outlines to a theory of this kind of prolific carelessness are actually present already in Strindberg’s own discourse on the writing process. In my work, I will try to avoid adding this discourse as an extra level to the work in order to explain or justify it, and rather bring it to mind in an attempt to affirm the curious and quirky use of common dramaturgical forms or techniques found in the Chamber Plays. To do so, I will furthermore call upon the body of the writer as well as his body of writing, in order to locate the work in the stylistic milieu of an authorship.

Strindberg’s poetics of writing

The work of the literary author, says Strindberg in a letter to a fellow writer, “grows profusely in his head like grapes or mold”.¹⁰ I would like to use this striking image as a point of departure since it indicates a kind of natural productive-

⁹ Ibid.
¹⁰ Letter to Ola Hansson, 1 October 1890.
ness in accord rather than conflict with the notion of carelessness. From experience, we all know the ability of mold to transmute familiar objects into strange and bizarre hybrids. Molds tend to grow where not expected and almost always where not wanted, at different speeds and in different directions, in patterns both typical and weird. The thing infested by mold is often recognizable, yet turned into something entirely different; and an increase in mold is a certain sign that something is being spoiled, and thus that certain uses or functions are lost. At the same time, however, new and strange effects may be gained. Thus, mold is not reducible to mere decay, but may also entail vital processes of becoming; one only has to bring to mind concepts like noble rot, or products like penicillin, Tokaji wine and Roquefort cheese to hint at possible positive connotations of the process. But before we take the image too far, let us look at how Strindberg comments upon the risks and opportunities involved in a writer spoiling his own work.

Strindberg’s furious attack on Ibsen’s portrayal of female emancipation in A Doll’s House (Et dukkehjem, 1879), presented not least in the foreword to the collection of short stories Married (Giftas, 1884) is well-known. However, in an equally rabidly iconoclastic essay from the same year, in which Strindberg settles the score with modern society and its artists, the play is criticized rather on compositional grounds. The author of the play has not, according to Strindberg, accomplished what he set out to do structurally speaking. Instead of completing the dramaturgical form he initiated he has let his imagination run wild, causing the result to sprawl and bifurcate in different and contrary directions. This is how Strindberg puts it:

Ibsen has three different endings to his Doll’s House. True, the story may end in three ways or more, but on what ending did the author decide? None! His brain went its own way, and when it got to the end, the author is left out of sight.¹¹

The critique is not limited to Ibsen but applied to the activity of writing as such: literature becomes dangerous since it is scribbled in “a state of partial insanity” by an author losing control over his own utterances which, when read in hindsight, appear incomprehensible even to himself.¹² To the sober mind of the writer-as-retrospective-reader the jotted thoughts are exposed as “a premature fetus, a whole grain that slipped through the grinder, or perhaps nothing at all,

¹¹ August Strindberg, “Om Det Allmänna Missnöjet, Dess Orsaker och Botemedel” (from Likt och olikt I, 1884), Likt och olikt I-II samt uppsatser och tidningsartiklar 1884-1890, ed. Hans Lindström, Samlade verk 17, Stockholm 2003, p. 44.
¹² Ibid.
some incoherent words that escaped while the brain halted for a second”.13 The writer, who depends on the whimsical fancies of the chaotic human brain, must consequently be considered as morally and politically unreliable. The writer is sick, and the act of writing is described in somatic terms, as a bodily illness: it causes a “sudden corporal fever” that “rushes blood to the brain”.14 Strindberg admits that his neurological take on Romantic inspiration is applicable not least to his own authorship; and his own account of his literary method somewhat ironically comes surprisingly close to the severely negative criticism directed at him by conservative critic Carl David af Wirsén. Commenting on Miss Julie (Fröken Julie, 1888), af Wirsén guesses that the play’s author “at the point of writing was troubled by some brain-disease, so that for the moment he was not fully normal”.15

So, while Strindberg criticizes Ibsen for failing to accomplish a composed whole as he loses track of his own writing, he also finds this kind of feverish squiggling as innate to writing and thus to literature as such. During a state of writer’s block he complains: “The pen is forced to move on and produce squiggles on the paper, but the thoughts are gone!”16 In this sense, a certain kind of writing could be said to take place in-between of composition, and thus it may also provide a solution or a way out: this writing is what grows out of the rupture caused by composing coming to a halt. This productive aspect of literature lies not only in the cognitive ability to recognize and combine recurring forms and patterns, but also, and more importantly, in the quirks and flukes of the material human brain. So, even though young Strindberg expelled art from modern society, the theme of feverish writing recurs in affirmative rather than negative terms throughout his lifelong commentary on writing. The possibilities inherent in fever are considered something necessary for and noteworthy in aesthetics, yet hard to describe in retrospect. In an essay on Dumas fils, for instance, Strindberg expresses the redundancy of authorial prefaces trying to explain the work (we are reminded of his own foreword to Miss Julie), since writing almost by definition entails the author’s loss of his work. Strindberg notes:

“The artist works unconsciously, creates like nature, at random, with an astounding profligacy, but the moment he, post festum, tries to think his

13 Ibid., p. 45.
14 Ibid., p. 44.
15 Carl David af Wirsén, review of Miss Julie in Post- och Inrikes Tidningar, 12 December 1888. (“vid nedskrivandet varit besvärad af någon hjern-åkomma, som gjort at than för tillfället ej var fullt normal”)
16 Letter to Pehr Staaff, 11 February 1883.
work over, to analyze it, he awakens from his half slumber, and falls to the ground like a sleepwalker.\footnote{August Strindberg, "Césarine" (1894), Selected Essays by August Strindberg, ed. and trans. Michael Robinson, Cambridge 1996, p. 118.}

We may compare this to Strindberg’s apologetic answer to a publisher expressing his concerns over sudden and unprepared plot-elements in a short story. Compositional flaws cannot be remedied, says Strindberg, since the story in question has already turned out to be something grander than what was intended and expected. Strindberg does not deny the act of sober composition, but he also acknowledges its potential to open up possibilities for unexpected transformations. Composing sets writing in motion, and as the latter transmutes the former the work may go from being just good and accomplished to becoming something interesting and astounding. Strindberg consequently adds that he seldom dares to correct his work, “and when I have amended, I have ruined”.\footnote{Letter to Karl Otto Bonnier, 23 July 1888.} The letter ends with an allusion to Pilate: “What I have written I have written!”\footnote{Ibid.}

In the preface to a collection of Strindberg’s own comments on theatre and drama, Göran Lindström reverses the relationship by contrasting the talk about feverish writing to the more craftsmanlike tuition in the art of writing drama given by Strindberg in letters to his young German translator.\footnote{Göran Lindström, "Inledning", in Strindberg om drama och teater. Programskrifter och öppna brev, ed. Göran Lindström, Lund 1968, p. 15} Lindström notes what he considers a revealing conflict between the confessions of “demonic inspiration” and the somewhat conceited instructions exposing the “administrative meticulousness that, in reality, distinguished Strindberg’s work”.\footnote{Ibid. (“demonisk inspiration”, “den kamerala noggrannhet som i verkligheten utmärkte Strindbergs arbete”)} In Lindström’s view, Strindberg was a consciously working artisan trying to maintain the public image of an unconsciously working artistic genius. While inspiration may be active in an initial and ideal phase, as an idea giving the impulse to write, what actually follows, according to Lindström, is writing as an act of careful composing, “the arduous act of elaboration and the stage of refinement”.\footnote{Ibid. (“det mödosamma utarbetandet och finslipandets etapp”)}

It is certainly true that we may find indications of a more technical concern for dramaturgy in Strindberg’s commentaries as well as in his dramatic works but while he certainly knew the conventions of the art he seldom managed to stick to them even when he tried. Stressing the image of the fastidious artusan may actually result in a refusal of the very poetics governing the oeuvre and the works under consideration. While Strindberg notes a complex and perhaps indefinable re-
lation between writing and composition, Lindström simply equates the two; and while Lindström simply dichotomizes inspiration and administration, causing the one pole to exclude the other in the tradition of the debate on Romanticism vs. Classicism, Strindberg rather notes how writing, routing a track in one direction, suddenly may take on another and unforeseen direction, and, consequently, that premeditated composing may emit irreversible possibilities for contingent productivity. What Strindberg talks about is not so much divine inspiration in contrast to craftsmanship as the possibility for a kind of mutation of forms, for the production of the new rather than just the commonly familiar, and for the potential involved in an event that – as careless as it may seem – will not always be in need of revision “post festum”. The question is not whether Strindberg mastered the tools of the trade or not, or to what degree such mastery would cancel out a concept of inspiration; we certainly know from his works that he knew a thing or two about dramatic composition and theatrical effects, but we also know to what extent he valued the ability of composition to alter its forms along the way. While Lindström seeks to replace a mythology of inspired creation with the reality of literary production, this aspiration, too, gets caught up in the ideal as it reduces writing to a destined search for the perfection of forms while neglecting the material situations in which such a search must be considered to take place.

In the case of the “winder”, Strindberg takes up a common pattern of compositionally motivated expository functions – a bit of a cliché – but suddenly turns it into something qualitatively different. He uses his skills as a playwright, but what really distinguishes him is his ability not to use but to forget to use them. Hereby the conventional may produce the unfamiliar and the common the stylistically idiosyncratic. Rather than by evoking divine inspiration, this happens as a physical incident which could be said to transform the cognitive act of composing into a material event of writing. This is actually all in line with Strindberg’s theory of a “natural art, where the artist works in the same capricious way as nature, without a specific aim”. Images of both the genius and the craftsman are deserted in favor of the rank growth of nature itself; and consequently, in another letter, Strindberg evokes the teleology of chance and presents it as his artistic credo: “Work like nature, not from nature.” In short, I find it necessary to acknowledge the ways in which Strindberg embraces the possibility for mutation and transmutation involved even when an author attempts to simply reproduce the

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24 Letter to Leopold Littmansson, 13 August 1894.
already established forms and patterns of the common reservoirs of literature and language.

Style and structure as aspects of literature

In dealing with Strindberg we consequently find ourselves to be playing around with at least two different aspects of design: on the one hand we have the molds of literature, i.e. the forms, the stereotypes, the matrices, the patterns, the clichés, in short that which makes the compositional strategies governing literary works intelligible, recognizable, and distinguishable; and on the other hand we have the mold of writing, i.e. the traces of the whims and quirks of the material brain and the contingent event of writing according to which elements, effects, and passages may be incorporated into the work without the writer even knowing how or why. I will associate the former aspect with the concept of structure and the latter with the concept of style: while structure relates to composition, intention, functions, genres as context, and operations, style relates to writing, contingency, whims, oeuvres as context, and behavioral habits, ticks, and quirks.

A play between similar aspects haunts conventional treatises on style as well as modern analyses of literary structures. As stylistics have traditionally discussed style as a matter of custom and option – what verbal form should an author choose to properly express a certain thought – it has also had to account for non-customary and non-optional traits of style and the limits of choice imposed by the habitus, disposition and inclinations of a particular writer; and as structuralism has defined the work of art as a set of pure functions combined according to the predictable principles of a code, it has also had to account for such elements that appear strangely afunctional, idiosyncratic, and unexpected when judged from the point of view of code. As I see it, both traditions must account for the play between what I call the act of composing and the event of writing: on the one hand the work as the product of a process constituted by a series of contingent situations where an indefinite set of material conditions are involved. 25 In the case of Strindberg, I understand style first of all in terms of the traces of writing that

25 For a discussion of writing along these lines, cf. e.g. Marianne de Jong, “The viability and consequences of describing literary writing as an action”, TRANS. Internet-Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften, 2002/14: “The literary act can be thought of as an undefinable but material opening or field in which a potentially limitless and unpredictable set of systems intersect. These systems could be biochemical, psychological, psycholinguistic or social and cultural, to mention but a few.”
are posited within or take place inside of composition, in-between its functional building blocks like weed or better yet, to use Strindberg’s own expression, a mold that may break out at limited marks to transmute the recognizable work into something new, strange and different. In that case, the Strindbergian work may be considered not only as a product of will and careful design, or even of the common rules of composition, but also as a product of the material brain and the contingent event of production as such.

At this point, I will briefly consider how a similar friction between the work, the writer and the act of writing has recurred in discussions of style and structure, two concepts which, especially in the French tradition, never seem to be quite separable. The word style itself is related to the act of writing etymologically, deriving from the Latin word “stilus” that denotes “an instrument for writing on wax tablets, hence, by metonymy, a way of writing”.26 While style has traditionally been associated simply with eloquence or the ability to garb a specific topic or thought in an appropriate verbal attire, certain persistent material relations seem inescapably associated with the concept. In 1753, Buffon famously declared that “style is the man itself” whereby he stressed that style is not only a set of rules to be learned and practiced but also a matter of personal disposition: if genius is lacking, rules become redundant.27 A century before, Bernard Lamy in his influential treatise on rhetoric related style to the material disposition of the specific writer, the “substance of the Brain”, and thus stated that the ways of writing would differ from one writer to the other as did their individual faces.28 Lamy concluded:

Discourse is the Image of the Mind; we shew our Humours and Inclinations in our Words before we think of it. The Minds then being different, what wonder if the Style of every author has a character that distinguishes it from all others, though all use the same Terms and Expressions in the same Language.29

And, closer to our own time, Remy de Gourmont took up Buffon at the fin de siècle in order to declare that “style is as personal as the colour of the eyes or the sound of the voice” and added:

27 Buffon, “Discourse on Style” (“Discours sur le Style”, 1753), Theories of Style with Especial Reference to Prose Composition, trans. and ed. Lane Cooper, London 1912, p. 178.
28 [Bernard Lamy], The Art of Speaking (La Rhétorique ou l’art de parler, 1675), unknown trans., London 1676, p. IV:3ff.
29 Ibid., p. IV:6f.
To write, as Flaubert and Goncourt understood it, is to exist, to be one’s self. To have a style is to speak, in the midst of the common language, a peculiar dialect, unique and inimitable, yet so constituted as to be at once the language of all and the language of an individual. Style is self-evident.  

Similar associations between style and disposition also prevail in those later strands of critical tradition that sought to dispose of the individual language or surrender it utterly to the language of all. Consider, for example, the case of Roland Barthes and the literary oriented branch of French structuralism. Following the Saussurean distinction between code and message, literary structuralism claimed an interest not in particular works as such but in the principles of combination that made the production of works possible in the first place. The work of art was accordingly defined as an assemblage of units that had been produced through a combinatory act following certain varied but stable “rules of association” that granted it the possibility to carry communicative meaning. Considered in this way, the work became intelligible insofar as it was composed; its communicability depended on the regularity of certain reoccurring and recognizable units and associations from which it was constituted. The object of structural studies was these combinatory rules, which Barthes labeled forms, that were considered as “what keeps the contiguity of units from appearing as a pure effect of chance”; and poetics as the structural study of literature was distinguished from hermeneutics in that it sought “less to assign completed meanings to the objects it discovers than to know how meaning is possible, at what cost and by what means”. In one of Barthes’ most orthodox works in linguistics, Elements of Semiology, the style of a writer was accordingly lumped together with aphasia under the heading of “the idiolect”, or the habitual uses of language restricted to specific individuals. Thus the suspiciously private concept of style would fall outside the scope of poetics; yet the hasty remark on the concept in Elements of Semiology seems included first of all to salvage it from more rigid linguistic models which would simply dispose of a topic which was rather at the very centre of

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20 Remy de Gourmont, “Concerning Style or Writing” (from La Culture des idées, 1900), Decadence and Other Essays on the Culture of Ideas, trans. William Aspenwall Bradley, London 1921, p. 160f.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., p. 218.
interest for the critical discourse on literature. It is significant that style recurs as a concept all through Barthes’ oeuvre where it is associated not primarily with the message as a specific instance of code but with the material producer and the act of production. Thus style is considered by the early Barthes as belonging to a biological frame of reference, it is described as the “transmutation of a Humour” and as “the product of a thrust, not an intention”, and the elements of style are said to “spring from the body and the past of the writer and gradually become the very reflexes of his art”. So, not even Barthes, who infamously proclaimed the death of the author, could really maintain the structural conception of art as a set of pure functions “without noise” for within the work operates the traces, the “grain”, of a material and productive origin, “the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs”.38

Apparently, the discussion of style not only concerns the proper verbal forms for specific topics, or individual expression, but also the disposition of the writer and the situation of writing: style is a way of writing and thus a performative practice. Like the lack of genius, the substance of the brain or the color of the eyes, the style is not primarily a choice of garb or a way to express one’s authentic I but a physical constitution and a set of traits and habits beyond individual control; Gourmont calls it a quality and adds that man “becomes what he is without wishing to even, and despite every effort to oppose it”. Modern works in stylistics, too, have to account for this play between the intentional and the contingent, the regular and the peculiar, as is seen for instance in Louis T. Milic’s distinction between what he calls stylistic options and rhetorical choices, or those artistic traits that result from inclinations that operate unconsciously within the

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35 Cf. ibid.: “Jakobson has questioned the interest of this notion [the idiolect]: the language is always socialized, even at the individual level, for in speaking to somebody one always tries to speak more or less the other’s language, especially as far as the vocabulary is concerned (‘private property in the sphere of language does not exist’): so the idiolect would appear to be largely an illusion. We shall nevertheless retain from this notion the idea that it can be useful to designate the following realities [aphasia, literary style, and the interpretational norms of restricted sub-communities]”. Cf. e.g. Roman Jakobson, “Results of a Joint Conference of Anthropologists and Linguists” (1953), and “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances” (1956), both in Word and Language, Selected Writings II, The Hague and Paris 1971, p. 249 and p. 559.
39 Gourmont, p. 166.
author and those that clearly stem from deliberate and premeditated choices. The restrictions imposed by style as related to the particular writer may also be considered as one of the aspects that render possible literary multitude and novelty for, as the differences of the brains produce differences of language for Lamy, it is the differences of style that for Gourmont guarantee a variety of literature that reaches beyond the simple variety of the same; without style, “everything would be said in the first hundred years of a literature”. Style is, furthermore, quite persistently linked to the act of writing, from Buffon’s cautionary image of the writer who wanders about without a plan and whose “pen running on un-guided will form haphazard, irregular strokes and incongruous figures” to Milic’s more affirmative recognition of “how mysteriously the words do flow on some occasions and refuse to on others”. The empirical recognition of the productivity associated with the material writer and the act of writing seems more or less shared, and opinions differ primarily in how that productivity is evaluated.

An illustrative example of an analysis of the play between composition and writing, or design and whim, is found in a brief essay on some distinguishing marks in Flaubert written by another modern French critic of the literary and structurally oriented tradition, viz. prime narratologist Gérard Genette. Here is how Genette comments on a passage from Sentimental Education (L’Éducation sentimentale, 1869) where a character’s reaction is likened to the sight of corpses in a morgue:

This macabre close-up obviously belongs only to Flaubert. The impression of freezing poverty experienced by Frédéric has led him far from his hero, far from his novel, into a vision of the morgue, which, for a moment, is to absorb him entirely in a sort of horrified fascination, of morbid ecstasy; and the comparison here has no other effect – no other aim, perhaps – than to break and to suspend for that moment, the course of the narrative.

The passage, according to Genette, is best conceived of as having its origin neither in a narrator nor in a code but in the material writer and it appears to have entered into composition as a trace of the material process from which it originates: Flaubert is suspected of having forgotten the course of his narrative rather to get lost in writing, and the image which suddenly grows forth in his brain simply

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41 Gourmont, p. 163.
42 Buffon, p. 172.
43 Milic, p. 80.
pours out onto the paper. Here design is apparently jumbled with the peculiar imagery that (as Barthes had it) sprung from the author’s body during the act of writing. A passage from *Madame Bovary* (1857) is described in a similar manner. Genette suggests that at one time Flaubert has apparently become bored and thus starts to think of something else whereby memories from the author’s childhood come back to him which apparently he could not help “devoting a line or two to”.

The passages that attract Genette’s interest emerge as a kind of lacuna in the composition of the work where the narrative halts in order to let writing germinate by itself, for its own sake; they spring forth from the material process where a specific body enters into an assemblage with a pen and a sheet of paper to produce lines and traces which apparently arise immanently from the situation itself. These lacunas, which for a rigid critic could appear as outbursts of “clumsiness itself”, furthermore open up a space for aesthetical appreciation since the author’s “second of inattention” for Genette rather “saves the whole scene, because in it we see the author forgetting the curve of his narrative and going off on a tangent”.

Instances like these are of interest for Genette because they are indicative of literature as art form as well as of the literary art of Flaubert, the specific author, for they demonstrate both how literature is open to an excessive profligacy of germinating images beyond what Barthes once called “the economy of the message” and the tension that may arise between disparate tendencies within a uniform oeuvre: here it appears in the way Flaubert’s notoriously meticulous devotion to the precision of design and formulation opens up for the incidental to emerge, crop up, and perhaps even take over the direction. Genette therefore lingers on these instances where Flaubert forgets about his diegetic characters and rather “becomes fascinated by some material circumstance: a door, behind her, that bangs to and vibrates, interminably”. This “escape of meaning into the indefinite trembling of things” that occupies and expands the spaces found in between the structural or compositional elements is evaluated by Genette as one of the most specific traits of Flaubert’s writing: it is this “involuntary, almost imperceptible trace of boredom, indifference, lack of attention, forgetfulness, that he leaves over an oeuvre apparently aspiring to a useless perfection” that best characterizes the singularity of Flaubert’s work. Genette’s interest, then, lies not

46 Ibid.
48 Genette, “Flaubert’s Silences”, p. 199.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid., p. 200.
primarily in the author as a biographical person but in the effects produced by the singular ways in which Flaubert has entered the composition of his work in the form of a distinct style. These effects may obviously be demonstrated and accounted for by structural analysis only insofar as it remains open towards the peculiar, the idiosyncratic, and the habitual aspects of a style, an author and an oeuvre. If we accept this view, the structural study of literature will have to coincide with an exploration of style and writing.

Strindberg’s concept of writing as mold should be helpful in this respect as it creates no strict opposition between the intentional and the accidental but situates the latter within the former as a potentially fertile event that may add to the work by changing its internal direction. For Strindberg, mindful composing is always infused by material forces which may turn the premeditated into something astonishing, and thus he seems to develop a certain kind of carelessness into a functional poetics that affirms some of the possibilities of literary writing which may be rejected by others as signs of mere offhandedness. Such a poetics acknowledges both composition and writing as different principles of direction that might still connect with and transform each other: on the one hand the thorough progress from one fixed point to another according to a destined goal, on the other hand the potential opening of a line of flight going in whatever direction that currently happens to be initiated.\footnote{On the line of flight, cf. e.g. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, \textit{Kafka. Toward a Minor Literature} (\textit{Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure}, 1975), trans. Dana Polan, Minneapolis and London 1986, p. 6: “a simple way out, ‘right, left or in any direction,’ as long as it is as little signifying as possible”.
\footnote{Buffon, p. 176.}} While the eloquent Buffon stressed that the writer having taken up his pen “must direct it successively from one main point to the next, not letting it stray therefrom, nor yet allowing it to dwell immoderately on any, nor, in fact, giving it other movement than that determined by the space to be traversed”,\footnote{Buffon, p. 176.} Strindberg, on the other hand, could find in retrospect that these moments of straying and dwelling were what actually made the work.

As the writer writes, the circumstances of a previous setup may obviously have been lost to memory already at the moment a new scene, image or formulation springs forth in his brain. While composing strives to match these different moments together as a whole, and thus goes back, adjusts, rewrites, crosses out and adds anew, writing, as I understand it here, relies rather on the ability to simply get on with it and press forward, even if it means that the design is occasionally messed up. For the composer it remains crucial always to keep in mind what one
is doing in order to produce a whole “that can be coherently remembered”;\(^{53}\) while writing, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari put it, rather “includes forgetting as a process”:\(^{54}\) sometimes, the writer must put the demand for coherence out of his mind not to get stuck in some unsolvable aporia that determinates production; and sometimes he will be carried away by the contingent flow generated from the material situation and the assemblage constituting a brain, a hand, a pen and a sheet of paper. Strindberg as an author often seems to plot out a design or a set of designs which are eventually transformed and altered during the actual writing; and as he goes over his manuscripts in retrospect, he may very well decide to keep whatever flaws, whims, variations or innovations that have emerged. The result, then, is an assemblage of designed structures and traces of the contingent event as the final composition comes to include the inscriptions of a series of material processes, of mistakes, confusions, mix-ups, reflexes, impulses, associations, whims, fancies, etc., that is, elements of memory as well as forgetfulness, of a strong will as well as an absent mind. This kind of assemblage then contributes to establishing a peculiar and distinguishable stylistic milieu sheltering a set of habits, quirks, and idiosyncrasies that typify the behaviors and ways of functioning of a particular oeuvre that is utterly *Strindbergian*.

In terms of methodology I find two, separate yet complementary, principle reasons why references to the act and process of production may be necessary in discussing Strindberg. First, we may use them as an *explanation* for certain traits of a work in order to refute speculative interpretations of its meaning or function; and secondly, we may use them as an *image* through which we try to conceptualize our recognition of the perhaps inexpressible singularity of a style and an oeuvre.

The difference of the Chamber Plays

The focus of my study lies on the play and friction between structure and style in the five Chamber Plays. These plays are of particular interest as they mark a return to conventional dramatic forms while simultaneously displaying an intensification of stylistic idiosyncrasy often associated with the “late style” of an artist. This might be what is behind Martin Lamm’s seemingly paradoxical claim that the Chamber Plays are “difficult to understand without reference to the writer’s


experience and recollections” yet “have a violent dramatic force which the spectator finds irresistible”. The plays seem strange but they work; and they seem conventional in comparison to some of the author’s earlier experimental pieces but they are still regarded as milestones in the development of modern Western drama. While Lamm claims that it is “only in reading that one notices the lack of logic”, I would rather argue that such a lack will only emerge as long as one approaches the style with an inadequate analytical model – one that mistakes style for composition and composition for consistency. Lamm, who possesses an extensive knowledge of the Strindbergian oeuvre as well as an intuitive understanding of the Strindbergian writing process, never uses such a model; but others do and thus clear the way for the kind of interpretational amendments previously noted.

Few attempts to define the Chamber Play as a genre have been made and there is probably good reason for this. The passages from two of Strindberg’s documents usually evoked to describe the form of the plays are elusively vague and unspecific. The first passage is from a letter written by Strindberg in the beginning of January 1907, just before the actual work on the Chamber Plays began. The letter addresses a fellow writer with advice on his future work by suggesting the aesthetics of an “intimate theatre”:

If you write something new, let me know, but aim for the intimate in form, small motif, thoroughly executed, few persons, great points of view, free imagination, but founded on observation, experience, carefully studied; simple, but not too simple; no huge apparatus, no superfluous minor characters, no regular five-acters or “old machineries”, no lengthy all-nighters.

Miss Julie (without intermission) has stood the test and proven to be the desired form of the impatient people of the present day. Thorough but brief.

While this letter is prospective even in relation to Strindberg’s own work on the plays, the second passage is retrospective, written during the summer of 1908. In the “Memorandum”, which was in an early form intended to be a foreword to an eventual collection of the first three Chamber Plays, we find Strindberg’s famous and often quoted reference to the “secret program” of Max Reinhardt’s Kammer-spiel-Haus, “The idea of chamber music transferred to the drama”: “The intimate

56 Ibid.
58 Letter to Adolf Paul, 6 January 1907.
procedure, the significant motif, the soigné treatment." Once more he launches the aesthetics of an intimate theatre, now accompanied with explicit references to the Chamber Play as dramatic concept. Here is how the two terms are explained:

In drama we look for the powerful and significant motif, yet with restrictions. In the treatment we avoid all luxury, every calculated effect and room for applause, brilliant roles, solos. No determined form should bind the author, for the motif conditions the form. In other words, freedom of treatment, only bound by the unity of conception and the sense of style.60

The “Chamber Play”-label as it was first conceptualized would, as Törnqvist and Birgitta Steene remark, fit “most of Strindberg’s short plays”.61 The first passage suggests, as Sprinchorn notes, that the author “had not advanced beyond the view expressed nineteen years earlier” in the preface to Miss Julie.62 Still, it is only the first of the plays, he adds, that could be said to actually answer to the declared idea of what a Chamber Play should be.63 Even Lamm pointed out that the idea of transferring the aesthetics of chamber music to drama was carried out only in the first play while the element of chamber music in the latter plays was restricted to the fact that they “bore opus numbers, that music was played in a couple of them, and that the least chamber music-like and for an ‘intimate’ theatre utterly unplayable one had received the title The Ghost Sonata”.64 In order to describe the actual aesthetics of the Chamber Plays, there are accordingly several reasons to refrain from using the earlier letter that predates them.

Lamm as well as Sprinchorn rather stress the differences found between the separate Chamber Plays which seem to refuse to be grouped together according to a single unifying program. This is hardly surprising if we take the poetics of mold into consideration, for even when a plan existed before writing, it could possibly transform in writing. Lamm explains that it is actually the abundance of variation in the Chamber Plays that he finds admirable, as well as the way they “reveal such widely different aspects of Strindberg’s talent”,65 and Sprinchorn concludes

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60 Ibid.
61 Egil Törnqvist and Birgitta Steene, Strindberg on Drama and Theatre, Amsterdam 2007, p. 18.
62 Sprinchorn, Strindberg as Dramatist, p. 248.
63 Ibid.
64 Martin Lamm, Strindbergs dramer II, Stockholm 1926, p. 372. ("att dramerna bero opustal, att det spelades musik i ett par av dem samt att det minst kammarmusikmässiga och för en ’intim’ teater fullkomligt ospelbara erhållit namnet Spöksonaten").
65 Ibid. ("uppenbara så vitt skilda sidor av Strindbergs begävning")
that the different plays demonstrate how the author had eventually “altered his conception of the form”. Sprinchorn apparently agrees as he stresses how Strindberg in retrospect, perhaps to justify the results of his production, simply “gave the playwright absolute freedom to follow the dictates of his imagination”.

From these brief observations I will suggest three premises that govern the present study: first of all, that writing in Strindberg and in the Chamber Plays should be considered a process of becoming rather than a fulfillment or a realization of ideals; secondly, that the Strindbergian poetics entails an affirmation of this processual nature of writing that will have consequences for the constitution or disposition of the works and thus also for how they should be interpreted; and thirdly, that the Chamber Play as a genre should be described only in retrospect, i.e. according to a thorough examination of the separate works rather than with reference to a pre-established and uniform program. An adequate description of the plays must furthermore be able to account not only for the similarities but also for the differences found as one play is compared to the other.

I situate my study in the play between structure and style, where structure is considered to open up the work to the contexts of language, genres and recognizable forms while simultaneously closing it off as an autonomous set of internal functions; and where style is considered to open up the work to the contexts of the authorship or the oeuvre while simultaneously closing it off as a singular result of a specific productive event.

A separate chapter is dedicated to each of the Chamber Plays. The chapter on *Stormy Weather* examines the structural use of focus and the hierarchy of character-functions related to the centering on a protagonist. *The Burned Lot* is discussed from the concept of a ruin to describe how a multitude of conflicting forms come together to produce a fragmentary result. *The Ghost Sonata* is described in terms of simulation: while Strindberg alludes to certain dramatic patterns, he also distorts them whereby new effects are created. The chapter on *The Pelican* explores the temporal flow of the play and how it relates to writing. And in a final chapter on *The Black Glove* I return to the question of the Chamber Plays as genre: I discuss in what way and to what degree the bringing together of

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68 Sprinchorn, *Strindberg as Dramatist*, p. 249.
separate plays, similar as well as dissimilar, produces a consistent context, and where we would find the outer limits of such a context.

Throughout the work I relate my discussion to previous studies and commentaries on the plays. Theoretical questions, primarily of a formal and interpretational nature, are continuously discussed as one of my main points will be that the Strindbergian way of writing will inevitably create restrictions to what kind of interpretations may be associated with his works. First of all, I will call in question interpretations that presuppose a kind of compositional consistency that I find lacking in the actual plays.
2. The I in the Pyramid: The Focal Order of *Stormy Weather*

“The I: The Centre. Egocentric.”

A. S. \(^{69}\)

Introduction: Two structural oppositions as point of departure

In his letter to Adolf Paul, Strindberg presented, as we have seen, a set of authorial advice regarding a new kind of “intimate” theatrical form: an intimate play should be simple but not too simple, it should execute a limited but thoroughly treated motif, and it should do so without recourse to an abundance of diverse characters, a huge theatrical apparatus, or obsolete dramatic techniques and technologies. Among Strindberg’s own Chamber Plays, written especially for his own intimate stage Intima Teatern, the first, Op. 1 *Stormy Weather*, is however usually considered to be the only one to actually adhere to the new aesthetics.\(^ {70}\) Lamm furthermore points out that the earliest intention regarding the genre, to create something of a dramatic equivalent to chamber music, was only carried out in this first attempt, and that the latter plays – and especially *The Ghost Sonata* – would turn out utterly unplayable for any kind of intimate stage of the time.\(^ {71}\) Since Strindberg’s commentaries on his conception of both the musical and the theatrical genre are quite scarce and vague, it is hard to tell whether Lamm’s conclusion is true or not; but what seems to be clear is, however, that Strindberg’s initial effort appeared as inadequate at least to the author himself. After having finished *The Ghost Sonata*, Strindberg denounced his first Chamber Play as “an excellent Philistine-play, that could ‘run’”.\(^ {72}\) At this later moment Strindberg seems, as Sprinchorn puts it, to have “altered his conception of the form”.\(^ {73}\) But

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\(^{70}\) Cf. for example Sprinchorn, *Strindberg as Dramatist*, p. 249.


\(^{72}\) Letter to Emil Schering, 27 March 1907.

\(^{73}\) Sprinchorn, *Strindberg as Dramatist*, p. 249.

What resonate in the play from the early artistic declaration are first and foremost the concentration on a limited but thoroughly executed central theme, and the overall concentration to a limited set of characters. Stormy Weather is undeniably the Chamber Play easiest to describe in structural terms – and probably the only one to, at least tolerably, fit into the formula of narrative structure – and in the present chapter I will take my analytical point of departure in two classical structuralist sets of oppositions both of which I find congenial to the play. The sets are, on the one hand, the opposition between I and Other and, on the other hand, that between centre and periphery. They are obviously quite compatible with and relatable to further oppositions like that of an inside and an outside, or the private and the alien, and they touch upon the theme of the play as well as its formal organization. Thematically, the play could be said to deal with the wish of an aging man to live his final days in peaceful seclusion – and the difficulty of doing so while the outer world always threatens to break the peace of isolation. Structurally, it is organized around a central subject – a protagonist I – trying to cut off the Others constituting his surroundings, and the dynamics of the play seem generated by his locking them out, and them trying to break in, which creates a ruptured balance of isolation that strives for restoration. As is obvious, we recognize elements from prose works like Inferno (1897) and Alone (Ensam, 1903).

The plot could be summarized like this: in the first act, the Gentleman’s peaceful life is interrupted by suspicious and unruly neighbors moving into the apartment above his. His brother discovers that the mysterious strangers are actually the Gentleman’s former wife Gerda, their daughter, and Gerda’s new husband Fischer. In the second act, the Gentleman and Gerda confront each other, exchanging accusations regarding their past and their breakup. During the argument, Fischer sneaks away with their daughter and another young girl, their neighbor Agnes. In the third act, the order is restored, and the Gentleman is once again left alone with his brother. Agnes returns, having abandoned Fischer; and Gerda has rescued the child and also left Fischer behind.

The following analysis will concentrate on the formal strategies Strindberg uses not only to establish a theme dealing with subjectivity and alienation, privacy and
What primarily interests me here is, in other words, what I will call the focal structure of the play. Already Gustav Freytag advocated the “thoroughly monarchical arrangement” of drama and stated that “the interest of the spectator must be directed mostly toward one person, and he must learn as early as possible who is to occupy his attention before all other characters”. In modern theory, Cleanth Brooks and Robert B. Heilman once defined dramatic focus as the “directing of the reader’s attention primarily to one character, situation, or concept, and the subordination of other interests to the central one”, and Manfred Pfister rede-

fined it as the hierarchical arrangement of figural perspectives according to authorial attention.\footnote{Manfred Pfister, \textit{The Theory and Analysis of Drama (Das Drama, 1977)}, trans. John Halliday, Cambridge 1991, p. 63f.} In narrative theory, Seymour Chatman has labeled “the presentation of a story in such a way that a certain character is of paramount importance” the functional “center” of the story, whereby the concept neatly ties in with our structuring oppositions.\footnote{Seymour Chatman, \textit{Coming to Terms. The rhetoric of narrative in fiction and film}, Ithaca 1990, p. 147f.} The question of protagonism has furthermore been one of the main topics for dramatic theory since Aristotle.

I have previously argued for the use of the list of dramatis personae of a play for highlighting such focal structures.\footnote{Erik van Ooijen, “Projects and Projections: On Focus and Perspective in Drama”, \textit{Borderlines. Searching the Boundaries of Narrativity and Narratology}, ed. Per Krogh Hansen, Holte 2009, p. 229ff. A similar discussion of the list in Strindberg’s \textit{The Father} (Fadren, 1887) is found in Ola Holmgren, \textit{Strindbergs mansdrama i tre läsakter. Från Fadren Till Damaskus längs Stora landsvägen}, Stockholm and Stehag 2006, p. 16f.} As one randomly chosen example of many, we may for instance look to the lists found in English translations of Sophocles’ \textit{Oedipus at Colonus}. This is how F. Storr renders it:

\begin{quote}
OEDIPUS, banished King of Thebes.
ANTIGONE, his daughter.
ISMENE, his daughter.
THESEUS, King of Athens.
CREON, brother of Jocasta, now reigning at Thebes.
POLYNEICES, elder son of Oedipus.
STRANGER, a native of Colonus.
MESSENGER, an attendant of Theseus.
CHORUS, citizens of Colonus.\footnote{Sophocles, \textit{Oedipus at Colonus}, in \textit{The Oedipus Trilogy} (1912), trans. F. Storr, quoted from the digital text at Project Gutenberg.}
\end{quote}

The layout is fairly obvious. Overall, the list gives an ordered and hierarchical impression, designed with the topmost character as an obvious point of interest and relational origin. Oedipus is not associated with the other characters, but with his country; while Antigone, Ismene and Polynoeices, on the other hand, are all titled according to their relationship to that origin, as Oedipus’ children. The relational status of Theseus and Creon is perhaps a bit more uncertain, but they are at least both placed at a notably lower level of the focal hierarchy. At the bottom are the anonymous roles including the Stranger – who another translator even explicates as “a stranger to Oedipus”\footnote{Eugenio Montale, \textit{Theban Plays of Sophocles}, trans. David R. Slavitt, New Haven and London 2007, p. 137.} – and ending with the Chorus. The
list starts off with the protagonist, then relates his relatives, and so gradually descends into lesser degrees of compositional importance.

With reference to textual criticism, we may remark that any such list must be considered as highly anachronistic when it comes to Greek tragedy; but such an objection may actually work to our advantage. Looking up the list in other translations, it turns out to be designed in comparable ways. Thus we may assume that the translators have recognized a similar formal pattern, or a similar compositional principle regulating the order of the work. The list then becomes something of an analytical result, like a condensed account of the plot as dramatic form. First and foremost, the list displays the focus on the protagonist and the ways in which the other characters are related to him as a kind of focal point. In a way, the list suggests a similar dynamics of plot as described by A. J. Greimas’ well-known actantial model, where the surrounding characters are only definable in relation to the central protagonist and his governing project, his “desire”.

Dealing with Strindberg, it is worth pointing out that he actually highlights the centering function of the list of characters in a negative way when he excludes it from his largely non-narrative play A Dream Play (Ett drömspel, 1901). Here, the author strives to avoid the establishment of a central position, and the play lacks a protagonist in any qualified sense. It is true that the preface to the play mentions “one consciousness” that “looms over all others”, but it should obviously not be identifiable as one single and uniform character. Rather, that one consciousness seems to be evoked by the author as a kind of poetic principle of decentralized dramatic composition, and attempts at identifying it with a single instance have failed. As Göran Rossholm demonstrates in an essay on the topic, the position of the subject in A Dream Play is instead shifting from character to character between scenes, and sometimes even within them. When Michael Robinson adds a list of his own to his translation of the play, it turns out correspondingly decentralized, as a multitude of haphazardly jumbled elements, lacking the stratified structure noted in the list quoted above.

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82 In addition to the two translations noted above I also have consulted Sophocles, Oedipus at Colonus, in The Seven Plays in English Verse (1906), trans. Lewis Campbell, from the digital text at Project Gutenberg.
The list quoted above could be described as a stratified structure of focus and periphery, relating central to marginal interests to constitute a uniform pattern. Narrative structure could be understood in a similar way. Story as a focal structure would then entail what Lars-Åke Skalin has called the narrative “impetus” or the kinetic energy or progressive direction of a story concentrating on the fate of a particular, centralized character rather than some other, or just anyone. Narrative structure in this sense would not be some omnipresent law of language or of textuality but rather one possible and recognizable pattern for artistic organization. It is thus associable not with narrativity in its widest sense, but rather with one mode available during the authorial act of composing, arranging or constructing aesthetic forms. As Georg Lukács noted, narration as an organizational pattern creates proportions; but there also exist other possible principles, as what he called the merely leveling effect of description. And the fact that an author may not only reproduce patterns but also play with them or even create new ones is certainly suggested by the case of A Dream Play. The narrative impetus or focus discussed here is thus neither something alien to nor necessarily intrinsic of the dramatic form. What interests us is rather the ways in which an author may organize his material in order to create effects of subjectivity, and the consequences of such effects for interpretation.

To come closer to what we are after, we may compare Peter Szondi’s definition of absolute drama with Pfister’s discussion of dramatic perspective, since hierarchical stratification and authorial composition draw a line between the two. In the absolute sense presented by Szondi, drama consists of the enclosed action generated by the internal dynamics of “interpersonal relationships”, i.e., agents interacting in an autonomous and delimited space-time continuum. Drama, in this sense, must, at least normatively speaking, lack focus since it must lack the sense of external organizational or authorial agency. The hierarchical impetus-order is, in Szondi’s definition, alien to drama since it implies someone having arranged the elements of the world. The only relational influences valid for an absolute dramatic context are the internal ones, i.e., the internally generated social and interpersonal forces. So, any sign of an arranging agent is deemed anti-

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dramatic or “epic” by Szondi. 90 But Szondi is of course well aware that dramatic authors may use such epic techniques and effects freely, intentionally or by mistake, and Strindberg is actually situated as forebear in the crisis of the dramatic form that, according to Szondi, would lead to such modernist forms as epic theatre, montages and memory plays.

Pfister, who takes up Szondi’s definition but whose own focus lies on drama as a communicative act between external agents, is on the other hand interested in the diverse ways in which the dramatic author may arrange his materials – what he calls the “figure-perspectives” associated with various characters – according to different hierarchical principles in order to control the intended “reception-perspective”. 91 As one of the simple techniques for doing so he mentions the use of “telling names as evaluative signals”, 92 an indication as good as any to the fact that, so to speak, not all men in drama are created equal. Although using the Szondian model as his point of departure, Pfister develops the discussion to concern the different types of hierarchical focal structures found in dramatic texts, constructed by an author to be apprehended and appreciated by his audience. The point is, on the one hand, that form is not innocent, so to speak; and, on the other, that we are not in the position to make our choice among presented positions of equal validity, unless in the rare cases of totally open and non-hierarchical subject-structures. 93 That such plays may actually be quite rare is furthermore indicated by Mikhail Bakhtin’s claim that the dramatic form can never achieve true dialogicity, and that even in Shakespeare “each play contains only one fully valid voice, the voice of the hero”. 94 Even in such openly structured plays as A Dream Play we find several scenes which certainly contain what Pfister calls “implicit or explicit guidelines inserted by the author to manipulate the receiver’s perspective”. 95 The one where the starving workers are contrasted to the man being too well-fattened even to be able to eat is just one of the more striking examples where it is quite clear with whom we are intended to sympathize.

The concept of focus of interest, and especially the Greimasian description of narrative impetus as the teleological pattern of a centralized subjective desire, seems to imply that such structures force us, at least in some sense, to relate to or adjust our attention according to the work’s projective structure. Such an adjust-

90 Cf. ibid., p. 6–10.
91 Pfister, p. 57–68.
92 Ibid., p. 61f. and 194.
93 Ibid., p. 67f.
94 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics (Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo, 1929), ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson, Minneapolis and London 1984, p. 34.
95 Pfister, p. 67.
ment would not entail identification, but perhaps a kind of aesthetic (rather than, for instance, philosophic, moral or ideological) sympathy, if that concept is understood as the intuitive apprehension of formal and thematic composition. To assimilate an aesthetic projective structure would then entail our affirmation of the meaning-patterns or belief-sets or attitudes that constitute the work, not as statements or propositions but as aesthetic elements or as what has been termed the position of an implied reader. The focal structure would be an aspect of the aesthetic form in this wider sense. That such a process of adjustment may be activated by reading a literary work seems actually to be confirmed, if negatively, by the methodology developed by critical theory. Reading “against” the text it strives to refuse its structural act of ideological interpellation and the work’s production of an implied reader-position associated with a set of values, norms, structures and oppositions, etc. But sympathy, as I understand it here, has more to do with direct affirmation than critical distance or the subsequent act of evaluation; it regards the intuitive and thus simple act of apprehending a form in its singularity. For example, we could of course attempt to subvert the scene from the dream play by siding with the well-fed gentleman, but such a perversely anti-Marxist upheaval could only be substantiated by our initial recognition of the overly explicit social critique intended by the author; otherwise, we would simply misunderstand the scene.

This is obviously nothing new. That a dramatic work may be, and often has been, stratified as a focal structure, portraying and pursuing a subject – a hero or a protagonist – and his impelling destiny has been one of the main tenets of dramatic theory since Aristotle. Yet we occasionally come upon theoretical models describing the dramatic form as essentially a host of leveled individuals all on par which each other and without authorial organization or compositional principles (that is, exactly what Bakhtin denied would be possible in a dramatic text). For instance, James Barrett claims in his work on narration in Greek tragedy that most drama confronts us with “a multitude of voices, each with an equal claim, in principle, to truth and authority”, and that the “absence of a narrator renders all speech onstage equally authoritative or suspect, equally bound by its status as a rhetorical creation”.

Thus, tragedy – and drama, as well as all non-epic genres, in general – would lack any hint of authorial organization:

Although it might seem equally obvious that dramatic characters speak only at the command of the author, tragic authors do not have recourse to an extradiegetic voice. Tragedy appears starkly as a genre without the privi-

If we took this literally, all drama would probably appear as a cacophonous mishmash of fragmentary thoughts more or less incapable of making a point or presenting a theme or displaying any kind of structural effects. By locating the rhetorical effect exclusively on the level of a character’s speech, Barrett neglects the actual rhetorical level of composition, what Pfister called the author’s guidelines for manipulation, of which that speech is but an aspect. If drama would lack privileged views or interpretive guidance, it would risk becoming meaningless, a pure bedlam of chattering noises. And, more importantly, by adopting such an obtuse view of the dramatic genre, we would miss out on the opportunity to compare different dramatic texts and the different compositional principles running through them. If literature was pure noise, we would miss the chance of noticing the actual elements of noise in it.

We will return to the question of narration in drama, since the problem touched upon here is one of the most critical stumbling blocks of interpretation and the question will be of importance for the analysis of Stormy Weather. Instead of dealing with general claims of the dramatic form, I will now look to our actual object of examination, the design of the specific play.

Establishing the opposition: Two initial examples of focal ordering

To start our analysis of the composition of Stormy Weather I will follow our previously set example and look up the play’s initial list of dramatis personae. It runs like this:

- The Gentleman, Retired Official.
- The Brother, The Consul.
- Pastry Baker Starck.
- Agnes, His Daughter.
- Louise, The Gentleman’s relative.
- Gerda, The Gentleman’s divorced Wife.
- Fischer, Gerda’s new husband, silent person.
- The Iceman.
- The Postman.
- The Lamp-lighter. (p. 11)

Ibid., p. 4.
Törnqvist points out that already the designations of the first two characters – the Gentleman (“Herrn”) and the Brother (“Broders”) – identify the former as the protagonist of the play.98 The Brother, as a kind of helper-character or confidant, is described in relation to the protagonist rather than the other way around; he is, in structuralist terms, “conceived in relation to it, as derivative and dependent”.99 And just as in our Sophoclean example, the list has an unmistakably hierarchical design, situating the topmost character in the focus of interest, and making him the central origin of relation. Not only the Brother is constructed according to this relationship and described even from the protagonist’s perspective, but also Louise, his relative, and Gerda, his former wife. On the whole, the characters are named as they would be addressed by the Gentleman: the Brother according to the intimacy of brotherhood, the female characters by their first names, Starck according to his occupational position in a mix of professional distance and neighborly acquaintance, and the minor characters at the bottom strictly according to the anonymous social functions they perform. In the latter case, we may further note that these social functionaries are described not as, for instance, a but the postman, that is, as the Gentleman’s postman rather than a postman in general.

The hierarchy thus derives from a central I and then gradually descends into anonymity. The structure is quite symmetrical, with a trinity of threes: three men (going from the personal to the familiar to the professional), three women (all described in relation to a male), and three minor characters, clearly marked as peripheral characters with an almost prop-like status. One anomaly is apparent, namely the case of the interposed Fischer. His position is dissociated in several steps, since he is first removed from the male trinity, and then further removed from the focal point by being associated not with the Gentleman but with his former wife, as her “new husband”. The alienating effect of this pattern – the Gentleman → Gerda → Fischer – is further enhanced by the social convention of calling him by his last rather than first name, by his lack of occupational position, and, of course, by the fact that he is characterized as “silent” already at this point. From the start, the character seems shrouded in mystery; or perhaps it would be more correct to say that he seems described as from the protagonist’s restricted position, that is, according to the partial knowledge of the Gentleman.

We find the thematic opposition between the I and the Other hinted at already in the structural design of the list of characters. We have the central character, the

characters close to the center, the quite peripheral ones, and, of course, the haunting presence of the unknown invading from the outside. Trivial as it is, the list thus provides us with a schematic version of a conflict between hierarchically organized characters, revealing the function of a character by its relation to the protagonist. And in contrast to Barrett’s model of equality, we might add that the hierarchy between characters – between the I and the Others – is quite violent in the deconstructivist sense, that is, “[o]ne of the two terms governs the other [...] or has the upper hand”. 100

Perhaps we may illustrate the list by a triangle, a standard model for demonstrating hierarchical relationships. This triangle may be faded to suggest the gradual descent from the central I to the anonymous, and to furthermore enhance our second structural point of departure, the opposition between centre and periphery, we may add a third dimension, turning the triangle into a pyramid. Viewing the pyramid from above we then get the feeling of the I as centralized also in a more literal sense, namely in the midpoint of the dramatic frame of the play. The illustration would turn out something like this:

The focal structure illustrated as a pyramid, viewed first from the side (I/Other), then from above (centre/periphery).

The reason for emphasizing this latter aspect becomes clearer when examining the play’s initial stage direction. The first act opens with the following description:

1:o. A modern façade with a Souterrain of granite, the upper parts of bricks with yellow plaster; window frames and ornaments of sandstone; in the middle of the souterrain a low gateway to the courtyard and, simultaneously, an entrance to the patisserie; The façade ends with a corner to the right where a square of standard tree roses and other flowers is visible; in the corner there is a letterbox; above the souterrain, the first floor with great windows which are open; four of these belong to a dining room, elegantly furnished; above the first floor the upper floor is visible, and its four mid-windows have closed red blinds lighted from within.

In front of the façade there is a pavement with trees from the avenue; in the foreground a green bench and a gaslight.

The Pastry Baker enters with a chair and takes his seat on the pavement.

The Gentleman is seen by the table in the dining room; behind his back is a majolica tile stove, green, with a ledge on which a great photograph is placed between two candelabra and vases; a young girl in a pale dress serves him the last course.

The Brother (outside) enters from the left, taps his cane on the window-sill. (p. 13)

The description is certainly rich in detail and may, as Anne-Charlotte Hanes Harvey points out, provide several practical difficulties in performance; this was actually Strindberg’s own experience after a less successful staging of the play and consequently he would later prompt for a more minimalistic stage setting. But the detailed description is interesting also because of its consistent focus on the Gentleman in the actual centre of the scenic frame. As Harvey notes, it seems almost to zoom in on the protagonist and his apartment, while the upper floor associated with Fischer, on the other hand, is situated on a kind of mystified margin of the frame. The protagonist’s apartment is furthermore, as Birgitta Ottosson-Pinna points out, the only one we are “invited” to enter, so to speak, while the other rather shuts us out. And Ekman adds that it is a compositional case in point of the work’s general theme that his apartment is exposed like a peep show while the mysterious neighbors upstairs are rather secluded and hidden behind blinds.

Looking at the stage direction, we find something of a spatial parallel to the list of characters. They both help to form the oppositional relationship between on the one hand the private and intimate sphere of the I, and on the other the disturbing obscurity of the Others. The stage direction seems designed to suggest a sense of detailed familiarity with the Gentleman and his personal surroundings, while respectively emphasizing his alienation from the hauntingly furtive neighboring apartment.

Both examples draw our attention to the theme suggested above, and the way it is manifest in formal composition. Appearing on the initial pages of the text, they could be said to establish the mechanics of focal order that are active throughout the play. The consistency of these mechanics creates quite a few peculiar dramatic effects which I will discuss in relation to unreliability, action and villainy. But first we may elaborate on the already initiated discussion of the scenic space as related to a subjective structure. Thus, the following section deals with the relation between inner and outer space presented in the play.

102 Harvey, "Att resa bakkänges", p. 32f.
104 Ekman, Strindberg and the Five Senses, p. 79f.
Focus and space

In *Stormy Weather*, both the list of dramatis personae and the initial stage directions are actually preceded by a short “Scenery” presenting the locales of the three acts and presenting how the first act takes place outside the house, the second inside the apartment, and the last back at the outside:

1:o Façade of the House.
2:o The Interior.
3:o Façade of the House. (p. 9)

In trying to define the function of this “scenery”, surprisingly many scholars have been compelled, perhaps because of its placement right before the list of characters, to interpret it in terms of a personification of the building, as if it was a character, and perhaps even the main character, of the play. But elegant as such a suggestion may sound, it says little about the play. First of all, the scenery may of course be purely instructive, aimed at producers of the play, giving a quick indication of what kind of settings are needed in performance. Furthermore, it may be seen as a concise presentation of the main course of action, as a kind of blueprint of the play’s progression. But most interestingly, it sets up a basic tension—an opposition—that associates the building with (rather than turns it into) the protagonist. The scenery distinctly highlights the line between the public and the private, and the outside and the inside. It also sets up the crossing of that line as a basic compositional structure of the play.

The early action of the play ties in with such a structure. The play opens with the Gentleman standing inside his private apartment, visible through the open windows. The Brother bridges the gap when, entering from outside the stage, he taps his cane on the window-sill and communicates with the inside protagonist. Along similar lines, the first passages of dialogue establish an opposition between the inner city and the outer countryside: the Brother has longed to get in to, and

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106 Harvey, “Att resa baklänges”, p. 33ff., and “Strindbergs scenografi”, p. 72ff., extensively discusses in structural terms the movement from outside to inside, and back.
the Pastry Baker has not had the chance to get out of, town all summer. The two brothers’ subsequent chitchat deals with a similar topic: the Gentleman has been cooped up in his apartment all summer, intimidated by the sunlit evenings that seemingly blur the distinction between the natural light of the countryside and the artificial lights of the city. In both these cases, a line is set up between inner and outer space, and then crossed by the latter entering the former: the Brother is visiting town, nature is visiting civilization, etc.

Asked why he refuses to leave his apartment, the Gentleman answers:

I don’t know! I have become immobile, I am bound to this apartment by memories … only in there I have peace and protection. Yes, in there! It is interesting to view your home from outside; I picture to myself that it is somebody else walking in there … imagine, I have walked there for ten years … (p. 17)

The inside of the apartment is linked to the inside of the Gentleman as a personal memorial space which is both confining and comforting. As such it is cut off from the public, even though, once more, the line implies transgression. The two spaces are divided, but they are not distinct, as the one may always enter the other.

As a reified memorial space, the apartment is a construct; it is a place where, as the Gentleman puts it, “only beautiful memories have remained” (p. 22). Functioning as a museum of his former marital life, the apartment replaces dynamic human relations with its static fetishized signs; Ekman aptly dubs the process “the apotheosis of memory”. The motif of substitution becomes most noticeable in the arrangement of the photograph with vases and candelabra placed upon the ledge of the tile stove. The Gentleman comments upon its function when asked whether he would once more like to meet his daughter:

Then I imagine that I would lose my mind or fall to the ground … You see, I once spent quite a long time abroad, during the time my little sister grew up … after the lapse of several years I returned, and found on the steam-boat jetty a young girl, who took me into her arms. I saw with horror two eyes which pierced into mine, but with strange looks, that expressed the most terrified dread of not being recognized. “It is me” she repeated several times, before I recognized my sister!

That is just about how I imagine a reunion with my daughter. Five years at that age makes you unrecognizable! Imagine: not to recognize your own child! The same, but a stranger! I would not survive it! No, then I would

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107 On the interior as subjective space, cf., e.g., Rothwell, p. 32; Sondrup, p. 110f.; or Warren Glen Green, Staging the symbolic journey. Illusion, devastation and resignation in the chamber plays of August Strindberg, diss., Ann Arbor 1996, p. 15ff.

108 Ekman, Strindberg and the Five Senses, p. 86.
A meeting is a risky event since it confronts stable memory with the change of time, whereby the well-known may suddenly turn unknown and strange. But the real danger seems to be the blurring of the boundaries between self and other brought by such a meeting when the other enters the self and mixes up its internal construct. The experience of not being master of your mental images is so terrifying that solitude seems to be the only safe solution. Thus, the “altar” substitutes the risky dynamic with the secure static. The room of the apartment then functions as a kind of material correlate to the personal memories of the Gentleman, providing them with a sense of tangible reality external to his inner imagination. The room is a kind of objectification of the subjective construct.

As Peter Hallberg notes, the Gentleman seems to be less concerned with his actual relatives than with his built-up memories of them. The actual will then always constitute a threat against the memorized. The Gentleman seems to strive to become, as it is put in the final act, “untouchable” (p. 71), and the basic tension of the play then, as Ekman concisely puts it, is that of a protagonist trying to protect himself “from all manner of intrusions from without”. This is how Ekman elaborates on the play’s theme and its relation to action:

The peace of mind seemingly achieved by the Gentleman at the start of [Stormy Weather] which is subsequently threatened by new events is the result of his having withdrawn from the present world: he lives above all among his memories. Therefore, he is disturbed by any information that threatens to destroy these memories, which concern, above all, his former wife who now, five years after their separation, has assumed sympathetic features in his mind. The dramatic reversal occurs when the gentleman is confronted with her in reality, at which point his memory of her is shattered.

The basic opposition between inside and outside coincides with the tension between the Gentleman and Gerda. In both cases, the latter opposites are charged with a sense of hazard. At the end of the first act, the Gentleman is back in his apartment, looking out through the window into the darkness, when he is suddenly startled by a flash of lightning revealing Gerda on the street outside the window. Once more, the outside is associated with haunting light, threatening strangeness and, of course, the approach of the other and the return of the past.

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110 Ekman, Strindberg and the Five Senses, p. 66.
111 Ibid., p. 86.
The Gentleman consequently speaks of his memories as his “fictions of certain realities”, and the possible return of his former families as “ghosts”, or “the dead walking” (p. 45). When during the second act the Gentleman is at last confronted with his former wife, he finds her to be “not the same person that I divorced” (p. 55). Gerda vainly interprets his sense of her having changed as having to do with her increasing age, and she repeatedly expresses her jealousy towards his younger relative, Louise.112 The real conflict, however, obviously lies in the harmful risks involved when the distant object of memory enters, or rather invades, the present memorial space.

The conflict is highlighted by Gerda’s reactions when entering the apartment. She finds it exactly as she left it, and suddenly the dining room, as Harvey points out, seems still to be her rather than his domain.113 In a series of exclamations she reclains the room piece by piece: “My piano”, “my palm trees”, “my buffet! with the knight and Eve”, “My Chessboard!”, etc. (p. 48f.)114 Gerda’s entrance then transforms the serene memorial space back into the marital battleground of the past, and while going over the objects, she also recounts the couple’s endless quarrels over trifles. The thermometer found still lying in a drawer, for instance, reminds her of their arguments about who should put it up. Because of Gerda’s entry into the apartment, the objects of peaceful association are turned into resources prompting aggressive appropriations. The state of static isolation has been disturbed, and needs restoration. In this sense, Gerda is part of an outside that always needs to be secluded and even removed for order to remain unchallenged.

The spatial organization of the stage highlighting the division between in and out thus coincides thematically with the conflict between static memory and dynamic reality, peace and turbulence, the personal I and the alien Other, etc. The conflict may accordingly be described in spatial terms, as a central construct of serenity being invaded by the peripheral elements of discord. The pattern of the plot could then be described as the motion generated when a centre that strives to maintain its boundaries, and thus its sovereignty, is threatened by an outside closing in on it. As is obvious from such a description, the opposition is violently hierarchical, and the position associated with the Gentleman always has the upper hand: the impetus of the play is entirely based on the firmness of the center and the aberrance of its peripheral adversaries. The markedness of this relationship

112 Cf., e.g., Green, p. 40.
113 Harvey, ”Strindbergs scenografi”, p. 65.
114 Something similar occurs when the Gentleman identifies the strange music coming from the neighbours as “My impromptu?”, cf. p. 43.
becomes important when interpreting the battle of conflicting versions fought by Gerda and the Gentleman inside the memorial space. Thus, we must ask ourselves to what degree the negatively charged conflicting version presented by the peripheral antagonist is able to relativize the positively charged memorial construct associated with the protagonist. This matter is discussed in the following section in relation to the concept of unreliability.

Focus and unreliability

From Gerda’s standpoint, the apartment is described less as a museum or an “Altar” than as a prison (p. 51). By entering the apartment, she exposes the marriage in a different light. The appropriative battle that takes up a large part of the second act especially concerns who was responsible – or to blame – for the married couple’s breakup.

As Barry Jacobs notes, the Gentleman provides at least three different takes on the reasons for divorce, going gradually from the idealized to the harshly brutalized. During the first act, the Gentleman tells his brother that, because of his noticeably greater age, he from the very outset promised Gerda to “return her freedom” as soon as his age began weighing her down. Thus, when the child had grown out of his care, and since the couple wanted no more children, he fulfilled his promise and left. When the Brother presents this version to Gerda, she responds with her counter version: the husband did not free her, but abandoned her, and, what is more important, by being the one walking out on her, rather than vice versa, he brought disgrace upon her, since someone always has to leave in shame. When the two combatants meet during the second act, the Gentleman provides a second, more callous, version: directly after the wedding, Gerda started turning everybody against him, including his own brother, and even spread doubts regarding his fatherhood. As soon as he saw her true colors, he prepared to leave, and only stayed long enough to see the child grow up to be his witness to her deceptions. According to the second version, Gerda cajoled the Gentleman until the wedding was over, but in the last version, given by the Gentleman to Louise during the third act, it is rather stated that she could charm anybody but him: “To me she was the coarse, crude, ugly, stupid one, and to the others she was the refined, amiable, beautiful, intelligent one!” (p. 75) Since he strives to remain independent, she turns their acquaintances against him, and rather robs him of his freedom by promoting all his subordinates, from the jani-
tors at work to the maids at home, to be in command of him. When she finally forces him even to obey his own child, he has had enough, and walks away: “and then there was conspiracy against the tyrant – that would be me!” (p. 75)

By contrasting the play to the Ibsenite theme of the life-lie, Ekman suggests that the Gentleman “may be observed moving from illusion to clarity as the play proceeds”. Jacobs interprets the Gentleman’s different versions along similar lines, and states that each one of them “seems to bring him closer to the truth and to liberate him from the tyranny that his distorted memories have exercised over him since the collapse of their marriage”. The interpretation encourages Törnqvist to consider this an instance of dramatic “unreliable narration”. Törnqvist states:

Initially inclined to see only the flattering side of his own past actions, the Gentleman is gradually prepared also to face the less flattering side. In our terms: as the play progresses, the Gentleman becomes a less unreliable narrator.

The remark, as well as the use of the concept, is in need of some discussion since it touches upon one of the main characteristics of the play. By deeming the Gentleman’s different versions as symptoms of unreliability one risks misrepresenting what really distinguishes Stormy Weather thematically and structurally speaking.

On the more technical side, we may first of all question the need to introduce the concept of a dramatic narrator here at all. That a play may constitute, and often does constitute, a narrative structure is obvious, and we remember, for instance, that Greimas designed his actantial model with the theatrical play in mind. But this merely implies that the play has an organizational principle, an impetus, or that it is composed; it suggests authorial rather than narratorial agency. Concepts for dealing with such aspects have been developed by dramatic theory since Aristotle, and do not rely on the communicative model of a narrator mediating events. Törnqvist on the other hand, not totally unlike Irene

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116 Ekman, Strindberg and the Five Senses, p. 89.
119 Greimas, p. 176.
120 Cf., e.g., Paul Ricoeur, Time and Narrative (Temps et Récit, 1983), vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, Chicago and London 1984, p. 33ff., where narrative is understood as Aristotelian mythos, or the principles according to which an organizer organizes his materials in order to form a compositional whole.
de Jong and the previously mentioned Barrett,\textsuperscript{121} counts as dramatic narration any situation where dramatic characters “refer to circumstances which do not relate to the immediate visualized present, notably circumstances in the past”\textsuperscript{122}. Most such cases are however probably better covered by differentiated concepts like dialogue, monologue, prologue, soliloquy, report, exposition, and so on. If we really do need the concept of a dramatic narrator, we should probably keep it for those cases where an author attempts to create something of a dramatic or theatrical \textit{counterpart} to first person narration; plays like Tennessee Williams’ \textit{The Glass Menagerie} (1945), Eugene O’Neill’s \textit{Hughie} (1959) or David Henry Wang’s \textit{M. Butterfly} (1989) could be such cases.\textsuperscript{123} In relation to more conventional plays (and even to some unconventionally “epic” in the Szondian sense) the concept risks confusing more than it clarifies since it depends on the distinction between a uniform set of existents and events – something of an objective reality or “what really happened” – and a subjective reporter mediating these events more or less truthfully. Such a setup is, as we shall see, not necessarily active in Strindberg. Furthermore, rather than a general logic of literature, narration – and particularly unreliable narration – could be understood in terms of a narration-motif, a mediation-motif, an unreliable-motif, etc. Thus we would only find use for the concept in those works where such motifs were actually present.

So, Törnqvist defines narration as a referential act performed by a present agent in relation to an absent referent, which he considers as equivalent to similar acts performed “in real life” (e.g. recounting past events).\textsuperscript{124} To some degree, the definition corresponds to Genette’s model of a narrator presenting a narrative

\textsuperscript{121} Cf. Irene J. F. de Jong, \textit{Narrative in Drama. The Art of the Euripidean Messenger-Speech}, Leiden and New York 1991, p. 1f., where the messenger-speech, defined as “a long, continuous speech in which a messenger reports events that have taken place off-stage”, is labelled as “a narrative, more particularly a first-person narrative”, or p. 117, where narrative in drama simply means cases where \textit{“dramatic characters tell a story, whereby they assume the role of narrator”}. Cf. also her “Introduction. Narratological theory on narrators, narratees, and narrative”, \textit{Narrators, Narratees, and Narratives in Ancient Greek Literature: Studies in Ancient Greek Narrative}, vol. 1, ed. Irene de Jong, René Nünlist and Angus Bowie, Leiden and Boston 2004, p. 8 where dramatic narrator is restricted to a character or what is called “intra-dramatic narrator”; or James Barrett, “Aeschylus”, p. 235, in the same volume: “Narrative in drama is always more than narrative. It is also, of course, the (speech) act of a character on-stage, the utterance of one of the dramatis personae.”

\textsuperscript{122} Törnqvist, “Unreliable Narration in Strindbergian Drama”, p. 61.


\textsuperscript{124} Törnqvist, “Unreliable Narration in Strindbergian Drama”, p. 61.
(discourse) that recounts events or “narrative content” (story). In its simplest variant, this story/discourse distinction is understood as informational, i.e. as a relative or subjective account of absolute or objective facts (someone presenting his or her version of what really happened). Reliability then becomes a matter of congruence between the statement and the world, and a question of epistemology and morality: is what is said true or false, is it acceptable or unacceptable? According to Dan Shen “a narration is unreliable precisely because we have come to the conclusion that things are not as the narrator presents them, a judgment very much based on our experience of the world”. A similar view lies behind what Törnqvist calls his “trivial, everyday sense” of unreliability: “A narrator, in my terminology, is unreliable when s/he, consciously or unconsciously, provides incorrect information (active unreliability), or when s/he is withholding important information (passive unreliability).”

Consequently, according to Törnqvist’s interpretation of the play, “we tend to side with the Gentleman against his wife Gerda for a long time – until we discover that he gives different reasons for his divorce from her”. Sympathy then becomes a question of likeability. Törnqvist seems to reason that since the character’s versions differ, he must be lying, and thus by definition also be unreliable. Because of the Gentleman’s inconsistent reports, Törnqvist argues, Gerda’s conflicting counter version is able to sneak its way into his discourse, and thus we are implicitly provided with “a very different story of her marriage to the Gentleman [...] that perhaps can be traced between the lines”. Thus we are able to realize that the Gentleman actually is the real tyrant, and his outburst turns into an ironic validation of the adversaries’ view:

The Gentleman here paints the picture of himself as a balanced person, striving for independence, victimized by the rest of the world. However, embedded in his complaint is the view of his subalterns, both at his workplace and in his home, that he is a tyrant. He can perhaps count on a certain understanding for his own point of view from Louise, who is very fond of him. It is more difficult for the recipient to accept the idea – which echoes Edgar’s view in Dödsdansen (The Dance of Death) – that the Gentle-

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129 Ibid., p. 70.
130 Ibid., p. 72.
man is right and all those surrounding him wrong. Even at this late stage in
the play, the Gentleman remains a somewhat unreliable narrator.¹³¹

But this is exactly the idea – the protagonist is right, no matter what; or, he is the
only character that may be rightfully wrong – we must often accept in Strindberg;
and it is probably even one of the characteristics that make him an interesting
writer. Törnqvist’s definition of unreliability is problematic because it is too gen-
eral: it neither takes the specificity of literature as aesthetic composition into con-
sideration, nor the specificity of the particular work and the particular author at
hand. It is in a sense almost ideological, since it relies on a set worldview, viz. our
everyday experience of life, where “things we are told” are clearly distinguishable
from “what really happened”,¹³² a logic which every work is thought to abide by.
It then risks negating the differences – compositional, thematic and structural –
between works and authors. When used in the everyday sense, the concept of un-
reliability furthermore risks turning into a pseudo-formalist rationale for the
critic’s personal – everyday – judgment, demanding all works to reproduce the
same structures of life experience: the stability of existence, the informational
status of statement, the virtue of truth, and so on. Or rather, it leaves the reader
without “manipulative” guidance of what position to affirm, what meaning-
pattern or set of beliefs to associate with the work and its design; in Pfister’s
terms, it negates the external “reception-perspective intended by the author”.¹³³

To avoid such a bluntness of method, we may remind ourselves of Wayne C.
Booth’s original definition of the concept which Törnqvist explicitly yet unfortu-
nately departs from it. For Booth, unreliability is at least initially not defined in
general terms (e.g., as equal to lying) but in relation to the design of the specific
work: it is considered to designate a prescribed effect of contrast produced when
a narrator’s speech stands out as being in conflict not with what really happened
but with “the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author’s norms)”¹³⁴. When dealing with unreliability, then, we are not dealing with the
question of right and wrong – neither epistemologically nor morally – in relation
to our general understanding of the world, or even our particular understanding
of “what really happened” in a fictional world, but with discernible features of
aesthetic form.

Unreliability then is distinguishable in relation to the specific poetics of a
work and an author. So, let us look at a few observations made in regards to the

¹³¹ Ibid.
¹³³ Pfister., p. 57.
peculiar use of exposition and reversal in the Chamber Plays. Take for instance a reflection presented by Lindström, which is valid in spite of its negativity: that the exposition found in the Chamber Plays does not really clarify the plot, since the information provided by dialogue is often ambiguous and contradictory, and thus generating “a dusk that may not be dispersed by the disposition of the text itself”.\(^\text{135}\) Lynn R. Wilkinson furthermore notes, with reference to the Chamber Plays, that what “comes to the fore here is a kind of dialogic process in which the events and structures of the past are unearthed, held up to the light, scrutinized, and discussed, perhaps even changed”.\(^\text{136}\) And Freddie Rokem adds that in these plays “the characters can be unmasked at any moment, because such an act does not have to be previously motivated in the plots”.\(^\text{137}\) This could be compared to a more general remark presented by Magnus Florin in relation to the reversals in Strindberg’s short and sketchy dialogue pieces:

What happens structurally is an immediate reversal […] But this kind of reversal does not occur, unlike the typical turn in classic dramaturgy, as a change from falsity to truth, from error to knowledge – it is not a matter of an awakening, a tearing down the web of lies. The change is indifferent and takes place again, and again, to and fro.\(^\text{138}\)

What is said in these quotes indicate two important things: firstly, that we are not dealing with the motif of subjective versions (illusion) contrasted with the truth of a stable and joint reality, but with the motif of subjective versions as such; and, secondly, that the plot structures are not those of anagnoritic peripeteia, but something else. In the first case, the concept of unreliability as personal statement diverging from impersonal fact becomes inadequate, since the playwright does not really compose his work in accordance with that logic. In the second case, even the Boothian sense of unreliability is insufficient, since there is no real con-


trastive effect between the protagonist and the norms of the work: the Gentleman is never wrong in the normative sense, even when he is presented as being “wrong” or unfair or one-sided epistemologically and morally speaking. In neither sense are we dealing with an unreliability-motif – not even when we actually are dealing with being-partial-motifs or being-blantly-wrong-motifs or even being-terribly-unfair-and-horribly-egocentric-motifs, etc.

In Stormy Weather, there is a strong conflict, not between the wrong version and the right, but between my version (the I), and yours (the Other). As is often the case in Strindberg’s portrayal of marriage, it is a matter of power rather than veracity: everything, including brutal lies and gentler ones, is not only fair in love and war, but mandatory and inevitable. We might illustrate the theme of marital warfare by two short excerpts:

GERDA. He should have let me go!
THE BROTHER. Why? Why would you want disgrace upon him?
GERDA. Well, one has to have it!
THE BROTHER. Your thoughts move in such strange ways! However, you have murdered him and fooled me into doing the same; how may we rehabilitate him?
GERDA. If he is rehabilitated, it will be at my expense! (p. 34)

THE BROTHER. Say no more, brother! – You’re only looking at things from your point of view!
THE GENTLEMAN. How would you want me to view my condition from the enemy’s point of view, I could not raise my hand against myself, could I?
THE BROTHER. I am not your enemy.
THE GENTLEMAN. You are, since you befriend the one who did me wrong! (p. 78)

Speaking from common sense, we may well find Gerda’s versions just as full and her point of view just as valid as the Gentleman’s; but the important thing is that they are not as interesting in the formal or focal sense. Unlike the Gentleman, she is not the protagonist but an antagonist. Her lies and betrayal are certainly rationalized in one sense, as the required actions of a player caught up in the game, and the two combatants come across, objectively speaking, as birds of a feather. But the import feature of structurality that Strindberg plays on so heavily here is that narrative is violent, not democratic: she is not I.

Thus, the structure of plot is that of a centre being temporarily invaded by the peripheral, and when the line is crossed, it needs to be restored. This has nothing to do with morals, but is a function of pattern and form. Rather than going from one state to its opposite (illusion to insight), the plot is about reestablishing an asymmetrical opposition that has been thrown off balance; and rather than being
a matter of relativizing the violent hierarchy, it is a question of restoring it in order to reestablish the equilibrium of the Gentleman’s solitude. Accordingly, Ekman’s conclusion that the play demonstrates “the impossibility of living among this type of imaginary notions”, or that “it is not possible to live on memories”, is somewhat misleading, and Lamm is more correct in relating the play to a general theme of chivalrous love in Strindberg’s later drama: “It is only at a distance, in the shimmer of longing or memory, that love may remain pure and tender.”

A significant point speaking for such an argument is the fact that the Gentleman is never really presented as unaware of his one-sided partiality or the artifici ality of his memorial construct; thus he is never debunked, and the implied author never winks at us, so to speak, behind the protagonist’s back. Rather, the Gentleman repeatedly acknowledges his bias. Early on in the play, The Brother expresses his concern that the Gentleman’s recollections of Gerda and their marriage are perhaps a bit glossed over; and later on, when the Gentleman insinuates an affair or at least a conspiracy between the two, he accuses him, as we saw earlier, of judging things only from his own “point of view” (p. 77). The Gentleman – in agreement with the norms of the work, we must add – confirms both allegations, and finds both stances to be quite in order. It is remarkable that the portrayal of the Gentleman not even comes across as ironical when compared to the Pastry Baker’s wife in the following humorous manner:

THE PASTRY BAKER. Us old ones love the dusk, it conceals so many flaws in us and in others … you know, miss, my old lady is turning blind, and still wants no surgery: There is nothing to look at, she says, and sometimes she wishes she were deaf too.

LOUISE. It may seem that way – sometimes!

THE PASTRY BAKER. Well, you live a quiet, lovely life in there, in prosperity without concerns; I never hear a voice being raised or a door being slammed, perhaps a bit too peaceful for a young lady like you?

LOUISE. Certainly not, I love the peace and the dignified, the graceful, the reserved, when you do not say it all, and when you feel obliged to condone everyday’s less delightful … (p. 23f.)

THE GENTLEMAN. My eyes? Yes, I’m getting short-sighted, but, like The Baker’s wife says: nothing to look at! Wish I were a bit deaf, too! Deaf and blind! The neighbors make such an awful commotion all night … (p. 53)

That his wife should look forwards to blindness is certainly expressed in a humorous manner by the Pastry Baker, but instead of being presented ironically, the

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139 Ekman, Strindberg and the Five Senses, p. 88.
140 Lamm, Strindbergs drame II, p. 381. ("Det är endast på avstånd, i längtans eller minnets skimmer, som kärleken kan bibehålla sig ren och skärr.")
141 Cf. the play p. 22 and p. 78.
suggestion comes across as a quite agreeable if mildly absurd attitude towards life. With age comes wisdom, and thus is created yet another violent opposition between old age and youth, or insight and folly, peace and turmoil. Louise’s gentle objection may be excused by her younger age, and, being a helper or a confidant rather than an opponent, she is still placed on the right side, i.e. the Gentleman’s side. By being associated with the peace of old age, Louise is still contrasted with Gerda and Agnes, who on the other hand both are attracted to the violent excitement associated with the neighbor Fischer.

One quite interesting aspect of the theme of subjective memory, then, is that the constructed memories of the past – the too fair as well as the unfair ones – even when self-allegedly distorted may be motivated as a proper way of getting along with your life. But this conclusion must of course be specified: the intentional distortion of memory is presented as a necessary strategy for getting along not with life in general but with my life, i.e. the life of the I, the focal centre of interest. So, even though the play presents several difficulties and problems involved with a solipsistic stance, it does not present a critique of the solipsistic stance taken by the Gentleman. It does not matter that he lies (because he does), or that he is unfair (because he is), or that his version is contrasted with conflicting ones (because it is). It is a question of compositional impetus and norm, not of moral or epistemological judgment, and by employing the concept of unreliability in the “trivial, everyday” sense, one risks not only to produce faulty interpretations, but also to negate the play’s characteristic use of the centric order of narrative structure. Thus one of the play’s most salient traits would evade the analytical description.

The impact of this violent opposition is not restricted to the relationship between the Gentleman and Gerda, and their respective views of the past. It actually affects the presentation of action and villainous characters in a manner that is quite striking, by almost entirely excluding them and thus by turning them into non-action and non-villainous non-characters.

Focus and action

The opposition between centre and periphery underlying the structure of plot recurs in the mode in which the dramatic action is presented. Even though the theme of subjective memory and the related conflict between the formerly married couple is central to the play, what from the melodramatic point of view could be called the real action takes place in the periphery. During the couple’s
argument, Fischer disappears not only with the child but also with the Pastry Baker’s daughter. Even though the element of kidnapping certainly could be used for theatrical effect, it is still portrayed not through thrilling action but through quite somber reports of events occurring elsewhere. Thus, the kidnapping could be considered yet another variation on a mystified outside haunting the inside.

Lamm suggests that the design relies on the fact that the kidnapping never really concerns or involves the protagonist, and draws a parallel to the static mode of one of the playwright’s dramatic precursors:

> Just as in Maeterlinck, all action is placed off stage, and the action is, in Strindberg too, not what is essential to the play. It is the reflections and moods of the old gentleman that give the play its interest, and one is more anxious that he should not have his peace disturbed than to learn the destiny of the wife and child.

The result is noteworthy: what is at the centre of interest is not excitement but the barring of excitement. The central project of the play concerns the retaining of peace, and thus Strindberg seems to go through great efforts to avoid action. The kidnapping-intrigue functions merely as a kind of sub-plot interpolated in the play as yet another variant of the structural and thematic design.

Let us recapitulate its presentation. During the greater part of the play, the kidnapping is not mentioned at all. Up until the very end of the first act, Fischer’s escape is implied only by Agnes trying to sneak past her father unnoticed. In the second act, Gerda spends more time vainly brooding over her growing age, quarrelling with her former husband, and expressing her jealousy towards both Louise and Agnes, than worrying about her child. She is presented as being quite conceited and rather ridiculous, and as passive rather than active: as discussed previously, she is an antagonist in the main conflict, as opposed to the protagonist, but in the case of the kidnapping-plot she does not propel the dramatic action forwards. Rather, she sides with the Gentleman against Fischer, but the entire line of action is secondary and subsidiary. For instance, the protagonist does not even become aware of the child’s disappearance until the final stages of the second act.

At the opening of the third act, everything seems to be back to normal: the windows of the menacing upper apartment are open, the room is lit, and the curtains are pulled back; the Gentleman and the Pastry Baker chitchat about work

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142 Lamm, *Strindbergs dramer II*, p. 374. (“Alldeles som hos Maeterlinck är all handling förlagd utanför scenen, och denna handling är också hos Strindberg ej det väsentliga i dramat. Det är den gamle herrns reflexioner och stämningar, som ge dramat dess intresse, och man är mer angelägen om att han ej skall störas i sin ro än att erfara hustruns och barnets öde.”)
and the weather; and when Agnes returns, “upset, frightened”, she is greeted by her father as if nothing particular has happened (p. 71). The Brother, too, returns, and reports how Agnes abandoned Fischer due to his purchase of mere third class tickets, why the deserted Fischer also left, travelling alone and southbound. Still, this denouement of the kidnapping story does not satisfy the Gentleman: what he really cares about is the fact that Gerda and the child still may return to haunt him. Thus he is not relieved until he receives the phone call confirming that they have left town to live at Gerda’s mother’s place. This fact seems to confirm that the plot involving the disappearing child is not the major one, but merely a sidetrack. The play ends when the Lamplighter finally enters to indicate the arrival of autumn as well as the happy ending.

The entire course of action involving the kidnapping is, as Karin Marie Svenmo points out, mediated by reports: over the phone, by the returning brother, and even by Louise in her turn reporting received phone calls. The focal order thus pervades and we seem to share the Gentleman’s position even when the external action is being related. Svenmo comments:

Thanks to these reports, the audience can follow the exciting development without ever diverting its attention from the gentleman and his reactions. Instead of watching the actions off stage, the audience focuses on the effect of the news on stage.

The point of this arrangement seems to be that there should be as little excitement as possible, and that excitement should be gotten over with as quickly as possible. Thus, the play does not even involve a finale in a stricter sense: as soon as Gerda exits during the second act, there is no conflict left to resolve. All that needs to be done is tying together the left-over strands of the sub-plot. This fact appears to have caused Strindberg some problems. What actually seems to be designed as an indication of a reversal or a peripeteia – the “break!” located in the middle of the final act – is presented in a perplexing manner:

THE GENTLEMAN. But what has happened? A break! (To the Pastry Baker.) Listen now, Mr. Starck!
THE PASTRY BAKER. You wanted something?
THE GENTLEMAN. I thought ... Did you see anyone coming out of here a moment ago?

145 Ibid., p. 165.
THE PASTRY BAKER. I saw an iceman, and a postman, I believe.
THE GENTLEMAN. Really! – *(To Louise)* Maybe it was a mistake – someone misheard – I can not explain this … Perhaps he’s fibbing! *(p. 73)*

The reader is probably bound to get just as confused as the Gentleman seems to be. True, the break mentioned may simply be the break-up between Agnes and Fischer as the scene occurs directly after her return; and the iceman and postman appear at the beginning of the second act, when the Gentleman mistakes them both for his brother.\(^{146}\) Still, it is rather unclear who and what the Gentleman is referring to and consequently it is hard to determine what the compositional function of this short passage would be, except for creating a perverted sense of closure or change. In any case it seems to strengthen the impression that the play must lack a proper ending because it lacks dramatic development.

The spatial progression indicated by the initial “Scenery”, as well as the entire design of the play, suggests that what happens is rather the slow return to a prior state. Thus, the projective impetus would be that of re-establishing a status quo. Harvey contests that the design of the “Scenery” should be considered as a variant of the common Strindbergian theme of repetition (“Gentagelsen”), but she offers no illustration of in what way the final state would differ from the initial one.\(^{147}\) Ekman, on his part, refers to the final lines of the play as support for his already mentioned interpretation of the play as a progression from illusion to insight. These are the final lines:

\begin{quote}
\textsc{The Gentleman.} The first lantern! Autumn is here! It is our season, old men! Dusk starts falling, but then reason arrives and lights up with the dark lantern, so you won’t go astray —
\textsc{Louise.} *(appears upstairs through the windows; soon thereafter it goes dark.)*
\textsc{The Gentleman.} *(to Louise.)* Close the windows, and pull down the curtains, so that the memories may go to sleep, in peace! The peace of old age! And this autumn I will move out of the quiet house. *(p. 82)*
\end{quote}

And this is how Ekman interprets them:

\begin{quote}
[I]t is certainly not the case that, at the end of the drama, everything returns to how it had been in the past. On the contrary, the final line of the play makes it clear that it is not possible to live on memories, which are then symbolically buried […] At the start of the play, the Gentleman has been described as ‘bound to this apartment through memories’. This bondage no
\end{quote}

\(^{146}\) Cf. Ekman, \textit{Strindberg and the Five Senses}, p. 70.
\(^{147}\) Harvey, ”\textit{Att resa baklänges}”, p. 37.
longer exists; in the last sentence of the drama, he announces quite logically that he intends to move out of the house.\textsuperscript{148}

Still, there is little indication that the last line is intended to negate the oppositional structure of the play preceding it. The memories are not buried, but rather associated with positively charged qualities running through the play: serenity, peace, solitude. Instead of being abandoned, they are salvaged from the stir and commotion caused by the entrance of the outside. The line presents a sense of closure, but it is the closure of theme and structural conflict – the centre is once more re-established – rather than a closure of plot or a finalization of a progressing development. In isolation, the final sentence may indicate a shift or an opening towards the outside, but such an interpretation lacks support in the rest of the play which so persistently strives to close itself around its central I. In its entirety, the play seems to move towards a state of static sameness rather than dynamic change. Symbolically speaking, the Gentleman’s potential change of address coincides with the arrival of autumn, dusk, darkness, and age, all taken as attributes for still seclusion.

To conclude the section, we may remind ourselves of the title of the play. The storm passing through the play has often been compared to its course of events, but the interpretations have varied. While some commentators consider storminess an ample illustration of the play’s dramatic action,\textsuperscript{149} others tone down the force of the storm to rather emphasize how the author accentuates its mild tepidity.\textsuperscript{150} As yet others further note, there is actually no real storm, but merely heat lightning.\textsuperscript{151} As is indicated by the discussion so far, I find the latter accent the one best suited for structural comparison. When it comes to the action of \textit{Stormy Weather}, the play may have a hint of flash, but it has no real thunder. As Lamm stresses, Strindberg seems to be playing with muted tones,\textsuperscript{152} and this muted mode is also found in the portrait of the play’s villain, Fischer, who, as we shall see, actually never really commits any villainous deeds.

\textsuperscript{148} Ekman, \textit{Strindberg and the Five Senses}, p. 88.
\textsuperscript{149} E.g. Svenmo, p. 164; Harvey, ”Strindbergs scenografi”, p. 73; Leif Leifer, ”Den lutrende ild. En studie i symbolikken i Strindbergs kammerspil”, \textit{Samlaren}, 1960/81, p. 174.
\textsuperscript{151} E.g. Harvey, ”Att resa baklänges”, p. 38; Green, p. 24; Berendsohn, p. 531.
\textsuperscript{152} Lamm, \textit{Strindbergs dramer II}, p. 382.
Focus and villainy

While the plot-line involving the kidnapping comprises only a small part of the play, the portrayal of its villain – Fischer – is dealt with more extensively. Just as the Gentleman is firmly established at the centre of focal interest, Fischer is decisively and quite meticulously placed at its peripheral border. Strindberg goes through a lot of effort to present a character that should strike us as capable of anything, but not in order for us to be able to follow a dynamic plot where Fischer propels action in the actantial function of the villain, but rather, it seems, because the author is interested in the dramatic mode of static presentation as such. What is enacted is not the wicked act itself, but rather the constant wickedness of the outside as presented by the central I. Thus we deal with yet another mode in which Strindberg is able to vary the basic opposition I/Other as thematic and structural principle. Because the opposition is hierarchically violent, it is not only the act of subjectively constructing other people’s wickedness that is emphasized, but the fact that such a construction is justified, not always, but in this particular case, when performed by the Gentleman, the protagonist.

Let us look at how the villainous Fischer is constructed. The spatial organization noted above – the division between private home and mystified surroundings – functions as an adequate framework for the play’s initial dialogue, which, to a large degree, consists of the two brothers’ speculations on their new neighbors. Strindberg employs what Lindström terms one of his trademark techniques for exposition, namely that of letting a character “point out and comment upon the on-stage action”. As Ottosson-Pinna puts it, the “secretive upper floor, which is only seen from the outside, is referenced and ‘constructed’ by the Consul”, i.e. the Brother. Take a look at the following excerpt from the text:

THE BROTHER. Tell me, Mr. Starck, who lives here, one floor up, on top of my brother?
THE PASTRY BAKER. Well, up there where the red curtains glow, the tenant died this summer, then it was unoccupied for a month, and eight days ago a master and mistress moved in, whom I haven’t seen … don’t know their names; I don’t even think they ever get out. Why do you ask me that, Mr. Consul?

THE GENTLEMAN. It seemed to be circulars!
THE BROTHER. His white skin should’ve been accompanied by black hair, but it was brown, thus dyed or a wig; tuxedo at home indicates nothing else to wear, and the movements of his hands when he put the letters in the box; then he disappears.)

THE PASTRY BAKER. I have seen a whole lot, but only later, during night-time! (p. 15)

153 Lindström, ”Dialog och bildspråk i Strindbergs kammarspel”, p. 169f. (“det originella greppet att låta en person utpeka och kommentera händelserna på scenen. […] En liknande karaktär har de två bröderna i början av Öväder[,]”)

154 Ottosson-Pinna, p. 111. (“Den hemlighetshulla övervåningen, som bara ses utifrån, refereras och ‘konstrueras’ av Konsuln, den gamle Herrns broder”)
THE BROTHER. We-ell ... don’t know! The four red curtains look like theatre curtains, behind which bloody dramas are being rehearsed ... that’s what I imagine; there is a Phoenix palm like a rod of iron, casting shadows on a curtain ... if you could only see some characters ...
THE PASTRY BAKER. I have seen a whole lot, but only later, during night-time! (p. 15)

The Brother's lack of knowledge is quickly compensated by his vivid imagination which charges the unknown with a sinister sense of menace. But Strindberg prepares the construction by consistently providing the apartment with an atmosphere of haunting mystery. From ten years back – i.e., long before Fischer’s arrival – it has allegedly been surrounded by unknown strangers, strange activities taking place during night-time, sickness and secretive deaths, hearses and corpses, typhoid, caskets and widows. The haunted history is used as a congenial backdrop – and even a kind of rationale – for a series of speculations presented by the brothers.

Take for instance Fischer’s first – and only – appearance in the play. It occurs shortly after the sinister presentation of the building and, as Warren Glen Green points out, the unsettling nature of the character’s appearance is strikingly in accordance “with the unsettling qualities of the apartment”. Here is Fischer’s entrance:

(A curtain is raised on the upper floor, but only a bit so that a woman’s dress becomes visible, then it is quickly lowered again.)

THE BROTHER. They move about up there! You see!
THE GENTLEMAN. Yes, it’s all so secretive, but it’s worst during the nights; sometimes there’s music, but bad music; sometimes, I believe, they play cards, and late after midnight coaches arrive to pick up ... I never complain about tenants, because then they retaliate, and no one ever complies ... It’s best to know nothing!

(A Gentleman, hatless in tuxedo, comes out from the Square and puts a large amount of letters into the box; then he disappears.)

THE BROTHER. What a heap of mail he had, that one!
THE GENTLEMAN. It seemed to be circulars!
THE BROTHER. But who was he then?
THE GENTLEMAN. It could have been none other than the tenant on the next floor ... THE BROTHER. It was him? What would you say he looked like?
THE GENTLEMAN. I don’t know! Musician, Manager, a bit of operetta, verging on vaudeville, card player, Adonis, a little bit of everything ...
THE BROTHER. His white skin should’ve been accompanied by black hair, but it was brown, thus dyed or a wig; tuxedo at home indicates nothing else to wear, and the movements of his hands when he put the letters in looked like shuffle up, cut and deal ... (p. 19)

156 Green, p. 20.
The new neighbors are obviously presented as a threat, just like the previous tenants; and they are characterized mainly by gossip presented by the threatened ones. As Törnqvist remarks, the guesses concerning the stranger’s morals certainly provide us with “conclusions that we would not be able to make on our own”. But Strindberg seems to want to strengthen a sense of restricted knowledge by entitling the strange character not by the name given in the list of dramatic personae – “Fischer” – but by the vaguer and more anonymous “A Gentleman”. Since the brothers do not know his real name yet, the character seems to be presented from their perspective. This is a quite striking technique, especially since it is used to present the only on-stage appearance of the character. Thus, the peripheral character can hardly even be called an antagonist in the actantial sense and that position seems reserved for Gerda.

When Fischer’s name is first revealed, shortly after his appearance, that scene, too, is designed in a manner that strengthens the secretive atmosphere and the sense of uncertainty. His wicked decadence is once more presented through subtle or not so subtle signs up for interpretation by the other characters: when the delivery boy arrives with a basket of wine bottles for a “Mr. Fischer”, Louise and the Pastry Baker suppose that it must be him living upstairs (p. 37). For Louise, the bottles signal “yet another sleepless night” (p. 26), and she furthermore guesses that the new tenants must be foreigners – southerners – since they never open their windows even during the late summer heat. Jacobs furthermore suggests that the foreign origin of the name itself – Fischer sounds German rather than Swedish – might have been chosen by the author to emphasize “the alien status of this slippery confidence man”.

The neighbors are never seen but often heard. Ekman points out that the upper floor is constantly presented through strange noises that are interpreted as indications of danger by the Gentleman and his associates. Everything to do with the neighbors is constantly taken to indicate the worst case scenario. The Pastry Baker suggestively reports having heard not only banging doors and popping corks, but “perhaps other pops, too …” (p. 26); screams and moans are taken as signs of violence to the degree of murder; rumbling noises are experienced as someone stomping on the head, and the pulling out of drawers as someone planning an escape; and when the phone disconnects, the Gentleman immediately

157 Törnqvist, Det talade ordet, p. 147. (“Broder hjälper oss här att dra slutsatser som vi själva inte skulle vara i stånd till.”)
158 Jacobs, p. 25.
159 Ekman, Strindberg and the Five Senses, p. 65.
concludes that he is being tapped. 160 When the Brother stumbles upon a dropped invitation to an after-midnight “Boston Club” he admits that such an arrangement very well may be quite innocent, but adds that he does not really believe that to be the case in this particular situation (p. 28).

All in all, the Gentleman and his associates may come across as a bit paranoid, but from experience we know that Strindbergian characters, just like the protagonists of early detective fiction, well may be gifted, as Törnqvist puts it, with “an exorbitant power of deduction”. 161 And the protagonist of Stormy Weather does apparently share at least one fundamental trait with the classic detective, namely, as we have already stated, that of always being right. Thus, all the prying speculations presented are confirmed during the last stages of the first act, when the Brother confronts Gerda: Fischer beats his wife, he is a fortune-hunter, he manages a gambling den in their apartment, and he even uses the little girl as a decoy. Once again, this happens not by dramatic enactment of the villain, but through other characters’ dialogue.

Hence, Strindberg seems to consistently want to highlight the speculative nature of the discourse presented, but the subjective mode of presentation is still presented as in accordance with the norms of the work: Fischer is just as bad as one might imagine, the ominous periphery is just as sinister as it comes across from the point of view of the secluded centre. Thus we might try to sum up a basic moral of the play: it is better not to know, if to know is to experience the unknown, which entails risk; and such risks are unnecessary, since in the safety of your home, you already know your surroundings just because they are unfamiliar. The peculiarity of such a moral is, furthermore, that it is not universal. Strindberg does not present us with a categorical imperative, but a situational ethics that in itself is enmeshed in the unavoidable focal structure of subjectivity, and thus inevitably bound to a the particular position of the centre.

Just as in the case of Gerda’s conflicting version, the structure remains unaffected even when the opposing point of view is explicitly acknowledged. When the Brother returns during the final act, he tries to moderate the negative view of Fischer, and this is also where he accuses the Gentleman of his one-sidedness:

THE GENTLEMAN. What did he say?
THE BROTHER. Well; you know, when you get to hear the other party, etcetera!

160 Cf. Green, p. 37; and Svenmo, p. 163.
161 Törnqvist, Det talade ordet, p. 147. ("Strindbergs dramafigurer visar ibland en orimlig slutledningsförmåga.")
THE GENTLEMAN. I want to hear! – Of course, he was not as bad as we imagined, he, too, has his sides …
THE BROTHER. Exactly!
THE GENTLEMAN. I would imagine! But surely you don’t want me to sit here and listen to eulogies of my enemy!
THE BROTHER. No, not eulogies, but extenuating circumstances …
THE GENTLEMAN. Would you ever listen to me, when I enlightened you with the proper circumstances? Yes, you listened and answered with disapproving silence, as if I was sitting there lying. You always sided with the wrong, and you only believed lies, and all this because – you took a fancy to Gerda. But there also was another motive …
THE BROTHER. Say no more, brother! – You’re only looking at things from your point of view! (p. 77)

The Gentleman’s bias is pointed out, as well as the fact that his reductive view of his adversaries excludes valid aspects of a fellow human being who, like himself, is absolute; but the brother’s critique is not the author’s. What is emphasized here is the impossibility to enter the absolute that is the other: to take another’s point of view is not really attainable, and if it were, it would result in an act of violence against the self. Thus the protagonist is still not presented in contrast to, but in accordance with, the work’s norm. Rather than undermining the violence of the hierarchical opposition, the scene seems to strengthen it in implying that the fact that the other, just like me, is absolute does not make him the same as me, since I am still the I and he is still the Other.

Furthermore, we must retain that what pertains to human beings not necessarily pertains also to dramatic characters. It is still the I that is of interest, both structurally and thematically speaking, and the he is only of interest in relation to this I. Thus the theme of subjectivity and the impetus of structure coincide, and the first must be considered in relation to the latter.

Leaving the subject (without deconstructing it first): Final notes on a few stylistic glitches

Up to this point, we have focused on the consistency of the focal structure and the theme of subjectivity. Although the play contains several implicit and explicit elements presenting a critique of solipsism or one-sidedness I have denied that these destabilize or undermine the text. Rather, I have argued, they fortify the violence of the central oppositions by underscoring that what applies to the one side does not automatically apply also to the other: the central character is right even when he is wrong and the peripheral character wrong even when he is right. But to say, in a deconstructivist manner, that such a violent opposition always
dismantles itself would be to risk the opportunity of describing how the text really works, and what it says and does by working in that particular way. And the aim here is formal and aesthetical, not political or philosophical.

There are, nevertheless, interesting glitches occurring in the text. While not deconstructing it, they point to a salient feature of the Chamber Plays to come, namely the growth of sometimes baffling, sometimes indiscernible elements which seem both unintentional and compositionally non-functional but which still provide the texts with an unmistakable stylistic atmosphere. I will conclude the chapter by looking at a few such glitches.

What interests me here is not those elements of Stormy Weather most obviously suited for a deconstructive reading. As potential such elements we may count the way a split is introduced right in the middle of the stable subject in the passage already quoted where the Gentleman looks at himself from the outside of his apartment; the passages where the boundaries between characters are seemingly blurred, as when Louise describes the two brothers as inseparable, perhaps twins, or when the Gentleman claims to have lived the life of the Pastry Baker to the degree of assuming his sorrows and worries. Perhaps it could be considered precarious for our analytical focus on the firmly centered subject to find passages in the play where the very notion of stable individuality is attacked, as in the pondering remark presented by the Gentleman when asked by Gerda if she has aged. He answers like this:

I don’t know! – They say that in three years there is not an atom left of the human body – in five years, everything is renewed, and because of that, you, who stand here, is someone else than the one who sat here and suffered – I can hardly say you [“du”, familiar address], that’s how perfectly strange I find you [“er”, formal address]! And I suppose it would be the same thing with my daughter! (p. 56)

Maurice Gravier once quoted the passage as an example of Strindbergian disintegration of the stable character, but in this particular case, nothing, of course, disintegrates at all; rather, the line once more fixes the I by alienating it from the Other. As being little more than a – quite delightful – philosophical figment of the author’s mind (Törnqvist labels it quasi-scientific, and quasi-science is of

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162 Jacobs, p. 22f. elaborates on the parallel between the two characters, and Leifer, p. 173, provides a Jungian interpretation of the Pastry Baker as the Gentleman’s shadow aspect.


164 Törnqvist, Det talade ordet, p. 223.
course one of Strindberg’s premier genres), the passage adds thematically to the focal order rather than over-turns it.

The glitches I have in mind are not hints of a counter-position always already at work within a text, but the sudden outbreaks of what I call the mold of writing. We find one example in relation to the Gentleman’s strong identification with his neighbor, the Pastry Baker, noted above. Since they have spent the last ten years living side by side, and the Gentleman knows the ins and outs of his neighbor to an almost supernatural degree, it is strange that he still seems to know very little about Agnes. When told of her running away, he exclaims “Pastry Baker Starck’s daughter! Oh my God! How old was she? – Eighteen years! A mere child!” (p. 63), and later he asks Louise whether she knew her, and if she was beautiful. The Gentleman is presented as if he has hardly seen his young neighbor at all, and due to his stated close connection to her father, one could expect that he would know of her age and looks, and whether or not she had befriended his own young cohabitant. But these two elements – his connection with Starck and disconnection from Agnes – seem strangely unrelated, and not intended to create a combined effect. The Gentleman is probably made to ask about the girl to give the writer an occasion to highlight her adolescence, but his sudden unawareness brings a strange sense of uncertainty to the text. Thus we might consider the elements as an example of what Ulf Olsson calls the abrasive or asyndetic nature of Strindberg’s style, according to which the components of a work remains unordered, isolated and simultaneous rather than stratified and hierarchically organized.\textsuperscript{165} Olsson speaks of the wound of style, and we certainly seem to have stumbled upon some compositional leakage here.

Take a more striking example. Naturally, the Gentleman is shocked when suddenly confronted with his former wife during the second act. She has been in the room while he was on the phone, but he mistook her for Louise. When finally recognizing her, he grabs his chest, cries out, and becomes weak. He is presented as startled and confused. They reluctantly exchange pleasantries, whereupon he asks about his daughter and then, as we have seen, explains that he does not desire to meet her since he neither would be able to recognize her nor to connect with her. They argue, but when the doubts of his fatherhood come up, he suddenly claims to have actually just met the child:

\begin{flushright}
THE GENTLEMAN. Oh yes! I just happened to meet Anne-Charlotte … 
GERDA. Have you met …?
\end{flushright}

One is inclined to ask oneself, as Lindström does, how and when that encounter is actually thought to take place.\textsuperscript{166} Berendsohn interprets the scene as the Gentleman’s confession that he has met the girl, and accordingly claims that he “knew all along, that Gerda lived upstairs, but remained silent about it”.\textsuperscript{167} But such an interpretation lacks compositional foundation. If the Gentleman is not sincerely surprised by the meeting, the entire act – and much of the play – will become quite incomprehensible. The strangeness is, however, limited to the particular passage, since it is not fitted into the development of the act as a whole, but remains isolated. Or, we could perhaps say that it is connected in another, non-compositional and rather associative, way. Previously during the act, the Gentleman is lost in monologic reveries concerning his daughter. He believes himself to hear the patter of her feet down the corridor, he tells of having nightmares about her every night, and claims to hear the sound of her feet and even her voice before falling asleep. Thus the girl, in a sense, seems to have materialized right out of his dreamy fancies. Or, to speak in authorial terms: Strindberg seems suddenly to take the unprepared leap from fantasy to work as he gets an idea, and immediately includes the encounter without first having paved its way plot-wise. Thereby we may observe one of the problems involved in regarding character speech as a referential act of narration: there is no previous or “actual” event to refer to, there is only writing or the pen pressing forwards, sometimes leaving the author behind. Strindberg accordingly seems to attempt to make up for his writing afterwards, by emphasizing Gerda’s surprised reaction (shared by the reader), and by rationalizing the unexpected claim with reference to the protagonist’s now notoriously selective and willful memory.

One last example, this time related to the similarity between the two brothers. While they speculate about the man with the circulars, a waltz is heard from the mysterious apartment. This prompts a comment from the Brother: “Always waltzes, perhaps they run a dancing-school, but almost always the same waltz; what’s the name of that one?” (p. 19) As Jacobs notes, this line might pose a

\textsuperscript{166} Lindström, ”Dialog och bildspråk i Strindbergs kammarspel”, p. 170.
\textsuperscript{167} Berendsohn, p. 531. (”Han visste alltså hela tiden, att Gerda bodde däruppe, men teg om det.”)
compositional problem: since this is the brother’s first visit since the Fischers moved in, he could hardly mean that one hears nothing but waltzes from that particular apartment – how would he know? Rather, Jacobs suggests, he must mean that one nowadays only hears trashy waltz music in general. Jacobs finds such an interpretation inadequate since it does not count for why the Brother then immediately would assume that they run a dancing-school. Both commentators however settle for the line being a way to contrast the brothers’ highbrow taste to the Fischers’ vulgar one. Still, the fact demonstrated by Törnqvist, that translators as well as directors have often had to modify the text, for example by altering the line or by putting it in the mouth of the Gentleman, confirms that the line is problematic. Ingmar Bergman apparently solved the case by presenting the two characters as aspects of a single person, whereby he, according to Törnqvist, is able to “retain Strindberg’s illogical text by creating a dreamlike feeling that we are actually experiencing a pseudo-dialogue which in fact is a soliloquy”. Apparently, Törnqvist concurs in suggesting that “The Gentleman, The Brother and the socially inferior the Pastry Baker are sides of the same I”. The interpretation could perhaps be supported by the characters’ similar language uses, as when the Brother’s “You’re supposed to handle filth so delicately, so delicately!” (p. 33) re-echoes in the Gentleman’s “And you’re supposed to handle their filth so delicately!” (p. 79). But that too would of course be a kind of textual correction, even if on the hermeneutical level. In Bergman, the strange segment is related to the artistic whole by re-interpreting the composition – which, of course, is valid in performance. Rather than being a glitch it becomes a key to a secret meaning of the performed play. But the interesting thing about the detail for the literary analysis is the stylistic effect of a compositionally non-functional element. Rather than an attempt to represent a multi-faceted personality divided into several characters, we have come across one of those delightful incidents that so easily happen in the process of writing.

The remarkable thing with Strindberg, furthermore, is that he actually seems to set out to form a kind of dramaturgical poetics where such events are affirmed as valuable elements of production. Rather than merely leaving them as mistakes

168 Jacobs, p. 28.
173 Törnqvist, *Det talade ordet*, p. 137. (“Herrn, Brodern och den socialt lägre Konditorn är sidor av samma jag.”)
or glitches, he seems to make them self-positing elements of the work. In *Stormy Weather*, they are quite few, and appear only as small rents in the firm structure of the play; but as they proliferate throughout the Chamber Play, the question of interpretation will become critical. Thus, we will be confronted with the question of what kind, or what kinds, of forms we are actually dealing with. If the rents and the fissures become the main thing – the structure itself – we are apparently no longer dealing with the same kind of form but with something different.

The matter will have to be dealt with already in relation to the second Chamber Play, *The Burned Lot*. In spite of showing striking similarities with *Stormy Weather*, it could be considered as a kind of structural and thematic opposite to Strindberg’s first Chamber Play.
Among the Ruins of a Story: The Multitude of Forms in The Burned Lot

“And plantains shoot and thrive
In the rubble of fallen pillars.”

A. S.

Introduction: Hotchpotch poetics

Chamber Play Op. 2, The Burned Lot, is often considered the least successful of the plays, and it is the one that, together with the final play, The Black Glove, has been given the least amount of scholarly attention. In an often quoted passage, Lamm characterizes the play as one of Strindberg’s “most brilliantly conceived and most poorly executed works”, and Carl Johan Elmquist describes it as a “peculiar mixture of absurdities and brilliant ideas”. Ollén finds reason to question what Strindberg actually may have intended genre-wise when labeling The Burned Lot his second Chamber Play, as it only shares the limited length with the dramaturgical guidelines presented in the letter to Paul; the play is, for instance, crowded with an excessive amount of minor characters. In comparison to the previous play, Ollén finds The Burned Lot to lack the “effective mood, reinforced by musical elements, that characterized Stormy Weather”, while “a couple of segments of a more lyrical-visionary character” are said to announce The Ghost Sonata, where similar features however are far more dominant.


175 Lamm, Strindbergs dramer II, p. 382. (“Brända tomten är ett av Strindbergs mest genialt tänkta och mest bristfälligt utförda verk.”)

176 Carl Johan Elmquist, Strindbergs kammarspel, København 1949, p. 46. (“Men Brända tomten er faktisk en så besynderlig blandning af urimelidgheder og geniale anslag”, etc.)


178 Egil Törnqvist, Strindbergian Drama. Themes and Structure, Stockholm 1982, p. 163 finds the fifteen characters constituting “a relatively large number considering the brevity of the drama”.

3. Among the Ruins of a Story: The Multitude of Forms in *The Burned Lot*

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The play, then, is located not at the centre of interest but rather in-between what surrounds it; it leaves the compositional principles of the first play behind, and approaches those of the next one, but it does not really resemble either one of the adjacent Chamber Plays. A similar view was perhaps shared by the author who, as we have already noted, was let down by his first "Philistine" attempt at the genre, and found himself, after having finished the third and more successful one, to have moved in a different direction. We are thereby reminded of the dissimilarity of the plays as pointed out by Lamm, who found the bundle admirable not because of its full realization of an intended artistic ideal, but because of the differences found among them bearing witness of the author's wide range.\textsuperscript{180} If we ask ourselves what kind of principles are at work in the play, it is obviously not those of designed perfection. Using architectural imagery, we could say that its structure is less that of a finished building, like an intricate pyramid for example, than that of a ruin scattered by the fissures and crevices found in-between disparate building blocks.

In approaching the principles of the play, we may take our point of departure in the contemporary – and quite brutal – criticism presented after its première at the Intima Teatern. Bo Bergman in the \textit{Dagens Nyheter} collapsed by the "fudged together hotchpotch of endless twaddle and cheap profundities", "composed in such an impossible manner that one just sits there gawking"; August Brunius in the \textit{Svenska Dagbladet} found "no idea, not one leading thought, not even the ruins of a story", but he did find a reason to request that "such impossibilities" should be prevented from being both published and performed; and the signature L.N. in the \textit{Aftonbladet} declared that something "more awkwardly miserable hardly could have been presented on a Swedish stage".\textsuperscript{181} Such harsh verdicts are obviously quite rhetorical, but they could also be reworked into constructive concepts for discussion and description: here we are provided with an opportunity to study the literary hotchpotch, the decomposed or, to refurbish Brunius’ striking formulation, the principles of a narrative ruin or of ruined narratives, or what Deleuze and Claire Parnet calls the aesthetics of the “overdressed”, “where something more is always added which will spoil everything”.\textsuperscript{182} Rather than studying

\textsuperscript{180} Lamm, \textit{Strindbergs dramer II}, p. 372.
\textsuperscript{181} All quoted in Ollén, “Kommentarer”, p. 393f. ("Inför denna hopvispade soppa av ändlöst prat och billiga djupsinnigheter föll man ihop"; "Brända tomten är så omöjligt komponerad att man bara sitter och stirrar"; "där finns ingen idé, icke en ledande tanke, icke ens ruinerna af en handling"; "finns det ingen möjlighet att förhindra att sådana omöjligheter tryckas och uppföras?"; "Något ledsammare, mera pinsamt eländigt torde väl knappast ha gifvits på en svensk scen.").
formal unity we may inquire into the multiplicities of forms, as we are dealing with the ruins of a building consisting, so to speak, not of one but of several stories.

The different sections of the chapter discuss different strands of plots or stories found within the play. In a first brief section I compare The Burned Lot to the previous play, Stormy Weather, in order to exemplify how the multiple is established both formally and thematically. The comparison forces us to shift our focus from the firm centre to the teeming swarm, from the isolated inside to the crowded outside, from closure to openness, and so on. In addition to the ruin, I use the image of the rhizome in order to describe the way the play is assembled.

Thereafter I use two lengthier sections to discuss two disparate blocks of thematic associations and lines of plot that run throughout the play, apparently without real order, and thus sometimes in conflict with each other. We may describe them as dealing on the one hand with mysticism, and on the other hand with mystery. The first section deals with the protagonist as an uncannily strange outsider who has seen through it all, but still found the possibility to affirm existence by accepting the forces of fate, faith and providence; he returns to his childhood home in order to confront the deceits of the closed community. The second section deals with the detective plot which, as Törnqvist states, may be considered the “main thread, from the plot point of view”. Here a suspected arson is investigated among the members of the small community. The two lines conflict in that the first one stresses divine, and the second one human, agency; and in that the first one gives up asking vain questions, while the second one demands a final answer.

Hereafter I discuss further elements that seem interjected into the play quite randomly. We have the preparations of an approaching marriage between the youngsters of the society, presented in quite an optimistic light contrasting to the general gloom and cynicism of the play. Hereto related are also farcical elements verging on slapstick. Furthermore, we will have to discuss the reoccurring references to the bishop’s funeral (or the erection of his memorial monument). The minor element is of greater interest as it has been commented upon by the author himself, and as it elucidates the Strindbergian mode of writing.

Finally we must ask ourselves to what degree such a multiple play may be given a uniform and all-embracing interpretation. In the final section I present a critical examination of one of the few attempts to provide a somewhat uniform interpretation of the play as a complex structure of concealed significances, namely Törnqvist’s analysis of The Burned Lot as an intertextual construct mainly based

\footnote{183 Cf. Törnqvist, Strindbergian Drama, p. 164.}
on biblical references. I argue that we may lose our actual object of investigation – the spoiled play, or the play left behind by its author – if we insist on providing the hotchpotch with too much interpretational uniformity.

Ruins and rhizomes: Initial notes on the architecture of the play

Let us start off by comparing a few elements of the play with their parallels in Stormy Weather. The dissimilarities are striking when looking up both the lists of characters and the introductory “sceneries” of the two plays. In the case of Stormy Weather, we analyzed the list as a lucid illustration of a basic hierarchical structure where a set of more or less peripheral characters were related to a central protagonist located at the very top. But in the second play, the list seems to be organized according to entirely different principles. Here it is in its entirety:

THE DYER, Rudolf Valström.  
THE STRANGER, His Brother, Arvid Valström.  
THE OLD WOMAN, His Wife.  
ALFRED, His Son.  
MATILDA, His Daughter.  
THE HEARSE DRIVER, Second cousin to the Stonecutter.  
PLAIN CLOTHES Police.  
THE PAINTER, Sjöblom.  
Mrs. VESTERLUND, hostess at “The Last Nail”, formerly nurse to the Dyer.  
THE WIFE, The Dyer’s Wife.  
THE STUDENT. (p. 87)

As in the earlier play, we find a pair of brothers located at the top; but their positions are reversed. Here the protagonist of the play, the Stranger, fills the secondary slot, and it is he that is described in-relation-to rather than as-origin-of the uppermost character, the Dyer. It is furthermore surprising to find the latter at the paramount position as he is not even a confidant but the proper antagonist of the play. We might suppose that the Stranger is located at the lower level because of the fact that, in contrast to the Gentleman, he does not appear on-stage from the very opening of the play. But the list is not designed in order of appearance either, as the Dyer’s entrance occurs even later on.

It is actually quite hard to find a principle at all behind the layout. It is rather disorganized, as characters seem jumbled together, and as names are mixed with
occupations and relationships are mentioned sporadically, as if actually interjected into the text at some later occasion. If we are to illustrate the connections, we may no longer rely on the lucid image of the pyramid, and instead we would have to draw a fairly random set of zigzag lines running back and forth all over the page. Those associations actually explicated by the list are, furthermore, but a fraction of the totality of links mentioned throughout the play. New relationships are constantly unearthed, and the list may almost be considered a teeming swarm where connecting lines shift and change, and where new ones may always appear. Here are the several connections I noted at an early stage, before abandoning the entire enterprise: the Mason has some sort of clandestine businesses with the Dyer; the Old Woman is the Hearse Driver's cousin, and has been working for the Dyer's father; Alfred and Matilda are about to get married, and thus the Gardener and the Stonecutter are about to have their families united; the Stonecutter's father worked in customs, and exposed the Dyer's family as smugglers; he furthermore went to school with the Dyer and the Stranger, and his brother met the latter during their respective visits to America; the Stranger is related to the Hearse Driver through his step-mother; Mrs. Vesterlund is related to the Mason, and is furthermore Matilda's godmother; and even the Student, who seems to be free from the mixed-up connections, will turn out to not only have an affair with the (Dyer's) Wife, but also to be the (judicial and perhaps biological) son of the Stranger, who in turn proposed to his mother while she worked as a maid in the Stonecutter's household. In Stormy Weather the interest of a character was determined by its relationship to the centre, but here every character seems relatable to every other character and thus caught up in a haphazard series of connections and reconnections.

Deleuze's and Guattari's contrastive concepts of arborescent trees and rhizomatic grass may illustrate this difference. Ronald Bogue sums up the concepts like this:

Arborescences are hierarchical, stratified totalities which impose limited and regulated connections between their components. Rhizomes, by contrast, are non-hierarchical, horizontal multiplicities which cannot be subsumed within a unified structure, whose components form random, unregulated networks in which any element may be connected with any other element.184

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A vertically erected tree, in this sense, “plots a point, fixes an order”, while in the teeming grass any point can be connected to any other point, at any time.\textsuperscript{185} In the list of the first Chamber Play every thinner branch reached neatly back to the central and structurating thick trunk which thereby carried the play in its entirety; and we found the hierarchical relation between top and bottom, roots supporting the trunk, crowned by the protagonist at the top. But here the list consists of a multitude of more or less random and disorganized associative links, even able to reform, regroup, shift and change interminably. Rather than a vertical order we get the impression of a crawling crowd or an una leveled and abounding horizontal activity similar to when, to use a figure that Strindberg probably would find fitting, “rats swarm over each other”.\textsuperscript{186}

In the list of the first play, everything returns to the fixed point of the centre, which constitutes the privileged point of entry, while the second list has “multiple entryways” and everything in it comes across as “detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification”.\textsuperscript{187} In the first case, we immediately know what to focus on and how to relate the presented elements to each other; we are able to approach the list as a lucid and condensed model of what kind of form we are about to encounter. There the list invites us like a parergonic colonnade or an inviting archway reproducing or exemplifying the kind of architecture that comprises the main part of the text. Here, on the other hand, it confuses us. We are not able to decide from what point to enter the play, or what character constitutes its preferred focus; one opening looks just as adequate or inadequate as the other. In \textit{The Burned Lot} we must bring the list with us like a map in exploring the shifting landscapes of the play; thus we return to it from time to time, in order to add notes to it or draw new lines across its design to illustrate the links and associations we discover along the way. Finally, however, we must give up as our confused scribble has made the list unreadable. Rather than being an external or invitational entrance it is caught up in the very turmoil we would suppose that it should represent in a schematic fashion; it does not introduce us to the teeming swarm but dwells right in it, adding to it proliferation. Instead of an architectural colonnade, we could be said to find the thriving rubble of a fallen pillar.

A similar description applies to the play as such. The multiple swarm recurs both thematically and structurally as the small community is depicted as a throng and as the form of the play itself consists of a cluttered mix of various forms, mo-

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\textsuperscript{185} Deleuze and Guattari, \textit{A Thousand Plateaus}, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{186} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{187} Ibid., p. 13.
tifs and plot-lines. A thematic illustration may be found already in the “scenery” which, as in the previous play, precedes the main dramatic text:

The left half of the fond is occupied by the walls of a burnt-down one-storied house; you can see the wallpapers on the walls, and tile stoves.

Behind, a blooming fruit orchard is visible.

In the right side-scene an Inn with a wreath on a pole; outside, tables and benches.

To the left of the foreground, salvaged pieces of furniture and household utensils thrown together in a heap. (p. 85)

Instead of the façade closing in on the subject from the earlier play we have an open ruin where the privacy of home (pieces of furniture and household items, etc.) is unearthed and made public; instead of the patisserie concealed under ground we have an open-air restaurant; and instead of a particular tile stove (like the one of green majolica) exclusively associated with the protagonist we have an unspecified amount of unspecified stoves. Most importantly we find that the detailed description of the immaculate order of the interior decoration in the former play is here replaced by random bits and pieces heaped together from various sources. Thus the inside is replaced by the outside, the private by the public, the concealed by the revealed, order by disorder, and so on.

As the contemporary critic Brunius hinted at, we may furthermore use the very image of a ruin to describe the way the play as such is assembled, and we could perhaps even combine the rhizome and the ruin in order to form an image where the rubble of fallen structures is infested by growing weeds and thriving grass. Ollén suggests, after having studied Strindberg’s manuscripts, that “the deliberately complicated plot of the play, provided with numerous digressions, may have been prepared at a relatively late stage”, and Ekman similarly demonstrates how Strindberg often seems to simply have interjected prose fragments and philosophical figments as declamatory monologues which “present ideas form A Blue Book I almost verbatim, without any dramaturgical revision”. Throughout the play we recognize repeated themes and motifs from earlier texts – essays, plays, etc. – which are never worked out but simply crop up, now here, now there. We get the sense that Strindberg has mixed architectural remnants of a few

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186 Ibid.

187 Ibid., p. 13.


disparate stories with various bits and bobs constituting ideas, aphorisms, sporadic thoughts, etc. These elements proliferate throughout the work and simply grow forth rather than develop or progress.

Thus, we may speak of a ruined form where grass and a variety of plants thrive and germinate, and the very image of a ruin has come to signify, as Robert Ginsberg puts it, how while “a valuable unity may have been lost, a field of fulfilling forms springs up from its seeds”.190 The ruin is furthermore confusing in mixing recognizable order with strange new displacements; in it the “disorderly displacement and the arbitrary, mysterious appearance of certain objects in places where they clearly do not belong can confound and surprise”, as Tim Edensor points out.191 And The Burned Lot certainly has confounded commentators. The theme that runs through the play of being baffled by the mysterious order of a universal disorder, or vice versa, is furthermore one of the very points causing interpretational confusion. In the following two sections – dealing first with the mystery of existence, then with the mystery of a crime – I will discuss various aspects of the theme, and in what ways it causes structural and interpretational conflicts within the play.

The story of an outsider

The protagonist of the play – or rather, the main character that more or less acts as the author’s mouthpiece and thus automatically represents the work’s norm – is, as is clear already from the title by which he is presented, an outsider. The present section deals with the theme of the outsider as related first to the enclosed community, then to epiphanic wisdom, and thereafter to the risk of being engulfed by the entangled community and by memory. The section concludes with a short comment on the messiness of the composition of the play. We find cracks and conflicts that become intensified as we then move on to the plotline regarding the search of the cause of the fire.

I. The outside and the insular morass

The protagonist of The Burned Lot also differs from his predecessor in Stormy Weather. In the second Chamber Play it takes a good third of the first act (the play consists only of two) even before he appears on stage, and then he is imme-

diately presented as strange and estranged in relation to the inhabitants of the small neighborhood. Here is his first appearance:

THE STRANGER (enters, in redingote, cylinder with mourning crape, cane.)
THE OLD WOMAN. It wasn’t the dyer, but he looked just like him! (p. 100f.)

The lost son, having left the country due to economic debts, is mistaken for his brother, who has remained in their parental home. Returning apparently on a whim to visit his parents’ grave, he finds the childhood home burnt down, thereby revealing the socially respected family’s clandestine history as smugglers. As the protagonist has learned about his background while abroad, he must now confront his still uninformed brother. Memories are awakened as the Stranger goes through the salvaged objects from the fire, as are old rivalries between the two. Childhood, family and the neighborhood are charged with negative connotations related to falsehood and deception, whereby the protagonist’s escape to the outer world appears as a positive alternative. The Stranger literally enters from the outside, and in contrast to the Gentleman it is he who constitutes the disturbing element unearthing what is buried in the past; nevertheless, his position coincides with the norms of the work. Let us take a look at how Strindberg illustrates the contrast between the inside neighborhood and the outside world.

From the start, the small community and its inhabitants are associated with a sense of ill-bred ignorance, prompted by a few simple techniques employed by the author. The characters’ dialogue is presented in a colloquial and chatty manner, exemplifying in its disorderly design the “asyndetic” Strindbergian style noted by Olsson.192 It is furthermore scattered with socio- or dialectal expressions, as well as old-fashioned idioms and personal idiolects: “Gudda” instead of “Goddag” (hello, or good morning), “torstig” rather than “törstig” (thirsty), “Åh gu bevare oss!” instead of “Åh, Gud bevare oss!” (Oh, God bless us!), and so on (p. 94f.). The cultural isolation of the backwards community is enhanced in comments as when an old woman relates how the student and the dyer’s wife usually play “that thing called tennis” (“de spelte sånt där tennis”) together (p. 98). One character is especially (and, it will turn out, rather deceitfully) portrayed as a yokel; the Gardener is (self-allegedly) a stupid drunk too cheap for his own good, and he constantly refers to himself as an utter oaf, a donkey, a muttonhead, an asshole, a

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192 Olsson, p. 24ff.
poor wretch, “the stupidest of seven siblings”, and so on (p. 99).\footnote{193} In striking contrast, we find that the language of the Stranger is sprinkled with idioms obviously intended to demonstrate his American travels: “all right” (p. 115), “God Bless!” (p. 124), “Dam!” (i.e., “Damn!”, p. 126), etc. Apparently, Strindberg seeks to design the dialogue so that the isolated neighborhood is distinguished from the outer world.

The community is furthermore associated with death from an early point. Lamm concisely dubs the lot “a lugubrious house” whose inhabitants all share interests in the funeral industry.\footnote{194} Known in general as “the Morass”, it lies next to the cemetery where all its inhabitants are said to end up sooner or later; the Hearse Driver (“Lik-Kusken”, literally the corpse driver) enters early on to gossip about his latest client; the local inn is called The Last Nail and is symbolized by a wreath, and it is also described as the place where delinquents in former times used to get a last drink before getting hanged; and so on. The Morass is furthermore described as a place where you risk getting stuck and becoming trapped forever. When the Plain Clothes detective enters to investigate the fire, Strindberg lets the Mason provide him with the following presentation of the area:

\begin{quote}

We all know each other, because there is something particular about this street; those who end up there once, never leave, that is, those who move out always return sooner or later, until they’re taken out to the cemetery which lies at the end of the street. (p. 89)
\end{quote}

The inhabitants of the Morass allegedly “hate each other, suspect each other, slander each other, torment each other” (p. 90). As the detective leaves, we get to see how the people gossip, observe and comment upon each other’s work, how they are all bound by blood or by business, and how they are curious and nosy and throw around unwarranted suspicions and accusations regarding the cause of the fire. They are portrayed as quite narrow-minded, and their entire horizon is occupied by the morass itself; they only discuss each other and what goes on in the nearest surroundings. In quite an extensive piece of dialogue, the Old Woman relates how the Stranger and his brother always fought and quarreled as children, and describes the house as one where “one came, the other one left, but returned they did, and here they died, here they were born, here they got married and divorced” (p. 97). The Stranger’s departure will consequently appear as a desirable and understandable move.

\footnote{193}{Cf. Ekman, \textit{Strindberg and the Five Senses}, p. 107 on the Gardener’s deceptive character.}

\footnote{194}{Lamm, \textit{Strindbergs dramer II}, p. 387. (”Det är ett lugubert hus”)}

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Halfway through the first act the two brothers meet. The Stranger immediately gets lost in a prolonged reverie which, according to the stage directions, is to be presented “slowly” (p. 107). He recounts his experiences as a child confined to the tiny lot and longing for the vast world outside:

There’s the lot; imagine, what a small space for so many destinies! – There’s the dining room with the painted walls; palm trees, cypresses, temples, beneath a rosy sky; that’s what I dreamt the world looked like, if you only got away from home! – And the tile stove with the pale flowers that grew out of shells – the niche with the zinc doors – I remember as a child, when we moved in, there was a name drawn in the zinc – and then grandma told me that the man with that name had killed himself in that room – I soon forgot that; but when later in life I got married to the niece of the killed one, I felt as if my destiny had already been written upon the metal – Well, you don’t believe in that kind of stuff! – But you do know how my marriage ended! (p. 107)

Several recurring motifs are condensed here. We have, of course, the contrast between the brothers, the visionary protagonist and his narrow-minded older brother; the notion of a pattern of correspondences running through human life, symbolically manifested in everyday items; the connection between death and vision; and, of course, the longing to get out of the cramped space. When confronted with the objects of his childhood home, the Stranger falls back into a dark past which he apparently has tried to leave behind: he feels as if he “falls down through time, sixty years, down into childhood” as he can smell the air of the nursery and once more experience the pressure on his chest as he remembers being pushed, frightened and beaten by his brother and the older kids (p. 108). As with the community in general, the home is associated with death and entangled relations, and the Stranger recounts how the father of their new stepmother, a grisly leering pall-bearer, enters the house and becomes the new grandfather. The Stranger, being true to his name, admits having always felt detached both from his close family and his fellow human beings, but he finds them interesting to watch and study.

The very identity of the protagonist is that of being distanced. While the Gentleman was looking out from the inside, the Stranger looks in from the outside; and while the former constituted a fixed point in space – the very centre of existence – the latter is rather an all-encompassing network of shifting lines and moving perspectives. Thus the Stranger has “seen life from all points of the compass and all positions. From above and from below”, he has visited America and the West Indies, Africa, Australia and Asia, and he has been “rich and poor, high and low, suffered from shipwrecks and experienced earthquakes” (p. 109f.). Wher-
ever he has been he has, however, always met a compatriot to whom he turns out to be related through family or acquaintances. Thus the entangled web of the morass proves to spread out all over the world. Still we sense a difference in direction, as we may separate a centripetal motion, a seeking of the centre, from a centrifugal one, a fleeing from the centre. The morass draws in its inhabitants and enmeshes them in a tight, messy and huddled knot; the distances between them are minimized as they are firmly tied together to constitute an inescapable centre. Yet several lines also run out from the knot to create potential escape routes towards a wider grid or network. While the morass is connected to the outside, it does not engulf it or enclose it, but is itself opened up by the notion of possible ways out, of growing distances and multiple points of view. The Stranger’s encounter with a representative from inside the morass is then not merely a negative experience as it provides the opportunity of a shift of perspectives. When in South Carolina he is confronted with a former schoolmate, the encounter is shocking and it upsets him, as his family’s background as smugglers is now revealed to him; but what is more important is that it also entails an insight, an encounter with the truth, that would be impossible from within the enclosed community. His brother, the Dyer, is still unaware of his social history, and so would probably the Stranger be, if he had stayed at home. The distance of the outside world is, in this sense, presented as positive and truthful, while the home community is not only deceitful but also ignorant of its own deceptions.

II. The outside and epiphanic insight

It is furthermore only through the shocking encounter with truth that true reconciliation becomes possible. Being detached, the Stranger experiences the world “as if it was staged for me especially; and thereby I have finally reconciled with a part of the past, and come to excuse the so-called flaws of others as well as those of my own” (p. 110). The connection between experiencing life as a personal spectacle and moral resolution has caused a few critical comments. Lamm finds the Stranger’s position egocentric and suggests that the very opposite attitude, “that the universe goes on as usual, regardless of our tiny personality”, would be more appropriate.195 Törnqvist, on the other hand, rebuts Lamm’s objection and provides us with a personal interpretation of the passage:

195 Ibid., p. 385. (“En motsatt åskådning, att universum går sin gång, obekymrat om vår lilla personlighet, borde snarare vara vägen dit.”)
By his idea that everything is staged especially for him, the Stranger only means that nothing happens by chance. There is a Director behind everything that happens in life. The Stranger does not have any exclusive rights. Anyone may have the same feeling that everything is staged for him/her especially. The need to experience life in subjective terms is universal.196

By turning the motif into general philosophy we lose an important aspect of the motif. As in the case of the Gentleman, the protagonist’s experience should not be turned into a categorical imperative, as it is grounded on a very peculiar – and personal – experience. It is true that the play deals thematically with the protagonist’s ability to recognize the true powers at work within the universe, and that he has seen through the illusions of subjective liberty, and we will explore this theme further on. In this sense both Lamm and Törnqvist are correct, and the Stranger’s claim is perhaps intended to be a bit more humble than it seems. Rather than as an expression of a universal need to experience oneself as a lone subject, it is used to posit the protagonist in the position of, as Törnqvist puts it, “a cool observer of life”, looking at things from outside.197 While such an attitude is highly exclusive – it separates him from rather than places him on a par with the common man – it is also what elevates him from the insularity of the morass and lets him affirm life in all its aspects, even those commonly referred to as flaws or faults. There is no contradiction, in this sense, between “exclusive rights” and the recognition of “a Director behind everything”: it is the exclusive position that lets the Stranger affirm the divine powers, and his ability to affirm the powers constitutes his exclusive position. Distanced observation makes truth appear, and the appearance of truth paves the way for reconciliation.

The exclusiveness as well as the outer strangeness of the protagonist’s position is enhanced by Strindberg’s associations of migration with death. The Stranger’s visits abroad are repeatedly associated with having visited the land of the dead, and both journeys are in turn related to growing wisdom; “I have been on the other side of the river” the Stranger says, re-echoing a line from Strindberg’s historical miniature on the death of Socrates, written just a few years earlier (p. 150).198 Early on, the Old Woman relates how “Arvid, the brother in America, was thought to be dead for several years”, but that he has now reportedly returned (p. 97); and when the Dyer, confronted with his brother, exclaims that he is not dead after all, the Stranger replies: “But yes, in a way! – I come from America, after thirty years” (p. 106). Ekman demonstrates how the idea that crossing

196 Törnqvist, Strindbergian Drama, p. 179.
197 Ibid.
over to the other side of life entails the ability to see the true nature of existence recurs in Strindberg’s philosophical prose works,\(^\text{199}\) and Henrik Johnsson notes the recurring idea in Strindberg that “the ghost always speaks the truth”.\(^\text{200}\) The journey to America then seems to metaphorically suggest how the protagonist is now able to study human life neutrally from a point outside.

The motivic complex of journey, death and insight is further radicalized as Strindberg lets his protagonist be an actual walking dead. Towards the end of the first act, the Stranger retells how, at the age of twelve, he commits suicide by hanging himself due to disillusion. His body is placed at the morgue, where he wakes up with a sense of transformation: he has forgotten his previous life, and starts a new one, as another person, who is experienced as odd by the family. The outsider-theme thus takes extreme proportions. Here is the Stranger’s story:

> When I woke up to consciousness, I seemed to be in the person of another; I approached life with a cynic coolness; well, it’s supposed to be that way, then! and the worse it was, the more interesting it got ... I now considered myself as another, and I observed, studied this other person and his destiny, which made me insensible to my own sufferings. But in death I had achieved new skills ... I saw right through people, read their minds, heard their intentions .. When in company, I saw them naked ... (p. 117)

Strindberg seems to expand the motif of a “split” personality, introduced but never worked out in Stormy Weather, by making the simile become literal: while the Gentleman felt as if being another person while fundamentally remaining himself, the Stranger’s identity as such seems to be that of otherness. The intensification of the motif fits into a general shift from the “full (lower) reality” of the previous play to the full-blown mysticism pervading the second one.\(^\text{201}\)

Törnqvist however warns us not to take the motif too literally, and provides the following reminder:

> [The Stranger’s] experience of life beyond death should not, however, be understood literally. He *has* not been to the other side, he only feels it that way. But this feeling is enough to give him a new perspective on existence.\(^\text{202}\)

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\(^{201}\) Cf. the letter to Emil Schering, 27 March 1907.

The Stranger admittedly declares that he does not know whether or not he really was dead at some time, but the psychologizing interpretation does away with the motif too quickly. Nothing points to the fact that we are to understand the passage purely as the protagonist’s subjective impression of his childhood except, perhaps, for the general uncertainty that surrounds it; “I was placed in the morgue, my dear, as dead. Whether I was, I don’t know”, etc. (p. 117) The main reason behind Törnqvist’s comments seems to be that the death-business is just a bit too steep and fantastic, but it fits right into the strategy of establishing, as Törnqvist actually points out, “the idea that the Stranger fundamentally differs from the rest”. As there is no real event to go back to and investigate – medical journals, etc. – we may not ask what really happened, but only in what ways the motif of the post-mortem protagonist operates aesthetically within the play.

First of all we notice yet another contrast between the protagonist’s mystical wisdom and the insular view of the inhabitants of the morass: for him death is a passage towards true life, while for them it quite literally represents just “the end of the road”. Furthermore, we should note that while Strindberg is ambiguous when it comes to the cause of the Stranger’s abilities, he is quite clear on the fact that he possesses them. We are actually presented with three different versions on the origin of his peculiar wisdom, spanning from him being “born without a veil over the eyes, so that you see people the way they are” (p. 150), to the adolescent suicide prompted by precocious disillusionment, to him having reached the wisdom of age, “when the eye starts to see” (p. 109). Referentially speaking the versions conflict, but they all work together to establish the strangeness of the protagonist, and to enhance his ability to see through life; furthermore they all associate wisdom not only with the estranged point of view but also with the sudden moment of epiphany. While it may seem a bit clumsy to line up three different and inconsistent events, it is the consistent construction of epiphanic insight as recurrent motif that is of interest.

Let us consider the most elaborate of the three versions, the suicide. At twelve, the Stranger suffers from life and experiences it as “walking into a great darkness” (p. 117). In school he is forced to celebrate a historical regent who in reality was “the destroyer of his country”; thus the school boy experiences the general falsity of existence (p. 117). We should note that the suddenly retrieved clarity is not presented as a final insight but rather taken as a starting point; it is not the teleological aim of the story (the protagonist moving from naïve ignorance to pessimistic insight) but an early point that the protagonist has had to reach beyond in order to transform his precocious disenchantment into a mature reconciliation.

201 Ibid., p. 178.
with life as an unquestionable mystery: “so that’s how it should be!” Nihilism then goes from suicidal self-destruction to an affirmation of life, hopelessness to a faith in fate. Rather than being depressively disturbed by the split, he intensifies it to the degree that it becomes interesting, fascinating, perhaps even joyous in its obscene morbidity. Cool cynicism is not negative but transforms the negation of life into its affirmation.

Let us for instance consider the following passage, which Törnqvist somewhat misleadingly presents as an example of the protagonist’s emotional inability to practice the dispassionate calmness that he preaches:

You could put a rope around the neck of the entire species, if you wanted to be fair, but you don’t want that! It is a horrible species, ugly, sweaty, stinking; unclean linen, dirty socks with holes, chilblains, clavi, Ugh! No, in that case a blooming apple tree is much more beautiful; Consider the lilies of the field, it is as if they were not at home here, and sense the way they smell! (p. 130)

True, the passage is not only cynical but severely misanthropic; but we should look at the way it is presented. While this is stated as a fair (or a just or a true) judgment, the Stranger only presents it in order to suggest that there is no call even for such just judgments (“you could … if you wanted to be fair … but you don’t want that”). We are not supposed to stop at the declaration of horrible life but to move on from the simple verdict to the affirmation of the joy found in nature. As in the dream play, the flowers seek to escape the soil, they flee the dirt for the outside of the open air; but they also constitute an element of beauty and pleasure in our human life. Thus, rather than being forced to remain within the purely ugly, we find, like the flower, possible openings towards the pleasant. Aggressive disillusion is not a finishing point but only a first step that opens up for joyous reconciliation with life in all of its various aspects. The mystical view lies in the ability to find pleasure in despair, and here the protagonist differs from the others.

In view of such an attitude we may consider one of the most often quoted passages of the play where the Stranger’s worldview is condensed into a striking image of a weave and the aging eye’s ability to discern its secret pattern. Here is the protagonist’s famous tract on cosmos as a weave:

Quite so, yes, everywhere the same ... When you are young you see the weave being set up; parents, relatives, friends, acquaintances, servants are the warp; further on in life you see the weft; and now the shuttle of destiny...
runs back and forth with the thread; sometimes it snaps, but it’s tied together, and thus it continues; the beam is beating, the yarn is forced into curlicues and then the weave is there. At old age, when the eye begins to see, you discover that all the curlicues form a pattern, a cipher, an ornament, a hieroglyph, that only now you are able to work out: This is Life! The World weaver has woven it! (p. 108ff.)

The quoted passage and the motif of the world weaver – recurring throughout Strindberg’s oeuvre – are dealt with by most commentators of the play.205 The interpretation of the passage might however pose a problem: while seemingly opting for a philosophy of the inside, of a search for the centre or the hard kernel of truth, it rather supports a philosophy of the outside, of the line of flight, and the wide spaces of unanswerability. The notion of existence as an interconnected weave does, as Vivi Blom-Edström points out, not coincide with a notion of total unity but rather of a “chaotic state, where everybody’s destinies tangle up in each other through recurrences and coincidences”.206 The epiphany of insight does in such case not entail the interpretation of a uniform meaning: we are not provided with a secret significance which up to this point has been concealed behind the conundrum of human life, but plain life itself suddenly emerges as pure meaning. Strindberg does not provide us with an elongated exegesis of the cipher or the hieroglyph, but only an affirmative statement: such is life. Insight does not expose a mystery but affirms mysteriousness; rather than finally seeing through false existence, existence as such appears for the very first time. The weave is not a hermeneutic product in need of the human as an interpretive agent, but all agency is constituted by the active powers at work outside of the restricted human will. Having realized that the individual is but a thread in the weave of external powers makes all further questions unnecessary, and perhaps even presumptuous in persisting on the necessity of human agency. There is, so to speak, no purpose in a thread interrogating the artisan.

205 For a general background on Strindberg’s use of the theosophically rooted motif, see Martin Lamm, Strindberg och maktern. Olaus Petriföreläsningar vid Uppsala University, Stockholm 1936, p. 132ff. For examples of the motif, or versions thereof, appearing outside of the play cf. e.g. the unpublished addendum to the dream play quoted in Strindberg, Ett drömspel, p. 157. Cf. also Ollén, “Kommentarer”, p. 383ff. and 403.
206 Vivi Blom-Edström, ”Vävsymbolen hos Rydberg, Selma Lagerlöf och Strindberg”, Göteborgsstudier i litteraturhistoria tillägnade Sverker Ek, Göteborg 1954, p. 282. (”ett kaotiskt tillstånd, där allas öden genom upprepningar och sammanträffanden trasslas in i varandra”)
III. The outside and the risky return

Having recounted the opposition between the epiphanies of the outside and the ignorance of the inside, and the centrifugal and the centripetal forces of the morass, we realise that one of the main problems associated with the outsider returning to the inside is the risk of once more being dragged in and engulfed by the insular perspective of the past. Such a tension is at work throughout the play which, as Lamm puts it, largely consists of the Stranger recounting “bloody injustices from childhood” and presenting his accusations against the remaining members of the morass.207 Ekman notes that most of the protagonist’s so called “memory monologues” are “brought about by different objects that he observes”.208 Thus several longer litanies are constructed according to the formula where an object – a piece of furniture or a household item – is first noticed, and then provided with a story recounting the perils of childhood or the misdeeds committed by the family: “Over there in the scrap-heap I see the family’s photography album” (p. 109); “I’m sitting and from here I see that very apple tree, that’s why I remember it so well” (p. 111); “I sit here and look, there in the scrap-heap, at our father’s bookcase” (p. 115); “It’s the student’s books! – Same crap as in my youth –“ (p. 125); “But what have we here? The headboard of a mahogany bed – In which I am born!”, and so on (p. 125f.). The return to the childhood home reawakens negative memories which thus provokes a reaction that also risks sending back the subject to his pre-epiphanic state of mind. The objects are used in dialogue as a kind of centripetal magnetic forces, dragging the outsider into the actual emotional situation associated with them, and thereby depriving him of his distanced perspective. As the injustices of childhood come back to life, the Stranger reacts by accusing the others of crimes and by defending his own faults, and thus he must remind himself: “I have not forgotten it, but I have forgiven.” (p. 111) His aggressiveness intensifies as the play progresses, even when preaching the need for compassion and forgiveness, and thus personal vengeance seems to overshadow the reconciliatory affirmation of the world-weaver as sole metaphysical agent. In this sense, the returner seems to sink deeper and deeper down into the hateful morass.

The Stranger’s hostility has caused a few critical commentaries. Lamm considers it an expression of “a small-minded and petty litigiousness” shared by the author, and finds no reason why the protagonist “necessarily needs to turn out to be

207 Lamm, Strindbergs dramer II, p. 389. (“I Brända tomten får nu Främlingen föra fram dessa blodiga oförrätter från barndomen och många flera.”)
208 Ekman, Strindberg and the Five Senses, p. 104.
related to and acquainted with everyone he happens to come across”.209 Lamm suggests that having an utterly unknown stranger present his verdict over a web in which he is not entangled would have been a better setup.210 Törnqvist, on the other hand, finds such an alternative “uninteresting in its simple moralism”, and points out that Lamm is “blind to the significance of the family symbol”.211 According to Törnqvist, familiar relationships signal nothing less than the interconnection of the great family of Man: thus we are to understand every instance of the very word “family” as related to mankind in general.212 Naturally, this brings some strange results, as when Törnqvist considers the photo-album to recount the fate not only of the family but of mankind, but it is also misleading in a more important sense. Törnqvist finds an important change occurring when the protagonist “accepts the idea that he is related to the rest, that he too is an imperfect human being”;213 thus the point of the play would be to reveal how the Stranger, too, “has a finger in the pie and that he is only gradually inclined to admit that he is not a true ‘stranger’”.214 But we have already noted that the Stranger’s epiphanic insight is prior to the development of the play, not a result of it; thus we must try to specify the interpretation of the family symbol.

The problem is similar to the one discussed earlier in relation to the Gentleman. First of all we should stress that we need to accept the fact that Strindberg may, and often does, use that very model suggested by Lamm, “the righteous sitting in judgment over the rest”.215 The Stranger is morally superior to the inhabitants of the morass, not because he has never sinned, but because he has reconciled and accepted his position as but a thread running through the weave. Furthermore we must contest the dramaturgical model of insight as personal development. Lamm is correct both in describing the pettiness of the protagonist – the crimes he exposes are quite trivial, although they gain in significance when presented as symptoms of the universal corruptions of existence – and in stressing the fact that he is used as the author’s mouthpiece. As with the Gentleman, we find no state of normative deviation in the formal sense; the protagonist rather constitutes the very norm of the work. If anything, he moves in the opposite direction as he lapses temporarily while getting pulled back into the narrow-minded

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209 Lamm, *Strindbergs dramer II*, p. 389. (”ett småaktigt och lumpet rättshaveri”); (”Man förstår ej […] varför denne ’främling’ nödvändigt behöver visa sig vara släkt och bekant med alla dem han räkar.”)
210 Ibid.
212 Ibid., p. 175.
213 Ibid.
214 Ibid., p. 247.
215 This is how Törnqvist sums up Lamm’s alternative; ibid.
revenge-attitude characteristic of the morass; thus he must remind himself from time to time: “And now, here I sit, going mad over someone who has been lying in the grave for thirty-five years!” (p. 136)

While the morass does not provide the Stranger with a new perspective on things, it does threaten to deprive him of the outsider point of view as he risks being caught up once more in the tight knot. Törnqvist’s rhetorical question prompted by one of the protagonist’s many outbursts – “Where is the cool observer now?” – is therefore unwarranted as we are not dealing with a dramaturgical structure where the protagonist is exposed and debunked. The general motion of the play is governed by flight rather than exposure, although several truths are exposed in the process, causing the very need for a return to the outside. This is highlighted by the very end of the play, where the protagonist simply leaves all troubles behind in order to once more leave the morass. Thus the play ends with the Stranger exclaiming: “out into the wide world again, thou wanderer!” (p. 157) The explorations of old memories have functioned not as something to delve into and get stuck in, but, as Ekman puts it, “to make a clean sweep of the past”, and thus as yet another open passage used to “move on, back out”.216

IV. The messiness of composition

In my attempted résumé of one of the threads running through *The Burned Lot* I have perhaps been neglecting the formal and thematic messiness of the dramaturgical layout. What is recounted here is, obviously, shattered throughout the play, and interspersed with other motifs, themes, and plot-lines. Perhaps, I have been a bit sloppy in claiming that the protagonist’s violent outbursts should simply be explained as the effect of him temporarily regressing to the narrow state of mind soaking the morass as there certainly is something funny going on when a protagonist preaches forgiveness and reconciliation while he simultaneously also condemns and criticizes every single aspect of human life surrounding him. In any case, the question is whether we are talking about effects of composition or effects of writing, and I find reason to sustain that we should not – as Törnqvist suggests – reduce such a conflict to a common pattern of the erroneous protagonist redeeming himself by progressively correcting his ways. Rather, it appears as if Strindberg initiates one kind of story involving a reconciliatory and righteous protagonist while he also seems unable, as Lamm actually points out, to refrain

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from bursting out into the many prolonged litanies over what appears as petty trifles. The lines of godliness and wickedness may run through the play without necessarily coming together to create a purely compositional effect, but rather forming something like an extending crack or crevice in the structure.

Consequently, we may be tempted to regard the composition of the play as an adequate formal expression of its theme: the messiness of human life corresponds with the structural messiness of the play. Blom-Edström suggests something along these lines in the following passage:

To portray a complicated context where the different motifs are woven into each other without anyone dominating the other, would however seem to exactly have been Strindberg’s intentions. The weave becomes a uniting symbol for the intricate relationships between people, but it is not their pattern but the individual threads whereby the context emerges, that is of interest for Strindberg. This has, naturally, involved an artistic problem difficult to master. The congestion of motifs that irrefutably makes the play confusing appears to be close to unavoidable. But Strindberg has at the same time, by the very concentration of characters and coherences, represented his vision of chaotic existence in a more concrete and intense manner than ever. 217

The passage is illuminating in highlighting the shifts between authorial intention, artistic dilemmas and disorderly composition, but we should be careful not to make it a justification of form, or a pretext of uniformity. As Lukács noted apropos Shakespeare we naturally risk when experiencing dissonances to “attempt to achieve a balance and, subsequently, create a unity where there is no unity”. 218

The simple fact that theme and design correspond does, of course, not make a work good or even unproblematic, and the same goes for the correlation between work and intention. Interpretational justification should not in such cases be allowed to obscure important characteristics of the play as, in this case, the sense of ruination rather than accomplishment that seems characteristic of the play. Equating messy life with messy art negates the peculiarities involved in both instances. Blom-Edström is of course aware of this, and her comments are cautious.

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and instructive; while John Ward, for instance, goes too far in overstating the success of Strindbergian composition in the case of *The Burned Lot*:

Taking full advantage of his new, flexible concept of theatre, allowing his characters to appear when they are needed thematically rather than when the plot warrants, he depicts with impressionistic brevity a detailed and authentic background. The result is undeniably cynical, but also effectively real. With its supple, indeed at times almost casual, sampling of social relations, it is the culmination of a tendency apparent in Strindberg’s work since the quart d’heure plays. By different techniques, he achieved most of what the naturalists hoped to achieve through social documentation, yet with more economy and greater dramatic force.219

Instead of simply doing away with all the formal and thematic conflicts found within the play I will now explore another and more severe clash between the aspect of the play dealt with so far – the story of the outsider returning home – and another of the main threads of the play focusing in the manner of a detective story on the fire as a suspected case of arson. This conflict is not explained by referring to a theme of messiness as in that case we would not experience a conflict at all but rather a harmonious convergence of form and theme. Yet the play demonstrates a purely structural clash associated with different types of theme. In relation to the detective form, the structure of flight before closure, and the affirmation of the unanswerable rather than the interpretation of secret ciphers, will actually become problematic.

The crime story

The detective story has come to signal the narrative structure of closure *par excellence*, and it is obvious that one hardly may combine its austere structural demands with the kind of theme and form outlined so far. In discussing *The Burned Lot* as a detective story, commentators have primarily noted three problems: that this particular plot-line lacks a consistent central position as it is obscured by several other elements; that it lacks efficiency since the play is interlaced by extensive monologic tirades and reveries; and that it defies closure. A recurring remark regards the fact that the construction of the crime mystery actually seems to have bored Strindberg, who rather than perfecting the form moves on to do something presumably more stimulating.

Ollén aptly labels *The Burned Lot* a “crime play with obstacles” and points out that the story of investigation persistently is being obstructed by the protagonist’s recurring “meditations and digressions”. While Strindberg initiates a detective plot “in the style of Edgar Allan Poe and Conan Doyle” he never finalizes it but rather presents us with endless diatribes on the wretched nature of man in general. Elmquist states in a similar fashion that while the play opens like a crime story, it does not end like one, since the mystery – who set the house on fire, and why? – is never presented with an adequate solution. Rather, the plot is lost in the hotchpotch of elements:

We are never provided with an answer to these questions, simply because Strindberg lost his interest in them along the way and followed other tracks. He wanted to push way too much into the modest frames of the play, and one motif is therefore not allowed to enfold, before it is sup-

We are never provided with an answer to these questions, simply because Strindberg lost his interest in them along the way and followed other tracks. He wanted to push way too much into the modest frames of the play, and one motif is therefore not allowed to enfold, before it is sup

The remark may be considered as misleading in that the mystery actually is solved, but it is still telling in suggesting the offhand manner in which this is done; the solution is likely to pass by unnoticed.

Björn Meidal emphasizes how the play, rather than revolving around a particular climactic disclosure, proliferates into a series of minor revelations consistent with the Strindbergian theme that “nobody is guiltier than anybody else, even though everybody has had their eyes opened to the fact that everything […] is humbug”. The mystical theme dealing with the universal corruption of mankind is thus at odds with a plot-structure centered on a particular crime. Meidal accordingly suggests that while several of the Strindbergian protagonists share distinctive features with the classical detective (especially Poe’s Dupin), and


221 Elmquist, “Kommentarer”, p. 389. (“en kriminalintrig i Edgar Allan Poes och Conan Doyles stil”)

222 Ibid., p. 46ff.


224 Ibid., p. 46f. (“Disse spørgsmål får vi aldrig besvaret, simpelt hen fordi Strindberg undervejs har mistet interessen for dem og fulgt andre spor. Han har villet presse alt for meget ind i skuespillets beskedne rammer, og det ene motiv får derfor ikke lov til at folde sig ud, for det fortrænger af det næste.”)
while the investigative techniques are similar – to follow trails, interpret ciphers, collect indices and evidence – the crimes found in Strindberg are first and foremost of a theological kind. It is well known that Strindberg at least periodically was an avid fan of Poe in whom he, as Eric O. Johannesson puts it, “recognized a kindred tendency to blend rationalism and mysticism”, but while Poe strived to perfect his philosophy of composition, Strindberg rather uses his peculiar brand of mystical philosophy to decompose structural composition. The Strindbergian mixture of mystery and mysticism results less in a synthesis than a bewildering structure of mystery and transgression, the very enterprise of revelation will naturally be an endless and quite futile task.

The present section discusses such a relationship as found in The Burned Lot. I am not interested in deciding whether The Burned Lot is a true detective story or not (it is not) but in using the model of the specific genre in order to outline the description of the particular and peculiar work under consideration. The very fact that Strindberg does instigate a detective plot, in conflict with other elements of the play, creates several compositional fissures which should be examined rather than just whisked away.

1. The structure of crime

First, let me sum up a few characteristics of the plot-structure of the detective story as presented in Tzvetan Todorov’s essay on the topic; I am primarily interested in the pseudo-referential stability of the model as well as its structural principles of curiosity and closure.

First of all we could note that the detective story is a highly structural genre in the first place as it “tends toward a purely geometric architecture”, and that the structure is based on a duality between “the story of the crime and the story of the investigation”.230 Thus the genre is presented as a paradigmatic example of the structural distinction (already touched upon) between story and discourse: here and now, it points out a there and then. Consequently, it could also be described as reliant on a kind of conceptualized stability of indexical reference. The spectacular events are accordingly restricted to the absent primary story, “second” story should therefore be kept from “becoming opaque, from casting a useless shadow on the first”.235 While the story progresses through functional closure is granted. The solidity of such a design as base for reception is often de-

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226 Meidal, ”Författaren som detektiv”, p. 155.
227 Meidal, ”Ola Hansson and August Strindberg”, p. 186.
of the investigation”. 230 Thus the genre is presented as a paradigmatic example of
the structuralist distinction (already touched upon) between story and discourse:
on the one hand we have the circumstances constituting “what really happened”
in the past, on the other hand the gradual process of unearthing these “real” cir-
cumstances.231 The former story is, according to the model, described as absent
from the work, while the latter is present; and we follow the latter as it recounts
the former. Thereby the model may be described as based on a referential struc-
ture: here and now, it points out a there and then. Consequently, it could also be
described as reliant on a kind of conceptualized stability of indexical reference.

The spectacular events are accordingly restricted to the absent primary story,
which has already ended when the investigative work begins. In the course of in-
vestigation, not much happens at all since, as Todorov puts it, the “characters of
this second story, the story of the investigation, do not act, they learn”.232 This
entails a structural effect of curiosity: beginning with the all too apparent effects
of the crime, the progress gradually moves towards exposure of its concealed
cause, of revealing the culprit and his motives.233 The structure of curiosity prom-
ises, on the one hand, a final resolution, and on the other, that the resolution will
constitute a finale delayed until the very last part of the work. Thereby structural
closure is granted. The solidity of such a design as base for reception is often de-
scribed in terms of a contractual promise, as in the following formulation from
Catherine Belsey: “Information is initially withheld on condition of a ‘promise’ to
the reader that it will finally be revealed. The disclosure of this ‘truth’ brings the
story to an end.”234

Curiosity needs the story to be constructed in a manner that provides the
reader with the possibility to comprehend and conceptualize a consistent and un-
ambiguous series of fictional actions and events that may be considered the con-
sistent what-really-happened of the past. Although ambiguity will certainly pro-
fuse throughout the work in order to grant the deferring effect of curiosity it
should not affect the comprehended resolution or the “first” story as such. The
“second” story should therefore be kept from “becoming opaque, from casting a
useless shadow on the first”.235 While the story progresses through functional

230 Ibid.
231 Ibid., p. 140. On the dual structure, cf. e.g. Peter Brooks, Reading for the Plot. Design
Pyrhönen, Mayhem and Murder. Narrative and Moral Problems in the Detective Story,
Toronto 1999, p. 65.
232 Todorov, p. 139.
233 Ibid., p. 141.
235 Todorov, p. 141.
mystifications, these should still be all worked out at the time the story ends. Todorov points out that there is little room for stylistic extravagances that would risk muddling the what-really-happened in addition to the basic techniques employed for achieving curiosity-effects.236

The structure of the detective plot could accordingly be associated with architectural structure; chronological duality; rhetoric of curiosity; closure; and clarity of style. Relating these characteristics of the genre to The Burned Lot we find that the play adheres – at least to some degree – to those of dual chronology and curiosity. Lindström suggests the chronological duality of the plot:

The decisive events have already taken place; what remains is their consequences. [...] The only sensational event, the arrest of the Student, takes place off-stage. What is shown to the audience is largely the reactions of the characters when events and their connections are revealed to them by messengers.237

The play opens with the Plain Clothes detective entering the scene of the crime – the burnt down house – and starting to interrogate the Mason about the fire. The identity of the culprit and his motives are then revealed in the very last pages of the play. Along the way suspects are presented, motives suggested, and various pieces of evidence brought up for examination and discussion; Ekman points out how objects (hairpins, keys, a lamp stand, etc.) are utilized to recreate a full image of what-really-happened prior to the fire.238 When the play is over, we should have a sense of what-really-happened as is indicated by Ollén’s imposingly clear and concise summary of the crime plot. It presents the course of action in the following manner (the page references are retained for easy reference):

The dyer’s wife has had an affair with the children’s informant, a student (cf. p. 151 f.). When she visits him she leaves behind her hairpins in his room (p. 98). The dyer is jealous. When the student has gone to the theatre, he takes his (paraffin) lamp (p. 121 f.) and places it in the female cook’s closet, which is located under the student’s garret (p. 99 f.). Then he closes all doors and hangs the keys up (p. 96 f.). Previously he has made sure, he believes, that the premium to his fire-insurance has been paid (p. 154). The closet and the student’s garret catch fire and the house burns to the ground. The dyer lets the suspicions fall upon the student and indicates that he may have had an affair with the female cook (p. 121 f.). The wife is not able to

236 Cf. ibid., p. 140f.
238 Ekman, Strindberg and the Five Senses, p. 103.
clear the student from these suspicions without also exposing herself (p. 151 f.).

But when it comes to architecture, closure, and style, the play seems more reluctant to fit into the models of the detective genre. The tidy paraphrase of an unruly text is obviously highly heretical in Brooks’ sense, and Lindström’s step-by-step analysis of the plot exposes several disturbing glitches within the dual chronology of the play. Details relating to the fire are revealed suddenly and unexpectedly, they are lacking verisimilar explanation as well as compositional preparation, etc. Here I will take a look at a few such glitches and discuss what we are to do with them in interpretation.

II. A compositional glitch: how to read the newspaper

The previously discussed theme of epiphany, as well as the mystically postmortem protagonist, already constitutes an odd setup for a detective story. Todorov lists as one of the criteria of the genre that “everything must be explained rationally; the fantastic is not admitted”, and here the Stranger certainly diverges from Poe’s Dupin and Conan Doyle’s Holmes. Like his fictional predecessors, the Stranger is able to see right through people, to read their innermost thoughts from their bodily expressions. For example: when the Student enters the stage, apparently searching for someone, the Stranger is able to confirm his affair with the Wife simply by judging from the movement of his eyes. But while the abilities of the classical detectives were entirely dependent upon the analytical method – it is the strict method of analysis that separates Dupin from the sloppy

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239 Ollén, “Kommentarer”, p. 389. ("Färgarns fru har haft ett förhållande med barnens informator, en student (jfr texten s. 151 f.). När hon besökt honom glömmer hon kvar sina hårnålar i hans rum (s. 98). Färgarn är svartsjuk. När studenten har gått på teatern, tar han dennes (fotogen-)lampa (s. 121 f.) och placerar den i kokerskans garderob, som ligger under studentens vindskammare (s. 99f.). Därpå stänger han alla dörrar och hänger upp nycklarna (s. 96 f.). Dessförinnan har han trott sig förvissad om att brandförsäkringspremien är inbetalad (s. 154). Garderoben och studentens vindskammare tar eld och huset brinner ned. Färgarn låter missankarna falla på studenten och antyder att denne kan ha haft ett förhållande med kokerskan (s. 121 f.). Frun kan inte fria studenten från denna misstanke utan att röja sig själv (s. 151 f.).")

240 Cf. Lindström  "Strindberg’s Chamber Plays, Opus 2 ’After the Fire’”, p. 53 (on where the fire started), p. 61f. (on who placed the lamp inside the closet) or p. 63 (on the alleged accidental nature of the fire).

241 Todorov, p. 142.

Parisian police,\textsuperscript{243} we are told, and perhaps even Holmes from the “inferior” and “superficial” Dupin\textsuperscript{244} – those of the Stranger have, as we noted, an uncanny origin. Even the two brothers in \textit{Stormy Weather} were closer to the “true” detectives since their description of the hatless gentleman was still based on rational judgment grounded in personal experience. In contrast, the Stranger is a pure mystic.

Strindberg’s use of a walking dead debunker departs from the crime story not only thematically but also structurally, as it subverts the processual nature of curiosity as well as its inherent economy. While the structure of the detective plot relies on a gradual progression paralleling the gathering of external traits and indices already determined by a certain economy – it is only what relates to the particular case that is of interest – the theme of mystical epiphany eliminates both the progressive structure involved in the construction and reiteration of the investigative process since the protagonist has already seen through the very existence of being, and the economy of the case since all aspects of existence are just as significant symptoms of a universal corruption rather than a particular crime. Here everything is “humbug and swindles, everybody is suspected for the arson, and even if they prove to be innocent in that case, they are guilty of something else”, as Leif Leifer puts it.\textsuperscript{245} Ekman aptly points out how the theme of human deception is manifested on a wide scale ranging “from everyday embellishments of the truth to criminal acts”,\textsuperscript{246} and thus we may conclude that the contemporary critic complaining about the “feeble-minded inability to distinguish life values from mere trifles” actually seems to have identified one of the most distinguishing features of the dramaturgy of the play.\textsuperscript{247}

The most notable structural glitch caused by the attempted blending of the detective story and a more or less omniscient protagonist concerns the Stranger’s sudden evocation of a surprisingly edifying newspaper; this is in many ways analogous to the Gentleman’s encounter with the child in the previous play. Let us recapitulate Lindström’s observations regarding this particular dramaturgical detail. When the Stranger first enters, he is utterly startled by the fire, and seems to have lacking knowledge of those inhabiting the area. Later, when he speaks with his brother, he however reveals, entirely apropos, that the circumstances discovered only a moment earlier surrounding the fire – as well as the erotic affair

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{243} Poe, p. 124, 132, 135.
  \item \textsuperscript{244} Doyle, \textit{A Study in Scarlet}, p. 30.
  \item \textsuperscript{245} Leifer, p. 184. ("Alt er humbug og svindel, alle er mistænkt for brandstiftelsen, og om også de viser sig at være uskyldige i den sag, så er de skyldige i et andet forhold.")
  \item \textsuperscript{246} Ekman, \textit{Strindberg and the Five Senses}, p. 93.
  \item \textsuperscript{247} Sven Söderman in the \textit{Stockholms Dagblad}, quoted in Ollén, "Kommentarer", p. 394. ("Samma svagsinta oförmåga att skilja på livsvärden och struntsaker.")
\end{itemize}
and the secret history of the family – have already been made public by the newspaper. Since the Stranger only has been off-stage for a short moment, we may assume that this is when he comes across the (apparently freshly printed) paper containing surprisingly current information. Even more notable is the fact that the paper is never explicitly mentioned by any other character than the protagonist, and that even the plain clothes detective investigating the fire seems utterly unaware of its existence. When the Stranger, furthermore, reveals the family history to his brother, he refers not to the paper but to the long ago encounter in South Carolina; and Lindström points out how puzzling the Stranger’s comment that he does not want to conceal the truth from his brother becomes in the context of everything having already gone public in the press. These observations are telling, but what are we to do with them in interpretation?

While I find Lindström’s minute observations interesting they are nevertheless presented in a somewhat nitpicky and unnecessarily derogatory tone, as a critique of the Strindbergian inability to make his plot stick together. In this sense they could be considered as typical of Lindström’s general approach. This is apparently also how Sven Delblanc has experienced his method in a review of Lindström’s essay:

I do believe that it is utterly important during an analysis of this kind to separate everyday logic from aesthetical logic. The problem “when did The Stranger read the scandalous article” appears to me as something of a pseudo-problem. I do not believe that the spectator notices this problem at all during a performance; it involves no violation of the aesthetical logic. Furthermore, I believe one must ask the question: is the “over-complexity” of these two dramas [The Burned Lot and The Ghost Sonata] an aesthetic flaw? I rather believe this peculiarity to be a deliberately calculated and highly proficient effect.

I am naturally inclined to agree with the general attitude of this argument, and it is often decidedly easier to support the general approach of Delblanc than that of

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249 Ibid., p. 57f.
250 Ibid., p. 57.
Lindström, but still I would like to point out at least one disadvantage of the former approach: it turns *The Burned Lot* into the exact same kind of work as *The Ghost Sonata*. Thereby we would have to negate the apparent differences manifested by the general assessment of the former as a *bad* and the latter as a *good* play. By evoking the “good” principle in order to justify the “bad” play, we lose the “ruined” aspect of the work whereas the frictions, strains and tensions are important features of the play. I would even maintain that Strindberg actually *does* initialize certain aesthetic forms that are never fully carried out or accomplished. Lindström’s close scrutiny of the plot at least has the methodological potential to show us when, where and why the crevices and ruptures of the play break out, while Delblanc rather just smooths over the cracks and fragmentations as symptoms of a perfected composition. I would even go so far as to claim that the play really does violate the aesthetic logic of the detective story, which is at least one of the several sets of logic that operates within it. The detective genre is extraordinarily nitpicky due to its high demands on verisimilitude, but also due to its particular rhetoric as a kind of puzzle-game relying on certain regulations. It is perhaps one of the few literary genres were an author actually may break the rules rather than just transgress the boundaries of convention. The “whodunit par excellence is not the one which transgresses the rules of the genre, but the one which conforms to them”, as Todorov notes.²⁵²

*The Burned Lot* is obviously not a pure installment of the genre but it utilizes formal patterns from it. The way this is done is however more adequately described in terms of haphazard compositional ruination rather than carefully calculated proficiency. What Lindström considers as flaws often seems to be generated by his methodological approach as such; according to Delblanc’s aesthetically oriented framework the same elements could instead be considered as compositional assets. The latter attitude is tempting, yet it risks laying a falsely justifying stress on compositional explanations for features of a stylistic kind. Thus we find that Delblanc’s version has little to say about both *The Burned Lot* as such and the particular way of writing drama characteristic of Strindberg. One advantage of the Lindströmian approach is its ability to take the process of writing as contingent event into consideration. By going beyond the ideal of formal perfection we may approach the Strindbergian method in a more adequate manner. The following Lindströmian remark on the topic is, for instance, both relevant and instructive as it helps us avoid paying too much hermeneutical weight to what appears to be a result of authorial whims:

²⁵² Todorov, p. 138.
Of course, there is the possibility that these diffuse and occasionally contradictory statements are the results of a lapse on the part of the author. While working on the play, Strindberg may have found it necessary to strengthen the Stranger’s passive role as messenger in the showdown between the brothers, and the sensational reference to the paper may have been added without thought to the general context.253

Still, the motif of the paper is but a detail: Strindberg throws in a forced compositional motivation in order to get on with his play. A more crucial discussion concerns the end of the play. We have already noted that the solution to the detective mystery, while present, seems to lack the ability to bring the play to a closure. Here we touch upon a more remarkable instance of a conflict between the detective story and the Strindbergian theme of divine providence.

III. Putting an end to crime: on closure

Let us look at how the resolution is prepared and presented. The motif of insurance fraud is brought up early in the play, already during Plain Clothes interrogation of the Mason:

PLAIN CLOTHES. Is it considered to be arson?
THE MASON. All fires are.
PLAIN CLOTHES. So who’s suspected?
THE MASON. The interested one is always suspected by the fire-insurance company; that’s why I’ve never had assurance.
PLAIN CLOTHES. Have you found anything while digging?
THE MASON. You usually find all of the door keys, since no person has the time to take them out when fire’s at your doorstep, except sometimes, in exceptional cases, when they are taken out, that is … (p. 92)

The Mason’s insinuating but evasive replies indicate that we are dealing with a crime and that the characters are withholding information. Since Strindberg early on “pounds home the idea of arson”, as Törnqvist puts it, we ask ourselves the question “of the classical detective novel: Who dun it?”.254 The passage is furthermore interesting because it indicates the shift from the particular to the universal – not this fire, but all fires; not this suspect, but all suspects; not this case in particular, but the usual case. On the one hand it appears to be an element of mystification in the crime plot, but on the other hand it also seems to obstruct the very enterprise of reaching for an unambiguous truth.

253 Lindström, ”Strindberg’s Chamber Plays, Opus 2 ’After the Fire’”, p. 57.
254 Törnqvist, Strindbergian Drama, p. 165.
Clues related to the culprit and his motives are distributed throughout the play, as was clear from Ollén’s summary. Motifs related to insurance-fraud also recur. During the last pages, it is unexpectedly stated that the fire was accidental; but in the very final scene it becomes clear that it was the Dyer who set the house on fire, or at least that he is responsible for arranging for it to happen.\(^{255}\) Here are the closing lines of the play:

**THE STRANGER.** Hear now, brother, Rudolf, my mother’s son after all, you turned in the Stonecutter, because he erased … well … but you erased in my Christopher Columbus or the discovery of America.  
**THE DYER.** *(defeated.)* What, what, what …? Columbus?  
**THE STRANGER.** Yes, my book, which became yours!  
**THE DYER.** *(remains silent.)*  
**THE STRANGER.** Yes! And that you carried the Student’s lamp into the closet, that I understand, I understand everything, but do you know that the dinner table wasn’t made of ebony?  
**THE DYER.** It wasn’t?  
**THE STRANGER.** It was maple wood!  
**THE DYER.** Maple?  
**THE STRANGER.** The honor and pride of the house, valued at 2,000 kronor!  
**THE DYER.** That too? Humbug, that too!  
**THE STRANGER.** Yes!  
**THE DYER.** Ugh!  
**THE STRANGER.** The debt is settled! The case is cancelled, the matter can not be investigated, the parties resign …  
**THE DYER.** *(rushes out.)* I am ruined!  
**THE STRANGER.** *(picks up his wreath from the table.)* I was about to go to the cemetery, with this wreath, for the parents’ grave; but I will place it here, on the ruin of my ancestral home! my childhood home! *(Makes a silent prayer.)*  
And then: out into the wide world again, thou wanderer! *(p. 156f.)*

Elmquist is not alone in deeming the end strangely inadequate, yet the confused outline of the play’s finale is interesting. The resolution is presented in a way that confirms Ollén’s suggestion of the crime plot as a late after-thought. In no way is it presented as a culminating finish, but rather it seems interjected in-between the several other disparate motifs related to the disclosure of deceptions; the fake table, for instance, obviously functions as a symbol for the respectable family now publicly exposed as criminals.\(^{256}\)

\(^{255}\) Cf. e.g. Lindström, *Strindberg’s Chamber Plays, Opus 2 ‘After the Fire’*, p. 50f.: “The Dyer has become suspicious and, to eliminate his rival, he arranges evidence which will make the Student suspected of attempted arson. His plan succeeds beyond all expectation in that the house actually catches fire and burns down, whereupon the Student is arrested for arson.”

\(^{256}\) Cf. e.g. Ekman, *Strindberg and the Five Senses*, p. 100 and 105.
The exposure of the Dyer’s hypocritical and judgmental attitude seems more important than that of his criminal guilt: while being quick to report the moral lapses of others, he never owns up to his own crimes from childhood. A central theme of the play deals with the arrogance of passing judgment or wreaking vengeance; the moral is concisely condensed by Törnqvist as “behind the unjust verdicts of men a higher justice is at work”. The Stranger exemplifies it repeatedly: as a child he stole apples, and as an adult, his fruit plantation is infested by thieves; he wrongly brands a young artist as color-blind and thus ruins his career, and is himself dismissed from the navy on misguided grounds; and so on. Judicial punishment is thus redundant as every crime will be balanced out by providence. The sins of the protagonist are, however, not simply abolished because he has suffered from them, but first of all because of his recognition of the secret forces at work; primarily, it is in this regard that the Stranger differs from his brother. The Stranger has learnt if not to forget so to forgive, and time and again he rebukes the Dyer for his morass-mentality, seeking to reprimand his neighbors for their shortcomings when he should rather reconcile with the shortcomings of mankind. So here there is apparently no need for judicial verdict (and its associated accumulation of proof beyond all reasonable doubt) to achieve balance and closure. The Dyer is rather caught in his own trap: having always cared to keep up appearances his entire life is exposed as a great lie, and having failed in spite of careful preparations to pay his insurance fee in time he also becomes financially ruined. Here Strindberg provides us with one final contrastive illustration of the two brothers. The Dyer sent his wife to pay the bill, but she sent their bookkeeper, who in turn arrived a couple of hours too late; and while the Dyer wants to sue the bookkeeper and make him pay, the Stranger urges him to forgive and to draw wisdom from the consequences of his own actions.

The two mashed-up clusters of formal and thematic associations seem incompatible: investigation negates epiphany, justice negates providence, truth negates fate, and so on. The conflict may be illustrated by briefly comparing the detective story with tragedy which, as a genre, has also been described in terms of retrospective analysis. They are, however, as I see it structural and thematic opposites. Curiosity is negated by tragic irony because in the first case it is the reader’s...

257 Törnqvist, Strindbergian Drama, p. 168.
258 Cf. e.g. Ward, p. 250f.
260 Friedrich Schiller’s letter to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 2 October 1797, available e.g. in Correspondence Between Schiller and Goethe, from 1794 to 1805, trans. George H. Calvert, vol. 1, New York and London 1845, p. 341 is usually used as the point of departure for such definitions.
insight that is postponed, while in the second it is that of the protagonist. Thus the pragmatics or rhetoric of composition are at odds: in the crime genre delay entails the promise of a positive solution, while in tragedy it rather builds up a sense of awe resulting from the portentous knowledge of an inevitable catastrophe, or, as Szondi puts it, of “the fact that man meets his demise along the very path he took up to escape this demise”.261 Thus, in tragedy, the investigative pattern becomes thematically and structurally redundant, since there is nothing to be revealed but only unfolded, and since insight or knowledge is not something to strive for but something that befalls you or hits you like a blow of destiny. The same goes for judicial verdict, when in tragedy one is always already guilty in striving for innocence. In Strindberg, retribution does not depend, furthermore, on the human agent’s disclosure of the truth, as disclosure itself strikes as an act of godly retribution.

The Burned Lot is obviously neither a tragedy nor a crime story, but as Strindberg assembles his materials from both genres (and others) he prevents the double-sided resolution to function as a resolution at all: nothing is resolved as the author simply ends his entangled play by cutting the Gordian knot. A loose end left blatantly hanging is for instance the case of the poor student; at the end of the play we find no indication that the innocently framed ever will be exculpated. As with the newspaper we may choose to simply do away with the entire matter. Törnqvist, for instance, seems to argue that it does not really matter as all the inhabitants of the morass are suspected for some reason or other; Strindberg simply highlights two of them – the Student and the Dyer – in order to “structure the play in a reasonably obvious, suspense-creating way”.262 But it is disturbing when the admittedly innocent character remains in custody at the end of the play. It would be unfortunate to simply dismiss problems related to one of the logics initialized by the play because it may be justifiable according to a different active logic, since what we have at our hands first of all is a multiple and shattered texts. Rather we should take the opportunity to examine the rifts as they run through the play, all the way to its very ending.

Strindberg lets the Stranger comment upon the Student’s unfortunate situation by concluding that the web in which he is entangled “is not bound by humans …”, and shortly thereafter he declares that no one suffers without reason (p. 151f.). Thus we may conclude, as Ward does, that the Student “with appropriate irony […] is punished wrongly for the Dyer’s crime, but justly for his own crime

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262 Törnqvist, Strindbergian Drama, p. 167.
of sleeping with the Dyer’s wife”. 263 In such case the balancing force of provid-
dence seems to be at work and we would be dealing with an elegant illustration
of the ironies of fate. But the end does not provide us with a sense of such ac-
complished design as the character simply seems to vanish from the play as the
author is done with him. At this point the cosmic balance seems thrown in as a
simple way of letting the author go on to deal with the showdown between the
two brothers. An important aspect contradicting the assumed irony is the fact
that the Student’s erotic involvement with the wife is never presented as wrong
according to the normative framework of the play, and he is rather one of the few
characters who escapes being scolded by the protagonist. The predicament of the
character rather fits into a series of motifs showing how the innocent take the
blame for the Dyer’s misdeeds. But neither of these suggested lines is actually car-
died out. Once again we seem to be dealing with the effects not of compositional
design but of the material process of production, and the Student is abandoned
not because Strindberg tries to make a point but because he needs to put the play
to an end.

The openness of the end seems to have left the door wide open for vivid inter-
pretations. The result of the crime investigation is double-sided: on the one hand, the
Dyer is, fairly obviously, pointed out as the culprit;264 but on the other hand we are
told that the case is dismissed as the fire was accidental.265 Törnqvist, following
Lindström, settles for both options: the Dyer puts the lamp in the closet to insinu-
ate an affair between the Student and the female cook, and to make the former sus-
pected of arson; but the lamp accidentally explodes and thus the house burns.266
The question of guilt would then, according to Törnqvist, be a matter of opinion:

The question of guilt proves insoluble. “The case is canceled, the matter
can’t be cleared up”, the Stranger states at the end. The words pregnantly
summarize not only his but also our conclusion, the conclusion we have ar-
rive at on the basis of the presented material. A conclusive solution as to
how the fire has arisen is denied us. Strindberg carefully avoids any one-
sided attribution of debts between Fate/God on the one hand and mankind
(the individual) on the other. In the last instance it is up to us to take a
stand in the matter. 267

263 Ward, p. 249. Cf. also Lindström, ”Strindberg’s Chamber Plays, Opus 2 ’After the
Fire’”, p. 63f.: “The student is arrested for a crime that he has not committed, but he
must take this as punishment for the offence he committed by deceiving the Dyer.”
264 In addition to the résumés already presented, cf. e.g. Berendsohn, p. 536.
265 Törnqvist, Strindbergian Drama, p. 247, attributes such an interpretation to Blom-
Edström, but while dismissing her version, his own ends up surprisingly close to it.
266 Ibid., p. 167; Lindström, ”Strindberg’s Chamber Plays, Opus 2 ’After the Fire’”, p.
63.
267 Törnqvist, Strindbergian Drama, p. 168.
But if no fire was expected, the entire motival complex related to insurance fraud would fall flat to the ground. The Dyer is presented as guilty – and justly punished – and we do have a pretty clear understanding of what has happened: he is responsible for the fire by being both malicious and reckless. What is interesting, however, is that the ambiguities surrounding the ending to a large degree depend on the recklessness of the author. Take for instance the main reason provided as to why the student’s unfortunate predicament would be impossible to set straight: the Wife is unable to provide the wrongly accused Student with an alibi as she would have to expose their romantic involvement. But that reason, evoked repeatedly throughout the play, would lack rationale as the mysterious newspaper has already announced the affair to the public. While Strindberg seems to have constructed the motif early on – perhaps in order to exclude the possibility of a final judicial verdict and to add to the theme of entangled relations – the construction is shattered by his later inclusion of the newspaper in the plot. The refusal of closure in such a case is not brought about by intricate design but by the author’s haphazard cluttering of disparate elements. Yet we have enough structurality to cause a sense of structural frustration as Strindberg initializes forms without paying them compositional attention. Thus we could describe The Burned Lot as a case of what Brian McHale calls “weak narrativity”, or a story told “poorly’, distractedly, with much irrelevance and indeterminacy, in such a way as to evoke narrative coherence while at the same time withholding commitment to it”.268

IV. A final note on light in the darkness

A final point that should be made in relation to the end of the play concerns its optimistic tone: right in the middle of crimes and punishments, false accusations, revenge and lies and bankruptcy, we somewhat surprisingly stumble upon what looks like a happy ending. At this point the detective plot enters an unholy alliance with the theme of the outside, as both the main character and the author seem to find a joyful relief in the possibility of simply getting out and moving on, “out into the wide world again”. While the Stranger needs to solve no more crimes and confront no more injustices of the past, Strindberg is now liberated from having to resolve plots, finalize themes, finish up motifs and tie together the disparate threads of plot. The lack of closure emerges as an affirmation of the potential line of flight. The happy ending then occurs in the only way it may oc-

cur at all: suddenly. Like a lily of the field it pops up from the dull and pessimistic soil of the morass and the aggressively misanthropic mood of the play.

There is, however, a confused kind of *peripeteia* appearing after approximately two thirds of the second (and thus final) act: in a few pages, a moment of light shines through, as Strindberg throws in the brief dramatic miniature representing the preparations for the wedding among the young inhabitants of the morass. There are recurring elements which seem intended for comical or even farcical effect. In the following section, I take a brief look on such elements, and also consider Strindberg’s way of producing a form where no element is ever worked out, but one more is always added. I also discuss the recurring motif of the bishop’s funeral. In the case of the wedding we find a bright stroke of joy found in the possibility of affirming life, and in the second case of the funeral we find the joy involved in affirming writing.

The stories of a wedding and a funeral

While the general shift from the particular crime to universal mysticism, causing the clashes between genres, is often presented rather dismally, we find aspects of it obviously intended for comic effect. Meidal suggests that Strindberg “ironically toys with the conventions of the classical detective novel” throughout the Chamber Plays and traces of such parody is certainly found in *The Burned Lot*.269 The play could perhaps be related to the genre of the “metaphysical” detective story, defined as “a text that parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions [...] with the intention, or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing”.270 Still, that move would risk indicating that subversion or parody here functions on a global level, as an accomplished compositional strategy, while in *The Burned Lot* such elements or aspects only take place in-between forms, as weeds in the cracks of design. In any case, these elements also vary the theme related to outside and flight as they suggest how there are cracks in the abysmal cathedral, turning into passages of brightness and hope.

Take the following humorously presented scene parodying elements of the detective genre by subverting the very mode of interrogation. The Stranger searches for a means to clear the arrested student of the false accusations, and thus queries

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the Stonecutter about the Wife, i.e. the mistress and the only potential alibi. The
pursuit is, as is clear from the following excerpt, highly unsuccessful:

THE STRANGER. So, who’s the Wife, my sister-in-law?
THE STONECUTTER. Yes! – She was a teacher in the household when the last
wife made off!
THE STRANGER. What’s her character?
THE STONECUTTER. Hm! character? Well, I don’t know what that is. Do
you mean occupation, sir? Name and character it says in the census regis-
ter, but it isn’t character that’s intended but occupation.
THE STRANGER. I mean temperament!
THE STONECUTTER. Oh I see, well, tempers shift; in my case it depends on
who I’m talking to. With a decent person I’m decent, and with a wicked
one I become a wild animal.
THE STRANGER. But we were talking about the Wife’s everyday tempera-
ment?
THE STONECUTTER. Weell, naught; like most people; gets vexed, if you
tease her; then merry, once again; why, you can’t always be in the same
mood.
THE STRANGER. I mean, is she cheerful or gloomy?
THE STONECUTTER. When everything goes well, she’s happy, and when it
turns against you, she’s sad or angry, like the rest of us.
THE STRANGER. Yes, but, what kind of manners has she got?
THE STONECUTTER. Well, it all equals out! – But, being an educated person,
she’s well-behaved, although, that is to say, she may turn crude, when she
loses her temper.
THE STRANGER. I couldn’t make head or tail of that!
THE STONECUTTER. (pats him on the shoulder.) No, you can’t make head
or tail of people, my good man!
THE STRANGER. He’s superb! (p. 141f.)

The answers undermine both the questions posed and the very enterprise of estab-
lishing a person’s “character”. The comical scene is thus simultaneously caught
up in the serious thematic shift from the crime-plot to the vision of mankind and
from the aggressive demand for truth to the reconciliatory recognition of the un-
answerability of existence: the individual is just like everybody else, and thus le-
gio, impossible to pin down; the solid kernel of identity is replaced by changing
moods in variable situations, etc. The Stranger’s reaction once again actualizes
the theme of flight: instead of getting distressed by the impossible, he gives up,
not in defeat but in joy, finding the whole situation delightful in its absurdity. The
naive commonsense of the insider resonates with the mystical insight of the out-
sider, as the comical scene corresponds to the serious theme. Still, the scene re-
mains locally isolated and may appear like a whim interjected rather than inte-
grated into the play.
There are also other interspersed moments of fun; Ollén e.g. finds jovial elements as well as black comedy in the protagonist’s tirades. Ollén, ”Kommentarer”, p. 393. The Gardener is a case in point; Ekman finds that his “comic nature lightens the drama”, Ekman, Strindberg and the Five Senses, p. 107. and Lindström refers to his monologues as solos “in a tone of peasant humour”. Lindström, ”Strindberg’s Chamber Plays, Opus 2 ’After the Fire’”, p. 53. His lines are confused and scatterbrained and seem intended as streaks of slapstick comedy or farce. His confused state of mind is especially utilized as he prepares for the wedding between his son and the Stonecutter’s daughter, which, in turn, constitutes the brightest moment of the play. The young lovers represent a sense of hope related to the possibility of fleeing the dull inside, as in the following excerpt from the dialogue:

ALFRED. Why, it is nice and open here, airy and sunny, and I have heard that it’s going to become a street …
MATILDA. Then you might move out?
ALFRED. Yes, we shall all move out, and I like that, I like the new, I would like to emigrate …
MATILDA. Ugh no! Do you know that our doves were building here on the roof, and when it burned last night, they flew around at first, but when the roof fell in, they went right into the fire. They couldn’t part with the old home!
ALFRED. But we have to get out of here – out! Father says that the soil here is impoverished … (p. 144)

Once more we find the insular home described as a luring death-trap, and we sense the potential relief associated with the way out. What is more interesting about the wedding-scene (or the preparing-for-the-wedding-scene) is its miniature comedic structure, opening in darkness and ending in brightness, once again merely thrown in into the larger structure. The light end, quoted below, actually verges on the ridiculous, and thus generates a stark contrast to the enshrouding gloom:

ALFRED. Now go and get dressed! I shall order some carriages!
MATILDA. We’ll have carriages?
ALFRED. Of course! Closed carriages!
MATILDA. Closed carriages? And tonight? Oh what fun! Come, come quick! We’ll have carriages!
ALFRED. (takes her hand and they hop out.)
Here I come! – Hey! (p. 147)
Ekman suggests that the scene, in spite of its cheerful tone, actually functions to reinforce the pessimistic theme concerning dissimulation and deceit. While it is generally believed among the inhabitants that the already poor gardener has been ruined by the fire, he suddenly turns out to be the rather wealthy loan shark of the morass. The happy end is accordingly prompted by Matilda who, after having believed that the wedding was cancelled, now realizes that it will be after all. Ekman thereby concludes that the Gardener’s repeatedly expressed self-contempt was “intended to deceive”, and adds that the unexpected revelation “contributes to a young girl’s loosing her illusions”.274 But the scene is presented in a bright light, while still presenting versions on the motif of faked personalities. Matilda is happily surprised and relieved rather than devastated. True, Strindberg adds “a touch of disharmony” to the passage, as Törnqvist puts it.275 Still, it does not seem as if pure pessimism is what Strindberg is after since he lets the scene end in the way it ends, and as it paves the way for the final lines of the play which also asserts the possibility of relieving flight in a positive manner.

As with several other elements, the wedding is thrown into the mix, and while we may discern a few thematic and structural functions of it we can only guess what the author really sought to achieve in including it within the play. The scene is yet another one of those threads spun by a weaver who refuses to answer for his actions, and perhaps we may even go so far as to consider one of the protagonist’s lines – “My speech lacks purpose, the memories are pushing on” – the author’s defense for repeatedly straying from his compositional tracks (p. 111).

The Strindbergian attitude towards his writing is explicated in relation to one of the other sidetracks of the play, namely the recurring references to the monument raised at the cemetery in memory of a “bishop Stecksén, of the Academy, you know” (p. 102). All we learn about the bishop is that he “apparently wrote books”, and that he collected insects, or, as it is put by one of the characters, “had pieces of cork in which he put needles, with flies on them” (p. 95f.). Törnqvist considers this “one of the more puzzling elements of the play” and describes the very brief characterization as “hardly a flattering portrait”;276 and Ekman as well finds the characterization “derogatory”.277 According to Törnqvist, the bishop functions in two ways: the monument is a contrast to the much plainer burial of an anonymous body mentioned by the Hearse Driver, and it constitutes

274 Ekman, Strindberg and the Five Senses, p. 107. (“loosing” in the original.)
275 Törnqvist, Strindbergian Drama, p. 173. Törnqvist’s pessimistic interpretation is close to Ekman’s: “The seed of duplicity characteristic of the older generation has already been planted in them; their development seems sadly predestinated.”)
276 Ibid., p. 176.
277 Ekman, Strindberg and the Five Senses, p. 103.
one of several motifs dealing with the debunking of the socially respected (the destroyer of the country, the family of smugglers, etc.). Thus the bishop is allegedly utilized to exemplify “the façade mentality, the humbug”.278

Still, I find the presentation too brief, sporadic and isolated to make such assertions, and while it is perhaps not very flattering, it is not very unflattering either. The actual stimulus for similar interpretations is found in Strindberg’s own comments upon the passages, and if we should pay them attention, we should pay them attention in their entirety. Here is Strindberg’s answer when his German translator asked him about the possible significance of the bishop’s monument:

The uncompleted (aborted) intentions may remain there, as they provide verisimilitude to the portrait of life, since life is full of wrecked plans, whims, projects that work as the padding of conversations, and yet create sources of energy. The bishop’s funeral is merely a background decoration that provides the mood and perhaps signifies something that I don’t remember; maybe “an undeserved halo”, suggesting the emptiness of it all, and the glorification of emptiness!279

The ground for the interpretation of the motif is certainly shaky as the “perhaps” and the “maybes” rather indicate that the motif is never worked out within the play. But while not being hermeneutically very enlightening, the passage is informative in regards of the Strindbergian mode of literary production. We are asserted that the element actually is incomplete and abortive, but also that it is kept that way; it is neither a flaw nor a function, but an effect caused when the event of writing is posited within the text of the play. This does not necessarily make it a “good” element in a “good” play since Strindberg rather seems to stick to the “bad” for one reason or another. While thematic significances certainly may be suggested, we should probably refrain from stopping at one fixed interpretation.

Thus we will have to ask ourselves how to deal critically with a text that does not constitute an accomplished architectural structure but which is ruined by the author and intentionally left that way. First of all we must decide how much we are to interpret at all as our suggested meanings risk lacking support not only in the author’s intentions but also in the very kind of composite form at our hands. My main concern regards the possibility of a uniform and total interpretation to hermeneutically “ruin” the very ruination which is an important aspect of the play as our actual object of investigation. After having thus tried to outline the composite nature of the play, as well as its underlying poetics of writing, I will finally approach one of the few and fullest attempts at providing the play with a

274 Törnqvist, Strindbergian Drama, p. 176.
279 Letter to Emil Schering, 24 April 1907.
consistent interpretation. The following section will be used to critically examine some problematic aspects of Törnqvist’s reading of the play as fundamentally based on intertextual correspondences based on Biblical reference. While I do not deny the presence of Biblical allusions within the play, I would still like to ask in what way they function: do they totalize the play so that it primarily becomes an intertextual construct, or are they rather yet another example of stylistic weed cropping up throughout the work?

An intertextual story?

Törnqvist opens his essay on *The Burned Lot* play by providing the following refutation of Lamm’s characterization of the play as abortive and crammed with several but never worked out ideas:

As a matter of fact Strindberg has given the play a shape which closely corresponds to its ‘message’. At first sight it seems highly chaotic; on closer inspection a meaningful pattern can be divined; the threads come together. What is true of our experience of the play is also true of life: not until one gets old and “one’s eyes can really see”, as the central figure states it, is one able to interpret the “pattern”, which “the world weaver has woven”.280

To my eye, this elegant justification of the disorderly design of the play seems a bit too neat, and it could even be considered to miss the mark when it comes to the meaning of the weave-motif. As we have seen, Strindberg never provides us with an interpretation of the hieroglyph, and he seems quite uninterested in one; in the context of the play’s theme we realize that the very search for a hidden meaning would be to violate the insights of epiphany. Instead of a spelled out meaning we are left with a confirmation: we are not to decipher the cipher but to accept our position within it; meaning is not found beneath the bewildering surfaces of life but within life’s ability to bewilder us; and we should not delve into the depths of hermeneutics, but get out of them, as their probing would be to demand answers from the unanswerable. Thus we may merely cry in joy: “This is Life! The World weaver has woven it!” Applying the theme of the play to the analysis, we would end up on the entirely opposite shore of Törnqvist: refuse the allure of answers and assert in cynic coolness that the worse it is, the more interesting it gets! Hereby, Törnqvist seems to have misinterpreted the very motif used as his interpretational starting point.

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280 Törnqvist, *Strindbergian Drama*, p. 163.
Let us consider Törnqvist’s approach. The analysis of The Burned Lot presented in Strindbergian Drama is later replicated in a more extensive work dealing with Strindberg and different topics related to dramatic theory. There it serves to exemplify the concept of “intertext”, defined as “such passages of dialogue that are not fully comprehensible without the knowledge of the external texts that are alluded to”. The chapter on intertext is largely restricted to biblical allusions, as is the analysis of the specific play; without knowledge of the Bible we thus risk, Törnqvist claims, missing out on deeper significances of the text, “probably more so now than in Strindberg’s days, as biblical knowledge has diminished as secularization has expanded”. Let us take a look at some examples of such secret meanings without which the play is considered incomprehensible.

First I must point out that Törnqvist is prone to over-interpretation whether he is dealing with allusions or not; the problem lies not in the theory of intertextuality but in his arbitrary way of evoking significances. Take his remark on the opening scene of the play. Here is the initial stage direction:

THE PAINTER stands stroking the window cases of the Inn; he follows all conversations, listening.

THE MASON stands digging in the ruins. A PLAIN CLOTHES DETECTIVE enters. (p. 89)

According to Törnqvist, the description should be interpreted in three steps. Realistically speaking, both characters process the effects of the fire, the one patching up the damaged paint, the other trying to locate its source. Symbolically, however, we find that the one “tries to cover up what the fire has laid bare” while the other “tries to reveal something”. Furthermore we are to associate the former with the Dyer and the latter with the protagonist. Törnqvist thereby concludes that here “two silent minor characters illustrate the thematic conflict which the two chief characters, the brothers, are later to incarnate”. But it would be impossible to apprehend such intricate symbolism at this early stage, and if we were to do it later on, we would at least suspect that the author would hint us in such a direction. The function is naturally much simpler: the fire is established, as is the

281 Törnqvist, Det talade ordet, p. 185. (“Intertextualitet avser med andra ord här sådana dialogavsnitt som inte är fullt begripliga utan kännedom om de externa texter som äsyftas.”)
282 Ibid., p. 186. (“Detta betyder att en del av innebörden i dialogen för flertalet åskådare […] går förlorad, nu säkert mer än på Strindbergs tid, eftersom bibelkunskapen avtagit med den tilltagande sekulariseringen.”)
283 Törnqvist, Strindbergian Drama, p. 174.
284 Ibid.
prying mentality of the morass and the mode of investigation. The Painter is of interest not because he is painting, but because he is eaves-dropping.

Having established this tendency in Törnqvist we may move on to the Biblical intertexts, or rather, to the often quite simple references to Christian faith which is what he really is discussing. Here is a short excerpt representing the Stranger’s first appearance onstage:

THE STRANGER. (looks around.) Has there ... been a fire – here?
THE GARDENER. Yes, it burned yesterday evening.
THE STRANGER. Oh, My God! (p. 101)

And here is the interpretation: “Laconic though it is, the reaction is telling. Unlike the people of the block, the Stranger connects the fire not with a human instigator – but with God. To him the fire is a manifestation of fate.” 285 The general strategy is interesting. In the play we find a recurring shift, what Lamm terms “the transition from realism to dream like fantasy”, 286 where the small and seemingly insignificant object is proved by the protagonist to bear an elevated universal significance. The protagonist’s approach is then reproduced by the interpreter in order to show how even the smallest detail of the play exemplifies a global meaning. Here it is the scholar that becomes the detective or de-bunker, putting all the disparate pieces together to form a unified pattern. Thereby he furthermore demonstrates an ability to succeed where previous scholars – stopping at declaring it all a disorderly ragbag of mixed stuff – fall short. But in doing so the interpretation negates the play which is shattered and out of joint, and it subordinates the play to the interpreter’s own hermeneutical construct. Once again we lose the opportunity to describe a specific kind of “ruined” poetics when all plays may be interpreted in more or less the same way according to the fancies of the scholar.

Another example. As is usually the case in Strindberg, the fire has a symbolic function. Leifer makes its combination of destruction and purification one of the central points in his essay on the Chamber Plays, 287 and I agree with Törnqvist that the fire in The Burned Lot is provided “both with negative and positive connotations”. 288 The double notion is condensed in the image of the apple tree having bloomed from the heat. Furthermore we note that the flower has positive connotations, it is pure and contrasts to the corrupted state of man, and it even

285 Ibid., p. 165.
286 Lamm, Strindbergs dramer II, p. 385. (”Hur naturligt och omärkligt sker ej övergången från realism till drömartad fantasy!”)
287 Cf. Leifer, p. 185.
288 Törnqvist, Strindbergian Drama, p. 168.
alludes to a Biblical passage (“the lilies of the field”, Matt. 6:28) supporting that very interpretation. Yet it is misleading to state that the “connection fire-flowering – earlier visualized at the end of A Dream Play – can be interpreted causally: the flowering (the salvation) is preceded/determined by fire (suffering, purification)”\(^\text{289}\). The reference to the earlier play negates the fact that a motif recurring in both plays may be treated in very different ways as they appear in entirely different contexts. In the dream play we know that the symbolic theme is superior, and that realistic scenes are not provided with thematic significance, but that thematic significance is presented through (pseudo-)realistic scenes. There Strindberg carries out the overarching theme of salvation on the global level. But here the motif is thrown in as mere fragments, haphazardly, and it lacks formal realization: there is so to speak no salvation-structure in The Burned Lot, and no character reaches salvation. The inhabitants of the morass are rather left behind after their deceit has been exposed. The important thing to remember is that the biblical allusions, while there, do not necessarily constitute carefully constructed symbols as they may be sporadic and random embryos of aborted intentions. There is accordingly reason to avoid fitting them together all too neatly.

Here are a few other, uncontroversial biblical references. The orchard is explicitly associated with the Garden of Eden as the Stranger recounts how as a child he experienced the temporarily lease of the orchard as him being “expelled from Paradise – and the tempter stood behind every tree!” (p. 111). He furthermore tells how he cursed a tree in anger of which a branch later would dry out, and that it made him think of “the Fig tree that our Saviour once cursed” (p. 111). He even refers to a great oak as “the Tree of Knowledge” as it was there that he lost his innocence when reading erotic literature found concealed in his father’s bookcase; thus, he says, he “withdrew from the paradise of childhood” (p. 111).

These passages constitute an undeniable complex of motifs related to biblical mythology and especially the myth of Genesis, but they provide no reason for us to consider, in the manner of Törnqvist, every single element of the play as part of an intricate reworking of the biblical prototype. To point out that the bookcase and the volumes of erotica are “Strindberg’s counterpart of the forbidden tree of knowledge” and an “equivalent to the eating of the forbidden fruit” is stating the obvious.\(^\text{290}\) We may also accept that the motif has a double function in disclosing the hypocrisy of the family as well as that of mankind in general.\(^\text{291}\) But a third suggestion suggested by Törnqvist is more problematic. The mere fact that

\(^\text{289}\) Ibid., p. 169.
\(^\text{290}\) Ibid., p. 172.
\(^\text{291}\) Ibid.
the motif involves a father is treated as him acting as “a substitution for God”, and the father’s pretense should thus be understood as that “guilt is transferred from mankind to their Creator”. But the interpretation misses its mark once more as it runs against the very grain of the play’s theme, according to which the powers should not be questioned but recognized. In The Burned Lot, arrogance towards the Weaver is a worse sin than stacking up porn behind your books on prayers, poetry and gardening.

The shaky father/God-association dupes the interpreter into one more misleading comparison between the Chamber Play and the earlier dream play as he states that they both deal with the same fundamental question, i.e. whether man is to blame or solely his Creator. But in The Burned Lot there is no more room for doubt or ambivalence: reconciliation is only available through unreserved affirmative belief. In this case, interpretation results in misrepresentation rather than elucidation of the work.

The interpretations become even more problematic as they are later developed. Since the orchard is established as a new Garden of Eden, and as Sprinchorn already has described that the two young lovers correspond to Adam and Eve, Törnqvist is able to suggest that the Gardener, Alfred’s father, also represents “the first gardener, God”. During the initial interrogative scene of the play, the interrogated Mason refuses to provide the policeman with any information that would possibly be detrimental for the Gardener. Törnqvist’s conclusion seems utterly impulsive: “Nothing but good about God! The Mason consistently adheres to his view that humanity is to be blamed.” But such a significance is highly improbable as it is more or less impossible to note, especially at the early stage of the play. Once more we must conclude that the passage rather functions to establish the morass as a place where people pry and withhold information. I find it somewhat remarkable that Törnqvist decides to pass on such spontaneous impulses to his later work, published approximately two decades later.

The later remark also applies to a few more severe cases of exegetis (or rather eisegeisis, reading in rather than reading out) gone out of hand. At one point the Stranger refers to the apple tree as a “vit Gyllen”/“white Golden” (p. 111). Törnqvist claims that the tree thus belongs to the, metaphorically speaking, “cross-

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292 Ibid.
293 Cf. Strindberg, Ett drömspel, p. 88.
295 Törnqvist, Strindbergian Drama, p. 173.
296 Ibid.
297 Cf. Törnqvist, Det talade ordet, p. 199.
bearing” family Cruciferae, and that Strindberg, by carefully identifying the tree, would be indicating “the connection between Fall and the Redemption” and thus “between the first and the second Adam”. The associative line would then go something like this: Paradise → Adam → (God →) Forbidden fruit → Apple → Cross → Jesus. But the apple rather belongs to the family Rosaceae (or, in earlier floras, Pomaceae, which however is now considered to belong to the former). The intended function behind the tree can thereby hardly be the kind of confused botanical puzzle suggested. Instead, we are dealing first of all with yet another remembrance of an emotional event from childhood, reactivated by the reencounter with the family home; and we actually find that an abundance of different cultivars of apple, pear and poplar occurs in the passage, as the Stranger goes on to tell how, while suffering from yellow fever in Jamaica, he still was able to recount all the different trees of his childhood orchard. Thus we also recognize a typically Strindbergian stylistic trait found throughout his oeuvre: the catalogue of specialist terms, originating from fields such as botany, zoology, chemistry, folkloristics, and so on. The compositional function of such a list may be hard to define, and our guesses are no better than those Strindberg presented regarding the bishop’s monument: perhaps it sets the mood or creates the milieu, perhaps it is there purely for rhythmical reasons or simply the effect of defamiliarization caused by esoteric jargon as such. If we are desperate for secret meanings found in cultivars of tree we could perhaps note that the fake mahogany table in reality was made of maple, as the Swedish name, “lönn”, connotes secrecy and surreptitiousness. But here the inclusion of the different trees seems to have been prompted by some suddenly awakened association. While it may not be compositionally motivated, we still find it typically Strindbergian.

A similar case relates to the volume of erotica, specified in the play only as “a certain Chevalier’s famous memoirs” (p. 115). According to Törnqvist the passage “obviously refers to Casanova’s erotic memoirs”, while Ollén rather suggests Jean Baptiste Louvet de Couvrai’s Les Amours du chevalier de Faublas. There is no reason to discuss who is correct, but only to note that Strindberg’s use of the motif is quite self-explanatory: it needs no reference, but is functional as it is – we understand what kind of literature is intended, and we understand the motif of the young boy’s initiation. The way a certain kind of literature is used compositionally is of far greater interest for interpretation than what actual book

293 Törnqvist, Strindbergian Drama, p. 170.
299 I am greatly indebted to Svengunnar Ryman for straightening this out in personal correspondence.
300 Törnqvist, Strindbergian Drama, p. 171.
301 Ollén, ”Kommentarer”, p. 450f.
the protagonist could have been thought to have read. Neither of these motifs relies on our knowledge of specific works, biblical passages or even botanical charts.

Being a literary author, Strindberg naturally has every right to include whatever whim and fancy he would like within his works; and this is often what makes him an interesting writer. We have greater reason to call Törnqvist’s interpretational whims in question as they are presented in a scholarly context. One would for instance presume that Ollén’s precise (and equally questionable) specification of the apple tree (as a “(Mälardalens) vitgylling” in his commentaries to the critical edition would prompt some kind of reconsideration, but Törnqvist still finds his results significant enough to repeat ten years after Ollén’s often clarifying comments. 302 At one time he however seems to have changed his mind: his earlier speculations on the meaning of the fact that the protagonist has bought his breast-pin at Charing Cross are, in the later work, supplemented by the admission that the Strindbergian play on words sometimes may come across as “farically forced”. 303 But I find reason to argue that the forced significances obviously belong solely to Törnqvist in these cases.

While the entire matter may be considered a technicality, we should still remain careful as not to lose sight of our real objective in studying the work as a specific composite of forms, structures and styles. Törnqvist’s treatment of the play as a uniform meaning-construct sometimes verges on the absurd, but at the same time he admits that the Strindbergian version of Genesis “is no coherent counterpart. Rather, fragments of the story of the Fall appear here and there, in transparent contemporary disguise”. 304 Within the statement lies my own critical remark against his analysis: we are dealing with fragments, with the rubble of ruins, not an intricate labyrinth built to harbor a concealed mystery. It would perhaps be surprising if the play was not crammed with religious allusions, to the bible, to theosophy (the world weaver), Swedenborg (the Dyer’s hands), as well as to other kinds of hinted references and we certainly find baffling correspondences between the protagonist and Christ, as both, as Törnqvist notes, have “died” – on Maundy Thursday! – and again ‘arisen’ from the dead. 305 Nevertheless, I suggest that we remain careful so as not to make such actually elusive observations themselves disappear in the muddled morass of arbitrary interpretations.

302 Cf. Törnqvist, Det talade ordet, p. 195 and 197.
303 Cf. ibid., p. 183, and Törnqvist, Strindbergian Drama, p. 178.
304 Törnqvist, Strindbergian Drama, p. 170.
305 Ibid., p. 178.
The main problem, as well as the great opportunity, involved in treating *The Burned Lot* is its ruined state: several of the problems discussed in this chapter arise as there is enough order to create one kind of interpretational problems, and not enough order to create those of another kind. The next Chamber Play, *The Ghost-Sonata*, is somewhat different. Instead of decomposing a bundle of different forms and structures by tossing them together Strindberg manages to create a successful work – the play is obviously the most appreciated of the Chamber Plays – by *simulating* form. Nevertheless we will have to tackle a few problems related to interpretation.
Now that's the horrible part! If they at least had some foundation, then you would have something to go on, to hang on to. Now there are only shadows, hiding in the bushes and sticking their heads out to laugh; now it's like fighting with air, performing simulacra with blank shots.

A. S.

Introduction: A parody of a play Chamber Play Op. 3, The Ghost Sonata, needs little introduction as it is generally considered to be one of the most prominent forerunners to – or one of the milestones of – modern Western drama. It is often referred to as the Chamber Play par excellence, and in comparison with the other plays it has at least one distinguishing mark, viz. its dramaturgical success: it actually works on stage. It is one of the most often played of Strindberg's dramatic works, and several of its performances have gained renown in the history of modernist theatre.

The Ghost Sonata was lauded by such prominent modernists as Aurélien Lugné-Poë, Rainer Maria Rilke, Friedrich Dürrenmatt and Kjeld Abell, projected for production by Konstantin Stanislavsky, Erwin Piscator and Antonin Artaud, and actually staged by Max Reinhardt, Eugene O'Neill, Roger Blin and Ingmar Bergman, just to mention a few.

Strindberg found, as we have noted, greater satisfaction in The Ghost Sonata than in the more conventional Stormy Weather. In a letter written shortly after the play was completed, he admits that he hardly knew himself what he had achieved, but that he had a feeling of having created something highly elevated that made him shudder, "like when you cry tears of joy."
4. Ghosts in the Machine: *The Ghost Sonata* as Simulation of Form

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A. S. 306

Introduction: A parody of a play

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Strindberg found, as we have noted, greater satisfaction in *The Ghost Sonata* than in the more conventional *Stormy Weather*. In a letter written shortly after the play was completed, he admits that he hardly knew himself what he had achieved, but that he had a feeling of having created something highly elevated that made him shudder, “like when you cry tears of joy”. 309 The work on the play

309 Letter to Emil Schering, 1 April 1907.
seems to have been initiated right after The Burned Lot was completed, when Strindberg apparently was in a lighter and more conciliatory mood, as he expressed a certain kind of newfound relief in knowing that he was probably working on what would be his “Last Sonatas”.  

Having finished the play, Strindberg received further encouragement from his German translator, who seems to have supervised the work on the Chamber Plays; and even a few contemporary critics expressed favorable opinions. Sven Söderman in the Stockholms Dagblad found the play artistically “very powerful in its oddity”, and Bertel Gripenberg in the Finsk tidskrift praised the “flowing imagination with which The Ghost Sonata is endowed with this singular, confused mix of vision, reality and nightmare, that makes it unparalleled in its author’s oeuvre”.  

Others were baffled by such singular oddity, and some critics even seem to have regarded the play as some twisted joke. Anna Branting in the Stockholms-Tidningen, for instance, expressed concerns that Strindberg was actually “pulling the Stockholm audience’s leg”. Such a reaction is quite understandable as there is a strange kind of novelty to the play which distinguishes it from its precursors, and more elaborate versions of this opinion may be found in later commentaries on the play. While Stormy Weather is deemed highly conventional, and The Burned Lot a failed attempt at innovation which decomposes traditional drama, The Ghost Sonata is often described as a successful experiment where the conventional is turned into something novel yet dramatically proficient. Gunnar Brandell speaks about an effective “sabotage” directed against our dramaturgical expectations as characteristic of the play, and while such a description may give a negative impression, we find a more positive approach in some critics’ use of the concept of parody. Ekman, for example, maintains that The Ghost Sonata “contains a number of parodied elements directed against certain theatrical conventions” – devices, scenes, stock characters, etc. – and that the “seasoned theatergoer may well recognize a number of conventional elements only to find them rapidly undermined”. Harry G. Carlson more specifically talks about elements appearing as a twisted parody of the techniques of the French well-made play, while Milton A. Mays argues that the play “takes as its main structural mode the

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310 Letter to Emil Schering, 27 March 1907.  
311 Both quoted in Ollén, “Kommentarer”, p. 413f.  
312 Quoted in ibid., p. 413.  
314 Ekman, Strindberg and the Five Senses, p. 183.  
fairy tale, that it is in fact a parodied fairy tale of sorts”. 316 What I find interesting about comments like these is the tendency to describe the techniques of the play as familiar yet strangely distorted. Fritz Paul stresses this last sense in bringing up “the utterly deformed and alien relicts from the analytical drama, for example Ibsen’s dramaturgy of exposure” as one of the elements of The Ghost Sonata that make special demands on readers of the play.317 I noted an example of this in the introduction to the present work, viz. the case of the unpronounced “funster”: there, I argued, Strindberg took a dramaturgical cliché – the revelation of a concealed relationship by a mutual physical trait – and turned it into something new and strange. The resulting effect is peculiar yet perversely natural to the specific context where it occurs.

This strangeness has sometimes provoked remarks on the private or inaccessible nature of the play. Hans Lindström, for instance, describes it as an “esoteric structure, where private experiences, fragments of reality, lines and reminiscences from books stored in memory, are reproduced and constitute patterns difficult to interpret since as a rule we are not given a key to the associative chains that would grant the details their meaning”.318 Yet his own attempt at explaining the biographical background to a few peculiar elements says little about the design of the play, and the idea of the esoteric nature of the play seems highly exaggerated in the light of its wide historical success. Although intertextual influences seem to abound in The Ghost Sonata – more or less striking references to biblical texts,319 Lesage,320 Goethe’s Faust,321 Beethoven,322 Hoffmann,323 etc., have been noted –

318 Hans Lindström, “Mosaiken i Spöksonaten”, Sevensk litteraturtidsskrift, 1979/42:3, p. 27. ("vad man skulle kunna kalla en esoterisk struktur, där privata upplevelser, verklighetsfragment, i minnet lagrade repliker och reminiscenser från lästa böcker reproduceras och bildar svårtydbara mönster, svårtydbara därför att vi oftast inte har nyckeln till de associationskedjor, som skulle ge detaljerna deras mening.")
320 Cf. e.g. Lindström, “Kommentar”, p. 99ff. and Johnsson, p. 167ff.
the secret keys to hidden meanings that intertextual analysis reveals have often appeared quite redundant in lacking explanatory function. Interesting enough, intertextual analyses, too, have used the concept of parody to describe how the play diverts from the patterns expected by simple structural and thematic comparison. While the play seems compiled of recognizable elements or disparate fragments of various sources, the various elements are apparently assembled into a new kind of aesthetical whole, and the elements borrowed from other sources are not included as encrypted riddles but come together according to a new and operative principle of composition.

Since The Ghost Sonata without a doubt is the best known and the most commented upon of the Chamber Plays, I will not attempt to present a “new” reading or a thorough interpretation here. I will discuss primarily a few specific problems that have emerged in discussions of the play and which relate to my general investigation. They regard the way Strindberg utilizes and transforms recognizable dramaturgical patterns into something peculiar, odd, or singular, yet in some way natural. Instead of focusing on the esoteric domain of secret meanings, I am interested in how common forms of literature may be altered and transformed. I take my starting point in the recurring references to parody and sabotage, and then try to specify a certain kind of formal relation, i.e. how conventional dramatic patterns are adapted in order to produce new effects. This is then related to the representation of space and time; to the concepts of agency, protagonism, and epic narration as unifying factors; to the use of exposition; and to the end as a structural function of closure. The final section also indicates how Strindberg’s completion of The Ghost Sonata opens up a new field of productive possibilities.

From parody to simulation: For a conceptual starting point

Ekman’s brief reference to a parodying effect found in The Ghost Sonata does not seem to imply a humorous function but rather a form of subversion of our expectations, and theorists of the concept have, as we know, actually stressed its formal and conceptual seriousness: nothing in parody, says Linda Hutcheon, “necessi-

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323 Cf. e.g. Lindström, ”Kommentar”, p. 97f. and Ekman, Strindberg and the Five Senses, p. 128ff.
324 Cf. e.g. Cedergren, p. 140, p. 143, and p. 148.
tates the inclusion of a concept of ridicule”.

Genette expands the concept of “serious parody” to denote all the various ways in which particular authors and works may transform common or pre-existing patterns, forms, and genres. Genette stresses the effect of a deforming transposition by relating the concept etymologically: parody means to sing “beside”, off key, in another key or in another voice, “deforming, therefore, or transposing a melody”. Ekman, Paul and others seem to be after something similar in using the concept, yet I would suggest that it is problematic for a couple of reasons. First of all, it relies too heavily on intentionality. Boris Tomashovsky finds “the play upon generally known literary rules firmly entrenched in tradition and used by the author in other than their traditional ways” an indispensable strategy for parody, yet such a description may apply to very different modes of writing. In The Ghost Sonata, we are never quite sure whether Strindberg sets out to deform his devices or if they are deformed by accident: the sabotaging effect could simply belong to idiosyncratic practice. The concept of parody may then be too destructive for a discussion concerned with eccentricity rather than iconoclasm, and with odd usage rather than the breaking down of forms. Parody might also be considered to demand that the relation between the original model and its distortive remodeling is highlighted: the point of parody is that we recognize the extent of the distortion. In Strindberg, on the other hand, the effect of strangeness might be striking while the relation as such may be played down and thus experienced not as an explicit spoof but as a vague premonition.

A concept that stresses such a “camouflaging” of the distortive relation may be found in the archaeological vocabulary. The term *skeuomorph* designates a “design feature that is no longer functional in itself but that refers back to a feature that was functional at an earlier time”. A *skeuomorph* is a formal trait that during a previous technological paradigm was prompted by a specific functional

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327 Ibid., p. 10.
use but now remains as a largely non-functional physical attribute. N. Katherine Hayles exemplifies it with the dashboard of her car being “covered by vinyl molded to simulate stitching”; thus, the plastic detail “alludes back to a fabric that was in fact stitched, although the vinyl ‘stitching’ is formed by an injection mold”.330 Except for their ornamental status, such lingering elements are considered to carry a pragmatic function in helping a user who is acquainted with old technology to “find a path through unfamiliar territory” when moving on to the new.331 Hayles claims that it “calls into a play a psychodynamic that finds the new more acceptable when it recalls the old that it is in the process of displacing and finds the traditional more comfortable when it is presented in a context that reminds us we can escape from it into the new”.332 While parody is deliberate, the skeuomorph may be utilized more or less unconsciously; it may be constructed to appeal to the preferences of the audience, but it may also come about due to the practical routine of the producer, sticking to his habits even when producing something completely novel. Unlike parody, the concept does not stress the distorted relation but rather camouflages it as a gradual and hopefully unnoticeable step in a process of evolution. It also replaces parodical destruction with a sense of comfort, or nostalgia for obsolete values during their historical sublation.

In going from parody to skeuomorph we come closer to the sense of old techniques haunting new forms; but instead of a sense of comfort, I would stress the eeriness experienced when something appears to be simultaneously familiar and alien. A further step in that direction would lead us to the concept of the unheimlich. While the skeuomorph helps us orientate in the unknown, the uncanny rather suggests “a lack of orientation”, as Ernst Jentsch puts it.333 Like the skeuomorph, it depends, however, on familiar recognition; thus Sigmund Freud places it within “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar”.334 An uncanny moment occurs when a sense of unease is prompted by the well-known suddenly appearing as foreign, or by a sudden glimpse of weirdness found within the common. Freud demonstrates how the concept etymologically develops from connoting the familiar to connoting the private, then the concealed, then the secret, then the mystical or occult, and he thus suggests that the homely as such carries the potential to transmute into its

330 Hayles, p. 17.
332 Hayles, p. 17.
opposite. The uncanny distortion is haunting yet startling, and it emerges as we have instinctively approached the strange not as a hostile threat but as something ordinary. The strangeness of The Ghost Sonata, too, is lingering and luring, slowly surfacing like ghosts rather than gods from the old machineries. Like the uncanny, it is also closely related to the contingent: we may not be sure why it comes about or from where it originates, yet its presence is exciting.

Psychologically oriented theories are more interested in real life experiences of the uncanny, and primarily treat literature as fictional examples or illustrations of such experiences. It is true that The Ghost Sonata offers motifs that could be used as such examples. One of the prime examples of the uncanny is, for instance, the mingling of reality and imagination caused “when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes”, and Lamm correspondingly remarks on how Strindberg in The Ghost Sonata often lets reality be replaced by a magnified simile coming to life, “the effect being an entirely different one, more peculiar and frightening, if the persons within a play actually appear in the shape to which they have been likened”. The colonel’s wife, who is first only compared with a mummy and then really appears as one, is an obvious example. This has little to do with the distortion of conventional forms but constitutes a common literary technique that could be associated with what the formalists called ostranenie or “defamiliarization”, i.e. the ability of literature to “speak of the ordinary as if it were unfamiliar”. Like the concept of the uncanny, defamiliarization, as it is used by Tomashevsky, concerns first of all how things, objects, or phenomena from everyday life – “nonliterary material” – are represented in literature. Victor Shklovsky, however, also associates the concept with the ability of literature to distort forms in unexpected ways: according to Shklovsky, order in art is always somewhat out of order and “poetic rhythm is similarly disordered rhythm”. In what follows, I will also be less interested in an author representing distorted objects and more interested in an author distorting literary forms and patterns.

335 Ibid., p. 127.
336 Ibid., p. 145.
338 Tomashevsky, p. 85.
339 Ibid.
Perhaps the concept that best sums up the relationship between work and form indicated here is that of simulation: the present chapter could then be said to deal with The Ghost Sonata as a simulation of forms. The concept is used here neither as in cognitive theories of fiction nor as in theories of aesthetical representation but to indicate how conventional formal features, idiosyncratic stylistic traits, and transmuted functionalities are assembled to constitute the specific work in consideration. Whereas the model of idealist poetics could be said to strive for a perfect match between dramatic form and function, and parody could be described as the exaggerated distortion of form forcing the break-down (or a possible reversal) of certain functions, simulation would suggest the wraithlike recurrence of form that camouflages its perversion of function by appearing familiarly strange or strangely familiar. This relates to an intuitive utilization of specific techniques which causes them to behave unexpectedly. The result is a play that uses recognizable compositional patterns that are simultaneously distorted by the associative flow of writing.

Simulating the continuity of space and time

The action of The Ghost Sonata takes place in the exterior and the interior of a modern apartment house, just as in Stormy Weather. The time span is concentrated, and the play is divided into three acts separated by falling curtains. The progression goes from the outside of the building to its inside. The following excerpts from the opening stage directions to each act show the consistency of space and the continuity of time:

1:o

The Ground Floor and the first floor of a modern façade, but only the corner of the house, which at the ground floor ends with a round drawing room, at the first floor with a balcony and a flagpole.


342 Cf. e.g. Mimesis und Simulation, ed. Andreas Kablitz and Gerhard Neumann, Freiburg im Breisgau 1998. Here, simulation is related to mimesis and to the sublime.

343 These are my own distorted variations on the first three phases of simulacra presented in Jean Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation (Simulacres et simulation, 1981), trans. Sheila Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor 1994, p. 6.

344 Cf. Törnqvist, Strindberg’s The Ghost Sonata, p. 19, on using “act” to describe the play’s parts.
Through the open windows of the round drawing room is seen, when the blinds are pulled up, a white marble statue of a young woman, surrounded by palm trees, strongly illuminated by sunbeams. In the window to the left you see hyacinths in pots (blue, white, pink). (p. 163)

2:o
Inside the round Drawing room; in the background a white tile stove with a mirror, pendulum clock and candelabra; to the right the hall room with perspective towards a green room with mahogany furniture; to the left is the Statue, shadowed by palm trees, which may be concealed by curtains; to the left, in the background: door to the hyacinth room, where The Young Lady sits, reading. The back of the Colonel is visible as he is sitting writing in the green room. (p. 188)

3:o
A room in some bizarre style, oriental motifs. Hyacinths of all colors, everywhere. [...] In the background the right door out towards the Round Drawing room; where you see The Colonel and The Mummy sitting, idly and silently; a part of the Death-Screen is also visible; left: door to pantry and kitchen. (p. 211)

While the basic setup may seem straightforward enough, it has nevertheless prompted a few problems. If you for instance attempt to draw a chart over the topography of the building, you may run into trouble in deciding where the single rooms are located in relation to each other. On the one hand we get a strong sense of continuity of space while on the other it seems difficult to grasp the actual layout of the building. Even more interesting is the fact that the spatial progression seems to be governed by some kind of twisting distortion, going from the realist exterior to the bizarre Buddhist setting.

Rokem points out that the structural “zooming” motion from outside to inside corresponds thematically to a laying bare of the “rotten foundations of the house as well as of society itself”. This progression is in turn associated with a series of shifts or “turn-arounds” between characters, where one character takes over the position of another like the Old Man replacing the Mummy in the closet. There is also a structural “turn-around” of the spatial perspective occurring between the second and third acts which results in a shift where the characters who were in the foreground of the second act appear in the background of the third act, and vice versa. The presentation of space, then, seems at the same time consistent and variable:

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345 Freddie Rokem, "Scenography and the Camera: Miss Julie, A Dream Play, and The Ghost Sonata" ("The Camera and the Aesthetics of Repetition. Strindberg’s Use of Space and Scenography in Miss Julie, A Dream Play, and The Ghost Sonata", 1988), Strindberg’s Secret Codes, Norwich 2004, p. 35.
This succession accentuates the continuity of the fictional space throughout the three acts. But instead of zooming in on the scene in the hyacinth room from the oval room and thereby gradually drawing the audience into the fictional world in a straight, one-directional fashion, Strindberg has effected a ‘turn-around’ with his camera, displaying (in Act 3) the oval room – which was the setting for Act 2 – in the background with the Colonel and the Mummy visible through a door on the right.346

The progression is described by Rokem as that of a camera moving into the house and then changing direction; thus a kind of architectural consistency of the setting seems to be implied. Such a description may be misleading since we are not, in fact, tracking a camera that moves through an established stage setting but watching a series of separate scenes replacing each other. It may furthermore come in conflict with the stage directions. If we are to view the hyacinth room from any other point of view than the possible “fourth wall” of the window presented in the first stage direction, we could perhaps expect that this window should be mentioned somewhere in the background of the room. Ekman points out, however, that the hyacinth room is apparently lacking windows and that both the interior rooms seem to be viewed from the point of view of the windows stated in the initial stage description: thus, instead of moving in and turning around, we could be considered to be “looking in”, first through one window, then through the other.347 In any case, what is interesting to note is that the sense of space relies less on the actual design of the building than on how the scenes are successively presented. Space is, in other words, temporal: it is not a room but a series of settings.

Törnqvist notes that the designation of the spatial locations of The Ghost Sonata appears to be incongruous from one act to another and concludes that Strindberg has apparently taken a few liberties with the spatial design.348 These liberties seem, as I see it, to be granted already by the nature of literature as such, as the effect of uniformity as well as variability is achieved not primarily by the architecture of the diegetic room but by the ways in which spatial motifs are presented. Still, Rokem’s comments indicate that The Ghost Sonata seems to adhere to the conventions of dramatic realism to a greater extent than do for instance some of Strindberg’s more experimental plays from the turn of the century, such as the dream play. In The Ghost Sonata, reality is not already dissolved but undergoing a process of dissolving that is initialized in the opening by the presence

346 Ibid.
347 Ekman, Strindberg and the Five Senses, p. 142.
of the ghostly Milk Maid and that is finalized in the end where the set is replaced by Arnold Böcklin’s symbolist painting *Die Toteninsel*. This gradual movement towards an obliteration of space is probably successful exactly because of the early establishment of a “realist” setting. Ekman aptly labels the dominant principle of the play “a continuing demonization”, and the representation of space could be considered one of the variations on this “demonizing” distortion. It is manifested for example in the simple yet drastic transmutation of the potted hyacinths: in the first act they are visible in the window like a marker of bourgeois decoration while in the final act they have been intensified and magnified into a multitude of flowers “of all colors, everywhere”.

Even more interesting is Strindberg’s presentation of temporal relations which certainly seems to be a (intentional or unintentional) play on conventional means. Rokem points out another detail that demonstrates how Strindberg on the one hand utilizes his intuitive ability to create a sense of temporal coherence while on the other hand he also gives in to the event of writing and the habit of throwing in elements seemingly at random. This detail is also related to the shift between the second and third acts. The Old Man being banished to die inside the closet constitutes the climactic finale of the second act. It is followed by a short vignette with the Student and the Young Lady visible through the background doorway to the hyacinth room: the former recites a passage from the Old Norse *Sólarljóð* while the latter accompanies him on the harp. The curtain falls and when the third act opens we are situated within that room and now the Student and the Young Lady are foregrounded while the central characters of the second act are seen through a background doorway (cf. Rokem’s “turn-around”). The opening line of the third act is the Young Lady’s “Now sing for my flowers!” (p. 211) which seems to correspond and refer to the musical recitation closing the previous act. As Rokem points out, Strindberg apparently constructed the transition from one act to the other in order to suggest a direct chronological continuity. Thus it might come as a surprise when the characters suddenly, halfway through the brief act, refer to the old Man’s funeral as having already taken place “the other day” (p. 221). The report will be incongruous with our intuitive assumption that the dead body of the Old Man is still to be found behind the death screen, inside the closet. While the author presents every indication that the final act follows directly upon the previous one, the chronology of the represented time rather sug-

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gests that several days have passed between them.\textsuperscript{351} The result may provoke, as Törnqvist puts it, “an uncertain sense of time”.\textsuperscript{352}

Rokem suggests that this incongruity demonstrates “the contradictions between what the audience thinks it sees and what is actually presented”: thus, the pragmatic situation of the recipient is considered to correspond to the theme of truth and illusion since the spectators become “active participants in the very process of perception and interpretation itself, just as the protagonist”.\textsuperscript{353} This is a compositional interpretation that suggests how fittingly form and theme come together to form a single effect, but we should remain aware that the reference to the funeral may very well be just a slip on the part of the author. I would rather associate the effect with the uncertainty provoked as the play seems to simultaneously work and not work according to certain conventional patterns used for establishing a sense of successive coherence. Such a description is less dependent on a notion of design and may associate the detail not with the uniformity of the work but with the uniformity of style and Strindbergian writing. It is a well-known fact that \textit{The Ghost Sonata} was written quickly\textsuperscript{354} and Strindberg simply seems to have moved on directly from one act to the other. Such a hasty progression may account both for the sense of continuity (as the play constitutes a single line of writing) and for the conflict between temporal markers (as the reference to the funeral might have simply been thrown in right in the middle of the process of writing). Strindberg may have wanted to include a motif that was never fully worked out, and he may have done so without paying attention to how this motif relates to the surrounding compositional context.

In \textit{The Ghost Sonata} such a “glitch” may apparently, as is indicated by Rokem’s description, become operational. While the detective pattern of \textit{The Burned Lot} still relied on the consistency of plot, whereby unresolved mystifications risked turning into formal disturbances, \textit{The Ghost Sonata} relies solely on the principle of distortion and demonization, wherein such mystifications actually fit in. In the case of temporality, the play simulates a principle of continuity that could be said to be put to work at the same time as it is set into play.

\textsuperscript{351} Törnqvist, \textit{Strindbergian Drama}, p. 184 and \textit{Strindberg’s The Ghost Sonata}, p. 21 suggests an approximate week, basing his suggestion on the general praxis of the time. Cf. Törnqvist, \textit{Det talade ordet}, p. 110. We only have reason to conclude that the dialogue suggests a time-span that may appear to be in conflict with the compositional layout.

\textsuperscript{352} Törnqvist, \textit{Strindberg’s The Ghost Sonata}, p. 21.

\textsuperscript{353} Rokem, ”Scenography and the Camera”, p. 38.

\textsuperscript{354} Cf. e.g. Törnqvist, \textit{Strindberg’s The Ghost Sonata}, p. 9.
Simulating protagonist-structures

Strindberg’s use of protagonist-patterns and centering-functions in *The Ghost Sonata* is a more complicated concern than his use of temporal markers. If we go to the list of dramatis personae, we find that it, too, shows signs of the theme of distortion as well as of the author’s rapid writing. Several of the characters are provided with an aura of eerie symbolism: instead of the dyers, masons, and gardeners of the previous Chamber Play, we have the Dead Man, the Dark Lady, the Mummy, and so on, and the Milkmaid is even explicitly referred to as a “vision” (p. 161). We also find a notable amount of inconsistencies. The Caretaker appears in the list but not in the play while the Female Cook, the Maid and the Beggars appear in the play but not in the list. The character called the Fiancée in the list is furthermore alternately called the White-haired Woman and the Old Woman later in the play. Törnqvist attributes such details to “Strindberg’s fast way of writing and his negligence as a proof-reader”, and even though they are typical of the Strindbergian way of writing drama, they are still often amended by English translators. Thus, the translations negate the opportunity to observe how Strindberg while working on what may very well seem to be a conventional list of characters intended for practical instruction to performers and directors cannot help but giving in to his own idiosyncracies as a writer. The differences found between how characters are presented in the list and how they later appear in the play demonstrates the effects that may be produced by the processual nature of writing.

In the previous two Chamber Plays, we had no trouble in locating a central character that acted more or less as the personal mouthpiece of the author and that also functioned as a dominating factor structurally. It is harder to decide on such a character in *The Ghost Sonata*, although the play is full of indications pointing in one direction or the other. Turning to the list of dramatis personae we find that it places two characters, which are separated from the others by being given personal names, on top: “Director Hummel, the Old Man” and “The Student, Arkenholz” (p. 161). Lamm equates the Student with the Stranger in claiming that both characters represent “Strindberg himself”, but as the author seems more willing in the Chamber Plays to identify with the aging man who has seen through it all than with the naïve youth who must still confront the horrors

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355 The Female Cook is absent in the first edition of the play, but has been added in the critical edition.
357 Cf. ibid., p. 54.
358 Lamm, *Strindbergs dramer II*, p. 393. (”Studenten […] är Strindberg själv alldesles som Främlingen”)
the Student. Consider for example the following scene:

![Scene description]

The ambiguity of agency and centre is already established in the opening act, during the encounter between the two main characters. It is the Old Man who engages the Student in conversation, who needs him for his cause and who expresses a personal desire to gain entrance to the Colonel’s home. Everything is presented as going according to the Old Man’s plans, and while he initially seems to be unacquainted with the Student, we soon learn that he has had his eyes on the young man “for a long time…” (p. 179). The first act is structured according to an active/passive-dichotomy where the Old Man almost seems to be directing the Student. Consider for example the following scene:

THE OLD MAN. Good! *(Reads the poster.*) They’re giving the Valkyrie as a matinee … Then the colonel and his daughter will be there, and since she always sits at the farthest end of the sixth row, I’ll place you next to her … Would you step into the telephone booth over there and book a ticket on sixth row, number 82.
THE STUDENT. Should I attend the Opera this afternoon?
THE OLD MAN. Yes! And you shall obey me, and things will go well for you! I want you to become happy, rich and honored; your debut yesterday as the brave rescuer will make you famous tomorrow and your name will be worth a great deal.
THE STUDENT. *(goes to the telephone booth.*) What a peculiar adventure …

(p. 170f.)

363 Mays, p. 192.
364 Ibid., p. 190ff.
The Student takes no initiatives of his own but agrees, often in an indifferent manner, with the Old Man’s proposals, and he expresses a personal desire for the imagined beauty and luxury associated with the Colonel’s apartment only after the Old Man has prompted him to do so. In contrast with that of the Old Man, the Student’s desire is furthermore presented more as a sporadic daydream than as a heartfelt aspiration. Thus, it is the Old Man that is the dominant factor in the first act while the Student apparently functions as his vehicle. The Old Man proposes that the Student should become “an arm for my will”, and the latter refers to himself as the “medium” of the former. The Faustian aspect of the relationship is stressed as the young man exclaims: “Is this some kind of pact? Should I sell my soul?” (p. 178f.)

The dialogue of the first act consists to a large degree of the Student confirming what the Old Man has already worked out. The Old Man dominates the scene also by directing the action by his verbal comments; as Kjellin and Ramnefalk puts it, he seems to command the other characters like a “sovereign puppeteer: when he gives the strings a jerk, they twitch and react”. This is stressed by the way Strindberg implies general stage directions in the Old Man’s lines whereby the character may appear as something of a mystical origin of the other characters’ actions:

There’s my little girl, look at her, look! – She’s talking to the flowers, isn’t she like the blue hyacinth herself? … She provides them with drink, only pure water, and they transform the water into colors and fragrances … Now here’s the colonel with the newspaper! – He’s showing her the collapsed house … now he’s pointing to your portrait! She’s not indifferent … she reads about the exploit … (p. 179)

The Old Man’s dominance is furthermore stressed by his habit of bossing the other characters around, while the submissiveness of the Student is demonstrated rather by him wanting to pull out of the scheme only to be lured right back in by the Old Man’s servant. The active/passive-dichotomy is stressed most explicitly by the fact that it is the Old Man who produces the Student’s rather ambivalent image as a hero. It is he who spreads the word of the deed and it is he who lauds the young man publicly, prompting the other characters to recognize him by his proclamations: “All hail the noble youth who, risking his own life, saved so many during yesterday’s accident! Hail, Arkenholz!” (p. 186). In other words, I would suggest that while the Old Man is a subject rather than a sender, to use Greima-

365 Cf. e.g. Törnqvist, “Faust and The Ghost Sonata”, p. 76f.
366 Kjellin and Ramnefalk, p. 85. (”han framstår […] som den suveräne dockspelaren: när han rycker i trådarna, knycker de till och reagerar.”)
sian terms, the Student is a helper rather than a subject; the former has a quest, the latter is a vehicle.

The focus seems however to shift over time. During the second act the Student is more or less absent as he is literally pushed into the background; but the Old Man vanishes from the play before the third act even begins, and during this act it is the Student that occupies the focus of attention. Such a lack of an obvious centre has provoked discussions on what really holds the play together. One interpretation suggested focuses on the Student and his function in a plot revolving around rescue. When the Student recounts his heroic deeds during yesterday’s fire, he does so in a manner that both strengthens the prevailing mood of uncertainty of the play and the passive nature of the character:

THE STUDENT. Yesterday, for example … I was drawn to that obscure street where the house later collapsed … I got there, and stopped in front of the building which I had never seen before … Then I noticed a fissure in the wall, heard the crackles of the double floor; I ran forward and grabbed hold of a child who was walking beneath the wall … The next second the house fell down – – – I was safe, but in my arms, where I believed I had the child, there was nothing …

THE OLD MAN. Well, what do you know … I certainly had imagined … (p. 174)

The Student’s steps are presented as governed by fate rather than will. The mystery of the account is enhanced by the vague references to the obscure street and the unknown house. The incidence is charged with a sense of dream or hallucination. We know that the Student has been busy all night “bandaging the wounded and tending to the injured” (p. 165), but the suggestive air of unreality of his own report stands in a distinct contrast to the persuasive proclamations later made by the Old Man during the end of the act.

The ambiguity of the passage and of the Student’s role as an agent becomes apparent in the differing interpretational commentaries on the passage: how should we understand the Student’s function as a rescuer? Sprinchor suggests that since the action of The Ghost Sonata already takes place in the land of the dead, the child disappears exactly because she is saved: as she is salvaged from death, she leaves the afterlife behind and may return to the world of the living.367 J. R. Northam rather emphasizes the Student’s failure as a rescuer and suggests that the play as a whole is shaped around the episode of the collapsing build-

367 Sprinchor, Strindberg as Dramatist, p. 264. The interpretation is refuted e.g. by Johnsson, p. 166.
This failure then becomes a kind of *mise en abyme* in which is concentrated the larger plot where the Student seeks to rescue the Young Lady from “the collapsing House of Life”. Such a parallel may be in place, but there is an important distinction to be made. While the larger plot would have to be considered as ending tragically – once more, “the Student’s arms remain empty” – the attempted rescue is just strange and eerie: the child is not left under the building and thus crushed by the collapsing matter but simply vanishes, mysteriously and without explanation. It is worth stressing that the reported collapse appears in the text less as a nucleus around which everything else is designed – Northam even claims that Strindberg is “dovetailing his play to the story of the accident” – than incidentally and suddenly, like a kind of accident itself. This unexpectedness as well as the eerie strangeness will perhaps both be overshadowed if we stress the synecdochic relationship between the report and the general design of the play, as such an interpretation indicates a kind of distinct clarity in terms of structure while the scene rather is characterized by an ambiguity where structural relations will remain vague and wavering. If this relationship is carried out as an intended parallelism, it is still apparently done so in an obscure and puzzling manner.

The model of parallelism could also be considered to have the disadvantage of focusing solely on the Student’s function as a protagonist and on his relation to the Young Lady, an aspect that is not really centered until the third act. It also goes too far in singling out the narrative pattern of the “bold knight of the fairy tale who saves the princess from the dragon” which is neither fully carried out as such nor especially dominant. The Student is not only, or even primarily, the

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369 Ibid., p. 43.
370 Ibid., p. 47.
371 Ibid., p. 43.
372 It could be noted that Törnqvist (*Strindberg’s The Ghost Sonata*, p. 50f.) presents a version of Northam’s argument. While he agrees with the association between report and plot, he remarks that the Young Lady is not a direct parallel to the innocent child since she is infested by disease: her being “sick at the source of life” is interpreted as referring to either syphilis, cancer of the uterus, or both. The disappearing child is then said to correspond to the loss of the Young Lady’s innocence, whereby the Student once more is “left empty-handed, deprived of the illusion that purity is to be found in this life” (cf. p. 39). The interpretation is supported by reference to notes left in various drafts by the author. Johnson (p. 173) points out that these notes are still not included in the actual play. The interpretation is furthermore quite speculative: as a reason for the idea that the Young Lady is suffering from cancer, Törnqvist evokes the fact that the Female Cook carries a soy bottle with “scorpion letters”. He then suggests that we should associate “scorpion” with crayfish and thus with cancer. The argument lacks textual support. Still, these interpretations may indicate the ambiguous compositional status of the passage.
373 Törnqvist, *Strindberg’s The Ghost Sonata*, p. 22f.
active hero; as we have seen, he also functions as the helper in the Old Man’s quest. The Old Man’s dominance has actually been suggested to be what holds the play together compositionally. Szondi famously describes the play as carrying on a basic epic setup from the dream play, a structure, however, which here remains “hidden behind the façade of a traditional salon Drama”\(^\text{374}\). While the play retains the formal setup of dialogic drama, the story is, according to Szondi, no longer generated internally by interpersonal relations but by the author presenting his characters as objects that are held up to be viewed “from the outside”.\(^\text{375}\) The plot of *The Ghost Sonata*, as Szondi sees it, does still revolve around secrets from the past being unearthed. In the conventional salon piece, this revelation emerged from the interpersonal interaction between the characters. In *The Ghost Sonata*, on the other hand, the characters do no longer act and Strindberg is for this reason considered to be in demand of a narrator or of an epic I “to unroll the past of the others”.\(^\text{376}\) This is, according to Szondi, the main function of the Old Man who thus also constitutes the sole principle of progression of the play.

Initially, the Old Man appears to be yet another version of the protagonist I of the previous Chamber Plays: he has achieved the wisdom of old age, he knows everything and has seen through it all, and he is always able to present a rationale for his own acts and deeds while the rationale of others are consistently considered unjust and malevolent. In discussing *The Burned Lot* I noted how the Stranger held up mankind to scrutiny but also how this setup caused a conflict with a theme of reconciliation that Strindberg was apparently also aiming for. In *The Ghost Sonata*, Strindberg seems to be ready to abandon the always right and rightful preacher as a protagonist. Consider for example the following brief exchange between the Old Man and the Student:

> THE OLD MAN. I saved your father from his misery, and he rewarded me with all the terrible hatred of someone owing a debt of gratitude ... he instructed his family to speak ill of me.
> THE STUDENT. Perhaps you made him ungrateful by poisoning the help with unnecessary humiliations.
> THE OLD MAN. All help is humiliating, young man. (p. 169)

Here, a new element is added as the opposite opinion, presented by the Student, no longer seems included only to be Socratically dismissed but actually to be taken seriously: the objection truly functions as a normative contrast to the justifications of the Old Man. A similar example is found when the Old Man presents

\(^{\text{375}}\) Ibid.
\(^{\text{376}}\) Ibid.
his own view on karmic balance. “I have made many people miserable and they have made me miserable, the one cancels out the other” (p. 177) looks like the kind of self-righteous affirmation of providence that occurs in the previous play, but here it should rather be understood as an immoral standpoint. In reality, the Old Man “wreaks havoc among people’s destinies, kills his enemies and never forgets”, as it is stated by his servant (p. 183). In this sense, The Ghost Sonata would actually be less I-centered than the previous two plays since there is no longer an absolute correlation between norm, theme and protagonist. While the protagonist-patterns of the earlier plays were quite stable and consistent, that of the third Chamber Play is more ambiguous and variable.

The departure from the previous use of the protagonist becomes most explicit in the confrontation scene during the ghost supper. Indeed, the Old Man is still allowed to justify his aggressive assault and he unmasks his adversaries, he assures, only for the sake of others: his object is to “weed out the tares, expose the crimes, settle the accounts, so that the young may start anew in this home, which I have given them!” (p. 206) But Strindberg seems almost to change his standpoint right in the middle of writing for soon the tables are turned on the Strindbergian debunker who is now unmasked by the Mummy. In contrast with the Mummy’s life of sufferance and repentance, the Old Man’s rage for truth and revenge appears unjust and selfish. Consequently, the attitude of the fragile Mummy also proves to be more potent than that of the vigorous Old Man:

THE MUMMY. [...] We are poor miserable humans, we know that; we have transgressed, we have erred, we, like everyone else; we are not who we appear to be, for we are, at bottom, better than ourselves, since we disapprove of our offences; but that you, Jakob Hummel with the forged name, should be sitting in judgment, that proves that you are worse than us poor wretches! You are not the one you appear to be either! – [...] THE OLD MAN. (has tried to get up and speak, but has tumbled down into the chair and shrunken up, shrinks more and more during what follows.) (p. 207)

Judgment and revenge is now definitely presented as an act of hubris, and The Ghost Sonata may accordingly strike us as being, as Lamm puts it, “not at all as morally repulsive as The Burned Lot”.

According to Szondi, the loss of the Old Man causes the play to break down as it loses its governing principle of epic mediation: with the Old Man out of the picture, progression becomes impossible, and the action may only fizzle out in

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377 Cf. e.g. Törnqvist, Strindberg’s The Ghost Sonata, p. 28.
378 Lamm, Strindbergs dramer II, p. 393. (“Därför verkar Spöksonaten trots sina gräsligheter ej alls så moraliskt frånstötande som Brända Tomten”)
the erratic, unfocused and delirious dialogue of the third act. As far as I see it, the author’s disposing of the mouthpiece protagonist is instead an adequate and necessary step in order for Strindberg to go beyond the problems involved in combining a human avenger and the theme of humility and reconciliation that he touched upon already in the previous Chamber Play. The “desperate, wandering conversation – interrupted by pauses, monologues, and prayers” of the third act could furthermore be considered to actually fulfill the process of dramatic distortion or demonization noted above. The death of the Old Man is thus probably not necessarily a problem: while Szondi emphasizes an important aspect of the play, i.e. the dominant role played by the Old Man, he could nevertheless be considered to pay too much importance to the basic epic/dramatic-dichotomy.

Still, attempts have been made at solving the Szondian crux. Törnqvist, for instance, suggests that the Old Man is actually replaced in the third act by the Female Cook, his counterpart or reincarnation; thus, even “after his death, he avenges himself by haunting the house”. Such a reply is in fact anticipated by Szondi who therefore explicitly states that the Female Cook only carries on the Old Man’s thematic role as a vampire and not his formal role as epic mediator: thus Törnqvist presents a thematic answer to what Szondi considers a functional problem. It is nevertheless interesting to examine the way Strindberg has incorporated the Female Cook into the play as it is indicative both of his manner of production and of the kind of progress that builds up The Ghost Sonata. The Female Cook could hardly be considered to uphold a formal principle of the work since her appearance is utterly episodic: she appears and disappears like a passing fancy. Instead of manifesting a governing factor as such, she demonstrates a different kind of logic that apparently is at work within the play. Törnqvist remarks that the Female Cook was added “at a late stage, presumably to strengthen the unity of the play”. I would suggest that we, by paying attention to how the character is gradually established, may observe how her inclusion rather seems to demonstrate a typical Strindbergian whim than a concern for compositional unity. While the Female Cook does not appear until the third act, her embryo is found already in the second act. During the ghost supper, the Old Man exposes the Colonel as really being “the manservant XYZ”, “he who used to be a sponger [“matfriare”] in a certain kitchen chamber ...” (p. 202).

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382 Törnqvist, *Strindberg’s The Ghost Sonata*, p. 21.
Soon hereafter the roles are reversed, and now a servant – Bengtsson – exposes the true identity of the Old Man: both have, on different occasions, worked as a servant to the other. Now it is the Old Man who is accused of being a sponger:

Thus he was a sponger in my kitchen chamber for two whole years – as he had to leave at three o’clock, the dinner was ready at two o’clock, and the family had to eat reheated food left by that ox – but he drank up the broth too, which then had to be thinned out with water – he sat there like a vampire, sucking out all goodness from the house, so that we became like skeletons – and he almost got us thrown in prison for calling the female cook a thief! (p. 208)

The motif of sponging is thus established and varied already during the second act. As is demonstrated by the quote, a female cook is sporadically mentioned for the first time in an associative complex marked by reheated food and watered down broth, leeching servants, vampires and starving skeletons. Between the two accounts a counterpoint is established in the recurring use of salient expressions like the sponger, the kitchen chamber, and so on. This irregular series of variations then reaches a climax which is prepared associatively but unprepared in terms of plot when the Female Cook finally enters the stage in the third act. She, too, is described as a vampire and she “overcooks the meat, gives us the sinews and water, while she drinks up the broth; and when we have steak, she first boils out the goodness, eats the sauce, drinks the gravy” (p. 215). The character apparently materializes out of a series of more or less capricious associations that are gradually distorted, intensified or “demonized”. Like mold, the motivic complex grows forth from a single hypha to a collective mycelium.

Such an impression will actually be strengthened if we consider the ways in which the associative threads run also from one Chamber Play to the other: while the falsely accused servant appears almost in all of them, the motif of the sponger and the theme of the provider turned vampire constitute the main elements of the subsequent play, The Pelican. This growth of writing, and an associated distortion of patterns, should probably be taken into consideration if we want to determine the governing principle of The Ghost Sonata: neither the Student nor the Old Man or the Female Cook as characters seem for example to determine the structural progress of the play but all of them are rather elements caught up in the spiraling process of associative “demonization”. While we find several indications of protagonist-patterns in the play, they all tend to shift, alter and misbehave along the way. The three acts could all of them be considered to be different in the way they initiate different kinds of narrative designs, yet they also come together to form this singular trajectory which propels the play forwards according
to its own inherent logic of strangeness. So, while the play as a whole perhaps could be described as a dizzying spiral rather than a well-arranged grid, it still relies on the presence of such gridded patterns that may be set into play.

Simulating exposition

The most apparent distortion of dramatic forms in *The Ghost Sonata* is probably found in Strindberg’s use of exposition since, as Brandell puts it, forms intended to inform here rather mystify.383 In this section, I first discuss the concept of exposition, then different accounts on the peculiar use of exposition in the particular play, and finally I compare two approaches in particular.

Exposition is commonly discussed in informational and referential terms. Pfister, e.g., briefly defines it as “the transmission of information to do with the events and situations from the past that determine the dramatic present”.384 Meir Sternberg expands the definition by stating that exposition functions to “introduce the reader into an unfamiliar world, the fictive world of the story, by providing him with the general and specific antecedents indispensable to the understanding of what happens in it”.385 Such a definition is favorable in that it stresses the functional and pragmatic aspect; while Pfister seems to focus on causation in a general sense, Sternberg seems more oriented towards the way in which the author introduces the reader to the story by making it understandable and followable. Still, Sternberg’s reference to the “fictive world of the story” rather than to the story as compositional construction may cause unnecessary confusion as it opens for epistemological speculations (the relation between author and world, reader and world, character and world, character and author, character and reader, and so on). It is probably sufficient to stress that the author uses exposition in order to introduce the reader to the story or to present him with a conceptual background to it. This rhetorical rather than epistemological aspect is further indicated by the brief etymological account presented by Patrick O’Neill in his encyclopedic entry on the concept:

The term “exposition” refers to the scene-setting presentation of circumstances preceding the primary narrative action. For the ancients, *exposition* (Latin “setting forth”) was the third part of the seven-part classical oration, its task being to define terms and state the issues to be proved. It was thus

383 Brandell, ”Questions without Answers”, p. 90.
384 Pfister, p. 86.
also known as explication, and it was in this sense that the term came to denote material, frequently preliminary, “explaining” the contexts of the dramatic action to be presented on stage.386

The etymological orientation stresses that exposition should not be understood in terms of a transmission of information or reference as such, in isolation, but that it designates a rhetorical function operative in relation to a composed whole where it does not point backwards in diegetic time but forwards within the composition, so to speak. In oration, exposition constitutes a preparation for and a setup of what is to follow, formally and thematically. Thus, the concept is associated with particular techniques and devices that may be used for a certain purpose. This is similar, at large, to how the concept has been used in the theory of drama, for instance by Freytag: exposition denotes a function that a craftsman of drama must master in order to make his dramatic patterns operate efficiently;387 it concerns how the writer early on may present an adequate background that quickly makes it possible for the audience to concentrate on the building up of the dramatic conflict. Later and more general theories, like Sternberg’s, have criticized the rhetorically oriented usage for being too narrow and rather understood the concept in purely informational terms: exposition denotes any element that could be considered to transmit any kind of information about the “world” where the action of a story takes place.388 One of the main objections against the Freytagian model, then, would be that it restricts the concept to concern only the initial stage of the play while information in the wider sense is obviously distributed throughout the entire work. Such an argument is presented for example in the latest study of exposition in Strindberg, where Hanif Sabzevari follows Sternberg in labeling every kind of reference to an existent or event not present on stage “exposition”, i.e. not only in the scenic past but also in the distant and the future. Expository information may then, according to Sabzevari, occur even in the final lines of a play as “every course of action in a drama brings past events to life, and predicts future events”.389 Every aspect of a work relatable to the story

387 Cf. Freytag, p. 115f.
388 Sternberg, p. 1 lists information “of the time and place of the action; of the nature of the fictive world peculiar to the work or, in other words, of the canons of probability operating in it; of the history, appearance, traits and habitual behavior of the dramatis personae; and of the relations between them”, etc., as expository.
or the diegesis will be considered to constitute a potential expository function: exposition is simply equated with information.

Yet, such a wide informational understanding of the concept must make it hard to specify the different ways in which an author may use informational patterns in general and expository patterns in particular: everything related to the story or to its setting becomes equally expository. According to the rhetorically and functionally oriented understanding we could rather ask how the author uses expository patterns and whether or not they also are used for expository functions. Thus we could ask, for example, whether a particular passage that "looks" informational provides an adequate background of the kind implied by Freytag, or if it rather prevents the recipient from getting a lucid view of the prerequisites of the plot: is it, in short, instructive and inviting or is it puzzling and mystifying? In The Ghost Sonata, as is indicated by the recurrent descriptions of its parodic or "sabotaging" mode, passages that appear to provide a conceptual background for the story seem rather to play upon our expectations in order to provoke a sense of bewildering confusion. Here, we do not find a perversion of reference or information as such – the passage may be just as referential or informational as an expository passage proper – but a perversion of technique or device, i.e. an estrangement of form and function.

In discussing the first act of the play, Lamm remarks that the author, in spite of having used an entire act for exposition, still has not managed to make his spectators acquainted with the dramatic situation at hand. Lindström expresses a similar opinion when he remarks on how Strindberg’s rich and varied use of conventional techniques for exposition nevertheless fails to present a lucid story as the information given is vague and full of contradictions. Benjamin K. Bennett further notes that circumstances from the past actually revealed yet lack real influence upon the action of the play. Brandell presents the fullest account along these lines:

Initially [the first act] appears to be a typical expository act with its questions and answers, but Strindberg constantly sabotages our expectations – insofar as they desire straightforward information about the characters who are going to appear in the drama – sometimes by informing us in a vague and contradictory fashion, sometimes by making the facts too "tight," but primarily through organizing them in a rhapsodical and whimsical fashion upon the action of the play. 392 Brandell presents the fullest account along these lines:

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390 Lamm, Strindbergs dramer II, p. 397.
sical fashion. Strindberg does not construct for us a central perspective that would allow us to decide what is more or less important in what we hear, and therefore no agreement is reached as to what we shall and shall not believe. 393

Let us take a look at an example of such a rhapsodic and whimsical passage, viz. the often quoted passage from the first act where the Old Man reveals the history of the house to the Student:

THE OLD MAN. The Caretaker’s wife, yes! – The dark lady over there is her daughter by the Dead Man, and because of that the husband got the position of caretaker … but the dark lady has a suitor, who’s of distinction, and expects to become rich soon; he is about to be divorced, you see, from his wife, who grants him a stone house to get rid of him. This distinguished suitor is the son-in-law of the Dead Man, whose bedclothes you may see being aired up there at the balcony … It’s complicated, isn’t it!
THE STUDENT. It’s awfully complicated! (p. 176)

While we can only agree with the Student, we are probably also intended to do so: the information as such is secondary to the effect caused by the very way it is presented by the author, and the point of the passage is not to be found in the informational value of it but in having us confirm the complexity of life. In other words, it is the theme of the intricacy of human relations in general rather than the actual relations that generates the dramatic impact of the scene. Such an impact seems to be provoked by the way the author presents the account as if it is mediating important information that we must try to comprehend and remember in order to understand the following development of the plot. By initiating a dramaturgical form that we easily recognize, the author lures us into taking a stance that is simultaneously disrupted. Still, this is not really sabotage since we have no trouble in keeping up with things as the play progresses and this progression seems governed by another kind of principle than that of plot. Obviously, we do not need to grasp this background in order to follow the “demonizing” development of the play. Thus, it would probably be unfair to accuse Strindberg of having failed in presenting the background since he actually seems to have been aiming for confusion rather than clarity. 394 In The Burned Lot, the mystification of the past could still provoke some frustration, but here mystification apparently strengthens the play. Such a conclusion will find support for example in a didactic anecdote presented by Delblanc. Delblanc

393 Brandell, ”Questions without Answers”, p. 87.
394 Lindström (”Dialog och bildspråk i Strindbergs kammarspel”, p. 179) for example, finds the ”Scenic Power” of the Chamber Plays weakened by the fact that the expository passages often seem contradicting and cryptic.
recounts how he, when teaching The Ghost Sonata, often asks that his students present a full account of the relationship between the characters. The result leads him to the following conclusion:

No one has hitherto satisfactorily managed the task. Yet no one has either experienced the complexity of the piece as an aesthetic flaw! The play appears to work excellently, notwithstanding that at the most we get a vague vision of a crawling serpent’s nest, and this was perhaps Strindberg’s aesthetic intention? 396

To put it short: while a background *is* presented, we do not need to grasp it in its informational details but only in its total effect of perplexing complexity. This effect could be said to rely on a use of a pattern that simultaneously is perverted. The expository or pseudo-expository passages, then, do not point backwards in history but happen, occur, or take place within the composition, thus propelling the progress of demonization.

Brandell’s analysis of the dialogue of the first act as consisting of “questions without answers” further demonstrates this perverted use of exposition. As one of his examples, Brandell refers to the following excerpt from the initial encounter between the Old Man and the Student:

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THE OLD MAN. [...] Are you a medico?
THE STUDENT. No, I study languages, but don’t know, for that matter, what I want to be ...
THE OLD MAN. Aha! – Do you know mathematics?
THE STUDENT. Yes, tolerably.
THE OLD MAN. That’s good! Would you perhaps like employment?
THE STUDENT. Yes, why not?
[...]
THE OLD MAN. Are you a sportsman?
THE STUDENT. Yes, that was my misfortune ... (p. 170f.)
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The scene shows how the Old Man snares the Student with a series of questions and approving reactions; he also seems to want to confirm that the Student is well suited for the task he has in mind. However, both the Old Man’s motives and the Student’s disposition remain somewhat unclear, and we will probably still be uncertain about how we are to relate the specific details to a developing plot. Brandell remarks on how the Old Man’s questions “come suddenly and impress one as capricious”, and this passage, too, is rhapsodically and whimsically organized.

Brandell remarks on how the Old Man’s questions “come suddenly and impress one as capricious”, and this passage, too, is rhapsodically and whimsically organized. While the Old Man seems to find out what he wishes to know, “the audience does not really receive a context into which it can place this information and does not know what information will be valuable later in the play”. Brandell argues that none of “these pieces of information plays any apparent role in the continuation of the play”, and concludes that the “dramatic ‘point’ lies precisely in the fact that explanation and analysis are excluded”.

In a later reply to Brandell’s essay, Törnqvist suggests that there may be significant “answers” to be found in such passages after all. He sums up the argument of the former as: “Just as his characters use language to mislead rather than inform others, so the author at times uses it to mislead rather than inform his audience. The recipient, reader or spectator, is put on a par with the characters.” Still, I would suggest that there is a relevant distinction to be made here: whereas the characters could be said to deceive each other using false or unreliable information, the author is only deceiving his audience insofar as he uses conventional patterns in a peculiar way. The first case is a matter of veracity, the latter is one of compositional strategy.

Törnqvist notes, concerning the question of sportsmanship, that even “a professional reader like Ingmar Bergman has found the quoted passage problematic”. During a rehearsal of The Ghost Sonata, the director allegedly complained that, although this was his third production of the play, he had never “understood those lines”. I would suppose, however, that Brandell and Bergman react on the passage for different reasons: while the former finds it a significant trait of Strindberg’s way of writing drama in the Chamber Plays, the latter could rather be considered to have stumbled upon an interpretational problem which must be practically solved in staging the play; while Brandell may point to the trait and describe it, Bergman will have to decide on how to adjust the particular detail to the new artistic context that his own performance constitutes; and while Brandell simply aims at giving an adequate account of the Strindbergian text, Bergman may even have to be an unfaithful reader in order to accom-

396 Brandell, “Questions without Answers”, p. 81.
397 Ibid., p. 81f.
398 Ibid., p. 82.
399 Ibid., p. 90.
401 Ibid., p. 37.
402 Cf. the rehearsal diary included in Törnqvist, Strindberg’s The Ghost Sonata, p. 180.
plish his own project. Theories of dramatical performance have always stressed that performance as such involves the possibility for the text’s “transformation into something other than itself, its irreversible annihilation as a literary text”, and in Bergman’s stagings we are sure to find numerous elements that carry Bergmanian rather than Strindbergian significances.

While these remarks may seem trivial, I would suggest that we take seriously the distinction between two opposite strategies: on the hand, the description of how a specific detail relates to a specific context; and on the other hand, the creation of a new context of meaning where every detail is reconsidered and readjusted in order to fit in. This distinction is hardly upheld in Törnqvist’s reply which also constructs a new interpretative complex of meanings; and this approach becomes problematic, as I see it, when the interpretation suggested seems to contradict the work as such. Törnqvist treats the question of sportsmanship as a central and significant element in the play. According to Törnqvist, the question is motivated because of the fact that the Young Lady later on is said to be out riding her horse. From this we learn that she is a sportswoman. Because the Old Man wants to pair her together with the Student, he is interested if perhaps he is a sportsman too: in that case, the match will seem more favorable. So far, the interpretation might perhaps be considered as plausible if a bit strained. If such a connection is intended by Strindberg, however, it would still have to be regarded as vague and carried out in an offhanded fashion. Törnqvist then goes on to suggest that the motif of sportsmanship has a figurative meaning, denoting “an honest, courageous and chivalrous person”. This is demonstrated by his performance during the accident with the collapsing building. That suggestion may also be feasible, as it points to the Student’s character as a naïve and good-hearted young man who perishes during the confrontation with a world of sin and evil. Still, I would add that these associations are executed in a rather loose and associative way and not according to the unambiguous and decisive manner indicated by Törnqvist. Eventually, Törnqvist’s interpretation seems to get out of hand. Since the Swedish word “olycka” may refer to misfortune as well as accident,

404 Just consider the explicit sexual connotations. In Bergman, the Young Lady is, for instance, dressed in clothes that are “dirty, blood-stained around the womb” (cf. Törnqvist, *Strindberg’s The Ghost Sonata*, p. 130), and when the Student in the third act laments the loss of virginity, this is accompanied in performance by him brutally separating the Young Lady’s thighs while he puts his hand against her womb (cf. Törnqvist, *Strindberg’s The Ghost Sonata*, p. 226).
405 Törnqvist, ”Questions without Answers?”, p. 37.
406 Ibid.
Törnqvist suggests that the Student’s brief mentioning of his “misfortune” refers to the failed rescue of the child, and thus to his failure as a sportsman. This associative chain then prompts us, according to Törnqvist, to realize that the child represents the Young Lady in the collapsing “House of Life”, as Northam had it. Since the Student is a Sunday’s child he is clairvoyant, and thus he is said to predict his later failure in rescuing the Young Lady. The fact that Strindberg uses the past tense in stating that the Student’s sportsmanship was his misfortune means only, according to Törnqvist’s suggestion, that the author is referring not to a particular past experience but to the Student’s “predetermined lot in life: to set the world that is out of joint right”. Hereby we arrive at the true answer to the question of sportsmanship, as Törnqvist sees it.

The fact that this interpretative chain may seem a bit far-fetched is actually acknowledged by Törnqvist in an implicit manner as he defends it by suggesting that it is made from the perspective of a re-reader and not from that of a first-time reader; the latter perspective, he admits, would rather coincide with Brandell’s model of “questions without answer” or the rhapsodic and whimsical principles of organization. One might ask then whether Törnqvist’s interpretation should not first of all be regarded as his personal account of how the work could be interpreted. Thus, Brandell’s version is probably preferable since it answers to the formal strangeness of the text that, as we have seen, is also indicated by several of the earlier commentators. The bewildering effect produced in the first act seems prompted rather by the way Strindberg uses what appears to be conventional expository techniques in order to confuse the recipient, that is, in order to draw him into the dizzying motion of distortion and “demonization. This strangeness, I would argue, is inherent to the text as such and to the way it is put together to function, and thus it will be just as operative in a second or third or fourth reading.

407 Ibid., p. 38.
408 Ibid.
409 Ibid., p. 39.
410 That the stressing of the position of the reader opens for interpretational relativism is indicated by the following remark which concludes the essay, ibid.: “When asking ourselves for whom the questions are left unanswered or answered enigmatically, we need to differentiate between the addressees on the stage and the recipients in the auditorium; between readers and spectators; between first-time recipients and rerecipients. Questions, which seem unanswered to one kind of recipient may well seem answered to another. Answers, which seem enigmatic to one kind may well seem lucid to another. Questions which seem answered in one way to one kind may well seem answered in quite another way to another. These are problems, which directors and actors constantly grapple with but which scholars are inclined to ignore.”
As I see it, it seems less feasible that we in rereading the work suddenly would recognize a number of novel meanings and significances that earlier had remained utterly obscured and unobtainable than that we would recognize the specific passage as one of the elements that operates in order to produce that very sense of strangeness we initially experienced. As Barthes points out, there is, in scholarly terms, no such thing as a first reading, only a laying bare of the operations at work in order to produce certain experiences: suspense is for example in this sense not a personal feeling but an aesthetic function.\(^{411}\) The work will, analytically speaking, already be plural as it will always be the same at the same time as something new.\(^{412}\) Something similar could be said about exposition: if taken as informational and referential, expository passages would only be operative during the first reading of the work, since they would become superfluous as soon as we had already gained the knowledge they are there to offer. In The Ghost Sonata, strangeness and mystification are operative as functions and thus not something that may be straightened out and dispelled through excessive interpretation. While rereading certainly is basic for analysis, it may, if it is taken as an incentive for interpretations that no longer pay attention to the constructed order of the work, force us farther away from that particular functional and formal framework which we set out to describe in the first place.

Simulating an end: Final remarks

I will conclude the chapter by briefly discussing the end of the play, which could also be considered a kind of perverse play with forms. The first act shows the Old Man deceiving the Student in becoming his key to revenge; the second act shows how this revenge is carried out as the Old Man unmasks the inhabitants of the house and is then punished for his crimes; the third and final act focuses on the Student who, having had his illusions torn down, struggles to find meaning while reality crumbles around him. As the pattern is hardly narrative, we should not expect narrative closure. The play could end as the Old Man’s quest is over in the second act, yet it continues, not according to plot but through more distortions. When the end arrives, it may seem both inevitable and erratic, both expected and surprising, and while it certainly is strange in one sense, it is still an appropriate way to end a play like The Ghost Sonata. It is probably due to its very oddity that

\(^{412}\) Ibid., p. 16.
the bizarre disintegration of the oriental hyacinth room seems to conclude the distortive progression leading up to it so well. This is how the play ends:

THE STUDENT. [...] You poor little child, child of this world of illusions, guilt, suffering and death; the world of eternal change, of disappointment and pain; may the Lord of Heaven have mercy on you on your journey …

(The room disappears; Böcklin’s Toten-Insel becomes the background; faint music, gentle, pleasantly sorrowful is heard from the island.) (p. 225)

Perhaps we could sum up the strange logic of the play with the help of one small detail from the lyrical dialogue of the final act that could be considered to exemplify Strindberg’s tendency, pointed out by Brandell, to present in dialogue answers that almost but not really reply to the question stated. Ekman points out how Strindberg lets the dialogue skid or slide in a strange but suggestive way. During the opening of the third act, the visionary speech is prompted by the manifold of multicolored hyacinths surrounding the two central characters. The Student comments upon them extensively but Strindberg lets the dialogue shift from one object to the other without marking a clear transition:

The reference to the hyacinths ends with the Young Lady wishing to hear their ‘fairy tale’. [...] But it is a tale that the audience will have to supply for themselves, for instead of relating it the Student expounds on the meaning of the shallot bulb and its flower as metaphors of the earth and the stars of heaven. To add to the confusion, the Young Lady asks the Student if he has seen the shallot bloom, when, in fact, its flower has been visible on stage the whole time, resting in the lap of the Buddha on the mantelpiece.

Ekman notes how the Student first describes the setting of the room, then interprets it, and finally gets inspired by his own interpretation “to the point of being spellbound by it”. The dialogue is constructed according to what Ekman calls “an associative rather than a rational structure” where a particular attribute is singled out and then elaborated on, whereafter the dialogue moves over to another attribute. Thus, the shifts seem to be motivated and meandering at the same time. This movement could perhaps be supposed to correspond to the author’s actual process of writing, as he first lets his associations roam around the room, introducing a set of props which in turn lets his poetical imagination run wild.

413 Brandell, ”Questions without Answers”, p. 83.
414 Ekman, Strindberg and the Five Senses, p. 134.
415 Ibid., p. 135.
416 Ibid.
The description of this gliding motion could then be extended to consider the play at large. Consider, for example, how the general theme of truth-telling is elaborated. During the final act, the disillusioned Student goes from fantasizing about ethereal love to realizing the torment of earthly existence. In the process, he adopts the Old Man’s compulsion to tell the truth even, and particularly, when it is unpalatable. The Student’s aggressive outbreak during the third act seems to fit right into the associative and distortive pattern even though it was developed according to a narrative structure where a character gradually goes through an inner psychological process. Instead of constituting the conclusion of a plot, it forms the final moment in a series of thematic variations. We remember how the Old Man during the ghost supper unmask the guests and exposes all their flaws and falsities; thereafter he goes mad as he takes over the Mummy’s insanity and enters the closet to die. In the final act, the Student recounts how his father during a social gathering suddenly snapped and “in a long speech stripped the whole company, one after the other, told them all how false they were” (p. 223). After this, we learn from the account, the father also went mad and was locked up in a madhouse where he died. The correspondence between the report and the earlier scene is stressed by what almost becomes a literal echo, as the father is said to have banged the table to call their attention just like the Old Man is banging his crutch during the supper. After the Student has finished his report on his father’s insanity, he too appears to go mad and the entire world is declared a madhouse. Then, the stage is replaced by the painting of the land of the dead. So, just like we saw how the Female Cook of the third act grew forth in a series of intensifying associations, the final scene, too, seems to be constructed from Strindberg’s sliding motion from one scene to the other, from one image to the other. Törnqvist remarks on how the Student’s father obviously becomes mysteriously connected to the Old Man through the similarity of the scenes.\footnote{Törnqvist, Strindberg’s The Ghost Sonata, p. 46.} Yet, his explanation that the Student’s aggressive eruption should thus be understood as genetically motivated misses the mark as Strindberg seems to work not with naturalist motivations but with a successive transformation and mutation of motifs.

The end of The Ghost Sonata brought the play as such to a terminal point. Hereby, a productive field of new possibilities was also opened for the author. The ending point simultaneously formed a passage towards new writing. Thus,
the gliding shift seems to correspond also to the production of the Chamber Plays at large. Directly after having finished his third Chamber Play, Strindberg started working on a fourth one titled *The Bleeding Hand (Den blödande handen)*. The author describes it as “more dreadful than the others”, and because of the aggressive depiction of his close relatives he found good reason for burning his manuscript. Nothing remains of this text. In its place, Strindberg started working on yet another play, called *Toten-Insel (Hades)*. He soon lost interest in the play, but it remains as a dramatic fragment that is considered a part of the author’s oeuvre. *Toten-Insel (Hades)* starts off exactly where *The Ghost Sonata* ends: it uses Böcklin’s painting as a background, and its action takes place on the isle of the dead. The main character, a recently deceased teacher who has just arrived at the isle, does not coincide with the Student but we may still note similarities between the two plays: both have characters named the Dead Man, and the opening dialogue of *Toten-Insel (Hades)* revolves around a rich and powerful person who, just like the Old Man, goes by the name of Hummel and also seems to wreak havoc on the lives of other people.

While the setup of *Toten-Insel (Hades)* is striking and although it contains some suggestive imagery it is still easy to see why Strindberg would lose interest in his work on the play. The land of the dead is presented as a contrast to the turmoil of mundane life, but its peaceful serenity could probably be considered as incompatible with Strindberg’s disposition as a playwright. The embryo of a conflict may be found in the opening of the play, where the Dead Man is still unaware of his death: when he wakes up inside the coffin he rambles feverishly on about his marital and financial problems and his troubles at work – Strindberg is accordingly provided with the opportunity to elaborate on some of his usual topics and situations. The long monologues also contain the typical blend of lyricism and reality of the previous Chamber Plays. The sketched opening of the third act, which consists of a single page, terminates, however, all possibilities for dramatic conflict:

*(Scenery: The foreground a shore with green trees; the wind whispers slowly in the trees, the small waves splash; the other shore an orange-grove)*

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418 Letter to Emil Schering, 1 April 1907.
Having outlined this peaceful, bright, and breezy scene the writer apparently abandoned the entire enterprise.

The work was not done in vain, however, since what would really become a fourth Chamber Play came to grow out of it quite literally. During the final stages of the sketched play, Assir (the Dead Man’s name in the afterlife) is offered some diversion in the form of a theatrical spectacle, specified in the manuscript simply with the word “Text”. The character is presented as experiencing the play-within-a-play as strangely familiar, yet frightful and horrible. From the original manuscripts we may assume, Ollén notes, that what was to be inserted here is actually the play that, when finished, would become *The Pelican*. What Strindberg intended the character to view was in other words the breakdown of his earthbound family after his own departure. That breakdown, far better suited for Strindbergian drama, evolved into a play of its own.

The messy relationships between these diverse plays – *The Ghost Sonata*, *The Bleeding Hand*, *Toten-Insel (Hades)*, and *The Pelican* – give us an interesting glimpse into the Strindbergian writing process where one play grows out of another in a series of mutations and transformations. This process could be considered to correspond to the motion found within *The Ghost Sonata*, where an association is established, repeated, distorted, and intensified during the course of writing.

*The Ghost Sonata* and *The Pelican* are strikingly similar in several regards, but I would still like to point to an important difference. While both plays could be considered to contain several glitches or odd effects, these glitches appear differently in each play. While the oddities of *The Ghost Sonata* often catch our eye and turn the work into something utterly novel, those of *The Pelican* rather slide by smoothly and charge the play with a sense of unproblematic conventionality. This *smoothness* will be the main topic of the following chapter.

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421 Ibid., p. 345.
422 Ibid., p. 343.
423 Cf. the commentary in ibid., p. 409.
5. The Flight of *The Pelican*: Smooth Temporality in Chamber Play Op. 4

“... whereupon the author presents the modest explanation that: 'the speech was thrown on paper at high speed. Perhaps it has thereby gained in regularity what it has lost in detail and preparation'.”

A. S.424

Introduction: Smooth structures

The Chamber Play Op. 4, *The Pelican*, is often considered the least problematic of the plays, and it gives a quite straightforward, direct, and uniform impression. Usually considered a return to earlier conventions, and a step backwards in terms of dramaturgic invention, the play is often associated with Strindberg’s naturalistic plays of the 1880’s rather than his more experimental dramas marking the turn of the century.425 When compared to *The Ghost Sonata*, *The Pelican* is easily considered “a retreat” in terms of dramatic technique: while the previous play distorted the conventional devices of drama, the new play simply appears to make use of them.426 Sprinchorn eloquently expresses how “Strindberg, like Beethoven in his last string quartet, retreats to the more familiar and well-trodden paths of his art and offers a straightforward plot and gaudy theatricality”.427 To prove the traditional structure of the play, commentators often refer to a brief study by Ingvar Holm which aims at demonstrating how well the play fits into the Freytagian model of pyramidal plot-progression.428

The conventionality of the play is associated in particular with its plot-structure. The father of a family has recently died, leaving his wife, son, and daughter behind. The latter has just married, but her new husband has cancelled

the honey moon in order to return to the family home. Apparently, he longs for his mother-in-law, who he fancies more than his wife. The attention given to her encourages the haughty and selfish mother who turns out to have systematically mistreated her children. While taking pride in her self-sacrificial parenthood she has actually neglected the children who now are weak and ill. The mother and the son-in-law conspire in search of the father’s will, but rather stumble upon a letter written by the father to his children; it reveals the mother’s maternal crimes, her relation to the son-in-law, and the fact that she, indirectly, caused the death of the father. Even though they try to hide the letter away, the son finds it and thus exposes them. Now, the two children take their revenge on the mother by assuming control of the household and by subjecting her to her own ill deeds, her stinginess and cruel neglect. They are joined by the opportunistic son-in-law. Finally, the son, in a fit of drunken insanity, sets the house on fire. The mother plunges out of a window while the two siblings join in a delirious vision of the happy family as the growing flames draw nearer; thus the play ends. This plot-line is usually considered both conventional and efficient. Springhorn deems it “simple, uncluttered, and primal” and adds that “it could serve and has served for Hollywood melodrama, French comédie rosse, and Greek tragedy” while Paul Walsh states that it “moves forward with calculated precision”; Törnqvist stresses the efficiency of its classical hubris/nemesis-structure, and concludes that the “retributive pattern could hardly be more symmetrical”. The frequent references to plot, simplicity and effectiveness make *The Pelican* something of a unique specimen among the Chamber Plays.

The proficient use of structural and thematic reversals is pointed out in particular, the dominating one obviously being the chiastic structure according to which the dead father and the Mother switch places in a self-sacrifice/exploitation-opposition. The “pelican in her piety” as an emblem for selfless parenthood is initially associated with the Mother but soon turns out to be more adequate in relation to the father. The central theme of debunking maternity has been extensively treated by earlier commentators, and may therefore be summed up very briefly: while the Mother claims to have nurtured her children with her own blood, she has in reality merely fed them with “a glass bottle and a latex rubber” (p. 292); the father’s true sacrifices – symbolized by him having patched his clothes while the children were dressed like nobility – have on the other hand gone by unnoticed.

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429 Sprinchorn, *Strindberg as Dramatist*, p. 274.
430 Walsh, p. 331.
432 For just one presentation of the symbolical background, see Ollén, “Kommentarer”, p. 423.
Gradually, the Mother is exposed as the idealized symbol’s “dark negative of reality”, to use Margareta Wirmark’s expression, and while she gets disparaged, the father is exalted. The reversal corresponds to several other more or less symmetrical displacements displayed by the text. Gerda, the daughter, assumes the Mother’s place as the matron of the house and thus gains the influence to punish her maternal misdeeds. The reversal is concisely summed up by Törnqvist:

Elise has served her family porridge with blue skim milk, while she herself has grown fat on the skimmed-off cream. When Gerda refuses to eat porridge and treats Fredrik and Axel to ‘a sandwich and a steak’ in the kitchen, a reversal of roles is indicated. She, not Elise, is now the lady of the house. The men, not the mother, are invited to the hearty meal. The retributive pattern becomes manifest in Axel’s remark to Elise: ‘you should reduce a little for the sake of your health, as the rest of us have had to do’. It is now the mother’s turn to be invited to porridge and skim milk, while Axel and Gerda are to have a more substantial meal. The roles have definitely been reversed.

Several other similar cases of reversal are noted, as in the case of the discovery of the left behind letter. Strindberg’s use of a secret document here is, compositionally speaking, far better motivated than in the several other cases of randomly appearing pieces of evidence found in the Chamber Plays. Per Arne Tjäder describes how it is efficiently used by Strindberg as a dramaturgical device:

The letter brings unpleasant surprises and affects the course of the action in a decisive way. Strindberg uses a double dramatic irony, when the discovered letter contributes to both the son-in-law and the mother getting caught in traps of their own. The son-in-law is eager to find the will but instead comes across the document which, in more ways than one, sheds light upon his own true position in the house. And exactly by being true to her habit of letting the apartment stay unheated the mother makes it possible for the letter, which is thrown into the fireplace, to be picked up by the son who, defying his mother, wants to light a fire.

433 Wirmark, p. 150. (“verklighetens mörka negativ”)
434 Törnqvist, Strindbergian Drama, p. 211. Törnqvist offers several other examples of reversals according to a similar pattern of retribution. Cf. e.g. Lamm, Strindbergs dramer II, p. 408 or Hallberg, p. 27.
435 Törnqvist (Strindbergian Drama, p. 209f.) comments upon Strindberg’s use of the letter: ”For the development of the plot, this letter is thus of central importance. […] To secure a sense of progression and suspense, Strindberg in other words informs us step by step.” Ekman (Strindberg and the Five Senses, p. 165) deems ”the letter that reveals a secret” an ”old trick in the theatre”.
436 Tjäder, p. 64. (“Brevet kommer med obehagliga överraskningar och påverkar på ett avgörande sätt händelseförloppet. Här arbetar Strindberg med en dubbel dramatisk ironi, då det upptäckta brevet aktivt bidrar till att både mågen och modern faller på egna grepp. Mågen är ivrig att leta fram testamentet och får då istället fatt i det dokument som på mer än ett sätt klargör hans verkliga ställning i huset. Och just genom att sin...
In addition to ironies, revelations, and twists of this kind, Ekman lists a series of thematic reversals related to the final scene of the play: here “the dying are being compensated for their suffering in this life” as their earthly horrors are all at once replaced by the delights of a liberating death.437

All the more striking are the many structural reversals where one character replaces, displaces or gets mixed up with another. We have already suggested that both Gerda and the father will occupy different aspects of the Mother’s position, in the first case as unforgiving matron, in the second as the emblematic pelican in its piety. The Son-in-law captures the position of the Son as he is granted the love and care that the Mother denies the latter;438 and he furthermore replaces the dead father as something of a master of the house.439 This results in the Mother merging with her daughter as his fiancée and mistress.440 The Son appropriates the space of the dead father by mimicking his manners – the eerie habit of wandering about confused, drunk, and screaming – as well as by literally taking his seat in the patriarchal throne, i.e. the rocking chair, the space most intimately associated with the departed.441 The chair is in fact alternately occupied by both the Son and the Son-in-law who are repeatedly mistaken for, or at least compared to, the deceased father.442 Another reversal occurs as the Mother takes over Gerda’s role as a “sleep-walker”: while the latter gradually awakens from her hazily idealized conception of life the former sinks deeper and deeper into delusion and illusion, so that the daughter exclaims, during a final confrontation: “Poor mother! You’re still sleepwalking, like we all have been doing, but will you never wake up?” (p. 291)

The extensive list of turns and twists and structural chiasms presented may seem chaotic, but they are all carried out in a quite effortless manner and generate

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437 Ekman, Strindberg and the Five Senses, p. 168f. According to Ekman coldness is replaced by warmth; foul smells by a wealth of pleasant scents; frightening sounds by pleasant sounds; falsified food and hunger by rich food and satisfaction; ugliness by beauty; and so on.


439 Cf. e.g. Tjäder, p. 69 or Johnsson, p. 82.

440 The question whether The Mother and The Son-in-law would be physical lovers or not is disputed among the commentators; I will relate to the question briefly in what follows.

441 Cf. Paul Rosefeldt, The Absent Father in Modern Drama, New York 1995, p. 37: “The son, who sympathizes with the Father, begins to mirror him. […] the son takes to drinking just like his father did. Sitting in the Father’s rocking chair, he becomes a double of the Father.”

442 Cf. e.g. ibid.; Tjäder, p. 69; Johnsson, p. 82. For examples in the play, see p. 256f.; 280; 288; etc.
a solid dramatic action rather than just a melodramatic mess of sudden reversals and surprising plot-twists. *The Pelican* was symptomatically the Chamber Play preferred by the more practically oriented and market minded August Falck, who, as we know, was Strindberg’s partner in founding Intima Teatern;\(^{443}\) and it is the only Chamber Play that actually complies with the restrictions implied in the concept of an “intimate” theatre.\(^{444}\) In *The Burned Lot* we noted how the Strindbergian mode of writing produced a series of bifurcations and multiplications of forms that, when put together, caused something of an incongruent set of conflicting fragments. In *The Ghost Sonata*, incongruence was avoided by placing every individual form under a new kind of superordinate principle of wholeness, what we called a trajectory of distortion or, following Ekman, a principle of demonization. As in the case of *Stormy Weather*, both modes caused the emergence of a kind of “glitches” which still operated in quite different ways (fissures in structure, sudden hints of compositional strangeness, etc.): these glitches were *experienced* as effects. *The Pelican*, in contrast, seems smooth: the number of glitches noted by commentators is considerably smaller as the play is regarded a compositional success or at least a fairly accomplished, if perhaps *too* conventional, piece of dramatic writing. The present chapter will discuss those glitches still noted and how they relate to the general experience of the play as a smooth surface or simple line.

I relate the discussion to the concept of temporality as referring to in what way elements taking place “early on” in a compositional or textual sequence relate to those occurring “later on”, and vice versa. In a first section I present an outline of what I call three different aspects of literature of relevance for the discussion: mimetic sequence as the representation of chronology within a consistent space-time continuum; compositional retrospectivity, or the way the literary work may be considered as a whole rather than a process whereby the sense of temporal progression is subordinated to a spatial principle of fixed relations; and the speed of writing or the stylistic aspect here associated with the Strindbergian poetics of mold. The following sections each focus on a specific interpretational problem in greater detail: they concern the way mimetic chronology relates to the division of acts within the play; the compositional functions of the Son-in-law and the father; and, lastly, the description of the scenic stage. In a concluding section I plead for

\(^{441}\) Cf. Ollén, “Kommentarer”, p. 427, or the letter to Emil Schering, 7 July 1907: “I will probably send you the Pelican, which Falck values the most and wants to start with!”

\(^{444}\) On spatial restriction, see for instance Törnqvist, *Strindbergian Drama*, p. 213 or Ekman, *Strindberg and the Five Senses*, p. 149ff. The play contains the smallest amount of characters of all the Chamber Plays, and all characters are of central interest. Margret, who still functions as *ficelle*, is the only potential exception.
the need of speed in literary analysis in order to avoid potentially misleading or inadequate interpretations.

Three aspects of literature of relevance for a discussion on temporality

Let us take our starting point in Strindberg’s famous preface to Miss Julie where the author presents us with the following often quoted description of his use of dramatic dialogue:

I have shunned the symmetrical, mathematical in French constructed dialogue, in order to let the brains work irregularly like they do in real life, where in a conversation no topic is brought to a full end, but one brain from the other is offered a random cog to connect with. And thus the dialogue too is roaming around, providing itself in the early scenes with a material that is later on elaborated, taken up, repeated, evolved, expanded, just like the theme of a musical composition.  

From this short comment we may extract at least three different aspects of literature which are of relevance for our discussion.

The first and perhaps most obvious factor is the representational aspect of literature in reference to which a literary work is often considered a textual representation of a consistent space-time continuum – a diegesis or fictional world – in which characters (or simply agents) act and interact. In the case of drama, this is usually associated with its “mimetic” aspect. Szondi, as we know, defines (so called “absolute”) drama as a primary presentation of an absolute “realm of interpersonal relationships”, where people interact in a present which, as Szondi has it, passes away and thereby produces change from which a new present springs forth. Drama then “generates its own time” which “unfolds as an absolute, linear sequence in the present”. The dramatic action of Miss Julie could then be conceived of as generated by the dynamics of the characters themselves as participants in communicative and interactive situations; and temporality would be inseparable from the sequential aspect of the fictional space where these situa-

446 Szondi, Theory of the Modern Drama, p. 7.
447 Ibid., p. 9.
448 Ibid.
tions occur. The model corresponds at least in part to a later general attitude towards literary fiction as the (re)presentation of an enclosed, internally governed and – more or less – autonomous fictional diegesis which may be found in narrative models where temporality is attributed to a story-level of projected events and changing states of affairs and where chronology is accordingly considered as “a mimetic principle organizing events in a pre-established level of action”. The mimetic model is encouraged if not necessarily justified by possible world-models of literature as “the representation of a number of events in a time sequence” and, in the field of theatre, by models describing the theatrical spectator as “principally concerned with piecing together the underlying logic of the action” in order to successfully “project the possible world of the drama”.

Models of that kind strive to account for how the internal dynamics of fiction are supposedly modeled on the dynamics of our external world, and thus imply that literature is constructed to represent a sense of worldly consistency, continuity, connections and relations. Of course, Strindberg only claims to have written his play as if it was generated through such an interactive and inter-personal dynamic: he mimics reality, and this is his artistic credo. The first aspect – the diegetic chronology of mimetic sequentiality – must therefore be considered as a secondary effect of the author’s governing intent when putting together his work as a composed whole. Here we approach our second aspect which we may call compositional retrospectivity. The second notion pays less attention to the illusion of the work as a self-generating diegetic dialectic than to it as a composed whole constituted by functions and motifs. In this compositional sense progress is not a flux of time or a sequence of events but an aspect of a designed totality entailing a sense of closure granting uniform significance to its distinct parts. The

449 Or at least we would admit, in Szondian terms, that this would be the necessary effect of a particular correlation between dramatic form and humanist/post-Renaissance-yet-pre-modern/bourgeois worldview made possible at a specific socio-historical moment. But we should be able to invoke the model without dwelling too much on the specific historio-philosophical poetics where it occurs.
450 Ruth Ronen, *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory*, Cambridge 1994, p. 214ff. The principle difference is, of course, that Szondi’s model is limited to a specific genre at a specific time and place (this is the dramatic illusion strived for, for different reasons, by Western dramatists of the 19th century) while possible world-theories of fiction aim for de-historized generality.
sense of time passing by does, accordingly, not rely on our realization of actions and events taking place digetically but of the structure of plot itself as a total form that, as Aristotle put it, “allows coherent perception”.

Temporality could thus be understood in spatial terms as related to a structure defined “exactly by the fact that it has an ending, does not wait for an ending but already possesses one so to speak spatially and simultaneously at the other end of the story or book”. While retrospection in narration is often associated with the predicament of a narrator – trying to construct a coherent configuration by selecting from and elaborating on events already occurred in a messy past – formally oriented theories of literature and drama rather have associated it with the way in which an author assembles his formal elements in order to produce a unified work: when approaching the end we should sense that there is no element of arbitrariness involved but that it all sticks together as one, and that the beginning so to speak already contained the end and vice versa. It is apparently along such lines that Strindberg seeks to remind us that we not should complain too much about the rambling randomness of the dialogue until we have the whole picture: it is all intended for a specific effect according to a specific artistic purpose.

Still, we should not take Strindberg at his word, for knowing him we also sense something more underlying the passage quoted from the preface. In many ways it comes across as a kind of naturalistic alibi for the Strindbergian mode of writing: the idiosyncratic construction of text and dialogue is excused by an appeal to a “true” poetics of verisimilitude. What Strindberg knows will strike the reader as an obvious irregularity of the work is attributed to a regular and planned more or less naturalistic poetics of the representation of irregular human behavior: it is people who are disorderly, not the poor author who just tries to capture them in art. The potentially disordered composition, it is suggested, simply corresponds to a solid artistic order. But the excuse seems to be an afterthought, and thus we may note our third aspect of literature, viz. writing as a force that may steer the work in an unforeseen direction and thus generate elements and effects beyond the author’s cognitive control. Such effects may sometimes be accounted for neither by reference to the projected chronology of a diegesis or to the “spatial” whole of an artistic composition. Genette discusses speed as the ratio between represented time – the duration of story, in his terms – and the textual (literally spatial) area occupied by that representation in dis-

454 Aristotle, 1451a.
455 Skalin, *Karaktär och perspektiv*, p. 250. (“en narrativ struktur som definieras just av att den har ett slut, inte väntar på ett slut men redan besitter ett sådan s.a.s. spatialt och samtidigt i andra änden av historien eller boken”)
course: a lengthy time span may, just like the Bergsonian piece of elastic, be presented in only few words, and a short moment on several pages, etc. My use of speed as a concept is however rather influenced by the Deleuzian distinction between speed and movement. Movement, in this sense, has more to do with composition: it is an extensive line, regulated by relations of an external grid of points, going from one point to the other in order to tie them together according to a structural principle. Speed, on the other hand, is an absolute intensity which at every possible point opens up an infinite field of potential new lines in any, every or no direction. Deleuze and Guattari accordingly speak of speed as a body of parts that “occupy or fill a smooth space in the manner of a vortex, with the possibility of springing up at any point”. The concepts point to differences but are not binaries as every movement relies on some element of speed (composition needs writing to materialize) and speed may always crop up in movement (the event of writing may be provoked by and take place within the act of composing): speed could accordingly be considered, to use Bogue’s words, as “movement out of control”.

We could use the famous squiggle by which Laurence Sterne describes the composition of the fifth book of *Tristram Shandy* as an illustration:

The event of writing as compositional trace, as illustrated by Laurence Sterne.

While Sterne’s (ironically presented, of course) narrator claims to have aimed compositionally for the Archimedean line of Christians and cabbage-planters – the straight line “which can be drawn from one given point to another” – the act of writing as a material event always proves to open up the possibility for unforeseen influences, disturbances and digressions: At point A this occurred, at point

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456 Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, p. 87f.  
460 Ibid.
B that happened, and it all came to affect the composition as a trace made self-
positional to the degree of becoming the very style of a work.

Writing should accordingly not be considered as an opposite to composition
but as something that may or may not take place inside it, spring out from its
middle, in order to produce a multitude of different effects. I will try to sum up
the relations between our three aspects using the Deleuzian term “territorializa-
tion”: the (secondary) mimetic stream of time is always territorialized by the
(primary) spatial framework of composition which situates every moment as a
point within a grid rolled out as a total and graspable whole. Writing, in turn,
deterritorializes composition by entering that grid as a disruption from within,
always able to produce de-gridded whirls and swirls. These lines are in turn po-
tentially reterritorialized as that disruption posits itself as a stylistic trait of a
work of art and an artistic oeuvre. That is: chronology is an effect of totality; to-
tality may be bifurcated by writing; and writing may be aggregated as style. Or,
in terms of reception: the recognition of represented time is subordinated to a
recognition of an artistic whole which in turn is potentially subordinated to a
recognition of the process of writing which finally may be subordinated to our
recognition of a particular style or the peculiar rules of significance constituting
the oeuvre as an artistic idiolect.

What is particularly interesting in the case of *The Pelican* is the fact that the
line produced, as suggested by the brief survey of earlier commentaries, is entirely
simple, plain and smooth. The effect of writing may produce a straight line as
well as a set of ruined lines or a demonizing spiral. In what follows I will focus on
four interpretational problems that are all more adequately related to the effect of
speed than to the mimetic chronology of the diegesis or to a principle of compo-
sition according to which the author has intended certain elements to carry signifi-
cance or interpretational meaning.

Four problems of temporal relations

I. Eating too often

*The Pelican* is divided into three acts titled “1st”, “2nd”, and “3rd”. Ollén notes the
significant fact that Strindberg on the title page of his original manuscript has
stated that the play may be performed “either as one long act, or three”, and
hereby we may already assume that the play should be conceived of as one simple
line – a smooth flow free of disruptions – rather than a set of distinct chronologi-
cal moments or points of time.\textsuperscript{461} To aim for a uniform effect is of course nothing exceptional but a common concern among dramatists. Nevertheless, the uniformity of the play has provoked a few interpretational problems when considered in contrast to the mapping out of chronological mimetic time.

Here I will take a brief look at Törnqvist’s analysis of the division as it articulates an interesting intuitive understanding of the play which is however presented according to a somewhat unfortunate choice of words. Here is what he says about the relationship between the acts as artistic and mimetic division:

Our spontaneous impression is that this action covers a few hours of one and the same evening. This impression is communicated by the unity of environment: not only do we find ourselves in the same room all the time; the storm in Act I is with us also in Act III.

However, with this interpretation the distribution of meals becomes problematic. At the end of Act II, Gerda invites the men to a meal. At the beginning of Act III, Axel tells Elise: “... and since we don’t get enough to eat in this house, Gerda and I intend to eat by ourselves”. But if Axel and Gerda have just eaten, why should they eat again? From Axel’s way of expressing himself we must conclude that a certain time has elapsed between Acts II and III. Thus understood, various developments – Fredrik’s drunkenness, the deterioration of Axel’s and Gerda’s marriage, Elise’s sense of being closed up – become rationally more acceptable.

While the time of scenic action, in other words, seems spread out over two non-consecutive nights, separated by a time lapse of unknown duration, the unity of mood and environment creates a feeling that everything happens in one and the same evening. This clash of two time concepts results in a sense of unreality, or better, half-reality.\textsuperscript{462}

The distinction between a first spontaneous impression and a latter more thorough analysis is interesting as it suggests the ability of the latter to override the former: at first we get a cursory idea that proves untenable at closer examination whereby a particular effect – a clash of conflicting time concepts – is provoked. We find an obvious parallel in the transition from second to third act in The Ghost Sonata (the reference to the Old Man’s funeral); still I find reason to suggest that the two cases differ in distinction. When discussing the previous play we opted for remaining cautious in attaching too great compositional significance to the sudden reference to the funeral as it could very well be just a careless slip on the part of the author, and the very same caution is probably warranted here. While a difference of intention remains uncertain we may note a difference of effect related to the distinct form of each play.

\textsuperscript{461} Quoted in Ollén, “Kommentarer”, p. 426.
\textsuperscript{462} Törnqvist, Strindbergian Drama, p. 208.
In the case of the funeral the sudden reference pops out, so to speak, as we still picture the Old Man lying dead inside the closet. I suggested that the effect may have been caused due to the author deciding to throw in a sketched motif without anchoring it to or incorporating it into the compositional whole: the reference remains unprepared and unmotivated. Whether calculated or not the detail however fitted quite well into the distorted progression of the play. While it may have been a simple mistake we are still able to imagine a scenario where the author in going over his play may still find it proper and thus decides to keep it as it is according to his Pilatean poetics – “what I have written I have written”.

But the present example of the doubled meals does not catch our eye in the same apparent way; rather, it slips us by entirely. If we imagined a similar scenario we would hardly expect the author to notice his presumed inconsistency at all, and thus he would never even have to decide on whether he should keep it or not. Instead, we may picture him as being quite satisfied with the unified theme and the uniform mood of the play as expressed by a smooth dramatic acceleration. An abundance of meals is actually quite in line with The Pelican as it relates so closely to the strikingly consistent theme of the play. Each meal constitutes a variation on motifs of revenge and reversal in correspondence with the general theme of nourishment and malnutrition: Gerda invites the men to a rich meal as a demonstration of her newly acquired control of the household and power over her mother; and the Son-in-law refers to a private meal as a demonstration of the expulsion of the Mother from the family communion. In both cases the Mother is forced to suffer “like we all have had to do ...” (p. 279). The coherence of theme and reversal is entirely superior to the logic according to which upon scrutiny we would note an unreasonable repetition of repasts. The sensation of “half-reality” so typical of Strindberg is accordingly provoked not by a clash of time concepts (everyday logic vs. dramatic flow) but by the efficient intensity according to which the entire action emerges like a menacing tragedy decreed by Fate, in combination, of course, with the claustrophobic setting, the somewhat grotesque portrayal of character, and the eerie ghost-scenes where the dead father seems distinctly present. The spontaneous impression overrides the rational examination rather than the other way around.

The model of conflicting time concepts is therefore inadequate as it suggest that we either apprehend the play as all taking place in one evening or in several consecutive evenings, or that these two conflicting views are synthesized into one. Yet the need to choose never arises, a choice never becomes necessary in order to understand the effect of the play: all we have to respond to is the single and uniform aesthetical progression according to which certain themes, motifs and structures
are varied to produce an aesthetically rather than mimetically cohesive flow. That flow generates a sense of evenningness rather than a series of evenings; it strikes the mood of a timeless witching hour lacking chronological structuration. If we demand everyday consistency of time from the play it will be reduced to a disruptive sequence laden with gaping holes and indefinite questions of what “really” happened. Such a view is however contradicted by the frequent reports of the play’s simple and accelerating progression. Simple intuition proves more adequate than thorough analysis in this case.

Thus, Tjäder is obviously right in pointing out that the entire question of what amount of time could be thought to pass between acts is utterly uninteresting. Törnqvist supports such a conclusion by referring to the unity of mood, yet retains a model that risks leading us astray. That we or the author should strive for rational acceptance is certainly questionable. The persistency of the storm is a case in point: our knowledge of genre simply admits that it may always be storming or raining in certain kinds of fiction, while in others the sun will always be shining. The motifs of drunkenness, of spatial confinement, and of marriage as a battle ground also lack the need for rational acceptance. Realistic motivation, as Tomashevsky stressed, relies more on the conventions of art than on our everyday apprehension of the real world surrounding us. That is why Törnqvist is able to dismiss a series of questions prompted by a brief breaking down of the so-called pre-scenic action as inadequate—“Why does Axel go so far as to marry Gerda, once Elise’s husband is dead? Why does he not, eventually, marry Elise instead? After all, this would only improve his financial situation”, and so on—by claiming that they are simply “not very rewarding when applied to Strindberg’s post-Inferno plays”.

This is however not due to the reason presented by Törnqvist: that the elements of the Chamber Plays are charged with metaphorical rather than realistic significance. The Mother’s line from the play’s opening—“the landlord won’t let us move [flytta], and we can’t move [röra oss]…”—should not be taken to metaphysically mean that “it is not for man but for God to decide when we are to die”. That the Mother should be considered not as an individual but as a representative of motherhood in general is a less speculative suggestion. Still, we need less interpretation here, and more simplicity. The important thing to recall is that the model of conflicting time concepts is therefore inadequate as it suggests that

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463 Tjäder, p. 63.
464 Cf. Tomashevsky, p. 83.
466 Ibid.
467 Ibid., p. 213.
468 Cf. Ibid., p. 212.
member is that in a play like *The Pelican* every element seems caught up in or engulfed by a structural process of forgetting, of speed, which here produces a surprisingly homogenous effect. When one meal is mentioned the previous one has already disappeared, not from a mimetically represented world but from the mind of the author and, in most “spontaneous” cases, also from that of the reader. We find the challenge for literary analysis in accounting for that process not as origin of creation but as posited by the text, i.e. for forgetting as part of composition, structure and work. The progression of the play not only originates in but actually seems to correspond to the smooth speed of a pencil moving over the flat surface of a paper, producing a simple line without breaks or dents by free hand, without a grid, a ruler, or even a chronometer.

II. Vanishing family members

Let us move on to another problem of a similar kind, now related to the function of character. We have already noted a list presented by Lindström of several instances of vague or contradictory information found within the Chamber Plays. In relation to the play under consideration he presents the following example: “Of what nature is the relationship between the Mother and the Son-in-law in *The Pelican*, and what becomes of the young man during the fire?”

The first part of the question is of less interest for us but the second part may be worth an examination as it constitutes the main point for a latter essay on the play, viz. Tjäder’s.

First, the messy question of the relationship between the two. Lamm, Berendsohn and Hallberg all point out the Son-in-law as the Mother’s “lover”; Törnqvist refers to her as his “mistress”; and Rosefeldt states that the Mother abandoned her husband “to go to her lover”. An opposing view is presented by Ollén and Wirmark. The first stresses that while the Mother certainly could be considered to have enticed the younger man in an inappropriate manner, she has still never been his actual mistress; and the latter concludes that we not are

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469 Lindström, “Dialog och bildspråk i Strindbergs kammarspel”, p. 170. (“Av vilken art är förhållandet mellan Modren och Mågen i Pelikanen, och vad blir det av den unge mannen i eldsvådan?”)
472 Rosefeldt, p. 36.
dealing with a case of adultery in any stricter, physical sense of the word.\textsuperscript{474} The last two versions have firm textual support as Strindberg lets the Son-in-law explicitly blame the Mother for having eliminated Gerda from his mind, “pushed her out of her place, except from the bedroom, which she got to keep ...” (p. 254). Yet we might suppose that the author, first of all aiming at debunking the female “Camorra” and the mythology of maternity, addresses the question at this moment only to make sure that her crimes will always be worse than his. Whether or not the two characters should be considered to have slept together is however obviously of less concern than to note the general theme of erotic replacements bordering on the incestuous that dominates the play and becomes structurally manifest in the several already noted patterns of replacements among family members.\textsuperscript{475} We grasp the thematic play of transgressing relations whether or not the physical act of love-making is explicated.

Now, for the second part of the question. This is the main argument presented in Tjäder’s essay: \textit{The Pelican} deconstructs the dramatic conventions of Strindberg’s time – the naturalistic and the well-made play (the concepts are used alternately) – due to its “lack of characters in the classical sense” and its “dissolved” dramaturgy in general.\textsuperscript{476} Tjäder locates the play in a Szondian manner at the point of transition from naturalist to symbolist or “modern” drama. We note a recurring model of clashing time concepts. The naturalist drama is described as bound to a scenic now which is conceived of as a product of actions and events from the past; this is said to express “bourgeois society’s conception of time, a linear and partly also causal time”.\textsuperscript{477} Modern drama, on the other hand, is timeless and restricted to a particular detached situation. In the first case, a play is governed by rules of consistency and probability, in the latter by symbolical associations. \textit{The Pelican’s} transition from the first conception to the second is illustrated by the way central discoveries like the revelation of the close relationship between the Mother and the Son-in-law merely passes by without entailing the kind of crucial dramaturgic turn one would expect from naturalist drama. It all comes across, according to Tjäder, “as if nothing has changed, as if their ‘ménage à trois’ could go on even during these new circumstances”.\textsuperscript{478} Thus, while the play still centers on the analytic structure where secrets from the past are un-

\textsuperscript{474} Wirmark, p. 150.
\textsuperscript{475} Cf. e.g. Johnsson, p. 82.
\textsuperscript{476} Tjäder, p. 65. (”pjäsen brist på karaktärer”, ”Därtill är Pelikanens dramaturgi alltför upplöst”)
\textsuperscript{477} Ibid., p. 63. (”dess tidsuppfattning är också ett uttryck för det borgerliga samhällets tidsuppfattning, en linear och delvis kausal tid”)
\textsuperscript{478} Ibid. p. 68. (”som om ingenting hade förändrats, som deras ’ménage à trois’ skulle kunna fortsätta även under dessa nya förhållanden”)
earthed in the present, these revelations lack dramaturgical effect whereby the entire setup remains dramaturgically pointless. This is the main theoretical background for the argument.

While lacking a progression of plot, Tjäder finds other spectacular things occurring within the dramatic construction of the play. A particular detail is focused, viz. the fact that the character of the Son-in-law simply vanishes from the play as he is present “neither during the violent change of scene that occurs when the son sets the house on fire nor in the minds of the persons”. This disappearance of a character considered as the “true agent” of the play becomes troublesome from the naturalist or plot-oriented point of view as it remains uncommented, unexplained and unmotivated by the text. According to Tjäder, it even risks the entire dramatic structure of the play as it introduces the different and conflicting logic of “symbolic” order. According to the argument, the true function of the character would actually be to revive the past in a more verbatim sense by acting as a vehicle for the return of the dead father to his family: the Son-in-law is a medium whereby the deceased may become gradually manifest and occupy a physical space within the room. When the Son-in-law for instance takes his seat in the rocking chair he literally reanimates the space of the father by setting it into ghostlike motion. So hereby – and this is the main point of the argument – we may solve the case of the vanishing character who is only lost from the plot-oriented or bourgeois point of view: while conventional poetics would consider the inexplicable disappearance of a central character a flaw the symbolic poetics of mediation actually makes it necessary. The character has fulfilled his function as the dead father is finally brought back to life (symbolically speaking) in the delirious vision of the final scene. The potential glitch is accordingly compositionally motivated after all, Tjäder explains:

That is why Axel does not even have a symbolic role at the end of the play. For at that moment he is replaced by the dead father who, in the two children’s vision of The Holy Family during the dreamt summer holidays of life, is apostrophized as head of the family and above all as father and

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479 Ibid. (“varken i den våldsamma scenförändring som inträffar när sonen sätter eld på huset eller i personernas medvetande”)
480 Ibid, p. 69. (”pjäsens verklige agent”)
481 Wirmark (p. 155) presents a psychological interpretation of how the father’s truth apparently becomes manifest in the scenic space, or at least that this is how things appear for the guilt-ridden Mother. Cf. Ekman, *Strindberg and the Five Senses*, p. 159ff.
482 Tjäder, p. 69. Cf. e.g. Carl Enoch William Leonard Dahlström, *Strindberg’s dramatic expressionism* (1930), 2nd ed., New York 1965, p. 202: “The rocking-chair symbolizes the spirit of the dead father, so much so that whenever the chair rocks the Mother is convinced that some invisible creature is seated there.”
nally also as husband. At that point, who reflects upon whether the son-in-law has perished in the flames inside the bedroom, or if he has escaped from the house by attending yet another “conference”?\textsuperscript{483}

Here is my main objection to the argument presented: the interpretation fails to present its own motivation, i.e. the need for an interpretational motivation of the detail at all. It could be relevant if we really were to consider the Son-in-law the true agent of the play, but we lack reason to do so. It is true that he, like the Son, assumes different aspects of the dead father from time to time but he does not “act” – in the dramaturgical sense – to any greater extent than the other characters. It is the Son-in-law who discovers the letter but it is the Son that is the agent of exposure, Gerda the agent of retribution, and finally also the Son who sets the house on fire. The Son-in-law merely tags along, so to speak. While the author may have been struck by a temporary fit of sympathy for the character as contrasted to the loathsome Mother, the character still joins her at the side of structural and normative antagonism. If we must declare a protagonist – an impetus – one would probably have to settle for the dead father: that would at least be supported by the fact that the play at one time was intended as the play-within-the-play viewed by the Dead Man in \textit{Toten-Insel (Hades)}. And to some degree, Strindberg could perhaps be considered to have solved his previous problems with the mouthpiece protagonists by letting the ultimate retaliator be a squeaky-clean martyr speaking the truth from the other side of the grave. Still, speculations of this kind only seem to prove futile in discussing the play as a protagonist-centered structure. While Tjäder is correct in calling in question the conventional pattern of the play we find a lack of support for the alternative and intricate structure of symbolic mediation.

Tjäder still provides us with yet another, less complex and more adequate, description of the matter, fully in line with our impression of the simple line. The logic of mediation is brought up as a more profound and thorough analysis or explanation of a quite simple observation: a character that plays a central role during the course of action plays no roll at all in the end of the play. The explanation presented suggests that this is due to the fact that the characters function according to single isolated dramatic situations rather than a totalizing global plot-construction. The entire problem appears then to be no problem at all, and Tjäder simply may state in a quite straightforward manner: “When the son-in-law has done his bit he may leave!”\textsuperscript{484} In trying to motivate or justify such a trivial yet suggestive observation by demonstrating how it all comes together after all with

\textsuperscript{483} Tjäder, p. 71.
\textsuperscript{484} Ibid., p. 69. ("När mågen gjort sitt kan han gå!")
reference to “modern” principles of composition we actually lose a valuable opportunity to study the place for non-compositional aspects in dramatic literature or the possibility for literature to work without coming together. The author’s lack of concern for one of his characters could perhaps be considered sloppy or surprising according to a more rigid model of dramatic construction but the detail is still hardly noticeable for anyone actually following the flow of the aesthetical design. If the ghostly mediation were truly a central functional principle of the play we would reflect upon it as readers or spectators, but Tjäder explicitly suggests that this is not the case: during the over-the-top finale we simply do not care about the fate of the lost Son-in-law. To completely forget about him as a reader is simply to react in accordance with the structure of forgetfulness governing the work.

The authorial situation seems to be clear: as the author’s writing progresses, a character that at one time was at his centre of attention later becomes superfluous for the current situation at hand, i.e. the final part of the play. The character is disposed of, not necessarily according to a conscious choice but perhaps due to the author actually forgetting about him. The Son-in-law falls out of Strindberg’s mind and thus also out of his work. If we were to point this out to the author, he could simply answer: yes, very well, but what I have written I have written. The writer works according to a poetics where motivation may be a vital aspect of planning the work but not of accomplishing it: several kinds of motivation will post festum in fact prove redundant or to have a restraining influence on the forms and effects that have actually emerged in writing. This is a simplistic explanation but just like the “spontaneous impression” suggested by Törnqvist it is far more in line with the actual design of the Chamber Plays than the complex interpretations presented as the more thorough or profound version of analysis. In its search for complexity, analysis risks refusing what it sets out to describe. The challenge rather lies in the attempt to describe the particular artistic and stylistic context where such an absent-minded mode of composing will become productive and thus produce works that really works.

III. Becoming a teacher

Let us move on to a more spectacular instance of situational functionality, pointed out by Ollén in his commentaries to the critical edition of the Chamber Plays. It concerns two passages of The Pelican, quoted below, that each indicates the dead father’s previous profession; they appear in the very first and last sec-
tions of the play. The first passage suggests that the father has been some kind of businessman, the latter that he was a teacher:

THE MOTHER. Father didn’t leave anything, you know that, perhaps debts ...
THE SON. But the business must be worth something?
THE MOTHER. There is no business where there is no stock, no goods, you see!
THE SON. (ponders at first.) But the firm, the name, the customers …
THE MOTHER. You can’t sell customers … (p. 238)

THE SON. (in ecstasy.) Is it summer? The clover is blossoming, the summer holidays begin, do you remember when we went down to the white steamboats and patted them, when they were freshly painted and waited for us, then dad was happy, then he was alive, he said, and the theme-books were finished! (p. 296)

Let us first recount Ollén’s brief outline of Strindberg’s biographical situation when writing the play as well as the private background to certain details related to the characters. It seems to have been painfully obvious for those involved to what degree the play was actually modeled after the marriage between Strindberg’s sister Anna and her husband Hugo Philp who had already served as the source of inspiration for the equally dismal couple in The Dance of Death (Dösdansen, 1900).485 Due to the recent death of Philp in 1906 Strindberg apparently aimed at rehabilitating his former brother-in-law by presenting him in a more favorable light. It is a well-established fact that the widowed sister who stepped in as Strindberg’s housekeeper for a short period at the time is associable with the several motifs of poorly executed housework and sinister servants appearing throughout the Chamber Plays. Here is what interests us: Philp, a teacher in real life, served as a prototype for the father in The Pelican as well as for the Dead Man in Toten-Insel (Hades); remember that these two characters developed as aspects of the same person. According to the setup where The Pelican was to be a play-within-the-play of Toten-Insel (Hades), the Dead Man was to view the fate of his family from the truer position beyond the distorted physical world. The intermingling of these two separate characters indicate the Strindbergian working process but it also throws light upon a specific interpretational problem related to the play, viz. the apparent “change” of profession from businessman to teacher noted above.


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The somewhat puzzling reference to the finished theme-books ("temaböcker") occurring in the final vision of family reunion quoted above becomes a bit more comprehensible if we compare the passage to another one from the fragmentary Toten-Insel (Hades). There, the Dead Man wakes up confused, distressed, and worried about his "class at half past six, yes, but before that I have fifty theme-books to grade, for the lower seventh grade ...", etc.486 Later on the stage directions state: "THE DEAD MAN (now called Assir = Earthman, is sitting down, marking theme-books; he looks still half asleep.)"487 The term theme-books apparently refers to some sort of student’s exercise books488 which the dead father/Dead Man has to go over and grade. The task is obviously presented as tedious work to just get over with: grading theme-books is used as an illustrative motif of the perils of everyday life that the Dead Man has left behind without yet having realized it; and in The Pelican, the finished task signals freedom and the arrival of the summer holidays. The logic of the motif then suggests or rather demands that the father has worked as a teacher and it is hereby that we may recognize the final vision as envisaging the mutual sense of liberation that brings the family together when school is out. This apparently adequate conclusion is on the other hand obviously contradicted by the passage from the first act where the father is presented as someone involved in business, sales, and customer relations. As far as I can see, Ollén is the first commentator to note the contradiction, and here is what he says about the messy mix-up of characters, professions and the real-life model in his critical commentaries:

Strindberg was to reveal the connection between “the deceased” Hugo Philp, Toten-Insel and The Pelican in a way that he himself probably did not notice. Why, in Toten-Insel the main character is – like his real-life prototype – a teacher, but in The Pelican he is stated to have been a businessman with a firm and customers. In the final line he too, however, is referred to as a teacher.489

The Pelican is probably second only to The Ghost Sonata as the Chamber Play that has gained the largest amount of academic attention and the fact that no one, as far as I can tell, has noted the discrepancy previous to Ollén’s critical edition

487 Ibid., p. 334.
488 Cf. Ollén’s explanation of words in “Kommentarer”, p. 463.
489 Ibid., p. 425. (”Sambandet mellan ‘den bortgångne’ Hugo Philp, Toten-Insel och Pelikanen kom Strindberg att avslöja på ett sätt som han förmodligen inte själv lade märke till. I Toten-Insel är ju huvudpersonen liksom sin förebild i verkliga livet lärare, men i Pelikanen anges han ha varit affärsmann med firma och kunder. I pjäsen slutreplik omtalas han emellertid som lärare också han:”)
could possibly be considered as indicating the “smoothness” of the play. Later, the detail has been taken up by Törnqvist. Here is his brief yet interesting comment upon the detail presented in an essay discussing a couple of TV-performances of the play:

When Strindberg first indicates that the deceased husband has been a business man and later implies that he has been a teacher, he makes himself guilty of a remarkable inconsistency. It is obviously the Son’s vision of the approaching summer vacation that has caused this change of occupation. Both professions are thematically so deeply rooted in the drama that it is hard to overcome the inconsistency in performance.\textsuperscript{490}

Törnqvist adequately stresses that both of the motifs are motivated locally, i.e. in the specific situation where they each occur while the global relationship between them remains lacking: it is not a conflict intended to be recognized as carrying compositional function or significance. The development of the first act hinges on the haunting presence of a hidden will possibly left behind by the dead father: because of the search for the expected document, triggered by the speculations about secret assets, the unexpected letter will be discovered. The fact that the father is wealthy also has thematic importance: thus the Mother’s extreme stinginess for which the children have always suffered will appear as even more outrageous. It is compositionally necessary, in other words, that the father’s profession be somewhat remunerative – for the first half of the play.

The last part in general and the final scene in particular is however governed by an entirely different kind of logic. Now there is less need for a lucrative businessman than for a humble man caught up in the torment of daily life, suffering in order to provide for his children, thus sacrificing himself for his offspring like a true pelican in her – or rather his – piety. The liberating vision of a reunited family relies, as we have already noted, on the fact that the summer holidays are shared by both parent and child: a teacher is accordingly a particularly appropriate profession thematically speaking. By stressing the notion and experience of a school holiday, Strindberg is furthermore able to condensate time into an abstract image where summer coincides with Christmas and appropriately charges that image with mutual connotations: light, warmth, excitement, relief, happiness, and, of course, the family united for once as one.

While both professions are ingeniously motivated when reviewed individually we find no apparent intention behind the way the one transposes into the other: both motifs function locally but lack a global – truly compositional or “spatial” –

\textsuperscript{490} Törnqvist, Ibsen, Strindberg and the Intimate Theatre, p. 175.
association. Put differently, we could claim that the compositional clusters seem to be subordinated to a superior principle of progress, i.e. what we have here termed speed. The father and his profession accordingly do not constitute a single motif but a divergent series of motifs affected by compositional forgetfulness: when the teacher finally springs forth the businessman is since long left out of sight. Just like the Son-in-law, the businessman has apparently vanished from the play and from the compositional structure. We actually find that something similar has happened to the very epithet of the pelican as it is first applied to the mother and then to the father. In the first case, the Son is able to expose her with reference to the findings of modern zoology: the pelican in her piety is pure folkloric myth say the new books on science. When the Son later applies the very same symbol to the dead father it still remains unaffected by the character’s own previous debunking: suddenly the myth may be employed as an adequate illustration of selfless parenting after all. Hereby the symbolic use becomes somewhat inconsistent as the author switches from demonizing the Mother to idealizing the father. Still, it all works; and the inconsistent use of symbolism as such may in this and similar cases actually strike us as typically Strindbergian.

If we were to consider the play primarily as the representation of a sequence of actions and events taking place or constituting a fictional diegesis we would of course have to deem the occupational shift simply as absurd; we can not rely on mimetic time to explain it as there is no mimetic progression associated with the shift. Or put simply: the shift does not “take place”, or rather, there is no shift at all but merely an assemblage of disparate motifs. A compositional or spatial analysis too would prove insufficient as we lack a structural relation between the two passages: they are not two opposing springer-stones holding up a constructional arc where one point is structurally related to every other point to constitute an architectural design. The only way we would be able to describe the relationship between the passages in terms of progression is by relating them to the actual event of writing: Strindberg starts off with one idea and ends up with quite a different one. Still, the writing has posited itself as a work and thus we do not even recognize the detail at all; it simply slips by. It may appear as “remarkable”, as Törnqvist has it, when it is pointed out for us in retrospective, but it is so because it indicates the possibilities of literature, not an inconsistency on the part of the author. The most significant conclusion we may draw from it is the fact that literature can apparently behave this way without causing any real trouble. It will never change our spontaneous impression of the work but rather appear as always already noticed even when not noticed, like a tick or a habit in someone very familiar to us.
IV. Slowly furnishing a room

I will consider one last example of the way a sense of temporality may be related to writing; it relates to a situational determination of the presentation of the scenic space. When compared to the excessively detailed settings of some of the previous Chamber Plays, the room of The Pelican will strike us as remarkably simple and minimalistic. It is the first Chamber Play, as Steene points out, to take place indoors from the very outset, and it is the only one where the room remains one and the same throughout the entire play. We lack an introductory “scenery” like those of the first two plays and the initial stage direction is actually restricted to a couple of brief sentences; in the second and third acts, it is simply declared that the decoration remains unchanged. Yet there are quite a few spatial elements – primarily pieces of furniture – that are left out from these stage directions. Thus we might note how the room emerges so to speak as a gradual process rather than is presented as a fixed location. This fact is not troublesome from the point of view of the dramatic text but will prompt a few directorial and setting-orientated decisions for anyone involved in staging the play. The aforementioned essay by Törnqvist deals with actual performances of the play and it is accordingly quite natural that it points to a few problems provoked by the gradual presentation of space. Still, the aspects pointed to will not force us to difficult interpretational choices but rather indicate some particular qualities associated with the play as a dramatic text.

Here are the initial stage directions presented at the opening of the play; we will briefly discuss two examples from Törnqvist’s essay which both relates to this initial passage:

A Drawing room; Door in the background to the dining room; balcony door to the right in pan coupé.
Escritoire, writing-desk, chaise longue with a purple bedspread of plush; a rocking chair.

THE MOTHER. (enters, dressed in mourning, sits down and idles in an easy chair; listens restlessly from time to time.) (p. 231)

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The first of Törnqvist’s examples discusses what he terms the “rather capricious” way in which Strindberg has indicated the spatial positions of the characters:

In the introductory stage directions we learn that there are three seating possibilities in the drawing room: “a chaise lounge,” “a rocking chair,” and “an easy chair.” When later we hear that “Gerda sits down in a chair,” we do not know which chair is meant. Similarly, the acting direction that “the Son gets up from the rocking chair” is surprising, since we have not learnt that he ever sat down there. All we hear is that he “gets up” from the chaise lounge. This kind of inadvertencies, lacking with Ibsen, are common with Strindberg. They illustrate both the speed with which he wrote his plays, his unwillingness to make changes in them, and his faith in the power of the actors to complement the text in a meaningful way.492

Like the previous examples, the observation is simple yet telling of the Strindbergian way of writing drama; as are the presented conclusions. In a previous version of the essay only one explanation to the capriciousness of the spatial positions is presented, viz. Strindberg’s faith in the creative capabilities of his actors.493 We could call this an intentional and compositional explanation: Strindberg is consciously vague so that the actors’ will be left some room for creative interpretation. In isolation, such an explanation is hardly satisfactory. The two new alternatives seem more in line with our experience of Strindbergian drama: Törnqvist explicitly refers to the speed of writing and furthermore supports what we have called the author’s Pilatean poetics. Strindberg writes fast, and he leaves his texts as they are. Thus it is suggested how the event of writing is turned into a poetics or a principle of production: this is what governs Strindberg’s texts, this is how they are put together as artworks. If we agree with such an explanation we will actually find that several types of interpretation will be negated: analysis must always be able to account for the possibility of mere whims, of forgetfulness, absent-mindedness etc. not only as modes of production or even as traces left in composition but actually as a functional style. The reference to the author’s recognition of the creative abilities of potential actors actually seems to be cancelled out by the references to writing: the capriciousness appears as unintended and little more. Taken as an aesthetical element, the vague directions seem to lack an intended effect: they are an effect of writing that, once more, simply slips us by. The very lack of specificity may actually add to the efficiency of the play, i.e. the way we easily get caught up in its smooth progression.

492 Törnqvist, Ibsen, Strindberg and the Intimate Theatre, p. 175.
The second example is of a similar kind. It concerns the way the scenic space is furnished or filled out by degrees in the course of the play; here are Törnqvist’s comments:

These stage directions are not complete. Later we learn that there is a “portrait” of the husband/father on the wall and a “tile stove,” “a palm on a pedestal,” “a photograph,” a “table,” “a bookcase” and “a flowerpot” in the room.

Strindberg’s manner of gradually introducing us to the room – he differs from Ibsen in this respect – means that there is a discrepancy between the reader’s experience of the text and the spectator’s experience of the performance; what is linear or sequential for the former is simultaneous for the latter. Yet here is an interesting correspondence between Strindberg’s text and the screen media, where the properties of a room are usually shown successively, in different shots. For the reader and the TV viewer, the various props do not exist until the dramatist/director chooses to mention/show them.494

Our general impression of the drawing room must vary considerably whether we achieve it all at once or rather successively, piece by piece. In the first case, the room may appear as cluttered and overburdened. Yet we remember how a sense of slender minimalism is prompted by the initial stage direction; and I would argue that it is this impression that is maintained as we progress through the play even though we will eventually stumble upon one item after the other. While the number of objects increases we never, as Törnqvist points out, have to picture them all at once. Once more we may suggest that this actually may contribute to rather than invalidate the impression of smooth efficiency. The stage, on the other hand, will obviously risk turning into one of those overloaded rooms typical for naturalist theatre whereby the impression of simple minimalism could get lost.

Hereby we may note an important aspect of the drama as a written text that risks being destroyed in performance. There is apparently good reason to distinguish the study of the drama as literary text from the study of theatrical performance. We should accordingly also be cautious towards the hermeneutics of mind-staging often advocated by drama scholars suggesting that the reader is always to construct a mental representation of what happens in a play as if it was enacted on an actual (or, in other words, rather virtual) stage.495 In order to achieve an adequate description of the distinctive character of a work or a dramatic oeuvre it may actually be necessary to avoid that kind of totalizing cognitive spatio-

494 Törnqvist, Ibsen, Strindberg and the Intimate Theatre, p. 176.
495 Cf., for some examples of Strindberg-scholars from different generations making more general claims of the importance of mind-staging, e.g. Gunnar Brandell, Drama i tre avsnitt (1971), Stockholm 1996, p. 77; Richard Bark, Dramat i din föreställning. Från Aischylos till Weiss, Lund 1993, p. 6; or Sabzevari, p. 21ff.
temporalization of a textual set of flows and speeds. As a method of analysis it risks provoking the same kind of problems as those demanding a more or less consistent or “logical” representation of the diegetic world and its intra-diegetic spatial and temporal relations. All such demands of total representation will at some point come to contradict the formal organization of a certain kind of works, forms, and styles.

Concluding remarks: The need for speed

What is striking about the several elements of the play discussed here – the references to meals, the disappearance of the son-in-law, the businessman turned teacher, the slow growth of furniture – is their utter insignificance; they do not mean anything, there is no need for interpretation, and they are almost indiscernible, not there to be noted at all. Actually, we may not notice them unless we take a particular stance towards the work which may very well prove deceptive as it produces interpretational problems related to the stance as such rather than the work under consideration and the particular poetics governing its design. In using the speed of writing as a concept in description and analysis we gain a couple of things. First of all, we present an analytical framework according to which we may pay less attention to unreasonable demands for coherence in the representation of chronology or temporal and spatial relations in general. In other words we find a potential alternative explanation to the interpretational problems that may be provoked either by the assumption that art simulates real “worldliness” according to a principle of minimal departure whereby several more or less metaphysical glitches will emerge, or by the normative assumption that a good author should strive to construct his mimetic illusion so that it all holds together chronologically, spatially, etc. In exchange it lets us pay more attention to the coherence of style of which a consistent use of a certain kind of mimetic or compositional inconsistencies may very well be a distinguishing and aesthetically suggestive trait. Hereby we may also approach literature’s obvious potential of producing wholes or assemblages or forms of different kinds, governed by different kinds of principles; in this particular case, we have attempted to describe how representation as well as structure are subordinated to a uniform effect of smoothness and compositional simplicity that may well demand a constant form of capriciousness.

The conclusion should not be that the elements discussed throughout the present chapter are unimportant or uninteresting or unproductive, merely that they must be considered according to a methodological framework that may account
for the particular kinds of importance, interest or production involved; stylistic kinds rather than signifying or structural kinds, for example, or effective kinds rather than functional, contingent rather than intended, and so on. When these elements are pointed out they may strike us, but not as a discovery; rather they appear as reminiscences of something that we already know without having ever had to explicate them. We recognize, which involves the possibility of affirmation rather than critique: yes, yes, that’s Strindberg, I know. Any such detail will hereby strike us as déjà lu, as always already read, known, familiar to any reader of the work long before it is “strikingly” pointed out for us. Instead of being remarkable it has the possibility to pass by unnoticed due to its innate congeniality within a specific artistic context. Details of that kind may accordingly not be isolated but remain an aspect of a milieu or environment, a stylistic ecology. It is the milieu rather than the isolated element that is of interest for us.

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Several studies on the Chamber Plays end with a discussion of The Pelican; yet Strindberg published one more text under that designation, with the same publisher and in the same format as the previous four plays. Thus, we have no reason to regard The Pelican as the genre’s natural ending point. The fact that Strindberg was always ready to add yet another part to a play or a series of plays, yet another version to a previously existing one, rework a previous text into a new format, or group together texts under a new heading is actually indicative not only of his working process but also of how he regarded his own genres and their delimitations and demarcations. This is something we have to consider in trying to summarize or define a genre like the Chamber Play that seems to be always open for yet another addition or expansion. The habitual exclusion of the fifth Chamber Play – The Black Glove – could therefore be considered as problematic and we must ask ourselves in what way a strict concept of genre is compatible with the design of the actual texts that constitute it. This will be the topic of my last chapter: where lie the boundaries of the Chamber Plays as genre, and where is its inner core or kernel? What is, in other words, kept inside these borders and what is left outside them, and why?
A Weed amongst the Wheat: The Black Glove, the Chamber Plays, and the Strindbergian Oeuvre

Introduction: Longing for light-hearted poetry

The fifth Chamber Play, The Black Glove, is a fairy play partly written in verse with a plot that takes place during Christmas time; thus the Christmas Angel as well as the tomte – a hybrid between Father Christmas and a kind of domestic trickster and protector of the house in Swedish folklore – play significant parts in the play which from the start was simply titled Christmas (Jul). The Black Glove was written almost two years after the other Chamber Plays and was the last play to be published under that heading. As it differs from the others in several respects, it is often considered not to belong to the Chamber Plays proper, and its exceptional position is indicated already by the subtitle: “Lyrical fantasy (for the stage) in five acts” (p. 299). The first four plays were written consecutively during a short period of time, but after The Pelican was finished, Strindberg went on to write a few plays in different genres, a couple of history plays and a fairy play set against an oriental background. Strindberg’s shift towards the latter genre is commented on in a letter approximately a year after the work on the previous Chamber Plays. Strindberg expresses here a longing for poetry and somewhat surprisingly exclaims: “Got plans for 15 Chamber Plays lying around! Some in verse! But there should be light at heart!” At this point, the Chamber Play as a concept seems to denote a dramatic form without distinct boundaries as it is

496 Letter to Torsten Hedlund, c. 29 April 1896.
497 The character is called “Christmas Angel” in the list of dramatis personae, and simply “Christmas” in the play; here, I will use the former alternative for sake of clarity.
499 Cf. letter to August Falck, 30 September 1908.
500 Letter to Karl Börjesson, c. 8 May 1908.
6. A Weed amongst the Wheat: *The Black Glove*, the Chamber Plays, and the Strindbergian Oeuvre

“This is all helter-skelter, but it must be so, for that is how it is.”

* A. S. 496

Introduction: Longing for light-hearted poetry

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499 Cf. letter to August Falck, 30 September 1908.
500 Letter to Karl Börjesson, c. 8 May 1908.
defined neither by a preconceived form nor even by the four plays already published. Rather, everything the author is currently planning for the stage seems to be a Chamber Play: it simply means what Strindberg is writing or planning to write in dramatic form. Such an extremely broad conception, where a Chamber Play may apparently be written in verse, have a light-hearted mood, and be intended for a family-oriented audience – “For old and young!” as it says in a letter – has apparently puzzled commentators, and a main topic in the discussions on The Black Glove concerns its relationship to the other Chamber Plays, or rather to the understanding of the Chamber Play as a more or less uniform genre.

The plot of the play is relatively conventional and may be easily paraphrased in summary; thus, for instance, Ollén’s brief résumé:

The play is about a little wife in a big apartment house. Or rather, it is about a big apartment house and in it lives among others a young wife, an 80 year-old taxidermist, an upright caretaker and the unregistered Tomte. Since it is Christmas time, the Christmas angel shows up as well, dressed in white with star-shaped snow crystals in her hair, in the manner of a postcard. The little wife is beautiful but has a bad temper. She has lost a precious ring and accuses her honest maid Ellen of stealing it. The wife generally has no desire to be friendly and is not in the right mood for Christmas. The angel decides to teach her a cruel lesson. The Tomte is instructed to kidnap her lovable little daughter Mary, who is not returned until the mother has been chastened and starts to feel remorse. The ring is found in a black glove which the wife had lost and which is found by the old taxidermist. When the young wife’s harshness has thinned, she is ready to welcome her Christmas Eve with the proper humble gratitude.

The play contrasts with the gloom of the previous plays; it is light and characterized by “its mild, conciliatory mood and its sincere resignation” as Elmquist puts it. It shares something of the calmer mood of the first Chamber Play as well as the setting of the previous plays since the action takes place in a modern apartment house. The themes of crime and punishment – of arrogance, chastisement

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501 Letter to August Falck, 30 September 1908.
503 Elmquist, p. 84. (“sin milde, forsonlige stemming og sin oprimtige resignation”)
and reconciliation – also recur, and a subplot revolves around yet another Strindbergian representative: here it is the taxidermist, an aging philosopher who, lost in his memories, wants to reveal the secret meaning of life. For this folly he is reprimanded by the secret powers here personified by the Tomte, who arranges a ghostly pantomime scene reminiscent of *The Pelican* as it demonstrates the uncanny presence of the forces at work behind the lives of humans. The previous plays’ slant towards the lyrical and monologic is furthermore pushed to the limit in *The Black Glove*. Thus, the fifth Chamber Play could be considered to have several points in common with the other Chamber Plays, while it diverges in other respects. In any case, the play has a typically Strindbergian flair, which is apparently a mixed blessing judging from scholarly opinions.

*The Black Glove* is often considered a dramatic failure. Elmquist finds it to be the weakest of the Chamber Plays, Steene dubs it a trifle in the Strindbergian production, and Ward simply states that it is bad. Lamm finds the play unpalatable due to its “syrupy sweetness”, and Ottosson-Pinna, too, refers to its overtly sweet and childish nature and finds it justified that it is rarely performed or discussed. For Leifer, the naïve, childish and sickly-sweet quality of the play disqualifies it from being analyzed among the other Chamber Plays, and it is often excluded from study. Dahlström and Berendsohn both keep the play out of their thematically oriented analyses, Törnqvist mentions the play but briefly, and it is absent in Ekman’s thorough study of the Chamber Plays. Hallberg, Berendsohn and Steene all find that *The Black Glove* falls outside of the limits of the Chamber Play as a genre and rather suggest that it should be placed among the fairy plays, “a completely different genre”.

The fact that the fifth Chamber Play is often weeded out, so to speak, from the others cannot solely be due to its lack of dramatic quality, for *The Burned Lot*, too, was, as we have seen, generally considered a failure; neither can it be because

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504 Ibid., p. 83.
506 Ward, p. 268.
507 Lamm, *Strindbergs dramer II*, p. 425. ("sin sirapsartade sötaktighet")
508 Ottosson-Pinna, p. 113.
509 Leifer, p. 170ff.
510 Dahlström (p. 204) claims that too much “scampering about” of the Tomte permits the play from being taken seriously in terms of expressionism, and Berendsohn (p. 551) deems it too fantastic to be considered as a depiction of Stockholm.
of its lyrical or fantastic elements for lyricism and fancy are found among the previous plays as well. The prime reason is undoubtedly the gleeful mood and the associated structural direction of the play which truly involves a change of character: in *The Black Glove*, it really is possible to be taught a lesson and to learn from it, and things *may* end happily. Considered as a reply to the previous plays, it would probably risk diminishing their bleak desperation by suggesting that you should not always take things so seriously but rather cheer up and get on with it.

No such relativization seems intended by Strindberg, yet the inclusion of the play among the Chamber Plays will affect the assembly in some way or another: at least it seems to stress the difference of the plays and the processual nature of their genesis. Furthermore, it could be considered to open up the Chamber Plays to the Strindbergian oeuvre and thus to suggest in what way this oeuvre is put together and according to what principles.

Questions like these will be the main concern in this last and concluding chapter of the thesis. It revolves around the concept of weed: the way poetry and image grow like weed in the structure of the play; the way weed is used thematically and morally as an image of tolerance; the way the play has been considered as a weed among the Chamber Plays; and the place of weed as a concept in Strindberg’s thought and how this could be said to correspond to the disposition of his work. The chapter will, accordingly, also round up our general discussion on the moldy aspect of literature; here, the principle of writing is demonstrated on an even larger scale. As we saw in the introductory chapter, the concept of style has often been used to point to the contingent, erratic and eccentric aspects of literary production which apparently emerge even in the most thoroughly composed works. Since literature seems to be inevitably associated with the act and event of writing, and since writing allegedly tends to take its own line and move in a direction of its own, theories and analyses of literature have had to account for these possibilities. In the introduction, I pointed to how even the structuralists, who were preoccupied primarily with the regular and systemic side of literary art, acknowledged them. Since the literary work of art is the result of a materially and temporally situated process of production which, in turn, consists of an indefinite set of incalculable forces, transformation and change seem inherent to the literary system as such. Writing, then, may be posited as a trace within a specific work which will accordingly appear to involve slow or sudden shifts of form in its composition; and it may, of course, also become apparent on the more general level of genres and oeuvres. The latter, taken as emergent contexts, will involve processes of becoming that are even more complex, vast, and open to change.
This concluding chapter revolves around this flexible mobility of literature as it focuses on the variability involved in the production of the Chamber Plays as an open whole, and the various ways in which this whole has grown forth.

Flowers on an espalier: Notes on the structure of the play

As was apparent from Ollén’s summary, the main plot is quite simple; yet the separate acts seem somewhat disparate. During the first act, the wife’s transgressions are demonstrated: we learn that she has lost her glove due to carelessness, yet she is quick to accuse the innocent maid of stealing when her ring has gone missing; we also learn that she is haughty and vainly idolizes her own child. Thus, the superhuman powers decide to teach her a lesson. The brief second act is a ghostly pantomime in which the child is spirited away by the Tomte. The third act, displaying the aftermath, is characterized by distress and nervousness: it shows the innocent maid’s anxiety caused by the accusations, and the wife’s insanity caused by the loss; the latter roams the basement, confused and delusional, mistaking base reality for the strangest of visions. Nevertheless, the Caretaker asserts us that all will end well. The fourth act is only loosely connected to the main plot and centers on the subplot with the taxidermist, Old One. It consists largely of a philosophical showdown between the erroneous Old One and his monistic worldview and the clear-eyed Tomte who rather advocates dualism. This act could be considered as a concentrated version of the earlier Chamber Plays as it depicts the old philosopher who has given up on life in order vainly to pursue a secret wisdom, who is reprimanded for his foolish arrogance and thus brought to insight, and who may thereby reconcile himself with life and his fellow humans. The act also ends with Old One finding peace in death. The act ties in with the main plot as the ring is found again. The fifth and final act is the most “post-cardy” one and presents a somewhat kitschy tableau where everything is once more set right. The ring is returned, the Maids are acquitted, the child is brought back, and the Wife has developed the proper humble attitude towards life and those surrounding her. She also learns that Old One was her lost father, and thus attends the dead as a final act of love. The play ends with her kneeling by the cradle while the Tomte blows the mother and child kisses from the background.

In order to describe the structure of The Black Glove we may relate it to the architecture of the house as it is depicted in the play. The Black Glove has the modern apartment house as setting in common with the previous Chamber Plays, yet while they all focus on a specific private home the locales of The Black Glove
shift between the different levels of “the Tower of Babel”, as the building is called (p. 313). Each of the five acts takes place in a different section, going from the main entrance hall to the hall of the wife’s apartment, then on to the caretaker’s home in the basement, then to the garret where the taxidermist lives, and finally to the nursery of the wife’s apartment. The Tomte describes the house as consisting of seven floors, each with three apartments, and as bustling with a multitude of lives that all emit a plethora of disparate sounds. Thus it is said that the separate lives go on side by side and “all jumbled up, like their pianinos / emit rhythms from a waltz, a fugue, a sonata” (p. 314). The dramatic structure of the play could likewise be described as consisting of a basic architectural whole divided into several separate yet crisscrossing segments which in turn consist of a multitude of lyrical monologues all of them made of even smaller parts of poetry and imagery. The parts flow together musically yet fragmentarily, just like the different bits and snippets from the pianinos; the play is also accompanied by snatches from several different pieces of music. As the Tomte says about the building, the play too is “stretching and it is straining”, and it “holds together, but only barely” (p. 313).

Elmquist finds the action too trivial to be captivating, and Lamm considers it a demonstration of the late Strindberg’s inability to handle plot. A recurrent critique regards the split into two more or less separate plotlines, the haughty mother and the presumptuous philosopher. Raymond Jarvi calls them “two threads of narrative continuity” joined in the end due to the revelation of the secret relationship between the two characters, and Erik Østerud similarly mentions the two different tracks which, however, are both solved as the final curtain falls. While the two strands share a similar pattern – hubris, trial, change – they are often regarded as inadequately integrated into each other; Lamm, for instance, stresses how awkwardly Old One has been inserted into the main plot, and Ollén finds the more or less autonomous Old One to be more interesting as a character than the plot as such. Extensive portions of the analyses of the play are often devoted to the philosophical duel between Old One and the Tomte which nevertheless remains quite isolated as it not does affect the progress of the

514 Elmquist, p. 87.
515 Lamm, Strindbergs dramer II, p. 425.
518 Lamm, Strindbergs dramer II, p. 425.
519 Cf. e.g. Ollén, Strindbergs dramatik (4th ed.), p. 573.
plot. The relationship of the two strands has thus often been described in terms of conflict rather than of harmony.

A second and similar split often commented upon is that between plot and poetry; while the play as a whole is often considered to be mediocre, it is nevertheless described as harboring certain details of literary value. Lamm and Ottosson-Pinna both dismiss the play at large but still emphasize certain “wonderfully lively passages”\(^{520}\) or “lyrical showpieces”,\(^{521}\) and Ollén remarks on how the extensive and verbose yet sometimes beautiful monologues in verse “tend to stifle the spindly plot of the play”; still, he finds that they may hardly be abbreviated as they “contain some of the most important and beauteous elements of the play”.\(^{522}\) Ward praises the use of verse and judges a few particular scenes as superbly executed while the play as a whole is deemed static, schematic and lacking dramatic force.\(^{523}\) What these commentators notice would be a conflict between what Brandell calls scenic and dramatic elements, i.e. elements which “come into their own within the individual scene” and those that “demand an apprehension of the play in its entirety”.\(^{524}\) In negative terms, the tension is described as a repeated shattering of a whole; and in more appreciative terms, the play seems to be considered as something of a rather dull espalier which nevertheless carries a number of beautiful flowers. If *The Pelican* constituted a smooth temporal flow, *The Black Glove* is probably better understood in spatial terms, and as a crazy-quilt rather than a canvas, as it is constituted by a collage of smaller and larger fragments which only meagerly come together as a whole.\(^{525}\)

We could point to several such passages of beauty to be found in the verbose monologues of the play, from the Tomte’s initial portrayal of the busy building which makes it come alive through words, to the view he presents over the city as seen from the garret, where the birds of heaven are seen sleeping, their heads tucked under their wings, while the wind sings through the wires and weather-vanes, and the pigeons “coo in the cornices” (p. 341). Through the character’s verbal discourse, a multitude of visions and not least sounds – euphonic as well as cacophonous – are presented through minimal means. The Wife’s delirious visions

\(^{520}\) Ottosson-Pinna, p. 113. ("underbart levande partier")
\(^{521}\) Lamm, *Strindbergs dramer II*, p. 425. ("lyriska glansställen")
\(^{522}\) Ollén, *Strindbergs dramatik* (4th ed.), p. 574. ("trenderar att kväva dramats spinkiga handling"; "rymer några av pjäsen viktigaste och skönaste inslag")
\(^{523}\) Ward, p. 268.
\(^{524}\) Brandell, *Drama i tre avsnitt*, p. 99. ("De sceniska elementen är sådana som kommer till sin rätt inom den skilda scenen; de dramatiska sådana som kräver en uppfattning av dramat som helhet.")
\(^{525}\) Cf. Østerud (p. 88f.) for an analysis of the Wife’s delirious monologue along similar lines.
as she wanders around in the basement also hold an exceptional position by their ability to demonstrate her mistaking the Caretaker’s Christmas dinner table for a surreal landscape where a growing candle is about to bloom, an anchor buoy floats on a sea of spruce trees, and a wild boar sticks his head up out of the waves while the fish walk the dry land. Or consider the following example from the fourth act which to a large degree consists of the Old One’s monologues as he is confronted by the Tomte. During the act, the character is defeated and collapses in his chair where he finally dies. Ollén stresses the undramatic dullness of the act in a witty manner by remarking on how the perception of an actor gradually falling asleep on stage easily obtains “a contagious effect” on an audience. Still, the scene is able to emit a number of striking verbal images like the following lamentation describing the experience of the overwhelmed Old One:

A mollusk that had his shell crushed,
A spider whose web was torn apart,
Straying bird out on the ocean,
Too far to turn back and reach the shore,
He flutters above a mobile abyss,
Until, worn out, he falls down – and dies! (p. 348)

In architectural terms, the play seems less interesting for its grand design than for the vibrant and vivacious verbal and poetic energies that it shelters; still, this life seems dependent on its habitat. The dull and schematic context could very well be what makes the verbal images catch our attention, like an insignificant dandelion growing out of some crevice in a dull wall; or perhaps The Black Glove with its “spindly” plot is better understood as a skeletal construct engulfed in the lavish growth of some spreading vine. In any case, the play commonly seems to be apprehended as something of a plot that has gone spoiled and overrun by weeds due to the author’s negligence in attending to it; and still, it is this disorganized profusion of verbose imagery that is considered to instill a sense of beauty in the play and to turn it into something other than just a cliché.

Considered in this way, The Black Glove may not appear as utterly deviant from the previous Chamber Plays as is suggested by some of the commentators. Rather, Strindberg could be considered to intensify the tension between the scenic and the dramatic, between the static and the dynamic, or between image and progression found in the earlier plays as well; the tendency towards monologue is also exaggerated here. Such an assertion, which I find quite justified, would not necessitate that we should consider the play a good one, but it indicates its situa-

526 Ollén, Strindbergs dramatik (4th ed.), p. 574. (“Att se en ensam skådespelare successivt falla i sömn på en scen får lått en smittsam effekt.”)
tion within a stylistic milieu which seems somewhat natural rather than entirely alien as it shares formal tendencies and inclinations which are constant within the Chamber Plays. In this sense, The Black Glove could even be considered to refine certain techniques as refinement not always entails perfection but also may result in depletion or overfertilization. What I find interesting is not whether this intensification is necessarily good or bad but the ways in which it demonstrates a certain kind of eccentricity which is developed throughout the other plays but also runs through the Strindbergian oeuvre as a whole; thus, although the play differs from the Chamber Plays, it highlights a trait which is still typical for them as Strindbergian works. We will come back to this quite complex set of relations later.

The prickly thistle: Notes on the theme of the play

Thematically, The Black Glove takes up some of the recurring themes from the previous plays and puts them in a new and less dismal light. Here, the naïvist setup and the fairy genre seem to provide the author with an opportunity to present a moral and metaphysical framework in which things are actually allowed to progress for the better. The fairy world also allows an unproblematic materialization of the non-human forces at work behind the everyday appearance of life, and it guarantees the authority of these archetypical characters as their virtue and power are already implied by their archetypal functions. While the self-righteousness of some of the previous protagonists was sometimes seen as hypocritical and while their verdicts over others might come across as a metaphysical transgression, the Tomte of The Black Glove may rightfully claim: “What the tomte does is always right! / He constitutes the law of this house!” (p. 313)

The relative innocence of the crimes committed in The Black Glove also guarantees, as Jarvi remarks, that the trials will be difficult yet brief and surmountable, and if we compare the Wife’s transgressions to Elise’s in the previous Chamber Play, they will even seem quite amiable: the Wife never neglects her daughter but rather pays her too much attention. Here, punishment will be less absolute because of the temporary nature of the trials and the fact that they will result in a beneficial change for those involved; and suffering will not demand a negation of life, as it did for the Mummy in The Ghost Sonata, but will rather be something that brings people closer together in love and joy. Taken together, these circumstances warrant a happy outcome; or rather, the light-hearted fairy

527 Jarvi, p. 19.
pattern provides Strindberg with an opportunity to go beyond the simple misanthropy of the previous Chamber Plays and to approach, instead, the humble and affirmative reconciliation with life which has earlier been repeatedly preached but never actually practiced.

In *The Black Glove* it is primarily the Tomte who upholds the metaphysical balance between right and wrong by exacting punishment and granting rewards; and he is sympathetically presented as his motives seem governed not only by a sense of justice but also and primarily by his care and compassion for those he is supervising. Harsh and unrelenting justice is rather represented by the Christmas Angel, who plays a smaller role. Already in the first act we see the Tomte managing the house in secret, by helping the kind-hearted maids with their cleaning and providing the wicked maids with the gathered litter. His function is also demonstrated by his delivery of small gifts in the form of Christmas cards with pictures of flowers on them. Because the Wife vents her bad temper on the servants, she receives a card with a special meaning: not the rhododendron, the viola, the snowberry or the mistletoe but the thistle that, just like the Wife, “is beautiful, but has its thorns!” (p. 312). In the opening of the second act, when he is about to embark on his mission to steal away the child, the Tomte recognizes his card of choice and expounds:

> There now, my Christmas card with the thistle!  
> A little weed amongst the wheat for you –  
> It’s prickly, just like you, but bears a beautiful flower!  
> Like you!  
> The beautiful little mother! (p. 319)

In the previous plays, every single trifle would be taken as a symptom of the miserable state of earthly existence, but here Strindberg preaches condonation: one will have to overlook a little weed amongst the wheat, and even happily accept it, in order to find joy in life and the people surrounding you. Thus, the Tomte recommends an attitude towards neighbors far away from the one demonstrated by the Gentleman in *Stormy Weather*:

> And the neighbor who doesn’t know his neighbor,  
> Must show forbearance and consideration,  
> Must overlook the caprices of his fellow.  
> One plays the piano after ten o’clock,  
> One gets up too early, another goes to bed too late!  
> It can’t be helped, you’ll have to compromise;  
> Listen to all these little sounds in the stairwell’s cochlea! (p. 313)
In *The Black Glove*, the demand for truth and retribution must stand back for care and compassion. The shift of attitude is perhaps most notable in Strindberg’s portrayal of Old One who, while still appearing as the author’s mouthpiece, is much gentler and milder than his predecessors from the previous plays. Like the Gentleman, he has abandoned true life and the love of his neighbors, and like the Stranger, he is driven by a vain search for the secret mysteries of life; yet, his search is less aggressive and more humanitarian, and when the Tomte proves him wrong, he is willing to learn and come out of it a wiser man more content with life. When he sets everything straight by returning the ring to its owner, he refuses to take any credit for the deed as, perhaps overly pious, he acknowledges his role as a mere vehicle for greater powers. While he shares a tamer misanthropy with some of the previous protagonists, Old One is still able to look past his own person and finally also to reach out to his fellow human beings. In contrast with the Gentleman, he will finally be able to reconcile with his long lost daughter, albeit in death, and his final words are typical of the mood of the play: “Now I will die content, now that I have been granted the favor of having made *one* human being happy!” (p. 361)

If this radical shift in mood may certainly seem overly syrupy and sickly-sweet, it is still *just as* exaggerated as the dismal despair and desperation of the earlier plays; exaggeration as such is not a sufficient reason to dismiss it, and its naïveté does not necessarily surpass the cynicism of the latter. Furthermore, all Chamber Plays have their infantile moments, which nevertheless demonstrate a *Strindbergian* infantilism that may result in interesting literary works. And the optimism of *The Black Glove* is worth taking seriously because it indicates an aspect of Strindberg’s thought where the gleeful, naïve and sentimental always occupies a zone which at times may lie very close to the gloomy, horrid, and cynical, just like vengeance is closely associated with love and compassion. When the desperately wandering Wife finally wakes up during the third act, it is because a print of the nativity scene hanging on the Caretaker’s wall catches her attention. As she then begs for mercy, the Caretaker – the demiurge who controls things from the underground – comforts her by stating: “I’m not angry, I won’t take revenge[.]” (p. 336) While the biblical allusions remained quite haphazard and occasional in *The Burned Lot*, the religious pattern seems to have a more adequately incorporated structuring function in *The Black Glove*, which is quite natural due to its status as a Christmas play. It ends, accordingly, with the Wife praising the Lord while
kneeling by the cradle. The Wife has gone through her baptism of fire and thus receives again, as Jarvi puts it, “her baby as the gift that, in point of fact, it is”.528

While commentators have shown reluctance to count in the play among the Chamber Plays proper, I would still argue that we have a better opportunity to line out some of the characteristics of Strindberg’s writing and the way in which he considered his work if we take his inclusion of The Black Glove as a fifth Chamber Play seriously. To weed it out could perhaps even be considered to run against the moral of the play, according to which we should never question the presence of a little weed amongst the wheat but rather embrace it as a chance to gain a further understanding of life. In any case, there are of course reasons both why we should and why we should not include it in our analysis of the Chamber Plays. The following section surveys three arguments presented on the subject.

The Black Glove and the Chamber Plays as genre

Strindberg included The Black Glove among the Chamber Plays without reservations, and eventually he even seemed to consider every new idea as a potential new Chamber Play. Still, the inclusion has provoked controversy among scholars. In this section, I will survey three of the more elaborate discussions of the relationship between the plays. The different approaches could be called exclusion (the play does not belong among the Chamber Plays at all), totalization (the play completes a total unit) and transplantation (the play belongs primarily to another genre).

Ekman’s account is brief and precise in arguing that The Black Glove should not be considered to belong to the Chamber Plays in any respect as Strindberg is alleged to have applied the title to the fifth play only for practical reasons.529 Ekman stresses the continuity by which the first four plays were written and that they share a “profoundly misanthropic mood” whereas the last play on the other hand is a morality “with a happy ending”.530 According to Ekman, Strindberg’s primary incentive for labeling the latter a Chamber Play at all was one of economy: because the publisher had secured the right to publish any forthcoming Chamber Plays, and already paid the author in advance, Strindberg offered him

528 Ibid.
529 Ekman, Klädernas magi, p. 195.
530 Ibid. (“de har den djupt misantropiska stämningen gemensam”, ”Svarta handsken är närmast en moralitet som slutar lyckligt”)
his lyrical fantasy as his Opus 5 as a kind of pay off. The suggestion seems confirmed by the author’s expression when stating in a letter that The Black Glove simply “accompanied the Chamber Plays” to Koppel, his publisher. Still, it is interesting to note how casually Strindberg treats his concept. Ekman suggests that practical reasons also explain why the author referred to what would become his last play The Great Highway (Stora landsvägen, 1909) as “a new chamber play”, but the term recurs quite often during the period. Strindberg offered his earlier Easter (Påsk, 1900) for republication with the motivation that “it is a Chamber Play”, and he considered both reworking A Dream Play into an opera or “a Musical Chamber Play” and refurbishing Gustav III (1902) into a “Chamber Play”.

While Ekman’s reservations are quite reasonable, the reckless manner in which Strindberg tosses his concept around is also indicative of the author’s attitude towards what kind of entity the Chamber Plays form: just as he often wrote his plays offhandedly, the limits of the Chamber Plays as a genre seem open to the author’s whims as well as to the influence of material conditions. Whatever sound reason we may have not to count The Black Glove as a proper Chamber Play, it is still there, no matter what. And this being there, its very possibility, is indicative of what kind of whole a Strindbergian genre or suite or set or series is: as a whole that emerges from its parts it is open to change and to the new or to the aberrant. While an exclusion of the play may seem justified, there is also reason to explore these relationships further as an index of the author’s style of writing.

In contrast to Ekman, Ward finds that The Black Glove shares “sufficient of the thematic obsessions of the Chamber Plays to be considered with them”. Such obsessions may concern the themes of karmic balance, of how guilt is paid in suffering, and how human existence forms a vast web of interconnected destinies. It would accordingly be worth studying the play to see how such and other recurring themes are varied. This argument is of course not limited to the

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533 Cf. letter to August Falck, 13 January 1909: “This morning a new chamber play arrived, con brio! Therefore, get the Glove out of the way so I can get through!”
534 Cf. letter to Karl Otto Bonnier, 28 September 1908.
535 Letter to Tor Aulin, 20 January 1908.
536 Letter to August Falck, 28 September 1908.
537 Ward, p. 264.
538 Ibid.
Chamber Plays but would involve the Strindbergian oeuvre as a whole since certain similar themes recur throughout his life. Thematic obsessions would accordingly not suffice to justify that The Black Glove should be studied together with the other Chamber Plays as it would equally apply to a vast number of Strindberg’s works. Still, Ward’s argument indicates how this oeuvre, too, constitutes an interconnected web lacking sharp dividing lines.

A more explicit attempt to pin down the thematic kinship between the fifth and the earlier Chamber Plays is presented by Wilkinson who is one of the few who argues for the necessity of considering The Black Glove as the concluding chapter of a cycle: according to this view, the five plays constitute a narrative sequence which, when taken together, form a cohesive meaning overriding the local significances of each play taken in isolation. Thus, the first and the last play are considered as a narrative frame enclosing a sub-cycle. While this sub-cycle undertakes some sort of regressive psycho-analytic exploration of an oedipal childhood, the last play is suggested to open it up for a discussion of the possibility of political change; the five plays are said to represent “five moments in time or aspects of a single situation” which together emanate in a social problem: “What is to be done?” According to the argument, the fifth play becomes crucial as it moves from the private anguish of the former plays to a discussion of social transformation: here, the domestic interior is related to a larger community to which it is connected; the change involves an economic redistribution where “the servants are paid their just wages”; the importance of the community is stressed, and the individual is situated in relation to that community; and politics are allegedly redefined in domestic terms as society is modeled on the nurturing relationship between mother and child. For these reasons, Wilkinson argues that the fifth play opens up a social dimension that remains hidden in the previous plays.

The argument is quite elusive, yet it points out firstly that the play is different, and secondly that its inclusion for this very reason will become significant. First of all, Wilkinson notes that the play has left the centering of the subject behind and that accordingly it could help to nuance and problematize the canonized yet reductive image of Strindberg as being solely “the precursor of the ego-dramas of German Expressionism”: The Black Glove helps us see that there is more to Strindbergian drama than the subjective mode and the dream play. Yet, what I found most interesting about her argument is primarily how it demonstrates to

539 Wilkinson, p. 465.
540 Ibid., p. 478ff.
541 Ibid., p. 481.
542 Ibid., p. 477.
543 Ibid.
what degree the presence of *The Black Glove* among the Chamber Plays makes a difference as it provokes a reaction. Its inclusion will in one way or the other affect our understanding of the whole and the context which the Chamber Plays form. Nevertheless, the notion of the totalizing function is incongruent with the fact that the inclusion appears to be governed less by design than by whim. The inclusion constitutes an opening towards the outside network rather than an enclosing or framing around an inside kernel.

Both the arbitrariness of the inclusion, as stressed by Ekman, and the effect of its empirical presence, as exaggerated by Wilkinson, seem important. When the fifth play is added to the sequence, the whole is irreversibly altered in one way or another, yet not as a finalizing totalization that subordinates the differences of the previous plays to an overcoding totality. The light-hearted Christmas play does not override the forms and themes of the previous plays, but it adds to the whole by opening up a different space of possibilities related to joy and merriment and happiness and warmth – and even, if not in the way suggested by Wilkinson, for change, progression, development, and an alteration of resentment as the dominating state of mind. It does not form a reply to the previous play by negating them but rather demonstrates the possibility to move on in a different direction, towards reconciliation in life and not only with life, or towards love, care and company rather than self-annihilation and obliteration. This is probably made aesthetically possible exactly by moving on to a different setup constituted by the Christmas play and the fairy setting.

The two approaches exemplified by Ekman and Wilkinson form the extreme poles of an opposition. A more pragmatic approach is presented by Boel Westin who never discusses *The Black Glove* in relation to the Chamber Plays but rather situates it among Strindberg’s several other fairy plays.\(^{544}\) Westin’s argument is nevertheless interesting as it implies a critique of the tendency to exclude the play from analyses, as well as of a canonized image of the “true” and radical Strindberg whose avant-gardism progresses linearly from naturalism to expressionism and so on. One reason why the fairy play in general has been exempted from analysis is, according to Westin, simply that the genre as such has been considered as too naïve and sentimental to be taken seriously. A more interesting reason is the fact that the fairy tradition as such apparently relates backwards, to tradi-

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tion, rather than forwards, to transgressive experimentation; thus, Strindberg’s continuous preoccupation with the fairy genre seems to disrupt “the successively codified image of Strindberg as an experimental, modern and ground-breaking playwright”.

The very fact that his penultimate play is a Christmas play rather than an expressive ego-drama thus undermines the common and persistent distinction between Strindberg’s pre-Inferno and post-Inferno dramas and the associated model of radical progression. Instead, Westin stresses how certain of the formal traits associated with “late” Strindberg are established already in his early fairy plays, and a similar observation has been presented by Ollén. Ollén notes that Strindberg’s first dramas resemble his last, that his fairy plays resemble the dream play, that traits typically associated with the latter also permeates his naturalistic plays, while naturalistic tendencies are also found in the post-Inferno plays, and so on. The observation results in the following conclusion about the author: “His attitudes continually changed, his mobile intellect constantly created new starting points for his drama, technically he tried out new variants, yet his personality as an author had definite constants.”

In relation to the problem discussed here, Westin’s recontextualization of the play could perhaps be considered as a strike at the Gordian knot. As the play is transferred from one context where it is disruptive to a context where it is harmonious, the problem discussed here is simply postponed. Still, I find the argument interesting as it points to an aspect which the other approaches risk to negate, viz. to what extent the plays are not only closed and autonomous objects but also elements of a decentred stylistic milieu constantly traversed by the infinite set of lines of writing that form the oeuvre. When The Black Glove is included in the Chamber Plays, it may seem to break the mold of the genre; yet, it also demonstrates the principles of that other kind of mold, the mold of writing and its principle of contingent transformation. Thus, the genre is opened up towards the oeuvre as a web where any fixed point can be related and connected to any other such point due to a governing mobility of the links that hold it all together. As the whole is that which emerges from a continual series of differences

545 Westin, p. 177. ("den successivt kodifierade bilden av Strindberg som experimentell, modern och nydanande dramatiker")
546 Ibid.
548 Ibid., p. 242f. ("Hans attityder förändrades ideligen, hans rörliga intellekt skapade ständigt nya utgångspunkter för hans dramatik, tekniskt prövade han nya varianter, men diktpersonligheten hade bestämda konstanter.")
549 Ekman’s approach is perhaps a bit ambiguous on this point as the thematically oriented method relies on a consistent preoccupation with certain themes in Strindberg’s work as a whole; still, The Black Glove is excluded although it demonstrates other themes which also must be considered recurring in Strindberg.
and repetitions and not the ideal form that precedes production, there is always room for a shift, a regrouping, a reworking, or an addition in Strindberg.

The mobility of the intellect, as Ollén called it, may very well be one of the constants of Strindberg’s personality as a writer; it is a characteristic of his work as well as of his thought and his way of experiencing life. Thus, it could be relevant to conclude by briefly expanding our discussion to a different area of Strindberg’s work, viz. a few botanically oriented essays or causeries whose topics come surprisingly close to the ones discussed here. As Per Stam remarks, it is often unfeasible to draw a distinct line of demarcation between Strindberg’s scientific treatises and his literary works.546 My main point in this concluding section will accordingly be that the principles that the author found present in nature could also be considered to rule his work. I end my thesis with an attempt to describe what kind of organizational principles govern the Strindbergian oeuvre of which the Chamber Plays is a part.

Conclusion: On the organizational principles of the Strindbergian oeuvre

In the introduction, we noted how Strindberg launched his aesthetics of a natural art and exhorted the artist to work like nature rather than from nature. There is obviously nothing extraordinary in a claim like that, but its significance will of course be determined by the worldview of the person uttering it. When the eloquent Buffon, for instance, encourages the writer to imitate nature “in its procedure and labor”, the advice is based on the premise that “nature follows an eternal plan from which she never departs”.551 Strindberg’s view is, on the other hand, quite the opposite: natural production is capricious, whimsical, governed by principles that are unpredictable, indeterminable and irreducible to a comprehensible model of construction. Thus, Strindberg declares that “all botanical systems are arbitrary and vain, and that nature does not create according to a system”.552 Here, I will try to briefly compare the Strindbergian way of writing with this understanding of nature.

In concluding his book on Strindbergian drama, Törnqvist returns to the image from The Burned Lot of life as a weave. It is presented to suggest how Strindberg

545 Westin, p. 177. ("den successivt kodifierade bilden av Strindberg som experimentell, modern och nydanande dramatiker")
546 Ollén, p. 136. ("Hans attityder förändrades ideligen, hans rörliga intellekt skapade nya utgångspunkter för hans dramatik, tekniskt prövade han nya varianter, men hans mobile intellect ständigt nya utgångspunkter för hans dramatik, tekniskt prövade han nya varianter, men hans mobile intellect"
547 Ibid., p. 242. ("Hans attityder förändrades ideligen, hans rörliga intellekt skapade nya utgångspunkter för hans dramatik, tekniskt prövade han nya varianter, men"
548 Ibid., p. 242f. ("Hans attityder förändrades ideligen, hans rörliga intellekt skapade nya utgångspunkter för hans dramatik, tekniskt prövade han nya varianter, men"
549 Ekman’s approach is perhaps a bit ambiguous on this point as the thematically oriented method relies on a consistent preoccupation with certain themes in Strindberg’s work.
551 Buffon, p. 173.
equates the order of life with the structure of his own plays, or rather, to what degree Strindberg endeavors “to shape the plays in such a way that they reflect his own conception of life”.\textsuperscript{553} Let us recall the passage from the Stranger’s speech:

> When you are young you see the weave being set up; parents, relatives, friends, acquaintances, servants are the warp; further on in life you see the weft; and now the shuttle of destiny runs back and forth with the thread; sometimes it snaps, but it’s tied together, and thus it continues; the beam is beating, the yarn is forced into curlicues and then the weave is there. At old age, when the eye begins to see, you discover that all the curlicues form a pattern, a cipher, an ornament, a hieroglyph, that only now you are able to work out: This is Life! The World weaver has woven it! (p. 108f.)

And here is Törnqvist’s comment:

> When we experience these plays for the first time, they appear like a welter of “twists” and “turns”,\textsuperscript{554} a difficult “cipher”, a mysterious “hieroglyphic”. When we experience them again we begin to distinguish a pattern. The power to survey which according to the Stranger comes with old age has a kind of counterpart in our gradual power to get below the surface and discover the correspondences which are found there.\textsuperscript{555}

Such a description has a certain Strindbergian ring to it, and I would be less reluctant to accept the comparison if it were not for the consequences of the approach as demonstrated by Törnqvist’s actual analyses of the plays: repeatedly the plays are treated as ingenious puzzles demanding an elaborate interpretation to become intelligible, and the interpretational grids that are applied will often come to contradict the compositional principles they set out to elucidate. Thus, I would once more like to stress that the image of the weave as it is presented by Strindberg in \textit{The Burned Lot} calls less for complex interpretations than for a simple affirmation. In Strindberg, it is not so much that we learn to get “behind the letter”\textsuperscript{556} to find another and different meaning hidden behind the weave of existence, and it is not even a question of unveiling a secret order behind the apparent disorder. Rather, it is a matter of seeing the meaning in the weave itself: we see the order of disorder as such, which is life rather than chaos. The Stranger’s lines end, consequently, not with an interpretation but with a simple assertion: This is Life! The pattern, the curlicue, the hieroglyph is the answer rather than the question; the

\textsuperscript{553} Törnqvist, \textit{Strindbergian Drama}, p. 218.
\textsuperscript{554} Strindberg has ”krumulerer”; I have translated this as “curlicues” while Törnqvist chooses ”twists and turns”.
\textsuperscript{555} Törnqvist, \textit{Strindbergian Drama}, p. 218.
\textsuperscript{556} Ibid., p. 219.
cipher is not to be solved but forms the solution as it asserts the vital insolvability and thus the irreducibility of absolute Life. What one learns in old age is not to go beyond the weave but to stop at it.

Let us consider how this point is established in some of Strindberg’s scientifically oriented texts which, as we know, often demonstrate an ambition to solve the puzzle of existence, but which also acknowledge the problems of that very ambition. We may note two brief essays, from 1888 and 1900, which not only share the same theme but also have similar titles: in both cases, Strindberg explores the “Secrets of Flowers”, and the arguments are presented in a manner suggestive of the Stranger’s conclusion. In the earlier essay, “The Secrets of Flowers”, Strindberg takes up the question of why each flower has its respective color. A series of empirical observations and comparisons are made, partial explanations are given, yet the concluding results remain absent. The very question of the reasons behind this or that phenomenon is abruptly rejected: “That we do not know, and it’s none of our business!”557 And the conclusive statement of the essay reads: “Is there any coherence or is there not? That is a thing I cannot answer!”558 The latter essay, titled “Some Secrets of the Flowers ……”, starts with Strindberg recounting his experience of strolling in the Botanical Garden in Lund which, for him, seems to retain the immanent principles of nature better than other similar gardens:

This garden has taught me more than others of the kind, since it almost lacks all order; the absence of system and classification seems at least to have preserved the quality of a stretch of nature to this enclosed Garden of Eden, where the plants also get to keep something of their personality, their fancies, inclinations and affections [“liebhaberier”]. Those who do well among the rocks have been allowed to live together in disregard of class, order or family. Those who love the water may meet by the brook or the pond, those who worship the sun have the land for themselves; and the friends of darkness, they get the shadows. There is not only freedom, but also beauty and, what is more, mercy in this Paradise, where the silent, patient, suffering friends may stand, still, in rain and wind, in heat and cold, to wait out their destiny, their birth, growth and death! – here, however, in the least unpleasant way for each and every one.559

Nature, for Strindberg, is a processual forming of relations and affections, an indefinite play of momentary and long-lasting connections and associations pro-

558 Ibid., p. 218.
559 Strindberg, ”Några Blomstrens Hemligheter ……”, p. 271.
duced by whims and fancies rather than a static set of essential features: one specimen approaches another by a mutual attraction rather than by an inherent sameness, and the scientific or philosophical understanding of nature must first of all understand this often accidental aspect of fluctuating mobility; otherwise, the very object of investigation will be refused. This flexible nature shuns systematization for it will sooner or later withdraw or move on in some other direction “as nothing in nature is exact or stable”, as Strindberg puts it in an unpublished essay on Linnaeus. According to Strindberg, the development of the plants is not structured like a chain, where one link follows the other in a linear fashion, but like “a net” (another version of the weave or the web) or a vibrant and immense whole where every point relates to or is relatable to every other point. Natural evolution is described not in terms of progress but of “motion, forwards or backwards, arbitrary change”, and nature’s conformity to law is deemed a fragment of our methodical minds “who want to trace a purpose in everything”. Strindberg could even be considered to demonstrate the principles he is describing by his very way of structuring the argument as a number of erratic series of more or less sporadic observations of resemblances and similarities, as for example in the following brief excerpt from a discussion on algae: “Chylocladia ovalies performs the role of Euphorbia, Corallina officinalis is nothing but spruce twigs just like Gelidium, Lomentaria articulata has dressed up as a mistletoe; Delesseria Sinuosa makes pretence of a kinship to the oak; and so on, infinitely.” Strindberg repeatedly justifies the apparent arbitrariness of such accounts by referring to the arbitrariness found in nature itself. Thus he may defend his method: “I am very well aware that psychologists have come up with a Greek word for the propensity to observe resemblances everywhere, but that doesn’t scare me, for I know that there are resemblances everywhere, because everything is in everything, everywhere!”

In the latter essay, the final conclusion is once more a simple assertion of the fact that the apparent disorder as such is endlessly coherent, but here the conclusion is accompanied also by an interesting remark on how to interpret such a ca-

561 Strindberg, ”Nägra Blomstrens Hemligheter …….”, p. 271.
562 Strindberg, ”Blomstrens Hemligheter”, p. 213.
563 Strindberg, ”Nägra Blomstrens Hemligheter …….”, p. 276. I have not checked the accuracy of Strindberg’s use of botanical terms here.
precious design of nature: “What does this mean? – Don’t know! Is it a deliberate prank or merely the expression of an immanent energy with an unconscious yet evident purpose?” A similar doubt has, as we have seen, often struck commentators of Strindberg’s dramatic works; in the case of Törnqvist, for example, the suspected prank has been taken for a clever if perhaps sometimes farfetched riddle that must be solved for the text to finally come together. Here, I have rather opted for the latter alternative as the perplexing passages have been taken to demonstrate the effects of an immanent energy present in the very act of writing.

So, there are apparent points of contact between the natural principles as demonstrated, for instance, by the Botanical Garden and the compositional principles of Strindberg’s oeuvre. The remarks I quoted from Ollén and Westin indicate to what degree the latter context, too, eludes stable classifications when any one play will always prove to have some point in common with any other play even if they were written during different periods and in different genres. That Strindberg’s work forms a vast net rather than a linear chain is an established opinion among scholars. About the same time Strindberg was finishing off his last Chamber Play, a young Lukács, in trying to suggest where the author was likely to go next, concluded that what could very well be done with the work of Ibsen was impossible in the case of Strindberg, namely “to establish the sequence of his plays based on their internal features”. For the contemporary critic, Strindberg’s progress was utterly unpredictable since the author always moved on but never really seemed to get anywhere: Strindberg’s work appeared incidental and to be lacking centre, and with “great detours, his development leads back to the original starting points, only to repeat itself once again at the end of yet another big detour”. Similar observations recur profusely in later commentaries. Roland Lysell, for example, finds it significant of Strindberg that he “after having completed a work returns to its theme once more, as if there were always something left behind”; Birgitta Trotzig remarks on how, from whatever point of entry you approach the Strindbergian oeuvre, “you end up in an existence of ceaseless transformations” where there is no centre but “everything is periphery

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565 Strindberg, ”Några Blomstrens Hemligheter ……”, p. 277.
567 Ibid.
that becomes centre”;

569 and Thomas Götselius concludes in a similar fashion: “Without actual end, this writing apparently consists of nothing but beginnings.” 570 In Strindberg, everything returns as a difference; thus, almost every theme or motif and every formal peculiarity found in the Chamber Plays have already been elaborated in some previous context, and still the plays emerge as a new form. Each and every element, and even the patterns they form when grouping together, are familiar; yet, this very familiarity is also found in the way every assembled whole forms something mildly erratic, like a refrain always slightly off-key, offbeat, infused by a different and strange melody, or adlibbed. This erratic aspect is found both on the level of the works as an assembly of parts and on the level of the oeuvre as an assembly of works: both are a kind of weave or web where certain points and lines attract to form clusters and messy knots like the plants in a garden come together among the rocks, by the brook or in the shadows.

Such groupings will always be slightly unfixed due to an inherent and interchangeable mobility and the possibility always to draw up new connections according to sporadic or persistent affections and inclinations. Maurice Blanchot once noted, when comparing the notebooks of Henry James with those of Franz Kafka, that while the former prepares detailed plans that will later be adapted into final works, in the case of the latter it is rather the drafts that constitute the work itself. 571 Perhaps we could expand such an observation to outline two different principles of design: on the one hand, works that are executed according to plan, and thus strive for a sense of perfection; and on the other hand, those that contain within themselves “the forward movement by which it discovers the shape of its completion”. 572 While the former could be considered as a labyrinth which “transcends apparent disorder to reveal a grand design”, 573 the latter would rather be regarded as a burrow which “prevents the introduction of […] the Signifier and those attempts to interpret a work that is actually only open to experimentation”. 574 Works governed by each principle may very well resemble


572 Ibid.

573 Penelope Reed Doob, The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages, Ithaca and London 1990, p. 66.

574 Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka, p. 3.
each other, yet they invite different strategies of interaction, for while the former could be considered as a static construct carefully built around a central secret which is hidden yet possible to reach, the latter would rather be the trace of a series of asignifying processes which has posited itself gradually, and thus includes the twists and turns not initially intended or expected. In the labyrinth, the set of possible connections could, furthermore, be considered to be limited to a predetermined minimum, and every new opening from one space to another will risk the functionality of the entire construct; while in the burrow, new openings would always be possible. A labyrinthine work, understood in this way, would invite us to go beyond the surface to find the hidden depths of significance; and a labyrinthine oeuvre would locate every instance according to a grid of allowed and refused relations. A burrowlike work would, on the other hand, rather invite us to explore the motions and speeds posited as a self-governing trace of the agent’s movements through matter; and the burrowlike oeuvre would always place the work in relation to a surrounding milieu open to a multitude of connections running from one habitat or passage to the other.

If we consider the Strindbergian oeuvre as such a milieu rather than as a grid we will have fewer problems with determining the specific relationship between *The Black Glove* and the Chamber Plays. When Strindberg includes the play, a series of resemblances and differences emerge: we find that the play demonstrates traits typical for the Chamber Plays while simultaneously it strikes us as utterly uncharacteristic in other respects. It would be reasonable to assume that something similar would occur if, on the other hand, we carried out the strategy implied by several of the commentators, namely to group together *The Black Glove* with the other Strindbergian fairy tales. Considered as a formal and thematic unity, the fairy plays, too, would in that case probably demonstrate similar inner tensions and affections and that genre, too, would seem to be stretching and straining. And nevertheless, the Chamber Plays as well as the fairy plays, and the naturalistic dramas and the dream plays, the short stories and the novels, even the poems and the essays, the letters and the diaries, all emerge to form a certain and distinct milieu governed by the same immanent energy of Strindbergian writing.

If we were to claim that Strindberg is wrong in placing the fifth play among the earlier Chamber Plays, that he commits an act of violence or disrupts an order, we would still note the multitude of subterranean roots or lines of marching ants that spill over from one zone to the other and thus demonstrate how they are already related regardless of what fences we put up or what demarcation lines we draw. The differences between Strindbergian genres are not systematic; they are based not on incongruities between internal essences but rather on changes in
proximity. As we have seen, the seed of difference is furthermore found already in
the Chamber Plays as such: as a whole, the Chamber Plays are already held to-
gether by difference and by sprawling profusions. Thus, the change of direction
that The Black Glove seems to imply was already produced virtually in the for-
mer plays. To treat the plays as a closed system, then, is to force closure upon a
whole which is itself founded on principles of openness and disorganized trans-
formation.

The weed recurs profusely in Strindberg’s works, not only as a productive prin-
ciple of writing analogous with the mold, but also literally as a distinct motif. In
the latter sense, it is usually presented as something negative, the proof of negli-
gence when an area or a piece of land has gradually gone spoiled. Still, the domi-
nant theme of The Black Glove – that one must embrace a little weed amongst
the wheat in order to learn to fully appreciate and enjoy life – is also an im-
portant element of Strindberg’s worldview: ethically, theologically, and philosophi-
cally. When Strindberg writes an essay on “My Garden”, he may very well com-
plain loudly about the tricky and persistent couch grass:

The fight against the couch grass can only be waged in one manner: with
persistent, never waning vigilance and work, and the victory is still quite
uncertain. It skirmishes underneath the earth, sticks up a scout here where
you least expect it, and when you have chased him from post to post, he
entrenches himself in a tuft of strawberry or right in the middle of the thick
parsley, where he is inaccessible. He is worse than the tapeworm; if you
pull off the latter piece by piece

But the complaint is also accompanied by the assertion that you will inevitably
approach a point where you must give up and accept the futility of your attack on
nature. Thus Strindberg moves on and says about the caterpillars:

The fight against the caterpillars is one of despair. Three times a day I re-
moved the eggs that are laid under the side of the leaves by the white but-
terfly Epeïra,576 and later I still had to remove worms (larvae) six times a

575 August Strindberg, ”Min trädgård” (from Blomstimålningar och djurstycken ungd-
domen tillägnade, 1888), in Vivisektioner. Blomstimålningar och djurstycken. Skild-
ringar av naturen. Silverträsket, ed. Hans Lindström, Samlade Verk 29, Stockholm 1985,
p. 223.
576 The editor remarks that Strindberg probably refers to the Pieris rather than the Epeira,
as the latter is a spider; cf. the explanations in ibid., p. 354.
day, without any success in protecting two dozen heads of cauliflower from the destruction.

The same thing applies to the caterpillars as applies to sin; you’re picking and picking and nevertheless it’s still there, until you finally grow tired, resign yourself to your destiny and think: I guess that’s how it should be, since that’s how it is!\(^{577}\)

This strand in Strindberg’s thought is not only negative in that it propagates suffering and submission, it is also an affirmation of life and thus a manifestation of joy: this is what life is, this is a manifestation of the force and power of possibility, difference and change, of affections and inclinations, light and darkness, mercy and friendship, birth, growth and death as visible in the Botanical Garden or the Garden of Eden. Like mold, the couch grass and the caterpillar are indistinguishable from the life we enjoy and the powers that we praise and fear.

Something similar is implied in the Strindbergian poetics of writing which, when noting the strange curlicue that has poured out of the pen or the undeveloped motif whose function is no longer remembered, acknowledges that this is writing, this is the work, this is the production of the energies of literature. Thus, Strindberg always says yes to literature, even when the staked out plots are infested by an erratic line of writing which entrenches itself in some element that has been carefully planted for one purpose or another. These molds or weeds or couch grasses or caterpillars of writing are also indistinguishable from the Strindbergian work as such: they are what we enjoy when we enjoy it, what interests us when we are interested in it, what is there to analyze when we analyze it. To demand and solely stress the principles of careful composition, of symbolical signification and overriding interpretations, of coherence and consistency and carefully constructed genres, then, will be to wage a vain and desperate war of despair against the skirmishing scouts of style and writing. And in the end, the weed will always win.

\(^{577}\) Ibid., p. 224.
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