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The Drama of Initiation: Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Strindberg, and S. I. Witkiewicz

August Strindberg's knowledge of the works of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam (1838–1889) is testified by a mention in his essay *Om modernt drama och modern teater* (1889), by his letter to Leopold Litmansson of November 6th, 1900, and by his letter to Harriet Bosse of February 25th, 1901. Régis Boyer proved further Strindberg's knowledge of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam as much more extensive than mentioned in letters; he showed that the works of the French writer played quite an important part in Strindberg's own creative work, especially in his late period. Boyer's list of influences and of converging points between the two authors could be continued and augmented, but his main conclusion remains unchanged; Villiers and Strindberg appear as a couple of spiritual brothers, they breathe the same atmosphere and they evolve as artists in a similar way. As far as Strindberg goes, one should rather speak of his impregnation by Villiers than of any sort of influence¹.

Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (1885–1939) was an enthusiast of Strindberg; he introduced *The Ghost Sonata* to the Polish theatre in 1926, and there are many links between his own dramatic works and those of the Swedish author². As to Villiers, Witkiewicz, who

¹ R. Boyer. "Strindberg et Villiers de l'Isle-Adam." *Revue d'Histoire du Théâtre*, 1978, vol. III (Actes du Colloque "Strindberg à Paris," Université de Paris-Sorbonne, octobre 1975).

² Cf. A. N. Uggla, *Strindberg och den polska teatern 1890–1970. En studie i reception*, Uppsala 1977, pp. 44–45, and ch. VII: Witkiewicz och Strindberg—

was a general reader of astonishing appetite, knew him early in Polish translations and probably also in the original version. The tales by Villiers were translated into Polish before 1900, the translation of *Axel* appeared in 1901 in the Polish Symbolist periodical *Chimera* as the first translation of the play into any foreign language. In 1902 there appeared a de luxe edition of *Axel*, while in 1917 we had a volume containing both *Axel* and *The Revolt*.

Witkiewicz read *Axel* as early as 1901. It may be seen from a letter which his father addressed to him on August 28th (Witkiewicz-senior was a writer, an art critic, and a painter). In their correspondence, of which only the father's letters have been preserved, they exchanged views and opinions on books, theatrical performances and exhibitions. There is another letter of May 20th, 1902 in which the father discusses the novel *Próchno* (*Mould*) by Waclaw Berent which he read upon his sons's advice, and speaks about the influences of Przybyszewski and of Villiers. Both letters reveal that the two correspondents had a fairly extensive knowledge of the works of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam and that allusions to the texts of Villiers were a matter of common practice in their intellectual relations³.

In the works of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz we can trace mainly (though not exclusively) the echoes of *Axel*. Interesting coincidences may already be found in Witkiewicz's first mature play *Maciej Korbowa and Bellatrix* (1918) which, by the way, also alludes to Strindberg, but the most evident traces of *Axel* are to be found in a play of 1922 *Nadobnisie i koczkodany, czyli Zielona Pigulka. Komedia z trupami w 2 aktach i 3 odsłonach* (*Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes, or the Green Pill. A Comedy with Corpses in 2 Acts and 3 Scenes*).

The main coincidences are those of plot and of some themes. In both plays the main theme is the initiation of the hero by masters of occult science—Master Janus in the play of Villiers and Pandeus

Tvä etaper av medvetenhet; L. Sokół: "August Strindberg and Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. A Parallel," [in:] *Swedish-Polish Literary Contacts*, ed. N.O. Nilsson, Stockholm 1978; "Strindberg et Witkiewicz," *Le Théâtre en Pologne*, 1978, no. 6–7, pp. 16–24.

³ S. Witkiewicz, *Listy do syna (Letters to Son)*, ed. B. Danek-Wojnowska and A. Micińska, Warszawa 1969, pp. 47, 99.

in the play of Witkiewicz. Both names are allusions to some god: in Villiers it is the two-faced Janus probably symbolizing the mysterious, equivocal character of the Doctor, or perhaps his universal knowledge. In Witkiewicz's play the name of Pandeus refers to all the gods. In both plays the heroes who are to be initiated experience some doubts and finally resign from learning the mystery. The temptations of life and of the world, particularly of women, have a great part in their desertion. Axel's refusal is partly made good in the third part of the play ("Le monde passionnel"); the desertion of Tarquinius in Witkiewicz's play is forced upon him by the situation: owing to a woman's intrigue his master betrays him and brings discredit upon initiation itself which ultimately proves to be an initiation into homosexual practices. The hero himself dies while fighting a duel with a woman.

The motif of duel is closely connected with *Axel*. The hero of Villiers almost dies at the hand of Sarah while the hero of Witkiewicz actually dies in the duel with Sophia. Both men, as well as Sophia, are experts in fencing with foils, but both ultimately use swords. Axel fights with Commander Caspar von Auerperg who must die as the possessor of the secret of the hidden treasure; Sophia and Tarquinius fight about Pandeus whom the woman wants to recapture as her lover while the man wants to retain him as friend and master. Yet, the broader sense of both duels seems to be the same. By killing the Commander Axel kills in his person the temptations of worldly life which he had presented to the hero in the preceding conversation. Tarquinius wants to kill the temptation of love which might bring about his fall and renouncement of the initiation. Both with Witkiewicz and with Villiers initiation is to be achieved by practising privations and strict asceticism. What must be renounced is not only erotic life, but any sort of life that is not entirely subordinated to the desire of unveiling the mystery. The hard dilemma for both heroes is then: either life or initiation.

The drama of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam has two plots—that of Sarah and that of Axel; both converge in the solution of the fourth part of the play, although the solution is not complete as Villiers never wrote the fifth part—"Le monde astral"—in which he meant to describe the story of the lovers after their death. Witkiewicz fully develops the plot which is connected with Tarquinius,

Pandeus and with initiation. The arrival of Sophia surrounded by a crowd of admirers disturbs this course of action and brings about the tragic (or rather grotesque) solution. After all, what we have here is "a comedy with corpses." Sophia's plot is shifted to prehistory and we learn about it from numerous hints and allusions made by the heroes on the stage.

The basic *peripeteia* in the fates of the heroes is brought about by the arrival of Sarah to Axel's castle and the arrival of Sophia to the palace of Pandeus. Both women are unusually beautiful and possess a strong individuality. What is more important, they represent the eternal womanly element in a particular, demoniac way. In his commentary to the text of *Axel* Pierre Mariel explains the meaning of the names of the heroine: Eve requires no comment apart from the reference to *Gen.* II 22. Sarah embodies (*Gen.* XVII. 15) the womanhood of the times of the law of Jehovah and of Abraham (her name means literally: princess). Emmanuelle stands for the womanhood of the time of Grace (*Mat.* I. 23) and the name means "God is with us."⁴

Sarah can fight and conquer. Her weapons are the axe, the knife, the pistol, but also her womanly charms. The demonism of Sophia in Witkiewicz's play is presented in a much more straightforward way: in the list of *dramatis personae* she is characterized as "demonic." Her present family name indicates that at least at a time she used to have a husband. Her second, maiden name is d'Abencérage. The allusion to Chateaubriand's novel (*Les Aventures du dernier Abencérage*, 1826) is meant to indicate the cruelty, the passion and the uncompromising nature of Sophia's love. Witkiewicz must have known the novel in one of the Polish translations or in the original; he retains the French spelling of the name Abencérage which was transcribed in Polish versions. Sophia openly declares her will to dominate, to conquer and to subject Pandeus to mental and perhaps also to physical torture. She says: "I'll make bloody mincemeat out of him. I'll eat his nerves sautéed over a slow flame. I feel the blood of all the Abencérages boiling with me."⁵ While

⁴ A. de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *Axel*, introd. et notes de P. Mariel, Paris 1960, p. 259.

⁵ S. I. Witkiewicz, *Dramaty (The Dramas)*, ed. K. Puzyna, vol. 2, Warszawa 1972, p. 182.

introducing herself to Tarquinius she says: "I am a mummy. I am thousands of years old, and my cruelty is boundless."⁶ In this light Sophia's duel with Tarquinius acquires quite a clear, new meaning: it is a poignantly drawn image of the struggle of the sexes which plays such an important part in the works of Witkiewicz while at the same time the theme of the demonic woman and of sex struggle brings us inside the circle of the ideas of Strindberg.

We now drop the search for further connections between the plays of Villiers and of Witkiewicz in order to deal with the theme which these two authors have in common with Strindberg—the theme of initiation.

The interest of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam in occult studies which is so strongly reflected in *Axel* is the result of his connections with the work of the great restorer of occultism in France—Eliphas Lévy (Alphonse-Louis Constant, 1810—1875), especially with his book in two volumes *Dogme et rituel de haute magie* (Paris 1861). The convergences are astounding and there is even a number of direct quotations from Lévy's book in *Axel*. Strindberg's occultist studies in Paris are a well-known subject and have been extensively described by Gunnar Brandell in *Strindbergs Infernokris*, and later on by other Strindbergian scholars. They also pointed to the role of Lévy in the shaping of Strindberg's views, although, of course, it was not the only source of occultist lore either for Villiers or for the Swedish author.

Witkiewicz certainly does not belong to the same tradition and can be hardly called an occultist. Theosophy and occultism were for him an object of scorn and a symbol of decadence. Still, the motif of initiation and all sorts of "occultist" occurrences do appear in his plays. The question is, then, how and why these themes entered into his work and what is their meaning in the total pattern of Witkiewicz's ideas.

While trying to answer the question it is hard to overestimate the role of Villiers and, above all, that of Strindberg. It was owing to the knowledge and study of his works that Witkiewicz was able to take over certain trends of European thought and literature of the turn of the 19th and 20th century. Although he himself belonged

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 181.

to the avant-garde and his work developed and exhausted itself in the nineteen-twenties, he used symbolist drama for his own purposes. One might say in this connection that his immediate predecessors were much more important for him than his contemporaries. He felt independent from expressionism, futurism and surrealism. If he sometimes came to the conclusions postulated by these very movements, it was done in his own way. The only contemporary whom he esteemed and confessed his dependence upon was Tadeusz Miciński (1873–1918)—a dramatist, poet and philosopher who is still almost entirely unknown outside his own country⁷. It is enough to state here that many themes and ideas which Witkiewicz knew from Villiers de l'Isle-Adam and from Strindberg, he also found in the strange works of Miciński who, in his turn, was a diligent student of Swedenborg, of magic and of occultism. He also knew well the writings of Villiers and Strindberg. In this way magic circle closes around Witkiewicz and his work.

Specialists say that the structure of the mystic drama of the turn of the century almost unavoidably takes the form of spiritual initiation. Before Master Janus decides to admit Axel to the final initiation the latter must pass through many degrees of purification and initiatory procedures; the hero withdraws almost in the last moment. In Witkiewicz's play initiation is also stopped and discredited in the last moment: Sophia treacherously gives Pandeus a sexually stimulating "green pill." Under its influence he wants to make Tarquinius his lover in spite of fact that he has been cured for a long time from homosexual experiences which he practised in his youth in order to try everything that is possible in life. Having previously tasted of everything and apparently feeling the nothingness of luxury and enjoyment, he now craves for initiation, but the point is, what he is going to be initiated into.

In the case of Villiers' hero the aim was the knowledge of the supernatural world in order to achieve power. The aim of initiation in Strindberg's late works (*To Damascus*, *The Ghost Sonata*, the „chamber plays”) can also be clearly deciphered. The Stranger learns the necessity of fighting, of suffering and of self-forgetfulness; he

⁷ Cf. I. Sławińska, "Strindberg and Early Expressionism in Poland." [in:] *Strindberg and Modern Theatre*, Uddevalla 1975.

undergoes the pains and uncertainties of a man on the road to his conversion. The student Arkenholtz realizes that the world is a place full of illusions, that nothing is really what it seems to be. Similar conclusions are attained by the heroes of the *Dream Play* whom the Daughter of Indra meets in her pilgrimage upon earth.

Supernatural occurrences are a usual feature of the drama of initiation in which they serve to unveil the sacred truth. In his article "Symbolist Drama: Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Strindberg, and Yeats" Haskell Block quotes a fragment of *Charles XII* in which Swedenborg foretells and announces the death of the king⁸. There are many more events of this kind in Strindberg. In *Axel* Sister Laudation wants to strike Sarah, but her hand grows miraculously paralyzed. When the name of Doctor Janus is first mentioned the ever-burning lamp in the sanctuary of the abbey suddenly goes out.

The plays of Witkiewicz include many events of this kind and many of them can be directly referred either to Villiers or to Strindberg. In the play *Maciej Korbowa and Bellatrix* which we mentioned a while ago one of the characters evokes the spectre of an armoured knight "as if taken from the picture of Paolo Ucello." The ghost appears in clear daylight and loses its hand as the result of a blow inflicted upon it by one of the characters. The hand proves to be empty armour which, however, remains as a material object after the ghost's disappearance. In exactly the same way Vera's ghost in the tale *Véra* by Villiers leaves a real key in her husband's chamber.

Clairvoyant characters whose premonitions prove ultimately true are not missing from the plays of Witkiewicz. What sometimes happens in those plays actually resembles Strindberg's dramas. In the *Ghost Sonata* the Student sees the ghost of the Milkmaid which is not seen by Hummel. The latter sees it only when it appears to announce his death. In the same way the living statue of Alice d'Or in Witkiewicz's *Mątwy* (*Cuttlefish*) is first seen only by a few of the characters; in *Matka* (*The Mother*) the mysterious Voice is first heard only by the mother and only later on by her son. A prophecy which resembles that of the death of the king in Strindberg's

⁸ H. M. Block, "Symbolist Drama: Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Strindberg, and Yeats," [in:] *The Occult in Language and Literature*, ed. M. Riffaterre, New York 1980, p. 46.

Charles XII occurs in the play *W małym domku* (*In a Small Country House*). Here Witkiewicz not only uses, but parodies *The Ghost Sonata*. Instead of "ghosts' supper" we have here a "ghosts' breakfast" with living characters and a ghost who eats heartily and helps himself to vodka. One of the characters in the play is a creatively impotent poet with a mania for writing. After long pains he gives birth to a poem describing two sisters taking poison, their death and some other events. For reasons unknown, as the poem is pure graphomania, it makes a tremendous impression upon the listeners to whom the author reads it. We understand the reason when we see soon that the death of the two sisters and also the other events have come true.

Witkiewicz also uses another trick which was considered an error in realistic drama, but which was very often used in symbolist or occultist plays, namely parallel repetitions. The best example here is *Kurka wodna* (*The Water Hen*) with the subtitle *A Spheric Tragedy*. The central event is repeated twice in identic scenery and under almost identic circumstances; Edgar Valpor twice shoots his mistress under a lantern. Examples of typically symbolist motifs and situations in Witkiewicz's plays could be multiplied, and yet it is impossible to place him unreservedly along with Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Strindberg, or Yeats. In their plays we have the theme of initiation presented in a serious way, even with solemnity and unction, whereas Witkiewicz treats it with mockery in a sneering and grotesque way. The distancing of the theme established by grotesque and mockery is to be explained in the light of the general aims which Witkiewicz appointed to himself as a dramatist.

His chief concern in plays, novels and philosophical writings was the decline and fall of the individual caught up in the process of social development which, according to Witkiewicz, was bringing the downfall of religion, of art and of philosophy. Art and philosophy are manifestations of the human individual; they furnish man with a metaphysical experience which, in turn, supports his uniqueness and his sense of inner unity. Art is capable of bringing about the experience of the Mystery of Being by its sheer constructional features which Witkiewicz called Pure Form in his system of aesthetics. The inability to experience the Mystery of Being, of experiencing metaphysics in general, is the price which man-

kind pays for the benefits of social progress, of the development of social justice and of democracy. The basic question for the author and for his heroes is how to retain the benefits of progress without bringing about the death of the individual and the end of art and philosophy. The heroes either attempt to face the danger on a global scale (like Leon in *Matka*), or they just try to save their own persons by finding access to metaphysics. Yet, metaphysical ecstasy is not to be had for merely wanting it. It cannot be achieved even by conscious attempts to arrange one's life in search of strong experiences. Witkiewicz's heroes talk about initiation, they make attempts to gain it, but they live in a world in which it is no longer possible. Their individuality has already been castrated by social progress and the only thing which connects them with the world into which they cannot enter any more is the consciousness that they have lost something of extreme, priceless value. Those who may come after them will no longer be conscious even of the loss. Meanwhile, the heroes organize clubs of initiates, brotherhoods of searchers for the Absolute, but whatever they do is tainted with disbelief, with pretending, or even with bad faith. Initiation has become impossible because the candidates are deprived of their metaphysical roots; their tragedy is the impossibility of reaching their goal. What is more, they are so ridiculous and unauthentic in their misfortune that what they present is not tragedy, but grotesque. What Villiers and Strindberg treated with earnest, Witkiewicz must treat with jeers and sarcasm.

Witkiewicz presents in his plays either the attempts to penetrate the mystery which are doomed to failure from their very beginning, or a strange world in which mysteries are revealed among fake, falsified surroundings. The very subjects of Villiers and Strindberg which these authors were able to treat in a serious way now simply must be tainted with laughter. Motifs of Strindberg or of Edgar Allan Poe (whom both Strindberg and Witkiewicz had in high esteem) may appear in the plays of the Polish author, but they do so in a significantly modified way. In *Metafizyka dwugłowego cielęcica* (*The Metaphysics of a Two-Headed Calf*) there appears a mysterious hooded character-- the embodiment and announcer of the plague. It is called Kala-Azar, as the play is located in New Guinea and Australia. Resemblances with Poe's *Masque of Red Death* are striking. When unmasked, the strange newcomer appears, however, to be a dandy

in a dress coat—a playboy from Sidney of the name of Moorphy. Still, he says that he is an embodiment of the plague and we are left uncertain about what is true, or we rather do not know what we are to believe.

The Beelzebub Sonata presents a still more poignant example. According to an old legend Beelzebub is to appear in a small town in Hungary in order to find a victim who, when possessed by him, is to compose a sonata that will be the embodiment of metaphysical evil. Hell in the play resembles a music-hall, but the music-hall is situated at the bottom of a disused pit. Just when we have started believing that what we see is a genuine café chantant (although we do not know who runs it and for what purpose it has been opened in a pit), Hell appears again, this time next door to the drawing room of the Baroness, one of the characters of the play. Witkiewicz disconcerts his audiences by cleverly using the dialectics of created and destroyed illusion. Every time we have accepted a solution, we are forced to drop it, and finally we do not know which attitude to choose. The procedure which Witkiewicz uses in order to achieve such effects seems to point to connections with some devices introduced in drama by Symbolist authors.

They were attracted by esoteric lore mainly because it gave them a chance to introduce new, unused images and new contents. As far as form goes, such interests implied the rejection of realism or naturalism⁹. This is the case in *Axel*, although Villiers was closer to Romanticism than to strictly taken Symbolism. Strindberg who had never been a full-fledged naturalist was gradually going away from naturalism in the course of his development. Still, his connections with Symbolism were of a fairly complicated nature. Witkiewicz totally rejected realism and naturalism; he anathemized the kind of symbolism represented by Maeterlinck, although he used the means and ways elaborated by other representatives of the Symbolist movement. The action of Strindberg's plays of his late period (e.g. Part I of *To Damascus*¹⁰) is located in a borderland between dream and

⁹ D. Gerould, J. Kosicka, "The Drama of the Unseen. Turn-of-the Century Paradigms for Occult Drama," *ibidem*, pp. 6–7.

¹⁰ G. Brandell, *Strindberg in Inferno*, transl. by B. Jacobs, Cambridge, Mass., 1974, pp. 222–276; E. Törnqvist, "Strindberg and the Drama of Half-Reality," [in:] *Strindberg and Modern Theatre*.

realism. The world in the plays of Witkiewicz which is constructed according to the dialectical principle of creating and shattering illusion seems to be a further development of Strindberg's concept. In spite of all the differences there is a similarity in this respect between Villiers, Strindberg, and Witkiewicz and it is possible to establish here some scale of evolution.

The three writers introduce the theme of initiation into their works, although initiation can no longer be achieved by the heroes of Witkiewicz. In *Axel* the supernatural appears in a way which harmonizes with the atmosphere of mystery: everything is still possible. Strindberg suspends the world of his later plays between dream and reality. Witkiewicz refuses to make a choice between realism and fantasy and accepts an issue that might have seemed impossible to his predecessors: he chose a way which was neither fantasy nor realism.

Transl. by *Grzegorz Sinko*