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JOURNAL OF CROSS-CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES |
REVUE D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE L'IMAGE

Publication details, including open access policy
and instructions for contributors:

<http://imaginations.csj.ualberta.ca>

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October 24, 2011

To Cite this Article:

Lee, Christopher., and Sascha Brosamer. "Missing Letters" *Imaginations* 2:1 (2011):
Web (date accessed) 6-19. DOI: 10.17742/IMAGE.crypt.2-1.2

To Link to this article:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.crypt.2-1.2>



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MISSING LETTERS

AUTHOR • CHRISTOPHER LEE
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This paper tracks the symptom of ‘missing letters’ in order to connect the anxiety that permeates August Strindberg’s life and works to his destiny as the carrier of his dead sister’s crypt. In his 1887 essay “‘Soul Murder’ (*A Propos* ‘Rosmersholm’),” Strindberg reveals that the bottom-line of his anxiety is not interpersonal conflict, but the potential for loss that always accompanies transmitted messages along their itineraries. By couching this threat of loss in the image of missing letters, Strindberg establishes the interchangeability between letters that go missing in transit to those missing letters that enter the corpus uninvited through the apertures of communication. Following the trajectory of these missing letters in his oeuvre (most notably, in *The Father*, *Miss Julie*, and *The Dance of Death I*), the paper eventually locates at the (missing) dead center of Strindberg’s literary corpus the phantom transmission from mother to son of the author’s younger sister Eleonora.

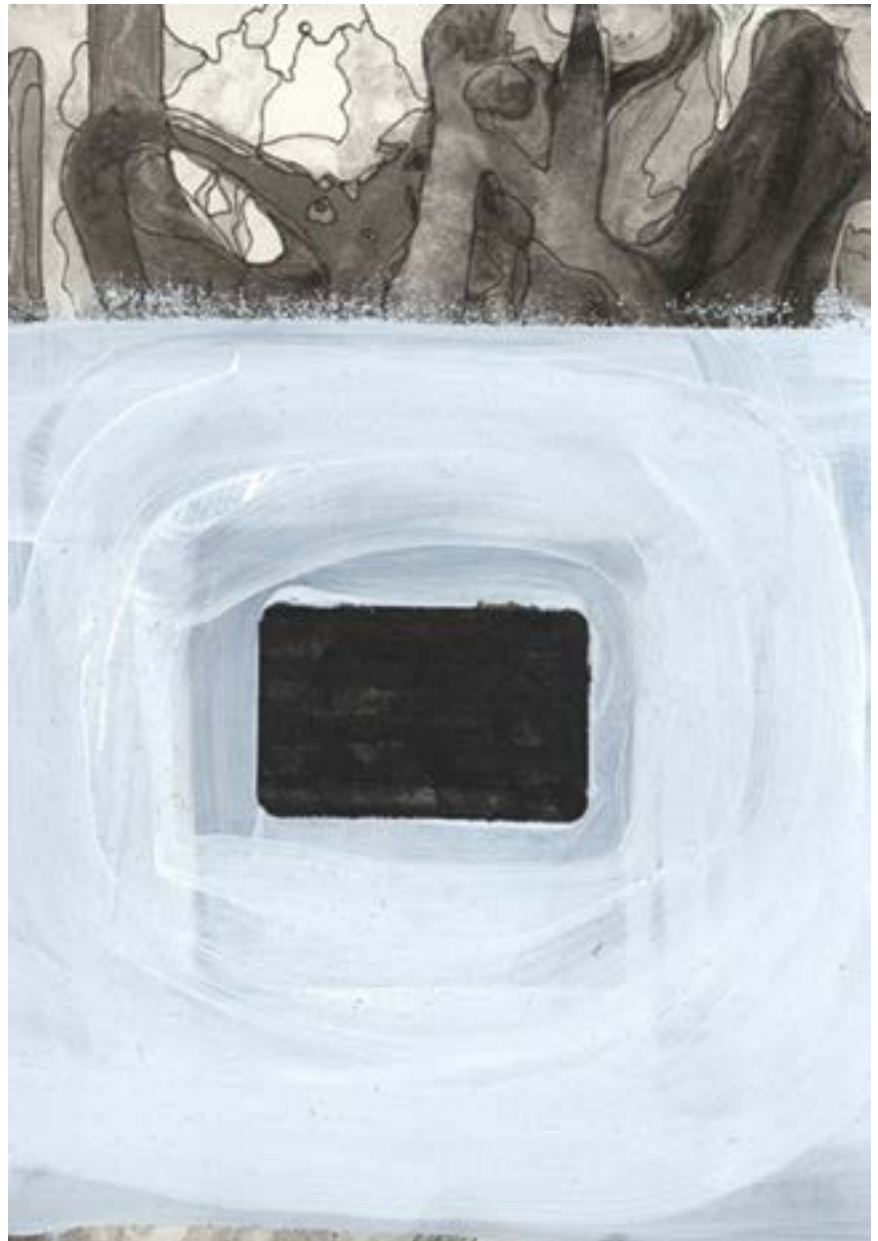
Born in Seoul, Korea, Chris Lee moved to Virginia, where he finished his schooling, and attended the University of Virginia, intending to study philosophy and Classics. However, a chance encounter with Gilles Deleuze in a Spinoza class developed into a strong interest in postmodern thought and psychoanalysis, and ultimately led him to pursue his interest in psychoanalytic theory and modernist literature at the UCSB, where he received his Ph.D. in 2010. In his dissertation, Lee addressed those foreign bodies that go undetected in the canons of literary history, calling attention to those aspects of Strindberg, Virginia Woolf, and Beckett that get passed over as the Unreadable (or simply as the unread).

Before commencing his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts Karlsruhe, class of Franz Ackermann, Sascha Brosamer trained as a paramedic and was enrolled for two years in the “Music and Media Art” program at the State Academy of Music in Bern, Switzerland.

Cet article suit le phénomène des « lettres disparues » pour faire le lien entre les grandes inquiétudes qui imprègnent la vie et les œuvres d’August Strindberg et son destin de porter la crypte de sa sœur décédée. Dans son essai écrit en 1887, *Soul Murder (A Propos Rosmerholm)*, Strindberg révèle que le résultat de ses grandes inquiétudes n’est pas un conflit interpersonnel, mais la probabilité des messages de se perdre en cours de route. En déguisant la menace de perte en l’image des lettres disparues, Strindberg établit l’interchangeabilité entre les lettres disparues en transit et celles non sollicitées qui pénètrent le corpus à travers les ouvertures de communication. En suivant la trajectoire de ces lettres disparues dans ces œuvres (notamment dans *Père*, dans *Mademoiselle Julie* et dans *La danse de mort I*), cet article trouve finalement la transmission fantôme de mère à fils de la sœur cadette Eleonora au centre mort (absent ou disparu) du corpus littéraire.

Chris Lee, né à Séoul en Corée, déménage en Virginie où il finit ses études secondaires. Il s’inscrit à l’Université de Virginie avec l’intention d’étudier la philosophie et les lettres classiques. Cependant, il prend de l’intérêt pour la pensée postmoderne, ainsi que pour la psychanalyse grâce à une rencontre fortuite avec Gilles Deleuze dans le cadre d’un cours sur Spinoza. En raison de cette rencontre il développe son intérêt pour la théorie psychanalytique, ainsi que pour la littérature moderniste à l’Université de Californie à Santa Barbara, où il obtient son doctorat en 2010. Sa thèse porte sur aux œuvres étrangères omises dans les canons de la littérature en soulignant les aspects considérés *unreadable* (ou simplement *unread*) dans l’œuvre de Strindberg, de Virginia Wolf et de Beckett.

Avant de commencer ses études à l’Académie des beaux-arts de Karlsruhe sous la direction de Franz Ackermann, Sascha Brosamer reçoit une formation d’auxiliaire médical. Il suit aussi deux ans du programme *Musique et arts médiatiques* au Conservatoire de Berne en Suisse.



Due in no small part to his extravagant statements on women and the women's movement, August Strindberg's literary career is too easily defined by the fierce intersexual conflicts that marked both his most famous plays and his life. This caricatured view has perhaps had the regrettable effect of making him one of those unread writers who nevertheless occupy, if in name alone, prominent places in our culture. However, by tracing the missing places that Strindberg insistently includes in his writings, it is possible to see through the smokescreen of external conflicts and see at the core of Strindberg's literary career and mission the sometimes conflicting drive to stage a missing letter that he was entrusted to carry, at the same as he preserved that letter from the perils of exposure.

"'Soul Murder' (*A propos* 'Rosmersholm')" (1887), an essay written at the inception of his dramatic career, invites this cryptological reading of the anxieties that Strindberg shaped into his dramas. The power of *suggestion* is a readily recognizable theme in Strindberg's plays—that is, the potential that one person may sabotage another person's psyche merely through regular channels of communication. "Soul murder" begins as a speculation on that theme, which he had recently explored in *The Father* (1886). In modern times, he writes, murder is replaced by soul murder, for a modern conspirator eschews the ostentations of direct force, relying instead on the clandestine method of soul murder (*själamord*) or psychic suicide (*självord*):

In the past one killed one's adversary without trying to persuade him; nowadays one creates a majority against him, 'prevails upon' him, exposes his intentions, ascribes to him intentions he does not have, deprives him of his livelihood, denies him social standing, makes him look ridiculous—in short, tortures him to death by lies or drives him insane instead of killing him. (*Selected Essays* 67)

Revealing the influence of persecution mania—that would later culminate in a four-year period (1893-1897) of recurring bouts of paranoid delusions—Strindberg then explains how soul murder works by offering examples that come straight out of his real—or really imagined—life. The first is "shelving," which he illustrates with reference to "a great actor [...] recently mur-

dered in the following way" (67). The soul-murdering director offers the actor a lucrative contract, one that grants the director, however, control over the relay between the actor and his public, whereby he wields the power to waste the actor's talent either by depriving him of roles or by giving him mismatched roles. Another example is that of the publisher who directs the exchange between a journalist and his public, a scenario "known in America as 'the handcuffs'" (67). Strindberg had actually accused his publisher Gustav Philipson of this indiscretion (Lagercrantz 236-37). After having granted an influential journalist a contract, the editor lets the manuscript go missing, hiding it in a drawer until it becomes old news. Eventually, the victim of soul murder will lose his will to live, and end up acting out the compatibility between soul murder and suicide, between *själamord* and *självord*.

However, just as the progression between *själamord* and *självord* depends on a letter that drops out, Strindberg's speculation, too, narrows its focus on the missing document itself as the source of soul murder. Early examples had highlighted those positive persecuting forces that hide documents (or hides the actor like he is a document to be shelved) as a means to soul murder. In the final example of soul murder, however, the focus shifts from the murder in causing some documents to go missing to the murder that inheres in missing documents themselves. Here is the final example:

Far simpler forms of torturing people to death can also serve as ingredients. One lets a manuscript or two get lost in the post. A vacuum then arises in a writer's psyche; there is a break in the line, so that the circuit is interrupted; the chain of development is broken, so that the next time he takes up his pen he does not know what he has written (and had published) or not written. He begins to repeat himself, referring to texts that he believes the reader knows, but which the latter has never heard of. His writing disintegrates, and he can no longer collect his everywhere dispersed thoughts. (68)

As one can see, this final soul murder by purloining of the letter is now no longer formulated in terms of dying to someone as either expression or knowledge, that is, input or output of information, as in the ex-



amples of shelving and handcuffs. The final example instead understands soul murder as a letter that goes missing in transit, but stays *in* transit as a missing letter. A break in the line, according to this formulation, does not merely create an interruption in knowledge. Whatever was missing from communication enters the channels of communication as a vacuum and becomes encysted within the writer himself. The paranoid fear of psychic murder that Strindberg first sought to restrict to the interpersonal setting becomes, in this final example, unmoored from the many imaginary adversaries who were summoned by Strindberg throughout his life to contain his anxiety and aggressiveness. What remains once the smoke settles is the murderous potential that inheres in the postal system itself, namely the always-existing potential of the letter to go missing and then come back as soul murder.

Indeed, even Strindberg's title for the essay, "'Soul Murder' (*A propos* 'Rosmersholm')," reflects his wariness of the missing letter. The quotation marks surrounding the word 'soul murder' and the binding parentheses that guard the name *Rosmersholm* indicate the care with which Strindberg approached the topic, lest the missing letter in the play gets out of hand and go astray, only to come back to and into the writer as his disintegration. Just as he tried syntactically to bind the threats to his writing, Strindberg's essay obscures his fear of missing letters under the smokescreen of misogyny and interpersonal battle, characterizing the soul murder in *Rosmersholm* as a psychic manipulation by Rebecca. However, *Rosmersholm*, like so many of Ibsen's dramas, is centered on the message that goes missing, only to return as a source of catastrophe. One has only to turn to some of the most famous dramas of Ibsen. In *A Doll's House*, it is the letters bearing Nora's forged signatures that, once forgotten, return to destroy the fragile equilibrium Nora tried to maintain. In *Hedda Gabler*, Løvborg's missing manuscript, after making its way into Hedda's hands, ends up producing, not the truth Hedda had sought for, but only a catastrophic end. In *Rosmersholm*, it is Beata's letter that, sent just before her death and in Mortensgaard's possession, allows her, years after her death, to defeat Rosmer's plans to supplant her and accept Rebecca (as well as the ideals of progressive politics for which Rebecca stands).



After beginning the essay as a confident scientist of soul murder, by the end Strindberg shows himself completely fallen prey to the threat of missing letters, whether as actual or potential. Strindberg ends the essay with a hopeful promise to get to the bottom of soul murder by writing a fragmentary announcement, exclaiming: “About that, another time” (*Selected Essays* 72). But this promise of maybe a manuscript or two that will clear the line between Strindberg and his reader points only to the fact that Strindberg never wrote this follow-up. Thus the soul murder essay ends up merely staging, as a conspicuous vacuum in Strindberg’s literary corpus, the missing manuscript that perhaps, but always potentially, got lost in transit.

All his life, Strindberg was pathologically wary of the capacity of things to go missing, even in his post-*Inferno* years, when he was presumably recovered from his paranoia. When his third wife Harriet Bosse, then estranged, lost her engagement ring during a visit to Strindberg’s house and later spoke to him of her suspicion of the maid, Strindberg first furiously refuted the charge, only to break down in tears when the theft was confirmed (Paulson 113-14).

His relatively late turn to drama, too, could be seen as a symptomatic preface to the *Inferno* years, when his obsessions reached their pathological climax in middle age. Drama is, after all, a genre that is missing its core. Referring to some off-stage past, or some off-stage text and context, the scene refers to some unseen element that the stage is busily trying to recover or cover over. Thus in his *Theater as Problem* Benjamin Bennett calls drama an “ontologically defective genre” that is the result of an incongruous—but productive—marriage between literature and the institution of the stage. When the reader senses a defect in a non-dramatic text, it is a problem of the specific text, but

when I read a drama, when the dramatic text is (for me) an object of reading, part of my understanding of its quality as drama is the recognition that it *could be* (for me) something quite different, a kind of shadowy, inferred presence governing the action and speaking of ceremonially disguised figures in an open space before a restrainedly festive crowd of which I would be a

member. (Bennett 61)

This works both ways. The stage, too, must necessarily evoke some unrepresentable past. Since Ibsen, realistic drama tends to handle time through the technique of indirect exposition. Through it, the stage forges the present “dominated by an oppressive, looming past” (18). However, for all of the technique’s capacity, “[d]rama inevitably concerns itself less with long periods of time as such than with the past as an immediate presence in our mental and social life [...]” (18). This past that is present is, in other words, absence that is contained in the stage, which is always missing its manuscript.

From the first of Strindberg’s mature dramas, letters were found missing and circulating within a self-constitutive or intrapsychic circuit connecting self and other as soul murder. *The Father* (1886), written a year before the soul murder essay, traces the root cause of the cavalry captain Adolph’s psychotic breakdown to the infiltration into and disconnection of his communications. The central issue, the potential illegitimacy of the daughter, is, for Strindberg, a communication problem, as legitimacy is seen as a proper transmission of legacy. The primary means by which Laura destroys Adolph is the postal exchange, which she ably turns into a scene of peril. Strindberg shows the soul murderer Laura sitting at the relays, clandestinely introducing the feared missing places into the framework of reality and control Adolph builds up via his professional and scientific correspondence. Specifically, Laura intercepts all incoming publications that contain information about the latest discoveries in the field of astrophysics, frustrating Adolph in his research (*Selected Plays* 175). It should be noted also that Laura relies on a letter she intercepted years ago, in which Adolph expresses doubts about his sanity, for the legal authority to declare Adolph insane. In other words, having been taken out of its proper trajectory and context, the letter is turned against its spirit, and Adolph’s own words return from this unexpected detour as the seed of his mind’s disintegration.

Missing letters are also the driving force in Strindberg’s next and most famous play, *Miss Julie* (1888). But here, Strindberg elaborates on his theory of soul murder by introducing the themes of insurance and fire. The bat-



tle of the sexes in *Miss Julie* has its origin in the arson perpetrated in Miss Julie's childhood by her mother, an act whose motivation Strindberg fails or refuses to explain. The arson is damaging and contaminating, however, only to the extent that its effects were made uncontainable and irreversible when the mother sought to circumvent the institution of insurance. Only by seeing through the diversionary fireworks of the arson, one can discern the essence of the dead mother's malice. Not her arson, but her interception (of the letters that contained the fire insurance premium) was what caused the financial ruin of the house, and almost led the father to commit suicide, the soul murder that returns to fulfill its destiny in the daughter.

Insurance asserts that since every conceivable loss can be replaced by some monetary equivalent, insured loss is loss already admitted and covered. The standard of mourned death, however, implies and hides the contrary notion of an always uninsurable loss. The fantasy of seamless replacement prepares, by proxy or inoculation, for this very catastrophe, but this calculability of the risk of loss reduces the living to their mere exchange value, thus turning what was a risk of loss to a generalized certainty of loss. As Laurence Rickels points out, the emergence of the great insurance houses in the seventeenth century occurred concurrently with the similar emergence of early modernity's mass and massive failure to mourn. When modern insurance companies in the seventeenth century arose as a response to the emergence of the colonial trade that created the need for expanded marine insurance coverage, this introduction of the risk-management instrument reflected a similar shift in the risk-management that lay closer to home, exemplified, for instance, in the transformation of Lloyds of London from a coffee house into an insurance firm, enacting the instrument of insurance's overtaking of coffee's role as the drink of the melancholic. As Rickels notes:

Lloyd's of London accordingly holds the exemplary place of transit between conceptions of melancholia. From a humoral disorder which strikes selectively, either giving rise to genius in the one so inclined or incapacitating a certain physical type always predisposed to the illness, melancholia became the specter of unin-

surable loss which endangers even innocent bystanders. (65-66)

Strindberg was certainly familiar and familial with insurance, being a family member of one of Sweden's leading shipping houses.

After suffering a setback in his youthful dream of becoming a playwright and an actor, Strindberg was offered a commission to write a short story for an insurance concern, *Nordstjärnan* ("The North Star," Lagercrantz 46). Strindberg wrote a story about "young Mia who is visiting Stockholm and writing home to her fiancé Axel in the provinces" and recalls for their joint edification the cautionary anecdote about a maternal uncle who left behind a wife and six children without life insurance benefits. In stressing the capacity of insurance to prepare for catastrophe, the story pleased the insurance concern so much that it hired Strindberg as the editor of its insurance magazine, *Svenska Försäkrings-tidning* (Swedish Insurance Journal, Lagercrantz 46). But it did not take long before Strindberg again ran up against those missing places cycling back in the doubling technology of insurance. The magazine folded in six months, mainly because Strindberg turned the tables on the insurance concern and began "to question," as Lagercrantz reports,

the legitimacy of the entire business; marine insurance became his favorite target [...] Strindberg wrote in his magazine about British and German ship owners' disregard for their sailors' lives. He wrote that these magnates, in order to collect, had no scruples about arranging to rid themselves of a worn-out vessel, with total disregard for the crew's fate. (46)

Was this really so? Or was this but another expression of Strindberg's paranoia? Regardless, what comes through in this episode is not only Strindberg's fear of the persecuting power that lets a missive (be it a ship sent out bearing cargo) go missing, but also his wariness of accident insurance's sinister underside that endangers, rather than secures, one's cargo. Strindberg returned to this experience in *Red Room* (1879), the novel that launched Strindberg's career as a writer, where he devotes a chapter to exposing insurance as a conspiratorial scheme of the large insurance houses. To celebrate

the founding of Triton, a new marine insurance company, its founder gives a speech about the power of insurance:

The merchant sends out his ship, his steamer, his brig, his schooner, his bark, his yacht, or what you will. The storm breaks his—whatever it is—to pieces. Well? The merchant says, “go ahead!”. For the merchant loses nothing. That is the insurance company’s idea and ideal. (*Red Room* 117)

But through the eyes of the hero Arvid Falk, the insurance company’s boastful confidence before loss is exposed as applying only to the major shareholders (117). The major shareholders’ security is paid for by the missing cargoes of small investors, who always lose out when there are accidents.

In his works, Strindberg, the son of a shipping agency owner, lived out the struggle between the major shareholders and the small investors, i.e. between the shipping agent father’s injunctive to mourn completely, and the persistence of a loss his mother entrusted to him in passing, an illicit, uninsurable transfer to which he would give the resonant name of soul murder. In the autobiographical text *The Son of a Servant-Woman*, Strindberg lets the curtain drop on a primal scene of this transaction:

Now, while she was still able to get up, she began to mend the children’s linen and clothes, and to clean out all the drawers. She often talked to John about religion and other transcendental matters. One day she showed him some golden rings.

“You boys will get these when Mama is dead,” she said. “Which is mine?” asked John without stopping to think about death. She showed him a plaited girl’s ring with a heart on it. It made a deep impression on the boys, who had never owned anything made of gold, and he often thought of that ring. (96)

The passage raises several questions. Why “a plaited girl’s ring”? What does the mother give to the son in making her death the condition of this transfer? Who is the girl for whom the ring was originally destined?

The identity of the girl is just as hard for the reader to discern as it was for Strindberg. Strindberg was the third of twelve children, of whom only seven survived infan-

cy. Such family history is not unique, as child mortality was high even in the nineteenth century—although in Strindberg’s family, it seems to have been exceptionally so. Nor is it unique that none of the biographies mention these five dead infants. Our refusal to acknowledge the death of the child grows directly out of their vulnerable proximity to death. In commencing his exploration of the missing links of German letters, Rickels puts the focus on the eighteenth century invention of the child-pupil, whose “double but separate” status doubles via analogy and genealogy that of the dead in their mortuary palaces (22-23). This newly cemented ontological status, coupled with the still high rate of infant mortality (as seen in the five infant deaths in Strindberg’s family, for instance), created a massive occasion for mourning.

A phantom is, as Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok have shown, a traumatic loss buried within the body that, nevertheless, does not issue from an experience or a relationship that relates to the bearer of the crypt, not even as something repressed. Rather than being repressed, a phantom is an effect rather of encrypting. The un-mourned loss of a child the parent buries in a surviving child’s body is an instance of a phantom taking up residence in a specific location inside the body. Since a phantom transmission must escape detection in order to preserve the buried corpus whole, a phantom transmission is, therefore, an unspeakable, secretive affair, which utterly counteracts attempts at libidinal introjection—that is, it severs the link of reference between words and some unconscious content (Abraham and Torok 171-72). Phantom words point, instead, to gaps in the introjective strivings of the ego, and to some catastrophe in the parent (174).

The ring passed on by his mother did not, for Strindberg, function as a symbol, but as the phantom gap described by Abraham and Torok, a place in his corpus where he could carry his mother’s melancholic incorporation of a lost daughter. In *The Son of a Servant*, the passing of his mother inspires in John only the fantasy of a girl mourning over her mother.

There was the only good thing that would come from the bottomless well of unhappiness: he would get the ring. He could see it on his hand now. “This is in memory of my mother,” he would be able to say, and he

would weep at the thought of her. But he could not stop thinking how fine it would look. (98)

The only consolation for the mother's passing is the ring that contains the mourning for the mother. But this mourning, like a girl's ring, appears to belong to the daughter, not to the son. John cannot stop thinking about how fine it would look on him. A girlish vanity is thus the limit of his mourning and the affirmation of a daughter's survival in him.

Although the name of Strindberg is associated primarily with the conjugal battle, the fact is the female figure that appears most persistently in Strindberg's works is not the wife, but the daughter. Strindberg's corpus is populated by figures like Miss Julie (*Miss Julie*), Queen Christina (*Queen Christina*), Agnes (*A Dream Play*), Eleanora (*Easter*), and Swanwhite (*Swanwhite*). Judith looms large, though off-stage, in *The Dance of Death I*, and takes center stage in *The Dance of Death II*. In fact, in both *Miss Julie* and *Facing Death*, Strindberg portrays a situation where the mother has left and only daughters remain.

Who was the daughter, then, whose unmournable loss Strindberg's mother passed down to him within a girl's ring? It is the name to be found entered in the Stockholm city archives. On record, two siblings, a girl and a boy, were born and died within the first three years of Strindberg's life, the first bearing the mother's name: Eleonora Elisabeth Strindberg, who lived from 5 May 1850 to 22 April 1851 (Stockholm Stadarkiv, *Död- och begravningskok 1748-1860 M-S*). She and the younger brother were the letters the mother had misplaced: a letter or two, a child or two. Late in his career, Strindberg was to memorialize this sister who died a few days before her first Easter (20 April) in *Easter*, where he gives the name Eleonora to the sister who returns from melancholic phantom burial.

In *The Father*, Strindberg staged the secret infiltration of this unmournable loss of a sibling or two unimpeded by accident-proofing (such as insurance). Adolph's scientific research is, in one sense, his attempt to regain control over ghosts, of translating specters into life. This is the gist of Adolph's discovery in his own words: "Yes, yes! I've been subjecting meteor stones to spectroscopy, and I've found carbon, in other words, vestiges of or-

ganic life!" (*Selected Plays* 155). By using the spectroscope, Adolph seeks to create a circuit where life and live messages will not get dropped along the way and become specters. However, the fragility of Adolph's false sense of control over specters is highlighted by the out of control loss that hits too close to home, which *The Father* can only name by proxy via the daughter Bertha's fears. As Bertha tells her father, a ghost dwells in the attic, mourning the survivors: "Such a moaning, mournful song, the most mournful song I've ever heard. And it sounded like it came from the storage room up in the attic, where the cradle is, you know, the room to the left" (169-70). This dead child, whose missing place was nevertheless represented by the empty cradle, is the source of Adolph's obsessive fear over the uncertainty of paternity. The fear that the child may not be his child analogizes the empty place dedicated to the child that no longer is.

However, although *The Father* and the essay on soul murder represent Strindberg at his most desperate, hovering between the futile attempts to gain control over the circulation of letters and succumbing to it in utter disintegration, Strindberg was slowly, painfully, building the communication apparatus that would give the vacuum some saving context at last. This he accomplished in part through his interest in technologies of live transmission that correspond to his role as the transmitter of life or undeath, as can be seen in *The Dance of Death*, a play that restages *The Father* in an attempt to find a solution to the problem of uninsurable messages left unresolved in *The Father*.

The Dance of Death takes place in a former prison on an island, now turned into the living quarters of Edgar, an artillery captain. Isolated from the mainland, Edgar and his wife Alice wage the seemingly eternal battle of the sexes, a manic attempt to obscure the vestigial evidence of unmourned death. But in this play, too, the center is missing. Just as the dead child dwells in the gap opened up as the question of paternity in *The Father*, so here, too, two dead children are mentioned in passing, casually dropped—the names dropped.

Kurt. Does he [Edgar] dance?

Alice. Yes, he's really very funny sometimes.

Kurt. One thing . . . forgive me for asking. Where are

the children?

Alice. Maybe you don't know that two of them died?

Kurt. You've been through that too?

Alice. What haven't I been through?

Kurt. But the other two? (*Miss Julie and Other Plays* 133)

However, in *The Dance of Death*, Strindberg averts the soul murder that the vacuum of the missing child (or two) typically packs away but then releases. Instead, Strindberg prepares a place for the missing children in the telegraphic apparatus, through which Edgar gets in touch with the surviving pair of children who, though they live on the mainland, analogize the dead pair by their absence. For this reason, it is crucial that Strindberg stages the telegraph not as a writing or printing medium, but as an audio medium. By focusing on the telegraph's ability to send its signals audibly to those in-the-know, Strindberg figures the telegraph as a live transmission medium, as a telephone for the in-group. Thus when Kurt asks Edgar why he does not use the telephone, Edgar gives him an answer that identifies the telegraph as the better telephone. The telephone, Edgar replies, exposes the message, its live transmission, to possibilities of infiltration ("the operators repeat everything we say" 130). Some loose-lipped operator could be listening in on the exchange, consigning the telephone to indiscretion and betrayal. As a result, the telegraph must fill in for the unreliable telephone as the medium that is more capable of receiving and containing the uninsurable ring.

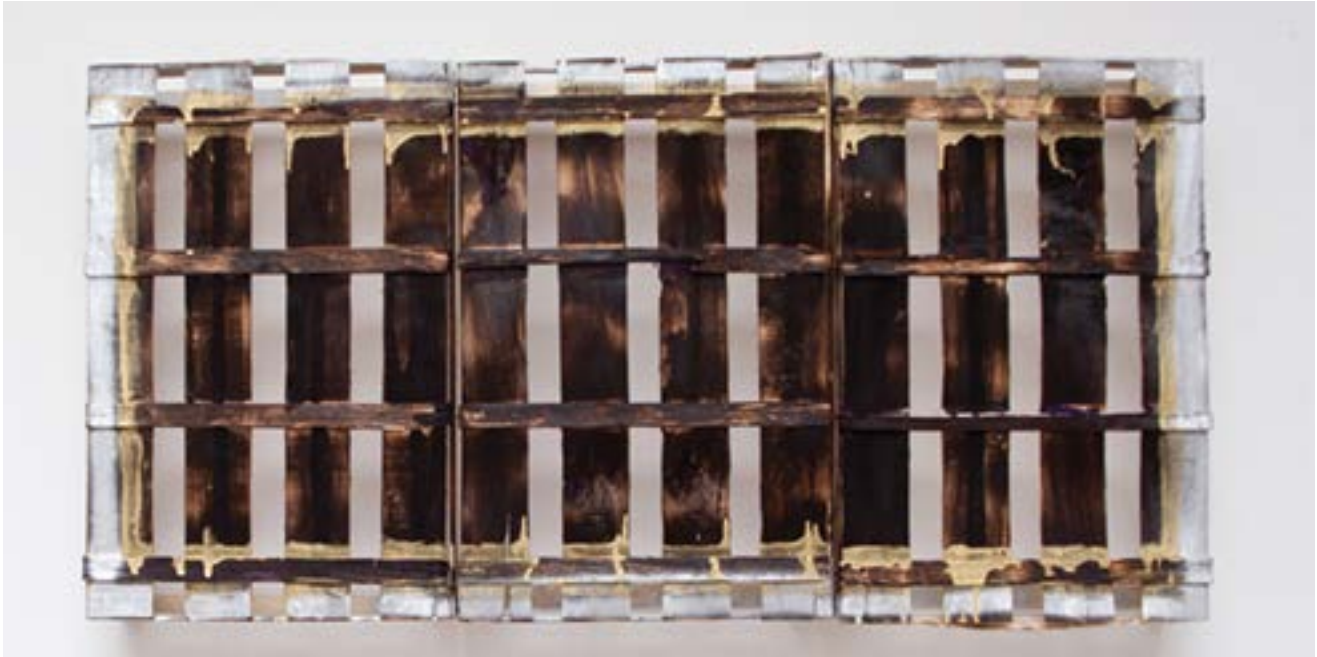
These apparatuses that straddle the divide between presence and absence provided the imaginative space within which Strindberg could restore the missing letters to relationality. As Strindberg emphasizes, the telegraph is a dwelling-place of specters. This the telegraph reveals in one seemingly harmless, and yet ominous, stage direction, which interrupts the small talk between Kurt and Edgar: "The telegraph begins tapping" (*Miss Julie and Other Plays* 130). Strindberg makes sure this seemingly pointless stage direction is given its full due. As Edgar explains to Kurt, the telegraph cannot be turned off. The telegraph always stays on, always in the ready position to receive, thereby opening the here and now to some other place. In other words, technical media can

mirror and double the radical exteriority incorporated within the body as a phantom, and serve as projection or endopsychic scan of its internal yet foreign topography.

What this scan reveals is the missing letter that was circulating in transit. In a remarkable pantomime that takes place in the middle of *The Dance of Death*, as Edgar is burning the love letters he had sent to Alice, the stage instruction notes that, suddenly, the telegraph gives a single click, upon which Edgar clutches at his heart in pain (164). Whereas in *The Father*, the spectroscopist's desire to dominate the specter resulted only in Adolph's obliviousness to Laura's control of specters via the post, in *The Dance of Death*, Strindberg could imagine the ghost, passed down as a ring, giving him a ring through Edgar's telegraph. Here, the medium is the message, to the extent that the "is" prepares the interval whereby the non-being of the message can be contemplated. Even as the click sends electricity into Edgar's heart, threatening to annihilate him, the click also opens Edgar up to the possibility of the ghost's missing-in-transit existence. A single tap in Morse code is the letter E. The telegraph reroutes the letter that had gone missing and begins to spell out the forbidden name of the sister.

Even after finding the missing letters and recognizing that they can exist only as missing, the melancholic must deal with the fragility of the encrypted ghost, now imperiled by the exposure to the outside. Of the two plays that started Strindberg's career, *The Father* had dealt with the threat of self-destructive doubling (with the spectroscopist). In *Miss Julie*, Strindberg addressed the perils of the crypt's exposure. As the final passage shows, Miss Julie's suicide and Jean's anxieties are both reactions and a solution to the threat of exposure.

JEAN. Don't think, don't think! You're taking all my strength away too, and making me a coward—What's that? I thought the bell moved!—No! Shall we stop it with paper?—To be so afraid of a bell!—Yes, but it's not just a bell—there's somebody behind it—a hand sets it in motion—and something else sets that hand in motion—but if you stop your ears—just stop your ears! Yes, but then he'll go on ringing even louder—



and keep on ringing until someone answers—and then it's too late! Then the police will come—and then...

Two loud rings on the bell.

JEAN [cringes, then straightens himself up.] It's horrible! But there's no other way!—Go!

[MISS JULIE walks resolutely out through the door

Curtain.] (*Selected Plays* 267)

Two loud rings, a manuscript or two—and the only way to stop the exhumation of these shallow graves is for Miss Julie to go and entrust Jean with the task of keeping her alive some other way. Jean must survive, in order to preserve Miss Julie from exposure. In the preface to *Miss Julie*, Strindberg explains, “[h]ence the servant Jean lives on; but not Miss Julie, who cannot live without honor” (210).

In the preface Strindberg made explicit the connections between Jean's destiny as the survivor and that of the writer, thus affirming in Jean, the French version of Strindberg's first name, Johan, his own destiny as the carrier of the sister's ring. The dramatist's task, as Strindberg notes in ending the preface, is to survive, and to wait for some future theater that will not allow the message to be dropped in the passage between the stage and the audience, a theater that Strindberg theorizes in detail in the preface. Notably, every aspect of Strind-

berg's theory of this intimate stage is geared expressly toward conservation, such as doing away with intermissions or removing from the theater all sources of distraction (213). But this stage exists in the future, and for now, the dramatist must preserve these manuscripts safely in a drawer (217). The writer's task is continuity, survival—as Strindberg stresses, even if he should fail, there will always be time for more attempts (217).

Even though Strindberg was to realize his theory in the *Intima Teater*, he would not use it as the idealized telecommunication medium he had called for in the preface that would insure his transmissions. Strindberg had discovered an alternative means for preserving his messages from exposure. This alternative means was fire, which figures as an important metaphor for Strindberg, when in 1875 he observes in a letter to Siri von Essen that the essence of his talent lay in fire:

—you believe that genius consists of a good, sharp head—not so—my head is not one of the sharpest—but the fire; my fire is the greatest in Sweden, and if you want me to, I'll set fire to the entire miserable whole! (*Lagercrantz* 63)

But for young Strindberg, fire stood for destruction. Later, Strindberg would retool the metaphor of fire as an instrument of conservation. Just as he sought in *The Dance of Death* to remedy the destructive effects

of *The Father*, Strindberg kept returning to the burned site of uninsured loss in *Miss Julie*, rereading and remediating the destructive fire as preserving fire. Three of four chamber plays of 1907 deal with arson: *The Ghost Sonata* takes place immediately after the hero risked his life, putting out a fire set by arson; in *The Burned House*, the *Miss Julie* plot of the misplaced insurance premium plays itself out exactly as before; in *The Pelican*, the son sets fire to the house to protest the mother's abusive neglect of her children. *The Great Highway* (1909) reaches its climax when the Hunter cremates the Japanese, per his request, after he commits ritual suicide—both figures being projections of the author in the Expressionist fashion. *A Dream Play* (1900) ends in a purifying flame, which assumes the shape of a giant telephone tower.

In his *Psychoanalysis of Fire*, Gaston Bachelard cites an early story by George Sand in which burning oneself is presented as the means of preserving the self and its relations against the threat of death.

In the heart of fire, death is no longer death. “Death could not exist in that ethereal region to which you are carrying me [...]. My fragile body may be consumed by the fire, my soul must be united with those tenuous elements of which you are composed.’ ‘Very well!’ said the Spirit, casting over the Dreamer part of his red mantle, ‘Say farewell to the life of men and follow me into the life of phantoms.’” (18)

Cremation replaces the fragile, decaying body with a virtual, ethereal corpse in the space left by the burnt body (Rickels 219). Our word “image” comes from the Latin *imago*, meaning ultimately from the ancient Roman practice of casting death masks (*imagines*), which were then prominently displayed in the atrium. In tracing the outline of the face, the *imago* preserves the corpse as vessel of the empty space dedicated to the undying portion that does not decay. This is what Maria Torok calls the exquisite corpse. As she explains, “the imago, along with its external embodiment in the object, was set up as the repository of hope; the desires it forbade would be realized one day. Meanwhile, the *imago* retains the valuable thing whose lack cripples the ego” (116).

The 1892 one act play, *Facing Death*, repeats the Miss

Julie story but attempts to lessen the impact of the misplaced insurance premium. In the play, Durand, a widower who oversees a run-down boarding house and tries to keep an eye on his unmarried daughters, will lose his final customer, and, rather than see his house go to ruin and his daughters let loose as prostitutes, Durand commits suicide (*själv mord*), but not before planning an arson (*mordbrand*) that will be his legacy and gift to the daughters. In this piece, which is set up right away as a play about collecting on insurance (Durand and his daughter mention it in their first conversation), the essential redress is contained in the distinction Strindberg draws between life and fire insurance.

(Durand) I want you to ask me this first: “Do you have life insurance?” Well-I!

ADELE (uncertain, curious): “Do you have life insurance?”

DURAND: No, I did have a policy, but I sold it a long time ago because I thought I noticed someone was impatient about collecting on it. But I do have fire insurance! (*From the Cynical Life* 113)

It is not life insurance that will help Durand protect Adele even after his death. It is fire insurance that will play that role.

ADELE: It's burning! It's burning! Father—What's wrong? You'll be burned alive!

(DURAND raises his head and pushes the glass aside with a gesture full of meaning.)

ADELE: You have ... swallowed ... poison!

DURAND (nods in agreement): Do you have the fire insurance policy? Tell Therese ... and Annette ... (He puts his head down again. The bell tolls once more—noise and commotion offstage.) (116)

The absence of life insurance does not make the suicide pointless, for the point of Durand's death is not to circumvent death by insuring life. It is fire, wherein his decaying body will be divorced from the *imago* and cease to interfere with his function as keeper of the crypt.

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Image Notes

p.7 Das Loch p.9 Fenster p.10 Untitled (detail)
p.12 Untitled p.17 Brandobjekt