

The Doctor and the Pastor: On Love and Evil in Hjalmar Söderberg's *Doctor Glas* and Bengt Ohlsson's *Gregorius*

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Abstract This article investigates the representations of evil in Hjalmar Söderberg's *Doctor Glas* (1905) and Bengt Ohlsson's, *Gregorius* (2004). In the definition of evil that is proposed, motivation is crucial, and Glas's narrative is considered to be an attempt to find an acceptable excuse for the murder of Gregorius. The portrayal of Gregorius as an evil monster is addressed in relation to Glas as an unreliable narrator. Social and psychological repression is discussed and Gregorius is analyzed as a mirror of Glas's personality. The theme of evil is also related to the return of the concept of evil in contemporary public debate and is considered as one possible explanation for the continued popularity of *Doctor Glas*. Finally, as *Doctor Glas* is read alongside its recent re-vision *Gregorius*, it is suggested that Bengt Ohlsson offers a strategy for counteracting evil. The novel is seen as an illustration of the concept "moral imagination" in seeking to lessen the distance between the evildoer and his victim.

Key words Söderberg; Ohlsson; evil; ethics; re-vision

Taking a look at the Swedish book market in recent years it is easy to get the impression that we are a nation fascinated by evil. Crime novels are so popular it has become common to talk about "det svenska deckarundret" ("the Swedish detective story miracle," in English sometimes called *Swedish, or Scandinavian, noir*) when referring to the works of, among others, Camilla Läckberg, Liza Marklund, and not least Stieg Larsson, whose books about Lisbeth Salander as a heroine with superb skills in martial arts as well as computer hacking have recently reached Hollywood and been made into action-packed movies. In addition, media contributes to an increased sense of fear by delighting in reports about murders and violence both at home and in other parts of the world. This article stems from an interest in the questions of why we are drawn to depictions of evil and what fictional depictions of evil may add to our understanding of the concept. These questions will be addressed as I analyze the representations of evil in Hjalmar Söderberg's *Doctor Glas* and Bengt Ohlsson's *Gregorius*.

My starting point is the classic Swedish novel *Doctor Glas* (1905) by Hjalmar Söderberg (1869 – 1941). In this short but thought-provoking novel, Söderberg's

eponymous protagonist decides to kill the husband of one of his patients. The unfortunate victim is pastor Gregorius, described by Söderberg as a heinous man. He is married to a beautiful young woman named Helga, who seeks out Doctor Glas to ask him to help her keep Gregorius, whom she finds sexually repulsive, away from her bed. The doctor complies with her wishes, partly because he disagrees with the institution of marriage, which he feels legitimizes rape under the name of marital rights, and partly because he has a romantic interest in Helga himself. He advises the couple to refrain from further sexual activity and suggests that they have separate bedrooms. When this does not help, he packs the pastor off to the spa town Porla for six weeks, thus allowing his wife to enjoy her affair with another man in relative freedom. But at the end of the summer, the pastor returns as vigorous and as desirous of his wife as ever, and Glas sees no other way out of the situation but to kill him. At the climax of the novel, he offers the pastor a lethal pill, which Glas had saved for himself if life were ever to become too much for him.

99 years after the publication of *Doctor Glas*, Bengt Ohlsson's (b. 1963) novel *Gregorius* (2004) added new life to the interest in Söderberg's work by providing us with a portrait of the victim of the doctor's concoction.¹ By responding in this way to Söderberg's novel, Ohlsson not only managed to craft an award-winning novel of his own (it won the prestigious Swedish August Prize of 2004), but caused a spate of revived interest in *Doctor Glas* and confirmed Söderberg's novel as a true classic in the Swedish literary tradition. It was translated into English in 2007 and received generally favorable reviews. Here we follow the clergyman on what is to be the last summer of his life, when he learns of his wife's unfaithfulness; for fear of his own health, he seeks out Dr Glas, who sends him to Porla, where he meets another woman and a different life begins to seem possible. Reading *Gregorius* alongside *Doctor Glas*, I discuss how the more recent novel comments on the parent text, particularly when it comes to the theme of evil.

Söderberg's dramatic *Doctor Glas* has been performed on stage many times and just last year *Gregorius* was at Stockholm Stadsteater. The texts are necessarily in dialogue with one another, and they voice concerns about the problems of life and death, faith and love, that are as relevant today as they were a century ago. In the following, I examine the representation of evil in *Doctor Glas* and *Gregorius*, suggesting that this subject at least partly explains the continued popularity of *Doctor Glas*.

1. *Doctor Glas* in the 21st Century

There is no doubt that Söderberg's text is still topical and is discovered by new readers each year. *Doctor Glas* has many qualities that contribute to its status as one of the Swedish classics, such as the detailed descriptions of Stockholm around the turn of the twentieth century; recurring themes like love, sexuality and the critique of social conventions; and, not least, Söderberg's lucid and memorable style of writing.

Doctor Glas is a complex novel that does not readily lend itself to categorization. It is ethical and philosophical tract, crime novel, love story, and social critique all in one. Hjalmar Söderberg called *Doctor Glas* "en tankebok," which translates into "a

book of thoughts” (Holmbäck, *Hjalmar Söderberg: ett författarliv* 237). It includes philosophical questions concerning contemporary social mores, public and private moral — and not least, ethical questions about life and death. The book offers no simple solutions to the questions it raises; instead, it asks readers to form their own opinions. Issues such as euthanasia, abortion, suicide and women’s rights that are addressed in the book were hotly debated in the last century. However, in a recent interview Kerstin Ekman instead calls *Doctor Glas* “en känslobok” — “a book of emotions” — noting that the main character and narrator Glas’s hatred of Gregorius suffuses his narrative from the first page.² Her comment also indicates that Söderberg’s text is still open to interpretation.

Many readers are drawn to Söderberg’s work because of his vivid descriptions of the Swedish capital at the turn of the twentieth century.³ Bure Holmbäck compares him with the 18th century poet and composer Carl Michael Bellman, and to Söderberg’s contemporary August Strindberg — two authors who are famous for immortalizing Stockholm through their vivid and atmospheric descriptions of Stockholm in their work.⁴ To readers of today, Holmbäck suggests, nostalgia is part of the attraction of Söderberg’s work: nostalgia for a Stockholm of the recent past, when the capital was less crowded and the pace of life slower. On the whole, Holmbäck suggests that Hjalmar Söderberg is something of a cult author with many avid followers who read his books and visit all the places he describes, book in hand, to see for themselves the places that meant so much to the protagonists of his novels.⁵ His position as a cult author is most likely a result of the fact that Söderberg has created his own fictional universe where not only characters (as mentioned above), but also themes and settings recur in several texts. Setting and atmosphere include, for example, Skeppsholmen, the bells of Jakob’s church, Rydberg’s bar, and falling snow. Recurring themes are the critique of the Christian morality and Protestant preachers, the dangers of searching for truth, and the discussion of contemporary politics.⁶ Söderberg’s critique of religion is coupled to that of the marriage institution, which he found particularly oppressive for women.⁷

Another explanation for the continued popularity of Söderberg’s work is his ability to combine clarity of style with complexity of thought in such a way that certain sentences are so often quoted that they have become almost proverbial. In an investigation of the reception of *Doctor Glas* throughout the 20th century, Eva Akinvall Franke notes that Swedish critics, while offering at times widely diverging opinions on the themes and characters of the book, have remained positive in their assessment of Söderberg’s style.⁸ As if to confirm his unique ability to express profound thoughts about man’s condition in lucid, memorable language, a collection of quotations was published in 2008 (Ed. Kaj Attorps. *Jag tror på köttets lust och själens obotliga ensamhet* [*I Believe in the Lust of the Flesh and the Eternal Loneliness of the Soul*]).

Finally, *Doctor Glas* is a text that raises many questions and offers few definite answers; this is part of the explanation as to why it does not seem dated, but continues to appeal to readers today. When it was first published, the doctor’s positive attitude to suicide, abortion and euthanasia, in addition to the murder that takes place, caused a scandal. As many critics have noted, for example, Kerstin Ekman in the in-

roduction to the most recent Swedish edition of *Doktor Glas* (2011), and Margaret Atwood in her review of the 2002 English version of the novel, Glas exhibits a very modern personality; he no longer believes in God or in any absolute truths, and he clearly displays *fin-de-siècle* melancholy. He is in some ways a predecessor of Camus' Existentialist protagonist Meursault. Glas is not quite as indifferent as Meursault as he carefully conceives his plan to take the parson's life, but when the deed is done he is only afraid of being caught; he does not regret his act and has no feelings of guilt.

In the introduction to the 1963 English translation (by Paul Britten Austin), William Sansom observes that "in most of its writing and much of the frankness of its thought, it might have been written tomorrow" (7). Almost forty years later, in 2002, it was published again,⁹ and reviewed by Terry Eagleton, who remarked that *Doctor Glas* is "the very paradigm of modern fiction" with its focus on a sensitive, isolated character, who tries to break out of the stifling social conventions embraced by his philistine peers (Eagleton 2002). Dr. Glas's doubts and *angst*; his failure to feel at peace with his existence are aspects of the text that give it a distinctly modern quality. It is also possible that a renewed interest in the concept of evil plays a part in the continued popularity of *Doctor Glas*.

2. What Is Evil?

In a recent book devoted to an investigation of the concept of evil, Ann Heberlein claims that the use of the concept in Swedish media and public debate, as in much of the Western world, has changed in recent years (*En liten bok om ondskan* [*A Little Book about Evil*], 2010). Citing American philosophers, such as John Kekes and Russ Schafer-Landau, she suggests that the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, 9/11, changed American attitudes to what was right and wrong and good and evil. Before then, it was considered old-fashioned and unproductive to apply the term "evil" as an explanation for certain attitudes or behavior. It was a concept that did not fit into the paradigm of moral relativism. After 9/11, this changed and the concept of 'evil' returned as a mode of explanation both in American and Swedish public debate.¹⁰

What, then, is evil? To Zygmunt Bauman, this question is "unanswerable because what we tend to call 'evil' is precisely the kind of wrong which we can neither understand nor even clearly articulate, let alone explain its presence to our full satisfaction. We call that kind of wrong 'evil' for the very reason that it is unintelligible, ineffable and inexplicable" (54). Evil is incomprehensible; frightening, senseless—in short, it is a mystery that attracts us because we fail to understand it.

John Kekes, however, does not stop at calling the question of what evil is "unanswerable." In *The Roots of Evil*, he claims that the evil of an action is made up of a combination of three components;

the malevolent motivation of evildoers, the serious, excessive harm caused by their actions; and the lack of a morally acceptable excuse for the actions [...]

Evil actions violate their victims' physical security and thus transgress fundamental moral prohibitions that protect minimum conditions of human well-being.
(2)

In addition, Heberlein argues that evil deeds are characterized by insight and intention, that is, there is a morally responsible agent who is fully aware of the harm he causes, and causing harm is the aim of the deed.¹¹ In other words, if a person causes harm without meaning to do so, this is not an evil deed even if the result may be seen as evil. In addition, an evil deed is perceived as incomprehensible or meaningless as there is no apparent reason for the (often excessive) violence, such as self-defense.

She goes on to discuss our need to be able to tell who is evil and who is not, to separate the potential evildoers ("them"), from ordinary citizens with no evil tendencies ("us"). The bottom line of Heberlein's analysis is that, in the end, there is no safe way of telling who is capable of murder or torture, and who will refuse it. Studies such as Hanna Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963), or more recently on American soldiers in Afghanistan are cited as support for this observation. Bauman reasons along the same lines, asserting that "evil may hide *anywhere*; that it does not stand out from the crowd, does not bear distinctive marks and carries no identity card; and that *everyone* may be found to be currently in its service, to be its reservist on temporary leave or its potential conscript" (67). What both Bauman and Heberlein suggest is thus that evil may walk among us without being recognized. There is an element of unpredictability to evil as there is simply no way of knowing what our neighbors, or even what we ourselves, are capable of.

This is a frightening thought, which is readily translated into the realm of fiction. In his study of the "psychological thriller," John-Henri Holmberg suggests that readers are attracted to the genre because in this type of literature we can encounter the unknown and incomprehensible in the human psyche. Holmberg explains that *Doctor Glas* is not an example of a psychological thriller because of Söderberg's focus on the doctor's rational analysis of his options. While I agree with this definition, having said above that it is very difficult to pinpoint the belonging of *Doctor Glas* to any *one* genre, I believe the point Holmberg makes about the reason for the renewed popularity of the psychological thriller in the late 20th century is true of Söderberg's novel as well. He says that the history of the 20th century shows that the evil which resides within us is infinitely greater than that which is found in the supernatural monsters of fiction. Our recent history has forced us to ask who we really are; and what monsters may hide inside us, or inside our pleasantly smiling neighbors. Söderberg's text continues to speak to us through the past violent century, inviting the reader to grapple with these inner monsters and our capacity for evil.

On the one hand, *Glas* is the evildoer who with malevolent intent causes his victim serious harm. On the other hand, his narrative is an attempt to explain that he has an "acceptable excuse" for murder, and it is constructed so that it seems to be *his* well-being that is threatened by the priest and what he represents. This tension is part of the text's force; the couple *Glas* — *Gregorius* are the main focus of my analy-

sis.

3. Dr. Glas: An Unreliable Narrator

It is significant that Söderberg has chosen a doctor as his protagonist in *Doctor Glas*. His profession is dedicated to saving lives, and yet he becomes a “conscript of evil.” Glas is a well-to-do, well-respected member of society, and his patients appear to find him trustworthy, but there is more to the doctor than meets the eye. In Söderberg’s text, we follow the development of the main character from an ordinary, if dissatisfied, professional man to a cold-blooded murderer. This is an intimate story dealing with sexuality, death and unfulfilled desire. It is told in the form of first person notations in his journal, giving the text a sense of immediacy as we can follow the development of his line of thought and his progress from thought to action on an almost daily basis. There is an unrelenting pace to the narrative as it moves on towards its final horrific destination.

The choice of narrative perspective also means that Glas is in total control of his own story as he chooses what to put in his journal and what to leave out. In the first entry, on June 12, he tells the reader what to expect from his story as he states the terms of narration:

What I set down on these pages isn’t a confession. To whom should I confess? Nor do I tell the whole truth about myself, only what it pleases me to relate, but nothing that isn’t true. Anyway, I can’t exorcise my soul’s wretchedness — if it is wretched — by telling lies. (16)

The first sentence points both to his loneliness and his lack of faith. As a narrator, he promises to be honest, but only to a certain degree. The final two sentences reveal his belief in the importance of being truthful as well as his self-doubt, which is to play an important part in the subsequent unfolding of events.

He is, of course, aware that anything he commits to paper can serve as evidence against him in case of a trial. As shown in the quotation above, he actually acknowledges that there are certain details he has decided to keep to himself, thus signaling to the reader to be on his or her guard as there may be hidden truths beyond what is stated in the text — and perhaps even beyond the doctor’s knowledge. On the day he has served the Rev. Gregorius his lethal pill (August 22), late at night after the deed is done, Glas feels paranoid and repeatedly checks that the door is locked, asking himself what to do with all the notes he has kept. The secret drawer in the writing desk is no good, as he believes it can be spotted quite easily. He considers hiding them in the attic among his old medical books, but in the end he concludes that it does not matter, there will be plenty of time to burn them if the need arises (127 – 28). Stealth and mystery are significant parts of the doctor’s narrative situation.

Lars O. Lundgren discusses the improbability of the narrative situation, that is, that the doctor would actually be in a condition to keep a diary while planning such a vicious act — and to do it in such a stylistically perfect way. This is a contradiction that Söderberg himself has noted himself, but contemporary critics did not question

this arrangement.¹²

While he is a man of great intellectual power who is capable of complex logical reasoning, as shown in the dialogues the doctor has with himself about whether to kill the pastor or not, he reveals that he is not a reliable narrator. His hatred of Gregorius and his love of Helga both make narrative objectivity impossible. The strength of the first-person perspective is that it draws the reader into the mind of the protagonist and lets her see and feel with him. But it soon becomes clear that the doctor's aim is to convince himself, and the reader, that he has an "acceptable excuse," as Kekes put it, for killing the parson. A large part of the book is made up of the doctor's reasoning and critics have been divided in their evaluation of the strength of his reasoning. There are those who, like Reed Merrill, find the murder of Gregorius "ethically justifiable" (47), while others are not convinced. Ann Heberlein, for example, reads *Doctor Glas* in the light of Kant and finds that Glas flouts "the good will" and abuses his autonomy.¹³ This question takes us to the motive for his deed.

4. "And So the Parson Must Go:" On Dr. Glas's Motive

Considering the unreliability of Glas as a narrator, his motive for killing the pastor is a question that remains open for debate. It could be called a crime of passion, but it is not done in the heat of emotional turmoil, and Glas has no cause for revenge or self-defense. The doctor comes across as a very rational and prudent man, who only decides to act after careful deliberation, and he knows that Helga is already committed to another man, her lover Klas Recke. One could, of course, argue that Glas has the romantic notion that Helga could one day become his. However, Glas's hatred of Gregorius is obvious from the beginning and he expresses a wish to kill the priest before he knows about his marital problems.

In the first pages of the book there are several hints at what is to come as Glas abjures the idea of his diary as "confession" (16) and wonders why he cannot sleep, as he has committed no "crime". Moreover, meeting the parson makes him think about the old conundrum of whether one would choose to "murder a Chinese Mandarin and inherit his riches" by simply pressing a button in the wall. Glas translates this question to the Rev. Gregorius and concludes that if it was a question of murdering the parson, he would press that button (15). This anecdote is important in that it points to the significance of distance between the perpetrator and the victim. The remainder of Glas's narrative is an attempt to increase this distance by objectifying and demonizing Gregorius.

By virtue of his profession, Rev. Gregorius represents attitudes and beliefs that Glas rejects. In Glas's opinion, the social rules of his time, mainly dictated by the Protestant church, prevent men and women from happiness by imposing strict regulations on love. As Terry Eagleton puts it, *Doctor Glas* is "not about the dreadfulness of murder but the horror of repression" (2092).¹⁴ The world that Glas lives in and reacts to is "a social order that stifles sexuality, terrorizes women, denies the body, and sees wretchedness as the surest sign that you are living an upright life" (Eagleton 2092). If we accept this description, Glas's actions become comprehensible. To Glas, it is "the social order" that is evil, then, and it is the duty of a thinking man

to react. Helga's vulnerability at the hands of Gregorius suggests that women were the particular victims of this social order.

Eagleton even goes so far as to call the act of killing Gregorius "entirely altruistic" (2092), thus suggesting that the doctor was acting out of an unselfish concern for Helga. I do not agree with this analysis, but suggest that the doctor was motivated by self-interest manifested through his desire to act. He claims to have felt like a passive spectator for too long, and he wants to become a man of action:

Often in my youth I have thought: To have been there! To have had the chance!
To be allowed to give, for once, and not always receive. It's so dreary, always
moving on alone, with a soul barren of fruit, at one's wits' end to know what to
do to feel that one is something, means something, or to have a little respect for
oneself. (59)

This passage indicates that the doctor feels like an outsider; someone who is not really part of life and who has lost respect for himself as a result. To act, to help someone, will make him a participant in life, and give him an active role in the flow of events. The lack of self-respect he voices here is important as it demonstrates that the deed he is about to do is an intensely personal act. The execution of the plan is shaded in secrecy and not even Helga must know who is responsible for it.

Later, in a long dialogue with himself about contemporary morals, the doctor says: "I want to act. Life is action, When I see something that makes me indignant, I want to intervene" (93). He wants to be a man of action and believes that killing the priest will make him one.¹⁵ Concern for Helga is secondary to this desire, serving primarily as the impetus for the act that the doctor believes will make him the man he wants to become.

The doctor continues his dialogue with himself revealing his attitude to life and the present social order:

The law only gives me the right to kill another in self-defence, and by self-defence the law only means defence when in direct peril of my own life. The law does not let me kill someone else to save my father or my son or my best friend, or to protect my beloved from violence or rape. In a word, the law is absurd; and no self-respecting person allows his actions to be determined by it. (94)

Here we see Glas, the moral individualist; if the laws are unjust, breaking them is defensible. Man must think for himself and act according to his own conscience and one should question laws when one finds that they are wrong. He goes on, "Morality, that's others' views of what is right...I'm a traveler in this world; I look at mankind's customs and adopt those I find useful. And morality is derived from '*morales*', custom; it reposes entirely on custom, habit; it knows no other ground" (94).

In the dialogues that Glas has with himself as he considers murdering the parson, the reader is invited into an active engagement with the text. This aspect of the text has caused some critics to complain about the novel's "stubborn problem-discus-

sion”, which risks causing “alienation in the modern reader;” a point first made by Erik Hjalmar Linder (46), and later reiterated by George C. Schoolfield (493).¹⁶ But the opposite might in fact be as true. Modern readers could well find such discussion challenging, as they are forced to choose sides along with the doctor. The strength of the narrative is the sharpness of the limited scope (even if it has its risks as I suggested above), whereby we are drawn into the doctor’s world and step by step brought up to the final vicious act. Kerstin Ekman’s characterization of *Doctor Glas* as a ‘book of emotions’ suggests there are yet other rewards for the reader. Yvonne Leffler argues that reading about evil and horror may be emotionally rewarding for the reader as well. Leffler, who analyzes horror stories and films, points out that reading fictional accounts of evil is a safe way of dealing with fears that we face in a threatening world. In addition, the depictions of crimes and horrors give us knowledge about what scares us and help us handle fears we have in real life.¹⁷ The popularity of crime fiction mentioned in the introduction partly arises out of this need. Söderberg’s *Doctor Glas*, which takes us inside the mind of a murderer-to-be, offers a similar combination of menace and security. In these passages, readers get access to “emotional and cognitive experiences that we are not allowed or do not allow ourselves in real life” (Leffler 271).

Finally, while social repression (primarily through conventional morality and the marriage institution) was part of Glas’s alleged motivation for his crime, and part of the “terror” of his narrative; individual psychological repression is also a significant factor of Glas’s motive. Love, sex and marriage are topics often addressed by Söderberg and in *Doctor Glas* these relate to the decision to kill the parson. Bure Holmbäck notes that in comparison to other works, such as *Den allvarsamma leken* (*The Serious Game*) and *Gertrud*, Söderberg’s attitude to eroticism in *Doctor Glas* is unusual. It is part of the psychology of the character Dr. Glas: while he is intellectually sharp, he is essentially a “sterile nature” (1969: 117). To Lars O. Lundgren, Hjalmar Söderberg’s protagonist has built a wall against the dangerous and dark side of existence. He is a man in need of control, above all control of sexual instincts, and he has a cerebral attitude to life.¹⁸ Early in his narrative, Glas confesses that “at past thirty years of age, [he has] never been near a woman” (16). He criticizes marriage which he thinks is too seldom based on feelings and too often serves only to give social sanction to child-bearing; and he cannot understand the pleasures of “instinctual satisfaction” when the consequences seem so dire; to the doctor, a death bed is not nearly as horrible as childbirth, “that terrible symphony of screams and filth and blood” (21). Ironically, the physical aspects of life—and love—are repulsive and frightening to Söderberg’s doctor. He can only conceive of Gregorius’s desire for his wife as an example of the instinctual satisfaction which he finds “ugly, indecent” (20). Gradually, the parson appears as the embodiment of all that the doctor fears and rejects.

The following observation by Terry Eagleton points to another aspect of the motive:

As a physician, Glas has power over life and death—and to that extent he re-

sembles the novelist, who can snuff out a character or bring one to birth with a flick of the pen. The artist, in turn, is a double of the master criminal, since both regard themselves as superior to the common herd and unconstrained by their timidly conventional values. There is something exquisitely mirror-imaging, then, in an artist writing about a doctor who turns his hand to crime. (2092)

The idea of “mirror-imaging” that Eagleton describes here is very interesting and I would suggest that it works on another level as well. Looking closer at the doctor and the parson, we see that Gregorius is the negative image of Glas. In his attitudes and behavior, Rev. Gregorius represents everything that the doctor loathes. In this analysis, it is important to remember that the portrait of Gregorius in *Doctor Glas* is not typical of Söderberg's depictions of clergymen. While he would often portray them with ridicule and irony, and without much sympathy, the hatred and disgust that is part of Doctor Glas's reactions to Gregorius are atypical when seen in relation to Söderberg's other works.¹⁹ While Söderberg was critical of the Protestant church and its representatives, the clergymen, the portrait of Gregorius is significant in what it tells us about the main character. In an act of reversed mirror-imaging, these depictions serve the purpose of describing the doctor's psychological make-up rather than that of the pastor.²⁰

While contemplating the idea of murdering Gregorius, Dr. Glas considers his own reaction to the vicar:

I'm scared. This is a nightmare. What have I to do with these people and their filthy affairs! The priest is so loathsome to me I'm scared of him—I don't want his fate mixed up with mine. What do I know about him? What I loathe about him isn't 'him', himself, but the impression he has made on me—he has certainly met hundreds and thousands of people without affecting them as he does me. The image he has deposited in my soul can't be wiped out just because he disappears, least of all if he disappears because of me. Already, alive, he has come to obsess me more than I like; who knows what he can get up to when he's dead? (99 – 100)

Here, Glas confesses that he is afraid of his own reactions to Gregorius. He also admits to not knowing the priest, and that the priest is a figment of his own imagination. He recognizes that he has become ‘obsessed’ by the priest, which indicates that he is aware that he is being unreasonable (and perhaps unfair) in his judgment. The passage indicates that there is something about Gregorius that resonates within Glas in a particular way, and that others are not affected as he is. His hatred of the parson is so personal and intense that we might even take the mirror image a step further and say that the reason why Gregorius is so odious to him is that he embodies qualities that Glas denies within himself: ugliness (the doctor has revealed that he is not happy with his own looks), sensuousness (he had a love affair in his early youth, but it came to a tragic end and he has never been near a woman since), and the need for spiritual communion and fellowship (which the parson has found through marriage

and religion, but which the solitary Glas cannot enjoy). In this twosome we find the man of science against the man of faith; one has power over people's bodies while the other is concerned with their souls;²¹ Glas has an analytical approach to life; is celibate and believes in controlling sexual instincts, while the parson is twice married and a passionate man who refuses to refrain from sex with his wife even though she no longer reciprocates his feelings. But the doctor knows that this monster that he vilifies throughout his narrative will continue to wield power over him even after its death. He may kill Gregorius, but the monster remains within.

5. Bengt Ohlsson's *Gregorius*: *Doctor Glas* Revisited

In Bengt Ohlsson's novel, *Gregorius*, we become acquainted with the man who, while he plays the role of villain to Söderberg's protagonist Dr Glas, remains distant to the reader. We are repeatedly informed by Glas of the clergyman's offensive physiognomy, his tendency to pontificate, his hypocrisy and, not least, his lasciviousness. As I have suggested above, we may read the depictions of his monstrosity for what they reveal about the psyche of Dr. Glas. There is not very much direct characterization of Gregorius through actions or speech, but instead his unattractive personality is brought out in his wife's confidences to the doctor, who then expands upon this information. To some extent, he is a figment of Glas's imagination, rather than a character in his own right. His life is in the hands of the doctor both literally and figuratively as, bit by bit, he is made into a monster by Glas. Here, he tells his own story and, in the process, his wife Helga is portrayed as more complex as well. She, too, appears as a flat character in *Doctor Glas*; she is put on a pedestal and referred to as "The Maiden Silkencheek" (45), or "loveliest of blooms and of women" (107). It is part of the fictional universe that Söderberg created in his novels to let the same characters return in different texts. For example, Martin Birck and Markel, who appear here as friends of Dr Glas also feature in other works (see for example, *Förvillelser* [Delusions], 1895, and *Martin Bircks ungdom* [Martin Birck's Youth], 1901) and the doctor himself returns thirteen years later in *Jahves Eld* (Yahweh's Fire 1918), so we may say that Ohlsson works in the true spirit of Hjalmar Söderberg when he decides to give a rather anonymous character a fuller story in *Gregorius*.²²

Reviewing *Gregorius* in *The Guardian*, Margaret Atwood notes that "[n]ovels that snatch character from other novels or stories and re-tell events from their point of view can give a reader the uneasy feeling that a previous author's work has been violated. Nonetheless, such books now constitute almost a separate genre." In an essay on *Doctor Glas* and *Gregorius*, Theresa Jamieson analyzes Bengt Ohlsson's re-vision of the earlier text within a post-colonial theoretical framework. She concludes that it "work[s] to restore or to reveal elements of the text's original narrative, which have often been overlooked in readings of the novel that prioritise its obvious engagement with sexual politics over its more subtle and searching engagement with ethics" (Jamieson 231). Reading *Gregorius* alongside *Doctor Glas* thus changes our understanding of the earlier text. Rather than "violating" its pre-text, *Gregorius* adds to the ethical discussion that takes place there. By staying very close to *Doctor Glas* in terms of character, style and setting, Ohlsson invites us to reconsider the original

text. Through his re-vision, Glas's narrative reliability is further challenged.

When resurrecting a century-old character, the question of style is sensitive. One reviewer of the Swedish edition described Ohlsson's language as "well written normal prose," being neither "archaic" nor too modern, with only a few instances of present-day Swedish (Sundström 2004). Ohlsson's main character must not sound too modern, particularly as his role as Glas's antagonist is to be the traditionalist as opposed to the modern doctor, who is not encumbered by the past either personally or in his philosophical outlook. Still, his tale must be enjoyable for a twenty-first-century reader.

The reader who is drawn to Söderberg because of his depictions of Stockholm will find familiar settings here. There are several detailed depictions of a Stockholm of the past, seen through the vicar's eyes this time. Ohlsson follows the original text closely in other respects as well, for example, the same time-frame is used as we encounter the vicar during the long, hot summer that will be his last. What information there is in the original narrative about the pastor's looks and behavior is meticulously put to use by Ohlsson, who even reconstructs authentic pieces of dialogue found in *Doctor Glas*.

In an interview in the Swedish daily newspaper *Aftonbladet*, Bengt Ohlsson says that *Gregorius* is a tribute to Söderberg's novel, which he keeps returning to and never tires of. The idea to write *Gregorius* came to him on one such occasion of re-reading *Doctor Glas*, when he felt he discovered a "crack" in the novel, as he says, allowing him a way into it.²³ What caught his attention was the dialogue between the pastor and the doctor in which *Gregorius* says he feels sorry for Helga, for they "had both so deeply hoped and longed for a little child" (Söderberg 26). Ohlsson's starting-point in *Gregorius* is that the pastor is sincere when is saying this. Here, *Gregorius* is, then, an aging man who keeps hoping he will not die childless.

Like Söderberg's Glas, Ohlsson's *Gregorius* is also an introspective man, who reasons with himself about his nature. Both narrators control their texts through the first-person perspective. Thus they tell us as much as they want, but they do not shy away from the more disagreeable aspects of their characters. In Ohlsson's text, the pastor is as uncomfortable in the doctor's presence as Söderberg's Glas is when meeting *Gregorius*. Still, he is able to show compassion and warmth, where Söderberg's Glas is skeptical and callous.

The doctor and the pastor remain incompatible, but despite mutual dislike *Gregorius* repeatedly expresses the wish for a better relationship with his physician. In a revealing passage, he muses: "There's so much I'd like to explain to him. Don't you understand, doctor, I want to say. There was only one single way to escape my loneliness, and it was her. I invested everything in her. Or, at least, as much as I could" (243). These lines hint at the depths of his loneliness and clarify his relationship with his wife. *Gregorius* acknowledges his own shortcomings, recognizing that he what he had to offer Helga perhaps was not enough (rather than giving her 'everything', he soberly corrects himself to say 'as much as I could'). Finally, he wants to develop a good rapport with the doctor, but is unable to reach out to another human being.

From the very first page of Ohlsson's text, it is clear that the pastor suspects that his wife is seeing somebody else and he is throughout depicted as a lonely man in search of love. Gregorius has made love his calling, yet the fear of love is a recurring motif:

I've preached about love all my life. I've thought about it, analysed it from every possible angle and wrapped it in so many words that I lost sight of the actual substance of it long ago. ...I've spoken endlessly about love, to avoid hearing how mute my own heart is. I've been particularly ready to pronounce on the problems and wrong turnings of love, and I've described fear of love as the greatest scourge of humanity, and the reason has of course always been, I now realise, that by this means I've been able to lull myself into believing that I myself is above this fear. How could I possibly be the victim of something I can describe so eloquently and with so much insight? Unfortunately, my dear Gregorius, says a voice, you should have understood, that it's precisely for this reason that fear is lodged more securely in you than in anyone else. (389)

It is noteworthy that Gregorius is here involved in a type of questioning of himself and his motives, which is similar to that of Glas contemplating the murder of Gregorius in Söderberg's text. The quoted passage indicates a certain amount of complacency in the priest's characterization of himself as someone who can describe love "eloquently and with so much insight" — a trait which the reader recognizes from Söderberg's depictions of Gregorius in *Doctor Glas* — but in the final lines the tone changes to one of merciless self-analysis. The quotation also serves as an illustration of the topic of love in Gregorius's narrative. While both men — Söderberg's Glas as well as Ohlsson's Gregorius — fear love, only the latter acknowledges this fear. The pastor's self-searching brings to light similar truths as that of the doctor, but their strategies for dealing with these truths are markedly dissimilar. Gregorius's story elucidates concerns that Glas's narrative obscures; the pastor seeks transparency on issues the doctor prefers to cloak in darkness and repression.

The close affinity between Söderberg's and Ohlsson's texts that is suggested has a bearing on the ethical implications of *Gregorius* as well. By modeling his work so closely on its pre-text, Ohlsson offers an alternative to the rhetorical strategies of *Doctor Glas*. In the process, he sheds light on how to resolve the effects of evil.

John Kekes tries to answer the question of what can be done about evil in two very specific ways. He asserts that a society needs "strong prohibitions of evil actions" (239). This amounts to a fairly straightforward invocation of rules and regulations, as well as punishment. In addition, he suggests that evil needs to be fought not only legally, but also through our powers of imagination. As a strategy for dealing with evil, we should cultivate our "moral imagination," which is "the attempt to appreciate other ways of life by coming to understand them from the inside as they appear to those who are actively involved in them" (Kekes 236). What he suggests here is that the evildoer often does not know or fully understand his opponent, and that if we could only reach such an understanding the need to do evil would be re-

duced.

The novel *Gregorius* illustrates the idea of “moral imagination.” By making the pastor narrator of his own story, Bengt Ohlsson attempts to give us an inside understanding of the life of the unfortunate pastor. Söderberg's *Gregorius*, as well as his wife Helga, are flat characters, which is a prerequisite for the development of the events in the earlier text, at least if we agree with Kekes that the evildoer does not know or fully understand his opponent. To Dr. Glas, *Gregorius* is a pompous, hypocritical man who rapes his wife under the pretext of exercising his conjugal rights. Making *Gregorius* the subject of his own narrative, Ohlsson explores what might have made the parson into the man he has become.

In the Afterword to the English edition of *Gregorius*, Bengt Ohlsson offers the following explanation for how one becomes a murderer: “you have to ensure a certain distance from the victim. You must see to it that the victim appears different, a different kind of human being. Then you must make him a little less human than the rest of us” (421). He goes on to say that this is what the Nazis did when they occupied Holland during World War II. Bit by bit they deprived the Jews of their rights, and through this process of gradual de-humanization and objectification, they became seen as different. Ohlsson concludes, “Finally it must have seemed logical to the Dutch that their Jewish neighbours should be packed into lorries and taken away. Dr Glas uses exactly the same methods” (421). What Ohlsson does then is instead to gradually “humanize” the objectified *Gregorius*. *Gregorius*'s narrative thus works to “restore and reveal” elements of Söderberg's novel. The two texts are engaged in a dialogue in which each work sheds light upon the other. Together, they will continue to fascinate readers and give us a deeper understanding of the important issues they raise.

Notes

1. It should be mentioned that three other novels relating to Hjalmar Söderberg's *Doctor Glas* have been published recently: Dannie Abse's *The Strange Case of Dr Simmonds and Dr Glas* (2002); and in Swedish Birgitta Lindén's *Jag, Helga Gregorius* (2008), and Kerstin Ekman's *Brottets praktik* (2009).
2. See Staffan Eklund, “Ekman går i närkamp med *Doktor Glas*.” *Svenska Dagbladet*, 29 Aug 2009.
3. In the introduction to the Swedish 2011 edition of *Doktor Glas*, Kerstin Ekman observes that the Stockholm Söderberg describes is a “world of glass” with none of the filth, noise, or smells of the growing modern capital (Ekman *x-xi*).
4. See Bure Holmbäck, *Hjalmar Söderbergs Stockholm*; 10.
5. See Bure Holmbäck, *Hjalmar Söderbergs Stockholm*; 20.
6. See Björn Sundberg, *Sanningen, myterna och intressenas spel. En studie i Hjalmar Söderbergs författarskap från och med Hjärtats oro* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet; Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1981); 138.
7. See Holmbäck, *Hjalmar Söderberg: ett författarliv* 248–49.
8. See Eva Akinvall Franke, *Eko av Glas: Läsningar genom ett sekel av Hjalmar Söderbergs verk Doktor Glas: En receptionsetetiskt orienterad studie* (University of Borås, 2004); 70.

9. Paul Britten Austin is the translator of the two English versions of *Doctor Glas* that were published in 1963 and 2002. There is also an American translation from 1998, by Rochelle Wright.
10. See Ann Heberlein, *En liden bok om ondska* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 2010) 11-14.
11. See Ann Heberlein 111.
12. See Lars O. Lundgren, *Liv, jag förstår dig inte. Hjalmar Söderberg's Doktor Glas* (Stockholm: Carlssons, 1987) 18-19. In addition, Tom Geddes observes the presence of "narrative irony" in all of Söderberg's work — another reason for the reader to carefully consider the role of the narrator. See Geddes 112.
13. See Heberlein 41.
14. Interestingly, the connection between repression and evil is echoed by John Lloyd in an article on the contemporary crime novels of Scandinavian noir in the *Financial Times* last year. Lloyd discusses the "leftist" bent of Swedish crime writers and how their disappointment with the welfare state has led them to depict the repressed darker side of our modern society, manifested through racism, misogyny, and violence.
15. In his desire to act, Holmbäck sees Glas as a Nietzschean *übermensch*, full of will, until the deed is done. Then he sinks into apathy and resignation and begins to refer to chance and biological determinism as an explanation for what he has just done. For more information about the conflict between men of action and thinkers, or philosophers, see Sundberg 141-58.
16. See George C. Schoolfield, "Review of *Doctor Glas* by Hjalmar Söderberg", *Scandinavian Studies* 71. 4 (1999): 493-495.
17. See Miki Agerberg, *Bakom vansinnet. Forskare om psyke, våld och rädsla* (Stockholm: Vetenskapsrådet, 2007) 55.
18. See Lundgren 66.
19. See Holmbäck, *Det lekfulla allvaret* 245.
20. More information about Söderberg and religion can be found in for example, Sven Lagerstedt's *Söderberg och religionen* (1982), Lars Ljungberg's *Allt för mänskligt. Om Hjalmar Söderberg's kristendomskritik* (1982), and Elena Balzamo *Den engagerade skeptikern. Hjalmar Söderberg och politiken* (2001). See also Söderberg's novels *Jahves eld* (*Yahweh's Fire* 1918), *Jesus Barabbas* (1928) and *Den förvandlade Messias* (*The Transformed Messiah* 1932).
21. Theresa Jamieson notes that at the end of the 19th century this distinction was sometimes blurred as physicians were increasingly granted the right to "treat diseases of both body and mind" (Jamieson 229).
22. The post-colonial thrust of this idea to bring a character from the margins of a pre-text to the center of a re-vision of this text is explored by Theresa Jamieson.
23. See Ingalill Mosander, "Det gällde att härda ut—att inte ta livet av sig." *Aftonbladet* 24 Oct 2004.

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