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Christian Ritual and Mythic Pattern in *Gustav Vasa*

The thematic implications of two divisions of the Christian ecclesiastical year are prominent in Strindberg's drama: the forty days of Lent and the seventy days from Septuagesima Sunday to Easter. The Lenten cycle in part repeats in larger scale the central theme of the Mass – the Passion of Christ – and in part celebrates those events in the Old Testament that foreshadow events in the New Testament, serving thus to remind worshippers forcefully that the beginnings are only preparations for the end. Christ's "types" in the Old Testament include Isaac and Jeremiah; as Bishop Amalarius of Metz described typological significance in the ninth century: "All previous sacrifices prefigure Him, and all sacrifice is consummated in Him."[1] Lenten celebrations, then, link time past with time present and make worshippers feel themselves elements in what Erich Auerbach has called a "structure of universal history."[2] This "universal history", says Auerbach,

> begins with the beginning of time, with the creation of the world, and will end with the Last Days, the fulfilling of the Convenant, with which the world will come to an end. Everything else that happens in the world can only be conceived as an element in this sequence; into it everything that is known about the world ... must be fitted as an ingredient of the divine plan ...[3]

Through "typological" or "figural" interpretation, every event in the continuing horizontal line of human history is bracketed and encompassed by the larger context of Biblical history. What happens now is related to God's Covenant with the people of Israel, since the fulfillment of the Covenant will come only with the Last Days and the end of the world. To the horizontal line of actual history is added a vertical dimension; present crisis has an analogy in a Biblical crisis.

[1] O.B. Hardison, Jr., *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages,* Baltimore and London 1965, p. 60.
[2] *Mimesis,* Garden City, New York 1957, p. 12.
[3] Ibid., p. 13.

Biblical crises are often associated with the number forty. Strindberg in *En blå bok* describes how he wrote *Drömspelet* after forty days of some of the most difficult suffering he ever endured[4] and how it brought to mind for him the forty days of the Deluge, the forty years of wandering in the desert and the forty days of fasting experienced by Moses, Christ and Elias.[5] In *Påsk,* instead of an Elias there is an Elis whose torment ceases at the conclusion of the forty days of Lent; the Stranger in *Till Damaskus I,* says, he has been waiting forty years for happiness, or maybe the end of unhappiness;[6] and King Magnus in *Folkungasagan* must in penance bear a cross forty times around the cathedral.[7] One might add that forty is also the traditional number of days of quarantine and we find a quarantine master mentioned in *Ett drömspel, Dödsdansen* and the short story collection *Fagervik och Skamsund.*[8]

The Biblical crisis that perhaps best epitomizes the importance of the Covenant is the Babylonian Captivity, the seventy years of which are reflected and symbolized in the seventy days of Septuagesima. The people of Israel, sent by God into bondage because of their sins, try to keep alive the hope that one day the Lord will make good the promise He made to Abraham that the Chosen People will find their way home to Jerusalem. Implicit in the Babylonian Captivity is the grand ritual movement of both the Mass and the Lenten cycle: from alienation to suffering to reconciliation.

Part of God's Covenant with Abraham was the vow "I will make of thee a great nation"[9] and one of the signs God sends of His intention is delivered to Abraham at the grove of Mamre: the patriarch learns that his wife Sarah, despite her advanced years, will bear a son to succeed him.[10]

[4] August Strinberg, *Samlade skrifter,* edited by John Landquist, Stockholm 1912 ff., vol. 46, p. 405.

[5] Ibid., p. 406.

[6] *Samlade skrifter,* vol. 29, pp. 7–8.

[7] *Samlade skrifter,* vol. 31, p. 87.

[8] About the significance of the number forty in Strindberg's work, see also Harry G. Carlson, *Strindberg och myterna,* translated by Sven Erik Täckmark, Stockholm 1979, pp. 228–9.

[9] Genesis 12:2.

[10] Genesis 18:10.

At the opening of Act III of *Gustav Vasa* a portion of the stage directions reads as follows: "On the walls paintings of scenes from the Old Testament; the most conspicuous one depicts: 'the Lord God visits Abraham in the grove of Mamre.' The portrait of Abraham bears a strong resemblance to the king."[11] In the horizontal line of Vasa's history, the Biblican analogy of Abraham constitutes a vertical dimension. And there are other analogies present as well, spiritual and political. As Abraham is to his followers and Vasa is to his subjects, God is to the people of Israel. Symbolically, "I shall make of thee a great nation" is the promise that every political leader owes to his countrymen. And for Strindberg's generation, raised in the spirit of revolution, "greatness" included freedom from slavery of all kinds. The promise to Abraham is a continuing debt, in spiritual terms that God owes to man, in political terms that man owes to his fellow man.

Strindberg's Vasa is an Abraham who has lost sight of the responsibilities he has to his people. The ritual action of the play is the purification of the king for the role he is to play as the patriarch of his nation.

Christian typological or figural symbolism, with its complex system of parallels, is similar to two other symbolic systems that Strindberg knew well in the Inferno period and later: Swedenborg's Theory of Correspondences and Éliphas Lévi's concept of transcendent universal analogy.[12] For both Swedenborg and Lévi, everything in Creation is linked together in a great design from the earthly plane to the cosmic; out of apparent chaos evolves endless coherence. But Strindberg's interest in typological/figural symbolism dates from much earlier than the Inferno years. In the very opening moments of *Mäster Olof,* the hero and the catechumens in his charge are rehearsing *Tobie Commedia,* the little drama long falsely attributed to the historic Olaus Petri. The theme is that of captive Israel in Babylonia, anxious about God's promise.

[11] *Samlade skrifter,* vol. 31, p. 197.

[12] Éliphas Lévi, *The Key of the Mysteries,* New York 1972, pp. 137 ff. On a cover of *Ockulta dagboken* is the assertion, not really justified, that the explanation of everything contained within can be found in *La Clef des Grands Mystères.* See also Göran Stockenström, *Ismael i öknen,* Uppsala 1972, for a discussion of the importance of the influence of Swedenborg.

FIRST CATECHUMEN
Trapped in our enemy's toils, it bodes not well,
O pity us, we poor children of Israel.

SECOND CATECHUMEN
O, dear brother, how we moan and wail
through our time of lamentation we must travail –
lost are our goods and lost our lands,
what can we hope for with empty hands?
How long have I not both dreamt and said,
the promise to Abraham is forgotten and dead.[13]

The drama rehearsal is interrupted by Lars Petri who suggests to Olof that the typological symbolism contains a clue to action. A real, historical task of liberation is at hand: the Swedish people are suffering under the yoke of Papal oppression and require a new spiritual leader.

The Swedish verb that I rendered above as "moan and wail" was a vital one in Strindberg's vocabulary: "klaga." Like the English word complain, klaga signifies making an accusation in an objective and even juridical sense, but it is not limited to that meaning, as the word complain is. "Klaga" can also mean to express a deeply felt sorrow. In English, the great wall in Jerusalem is the "Wailing Wall"; in Swedish, "klagomuren".

In *Mäster Olof,* Gert Bookprinter draws up an inventory of "klagomål" or charges of injustices against the king. In *Gustav Vasa* the same king is again the target of "klagomål", this time the grievances of the Dalecarlians. And in *Carl XII,* a Swedish farmer whose country has suffered badly because of the monarch's ruthless imperialist ambitions shouts for Heaven to hear his "berättigade klagomål" – justified complains.[14] These are "klagomål" in a limited political or criminal sense, but the word was charged with more powerful meaning than that for Strindberg. In *Ett drömspel,* the god Indra has grown impatient with mankind. "Their mother tongue", he says, "is complaining."[15] When his Daughter goes down to earth, she discovers that the bases for the complaints and lamentations are not so much specific as general, not so much socio-political as metaphysical. The lamentations are *de profundis* and the injustices suffered are the pains of existence.

[13] *Samlade skrifter,* vol. 2, p. 7.
[14] *Samlade skrifter,* vol. 35, p. 123.
[15] *Samlade skrifter,* vol. 36, p. 219.

Whether Strindberg is referring to God and captive Israel or Indra and suffering mankind or Vasa and the Dalecarlians, in each instance the bond of understanding between higher and lower orders is in disrepair. God and man, king and subject are alienated from each other and there is a longing, either spoken or unspoken, for atonement and reconciliation.

In *Öppna brev till Intima teatern,* Strindberg indicated another Biblical figure whose fate, like Abraham's, was analogous to Vasa's. He said the king is struck by providence "with all the misfortunes of Job."[16] But this is not the end of mythic parallels and they are not restricted to Christian typology. Crown Prince Erik states that his father, in a fit of anger, threw a Hungarian steel hammer at him "like the God Thor throws at trolls."[17] And Erik says that he has heard that his mother was killed by a blow from "a Thor's hammer."[18] Handling the hammer is a nervous reaction Vasa has to the political chaos that seems imminent in the kingdom; from time to time he slams it on the table, alarming the Lübeck merchant Herman Israel. Indirect parallels between the thunder god and the king are also present. When Vasa loses his temper with Master Olof, he orders the cleric: "Go back to your pulpit and thunder there. Here *I* do the thundering!"[18] And in the final scene, the Dalecarlian Engelbrekt admiringly calls Vasa "dundergubbe",[20] a thunder resonance lost when it must be translated into English as something like "hell of a man."

Strindberg's practice of blending elements from different mythologies I have described elsewhere as "polyphonic".[21] If we consider the historical facts of Vasa's life as the primary melody line, then the references to Abraham, Thor, and even Job are secondary melody lines working in counterpoint. This syncretistic approach to the use of mythic imagery was common in the nineteenth century, especially among some of the writers Strindberg admired most. For example, Victor Hugo's *La Légende des Siècles* "attempts a full canvas of all

[16] *Samlade skrifter,* vol. 50, p. 247.
[17] *Samlade skrifter,* vol. 31, p. 183.
[18] Ibid., p. 203.
[19] Ibid., p. 224.
[20] Ibid., p. 276.
[21] *Strindberg och myterna,* pp. 125 ff.

Christian myth and much pagan, Islamic, and Indic as well."[22] And Balzac "treats Paris as if it were a deposit of mythologies, a vast organic history whose every smallest life or nuance contributes to the whole."[23]

In *Gustav Vasa* Erik has no difficulty thinking in terms of polyphonic mythology. For him, Vasa is not only Thor-like. He says that when he sees his father dressed in a blue cloak and huge felt hat and carrying a wild boar spear as a walking stick, "I think he is the god Odin himself."[24] Erik is obviously familiar with Nordic myth; among the common attributes associated with Odin are a flowing mantle, a widebrimmed hat and the mighty spear Gungnir, which, it was said, would never stop in flight.[25] Furthermore, Odin was a master of disguise and often appeared as an ordinary traveler, just as the king does in Act IV of *Gustav Vasa,* when he prowls about the streets of Stockholm, incognito, with his cape, hat and spear.

The Odin and Thor resonances add to Vasa an aura of awesome divine power, reinforced by the fact that the king does not appear on stage until the third act. He is one of a gallery of Strindberg figures who during the course of the action of a play assume formidable dimensions because they are talked about in their absence. The Count in *Fröken Julie* and Laura's mother in *Fadren* are others.

The cumulative effect of the polyphonic mixing – Abraham and Job and Odin and Thor – is impressive. Complexity is suggested in the character of the king quite different from that achieved in a figure, for example, from an Ibsen play, where character is usually developed – the mythic Peer Gynt is an exception – through action that pursues hidden psychological secrets. To understand the complexity, we have to examine the way Odin and Thor are depicted in the sagas – some of Strindberg's favorite mythic sources.[26]

Although Odin is most often regarded as the chief Nordic god, in terms of the powers he and Thor can exercise the two are sometimes

[22] *The Rise of Modern Mythology 1680–1860,* edited by Burton Feldman and Robert D. Richardson, Bloomington, Indiana and London 1972, p. 427.

[23] Ibid., p. 430.

[24] *Samlade skrifter,* vol. 31, p. 183.

[25] *Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology,* London 1959, p. 259.

[26] According to Hans Lindström, the *Edda* in Afzelius's translation was among the few books – fourteen in number – which appear in all three of the library collections Strindberg was known to have owned in his lifetime. See Lindström, *Strindberg och böckerna,* Uppsala 1977, p. 13.

seen as equals. In personality, however, they are very different. Thor is almost always an admirable figure, the prototypical warrior: straightforward, courageous and of great strength. Odin, in contrast, can be devious and misterious. He is the chief of the warriors without himself being a physical fighter and he possesses magical powers, such as the ability to transform his shape into animal forms. Those who believe themselves in Odin's favor should be wary, for his favor can be inconstant and his wrath bloody[27].

But Odin's positive aspects must be mentioned, too, as must Thor's negative aspects. Odin was regarded as the divine ancestor of the Swedes[28] and in the *Hávamál* he himself tells how he was pierced with a spear and hanged on the World Tree, Yggdrasill, as a sacrifice for the attainment of wisdom.[29] And Thor, for all his admirable qualities, has a monstrous temper. Once aroused, "nothing then restrains him," says George Dumézil, "not even legal scruples: he does not recognize the promises and pledges that the other gods"[30] have made and becomes a force of blind destruction.

All these contradictory aspects are combined in Vasa[31]. He is aristocrat and plebian, subtly devious politician and candid warrior; capable of being faithful and treacherous, compassionately understanding and ruthlessly vindictive, bluntly insensitive to the suffering of others and yet, as in the scene where he walks unrecognized on the streets of Stockholm, also able to learn to sympathize with suffering. This exposure to painful truths about the justness of his people's grievances against him he describes as "humiliation beyond compare"[32] and con-

[27] One of the stanzas in a lay from the *Poetic Edda,* "The Song of Harbard," contrasts the two gods in a way that indicates that Thor was more plebian, which may be why he was more popular than Odin among the Nordic peoples:

Odin gets the nobles who fall in battle,
While Thor gets the kin of slaves.

See *Den poetiska Eddan,* translated by Björn Collinder, Uddevalla 1972, p. 101.

[28] H. R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe,* Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England 1964, p. 56.

[29] *Den poetiska Eddan,* p. 70.

[30] *Gods of the Ancient Northmen,* edited by Einar Haugen, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 1973, pp. 66–67.

[31] Cf. *Spöksonaten,* where Odin/Thor resonances are also present in the character of Hummel; see *Strindberg och myterna,* pp. 265 ff.

[32] *Samlade skrifter,* vol. 31, p. 242.

fessess to his son Johan that "no one is ever in so high a position that he doesn't have to step down occasionally."[33]

Birgitta Steene has described the scene as "like the reenactment of the old ritual of the Fisher King – the disguised ruler descending among his people."[34] Another figure from myth and legend who descends is Harun the Just, from the *Arabian Nights* – the Caliph of Baghdad who goes in disguise to determine how law and order is being kept. In *Ett drömspel,* Harun's mission is compared to Agnes' and by implication to Christ's.[35] In mythic terms, the descent of the godhead – the Incarnation – is an important turning point in the relationship between the mortal and the divine. "Just as man suffers from God," says Jung, "so God must suffer from man. Otherwise there can be no reconciliation between the two."[36] Agnes suffers and learns compassion; Vasa suffers and learns humility.

The Christian drama of the Incarnation played out in the three days of Easter is the high point of the ecclesiastial calendar year and essential features of the year figure importantly in Strindberg's drama.[37] Maundy Thursday, for example, is the setting for the opening act of

[33] Ibid.

[34] *Shakespearean Elements in Historical Plays of Strindberg,* in: Strindberg A Collection of Critical Essays, edited by Otto Reinert, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 1971, p. 133.

[35] *Samlade skrifter,* vol. 36, pp. 271 and 323: "DOTTERN: Ni tror väl inte att jag är Harun den Rättrådige?; DIKTAREN: Var det icke Indra som en gång sände sin son ner för att höra mänsklighetens klagomål?"

[36] *Answer to Job,* translated by R. F. C. Hull, Princeton 1973, p. 52.

[37] The plays *Advent* and *Påsk* are only the most obvious examples. *Fadren,* for instance, takes place at Christmas, the time of the winter solstice, and *Fröken Julie* at the summer solstice, which is also the celebration of the birth of John the Baptist, whose coming foreshadows that of the Savior by exactly six months. But Midsummer also means the beginning of the descent of the sun toward the darkness of winter and in *Fröken Julie* references are made to the death rather than the birth of John the Baptist, whose beheading is discussed by Jean and Kristin in a tragic foreshadowing of the heroine's own death. *Mäster Olof* opens on the eve of Pentecost, which marks the moment after the Crucifixion and Ascension when God demonstrated the continuity in the covenant established with man through Christ's coming by sending the Holy Spirit with a message of self-realization and salvation. In the play, Gert Bokpräntare is the bearer of the message to Olof, but Olof is never able to answer the calling fully. At the end, Gert reminds him again of the challenge and opportunity of Pentecost with the warning that "evig fördömelse skall vara en nåd för den som begått synd mot den Heliga Anda." *Samlade skrifter,* vol. 2, p. 179.

Påsk, and the day has interesting implications for the play. Maundy, from the latin *mandatum* – command, order – refers to the words Jesus spoke to his disciples after washing their feet at the Last Supper: "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another."[38] In *Påsk,* only Eleonora understands this commandment at first, but by the end of the play all the members of the Heyst family have learned the lesson.

Maundy Thursday also has a somber aspect, especially as it was observed in the early Middle Ages. O.B. Hardison describes the church service for the day as a burial ceremony: "the cross and images have been shrouded since Passion Sunday. Now the church and altar are stripped bare ... ; the ministers remove linen, candles, veils and ornaments. The desolation of the church is now complete."[39] Finally, vespers is sounded with wooden clappers instead of bells, and the bells remain silent until the vigil Mass of Easter Eve[40].

Both the sounds of bells and their silence have important symbolic roles to play in *Gustav Vasa.* Strindberg's use of polyphonic mythology was not confined to aspects of characterization: it is a cohesive method, connecting element to element, parts of the whole, until what emerges is a dense, harmonious, unified fabric. Bell images represent one thread in this fabric.

At the opening curtain the Dalecarlian rebel Måns Nilsson and his wife are listening in their home to the strangely ominous tone of a bell tolling in the village. Måns says it sounds like a fire warning or a cry for help and his wife agrees. "It seems to me," she says, "it's sounded like that ever since the king confiscated the church bells."[41] In less than a dozen lines Strindberg manages beautifully not only to set in motion one of the play's basic conflict's – the resentment felt by the Dalecarlians because the king confiscated papal property in the name of Protestantism – but to establish a solemn mood of foreboding. The town bell now tolling so dismally brings to mind precious things the Dalecarlians have been deprived of. Måns' wife says:

[38] John 13:34.
[39] HARDISON, p. 126.
[40] Ibid., p. 158, n. 53.
[41] *Samlade skrifter,* vol. 31, pp. 133–4.

> . . . it's a constant reminder of the great bell of St. Mary that the bailiff stole. Do you remember when the bell of St. Mary was cast of the finest rose copper and the whole town brought milk and cream to make the clay mold firm – and when the metal was molten we threw in half our family silver to strengthen the tone? And then she was christened at Candlemas. She rang for the first time for my father's funeral – – – Then she was sent to Herman Israel in Lübeck, who made coins of her.[42]

What appears to be only a simple peasant woman's reminiscence is charged with multiple energies and tensions. For Måns' wife the bell is both a source of community pride and something deeply personal – it tolled for her dead father. Appropriately for a bell named for Mary, it was christened on Candlemas, the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin, another Strindberg reference to the ecclesiastical calendar. Holy Mother, bells, and Mother Church – this traditional cluster of associations had an extraordinary pull on his imagination and not just in late works like *Till Damaskus* and *Inferno*. In *Mäster Olof* the Protestant reformer hero acts defiantly when he rings a vespers bell to hold a service forbidden by church authorities, but he never overcomes the guilt he feels for denying his mother's pleadings that he remain a Catholic.

Two other significant early bell references are in *Röda rummet* and *Tjänstekvinnans son*. In the opening chapter of the novel, Arvid Falk, listens to the church bells of Stockholm tolling vespers, each bell with its own special sound, but one more special than the rest: the bell of the church in the cemetary of which his parents were buried – Klara.[43] In the autobiography there is the wonderful passage describing what a thrill it was for Johan while visiting in the country as a boy to get a chance to ring a church bell. The author concludes about Johan: "Church bells seemed to pursue him."[44] Similarly, one might say of the author that throughout his life he was haunted by church bells.

As a symbol, the bell is important in a number of mythologies. In India, for example, its sound is said to reflect primordial vibration, and universally it is regarded as possessing the power of exorcism and purification.[45] The narrator in the novel *Inferno,* describing the music of the bells of Paris, says that "in the midst of the ordinary ringing

[42] Ibid., pp. 135–6.

[43] *Samlade skrifter,* vol. 5, pp. 7–8.

[44] *Samlade skrifter,* vol. 18, p. 51.

[45] Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *Dictionnaire des symboles,* Paris 1969, vol. 2, pp. 53–4.

boomed a heavy, solemn rumble that seemed to come from the bowels of the earth."[46] He learns from a waiter that what we heard was the great bell of Sacré Cœur in Montmartre, but he senses that a message is being sent to him, the nature and source of which he cannot quite determine.

The hanging position of a bell suggests something suspended between heaven and earth and because of this is a source of communication between the two.[47] In *Gustav Vasa* the king has silenced the bells. It is no coincidence that he is as out of touch with his conscience and with God as he is with his subjects. Power has made him arrogant, hubristic, and hubris, whether present in a Greek, Shakespearean or Strindbergian hero, is a sin that must be curbed, "the one vice," says the narrator in *Inferno,* "that the gods do not forgive."[48]

But the bell of St. Mary described by Måns' wife has political as well as religious associations: townspeople came together to bring milk and cream for its casting and it contained precious family silver. Though gone, it remains a symbol of everything the Dalecarlians hold dear: religious freedom and pride in provincial and family traditions. And now, thinks Måns' wife, it has been converted into coins for foreigners.

Later in the same opening scene, another Dalecarlian rebel, Nils of Söderby, tries to warn the king's spokesman, Master Olof, that if his people are further oppressed by Vasa, they will rise up in wrathful opposition. They may have lost their church bells, but, Nils boasts, "There's still the Mora bell in the valley of Lake Siljan. It's quite a bell, you see, and when it jingles, it can be heard far into Norway and fourteen thousand men will stand as one!"[49] Olof, however, uses Nils' reference to the great Mora bell ironically, to remind the Dalecarlians of their lack of loyalty to the crown. He says he is happy to learn of the bell: "we'll ring it properly the next time the Danes come, because at the last conscription here only seven thousand turned out – against our country's enemies!"[50]

[46] *Skrifter av August Strindberg,* edited by Gunnar Brandell, Stockholm 1953, vol. 9, p. 47.

[47] Chevalier, p. 55.

[48] Auguste Strindberg, *Inferno,* translated by Marcel Réja, edited by C. G. Bjurström, Paris 1966, p. 130.

[49] *Samlade skrifter,* vol. 31, pp. 149–50.

[50] Ibid., p. 152.

The bell theme reappears in Act II as a further example of Vasa's unscrupulousness. Instead of using the confiscated bells to pay Sweden's debts to the Hanseatic League, the king had them sent to the royal foundries to be turned into field guns and mortars,[51] presumably to establish his authority even more firmly.

In Act III the king is faced with a difficult decision. Although the Dalecarlians Måns Nilsson and Anders Persson were among his earliest supporters as he struggled to win the throne, he feels their intrigues against him have gone too far. "It's been two years," he tells them, "since you renounced allegiance to me and declared war over the matter of the bells,"[52] and he sentences them to be executed. The scene has a marvelous ambiguity. Even as we are made aware that there is justice in Vasa's determination to preserve civil order, the insensitivity implied in the way he speaks about "the matter of the bells" leads us to believe that he still has much to learn about the duties of a monarch toward his subjects.

The bell theme returns in a new variation in the first scene of Act IV. It is interesting that the physical location is almost identical with that of the first scene of Act V of *Mäster Olof,* where the stage directions describe another Klara reference: the cemetary of St. Klara's cloister. The real cloister was demolished in 1527,[53] but Strindberg in *Gustav Vasa* specifies the setting for Act IV as the square in front of one of its buildings which now houses, ironically, the Stockholm offices of the Hanseatic League. Two women discuss the building – Agda, a tavern waitress, and Karin Månsdotter, the ill-fated flower girl who later became the wife of Erik XIV. Agda is searching for her fiancé, who has disappeared, and Karin offers to help by inquiring at the League offices. Agda remembers the building's origin and says "I used to bring flowers here often, when there was a statue of the Lord's mother there in the corner."[54] When Karin rings the bell at the gate, it brings back old memories for her too: "Listen! It's the old vespers bell. I recognize it!"[55] The building may be a commercial establishment but it is haunted by memories of a time when it was a spiritual refuge, watched

[51] Ibid., p. 166.
[52] Ibid., p. 225.
[53] See "Klara Kyrka," in *Stockholms Kyrkor,* Stockholm 1928, pp. 21–2.
[54] *Samlade skrifter,* vol. 31, p. 228.
[55] Ibid., p. 230.

over by the Virgin Mary, a home for the order founded by the maternal Saint Klara, who was dedicated to charitable activities and the education of children. In *Mäster Olof* the Klara cemetary scene has a nightmare quality, with workmen dismantling cloister buildings on Vasa's orders, and something of the same quality lingers over this scene. It is as if the building has been cursed because money changers have been permitted to take over the temple.

After Agda and Karin leave, the king enters in disguise with his son Johan and they too seek entrance to the offices. But when Johan rings for admittance, the vespers bell no longer sounds. The king is then approached by strange beggars and by the widow and daughter of the recently slain Måns Nilsson. Like creditors come to collect debts, they make Vasa aware of how distant he has been from his people and their suffering.

The bell theme, like a leitmotif returning again and again, illuminates different aspects of Vasa's ordeal. As with all really effective symbolic patterns, it is multivalent, changing like a kaleidoscope to reveal new meanings, now religious, representing the Mother Church, now political, echoing the Dalecarlians' discontent, and now, as we shall see, even metaphysical.

The ritual movement from hubris to atonement and reconciliation is completed in the final scene of the play and the reconciliation takes places on several levels. The Dalecarlians are ready again to support the king against new threats to his power coming from the south and Vasa makes his peace with Heaven: "Oh God, Eternal One. Now thou hast punished me. . . . Thou hast punished me, and I thank thee!"[56]

Similar sentiments are expressed by the Creator God in the revised version of the brief drama *Coram Populo,* Strindberg's adaptation of a medieval drama first published as a play-within-a-play in the epilogue to the verse *Mäster Olof.*[57] This lower order deity, probably modelled on the Demiurge of Gnosticism,[58] having regretted creating a world of madness just for his own amusement, prostrates himself before the Eternal One and confesses, "there are none among the gods like unto thee ... ; thou alone art the one and only God!"[59]

[56] Ibid., pp. 276–7.

[57] Cf. *Samlade skrifter,* vol. 2, pp. 312–18 and *Inferno,* Paris 1966, pp. 15–26.

[58] See my discussion in *Strindberg och myterna,* pp. 35, 36, et passim.

[59] *Inferno,* Paris 1966, pp. 25–6.

For both Vasa and the Demiurge the ritual purgation of hubris is accomplished, but in each instance the Eternal One does not answer; He remains invisible and His silence is eloquent. In the cloister house scene the muteness of the vespers bell suggests that contact between heaven and earth has been severed. There is a similar moment of silence in the Grotto scene of *Ett drömspel* when Indra's Daughter loses contact with her father: "I can no longer hear his answer! The ether no longer bears the sounds from his lips to the shell of my ear – the silver thread has been broken – Alas, I am earthbound!"[60] In vedic mythology the silver thread expresses the sacred inner path which binds man's outer consciousness, his intellect, with his spiritual center.[61] Throughout Strindberg's post-Inferno drama, behind the attempts to evoke rituals of reconciliation is a desire to rejoin the broken thread and to end God's silence.

[60] *Samlade skrifter,* vol. 36, p. 302.
[61] J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols,* New York 1962, p. 23.