

“The Shadow Who Wished to Become a Man”: *Doctor Glas* in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract:

This essay considers two recent re-visions of Hjalmar Söderberg’s *Doctor Glas* (1905), demonstrating how the novels, rather than offering a critique of their pre-text (as is customary in re-vision) facilitate a recuperation of elements of the original narrative, which have been obscured by earlier readings. Finally, it explores how these texts, by questioning the narrative authority of Söderberg’s protagonist, raise issues concerning the primacy of scientific discourses in the twenty-first century

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When is a literary masterpiece not a masterpiece? According to Eric Hjalmar Linder and George Schoolfield, parading as “a pamphlet from the 1880s” is sufficient to ensure that even a novel usually labelled a “great work” of literature is, in fact, only “*intermittently* a masterpiece” (Schoolfield 1999: 493, added emphasis). Thus Hjalmar Söderberg’s *Doctor Glas* (1905) was judged and found wanting. Fortunately, literary critics, like literary prizes, are not categorical determinants of artistic merit. Both, however, can provide a fair indication of the kind of styles, issues or themes which are deemed noteworthy at any given time. Interestingly, then, in 2002 neo-Victorian novels comprised a fifth of the Booker longlist, and among this coterie, which included Sarah Waters’s *Fingersmith*, Philip Hensher’s *The Mulberry Empire* and Will Self’s *Dorian: An Imitation*, was *The Strange Case of Dr Simmonds and Dr Glas*, a re-working of the Swedish classic *Doctor Glas* by acclaimed poet Dannie Abse. Just two years later Bengt Ohlsson won the August Prize (Sweden’s most prestigious literary award) for his novel *Gregorius* (2004), another re-telling of Söderberg’s tale, this time from the perspective of Glas’s nemesis, the Pastor Gregorius. The critical validation accorded Abse and Ohlsson is perhaps not wholly surprising. Both writers are leading literary figures in their respective countries, while the presence of Will Self’s *Dorian* on the Booker long-list alongside Abse, points to the contemporary appetite for astute re-workings

of canonical texts. However, a little more surprising is the instance of the novels being published to such acclaim within two years of one another. If one considers that 2002 also saw the reissue of the English edition of *Doctor Glas*, following an absence of over thirty years, it begins to look as though the novel might have something significant to say to a modern readership.¹ I want to begin by posing two questions, which will be expanded through the course of the article. Firstly, how do the neo-Victorian adaptations of Abse and Ohlsson enable *Doctor Glas* to ‘speak’ to a contemporary audience?² And, following on from this, what, if anything, does this say about the continued relevance of Söderberg’s novel in the twenty-first century?

The plot of *Doctor Glas* charts the doctor’s intervention in the marital discord between two of his patients: the aged Pastor Gregorius and his beautiful young wife, Helga. In short, Helga finds her husband physically repulsive, but Gregorius’s religious beliefs mean that divorce is out of the question. In desperation she approaches Dr Glas for help, and he is happy to oblige. Gregorius is old and fat and ugly, and to Glas’s mind the union between this “feminine flower” and the grotesque Pastor is not only aesthetically repugnant, it also reinforces his belief in the chaos and perversity of human existence (Söderberg 2002: 31). Therefore, Glas tells Gregorius that he is treating his wife for a gynaecological complaint and prescribes separate rooms for the couple: Helga, he says, must practice total abstinence if she is to recover. But Gregorius can’t keep away. He rapes his wife. Glas revises his prescription. Now he convinces Gregorius that he has a potentially fatal heart complaint and packs him off to the country for a rest cure. So far so good, but Gregorius has to return eventually; and when he does Glas decides that the only way to address the problem of the Pastor is to dispatch him – permanently.

Essentially, then, Söderberg’s *Doctor Glas* is a story of a murder, or, more to the point, of ‘ethical’ murder. Presented as the fictional diary of its eponymous narrator, it is the story of a man who, torn between his duty as a doctor and his desire to protect a vulnerable woman from the vile attentions of her “odious” husband, commits the ultimate criminal act (Söderberg 2002: 4). It is an ambiguous and complex novel. Greeted with outrage by contemporary readers who believed Söderberg had produced a tract which advocated both euthanasia and murder,³ it has since, in Susan Sontag’s words, acquired the status of a “masterwork of Northern European literature”, an elegant and lyrical exposition of the challenges of ethical

choice (Sontag cited in Söderberg 2002: front cover). Indeed, the writer William Sansom has declared that “in most of its writing and much of the frankness of its thought it might have been written tomorrow” (cited in Anon. 2002: xii). And yet the novel is marketed as a “classic nineteenth century drama”, a novel which, for Susan Sontag, conforms to the tradition of “Balzac’s *Eugénie Grandet* and Henry James’s *Washington Square*” (cited in Anon. 2002: xii).

This confusion surrounding the categorisation of *Doctor Glas* can be attributed, at least in part, to the familiarity of its plot, a tale apparently suggestive of a kind of melodrama, “featuring a tyrannical older man, his hapless [...] young wife, and her caddish suitor” (cited in Anon. 2002: xii). According to George Schoolfield, though at one time the issue of Gregorius’s murder was hotly debated in the press, this tendency to privilege the marriage plot at the expense of the novel’s wider ethical concerns has a lengthy history. Reviewing *Doctor Glas* shortly after its publication, the critic Fredrik Böök dismissed as a “failure” the novel’s contemplation of the murder of Gregorius, although he “concludes that the book provides a causerie about a serious matter, by which [he] means the predicament of Helga Gregorius” (Schoolfield 2003: 292, 293). Half a century later Olle Holmberg lauded the novel’s style but “confessed that [...] one could read [it] without worrying too much about the moral problem” (Schoolfield 2003: 293). Finally, Schoolfield writes, it was Linder who, in the 1960s, delivered the most damning verdict, suggesting not only that the novel was “out of date”, but that by virtue of being “a sort of pamphlet from the 1880s directed against the concept of marriage at the time”, it was likely to inspire, in modern readers, “a sense of alienation [...] more than any other of Söderberg’s novels” (Schoolfield 2003: 293).⁴

Linder may have a point. *Doctor Glas* is certainly not an emotional novel; and though, ostensibly, the plot revolves around the Gregorius marriage, neither the Pastor nor Helga can be deemed a fully developed character. Rather, it seems reasonable to conclude that the story of their marital difficulties exists primarily to provide a motivation for murder and the ethical debate which precedes it. Nevertheless, it is disconcerting to encounter readings of *Doctor Glas* which see in Söderberg’s text a compelling eugenicist argument. Eva Akinvall Franke has noted that it was not until the 1970s and 1980s that the ethical implications of *Doctor Glas* really came to the fore. This, she writes, coincided with the period when the

novel caught the attention of the international academic community (Franke 2004: 15). In one of the few studies of *Doctor Glas* currently available in English, Reed Merrill suggests that the “importance of [the] work lies” not only “in its emphasis on ethics” but “in Söderberg’s convincing defence of necessary murder, a traditionally indefensible moral, logical, or legal act” (Merrill, 1979: 47). Merrill’s literal reading of Glas’s ethical ruminations, however, fails to take account of the extent to which Söderberg’s use of narrative irony shapes the text, for, as Tom Geddes has emphasised, “[i]t soon become[s] apparent [...] that he is very much aware of the dangers inherent in the attitudes he himself describes” (Geddes 1999: 112). *Doctor Glas* may parade as a polemic, but Söderberg’s “concern is with truth, [although] his tactic for approaching truths is to reveal untruths, a rather early ‘deconstructive’ approach”, which consistently challenges the novel’s readers to examine the roles played by rhetoric and hyperbole in even the most emotive and convincing of arguments (Brantly 1992: 295). It is with the revelation of these untruths that I would argue the works of Abse and Ohlsson are primarily concerned. Therefore, for the remainder of the article the focus will be on exploring the ethical imperatives of these novels by demonstrating how, rather than offering a critique of Söderberg, the texts facilitate a recuperation of elements of the original narrative, which have been obscured by earlier readings, and to consider, in relation to this, how their questioning of the narrative authority of Dr Glas raises issues concerning the primacy of scientific discourses in the twenty-first century.

1. Contemporary Re-Visions

As works which ‘re-write’ an earlier, canonical text, Dannie Abse’s *The Strange Case of Dr Simmonds and Dr Glas* and Bengt Ohlsson’s *Gregorius* belong to what has, in recent years, become a distinct sub-genre of contemporary postmodern fiction: the re-visionary novel. In his essay “‘Writing-Back’: contemporary re-visionary fiction” Peter Widdowson suggested that the most significant characteristic of this type of fiction is its “clear cultural-political thrust”, a concern which is often expressed via a revision of the original novel, or pre-text, in light of contemporary critical discourses (Widdowson 2006: 505). In the case of Abse and Ohlsson this becomes a movement to examine from a twenty-first-century perspective the ethical underpinnings of *Doctor Glas*, which have often been overlooked by readings that prioritise the novel’s engagement with sexual politics.

Although re-visionary fiction as a genre or observable trend is a fairly recent literary development, critics have been discussing its possibilities for literary studies for some time. From Adrienne Rich's essay 'When We Dead Awaken' (1971) onwards, literary re-vision has been seen as both a process of reclamation and as an implicit challenge to the authority of canonical literature. For Rich this "act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering a text from a new critical direction", was tantamount to "an act of survival", a radical critique of literature and its prejudicial assumptions (Rich 1972: 35). Rich was concerned with re-vision's potential for feminism, but in later years the practice of re-vising or 'writing back' to the canon has proved an important development in Marxist and postcolonial, as well as feminist literary studies. As Grace Moore has claimed, this process

has been vital for the recovery and reclamation of marginalized voices and the revisionist process often marks the first stage for writers attempting to move away from subordination to the English canon by revisiting or distorting 'classic' texts. (Moore 2008: 136)

I would like now to consider two points in Moore's statement as they apply to re-visionary fiction, and to the novels of Abse and Ohlsson in particular. Firstly, that re-visionary fiction is primarily involved in returning to "the English canon", and secondly, that its concern is with "distorting [those] 'classic' texts". The idea that re-visionary fiction as a genre is devoted to writing back to the classic English text is pervasive and certainly not unfounded. Neo-Victorianism after all has grown out of the same kind of historiographic and metafictional impulses as re-visionary fictions, and the fact that it has become popularly associated with the Victorian rather than being termed post-, retro-, or neo-nineteenth century suggests that it has its roots in a British context.⁵ Indeed, many of the most well-known re-visionary fictions are also neo-Victorian - *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), *Mary Reilly* (1990), *Jack Maggs* (1997), to name but a few. However, while Moore suggests that the Englishness of the texts re-visioned owes much to the contemporary "postcolonial backlash against a continuing valorisation of the English literary canon" (Moore 2008: 134), for Widdowson and Steven Connor it is essentially the familiarity of the English canon which is

important, suggesting respectively, that writers choose to re-vision “those classics that retain a high profile of admiration and popularity in our literary heritage” (Widdowson 2006: 501), because “there would be hardly any point in taking as one’s object a text that were *not* thus well known” (Connor 1994: 81 original emphasis). These statements make the re-visions of *Doctor Glas* all the more interesting.⁶ The novels of Abse and Ohlsson involve re-interpretations of a classic text which cross both linguistic and cultural divides. Moreover, while in Sweden the profile of Ohlsson’s *Gregorius* is presumably to a certain extent dependent on its identification as a revision of Söderberg’s text, in Britain (where it has also been very well-received) this identification is problematised by the fact that many readers will not be at all familiar with the earlier work.⁷ The case is similar as it pertains to Abse’s *The Strange Case of Dr Simmonds and Dr Glas*, for although the requisite familiarity is supplied via its engagement with R.L. Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), the novel is thematically and structurally dependent upon Söderberg’s text. The effect of this, I would suggest, is that, in a reversal of the general approach to re-visionary fictions, British readers are just as likely, if not more so, to approach *Doctor Glas* as a result of their engagement with the novels of Abse and Ohlsson than vice versa. Such an instance, I suggest, could potentially refine the novels’ categorisation as re-visionary fictions, and identify them more closely with those texts which Susan Onega and Christian Gutleben have termed refractions, that is, works involved in a “textual dialogue” with the parent text in which “neither of the two is considered as the source but where each sheds light on the other” (Onega and Gutleben 2004: 9).

2. Bengt Ohlsson: Resurrecting Gregorius

The greater part of the narrative of *Doctor Glas* addresses the question of whether the doctor can be justified in the decision to kill his patient, the Pastor Gregorius, if such an act will prove to be beneficial to another, namely his “pretty young wife”, Helga (Söderberg 2002: 4). The case is presented in Glas’s diary as the purely philosophical argument of a disinterested and objective observer, although, as Susan Brantly has noted, “his ‘objectivity’ is compromised by his attraction to Helga Gregorius and his revulsion for her husband” (Brantly 1992: 293). Indeed, from the very

first page of his diary Glas's instinctive antipathy towards the "odious physiognomy" of Gregorius is evident:

[W]hy, of all people, must I keep bumping into the Rev. Gregorius? I never see that man without remembering an anecdote I once heard told of Schopenhauer. One evening the austere philosopher was sitting, alone as usual, in a corner of his café, when the door opens and in comes a person of disagreeable mien. His features distorted with disgust and horror Schopenhauer gives him one look, leaps up, and begins thumping him over the head with his stick. All this, merely on account of his appearance! (Söderberg 2002: 3)

Such an act of savagery, however, is not to be countenanced by a respectable doctor. Nevertheless, just moments later Glas begins to ruminate on an 'old conundrum':

If, by pressing a button in the wall, or by a mere act of will, you could murder a Chinese mandarin and inherit his riches – would you do it? This problem I've never bothered my head to find an answer to [...] But if, by pressing a button in the wall, I could kill that clergyman, I do believe I should do it. (Söderberg 2002: 5)

The passages raise two important points which Ohlsson's novel addresses. Firstly, Glas's readiness to kill Gregorius is dependent upon his being able to maintain an appropriate physical and psychological distance from the crime. Secondly, though Glas argues that his decision to kill Gregorius is motivated entirely by a wish to protect Helga, his diary establishes that the *desire* to murder Gregorius was one the doctor had harboured for some time before she solicited his help. It is therefore debateable whether his decision to commit murder is taken in service to Helga or whether she merely provides an acceptable narrative through which Glas can articulate the violent intentions he indicates at the outset of his account.

In his review of *Gregorius*, Paul Binding suggests that many readers of *Doctor Glas* labour under a misapprehension when they accept the popular "view that Söderberg's Glas committed his crime essentially for

love of the appealing Mrs Gregorius” (Binding 2007). Rather, he argues, “Glas expressly compares himself to Dostoyevsky’s Raskolnikov [*Crime and Punishment* (1866)], and his deed [therefore] anticipates Existentialism’s rejection of conventional morality” (Binding 2007). Söderberg, he continues, “gave us Glas to arouse our critical faculties rather than our sympathies” (Binding 2007). Ohlsson would no doubt concur with this reading. In the afterword to *Gregorius*, the author notes that Söderberg’s text is, “in his own words, both ‘a thought-provoking tract and a fully formed novel’ and the question that Dr Glas seeks an answer to is whether there can ever be any justification for killing another human being” (Ohlsson 2007: 421). However, as Linder has claimed the “question” is, in fact, “purely academic” (Linder 1965: 45).⁸ For ultimately Glas, fearing that life has passed him by, is looking for a feat to perform, something to prove that he is alive, that he is not merely “the shadow who wished to become a man” (Söderberg 2002: 50). However, as in Hans Christian Andersen’s story ‘The Shadow’ (1847), to which he refers, if the shadow is to become a man, then the man must, in turn, become a shadow. Finally, he must “be done away with.... Quietly, of course” (Andersen 1983: 344 original ellipses).

Gregorius is a fairly faithful re-vision of *Doctor Glas*, narrated by the persecuted Pastor of Söderberg’s novel. And yet, for Ohlsson, the decision to resurrect Gregorius is “more than just playing games with narrative perspective” (Ohlsson 2007: 421). Like many re-visionary novels, it invites us to reconsider the record of events offered by its pre-text; the resurrection or repositioning of a previously silenced or marginal character works to demonstrate “how unstable such apparently truthful accounts [...] may be” (Widdowson 2006: 505). In this sense, Ohlsson’s novel belongs to a tradition of neo-Victorian fictions, beginning with Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), which induce the canonical texts of the nineteenth century to speak in new ways to a contemporary audience, by reconstructing the voices of the disenfranchised and peripheral figures of the original work. Therefore, one could not, after reading Rhys’s novel, return to *Jane Eyre* (1847) ignorant of its underlying prejudice, or the extent to which the heroine’s – or, indeed, the text’s – triumph is dependent upon the violent sacrifice of Bertha Mason. Similarly, the repositioning of the Magwitch character of Dickens’s *Great Expectations* (1860-61) at the centre of Peter Carey’s *Jack Maggs* (1997) serves to indict Dickens for the callous way in

which the injustices of transportation are obscured by its status as plot device in the original novel. A slightly different example, however, would be Valerie Martin's introduction of a working-class female voice into the hallowed environs of the gentlemen's club atmosphere of Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* in her re-vision of the novel, *Mary Reilly*. Essentially, what all these novels have in common is, as Moore notes, a desire to "bring to prominence figures who were marginalized in the original text as a result of social and economic prejudice" (Moore 2008: 140). It is for this reason, perhaps, that Widdowson discerns a clear "feminist or postcolonial animus" in the re-visionary tradition (Widdowson 2006: 497). And it is at this point that Ohlsson's novel diverges from the concerns of its forebears.

Though rendered marginal within the pages of Dr Glas's diary, the Rev. Gregorius is not innately disadvantaged, either socially or economically. On the contrary, his professional standing establishes him as Glas's equal. One might venture, then, that Ohlsson's re-vision of Söderberg's novel has as much in common with the impetus of Will Self's *Dorian: An Imitation* (2002) as it does with reparative feminist or postcolonial fictions. Self, after all, is not pursuing a project that would see him bring Sibyl Vane centre stage, but he is engaged in rendering explicit the disguised references and witty innuendo of Wilde's text so that his characters' 'sins' are exposed for all to see. It is in this spirit of exposure or elucidation that *Gregorius* proceeds, reclaiming the voice of the Pastor in order to explore the justifications for his marginalisation, while encouraging the reader not only to see Gregorius, but in so doing to see through the rhetorical arguments of Glas.

According to Ohlsson, the objective behind the resurrection of Gregorius is to address the way in which the character is "carved out" by Söderberg "with a definite aim in mind" (Ohlsson 2007: 421). In the pages of Glas's diary, Gregorius hardly features as a character at all, but only as a figure of the shadows, teetering at the periphery of the text. From the first we are given to believe that the Pastor is a loathsome man, disliked by everyone; worse still, he has raped his wife. Soon, he appears little more than a "creature", a "nasty fungus", which must be removed before it poisons the life of his wife (Söderberg 2002: 27, 4). It is through this strategic abjection that Glas "gradually strips the Pastor of every trace of humanity, one piece at a time" until, finally, "even modern readers begin to

feel their humanitarian instincts crack” (Ohlsson 2007: 422, 421). Significantly, Ohlsson views this narrative technique as Glas’s *preparation* to commit murder, a rhetorical process intended to prevent him from “going under” as he wrestles with the ethical implications of his violent desires (Ohlsson 2007: 421). And certainly, as Glas comes to see the impending murder of Gregorius in an increasingly utilitarian light, he imagines himself not as a murderer but as a healer, a righteous crusader who will destroy the “rotten flesh which is spoiling the healthy” (Söderberg 2002: 88). This process of aesthetic and psychological distancing is not unlike that which Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak identifies as being directed towards Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, in which it functions “to render indeterminate the boundary between human and animal and thereby to weaken her entitlement under the spirit if not the letter of the Law” (Spivak 1985: 249). Similarly, in *Doctor Glas* the doctor’s gradual dehumanising of Gregorius works to recast the impending murder as a heroic as opposed to an unethical act.

In *Gregorius*, then, Ohlsson aims to present the reader with a more complete character rather than Glas’s piecemeal depiction. His novel is thus conceived as “a movement in the opposite direction,” a narrative through which the persecuted Pastor becomes whole again, though not, Ohlsson stresses, more “sympathetic”, just more human (Ohlsson 2007: 422). One of the principal techniques by which Ohlsson enables us to see Gregorius more clearly is to allow us to follow him into his banishment at the spa retreat to which he is sent by Glas, and which is very much “off-stage” in the original text. Here, released from the confines of *Doctor Glas*, Gregorius becomes “more sharply defined. Easier to like, and for that matter easier to dislike, but no longer someone who inspires nothing but vaguely gloomy thoughts in others” (Ohlsson 2007: 332). In this way the novel steadily brings Gregorius into focus for the reader, the effect being that, as one becomes better acquainted with the man, the inevitability and justifiability of his demise becomes much less clear-cut.

Ohlsson’s technique has much in common with that used by Valerie Martin in *Mary Reilly*, in which the decision to endow the formerly silenced maid with ultimate narrative authority ensures that Martin, as Marta Bryk has noted, is able “to broaden the scope of her novel”, as Mary relates her tale from within Jekyll’s home, a place from which the focalising characters of Stevenson’s novel are excluded (Bryk 2004: 207). Nevertheless, Martin’s aim in creating a below stairs world of service to complement and

counteract the above stairs world of affluence and patriarchal authority has been read as “implicitly condemning the [social] vision offered by Stevenson” (Bryk, 2004: 208). On the other hand, Ohlsson’s challenge to the authority of Dr Glas, rather than being conceived as a condemnation of the ideological impulses of Söderberg’s text, is figured as an exploration of the ethical implications of distance, or, as Carlo Ginzburg terms it, the “chronological and geographical limits of pity”, which challenges the way in which the novel is often read (Ginzburg 1994: 48).⁹ Ohlsson’s engagement with the concept of pity or empathy as reliant upon distance appears to be double edged. Firstly, and primarily, by bringing us into a closer acquaintance with Gregorius, Ohlsson demonstrates the ways in which Dr Glas’s narrative, by dehumanising the Pastor, that is, by making him decidedly not one of us, works primarily not as a rationalisation for murder but as a justification for his own illogical prejudices. After all, as he has Gregorius say, “[i]f [there’s] someone you feel hostile to you’ll furnish them with a series of unattractive qualities, so that in the end your antipathy will appear entirely comprehensible, even logical” (Ohlsson, 2007: 276). Thus Glas’s presentation of Gregorius’s murder as an altruistic act performed in service to Helga Gregorius can be seen, as Söderberg perhaps intended, as an “exculpatory and ennobling legend of his own” devising (Schoolfield 2003: 299). Secondly, as the conundrum, with which Glas introduces Gregorius’s impending demise, suggests, the extent of one’s psychological and/or physical distance from crime can have a considerable impact on one’s conception and experience of the event itself. As Diderot wrote in 1771, “perhaps distance in space or time weaken[s] all feelings and all sorts of guilty conscience, even of crime” (cited in Ginzburg 1994: 50). It seems possible, then, that although Ohlsson credits “modern readers” with well-developed “humanitarian instincts”, that our intellectual and emotional engagement with the murder of Gregorius is somewhat limited by our temporal distance from Söderberg’s text. Therefore, by revising *Doctor Glas* for the twenty-first century, Ohlsson’s text works to counteract the means by which, as Matthew Sweet writes, we have “imbued nineteenth-century killing with a seasonal charm, a cuteness that we would not be willing to extend to the activities of more recent murders” (Sweet 2002: 74), and to invite us to consider anew the ethical underpinnings of the original novel.¹⁰

3. The Multiple Re-Visions of Dannie Abse

In *The Strange Case of Dr Simmonds and Dr Glas*, Dannie Abse strays still further from the confines of *Doctor Glas*, transposing the Swedish tale to 1950, specifically post-war London. Abse’s decision to both update and relocate his narrative allows him to address directly issues to which Ohlsson can merely allude: the displacement of countless Jewish refugees, for example, signifies a terrifying development of the prejudice that saw Gregorius excised from the narrative of *Doctor Glas*.¹¹ The novel is structured as another fictional diary, that of the titular Dr Simmonds, and essentially recreates the triangle at the centre of *Doctor Glas*, with the diarist, Dr Simmonds, adopting the role of Glas, and finding himself attracted to the beautiful Yvonne Bloomberg, while harboring murderous and distinctly anti-Semitic feelings toward her husband Anton.¹²

As the title suggests, *The Strange Case of Dr Simmonds and Dr Glas* is a reworking of Söderberg’s novel that is also heavily influenced by Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Moreover, when *Doctor Glas* enters the narrative in tangible form as a copy of the novel given to Simmonds by Yvonne Bloomberg, Abse invokes that other great example of *fin de siècle* decadence, Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891).¹³ Linder may have believed that the subject matter of *Doctor Glas* could alienate modern readers, but in George Schoolfield’s view anyone familiar with the decadent fiction of the *fin de siècle* is likely to find much of value in Söderberg’s novel: “it is a treasure trove of debts and contributions to that literature: the neurasthenic protagonist with his stunted emotional life, the protagonist as murderer or semi-murderer” (Schoolfield 2003: 293). The thematic similarities between the novels of Söderberg, Stevenson and Wilde are numerous – the nature and visibility of evil, hypocrisy and the double life, the Faustian pact – but it is through their engagement with issues of individual responsibility and determinism that Abse most convincingly aligns these classics of *fin de siècle* literature.

In her study of twentieth-century Swedish literature Brantly identifies Söderberg as a leading proponent of *sekelskiftet*, that is, Swedish literature of the *fin de siècle*, and states that “[o]ne of the dominant features of literature of the *sekelskiftet* is the belief in biological determinism” (Brantly 1992: 291). Thus in *Doctor Glas* the murder of Gregorius is first conceived, as Tom Geddes has argued, “as an extension of Dr Glas’s argument on the problem of free will and determinism”, which becomes “a

desperate attempt to commit one act” (Geddes 1999: 120). Nevertheless, by the end of his narrative, Glas has arrived at the conclusion that his murderous act has, in fact, been determined from the start, a result of inexorable influences beyond his control:

I felt my ‘action’ to be a link in a chain, a wave in a greater movement; a chain and a movement which had had their beginning long before my first thought, long before the day when my father first looked with desire upon my mother. I felt the law of *necessity*: felt it bodily, as a shiver passing through marrow and bone. I felt no guilt. There is no guilt. (Söderberg 2002: 127)

This declaration made in the final pages of Glas’s diary is an explicit refutation of responsibility for the murder of Gregorius through an appeal to the forces of nature. It also presents us with a concept of criminality that was not uncommon in literature of the period. As Martin Wiener asserts, the growth of theories of determinism during the nineteenth century ensured that instances of criminality and deviance, rather than being attributed to “inadequately controlled energies” became increasingly associated with “a relative lack of autonomy” (Wiener 1994: 226). By the 1880s and 1890s the popularisation of these theories had exerted its influence on the literary image of the criminal, who, having been “reshaped by the diminishing sense of power of the individual will”, was now “no longer a wicked individual but rather a product of his environment and heredity” (Wiener 1994: 226). This is an image discernable in both *Jekyll & Hyde* and *Dorian Gray*. In Henry Jekyll’s ‘Statement of the Case’, which concludes Stevenson’s tale, the errant doctor repeatedly refers to himself as “doomed”; he also figures himself as a “slave” to the “primitive”, the “bestial”, and the “lower elements” of his nature which reside in the body of Hyde (Stevenson 2006: 54, 53, 57), all of which indicate that Jekyll’s “atavistic alibi” is an evolutionary throwback, evidence of the savage past that governs the present (Mighall 2003: 151). Similarly, when the deteriorating portrait of Dorian Gray begins to resemble “the twisted body” of the grandfather of whom Dorian has “hateful memories”, heredity as an inescapable legacy is invoked once more (Wilde 2000: 118, 114). Indeed, as Robert Mighall writes, ‘Dorian is a product of his heredity. His criminal tendencies derive

from his grandfather [...] By stressing the role of heredity in Dorian’s actions, making him a ‘scientific’ rather than a moral study, Wilde was [...] diminishing Dorian’s moral responsibility for his actions” (Mighall 2000: xx).

Abse’s novel, however, presents the determinist arguments of Glas (and, therefore, indirectly, those of Jekyll and Gray) as merely another exculpatory narrative intended to account for an otherwise irrational prejudice and fatal act, while his decision to set his novel in a post-war, post-Holocaust climate ensures that modern readers have an all too familiar example from recent history of the potentially catastrophic effects of the kind of theoretical arguments upon which Glas ruminates in Söderberg’s novel. In the character of Dr Simmonds, Abse presents us with a man whose buried prejudices find a covert fulfillment and vindication in the fantasy of a deterministic heredity:

The Nazis must have felt that way [the exhilaration of belonging to a crowd], losing momentarily their individual identity [...] as they held high their swastika banners and torch-marched through the night towards their floodlit, fulminating, hypnotic Führer. Had I been born in Germany, would I like so many, have welcomed the irresponsibility of conformity and ease – freed from the pressures of choice? (Abse 2003: 30-31)

Though *The Strange Case of Dr Simmonds and Dr Glas* is not a complete re-visioning of either *Jekyll and Hyde* or *Dorian Gray*, both novels contribute significantly to the thematic framework of Abse’s text, as well as suggesting affinities between Söderberg’s novel and its British counterparts. It is perhaps not surprising then that it should bear some slight similarity to Emma Tennant’s earlier re-vision of Stevenson’s tale, *Two Women of London: The Strange Case of Ms Jekyll and Mrs Hyde* (1989). Tennant’s novel is essentially a feminist re-working of *Jekyll and Hyde* which, like Abse’s novel, uses a temporal transposition - in this case to the 1980s - to address the sexual and social bias of Stevenson’s narrative through an exploration of the effects of Thatcherism in the twentieth century. However, its similarities with Abse’s novel are most obvious in its engagement with medical ethics and individual moral responsibility. Of particular

significance is Jean Hastie's work on the Gnostic Gospels, which leads her to conclude that "[t]he message of the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is that we are responsible for the choices we freely make, good or evil, just as Adam was" (Tennant 1989: 73). For Steven Connor, Hastie's statement asserts a "doctrine of ethical self-determination and self authorship [which] stands against the demonizing impulses of Stevenson's story" (Connor 1994: 86). The implication, of course, is that, regardless of temptation, we each bear responsibility for our choices and actions, even if the temptation in question is the influence of a lovely woman, or, perhaps, a poisonous book.

Abse's use of Söderberg's text is ingenious; the novel both incorporates and re-works the original in such a deft manner that it is difficult to determine which is the more dominant narrative: does *Doctor Glas* inspire the events related in Simmonds's journal, or does it merely contextualize them? As soon as he begins to read Söderberg's novel, Simmonds is alerted to the peculiar similarities between his own life and that of the fictional doctor: "What game is this? Why has Yvonne Bloomberg given me this particular book? Is it just because I'm a doctor who keeps a journal or has she a more arcane motive?" (Abse 2003: 50). Significantly, Simmonds's suspicion of an "arcane motive" on the part of Yvonne is immediately suggestive of the kind of concerns surrounding the potential influences of literature, which inspired the outcry against Söderberg's novel following its initial publication. Nevertheless, as the story progresses, so too does his identification with Dr Glas, and the Söderberg tale becomes inextricably entwined with his own narrative:

I remember how the Reverend Gregorius took the cyanide. He was accompanied by Dr Glas who recommended it. He swallowed it down with a drink of water, believing it was good for his heart. Then Dr Glas heard Anton Bloomberg's glass fall and shatter on the floor; he saw Bloomberg's arm drop limply down and his Jewish face sink down towards his chest with his fish-eyes widely open.

I must not. I dare not. (Abse 2003: 125)

The infiltration of *Doctor Glas* into Simmonds's text is so significant that the journal begins to resemble a narrative of possession: "I sense that some

external power is trying to plant ideas in my mind” (Abse 2003: 180). It is unsurprising, then, that in the aftermath of the attempt on Anton Bloomberg’s life, Simmonds insists, “I gave the injection to Anton Bloomberg while I was not myself, while I was sleep-walking” (Abse 2003: 180). Simmonds’s claim amounts to a plea of temporary insanity, very much like Jekyll’s claim of being “no more myself when I laid aside restraint and plunged in shame” in the guise of Mr Hyde (Stevenson 2006: 52). However, just as Jekyll’s creation of Hyde provides an outlet for pre-existing desires, so Abse suggests that the rationale for crime follows rather than precedes the event: “criminals [...] kill because they need to kill and afterwards swipe the corpse’s jewels or money. Otherwise they’d think themselves mad” (Abse 2003: 54). This notion of retrospective justification is structurally embedded within Abse’s novel, and the textual clues which problematise the authority of Glas’s account are replaced in his text by a framing narrative that ostensibly promotes but, finally, utterly denies the veracity of the history it contains.

Set in the year 2000 – fifty years after the events depicted in Dr Simmonds’s journal – the framing narrative is related from the perspective of Peter Dawson, a literary agent, who is approached by Yvonne Bloomberg with a request that he manage the publication of the journal of Dr Simmonds, which she has in her possession. Having introduced the central narrative in this way, the novel then closes with a series of letters, which represent the negotiations pertaining to the publication of the manuscript that has been given the title *Dr Simmonds and Dr Glas*. In the course of this correspondence, it transpires that the first English translation of *Doctor Glas* was not published until 1963 and therefore could not possibly have influenced the events of 1950, as they are related in the journal, but has apparently been used to contextualise the story at a later date or to provide a retrospective motivation for the attack on Anton Bloomberg. Dr Simmonds, it seems, stands as evidence of Wilde’s claim that there is no such thing as a poisonous book: “Art has no influence upon action” (Wilde 2000: 208). Rather, like the hypothetical reader of *Dorian Gray*, Simmonds has looked into a book, seen a reflection of himself but, unlike that reader, instead of recoiling in horror, has seen within it a justification for his own unacknowledged prejudices.¹⁴

Finally, however, while the chronological inconsistency within the text of Dr Simmonds’s journal highlights the way that events can be

justified in the context of an alternative narrative, Dawson's failure to notice the contradiction at the heart of the story is of equal significance, for it is surely representative of the way in which *Doctor Glas* has often been misread or, as Brantly suggests, read "somewhat naively" (Brantly 1992: 293). Fortunately, however, his correspondence also encourages a return to Söderberg's original work, suggesting that:

It is intriguing to compare the books – and readers might be interested to do that [...] I fully agree with William Sansom when he...enthused about the [...] novel [...] 'In most of its writing and much of its frankness of thought, it might have been written tomorrow...'

Well, tomorrow is today! (Abse 2003: 191).

4. Trust Me I'm a Doctor

In *Inventing the Victorians* Matthew Sweet closes his fifth chapter 'I Knew My Doctor Was a Serial Killer Because...' with reference to a church service he attended shortly after the trial of Dr Harold Shipman:

The Rev Michael Newman opened his address with a gag: "What's the difference between a doctor and God?" There was a small pause as we tried to guess the punch line, but nobody managed it. "God," said the Rev Newman, "knows he's not a doctor." There was an audible "Ah!" as his parishioners absorbed the truth of this observation. (Sweet 2002: 85)¹⁵

Sweet was in Rugely, the former home of the notorious Dr Palmer, Victorian England's most prolific poisoner, to investigate the remarkable similarities between the crimes of the two doctors. His conclusion, namely that, despite the intervening one hundred and fifty years, each murderer had been able to rely upon his patients' unswerving "faith in his professional authority" in order to carry out his intentions (Sweet, 2002: 73), raises interesting questions concerning not only the unchallenged authority of the doctor and our role in upholding it, but also, indirectly, the credence given to the narrative of Dr Glas.

At the end of *Doctor Glas* Gregorius dies. Having encountered Glas by chance in town, he accepts a pill, which the doctor offers with the assurance that it will be good for his heart. The pill is, in fact, a compound of potassium cyanide, which the doctor made some time earlier. Gregorius dies almost instantly. The scene is played out again in Ohlsson’s *Gregorius*, but of course here it is seen from a somewhat different perspective. Ohlsson has said that at one time he entertained the possibility of saving the Pastor’s life, but Dr Glas still offered him the pill, while Gregorius, one could argue, made the choice to accept it long ago (Ohlsson 2007: 422). However, it is Ohlsson’s focus upon this choice at the close of his novel which, while it does nothing to absolve Glas of his guilt, certainly destabilises the inevitability of Gregorius’s demise. At the time of his death Gregorius has only recently returned from the spa town to which he had been exiled by Glas, and here the Pastor had reached two conclusions. First of all, there is nothing wrong with his heart, for certainly the spa’s renowned doctor could find nothing at all amiss. Secondly, and most poignantly, he declares, “I want to live. I don’t think I’ve ever wanted to live more than I do now” (Ohlsson 2007: 359). Nevertheless, when Glas offers him the pill, the Pastor’s reaction is automatic:

I thank him and take one and it’s not until I put it in my mouth that I’m struck by the irony of the situation. That I take a heart pill from him when I had really wanted to tell him that Dr Lidin had found nothing wrong with my heart. (Ohlsson 2007: 417)

Finally, Ohlsson suggests, Gregorius’s ingrained passivity renders him complicit in his own untimely end.

To a certain extent the death of the Rev. Gregorius at the hands of Dr Glas can be seen as an allegory of the triumph of science over religion, which came to mark the twentieth century. Indeed, the growing professionalisation of medical practice in the nineteenth century, by granting physicians the exclusive right to treat diseases of both body and mind (Shuttleworth 1996: 42), witnessed a transition that was, for Foucault, akin to the “establishment of a therapeutic clergy” (Foucault 2003: 36). Even as early as 1848, so Sally Shuttleworth has noted, an article on ‘Moral Physiology; or, the Priest and the Physician’ concluded that “medical

science ha[d] rendered the role of the priest all but redundant” (Shuttleworth 1996: 42). She continues:

Increasingly social problems and individual deviance were medicalized, traced back to a physiological base. The physician, in consequence, was raised to a new eminence: the arbiter or normalcy, and licensed interpreter of the hidden secrets of social and individual life (Shuttleworth 1996: 42).

Is it his role, then, as “licensed interpreter” that enables Glas to argue so convincingly for Gregorius’s innate deviance and the necessary treatment?

In *Doctor Glas*, Gregorius remains in the margins of the text; the very ambiguity of his physical presence encourages the reader to see him less as a human being and more as a case, a problem in need of a solution. Little wonder then that in *Gregorius* we find the Pastor “overcome with longing for Dr Glas’s predecessor, old Dr Morén [...]. To him the practice of his profession was a passionate research project [...]. It was there, in the human body, that Morén found God” (Ohlsson 2007: 116). However, as Iain Bamforth writes, by the mid-nineteenth century the “individual patient” was already “on the way to becoming a case study, while the old Hippocratic notion of the medical triangle (disease, doctor, patient) gave way to a duel between doctor and disease” (Bamforth 2003: xiv), hence Glas’s conception of the Gregorius marriage as one between the “rotten flesh” and the “healthy” (Söderberg 2002: 88). This sentiment is echoed by Abse’s Dr Simmonds, who declares, “I was taught about diseases, not about patients” (Abse 2003: 74).

There is little doubt that these novels see science, or medicine, as the pre-eminent metanarrative of the twenty-first century, “trumpet[ing] out recommendations [...] like imperial edicts” over the heads of the populace (Ohlsson 2007: 107), and both are deeply sceptical of the totalising tendencies of a narrative schema that views the treatment of human beings as an abstract idea or philosophical conundrum. Dannie Abse, a doctor himself, is perfectly placed to trace the development of medicine in the twentieth century, from the “migratory power” of the pre-war years, through the antibiotic revolution of the 1940s and 1950s (Abse 2003: 56). However, it is the image of the doctor as magician that proliferates in his *Strange Case*:

The ancient Egyptian healers believed, “He who treats the sick must be expert and learned in the proper incantations and know how to make amulets.” They didn’t teach me that when I was a student at the Westminster Hospital Medical School, though some of the prescriptions I wrote out when I qualified in 1934 were hardly more scientifically based. No wonder someone once accused doctors of dropping drugs of which they knew little into stomachs of which they knew less. (Abse 2003: 21).¹⁶

The discovery of penicillin, of course, altered this situation, allowing the doctor the opportunity, as Simmonds claims, to “possess a wand” (Abse 2003: 56). Nevertheless, Dr Simmonds will discover that his power to harm far outweighs his potential to heal. In the character of Dr Simmonds Abse conflates science with narrative, and, ultimately, illusion (even his fantasy of freeing Yvonne from her marriage involves Houdini) in a man whose role is signified not by a wand, but by a drug.

In the novels of Ohlsson and Abse the image of the pill carries a weight of symbolism, functioning as a metaphor for the dominance of scientific discourse in the modern world. For Abse’s Dr Simmonds it represents two sides of the coin, both the magus-like power of the doctor, following the antibiotic revolution, and the impotent emptiness of science in the face of real human tragedy, for, faced with the myriad of psychological and stress disorders presented by his Jewish patients, “all [Simmonds] can do is prescribe a placebo – an iron tonic, a vitamin or a sedative. Just to reassure them doesn’t seem enough” (Abse 2003: 20). Ohlsson, on the other hand, adapts his use of the image directly from Söderberg’s text, in which Dr Glas’s final act is foreshadowed by his recommendation to Gregorius that the ritual of Holy Communion could be made more hygienic if the communion wine were administered in capsules. Margaret Atwood has suggested (not erroneously) that this is an example of one of the more “burlesque” elements of the novel (Atwood 2002: viii). However, from the postmodern perspective of Abse and Ohlsson, it appears to be more representative of the discourses we so unthinkingly swallow and of the almost seamless exchange of Science for Christianity as the Grand Narrative of the Western world.

In *Doctor Glas* Gregorius is a figure of the margins. Yet the doctor also remains concealed within the text, his motives veiled by an apparently dispassionate objectivity, just as his person is obscured by the profession that acquires for him both Helga's confidence and the reader's faith. Through their re-visions, however, Abse and Ohlsson bring us into closer acquaintance with these two characters, enabling us to see the man in the doctor and the man in the monster. The result, we find, is that while the murder of Gregorius the man is no longer so easily justifiable, neither is the impartiality of the doctor so easily verifiable. For Linder Söderberg's text was marked by a "hatred of theology" (Linder 1965: 45).¹⁷ Conversely, by exposing a corresponding display of dubiousness with regard to the narrative and ethical authority of the doctor at the centre of Söderberg's novel, the work of Abse and Ohlsson functions to realign its concerns with those of our own postmodern era. In doing so they fulfil the purpose of revisionary fiction which, as Widdowson propounds, is to:

not only produce a different, autonomous new work by rewriting the original [...] but also [to] denaturalize that original by exposing the discourses in it which we no longer see because we have perhaps learned to read it in restricted ways. That is, they recast the pre-text as itself a 'new' text to be read newly – enabling us to 'see' a different one to the one we thought we knew. (Widdowson 2006: 503)

However, I would suggest that, rather than denaturalising *Doctor Glas*, its re-visions work 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. Finally, therefore, the novels reveal their *refractive* impulses by "invit[ing] a rediscovery of the earlier text rather than a condemnation of [its] political premise" (Onega and Gutleben 2004: 13).

Notes

1. An alternative translation by Rochelle Wright was published in the USA in 1998, although it appears Austin’s is considered to be the definitive edition.
2. Although *Doctor Glas* is properly an early twentieth-century text, the tale is set in the closing years of the nineteenth century.
3. According to Eva Akinvall Franke, such was the reaction to the novel that it was suggested by one cultural watchdog that the book was potentially “dangerous” in the hands of young readers (Franke 2004: 29).
4. Again Schoolfield is referring to Linder’s *Ny illustrerad svensk litteraturhistoria Fem decennier av nittonhundratalet* (1965).
5. Nevertheless, increasingly the term neo-Victorian is being used to identify a whole range of texts by non-British authors, or which feature non-British locations etc. What these novels appear to have in common, however, is a critical engagement with so-called ‘Victorian values’.
6. Of course there is no reason to assume that in re-visioning a European text they are anomalous; other recent re-visions of non-English canonical texts would include Irina Reyn’s re-working of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* (1873-77) in *What Happened to Anna K* (2008) or Cristina Rivera Garza’s *No One Will See Me Cry*, (2003), which owes a considerable debt to the Mexican classic *Santa* (1903) by Federico Gamboa.
7. This is to some extent an assumption but given that *Doctor Glas* had been out of print in its English edition since the late 1970s it seems to be a fair one.
8. Linder writes: “Problemet är löst från början – läkarens inre överväganden är rent akademisk debatt.” (“The problem is solved from the beginning – the doctor’s internal deliberations are purely academic debate.”) (Linder 1965: 45)
9. This is an issue raised in *Doctor Glas* when Glas writes: “as for the lives of faraway, unseen people, no one has ever cared a fig for them” (Söderberg 2002: 8).
10. Sweet here refers to the legacy of Dr Palmer, the infamous nineteenth-century poisoner, who is now something of an “icon” (Sweet 2002: 84).
11. Reviewing the novel in *The Spectator*, Alan Wall claimed that Abse’s novel “probably ranks as one of the subtlest studies of prejudice ever written” (Wall 2002: 2). In his afterword to *Gregorius* Ohlsson compares the abjection of Gregorius to similar processes used by the Nazis (Ohlsson 2007: 421).
12. Simmonds, however, refuses to accept that his feelings toward Anton may be influenced by anti-Semitism, though he does confess that his friend “Rhys

reckons I have a vestigial sprinkling of Nazism in my soul [...]He even suggests I'm a bit anti-Semitic" (Abse 2002: 31).

13. Dorian accuses Lord Henry Wotton of poisoning him with a book generally thought to be Joris-Karl Huysmans' *À Rebours* (1884).
14. Lord Henry tells Dorian that: "The books that the world calls immoral are the books that show the world its own shame" (Wilde 2000: 208).
15. Shipman was found guilty of murdering fifteen patients with overdoses of morphine in 2000.
16. The image also appears in Abse's play 'Pythagoras (Smith)' (1990), as well as some of the poems in his collection *White Coat, Purple Coat* (1989).
17. Linder suggests that the novel's "hatet mot teologin" ("hatred of theology") is one of the elements which "försvagar dess verkan" ("weakens its effect") (Linder 1965: 45).

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