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MOLINA-GARCIA (Erika Natalia), « Taste and Time. An Essay on the Phenomenology of Hunger and Theatre », *European Drama and Performance Studies*, n° 23, 2024 – 2, *Stage and Plate. Eating and Starving in European Drama and Theatres (16th-19th century)*

DOI : [10.48611/isbn.978-2-406-17447-9.p.0375](https://doi.org/10.48611/isbn.978-2-406-17447-9.p.0375)

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MOLINA-GARCIA (Erika Natalia), « Taste and Time. An Essay on the Phenomenology of Hunger and Theatre »

RÉSUMÉ – Prenant appui sur les œuvres de Husserl, Ingarden et Levinas, cet article explore la pièce *Rosmersholm* d'Ibsen dans une perspective phénoménologique, cherchant à éclaircir à la fois le sens de cette pièce, la phénoménologie de la faim et du théâtre, ainsi que la signification plus générale de la jouissance alimentaire.

MOTS-CLÉS – *Rosmersholm*, *Bild-bewusstsein*, Epoché, métaphysique de la présence, nausée, plaisir, proximité, Edmund Husserl, Roman Ingarden, Emmanuel Levinas

MOLINA-GARCIA (Erika Natalia), « Goût et temps. Essai sur la phénoménologie de la faim et du théâtre »

ABSTRACT – Drawing on Husserl, Ingarden and Levinas' works, this article explores Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* from a phenomenological perspective, aiming to shed light both on this play and on the phenomenology of hunger and theatre, as well as on the larger meaning of alimentary enjoyment.

KEYWORDS – *Rosmersholm*, *Bild-bewusstsein*, Epoché, metaphysics of presence, nausea, enjoyment, proximity, Edmund Husserl, Roman Ingarden, Emmanuel Levinas

TASTE AND TIME

An Essay on the Phenomenology of Hunger and Theatre

*Meanwhile, until earth's structure vast
Philosophy can bind at last,
'Tis she that bids its pinion move,
By means of hunger and of love!*¹

In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud assigns to this poem, Schiller's *Die Weltweisen*, the *starting-point* of his energetic theory of instincts and libido. The hunger and love that move the world, the two forces that keep it going, became in Freud's interpretation of psychic life the two preservation instincts we are all subjected to: the preservation of ourselves and the preservation of the species. These preservation instincts act like two forces with two different directions: the hunger that preserves the ego is a centripetal force for it desires to consume, to bring alterity *into* oneself, digesting what is eaten, assimilating, making it a part of us, whereas the love that preserves the species is a centrifugal one for it desires to touch, to go towards and get into contact with the objects of its desire, not to assimilate them, but to partially fuse with them into a new production, a new life: to re-produce beyond the ego. This second kind of instinct, the centrifugal object-instinct, not the ego-preserving hunger, is what Freud called *libido*.² Thus, when we address hunger, as we well know from our daily experience and as we can realise it when we reflect upon it, we address a primary aspect of our lives: our needs, those that are immediately ours, that do not go through the mediation

1 Friedrich Schiller, *The Poems of Schiller Edited by Henry D. Wireman* (Philadelphia: I. Kohler, 1879), p. 313.

2 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), p. 104.

of the other, of love and its objects. These needs that hunger names are in a much stronger sense beyond any rational control. This is why the analyses of sensory experience specifically relating to eating and tasting are important: not only because of the contemporary reassessing of the body as such, after centuries of religious and philosophical rejection of our embodied existence but because the taste of the world, how we savour it and live from it, highlights the intimate, alimentary, sensuous and dependent relationship in which we are, as long as we live, with all of its nourishments.

Tasting, like eating, spans the range from satisfaction of brute hunger (and salvaging a body from death by starvation) to the most frivolous, chosen experimentation. The particular circumstances under which one eats are not incidental but become significant in the meanings of foods and tastes [...]. Tasting is an intentional activity, which is to say, it is a conscious event that is directed to some object or other.³

In this *gustatory semantics*⁴ that takes shape as the deeper meanings of eating are reflected upon, the study of cultural narratives such as theatre becomes significant. In this setting, drawing on the phenomenology of theatre as the intentional and bodily analysis of theatre from the perspective of any and all its participants, be it actors, spectators or any other subject coming *into play*, here I explore the role of alimentary scenes and enjoyment in one of the plays phenomenologists worked on: Ibsen's *Rosmersholm*. Aiming to shed light both on this *pièce* and on the realms of the phenomenology of hunger and theatre, as well as in the larger meanings of nourishment, I will first do a preliminary analysis of Ibsen's play, to then explore how it can be considered a phenomenological *mise en scène*, where it is not society nor the psychological structure of the subject that are decisive but the basic dynamics of life and meaning that are: hunger and love, enjoyment and touch, the sensible constitution of the self and of the other.

3 Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 96.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 185.

SUPPER AT ROSMERSHOLM:
THE ANCHOR BEFORE THE STORM

Rosmersholm is the first of the so-called Middle Plays, composed while Ibsen lived in Munich. Appearing in 1886, one year after Ibsen's first visit to Norway in eleven years, and before the publication of *The Lady from the Sea* (1888) and *Hedda Gabler* (1890), the other two plays of this period,⁵ *Rosmersholm* condensates succinctly what can be called Ibsen's *third way* or Ibsen's *evasion*, namely a gesture indicating that, although the crucial debates of his time around politics and social conflict on the one hand, and around the psychic life of the subject on the other, are being reflected upon and problematised through his plays, there is something else *at play* as well, something else being thought: a dramatic line that we might call phenomenological. Being written and taking place at the end of the nineteenth century, *Rosmersholm* could, indeed, be understood by one of the two tendencies (or a combination of them) that are habitual in the hermeneutics of Ibsen's work as an expression of modernity, i.e. the readings that reduce it to social criticism or to *character studies* (in-depth explorations of the human psyche).

As the father of modern drama, Ibsen is visionary in his projection of a modern self that departs from traditional cultural frameworks. Almost all of his plays are concerned with the representation of characters against traditional fixed parameters of self-definition. This modern self is reflective and critical, as opposed to the dutiful and obligatory; it is framed beyond the confines of traditional institutions, such as family, law, society, and the church. [...] Ibsen criticism over the past century has been focused mainly on the *social plays*. However, there has also been a growing interest in Ibsen's works that probe hidden psychological issues in characters.⁶

Such readings, Marxist or Freudian, would not be astray: the play opens, indeed, with trauma, with the evocation of a recent suicide, and

5 Janet Garton, 'The middle plays', in *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*, ed. by James McFarlane (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 106–25 (p. 108).

6 Kwok-kan Tam, 'Introduction', in *Ibsen and the Modern Self*, ed. by Kwok-kan Tam, Terry Siu-han Yip, and Frode Helland (Hong Kong: Open University of Hong Kong Press, 2010), pp. xii–xxiv (p. xiii).

tells the love story of Rebecca West and John Rosmer, both characters representing quite explicitly the newness of modernity, as well as its adrift-ness. 31-year-old Rebecca, the friend of the deceased woman, is trying to become a proper Rosmer, trying to be a part of this traditional religious family, although only to revolutionise it, even to end it, while John, the widower, quits the clergy under Rebecca's influence, in hopes of one day employing his forces to strengthen the cause of social transformation and human emancipation. Both characters confront the old regime as well as the new: the ecclesiastical and the politicians' rulings represented by the conservative Dr. Kroll and the reformist Peter Mortensgaard. Between these two tendencies, Rebecca and Rosmer have 'a vision of a third way'.⁷ They conceive a moral utopia, social change through education, along the lines of the ideals of Enlightenment: 'ROSMER. To elevate all our countrymen into noblemen'.⁸ Educative ennobling to which the tempering of wills and emancipation would organically, spontaneously follow. A revolution by virtue and truthfulness then, as opposed not only to the falsehood and harness of institutions such as religion or political parties, but also as opposed to the falsehood and harness of superstition, embodied by Mrs. Helseth, the housekeeper, and of empty intellectual vanity, represented by the dilettante figure of Ulrik Brendel. In Rosmer's words, they dream of opening themselves to *that great world of truth and freedom* that has appear to them as a possibility in their conjoined readings, *like a revelation*.⁹

Rosmersholm's phenomenological *third way* does not, nonetheless, refer to any political exception or social utopia any individual character could embody. It refers also to a different register than those readings that make of this play yet another clever illustration of the Oedipus complex, of the vicissitudes of frustrated desire and guilt, readings that date back to Freud himself. Nevertheless, we would like to bring back to memory how Freud summarises the plot:

Rebecca [...] finds a position at Rosmersholm, the home for many generations of an ancient family whose members know nothing of laughter and have sacrificed joy to a rigid fulfilment of duty. Its occupants are Johannes Rosmer, a former pastor, and his invalid wife, the childless Beata. Overcome

7 Garton, 'The middle plays', pp. 108–9.

8 Henrik Ibsen, *The Complete Major Prose Plays* (New York: Plume, 1978), p. 518.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 519.

by a wild, uncontrollable passion for the love of the high-born Rosmer, Rebecca resolves to remove the wife who stands in her way [...]. She contrives that Beata shall read a medical book in which the aim of marriage is represented to be the begetting of offspring, [...] then hints that Rosmer, whose studies and ideas she shares, is about to abandon the old faith and join the party of enlightenment [...]. The criminal scheme succeeds.¹⁰

These, the causes of Beata's death, of this indirectly but thoroughly encouraged suicide, only start to be disclosed through the sceptical enquiring of Dr. Kroll during the second act, and they are not fully revealed until the fourth and last act with Rebecca's love confession to Rosmer.

But before this deploys, before the dialogues start, hinting undoubtedly to a socio-political context and to the relevance of desire and trauma in the architecture of the human psyche, depicting external and internal landscapes that Ibsen constantly tries to explore; even before the first evocation of Beata's suicide in the first act with how Rosmer isn't able to follow the shorter path towards his house for it takes him too near the place of Beata's death and its memory; most remarkably, before all this, the play opens with a simple supper, a most anticipated dining scene that never comes. This supper points towards the *third way*, towards what we call Ibsen's phenomenological *evasion*, where the author seems to say: not this nor that but a *ligne de fuite*. First act, first scene: the proscenium curtains open. Rebecca crochets. She has almost finished a large, white shawl, and in the first line of dialogue, the housekeeper asks: 'Shouldn't I begin setting the table a bit for supper, miss?'.¹¹ This unconsummated gastronomic moment frames and extends through all of the first act, giving the whole play its tone, a hue of incompleteness, and even resonating with its ending, announcing its structure: a fractal structure of *undoings*, of *almosts*, of *never-quite-dones*. As Rebecca's shawl that will never be finished, as her intrigues that will never allow her to consummate her carnal desires for John, this friendly supper between the both of them, to which Dr. Kroll is also later invited, never takes place, symbolising the appearances that cannot be kept, the normalcy

10 Sigmund Freud, 'Some Character-Types Met with in Psycho-analytic Work', in *Writings on Art and Literature*, ed. by Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 151–75 (pp. 166–7).

11 Ibsen, *The Complete Major Prose Plays*, p. 497.

that will never take whole of any moment of the play for since its beginning it will not cease to unfold vertiginously until its decisive ending.

Rosmersholm is in this way full of incompletions at all its levels, talking about defeat and the ruins of not only traditional institutions but also of the puerile – although sincere and touching – projects of love – for a single person or for humanity – through which we as individuals might give meaning and direction to our drive, to our lives. The incompletions I would like to address are, nonetheless, yet of another type. In other words, *Rosmersholm* is not exhausted by Marxist or Freudian analyses. It does not end with nor is merely a sociopolitical drama or a psychomachia: Rosmer and Rebecca die, killing themselves together, not for honour nor a moral or political dream, not for anguish nor unrequited love. They kill themselves together with a smile on their faces, almost playing, without answering any dichotomic question, evading them, going through a third path hand in hand: 'ROSMER. For now we two are one. REBECCA. Yes. Now we're one. Come! We'll go then gladly'.¹²

How can we understand such a gesture? Should we even try to understand it or is it simply the contemporary *absurd*, the meaninglessness of life, that presents itself at the end of this *pièce*? On the contrary, in my interpretation, this gesture has a profound meaning. This joint suicide points precisely towards the *third way*, this *evasion*, this *something else* beyond the theorisation of social or psychological conflict, beyond the dichotomy between society and the individual to which *Rosmersholm* has been reduced. To clarify this *something else*, this other register or dimension that, it seems to us, *Rosmersholm* allows us to grasp, this *ligne de fuite*, I need to briefly refer to how phenomenology has thematised hunger and theatre.

12 Ibid., p. 584.

ABSENCE AND THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF THEATRE

*Phenomenological reduction is a scene, a
theatre stage.*¹³

In its founder's words, 'phenomenology is an infinite field of eidetic analyses and eidetic descriptions'.¹⁴ It is the meditative and methodical exploration (the method being phenomenological *epoché*) of what is *constant* in each of our experiences. This is the *eidetic* part: the intuitive capturing of the *essential* traits (*eidos*) of what we live, when we take the time to stop and observe it, adopting a distinct disposition of allowing phenomena to appear and letting go of our prejudices about them. In other words, in phenomenology, the aim is to describe all the regularities of experiences, the usual dynamics and constitutive elements one might be able to intuit during meditation or in *epoché*, in the *interruption* of the non-reflective course of experience. The fluidity of our daily life is interrupted but only to set up certain gestures: we pause but then we need to do the *bracketing* and neutralisation of our prejudices and beliefs – as much as we can. Finally, through this bracketing, because of it, we obtain the reductive modification of what is being lived and the neutralised modification of our attention, which can then explore more easily the scene of what is appearing. Just as a play put on to better seize and better reflect upon human emotions, in the distance and the open space of the stage, phenomenological meditation opens the scene of consciousness.

This kind of meditation is *phenomenological* because what is being lived is considered as *phenomena*, meaning it *appears* to us as taking place and making sense in the different experiences we have but we are no

13 Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 86. *La réduction phénoménologique est une scène*, Jacques Derrida, *La voix et le phénomène* (Paris: PUF, 1967), p. 96.

14 Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Third Book, Phenomenology and the Foundation of the Sciences* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1980), p. 51.

longer one with it. We detach from our beliefs around phenomena and from everything that is not essential to them, revealing their intimate functioning. The phenomenological method is therefore simple but not singular. It is simply letting experience freely appear and develop but as any meditative method, it is a constant effort: an iteration of efforts, of rememberings and neutralisations, that are not demanding, nonetheless, but rather aiming to accompany experience, to follow it without altering it too much, seeking to see, describe and understand it as best as possible. Still, it is an exercise, a change of attitude, and a reiteration of subtle activities. This is what I want to highlight quoting Derrida, above, at the beginning of this part: the phenomenological reduction is a theatre stage. Why? Because it demands a performance, a methodical exercise, as well as the exploration of the scene that is created through the *epoché*, of the space that the method is constantly opening and revealing. This is why Husserl talked so often about the phenomenological description of experiences in reference to a *new dimension*, as ‘an infinity of ever new phenomena belonging to a new dimension, coming to light only through consistent penetration into the meaning and validity implications of what was thus taken for granted’¹⁵: each *epoché* and all of them in their ensemble and iteration open and keep opening a realm where no substantial category is assumed, where, for example, this table does not appear as merely a table but as a series of constitutive elements in relation that have the meaning of *a table*.

The phenomenological stage is thus one that depends on our detaching and introspective performance, a production we construct in that way, where the play is performed by the inner workings of experience and where there is a ghostly character that examines everything: our awareness or attention.¹⁶ In this context, aesthetic moments like appreciating a painting, being moved by a melody, or going to the theatre have been capital for phenomenologists since the beginning of the discipline, for they imply a specific set of experiences particularly useful to understand one of the most important performances of consciousness: our representational capacity or,

15 Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 112.

16 For more on the similarities between performance and phenomenology, cf. Eirini Nedelkopoulou, Maaïke Bleeker, and Jon Foley Sherman, ‘Introduction’, in *Performance and Phenomenology: Traditions and Transformations*, ed. by Eirini Nedelkopoulou, Maaïke Bleeker, and Jon Foley Sherman (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 1–16.

in phenomenological terms, our *image-consciousness* (*Bildbewußtsein*). Husserl indicates¹⁷ that in aesthetic experience or when we have a *purely aesthetical* attitude, when we take something to be, not real but a *mere picture* [*bloßes Bild*], a mere representation of reality, we neutralise its effects on the world and our belief in it. For example, when we read or see the scene where Helseth witnesses Rosmer and Rebecca falling from the bridge together and disappearing into the water at the end of *Rosmersholm*, we do not believe this scene to be real. Being *de facto* the bodies of actors moving in real space and in front of us, we still see the scene not as something actually happening but *as image*, i.e. ‘without imparting to it the stamp of being or non-being, of being possible or being deemed likely’.¹⁸ This neutralisation of not only aesthetic experience but of any attitude or form of image-consciousness, mnemonic, imaginary, oneiric, or of any other kind we might come to grasp in phenomenological meditation, is one of the primary and main points of the phenomenological analysis of art. In this respect, a theatre scene is no different than a painting, a narration or a movie scene: they are embodied images.

Although there are other important points of aesthetic phenomenological analysis where theatre differentiates itself from other aesthetic experiences, particularly regarding the fact that actual living bodies perform in front of our eyes, allowing for a particular form of kinaesthetic empathy,¹⁹ the distinction between aesthetic enjoyment and aesthetic judgment applies also to all aesthetic experiences.

We can look at a picture ‘with delight.’ Then we are living in the performance of aesthetic pleasure, in the pleasure attitude, which precisely is one of ‘delight.’ Then again, we can judge the picture, with eyes of the art critic or at historian as ‘beautiful.’ Now we are living the performance of the theoretical or judgmental attitude and no longer in the appreciating or pleasure-taking.²⁰

The consideration of these two constitutive polarities of aesthetic objects and experience, pleasure and judgement, that the neutralised positing of images allows, that their being re-presentational – i.e. less-than-real but still real – allows, is the core of Roman Ingarden’s (namely,

17 Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book, General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1982), p. 262.

18 Ibid.

19 Cf. Stanton Garner, *Kinesthetic Spectatorship in the Theatre* (Cham: Springer, 2018).

20 Husserl, *Ideas, First Book*, p. 10.

the phenomenologist that gave an important place to our *Rosmersholm*) analysis of the work of art, although his examination is so detailed that the Husserlian idea of neutralisation is no longer accurate to name the particularities of aesthetic modification and of the relationship aesthetic objectivities have with reality.²¹ As we look at a painting or witness a play, we don't worry about the reality or probable occurrence of what is being re-presented. We feel, for instance, how Kroll's irritation intensifies as he discovers Rosmer's new ideals and speculates quite correctly about their source, but we do not feel that we are at any risk because of his anger, as we could be if we witnessed a similar confrontation in the real world.

Our emotions in the aesthetic world are, indeed, of a special kind. They are, simultaneously, inconsequential and freer, and more intense because of it. Even if they are lived and felt in our own bodies, and even if they might resonate in us well after the aesthetic experience has ended, giving us insights into our real lives, having sometimes earnest and lasting effects, they are not quite *ours* and merely *quasi* real, for they do not relate directly to any object or subject of our real world.

Ingarden's theory explains this by exploring the richness of phenomena and the different degrees and strata of experience that go from the initial originary sensuous emotion that, for example, a picture *carves* in us, until the moral judgement or convictions it can inspire over time. Emotion and judgement are thus two extremes of a manifold and abundant continuum of discontinuities: the aesthetic experience begins with an initial feeling that develops into many pathways. Many paths of sensation, pleasure and cognitive apprehension that will go on or stop depending on the qualities of the work of art, our psychic state, and even circumstances as trivial as how long the spectatorship experience lasts, how pure it is or how contaminated we are by external dialogue, by prejudices or by disruptions. Some of these paths will, indeed, develop into a moral position-taking or a hermeneutic-aesthetic view that will affect some of our subsequent decisions or maybe the rest of our lives. It is the fact that most of these paths, most of these bits of experience will stay in their embryonic state of sensuous emotion, and will be cutoff before they have a chance to develop and relate to the rest of our lived experience, that will create the false view of art as a pleasurable banality, as mere amusement:

21 Cf. Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art* (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 221.

[...] aesthetic experience is not a mere experience of pleasure, which stirs in us as a kind of reaction to something given in sense perception. The reasons for considering this experience as actually momentary and relatively simple are only apparent. They arise from the fact that the aesthetic experience is often not completely unfolded, for quite incidental reasons. It is interrupted before the constitution of the aesthetic object is achieved, and consequently the culmination of the experience is also missing.²²

Is in the context of this theory of aesthetic experience, or of *the literary work of art*, i.e. not only of fictional narratives or of what we call *literature* but of every aesthetic experience mediated by language, that Ingarden does a detailed phenomenological analysis of theatre²³ and utilises *Rosmersholm* to illustrate one of the most remarkable capabilities of theatrical *mise en scène*: their capacity to allow us to empathise with the invisible past of embodied characters. Ingarden's choice of enriching the usual plays analysed by phenomenologists with Ibsen is, moreover, for us eloquent. It is symptomatic of how phenomenology as a school was evolving in Husserl's later years and through the ensuing generations of phenomenologists: opening, from its original project of a rigorous science of egoic consciousness, towards an analysis of intersubjectivity and empathy as the fundamental constitutive instance of all phenomena. If Husserl analyses theatre usually thematising heroic pieces, like Shakespeare's *Richard III* or Schiller's *Wallenstein*,²⁴ to keep highlighting how, when perceived, an aesthetic object, for example, a king, is not a real king that we grasp but a fictional one, Ingarden chooses to focus on how all through *Rosmersholm*, as the intrigue develops and we form a bond with Rosmer and Rebecca, we empathise with them, we feel the feelings they are experiencing not only in the present but also and mostly in their past.

As we empathise with the body of actors and how they interpret their characters, constituting actor and character as one single intentional subject in the neutralised realm of *Bild*-consciousness, or as we

22 Roman Ingarden, *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 187.

23 Cf. Roman Ingarden, 'Appendix: The Functions of Language in the Theatre', in *The Literary Work of Art* (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 377–96.

24 Cf. Edmund Husserl, 'Aesthetic artistic presentation [*Darstellung*] and perceptual phantasy. Objective truth in the sphere of phantasy and in the sphere of actual experience. Revision of the earlier theory of image-consciousness as depiction, worked out in more detail in the case of drama', in *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory 1898-1925* (Dordrecht, Springer, 2005), pp. 616–25.

empathise with the characters we form in our imagination while reading, we understand in our flesh, little by little, the fictional biographies that the theatrical text, that this particular form of literary work of art, gives us access to. Let us not forget the phenomenological definition of empathy, feeling the feelings of others in our own flesh not as our own but as the feelings of others, constituting the other in us: 'Just as our own individual is announced in our own perceived experiences, so the foreign individual is announced in empathised ones'.²⁵ Empathy is, indeed, much stronger than compassion – not to mention that it is also utterly passive and unconscious, not any action or will of the subject –, because we feel and live what the other lives and feels in our own bodies, in our guts, in our skin, but we live and feel it not as if these feelings belonged to us but as belonging to the other. This distinguishes these empathetic feelings both from our own actual feelings and from our own non-actual feelings, for example, remembered or imaginary ones.

To consider this phenomenon, the phenomenon of empathy, is what makes us realise how remarkable the experience Ingarden thematises through *Rosmersholm* is: we empathise through the bodies of actors with the unseen past of the characters, and even with the thoughts and feelings of ghosts such as Beata's that is never *on stage*. We empathise thus with individual biographies but also with a family, with the fact of not having one, of not belonging to one in Rebecca's character, even with the history of nations in *Rosmersholm* as a whole. The importance of the ability we have to empathise with the past of fictional characters could hardly be overstated for it seems to bare the very possibility a work of art gives us to reflect on what it means to be human, to have human emotions and live in a transgenerational community of humans. The kinaesthetic empathy between our bodies and the bodies of actors – or between our bodies and the imagined bodies of the characters, when we read *Rosmersholm* – is the phenomenological basis for a series of aesthetic experiences that are grounded on absence.

Ingarden determines that a play has three elements that need to be relatively consistent – even if art allows for much poetic freedom – among them to form a synthetic unity, to become a *world*: 1. *Present* objectivities, namely things, people, and events given to the spectator exclusively in perception 'through the acting of the actors or through

25 Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy* (Washington: ICS, 1989), p. 34.

the décor',²⁶ 2. Twofold or *present/absent* objectivities, that is objectivities that are given both in perceptual depiction, in the bodies of actors or the materiality of objects, and then also, after they have been in that manner perceptually presented a first time, subsequently re-presented through linguistic means, evoked in dialogue. And 3. *Absent* or merely linguistic objectivities which are never shown on stage but only discussed by the characters or implied and invoked by their discussions. Is this third group of absent intentional objectivities that a play like *Rosmersholm* allows us to best comprehend, and with it, the larger functioning of our consciousness that is able to focus and give meaning to absent, non-perceptual objectivities; giving sometimes even a much stronger significance precisely to those things that are not there than to *present* ones.

[...] in Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* we follow the *present* vicissitudes of Rosmer and Rebecca West and in the process always discover something new about the past of these two people, we become conscious of how it mingles increasingly with their *current* lot and indeed begins to dominate the events now taking place, until, finally, it forces the tragic decision. Represented merely linguistically, the past achieves in the tragic end of Rosmer and Rebecca nearly the same self-manifestation as their decision to take their own lives, which occurs directly *on stage*. This, itself, is again intentionally determined only by the conversations of the two represented persons, but it is done in such a way that it seems as real and actually present for the spectator as the last words of the departing individuals.²⁷

As it highlights the different degrees of phenomena, their various intensities beyond the merely present perceptual object, aesthetic phenomenology harmonises with and becomes a reminiscence of a much more up-to-date philosophy that some read as being far from the phenomenological project: the Derridean critique of the metaphysics of presence. If phenomenology is a convenient enemy, useful contrasting point to outline the critical philosophy of deconstruction, when we consider aesthetic experience from a phenomenological perspective, we find ourselves dwelling on the theatre of *epoché* and getting to see a not so different scene as that of deconstruction. We grasp, indeed, how each apparently solid experience is swarming with shadows, subtle drafts of memory and phantasy, fragments of sensation and emotion that

26 Ingarden, 'Appendix: The Functions of Language in the Theatre', p. 379.

27 Ibid., p. 380.

constitute in us experiences that are as indirect and fictional as they are real and intense, as those of Rosmer and Rebecca. This closeness between deconstructive philosophy and Husserlian phenomenology precisely with respect to how absences are the transcendental grounds, the condition of possibility of any presence was clear for Derrida himself:

The absence of the referent is a possibility rather easily admitted today. This possibility is not only an empirical eventuality. It constructs the mark; and the eventual presence of the referent at the moment when it is designated changes nothing about the structure of a mark which implies that it can do without the referent. Husserl, in the *Logical Investigations*, had very rigorously analysed this possibility.²⁸

Drawing on this, on the importance of absence for presence, as I highlighted the importance of the past for the present and of fiction for actual self-perception and self-reflection, I will now finish my analysis of *Rosmersholm* in a phenomenological key through a brief depiction of how hunger, that emptiness at the heart of our daily lives, is thematised in phenomenology, specifically in Emmanuel Levinas' work.

ROSMERSHOLM IN A PHENOMENOLOGICAL KEY

*You recall, mein Johannes, that I'm something of a sybarite. Ein Feinschmecker. And have been, all my days. I love to savour things in solitude. Because then my pleasure doubles, yes, ten times over.*²⁹

Rosmersholm, first act: the conceited thinker, the somewhat deluded Ulrik Brendel touches upon the link between ideas and nourishment, eating and thought that I suppose throughout this article and that has

28 Jacques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', in *Margins of philosophy* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 307–30 (p. 318).

29 Ibsen, *The Complete Major Prose Plays*, p. 514.

been increasingly emphasised and explored in recent years.³⁰ After all, as Schiller and Freud said: hunger is one of the reasons the world turns.³¹ Why would hunger not then be intrinsically related to thought, as it must be – one might suppose from reading these thinkers – intrinsically related to everything? The unassignable character of Ulrik Brendel, distasteful as he is delectable, drawing on the archetype of the fool that obstructs and deconstructs any easy assignation to moral categories, displays in its dialogue a series of suggestive comments that seem to clarify the specific way in which hunger and thought might connect:

BRENDEL

[...] whenever new ideas unfolded, dazzlingly and boundlessly within me, lifting me to the heights on their soaring wings [...] The ecstasies I've relished in my time, John! [...] the celebrity, the laurel crowns – all these I've gathered in my grateful hands, trembling with joy. In my most secret imaginings [...]

KROLL

Hm---

ROSMER

But nothing written down?

BRENDEL

Not a word. It's always sickened me, that slave's labour of being my own secretary. And then, why should I profane my own ideals, when I can enjoy them in their purity, all to myself? But now they're going on the block. Truly – I feel just like a mother giving her budding daughters into their bridegrooms' arms. But I'll sacrifice them, nevertheless, on the altar of liberation.³²

Brendel, this peripheral character, does not only represent a central element of the dramatic knot, namely the all-too-human tendency to give meaning to one's life through dreams of agency, through self-aggrandising dreams of celebrity and influence over others – as Rosmer himself did at one point –, and the obligatory sequel of such dreams: disappointment, either because this agency is never achieved or because, after such achievement, the meaninglessness of life waits unbothered for those who tried to solve it in that manner. He also touches upon the solitude of hunger.

30 Cf. Valeria Campos, *Pensar/Comer. Una aproximación filosófica a la alimentación* (Barcelona: Herder, 2023).

31 Friedrich Schiller, *The Poems of Schiller Edited by Henry D. Wireman*, p. 313; Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 104.

32 Ibsen, *The Complete Major Prose Plays*, pp. 513–4.

Hunger in its larger sense – as the name of our needs, those that are more urgent – engulfs us into ourselves. Thus, referring to the sybarite pleasure of thought, the temptation of keeping ideas for oneself, only for one's own enjoyment, Brendel reminds us of Levinas' phenomenological analysis of sensibility and allows us to understand *Rosmersholm* otherwise: in the key of phenomenological absence, the sensible absence that is at the heart of every presence, the hunger, the infinite thirst that can never be satiated.

Let us explain. The philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas has as an important element the solitude of not only self-gratification but of *any* sensuous gratification, not to mention that the phenomenologist depicts sensibility and sensory satisfaction, precisely, in the gustatory semantics of hunger. These descriptions are part of a general theory of sensibility that distinguishes itself from previous phenomenological theories. Levinasian phenomenology radicalises, indeed, traditional phenomenology in that perception will no longer be understood as the intentional relation between a subject and its objects, in an infinite series of intentional expectations that are either fulfilled or disappointed, but as a sensibility that is forever hungry; a hunger that is not fulfilled by the edible and constitutes hence the gaping wound that subjects are, always shuddered by the other.

Hunger then is hunger of the edible, perception consciousness of the perceived, like *four is twice two*. The phenomenological, that is, *reductive* description, should distrust such a presentation of the psychic³³ [...]. The immediacy of the sensibility is the for-the-other of one's own materiality; it is the immediacy or the proximity of the other. The proximity of the other is the immediate opening up for the other of the immediacy of enjoyment, the immediacy of taste, materialization of matter, altered by the immediacy of contact.³⁴

Levinas' phenomenology goes in this fashion, deeper into the phenomenological scene – behind the stage, one might say –, to see the ghosts that are only evoked in the theatre of consciousness. He gets to explore sensibility in its most fundamental elements, in the strata that barely form before any intentional consciousness can be constituted, from *nausea* to *enjoyment*, and from *enjoyment* to *obligation*, as David Goldstein puts it.³⁵

33 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than being or Beyond essence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2006), p. 71.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 74.

35 Cf. David Goldstein, 'Emmanuel Levinas and the Ontology of Eating', *Gastronomica*, 3 (2010), pp. 34–44.

What do these technical terms mean? *Nausea*, as an elaboration from Sartre's concept, is the name of the sensible encounter with Being as such, the *feeling for existence*.³⁶ In other words, the experiencing we get when we feel ourselves existing, among the anonymity of beings, of what Levinas calls the *il y a*, the *there is*. *Enjoyment* and *Obligation*, on the other hand, are the names of the two aspects of the twofold dynamics of the sensible encounter with alterity, be it the alterity of nourishments or the alterity of another living being. This sensible encounter, this *proximity*, precedes the constitution of consciousness but also is constantly there, in that scene, in every intentional relation, sustaining it; it is its pre-intentional *signification*, in Levinasian terms, that could not be called a 'fundament' or its 'grounds' – although it is –, because these names would betray the absolute gapingness that sensibility – this being *for-the-other*, this always being opened up by alterity – represents.

This gapingness that precedes the scene of consciousness is twofold because it is firstly hunger for matter, for the alterity of the elements that we assimilate and digest, enjoyment that folds the subject into itself, a 'folding back upon oneself proper to ipseity',³⁷ and then also a hunger for the other person, *contact*, *vulnerability*, *obligation*, all technical terms aiming to name that second moment of sensibility that does not mark our limits but how porous, how open we are: 'The approach of the neighbour is a fission of the subject, [...] a fission of self, or the self as fissibility'.³⁸ Both these moments can and should be understood as hunger: a hunger that in enjoyment – but also the disgust of satisfaction – marks our limits, our *place under the sun*, our *self*, while another hunger that in the contact of another's skin highlights our being forever more than porous, ravenous for them.

Desire knows perfectly well what it wants. And food makes possible the full realization of its intention. At some moment everything is consummated. Compare eating with loving [...]. For what characterizes love is an essential and insatiable hunger [...]. There is also the ridiculous and tragic simulation of devouring in kissing and love-bites. It is as though one had made a mistake about the nature of one's desire and had confused it with hunger which aims at something, but which one later found out was a hunger for nothing. The other is precisely this objectless dimension. Voluptuousness is the pursuit of

36 Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), p. 61.

37 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 110.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 180.

an ever-richer promise; it is made up of an ever-growing hunger which pulls away from every being. There is no goal, no end in view.³⁹

Rosmersholm is, in its construction, an illustration of Levinas' thought: the dinner that never comes and the sexual encounter that never takes place between Rosmer and Rebecca are, like the twofold dynamics of sensibility, enjoyment and contact, the unseen columns that structure the visible unfolding of the play, as these are the pre-phenomenological scaffoldings of the scene of intentional consciousness. But beyond this illustrative use one might do of the *pièce*, to read *Rosmersholm* in a phenomenological key is to give all its weight to its ending: the double suicide of Rosmer and Rebecca, as Beata's ghost and the foretelling white horse, symbolise the fact that absence – the non-appearing, the gapingness, an emptiness that is all but empty – is the reason for presence, the motor of the whole intrigue. After all, as Schiller and Freud suggested in intuitions that are closer to Levinas than one would like to think, hunger and love are no more than sensuous relations to absences that can never become present, irreparable thirsts. Even if we might fleetingly feel satisfied, we will never stop being hungry as long as we live, as we will never be in contact, nor with another, nor with the elements, in the way our desire wishes.

CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

A-t-on mesuré les profondeurs de la faim?
[...] *La faim qu'aucune musique n'apaise.*⁴⁰

We have tasted *Rosmersholm* with a phenomenological tongue, we have seen it with phenomenological eyes. We started this path with

39 Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, pp. 43–4.

40 Emmanuel Levinas, 'Sécularisation et faim', in *Herméneutique de la sécularisation*, ed. by Enrico Castelli (Paris: Aubier, 1976), pp. 101–9 (p. 108): Have we measured the depths of hunger? [...] The hunger that no music soothes.

Freud reading Schiller, one of the preferred dramaturgists in the canonical phenomenology of theatre but only to see that beyond the usual hermeneutics of Ibsen's play, typically reading it as regarding social conflict or psychic life, one could understand it as referring to another kind of conflict, pointing towards another trail: the phenomenological drama of hunger, of desire, of how what appears has its grounds on what disappears, and how one might assume this gladly, smiling. The drama of sensuous desire, always in a thirsty relationship with alterity, ultimately unsatisfiable, is no other than the drama of being alive when this life is considered at a more fundamental level than that of the constitution of the self. Is life at the level of sensibility, of pure bodily forces wanting. One would hardly complain of having such hunger. Seen like this, it certainly inspires a smile, almost a sigh of relief: 'REBECCA. Yes. Now we're one. Come! We'll go then gladly'.⁴¹ *Rosmersholm's* final deaths refer thus to the hunger inherent to life, while its ghosts and shadows to how phenomena actually appear, marked by their incompleteness and the non-appearing: by their not-yet-seen facets, by the past, by the unseen desire impossible to quench.

To get to this conclusion, I have first shown how the classical phenomenology of art understands it as embodied images that are neutralised, namely to which we do not give a reality status but that precisely because they are quasi-real, allow us to extend our reflection to the quasi-world of aesthetic experience: the narrative world, the pictorial landscape, the biographies of the Rosmer's or their two-centuries-old tradition coming to an end. With Ingarden and his theory of the many interrupted paths aesthetic emotions launch, only some of which will get to become axiological judgements and change our conscious life, we have then seen how relevant the capacity we have to empathise with the invisible past of embodied characters is. Finally, this reflection on fiction and the past has shown us the importance of absence for presence in more general terms, just as the supper scene proves fundamental for *Rosmersholm's* structure and its ghosts for its intrigue. This has led to the final analysis of the Levinasian theory of sensibility as hunger: the sensible irretrievable hollowness of desire. This

41 Ibsen, *The Complete Major Prose Plays*, p. 584.

is *Rosmersholm's* third way: to bring us back to that sensibility off-stage, to the behind-the-scenes of hunger and love, of enjoyment and touch, to the sensible and intrinsic constitution of the self and its community, rather than to an external analysis of the social or the psyche.

Erika Natalia MOLINA-GARCIA
Universidad de La Frontera
Facultad de Educación,
Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades
Área de investigación filosófica