



VIOLA DI GRADO

**The Demons of Faro: Ingmar Bergman and the interior vocabulary of disaster**

In one of his last interviews, Ingmar Bergman pulled from his pocket a scrawled-on piece of paper from an exercise book and read out his list of demons. “The worst is the demon of disaster,” he began. “I have a high level of preparation for disaster.” Most people would call it pessimism – but pessimism relates to an empirical, erratic feeling of commonplace experience whereas Bergman’s demon – and this is clear in his whole filmography – concerns the very substance of reality, which our prosaic daily actions are not remotely concerned with. The “demon of disaster” is a hypersensitivity to the decline of things – to decay, to life’s purpose of budding for just a moment before blossoming and then withering. And what the Japanese, in their golden age of highly educated and solitary ladies-in-waiting, called “mono no aware”, the spellbound stupefaction of understanding that what is beautiful must come to an end, the realisation that beauty actually emanates from an acute and invaluable perception of its ending. From the “demon of disaster”, in fact.

While Bergman recounts his demons from a table in his lounge, - they also include rage, neatness, pedantry – we see behind him, outside the window, the brick wall he had had built to isolate himself from everything – people, life, the distant, faceless figures of casual tourists or even members of his crew. The wall which marked the boundary of his marriage to Liv Ullman, sealing the couple in a sarcophagus of solitude and visions, in thorny tangles of words which in the narrow dimensions of their relationship always assumed a terrible importance.



“He knew how to say things which would remain in you forever,” Ullman said in an interview sixty years later – with a look somewhere between bitterness and deep emotion, that mixture that is reserved for people who have died and who perhaps loved us in an ill-chosen way.

I arrive at the *Baltic Centre for Writers and Translators*, a very beautiful residence for writers in the centre of the island of Gotland, on a freezing January evening. The streets are snow-covered and Visby, a medieval UNESCO heritage city, is entirely hidden by darkness. On the following day I discover that it is enchanting. A small centre on the waterfront studded with the ruins of basilicas and Cistercian monasteries, dominated by the majestic Sankta Maria Domkyrka, a 13<sup>th</sup> century Romanesque cathedral. Between one ruin and the next the shops are all closed. All in all it is a kind of ghostly village where the inhabitants (no less than 23,000, it appears) are invisible or hide themselves well. Besides it is the only spot in Sweden connected by ferry to the island of Fårö, where Bergman lived and shot his more extraordinary films – among them *Persona*, filmed entirely on the stretch of sea in front of his house.

I suddenly decide to organise my pilgrimage. Patrik, who works in the residence, straightaway proves to be gracious and incredibly efficient in helping me plan everything, and then decides to transform it into an excursion for everybody – a car full of writers, happy to leave behind for one day the tribulations of writing to explore the settings of Bergman’s heart.

Because this place, Fårö, as I discover as soon as I arrive on the island, is a natural museum of Bergman’s psychic landscapes. When he visited it for the first time he did so with minimal enthusiasm, simply for production reasons – it cost less to film there – and he was by no means



convinced. But as soon as he saw the island he changed his mind. He loved it so deeply that he decided to move there till the end of his days. “I have found my home,” he said.

The excursion begins in the church where he was buried along with his last wife. His name is hidden by a braid of luxuriant greenery, only the “ING” can be seen. And indeed my whole journey on the island will be punctuated with random syllables, symbols, fragments of meaning. I found a rock with “VIO DIG” written on it, half of my name and surname, hidden amongst some stones of chalky origin and pieces of emerald green glass chewed on by the sea. At the cemetery the first thing that catches my eye is a headstone on which is written “I loved life so much, but it wasn’t reciprocated”.

We get back into the car. We pass snow-clad fields devoid of vegetation, every so often the black silhouette of a tree appears like the bony hand of a demon. The sky is gloomy, opaque, the wind is biting. There are no hospitals or supermarkets, shops, schools (the last one closed some years ago). Patrik and Marie Sinlkeberg, a Swedish poet in a leopard-skin coat, tell me that Bergman aroused dislike in the Swedes. They say that it was related to the rules devised by a Danish writer, Aksel Sandemose, rules on which is based historically the collective vow of humility of the Swedes and Scandinavians in general (including the people of Iceland): “You are not to think that you are anyone special” and “You are not to think that you can teach us anything”.

Breaking one of these rules, the Swedish still believe, threatens the stability and social uniformity of the community, and Ingmar Bergman broke them all, simply by showing that he



was aware of his own gifts. I think of the communal swimming pools and the night clubs of Reykjavik, where nobody dares to approach in a reverential manner a minister or musical celebrity who happens to be there (since the overture itself, the recognition in the crowd, is an acknowledgement of hierarchy) and then I think of *Dogville* by Lars Von Trier, where even having stood out provokes diffidence and collective rancour through ethical solidarity in the community.

Among the few houses, hidden by greenery or by brick walls, suddenly appears a *crêperie* with a courtyard full of old car wrecks, buried in the snow, with tyres strewn around and choked with weeds. A rusted petrol pump dating from the fifties, dented car doors, a neon sign with the word “Elvis”. A tatty museum of objects once useful and loved, related to human life, now buried in memory and in the bitter cold. Patrik explains to me that this man used to collect scrap. The word got around and everyone started dumping old stuff that they no longer wanted in the courtyard of his *crêperie*. It is the wasteland of things – “the things in themselves, myself being myself”, said Woolf: the things as they are after we strip them of our desires and our needs, of our affectivity. And so the boundless beach appears to me too, protected by an enclosure in which Bergman filmed *Persona*. A savage, nameless territory, wedged beneath a cliff which snakes alongside the sea and leads directly to his house. It is situated in the village of Hammars, at the end of the rugged fields of Digerhuvud, a lunar area flanked by gigantic rocks (raukar) in contorted shapes that Dali would have fallen in love with.



We go down, holding onto the slippery rocks. We move forward following a tongue of lead-grey sea, stormy, full of rocks piled up and slippery with ice. I see Liv Ullman everywhere: looking out at the cliffs above my head, confused and speechless, then sitting serenely on the last patch of beach, watching the rugged cliffs and the few trees twisted by the wind. The Liv Ullman of *Persona*, who no longer said one word to fight against the discrepancy between personal truth and the role that is presented to others, and the real Liv Ullman who, in love with her director, had followed him with monastic self-denial to this island, remote from everything. *You don't think we should get away from here?* asks Alma/Bibi Anderson nervously in the film, but Elizabeth/Liv Ullman shakes her head and goes back to reading her book.

There was a moment in which happiness ended, says Ullman: perhaps it was when he had the wall built, preventing her from having people visit. There was a moment in which “it began to be the dream of someone else”. Only on Wednesdays could she go and socialise with the other members of the cast, wash her hair and drink and chat, be carefree (she was 28 years old) but at a specific time she had to return, and he used to wait for her at the door, looking darkly at his watch.

Winter arrived and the landscape was bare and static, he would stay for hours in his room. They would argue, not talk to each other, the walls of the house closed in on them. “You are my Stradivarius”, he will say to her years later, but something in his human violin was breaking: maybe the so-called “soul” – the dowel inside the instrument which balances the



tone – was no longer able to bear the rumblings of the interior voices, of both of them, blended and amplified by their seclusion. She felt “the darkness in her stomach”, because it is known that the body reclaims everything, whatever the mind rejects, the viscous emotional dregs of the “demon of disaster”. When he couldn’t sleep she would sit by his side, terrorized by his thoughts: “Maybe he was thinking that I wasn’t part of the island, that I had disturbed the harmony that he was trying to create inside himself and in nature and in the stillness which was so dear to him. I lived according to his desires in order to feel safe ... in order that he was safe”.

And the same fantasy as *The Hour of the Wolf*, the same contagion of malaise and visions: in the film Liv Ullman lives reclusively with her artist husband and is slowly infected by his hallucinations. But it wasn’t like that for the real Ullmann. There was a breaking point, the two parted and she moved to Oslo: “when I left I didn’t take with me the rocks and the stones and the beauty; in my luggage there was only solitude and the feeling that something inside me had changed forever.

But they always remained “painfully connected”, as he said to her as he sat in front of the house. Up until the morning on which she woke with a start, in her Norwegian home, because she felt that something terrible was going to happen to Ingmar. There was no time to waste, and so she chartered a plane and flew all the way to his house. He was no longer speaking. Looking into his eyes in the semi-darkness of the house by the sea, she told him: “I came because you called me”. It was a quote from one of his films, *Saraband*: until the end they



lived and loved each other, mingling cinema and real life. Maybe, in the last hours, in the stringy silence of that house at the end of the world, they also heard Victor Yeran's Suite No. 5 in C Minor. Perhaps, in the last minutes, the darkness of the rooms was fragmented into the black and white expressionism of Sven Nykvist's photography and their faces, as in *Persona*, became pure white discs in the darkness, like stars adrift. That night he died.

We carry on, visiting the English cemetery, founded after a cholera epidemic, and Helgumanenn, the village of fishermen with boats, their paint peeled off, bedecked with big stones. Then Langhammers, a black beach dotted with rocks several meters high, remnants of an ancient time in which the sea was higher. They resemble alien sculptures, actually they are, because they speak of a time that we are not part of. I collect fossils of shells and big chalky yellow stones. There too I have the sensation of a desert. As in Bergman's house, on the wall where he drew love hearts and black crosses to log every moment of joy and dejection. "They too will disappear," said Liv Ullman in an interview, stroking the most faded hearts, and then with a smile she took out a blue teddy bear which he had kept from his childhood.

And the sensation of things when a person dies who had them, touched them, used them, in this case interiorized them and made them into filmic and psychic drama. What do they tell us now, these trees twisted by the wind, and the bay of *Persona* which, sixty years later, has retreated like a dream upon awakening, and is a hard nest of black rocks? What do they tell us, the landscapes which have been invested with human symbols, what do they tell us by the time the human is lost and nature has brutally reclaimed them?



This is what Lacan, recalling Freud, called *Das Ding*: reality stripped of human comment, of the mystification of the mind, plunged into itself. Without its tormented and hyperverbalized ghosts – complex and lacerated women who are torn apart and save themselves in words – Fårö sinks into a primal idea of nature, literally in Latin “what is about to be born”: what the human word (or the movie camera) takes possession of ceases to be born and begins to see its own end, to sensitise itself to the “demon of disaster”, but when the human word leaves the landscape – when Ingmar Bergman dies and with him, partially, his characters – the earth returns to its mysterious “about to be born”, to the magic of its suspension.

The drama of *Persona*, the conflict between being and appearing, the impossibility of *being* with others as well, rather than reciting – is expressed perfectly in this organic suspension of the landscape: film settings which now are only beautiful deserts, rugged valleys of rocks emerged from chasms, an empty house which was full of love and conflict. Elizabeth the actress who no longer speaks, not even one word, Alma the nurse who looks after herself by neurotically telling herself of dreams and mistakes, and the beach which devours them both and merges them until they are unrecognisable – the windows moulded by the waves, Ingmar’s name devoured by the plants, nature which is finally “itself being itself”.

What then remains of us, of the human word which torments us and pins us down and also saves us a bit, in that rugged seafront dotted with rocks and occasional plastic bottles? An “about to be born”, a promise which is no longer human, closer to the sightless symbols of the rocks, to their inflexible eternity which draws close to our lives and always transcends them.





Since, as in Tranströmer's words, also "tomorrow there will be a glowing sun/in the grey half-dead forest/where we must work and live. And when Liv Ullman on a whim lifts up the waistcoat of the young Bergman's teddy bear she will be surprised to find a message that he had written to her many years ago, and that he had hidden there like a treasure: it is really true that we are painfully connected. How many people had what we had? I adore you immensely.

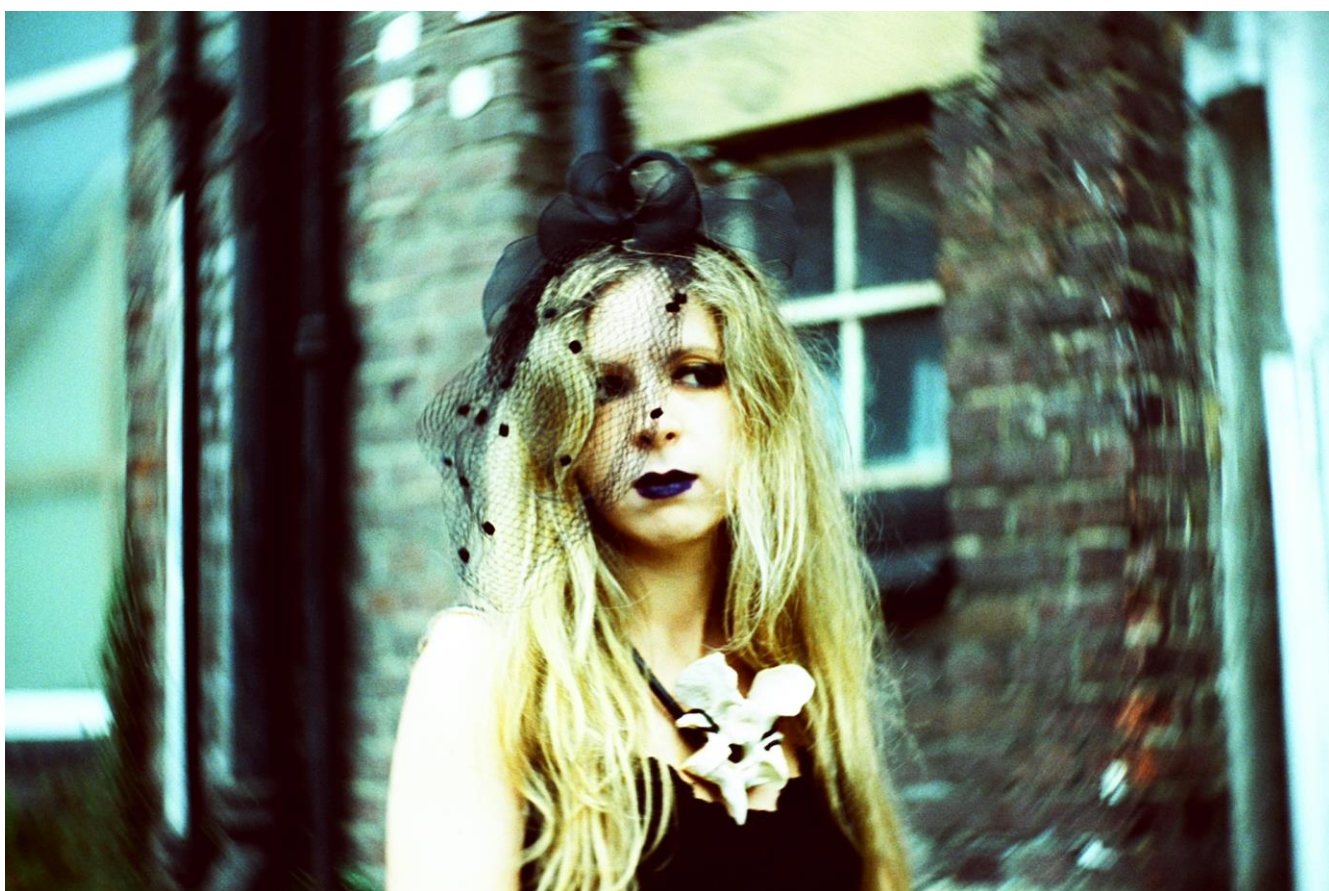
Translated from the Italian by Suze Randall

**Viola Di Grado** is an Italian novelist with works published in twelve countries. Born in Sicily in 1987, she was the youngest writer to be awarded the Campiello Opera Prima Award. Her debut book *Settanta acrilico trenta lana* was also awarded the Rapallo Carige Award and longlisted for the Strega Award and the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. Her second book *Cuore cavo* was shortlisted for the PEN Literary Awards and the IPTA Italian Prose in Translation Award. Her third book is *Bambini di ferro*.

**Suze Randal** completed a Bachelor of Arts degree at Victoria University in 1970. She retired from teaching languages in 2014, having spent most of her teaching career as Deputy Principal of Rongotai College in Wellington. In 2017 she returned to Victoria to study Italian.



*1. Bergman's Island (photo by Viola Di Grado)*



*2. Viola Di Grado (photo by Andrej Russkovskij)*