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LINDA HAVERTY RUGG

August Strindberg: the art and science of self-dramatization

Vid avenue de Neuilly där ligger ett slakteri, och när jag går till staden, jag går där alltid förbi.	On the Avenue de Neuilly Stands a slaughterhouse that I always pass by when I walk into town.
Det stora öppna fönstret det lyser av blod så rött, på vita marmorskivor där ryker nyslaktat kött.	The big open window Gleams with blood so red On the marble counter Steams fresh butchered meat.
I dag där hängde på glasdörrn ett hjärta, jag tror av kalv, som svept i gauffrerat papper jag tyckte i kölden skalv.	Today on the glass door Hung a heart, a calf's heart I think, Wrapped in frilly paper – I saw it shudder in the cold.
Då gingo hastiga tankar till gamla Norrbro-Bazarn, där lysande fönsterraden beskådas av kvinnor och barn.	Then my thoughts took flight to the old Norrbro bazaar where the gleaming rows of windows are viewed by women and children.
Där hänger på boklådsfönstret en tunnklädd liten bok. Det är ett urtaget hjärta som dinglar där på sin krok.	There in a bookshop's window Hangs a little, calfskin book. It is a torn-out heart dangling there on its hook.

(*SV*15, p. 165)

A calf's heart, a torn-out heart, a little book, thinly clad in calfskin; we make a leap and imagine the author's heart, dangling on its hook. It would be difficult to find a more vivid, provocative and theatrical image for an exiled author's exposure to the merciless gaze of the public. This poem forms the introduction to August Strindberg's cycle of poems *Sleepwalking Nights in Broad Daylight*, a collection composed mostly while Strindberg resided in Paris in 1884. Though poetry is not Strindberg's strongest suit (and it is unfortunate that only a little of the jarringly jolly rhythm and rhyme of the *Knittelvers* he uses comes through in translation), this particular piece offers an

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altogether fitting emblem for Strindberg's vision of his authorship as well as a fine example of his methods. For instance, one would have to be a rather jaded or disaffected reader not to be struck, nearly offended, by the bloody violence of Strindberg's imagery; but at the same time there is a kind of perverse pathos in the way the poet represents his work (we think: himself) exposed and vulnerable to the curious gaze of idle passersby, women and children. It is as if he were confined to the stocks in a Puritan marketplace as a target for ridicule, which may in fact be his object; in one of his autobiographies he writes that he early on 'developed a liking for self-torture'.[1]

Is it a simple case of masochism that compels Strindberg almost always to adopt an aggressive stance? In one of the photographs he meant to include for publication with the first volume of his autobiography, he poses with a flexed riding whip in his hands and adds the only half-humorous caption: 'Come on you devils, let's fight!' He is not a big or physically strong man; this gesture of egging on his enemies would surely lead to a (desired?) drubbing. (He begins one series of essays, *The New Kingdom*, with an epigraph from Charles Dickens's *Pickwick Papers*: 'You, sir, are a Humbug!' You – in Strindberg's context – being the nobility and their sycophants, the *haute bourgeoisie*.) But this is more than a personal stance, more than masochism; there is a rhetorical method at play here that aims to confront the reader with an abrasive text, to challenge social and aesthetic norms through sheer provocation. It is the method Nietzsche would call 'philosophizing with a hammer', and Strindberg was to be an admiring reader and correspondent of Nietzsche's.[2] The bold language, the bravado and playacting are part of a strategy that presents the role of literature as deeply divided: on the one hand, writing is a weapon, which serves to attack established power structures and bring them down; on the other, writing exposes the writer to the wrath of the authorities and society at large. The radical writer is both a danger to the authorities and, like the people he means to champion, a victim, or at least a potential victim. In Strindberg's self-dramatization, a deep fear of the public gaze, anxiety about his many enemies (real and imagined) and not least an intense self-questioning are paired with bold aggression.

And what is the target of his aggression, the reason for this rhetoric of power? From the outset of his writing career Strindberg begins to call basic values of Western society into question: the class system, gender roles, marriage, child-rearing, sexuality, capitalism, religious institutions, education … essentially all the foundations of the culture in which he lived. Quite pointedly he took aim at the alliance between the monarchy and the wealthy bourgeoisie that existed in Sweden at the time. He also developed and employed new forms with which to issue his challenges – the naturalist drama, a departure from stilted verse forms of the past, written in vivid, living language and featuring psychologically complex characters; the autobiographical novel,

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1. Strindberg: self portrait, Gersau, 1886.

with its extreme, personal tone yet inherently ambiguous relationship to 'truth'; the Chamber Play, focused on the intense engagement of the audience with just a few figures; the 'dream play', which means to stage the workings of the dreaming consciousness; and experimental novels that approach surreal

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and stream-of-consciousness narration. In the later stages of his authorship, particularly, he sets the stage for modernism. In Thomas Mann's words:

> As poet, thinker, prophet, and originator of a new world of feeling, Strindberg is so far advanced that even today [a half-century later] his work does not seem in the least exhausted. Standing outside and above schools and movements, he unites them all. A Naturalist as well as a neo-Romantic, he anticipates Expressionism, making the entire generation working under that name indebted to him. At the same time, he is the first Surrealist – the first in every sense.[3]

And Strindberg produced a greater literary and artistic body of work than most English speakers would guess. It is not difficult to give an impression of the spirit of Strindberg's authorship; its sheer daring and strength make it easy to distinguish. But any attempt to give a full account of his body of texts in an essay, or even in a collection of essays, must inevitably fall short. Among European literary prodigies, Strindberg ranks nearly with his ideal, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, in terms of the range and volume of his writing. For the world outside Sweden Strindberg is known primarily as a dramatist, and indeed his dramatic work is voluminous, varied and in many cases of enduring international importance. But he also wrote novels and novellas, (numerous) autobiographies and autobiographical fictions, serious and pseudo-scientific essays, art criticism, history, philosophical and theological meditations, botanical and geological as well as linguistic and ethnographic studies, journals and a novel that pretends to be a journal, fake interviews, histories in prose and drama, travel guides (of a sort), poetry, a thick four-volume diary/'breviary' during his last years called *A Blue Book*, and more, including a genre emblematic of the author's general world view that lacks a proper English translation: a literary *fejd* or 'feud'. In total his collected works, when edited for the third time in the Swedish national edition, will occupy seventy-two volumes. And there are twenty-two edited volumes of correspondence containing some ten thousand surviving letters, some of which Strindberg intended for publication during his lifetime, all of which he may have suspected would eventually be published.

When Strindberg is placed alongside his Scandinavian near-contemporary, Ibsen, this is largely because of the originality of their dramatic work; but while Ibsen did venture into some poetry, his *œuvre* does not begin to embrace the breadth of Strindberg's. We should not address size as an absolute standard – Strindberg was somewhat perversely preoccupied with size[4] – but Ibsen's collected works occupy eleven volumes to Strindberg's seventy-two. A painter, a photographer, a scenographer, an occasional inventor and (al)chemist, Strindberg produced innovative scientific and visual art as well, and he would no doubt have felt a strong sense of vindication had he known

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that his paintings would be displayed at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris in a special exhibition in 2001–2 and at the Tate Modern Museum in London in 2005.[5] When Strindberg's international reputation is placed on the scales alongside the immense volume and force of his *œuvre*, he easily takes his place as Sweden's primary canonical writer – Sweden's Goethe, Sweden's Shakespeare. And Strindberg, like Shakespeare, takes up the mantle of national poet by writing a series of historical plays that, in Strindberg's case, chart the course of the Swedish nation, a series Strindberg begins in his early twenties, and which are discussed elsewhere in this *Companion*. Clearly Strindberg put himself on the path to becoming the national poet, although in his later years, after he had returned from exile, he realized that that kind of official recognition from the establishment would never be his. He was, for instance, never granted a Nobel Prize, though both his country-woman Selma Lagerlöf and his fellow naturalist writer Gerhard Hauptmann were deemed worthy before Strindberg died in 1912.

So Strindberg, unfortunately for the Swedes, is an uncomfortable and unruly national icon, not as invariably awe-inspiring as Shakespeare or as solidly respectable as Goethe or as avuncular as America's Mark Twain. Even most English speakers, who remain unfamiliar with much of Strindberg's *œuvre*, know that Strindberg was a difficult character. So what do we know of Strindberg, or what do we think we know? Near the conclusion of Ingmar Bergman's family epic, *Fanny and Alexander*, one of the characters proposes that the theatre she directs should stage a new play by August Strindberg: *A Dream Play*. The reaction her suggestion elicits is 'Ugh, not that nasty old misogynist!' And the audience laughs in recognition. Ah, yes, the nasty old misogynist. This is an image we can recognize and deride. And certainly Strindberg provides us with plenty of ammunition in plays like *The Father*, in which a wife intentionally drives her husband insane in order to gain control of their daughter's upbringing. Strindberg's preface to the short-story collection *Getting Married II* (1886) catalogues the evils of Woman: she is a cheater, she is lazy, she is a liar, she is cowardly, she is incapable of unselfish love, she is power-hungry, she is better paid than men and on and on.[6] The question of whether Strindberg actually reviled women as much as he seemed to in his writing can be debated; certainly there is strong evidence that he opposed the feminist revolution of his time on the (supposedly Darwinian) grounds that it espoused an 'unnatural' view of woman freed from her biological destiny as Mother. Yet in *Getting Married I*, published just two years before the second volume, Strindberg had argued in revolutionary terms for a radical equality between the sexes in a treatise entitled 'The Rights of Women, to which Nature entitles her, but which through the perverse [*förvända*] order of society (and not through masculine tyranny) have been stolen from her'. Among these rights

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he lists the right to equal education, the right to sexual freedom, the right to divorce without establishing wrongdoing by either party, and the right to vote (pp. 24–6). One could of course argue that Strindberg radically changed his mind in the two years between volumes I and II of *Getting Married*, an argument that would seem to be supported by the events of his personal life in the interim (i.e. extreme marital distress). And there is often a temptation, excited by Strindberg's own self-dramatization, to assume that the events of his life tally perfectly with his textual representations. But if one pays close attention to his writing on women and feminism one sees that his more immediate concern is that gender roles for both women and men are perverted by the power structures of society as it exists. This can account for the near simultaneity of apparently radical arguments and apparently outrageous reactionary ones. Thus the received image of Strindberg as woman-hater may be more complex than a quick quip can convey, and it is important to attend to the way in which we can be lured into an all too easy identification between the author and the texts.

Another thing we may think we know: Strindberg was insane. Throughout his life he was accused of insanity and feared possible commitment to an institution. An overall image of paranoia and psychosis does indeed emerge from a reading of his various autobiographical texts and letters. He suspects his first wife of having a lesbian affair with an alcoholic artist. He imagines that someone is trying to electrocute him through his hotel wall. In despair over his love affair with his first wife (who was married at the time), he throws himself from a ferry into the freezing water and has to be rescued. He believes that he has inadvertently caused his child to fall ill by sending telepathic messages to her via a photograph. He also rages against his many enemies, a good number of them former friends. He drinks a significant amount of absinthe at a time when he also claims to find art produced by nature, such as a miniature Byzantine figure of the Madonna and child in a piece of burnt coal plucked from his stove (*Inf*, p. 136). It has thus become an absorbing task for scholars and lay readers over the past century to attempt to diagnose Strindberg's mental illness, and readers can also derive some amusement from Strindberg's extreme language, which seems at times to certify that he is indeed unhinged. In writing in a letter to a friend, for example, Strindberg claims that his arch-rival Ibsen has plagiarized him, and he pronounces in triumph, 'Do you see that my seed has fallen into Ibsen's brain pan and fertilized! Now he carries my seed and is my uterus!' (*SL*, p. 438). Strindberg's writing sometimes springs so far outside the bounds of what seems normal or acceptable or rational that a reader can be tempted to resort to the verdict of insanity. Yet a close reading of either *A Madman's Defence* or *Inferno* (the sources for several of the admissions made by Strindberg cited above)

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precludes the idea that their author was anything but fully in control of his texts and his thoughts. This madness of Strindberg's, whether expressed in fictional or autobiographical texts or in letters, is a textual performance, as Ulf Olsson argues in his study of Strindberg's insanity.[7] A reader is well advised to think of Polonius' line from *Hamlet*: 'Though this be madness, yet there is method in't' (II: ii). Strindberg developed a highly sophisticated mode in which to respond to the claims that he was mentally ill. Insanity is a figure in Strindberg's texts that performs as an extension of the rhetorical method mentioned above, philosophizing with a hammer. By pressing against the boundaries of the sane and normal, Strindberg explores new forms and challenges cultural assumptions of normality – and at the same time, places himself at risk, offers himself up as a dangerous element in need of confinement.

In both of the examples cited above, misogyny and madness, one of the central modes of Strindberg's authorship comes to light: his self-dramatization. In using this term I do not mean to flip back into the trap of analysing the author through his works; I do not mean to say 'Strindberg was a theatrical, exhibitionist personality', and leave it at that. On the contrary, Strindberg's focus on elements of his own life and mind in his writing were part of an experiment in which he interrogated the meaning of language and truth, and of selfhood as a textual and societal construction. It is indeed the case that much of Strindberg's writing deals closely with representations of his life events and his own fears, desires and dreams. He writes that he uses himself, his life and his experience as his primary focus in writing because he is the only person he can truly know – and he uses himself clinically, scientifically, as the object for observation and analysis. For instance, he wanted the fifth volume of his autobiography (entitled *He and She*) to consist of the actual, lightly edited correspondence he conducted with his first wife during their (extramarital) love affair, courtship and elopement, but his long-suffering publisher Albert Bonnier refused to take it on. One can understand Bonnier, who had nearly been taken to court in Strindberg's stead for blasphemy in *Getting Married I* when the accused author initially refused to return to Sweden to stand trial. Bonnier judged that it would be too risky to publish the intimate letters, since in the little world of Swedish cultural life everyone would guess who the writers were, and his firm would indubitably be in for another lawsuit. But Strindberg's argument to Bonnier is revealing:

> The question is really whether the private interests of some individuals should not be set aside for the vital purpose of bringing to light for the first time a human being's entire and true life's account … As you can see, my book is not meant as a rescue of my marriage or a purification ritual, but a self-analysis, an anatomical psychology. (*SL*, p. 204)

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The book is not, in other words, personal (despite its inflammatory revelations), but a kind of scientific case study (anatomical psychology) which can be used to advantage in analysing (and challenging) the existing institution of marriage. And in fact, Strindberg keeps pace with the development of the field of psychology throughout his lifetime. In Strindberg's view readers who jump immediately to an association between the published letters and the (scandalous) persons who were the original actors are simply bad readers.

The figure that stands at the centre of his writing, this subject that resembles himself, is a matter for intense interrogation in Strindberg's work. His texts ask, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly: how is subjectivity, that is, agency, constructed through language? One arena in which Strindberg engaged the question of the subject's construction was autobiography. Here he takes inspiration from Rousseau, who begins his *Confessions* by saying 'I have unveiled my inner self … opened my heart', but while Rousseau confines himself to an abstractly metaphorical evocation of 'heart', Strindberg goes straight to the butcher's shop, its windows gleaming with blood, and the autopsy table for his metaphors as when, in a letter to his publisher, Albert Bonnier, he envisages reading and writing the history of the person he knows best, i.e. himself, by close scrutiny of his 'cadaver' (*ASB* 5, p. 344). In the language he also employs with reference to scientific methodology, Strindberg proclaims his adherence to the naturalist literary project begun in France by Hippolyte Taine, the Goncourts and Émile Zola. He also answers the call of Danish critic Georg Brandes, who issued a demand for a literature that would turn away from Romantic nostalgia and fantasy in order to treat the issues of the day and serve as a locus for debate, for social change. So when Strindberg insists on his own life and experience and perceptive apparatus (i.e. body) as the central focus for his work, it is not primarily out of personal interest.

Following the lead of Goethe, who at the outset of his autobiography *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (*Poetry and Truth*) describes in fateful terms the astrological configuration of the planets at the moment of his birth, Strindberg opens the first volume of his autobiography with an account of a constellation of historical events in conjunction with his birth in January 1849, focusing in particular on the revolutionary fervour of 1848. In a word, Strindberg wishes to underscore that he was born under a revolutionary star, on the cusp of modernity. The first of his works to attract significant critical attention was a richly Dickensian comic novel, a political and aesthetic satire entitled *The Red Room* (1879), which served up a darkly humorous and critical portrait of Stockholm's political, Bohemian, bluestocking, publishing and journalist circles at a historic moment of transition in the Swedish class system and government. The deadly accurate blow aimed at overgrown bureaucracy and corrupt business practices ensured the novel's

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lasting popularity. With this critical debut Strindberg distinguished himself as an anti-establishment force to be reckoned with, and throughout his life (despite some occasional rather contrary reactionary strains in his thinking and political sentiments) he was held to be a poet of the people, a radical voice. He formed a long-standing relationship with the Swedish Workers' Movement; at his funeral, thousands marched with the red flags of the radical left.

Indeed, the first volume of his autobiography, *The Son of a Servant*, from the title onwards, carefully crafts an image of the nascent author as aligned with the working classes through the child's identification with his mother, who was a waitress when Strindberg's father, the son of a successful mercantile family, met her. Strindberg exaggerates and overdramatizes the tension that erupts when his 'servant' mother (she was the daughter of a tailor) marries into what he calls his aristocratic paternal family (they were solidly bourgeois). He also pushes the boundaries of empirical fact when he describes himself as an illegitimate child; his parents married after their second child, his older brother, was born, which was not as much of a scandal at the time as the autobiography would have it. Such lapses in accuracy move a biographer of Strindberg like Olof Lagercrantz to remark that the autobiography is not dependable, not, as the Rousseauian gesture of unveiling the heart would claim, strictly truthful. But the object of the autobiography is precisely dramatization. The book is not intended to be an accurate portrait or to win pity from the reader for the author; instead the story of 'Johan', as Strindberg calls his childhood self, writing of himself in the third person, stands in as a model for a sensitive Swedish child caught between social classes. His plight offers the opportunity to examine the psychology of childhood in general, and to launch attacks against the authoritarian structure of the family and its injustices, the class structure of Swedish society, the failure of the educational system, the idiocy of gender role construction and so on, often in a biting, satiric moral tone: 'Glorious moral institution, the sacred family, irreproachable divine institution meant to raise citizens to a life of truth and virtue!' (p. 17). Johan is not simply 'August Strindberg', in other words. Per Stounbjerg will deal with *The Son of a Servant* and Strindberg's autobiographical impulse in his essay in this *Companion*.

The narrative style of *The Son of a Servant* parallels Strindberg's dominant literary form, the drama, in terms of its dialogic structure. At times fully situated in the consciousness and cognitive space of a young child, immersed in the child's fears, ignorance and desires, and at other times leaping into a position of moral authority (as in the passage quoted above), the narration poses an evolving consciousness against a hotly engaged critical sensibility. This is true in a slightly different way of Strindberg's debut novel, *The Red*

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Room, in which the young protagonist serves as the evolving consciousness at the mercy of both the satiric omniscient narrative voice and other perspectives represented within the novel, producing a rich heteroglossia. In Strindberg's early prose the point of narrative dramatization is a call for social change.

Drama, of course, involves dialogic tension in a social setting, and the creation of dramatic characters who are meant to represent real, psychologically complex humans is one project that seeks to perform the construction of subjectivity. In his preface to *Miss Julie*, for instance, Strindberg exhibits an overt awareness of the problems of creating humans in language; he discusses in depth his desire to produce truly realistic figures, 'characterless characters', that is, characters who do not perform in a stereotypical or predictable way, but who vacillate, act on unconscious impulses, are products of genetics and environment (according to Darwinian precepts), etc. How do existing societal structures determine who we are (the son of a servant?), and how might we write our way out of these structures? Despite Strindberg's professed desire to produce complex psychologies in *Miss Julie*, he ends up with a rather abstract structure: the power struggle takes place between decadent nobility (represented as female in the person of Miss Julie) and the rising underclass (represented as male in the servant Jean). But he does attend to the forces of nurture and nature in the formation of his characters, drawing on Darwinian models of evolution on a psychological scale, and moving toward a modern psychological vision of the power of the unconscious, when, for instance, he engages the use of hypnotism both at the conclusion of *Miss Julie* (1888) and in his earlier play, *The Father* (1887): 'You could hypnotize me when I was wide awake, so that I neither saw nor heard, only obeyed' (*MJoP*, p. 37).

Strindberg's commitment to science was related to his experiments in drama and literature as well, in the sense that science was a means to get at the essence of things, their structures, their origins, as literature provided the tools to come to grips with 'the evolution of a soul' (this was the subtitle to his first autobiography) and the structures of society. He studied botany (following in the footsteps of Carl Linnaeus), geology, psychology, optics and other disciplines, especially chemistry, or with time more accurately, alchemy. In solitude in his hotel room in Paris he mounted chemical experiments in pursuit of the chimerical universal element, a theoretical position harking back to that of alchemists in search of gold, though Strindberg's concern was not gold in the sense of wealth, but an understanding of the basic material nature of the world. He had developed a similar preoccupation in his earlier study of philology; he taught himself some Hebrew and Chinese with the idea that he would be able to establish the ties between these languages and modern European languages, and thus begin to reconstruct the original world language, pre-Babel, so to speak. Another interest spurred by his Naturalist bent

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