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STRINDBERG THE EUROPEAN

...the intention of this essay is to show that the Swede is a European, with European rights and obligations. In this connection I wish to point out that the Swede, if he wants to grow into a world citizen and tellurian, must give up his petty views concerning the great advantage of being a Swede, which does not mean that he should let another nation eat him up.... (SS 16:143)¹

This statement is not, as one might think, a drastic pleading for Sweden's joining of the European Union - before the referendum in November 1994. It is a statement by August Strindberg, made in his essay 'Nationality and Swedishness' more than a hundred years ago.

In September 1994 there was a big cultural manifestation in Stockholm called *Svenskt Festspel*, roughly *Swedish Festival*. At this event, lasting about ten days, the main theme was "Strindberg and Stockholm". Strindberg was not only celebrated as 'the Swede of the Year', an honour bestowed annually on a prominent Swede living abroad. He was the Stockholmer of the Year.

In view of this, it is good to remember that in his own lifetime - except, perhaps, for the very last years - Strindberg was widely regarded as an enemy of his own people and a seducer of Swedish youth. As for Strindberg himself, we should recall that although he always loved Swedish nature - especially the Stockholm archipelago - he frequently attacked the Swedish nation and Swedish mentality.

However, Strindberg had not always been critical of his fellow countrymen. In the beginning of his career he was, in fact, rather nationalistic. At the age of twenty-three, in the article 'Latin or Swedish' (1872), he states that Icelandic, representing the origin of the Scandinavian languages,

¹References to Strindberg's work in Swedish are as follows: *SS* stands for *Samlade Skrifter*, 1-55, ed. John Landquist (Stockholm, 1912-21). Figures refer to vol. and page. *SV* stands for *Samlade Verk* (Stockholm, 1981-), chief ed. Lars Dahlbäck. Figures refer to vol. and page.

should replace Latin in school education. And he continues:

We call for nationality and do everything to wipe it out. ... Give us back our mother tongue that lies trampled in the dirt. Return to our people the memories of its childhood, nay, of its manhood, so that we have something to live for and rejoice in.... (SS 4:264)

Six years later, in the essay ironically entitled 'Our French colorists', he asks whether Swedish nature is not sufficient to inspire Swedish painters. "Do the artists need to go abroad to learn how to paint?" he wonders. His answer is an emphatic "Not at all!" (SS 4:190)

However, Strindberg's attitude to his own country gradually became more negative. One reason for this was that his major work in the early period, the historical play *Master Olof* (1872), now recognized as the first modern Swedish drama, was rejected by the theatres. Feeling neglected by his countrymen, he took his revenge in the novel, *The Red Room* (1879), in which various parts of Swedish society are ridiculed. In the chapter entitled 'On Sweden', Olle Montanus, a bohemian with anarchist leanings, denationalizes his own country:

It is certainly more than an unconfirmed supposition that the most fruitful idea and the most forceful aspiration of our times is the abolishment of the narrow-minded national feeling, which separates nations and turn them into enemies of one another; Sweden is, as everyone knows, originally a German colony and the language which has been kept relatively pure until our time consists of twelve varieties of low German. This circumstance, the difficulty of the provinces to communicate with each other, has been a mighty lever against the development of the unhealthy concept of nationality. It is my conviction that the country will gain by joining other nations, for it cannot lose anything - since you cannot lose what you do not possess. The nation simply lacks nationality.... Can anyone tell me of anything Swedish in Sweden except our fir trees, pines, and iron mines, which will all soon be superfluous? What are our ballads? French, English, and German romances, in poor translations! What are the folk costumes whose disappearance we deplore? Old tatters from the dresses of medieval noblemen! ... Tell me of a Swedish

poem, piece of art or music which is specifically Swedish, different from those that are non-Swedish! Show me a Swedish building! It does not exist, and if it does, it is either bad or designed after a foreign model. (SV6:234, 236)

The idea that a specific Swedish culture is virtually nonexistent returns three years later in the two-volume cultural history *The Swedish People*, so called in opposition to Erik Gustav Geijer's tenet that the history of Sweden equals the history of its kings. In the introduction to this work Strindberg states:

Before I describe, century for century, the customs of the Swedish people and the cultural development, I wish to indicate how little there is of a native, original tradition that we may build upon, how difficult it is to find anything that we may call originally Swedish.... (SS7:31)

The view that Sweden lacks a national tradition returns in the article entitled 'Corporation Sweden' (1886):

If nationality means a race or a tribe, then Sweden is no nation. If a corporation means an association formed by common interests, then Sweden is a corporation.

The managing director, the king, is French, at times also Norwegian, and on weekdays Swedish.... The woman manager is German. ... Sweden's most important man is Finnish.... Sweden's richest man is Scottish, its foremost statesman Walloon, its foremost author Polish... (SS54:241)

With the appearance of *The New Realm* (1882) Strindberg became, as he himself proudly put it, *skandalskrivare*, a word meaning both a writer about scandals and a scandalous writer. The appearance of this book made it virtually impossible for him to remain in Sweden. For twelve years he was to live abroad. Between 1883 and 1889 he lived in turn in France, Switzerland, Germany and Denmark. From 1892 to 1898 he lived in Germany, Austria and, for a long period, in France.

It was in the early part of this voluntary exile that Strindberg became a confirmed European. In a letter to the painter Carl Larsson, he declares:

I begin to regret my Swedish patriotism! It is narrow-minded! We should all become Europeans! It is a greater task than being Swedish! But I want to set myself the task of turning the Swedes into Europeans!²

It was presumably Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson who encouraged Strindberg to become a European *writer*.³ Bjørnson, who was himself in voluntary exile, turned to a European audience when pleading for the abolishment of the union between Sweden and Norway. In a letter to him in 1884, Strindberg recognized his indebtedness: "Bjørnson, your words about a 'European reputation' are taking root in my soul! I've held it in contempt before! But do so no longer!"⁴

It is around this time that Strindberg, in Ouchy outside Lausanne, writes his article 'Nationality and Swedishness', meant, he says, as

a benevolent antidote against the harmful patriotism which impedes development by constantly turning our great memories of the brutal past into paragons for the youth; which sees what is Nordic as something unique, that should separate the Nordic tribes from the other Germanic ones and prevent the union ... that is the wish for the future.

And yet, he continues,

the Swede is more European than other European nations! Yes! The Englishman was born English with contempt of the French and some hatred of the Germans; the Frenchman was born French with hatred of the Germans and contempt of the English; the German is

²Letter to Carl Larsson 21 March 1884, in *August Strindbergs Brev*, ed. Torsten Eklund, Vol. IV (Stockholm, 1954), p. 81.

³Gunnar Brandell, *Strindberg - ett författarliv*, Vol. II (Stockholm, 1985), p. 28.

⁴Letter 4 May 1884, quoted from Michael Robinson (ed.), *Strindberg's Letters*, Vol. I (Chicago, 1992), p. 141.

German with alternating hatred of the French and the Russians. The Germans learn at most one language besides their own, the English hardly any, the French none.

They all read exclusively French, German and English textbooks and regard their own country as the centre of the world. Hence one-sidedness and chauvinistic boastfulness. The Swede, by contrast, sits in his separate corner; ... learns all the three major languages; chooses between three literatures, three philosophies, without much prejudice, and picks the best. It is, after all, a rather advantageous position which makes him more universal than those of the other nations.

Every country, he declares, should have its own language,

but next to it a foreign language, only one, for nobody can have a complete command of more than two languages. We do not need to look for this universal language; it is not the dead Latin, it is French, the French of today, which seems to be accepted by all cultivated nations in Europe as the means of communication, even by the Prussians who hate the French and by the proud Englishmen. (SS 16:166-7)

In a note he protests against the idea that English might serve as a *lingua franca*, for English, he says, is a non-European, colonial language.

To many Swedes, Charles XII is the prime national symbol. Today, the neo-Nazis organize manifestations by the statue of Charles XII in central Stockholm. Strindberg was present when this statue was inaugurated in 1868. Both the neo-Nazis and Strindberg have clashed with the police. But while today's skinheads have done so because they violently celebrate Charles XII for his endeavour, long before Napoleon and Hitler, to defeat the Russians, Strindberg stood on the side of those who disliked the "destroyer of Sweden", as he calls this king. Sweden lost the war against Tsar Peter, Strindberg argues in 'Nationality and Swedishness', because Charles, succumbing to an antiquated national ideal, had stagnated, whilst Peter by his upbringing had become "Europeanized".

Most of Strindberg's pro-European, anarchist articles were written in Switzerland. This is no coincidence, since he regarded Switzerland as the

most ideal state in Europe and, as he puts it in the short story 'Remorse', "the miniature model for the Europe of the future!" (SS15: 220)

He who still doubts the possibility of joining a great European federation of states, some time in the future, with a population speaking different languages, he should witness Switzerland, where the experiment has already been successfully undertaken. (SS16:148)

The secret of the peaceful coexistence of the different linguistic groups in this country, Strindberg believed, was to be found in the independency of the cantons within the Swiss federation. In a letter to the Danish critic, Edvard Brandes, he exclaims:

A European land without a king, without a royal theatre, orders, academy, official press, and reptilian adolescents, a land in the centre of Europe without an overclass - that really is something! Come and have a look, you old son of civilization, and you'll see many of your dreams realized. It's a tonic which raises the spirits, and I always become a better person when I cross its frontier.⁵

It was in Switzerland that the *Ligue internationale de la Paix et de la Liberté*, founded in 1867 by Garibaldi, Victor Hugo and others, had its central office.⁶ To Strindberg, it was no coincidence that the League of Peace, an organization promoting the idea of the United Nations of Europe, "the loftiest idea of mankind and of this century," was situated in Geneva. (SS16:148)

Switzerland appealed to Strindberg not only for political reasons. He liked to be surrounded by nature, unsullied by man, the kind of scenery that had inspired Rousseau to his back to nature gospel. Along with him, Strindberg believed that man, though born good, had been perverted by civilization. Moreover, Switzerland was the home of anarchism and nihilism. Already in the 1840s one of the anarchists nourished plans of making Lausanne the centre of a new Europe. Bakunin, Herzen, Ogarev,

⁵Letter 9 June 1886, quoted from Robinson, op. cit., p. 203.

⁶Sven-Gustaf Edqvist, *Samhällets fiende: En studie i Strindbergs anarkism till och med Tjänstekvinnans son* (Stockholm, 1961), p. 253.

Elpidin, Netjajev, Krapotkin - they had all lived in Switzerland.⁷ Shortly after he had arrived in Ouchy, Strindberg wrote to Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and Jonas Lie:

Here now is a joint letter for you on rose-coloured paper, written at a table from where one has the view over the blue lake of Geneva, the Savoy, Mont Blanc and Jean Jacques' Clarens, and were I to strain my eyes, I would be able to see the nihilists in Geneva.⁸

Strindberg's counterpart of Rousseau's noble savage was the peasant. If man could not return completely to a natural condition, he could at least try to retain the kind of life that came closest to it, the life of the peasant. Presumably with the intention of refuting the idea of many socialists that the future belonged to the urbanized industrial workers, Strindberg nourished a plan to write a book about the conditions of the European peasant. But the grand project shrank to the modest size of a rather slender volume called *Among French Peasants*, completed in 1886 but not published until three years later.

Strindberg's attitude to two discriminated groups - the Jews and the women - has been a matter of dispute.⁹ It is easy to find both anti-Semitic and anti-feminist statements in his work. In both cases his personal situation had clearly coloured his views. When his situation changed, his views tended to change. It has rightly been observed that Strindberg's anti-Semitism was partly determined by the fact that he was at times economically dependent on Jewish publishers.¹⁰ What concerns us here is that his ambition to become a good European seems to have affected his attitude to Jews. In the article entitled 'My Hatred of the Jews' (1884) he claims that his anti-Semitism has been of a temporary kind. Disliking

⁷Edqvist, op. cit., p. 235.

⁸Letter 25 January 1884, quoted from Robinson, op. cit., p. 121.

⁹Strindberg's attitude to the Jews is examined by Nina Solomin in her article "Strindberg och hans syn på judarna" (*Svenska Dagbladet* 2 September 1994). For a thorough and balanced treatment of Strindberg's attitude to the woman question, see Ulf Boëthius, *Strindberg och kvinnofrågan till och med Giftas I* (Stockholm, 1969).

¹⁰Gunnar Brandell, op. cit., Vol. I (Stockholm, 1987), p. 325.

what he considered misplaced chauvinism on the part of the Swedish Jews, he praises the Danish Jews who have fulfilled their mission of being "the nobility of the world". In Denmark

the Brandes brothers, ... courageously liberating themselves from their false position, had introduced European culture in a nation stagnating from self-idolatry. These men have broken with convention by appearing under their true colours as Europeans in the foreign country. This is in my opinion the great calling of the Jews in the West. He [the Jew] has no fatherland, he has been in every land; has kept free from all narrow national prejudices; is not fettered by the deadening dogmas of Christianity; is brother to all men; always speaks a cultural language; has kinsmen in all European nations. This is an advantageous situation, and it has turned the Jews, on the whole, into an intelligent, perhaps the most intelligent, people in Europe. No one has been able to judge European literature so liberated from national and religious concerns as Georg Brandes, precisely because he was a European, but not a German or French European. (SS 16:223, 225)

Strindberg's attitude to the woman question is a much more complex issue than the simplistic, all-too-common label 'misogynist' suggests. His views on this topic, irrespective of the private situations which may have contributed to them, should not be regarded simply as compensatory outbursts of a man with a sexual inferiority complex. The point Strindberg, with his Rousseauian outlook, tries to make is that the woman question is merely part of a much larger and more burning issue: the perversion of modern society. While the emancipationists struggled to raise the status of woman in a *male society* and consequently saw this particular kind of society as the main enemy, Strindberg argued that it was *society as such* that was evil and should be changed. Rather than fight one another, men and women should join forces and fight a society which, based as it was on an artificial division of labour, was detrimental to both sexes. In the long and important article 'On the general discontent, its causes and remedies' (1884), Strindberg suggests three solutions to the problems: self-help, self-rule, and restraint with regard to luxury (SS 16:93). By self-help he means diminished division of labour, by self-rule decentralization. All

three remedies were already applied in the largely agrarian Swiss canton where he was dwelling at the time - an area, incidentally, where women have only recently been allowed civic rights.

However, Strindberg's views were to change very quickly and radically. In an often quoted letter to Verner von Heidenstam, written in Bavaria, where Strindberg had settled in early 1887, he says:

In Germany! In a country house with its *Pächter*, by lake Boden. Patriarchy and male discipline, recruits three ells tall with plump cheeks; France was absinthe and self-abuse; Switzerland matriarchal slop. There are still males here with lively pricks. I admire Bismarck's speech.¹¹ He is a realist, the modern spirit. If we are to have State and Society, well, damn it, let's do things properly. If there are to be nations, then let there be guardsmen; if there are to be guardsmen, then let them live in barracks, and drill from 5 in the morning until 8 in the evening! Oh! we antiquated old idealists!¹²

As this ambivalent letter indicates, Strindberg was trying hard to distance himself from his democratic agrarianism, which he now regards as an expression of "old idealism." The letter gives a foretaste of his Darwinian-Nietzschean belief - openly expressed a year and a half later in his Preface to *Miss Julie* (1888) - in the right of the strong to survive in the struggle for existence.

In March, 1886, Paul Lafargue had published an article in *La Nouvelle Revue*, in which matriarchy was regarded as humanity's original socio-political system. Strindberg read the article and in the second part of *Getting Married* (1886) he points out that Lafargue's research has "fully supported my suspicions concerning the women's movement as a return to the female domination that existed in prehistoric times...." (SS 14:239). A Europe ruled by women was certainly not what Strindberg would relish.

Despite his contempt of literature, which he regarded as an expression of a culture that he principally rejected, Strindberg did not give up writing

¹¹Bismarck had recently suggested that another war between France and Germany might be imminent.

¹²Letter 15? January 1887, quoted from Robinson, op. cit., p. 221-2.

fiction. Having failed to conquer Europe with his anarcho-agrarian gospel, he tried to conquer Paris both with fiction and non-fiction. While he had incidental successes in the mid-nineties with his naturalistic plays, his articles in newspapers and journals did not make much impression. After his so-called Inferno crisis, Strindberg turned away from the social and political problems of this world. His attention was now devoted to what may be beyond earthly existence. Metaphysical questions came into the foreground. Europe as a socio-political concept no longer seemed important.

Returning to a Sweden dominated by neoromantic nationalism, Strindberg seemingly adjusted to the spirit of the time. He now composed his impressive series of plays about Swedish royalty - the largest undertaking of its kind since Shakespeare. Yet, rather than pay homage to the portrayed monarchs, as the writers of the period usually did, Strindberg treated them quite disrespectfully, seeing them first and foremost as controversial human beings. Besides, the pervading theme in these plays has little to do with nationalism. The conflict is invariably one between the protagonist and what Strindberg called "the Powers" - Fate, Providence, God.

However, at the end of his life Strindberg was again to concern himself with social and political issues. Opposing the writers of the nineties - especially its leader, his former friend, Verner von Heidenstam - he published a great many, highly polemical articles in the newly started socialist paper *Aftontidningen*. This was the beginning of the so-called Strindberg Feud (1910-12), the longest and most violent press debate ever launched in Sweden. Strindberg's articles clearly reveal his endeavour to make his socialist sympathies harmonize with his Christian faith. Politically, his concern is now - after twelve years in Stockholm - focused on Sweden. Only once in a while he refers to the Swiss system, still in very positive terms (*SS* 53:195, 540). Knowing that he was suffering from cancer and that he did not have long to live, the North Cemetery in Stockholm was during these years in more than one respect much closer to him than Europe.

Today it is evident that Strindberg is one of the seminal European writers around the turn of the century. His influence has been enormous. If he did not quite conquer Europe in his own lifetime, he has certainly done so by now. It is a strange feeling that in September, 1994, many

Europeans came to Stockholm to celebrate the man who once wrote:

I've no desire at all to be a "great" writer, still less a "great" man; it simply embarrasses me and gives me a false status. I want to go around in my dressing-gown and underpants and be called a muckraker [*skandalskrivare*]; that wouldn't embarrass me.¹³

Many of Strindberg's views on the relationship between Sweden and Europe are still surprisingly relevant. Is it because this relationship has remained basically the same after more than a century? Is it because the issues are, again, burning? Or is it because Strindberg was ahead of his time? I tend to think the latter. He usually was.

¹³Letter to Gustaf af Geijerstam 13 December 1884, quoted from Robinson, op. cit., p. 168.