

Inga-Stina Ewbank

## Strindberg and British Culture

When Miss Julie, trying to picture for Kristin a glorious future in a top job in a Swiss hotel, reaches out for the ultimate bait, it is that "You're sure to be able to get yourself a husband one day! a rich Englishman, you know - - the English are so easy to - (*slowing down*) - catch".<sup>1</sup> By the time she gets to the end of her sentence, Miss Julie knows that she is talking about the impossible; and, ironically, it has proved almost as impossible for Strindberg to "catch" the English, rich or poor. Michael Robinson, who has done more than anyone to create an understanding of Strindberg in today's Britain, has also written very fully on the reluctant reception of Strindberg in England - so different from the recognition and acceptance as a seminal influence he has received on the European Continent, not least in Germany and France - and on its causes.<sup>2</sup> In this paper I merely want to look closely, and from both directions, at some aspects of the relationship between Strindberg and British culture, mainly focusing on what I see as two key years, 1893 and 1913. Both Strindberg's perception of England and the perception - and reception - of him and his works in England

---

<sup>1</sup> Translations into English in this paper are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Robinson, "Leaving Gravesend at Last, or Introducing Strindberg to England", in *Studies in Strindberg* (Norwich, 1998), pp. 9-23, and "Aldrig längre än till Gravesend: Strindberg och England", in *KVHAA Konferenser*, 33 (Stockholm, 1995), pp. 109-120.

consist largely of negative judgments and non-events; and together they form a tangle where causes and effects are inextricably knotted together.

I will begin the disentangling with a quotation from the front page article in *The Times Literary Supplement* on 16 January 1913:

If this man, one reflects, had taken plenty of exercise, had known the value of cold water in large quantities for internal and external use, had tuned himself up, body and mind, by the simple self-mastery implied in these things, would not his great brain have produced work with more in it of the beauty that preserves?

This is part of a review of a whole row of recently-published translations of Strindberg works (in each case the first published translation of that work in England): three pieces of autobiographical prose (*The Confession of a Fool*, *Inferno* and *Legends*) and three plays (*Miss Julie*, *The Stronger* and *There are Crimes and Crimes*).<sup>3</sup> The article opens on the recognition that “[t]ill a few months ago scarcely any one in England knew more of Strindberg than they could learn from floating gossip about a mad Swedish author with no savoury reputation, or from occasional inefficient performances on Sunday evenings of plays that seemed to confirm that reputation as just”.<sup>4</sup> But now, it continues, thanks to these translations,

<sup>3</sup> *The Confession of a Fool*, trans. Ellie Schleussner; *The Inferno*, trans. Claud Field; *Legends*, trans. anon.; *Miss Julie*; *The Stronger* and (as a separate volume) *There are Crimes and Crimes*, trans. Edwin Björkman - all these published in London, 1912. In 1913 Ellie Schleussner, who had failed to find a publisher for a translation of *The Dance of Death*, was to publish translations of *Married*, of *By the Open Sea*, of *In Midsummer Days and other tales* and of *The Red Room*; and the same year Claud Field published translations of *Zones of the Spirit* [*En blå bok*], of *Historical Miniatures*, of *The Growth of a Soul* [pt. 2 of *Tjänstekvinnans son*], and of *The Son of a Servant*.

<sup>4</sup> The earliest of such productions seems to have been of *Simoom* and *The Stronger*, translated by Frank Castle and Edith A. Brown and performed by

“it is possible to arrive at some idea of a strange mind which had kept Sweden and France and Germany exercised for a good many years”. And the “idea” arrived at in the closing sentence of the article is of “a mind raging at life because it is blind to three-quarters of life, and cursing the world because it has not learned the rudiments of self-mastery”.

Little deconstruction of this review is needed to see that it tells us at least as much about British culture as about Strindberg. That *The Confession of a Fool* (or, in the currently accepted version of the title, *A Madman's Defence*) could have been transformed into something of “the beauty that preserves” if its author had applied enough cold water, internally and externally, or that the fragmented self in *Inferno* or *There are Crimes and Crimes* would be able, or would want to, “master” that searching for an identity which is so essential to these proto-modernist works - the mere thought is so absurd that the reviewer's irony (if it is irony) scores an own goal. The Strindberg of this article has been read and constructed according to a particular cultural system - a public school culture where clean-living young imperialists were steeled by cold baths and thin blankets to face life with a stiff upper lip: the culture which Strindberg himself, in his last years, liked to read about in Kipling's *The Day's Work* (of which there was an annotated copy in his library when he died).

But many years have passed since 1913, and the question of Strindberg versus British culture is of course complicated by the fact that we are not dealing with two monolithic and unchanging entities. We can safely say not only that Strindberg is so made up of contraries and contradictions that he practically lacks an identity, but also that contemporary British culture is deeply uncertain of its own identity. It would be good, then, if we could also say

the New Stage Club at Bloomsbury Hall on 29 Nov. and 1 Dec. 1906. The Adelphi Play Society staged *The Father* on 23 July 1911 and *Miss Julie* on 28 April 1912; and the Stage Society presented two performances of *Creditors* in Ellie Schleussner's translation at the Prince's Theatre on 10 and 11 March 1912.

that, while the "Rule Britannia" of 1913 has become the "Cool Britannia" of the late 1990s, a climate for Strindberg has developed. This is what it seemed like in the winter and early spring of 1995 when, as Michael Robinson has described, several Strindberg productions were mounted in London and enthusiastically reviewed, and when Michael Billington in *The Guardian* could call Strindberg "the midwife of modern theatre".<sup>5</sup> At the same time one of the "better" Sunday papers presented a table of what is "in" and what is "out" in English culture towards the end of the century. According to this, *bouillabaisse* is out and *gravadlax* is in, figs out and wild strawberries in, Fellini out and Bergman in, and last but not least, Almodivar out and Strindberg in. But even a flock of swallows does not make a summer. In April 1998 I was asked by BBC's Radio 3 "Nightwaves" to review the Irish version of *The Dance of Death* translated by Carlo Geber and directed by him at The Tricycle Theatre in north-west London. Fired by enthusiasm for a translation and a production which had managed to bring out the energy, intensity and black humour in the language and characters of the play, I arrived to find that my co-discussant was the literary editor of one of the "better" Sunday papers, and that he had come to pour cold water over every utterance of Strindberg enthusiasm. Strindberg was mad, hysterical, etc., and his psychology "an outdated freudianism". The bulk of the 45 minutes assigned to the programme was devoted to Noel Coward. Perhaps it isn't so long since 1913.

I will therefore go back still further, to the 1890s, and even the 1880s, when Strindberg *should* have established himself in England, but when a row of non-events came to condition the reception, both then and later, of his work.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Robinson, "Sentida genombrott för Strindberg i England", *Parnass*, 1 (1996), pp. 46-7.

Strindberg wanted to be a European, but he was never an Anglophile.<sup>6</sup> There is a certain irony in the fact that his longest single comment on British culture - the poem entitled "Albion" in his manuscript and printed as number V in the "Exile" cycle in his 1883 volume of *Poems in Verse and Prose* - is quite literally based on a non-event. Probably written in the autumn of 1883, it sums up the ethos, culture and politics of a country which he did *not* visit on his way to Paris seven years earlier, but over which he - through the prophetic "I" of the poem - can still pour his curses. The image of an "Island of wholesalers" driven by "corner-shop politics", a "sooty black [...] coal barge" full of "stocking-knitting / tea-sipping women" and of imperialists whose similarly black hearts are responsible for "East-Indian sins", "African crimes" and "Irish villainies" - this image is far from unique among Scandinavian perceptions of England in the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> As early as 1806 Esaias Tegnér - like Strindberg, a Francophile - had made France, in a dialogue poem, voice much the same accusations against England:

Listen, I know you well and despise your politics  
Built on the balance of trade, rising and falling with it...  
The negro is beaten to death, alas! to sugar your tea.<sup>8</sup>

But, if Strindberg's Albion is something of a cliché, the poem still catches much of the claustrophobically self-sufficient island mentality which he apparently took for granted he would encoun-

<sup>6</sup> Cf. his letter to Jonas Lie, 19 May 1884: "Men jag vill bli Europé!": *August Strindbergs Brev*, ed. Torsten Eklund, IV (Stockholm, 1954), p. 168.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. the vision of "the sickening cloud of the Briton's coal-smoke" ("Brittens kvalme Stenkulsky") in act V of Ibsen's *Brand*; and see Olav Lausund, "Rival Images: Views of Britain in Nineteenth-Century Norwegian Writing", in *Anglo-Scandinavian Cross-Currents 1850-1914*, ed. Inga-Stina Ewbank, Olav Lausund and Björn Tysdahl (Norwich, 1999), pp. 331-342.

<sup>8</sup> Esaias Tegnér, "England och Frankrike", in *Samlade skrifter*, ed. Ewert Wrangel and Fredrik Böök (Stockholm: n.d.), pp. 195-7.

ter on his first and only visit when, the day after his arrival at Gravesend, he describes himself as "Incarcerated on the Isle of Women".<sup>9</sup> Nor was he unique in this respect: even as keen an Anglophile as Georg Brandes had to admit, when writing about his visit to London in 1895, that the British, however admirable, are "perhaps also as conceited and self-satisfied as is no other people on this earth".<sup>10</sup>

But Strindberg's poem has a second voice, an "I" who comes in to forgive England everything,

Not for your own sake  
But for yours,  
Dickens, Darwin, Spencer and Mill.

This particular reversal points to a general truth: that in so far as Strindberg had significant relationships with English culture, they were not prompted by an openness to that culture as such but by engagements, often ardent, with individual writers and their work. In time he came to change his views on Darwin, Spencer and Mill, but Dickens remained a source of inspiration. So, of course, though he is not mentioned here, did Shakespeare whom he seems at times to identify with England: in the essay on role-playing called "Marionettes" (1895), for example, he can define England in passing as "the aristo-democratic country, the homeland of Shakespeare, the creator of *Hamlet*".<sup>11</sup> But in the end it was himself, rather than

<sup>9</sup> "Infångad på die Fraueninsel": letter to Adolf Paul, 21 May 1893 (*Brev*, IX [Stockholm, 1965], p.196), translated in *Strindberg's Letters*, selected, edited and translated by Michael Robinson, 2 vols. (Chicago and London, 1992), II. 457.

<sup>10</sup> "[...]maaske ogsaa egenkærlige og selvgode som intet andet Folk paa Jorden": Georg Brandes, "Indtryk fra London", first published in *Tilskueren*, July 1896, re-printed in *Samlede Skrifter*, XI (Copenhagen, 1902), pp. 304-336; 306.

<sup>11</sup> The essay "Marionettes" was first written in German and published in *Das Magazin für Litteratur*, 64 (1895) and translated into Swedish by John Land-

English culture, that he saw in Shakespeare; and in an essay like "The Self-sacrifice of the Poet" in *A Blue Book* he positively appropriates Shakespeare: "the great Briton" is to all intents and purposes transformed into August Strindberg.<sup>12</sup>

So, Strindberg and English culture: two closed systems. A lost opportunity to build a bridge between them forms, in terms of chronology, the next non-event: the travels across the British Isles which Strindberg did *not* undertake, and the book "Among British Peasants" which he did *not* write. "I'm thinking of devoting some summers of my life to discovering Europe as Stanley discovered Africa!" Strindberg wrote to Carl Larsson on 29 February 1884. First France and then "[t]he following summer we could take England, Scotland and Ireland! With an English trans."<sup>13</sup> The French expedition eventually took place in the summer of 1886 and was recorded in *Among French Peasants*, published the same year; but by "the following summer" Strindberg had written *The Father* and was moving in directions pointing away from the British Isles. England remained to him a bastion of "old monarchy and an Established Church [tvångskyrka]", as he puts it in a letter to Edvard Brandes on 5 March 1886, in which he claims that "[t]he only thing that has given me joy this year was the workers' riot in London" and suggests that pumping air into its gas pipes would be a way of blowing up the whole city.<sup>14</sup> One cannot help wondering what the effect might have been, on both subject and object, of Strindberg "discovering" England and publishing his findings in "trans.". One wonders, too, whether Strindberg appreciated the irony in the fact

quist in his edition of *Samlade skrifter av August Strindberg*, XXVII (Stockholm, 1917), pp. 617-622; 622.

<sup>12</sup> *Samlade skrifter*, XLVI (Stockholm, 1918), p. 72. - I have developed this point more fully in "Shakespeare and Strindberg: Influence as Insemination", in *Shakespearean Continuities*, ed. John Batchelor, Tom Cain and Claire Lamont (London, 1997), pp. 335-347.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Robinson, trans., *Strindberg's Letters* I, p. 129.

<sup>14</sup> *Brev*, V (Stockholm, 1956), p. 287.



that Gustaf Steffen, his assistant on the travels among French peasants until their relationship became poisonous, came to be the author of quite a different study of the island nation, *Från det moderna England (From Modern England)* (1893).

The same year, 1893, saw the non-event which is most important in this context: Strindberg's own stay in England which did *not* lead, as he had hoped, to his plays being performed and his works translated and published. The facts are well known. The newly-married couple landed at Gravesend on 20 May and lived there cheaply in a couple of furnished rooms; they moved, almost penniless, into J.T. Grein's flat in London on 10 June; and a week later Strindberg fled the country because, as he wrote, he "was about to develop rabies from the heat and the coal-smoke".<sup>15</sup> Frida remained in London until the beginning or middle of August, in the hope of finding a theatre and a publisher for his works. Michael Robinson has finely analysed the anti-Strindberg situation in the London of 1893;<sup>16</sup> and here I simply wish to tease out the cultural oppositions which doomed the enterprise.

The couple arrived in England with no firm contacts in literary or artistic circles, and the culture they met in the Gravesend boarding-house was late-Victorian petit-bourgeois. Strindberg found himself in the country of the "tea-sipping women", with no redeeming trace of "Dickens, Darwin, Spencer and Mill". The "shameless married English double-bed with shining brass knobs [...] brazenly defies our notions about modern marriage", Frida writes; and Strindberg hated "the smoothly-polished mahogany, the rosy shells on the what-nots, the prints after Alma-Tadema and Sir Frederick Leighton. *Pour cocottes'* - he says disgustedly".<sup>17</sup> While Strindberg's letters give positive vignettes from the first few days in Gravesend -

<sup>15</sup> Letter to Adolf Paul, 22 June 1893 (*Brev*, IX, p. 215).

<sup>16</sup> See note 1, above.

<sup>17</sup> Frida Strindberg, *Marriage with Genius* (London, 1937), p. 175. Hereafter page references are given in the text.

"England is good, the ale is strong, the gin is half-strong"; roses bloom on the walls at Whitsun, and the chestnuts are "sky-high"<sup>18</sup> - and then fall silent, Frida's retrospective story tells of a paralysing culture shock. Strindberg wanted to work on a new novel but found he couldn't: all those cultural trappings "make mock of the glorious wildness of his dreams", she writes, and then immediately moves on, in a discourse more fanciful than clear, to make the English climate an agency in the devastation of Strindberg's creativity: "The fairylike silvery veil which shrouds England's heaven and hell and separate both equally from the common earth strangles his imagination" (p. 176). Sentences like this remind us that Frida's narrative, more than the authentic letters she reprints, needs to be seen as self-consciously literary rather than read as documentary. However, it seems that, as they moved to London, the climate did its best, by amazingly combining a heatwave with smog, to confirm the notion of "Brittens kvalme stenkulsky" (see note 7, above).

There are two versions of what it was like for the Strindbergs in J.T. Grein's flat, which he put at their disposal while he himself travelled abroad. Both Alix Grein's story and Frida's were written long after the event; the difference between them points the difference between two cultures. Michael Meyer is mistaken when he describes in his Strindberg biography how "Grein and his wife Alix greeted them; Alix remembered that Strindberg arrived carrying his large sack over his shoulder".<sup>19</sup> In fact, Grein and Alix were not married until 1904; she was very much younger than her husband and would have been a child, and certainly not there, in 1893. So what she "remembered" and related in the book about Grein which she published in 1936,<sup>20</sup> is her version of what Grein must

<sup>18</sup> Letters to Adolf Paul, 25 and 23 May 1893 (*Brev*, IX, pp. 199, 198).

<sup>19</sup> Michael Meyer, *Strindberg. A Biography* (London, 1985), p. 275.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Orme [Alix Grein's pseudonym], *J.T. Grein, The Story of a Pioneer, 1862-1935, by his Wife* (London, 1936).

have told her from his remembrance of things past. When she identifies Strindberg as "the ego of an erratic genius", this is presumably coloured by both her own and Grein's later perceptions.<sup>21</sup> In writing about the two Strindbergs in the Pimlico flat, she is the jolly English middle-class hostess. "He and Frida were happy in England; they would have welcomed any suggestion that might prolong their stay", she writes; and in Grein's flat they found, "one might imagine, some inspiration for a writer's pen in the chiaroscuro of the adjacent market with its busy crowd of vendors and buyers under the shrill light of the naphtha lamps".<sup>22</sup> Frida, on the other hand, writes of Strindberg being cooped up in two narrow rooms which he had to share, day and night, with a woman, and of the street market as "[a] sharp and brutal scent of raw meat [...], of fish, winkles, rotting fruit and vegetables, pitch, salt water and human sweat" (p.182). And as for Strindberg's "inspiration", he found it impossible to work at Grein's desk, with its drawers "full to bursting of other people's intellectual labours" (p. 183).

When Georg Brandes visited London in the autumn of 1895, he stood on Westminster Bridge and found the city "beautiful: beautiful in its expression of solid British imperial power";<sup>23</sup> and members of the intellectual and literary élite vied with each other to meet and entertain him. Even the fastidious Henry James saw in him "a fine foreign mind".<sup>24</sup> Two years earlier Strindberg found London a nightmare, and the products of literary and dramatic activity which filled Grein's drawers to bursting remained as "foreign" to him as he remained foreign and strange to their creators. Three things had drawn him to England: a feeler from Grein about

<sup>21</sup> Michael Orme, p. 130. She cannot have read Frida Strindberg's book in its English (1937) version and is unlikely to have read the German version, *Lieb, Leid und Zeit* which, like her own book, was published in 1936.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Orme, p. 130.

<sup>23</sup> "Indtryk fra London", p. 304.

<sup>24</sup> See Jørgen Knudsen, *Georg Brandes, Symbolet og Manden, 1883-95*, 2 vols. (Copenhagen, 1994), II, p. 666 (note to p. 608).

the possibility of a production of *The Father* by the Independent Theatre;<sup>25</sup> a rumour that Heinemann was interested in publishing Strindberg's *Somnanbulist Nights*; and an article about Strindberg and his works in the *Fortnightly Review* in September 1892, written by Justin Huntly McCarthy, who was also responsible for a translation, in the August 1892 issue of *The Gentleman's Magazine*, of parts of the Preface to *Miss Julie* - and who in a letter to Strindberg had declared himself "un de vos plus fervents admirateurs".<sup>26</sup> All three draws turned into non-events. Grein said to start with that it was too late to put on *The Father* in the current season, and later that it was impossible to find an English actor to play the Captain. Heinemann had gone to Italy, they were told, and had left no word about an intention to publish Strindberg's poems; and when he returned, after Strindberg had left England, all that Frida got out of him were a few lunches at the Savoy which for a while led her to hope for a dramatic "triumvirate" with Strindberg as author, Grein as director and Heinemann as publisher.<sup>27</sup> And, Frida writes, not even the essay in the *Fortnightly* proved "an 'Open Sesame!'" (p. 177).

If Strindberg had really thought that McCarthy's article would have that effect, he cannot have read it very carefully. True, its rhe-

<sup>25</sup> In a letter (in German) to Strindberg, dated "Jan. 1893", Green says that he admires Strindberg's work and "would like to be the first to introduce it in England"; asks approval of a plan to produce *The Father* with The Independent Theatre during the coming year; and, as leader of that theatre (which at that point he renders as "Leiter der Freien Bühne"), requests the rights "für England und Kolonien" to all Strindberg's works. See *Briefe an Strindberg*, ed. Walter A. Berendsohn (Mainz & Berlin, 1967), p. 73.

<sup>26</sup> McCarthy to Strindberg, 4 November 1892. (*Briefe an Strindberg*, p. 70.).

<sup>27</sup> See *Marriage with Genius*, esp. p. 196, and Strindberg's increasingly sceptical as well as agonised responses to her plans, in his letters to her across the weeks of separation. By 18 July, e.g., he can write: "Il vaut la vie, l'avenir, et je m'en fiche de l'honneur d'être joué à Londres"; and on 22 July, in a letter to Marie Weyr, he describes Frida's theatre projects as "trop grandioses pour être vraisemblables" (*Brev*, IX, pp. 246 and 251).

torical opening raises expectations - "A new star has arisen in the North" - and the first paragraph asserts that, though "[t]he Swedish dramatist is not the peer of the Norwegian dramatist", he is "in his degree a remarkable personality, a potent factor in that deeply interesting problem, the future of modern drama".<sup>28</sup> But the next step is to apply cold water by warning against excessive enthusiasm: "A state of fever is not a sane state" (p. 326). A less-than-accurate biographical sketch sums up Strindberg's life as "a life of Picaresque Pessimism", and has him currently residing "chiefly, if not entirely, on one of the islands or skerries outside Stockholm, living a life of almost absolute retirement" (p. 327). After this, it is not surprising that, having praised *The Father* and *Miss Julie* as realistic tragedies, McCarthy grows steadily cooler as he finds himself forced to declare that "[p]essimism is the lesson of all Strindberg's later pieces" - a pessimism which Strindberg has absorbed from "his master in life", Nietzsche, and the keynote of which is therefore "a merciless misogyny" (p. 333). What McCarthy gives with one hand he takes away with the other: the "grim power" of *Miss Julie* can be fully appreciated only if it is "seen acted", but "that is scarcely likely to come to pass upon our stage - even upon the stage of the Independent Theatre". And, he adds, with an afterthought that bodes ill both for Strindberg and for the "future of modern drama" which McCarthy claimed to be so deeply interested in: "I do not say that it would be well that it should come to pass" (p. 330). The final paragraph of the article retreats into a kind of weary defeatism, undercutting most of the claims it had made for Strindberg, by saying that he is really not doing anything very new, and anyway what is new will soon seem old. So, with a closing gesture - "Let it [the Preface to *Miss Julie*] then hang peacefully with the other tattered banners in the Temple of the Drama" (p. 334) - the lid is somewhat pusillanimously put on what initially looked like a genuine advo-

<sup>28</sup> Justin Huntly McCarthy, "August Strindberg", *Fortnightly Review*, 53 (September 1892), pp. 326-334; 326. Hereafter page references are given in the text.

cacy for Strindbergian drama. If McCarthy had convictions, he did not have the courage to go with them: much as J.T. Grein, in founding the Independent Theatre, was convinced that England needed a Théâtre Libre but then, in practice, backed away from the radical measures needed to achieve one.

Clearly Strindberg had not appreciated what these warning signals indicated about English theatre culture in the early 1890s. Nor had he appreciated that Grein - who, when he wrote to Strindberg in German, identified himself as "Leiter der Freien Bühne" - was not an Antoine or Lugné-Poe. Unlike the Théâtre Libre and the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, the Independent Theatre was primarily a literary theatre, with an illustrious and mixed membership of playwrights, novelists and other literati,<sup>29</sup> but with no stage of its own.<sup>30</sup> It was more of a society for the promotion of new dramatic texts - though without any really clear textual policy - than a movement towards innovative theatre. Staging and acting were secondary interests, and the few performances (in temporarily-rented theatres) given to each text tended to be conventional and undistinguished. It was not a forum for a Strindbergian breakthrough. During its lifetime, from 1891 to 1898, the Independent Theatre was responsible for altogether 28 productions - but for no Strindberg, nor for any genuine renewal of English theatre, always excepting its very first production, of Ibsen's *Ghosts* on 13 March 1891. But even then it was the play as a text dealing with shocking material, not as a theatrical experience, that made the London press heave with a mixture of execration and adulation.

<sup>29</sup> So those whom Strindberg could have met in 1893, but did not meet, included Grein's close advisers, George Bernard Shaw and George Moore, as well as William Archer, Gilbert Murray, Thomas Hardy, George Meredith, Henry James and many more.

<sup>30</sup> The best account of the Independent Theatre remains chapter IV, "A Literary Theatre: The Lesson of the Independent Theatre", in John Stokes, *Resistible Theatres* (London, 1972), pp. 111-180.



That Ibsen was the main obstacle in Strindberg's way was understood both by Alix and by Frida. "There were 'harps in the air' in the Warwick Street flat, but not his harps", Alix writes, alluding to *The Master Builder* which - promoted by William Archer and Edmund Gosse, who had jointly translated the text - had opened with matinée performances at the Trafalgar Square Theatre in February, transferred in March to evening performances at the Vaudeville, and been revived in June at the Opera Comique.<sup>31</sup> Frida's account has the same subtext:

Strindberg is Youth, knocking at master Solness's door. But here Ibsen himself is only just coming into the world. You cannot very well thunder to an innocent: "Make way, Ancient!" [...] Still less, however, can one remain what one is and what one wants to be - Strindberg the pioneer - at a writing-table where the battle for Henrik Ibsen is still in progress. (p. 183)

Identifying Strindberg with Hilde Wangel may, as such, seem absurd, but Frida - who after Strindberg's departure went to see Elizabeth Robins play the part at the Opera Comique - is realistic in her appraisal of the English theatre as "[having] just arrived - at Ibsen".<sup>32</sup> By 1893 the shock wave created by the Independent Theatre's production of *Ghosts* had been succeeded by a situation in which Ibsen was very much the author of the day: performed,

<sup>31</sup> See James Mc Farlane's account in *The Oxford Ibsen*, VII (London, 1966), p. 537. - The Opera Comique was the theatre whose existence Strindberg not altogether surprisingly refused to believe in, Frida having suggested it as a possible venue for his plays: see *Brev IX*, p. 262.

<sup>32</sup> *Marriage with Genius*, p. 204, Frida writing to Max Burckhard, manager of the Imperial Royal Hofburg Theater, Vienna: "We are guests of an admirable young enthusiast, who wants the good and the new, but has just arrived - at Ibsen. I lunch once or twice a week with a young publisher; he wants the good and the new, but has just arrived - at Ibsen".

parodied and read. It was not only a group of intellectual enthusiasts - Archer, Shaw (not least with his *Quintessence of Ibsenism* in 1891), Gosse, Henry James and others - who saw in Ibsen the future of modern drama; but a much larger reading public was coming to accept his work as an ultimately edifying addition to British culture. By 1893, William Archer estimated, 100.000 copies of individual Ibsen plays had been sold in Britain.<sup>33</sup> When Eleonora Duse visited London and played Nora in *A Doll's House* in June 1893 - a production Strindberg could have seen but didn't, any more than he saw *The Master Builder*, *Hedda Gabler* or *An Enemy of the People*, all playing during his stay in England - then reviewers could complain that she was "too southern", not "Ibsen's Nora". The implication was that, as northern Europeans, they had a privileged understanding: "the real Nora Helmer" had become British.<sup>34</sup> Dr Stockman in *An Enemy of the People* could be interpreted as a descendant of that Victorian idol, Sigurd in the *Volsunga saga*;<sup>35</sup> and the essence of Ibsen, who had not published any embarrassing autobiographical writings and so - unlike Strindberg - did not loom over his works as a remarkable, pessimistic or mad personality, could be constructed as a modern version of Viking moral boldness (and, in the case of Dr Stockman, as promotion of pure - unpolluted - cold water).

<sup>33</sup> William Archer, "The Mausoleum of Ibsen", *Fortnightly Review*, 54 (1893), pp. 77-91; 87. - For fresh light on "The Ibsen Phenomenon", see essays by Sara Jan, Gail Marshall, Tore Rem and Kirsten Shepherd-Barr in *Anglo-Scandinavian Cross-Currents 1850-1914* (cf. note 7, above).

<sup>34</sup> See Gail Marshall, "Duse and Ibsen in the 1890s", in *Anglo-Scandinavian Cross-Currents 1850-1914*, pp. 203-214; 208.

<sup>35</sup> As in Ernest Rhys's editorial Preface in Edmund Gosse's *Northern Studies* (London, 1890), p. vii. Gosse's book, which included two essays on Ibsen but none on Strindberg, was published in the popular Camelot series, where in 1888 had appeared both a translation of the *Volsunga saga* and a volume of three Ibsen plays: the first translations, by Archer, of *The Pillars of Society* and *Ghosts*, and Eleanor Marx-Aveling's translation of *An Enemy of Society* (sic).



On such a cultural agenda, the reception of Strindberg was predictable. McCarthy's article, with its stress on "pessimism" and "merciless misogyny", could not have been much of a promotion in a culture that had begun to appropriate *A Doll's House*. Strindberg saw more clearly than Frida that this culture had no room for him and his anxieties. On 28 June he wrote in response to her news of a translator for *Son of a Servant*: "Tjenstekvinnans son plus Beichte sont impossibles en Angleterre, puisque l'auteur est inconnu et qu'il y a beaucoup de choses sexuelles".<sup>36</sup> And, though he asks in the same letter whether she has made contact with McCarthy and Archer, ten days later he expressly forbids her to give his *Poems* to Archer: "Il y a des choses dangereuses!".<sup>37</sup> Apparently he expected no understanding even from those most identified with modern English theatre. Of course he is himself deeply complicit in this deadlock: his later unwillingness to respond to approaches by Shaw, who was genuinely interested in his work, is well known.<sup>38</sup> There are several accounts, partly contradictory but all with a touch of the bizarre, of Shaw's visit, with his wife, to the Intimate Theatre to see an *ad hoc* performance of *Miss Julie* in July 1908;<sup>39</sup> what is certain is that it was Strindberg's fault that it produced no further contacts. Nor did Shaw's letter to Strindberg in March 1910 do so: here, I think, we can see a shadow of the same cultural deadlock that blighted the 1893 visit. Shaw's "bait" proposal that Strindberg find a venue for his plays at the Afternoon Theatre is

<sup>36</sup> *Brev*, IX, p. 219.

<sup>37</sup> *Brev*, IX, p. 235.

<sup>38</sup> See, e.g., Michael Robinson, *Studies in Strindberg*, p. 15.

<sup>39</sup> See Shaw's letter to William Archer of 16 (?) July 1908 and his (scripted) interview in *The Daily Telegraph*, 25 January 1909; the account by August Falck in *Fem år med Strindberg* (Stockholm, 1935), pp. 170-173; and that by Gustav Uddgren, who somewhat implausibly claimed that "Shaw wept torrents, though he did not understand a word, while Mrs Shaw chattered so much that she drove Strindberg into a fury" (cited from Gunnar Ollén, *Strindbergs Dramatik* [rev.ed., Stockholm, 1982], p. 135).

conditional upon his major proposal, that Strindberg send his *Lucky Peter's Journey* to Sir Herbert Beerbohm-Tree, the manager of her Majesty's Theatre, who is desperately looking for a suitable play: "another *Peter Pan*". Maybe Shaw shouldn't have used that phrase, or made it clear that the Afternoon Theatre was a would-be avant-garde theatre "attached to His Majesty's Theatre", or described His Majesty's as "a favorite with the innocent bourgeoisie and their daughters, who would fly horror-stricken at the very first of Julie". The final straw might well have been the cheery humour of the tone - so like Alix Grein's that it is tempting to call it "British" - in which Shaw suggests that he and his wife know Strindberg better than "all the old Strindberg legends which circulate here just as they do in Stockholm, in spite of my wife's insurance [*sic*] to everybody that you are a most friendly man, with memorable dark blue eyes and an appealing smile".<sup>40</sup>

Frida, when she finally gave up hope of a "triumvirate", divides the blame between Strindberg ("He is a law unto himself") and fate:

It is written in the book of Fate. The English modern movement will have to dispense with us. There will be no Strindberg Theatre here, most likely no new art of the stage either, for a little while yet. (p. 223)

If she is confused about the causes of the débâcle, she is right about the result. "What is modern is, here and now, that mode of writing [*skap*] which is most able to move and affect [*gripa*] one's contemporaries", Strindberg wrote in 1895.<sup>41</sup> Strindberg's mode (or modes) of writing moved very few of his English contemporaries

<sup>40</sup> Shaw, letter to Strindberg, 16 March 1910, cited from *Briefve an Strindberg*, pp. 160-161.

<sup>41</sup> "De modärna?", an article first written in German and published in *Das Magazin für Litteratur*, 64 (1895); translated into Swedish by John Landquist in *Samlade skrifter*, XXVII, pp. 589-595; 589.

and did not affect English Modernism. A first translation, by N. Erichsen, of *The Father* in 1899 attracted little attention and the sporadic early performances (see note 4, above) met mainly with uncomprehending abuse, a reviewer of the 1912 production of *Creditors* even suggesting that to translate plays like this into English is "a waste of time".<sup>42</sup> Only with the death of Strindberg came a stream of translations (see note 3, above), dominated however by autobiographical prose works rather than plays. The notion of Strindberg texts as thinly veiled, or un-veiled, biography thus came to be both cause (of the choice of texts to translate) and effect (of the reading of the chosen texts). Emelie Lind-af-Hageby's study, *August Strindberg, the Spirit of Revolt* (1913), meant well but managed only to confirm what had become, and was to remain, the received opinion. "She is inclined to set too high a literary value on the brutality, the want of artistic control, which heaps many of Strindberg's pages with fury and filth", was the opinion of *The Times Literary Supplement* (1913, p. 207). Increasingly articulate women's voices contributed to the antipathy against "the Norwegian antifeminist" as Rebecca West, one of the loudest, described him, with more fervour than exactitude.<sup>43</sup> In two articles provocatively entitled "Strindberg: the English Gentleman" she reviewed the 1912 translations of *The Confession of a Fool* and three plays (see note 3, above), insisting that Strindberg must be studied in England because his "psychology" (i.e. attitude to women) is exactly that of the typical Englishman. But, having used Strindberg as a paradoxical feminist weapon, she proceeds to warn against him: he cannot write, and "it would be disastrous if he became an artistic influence".<sup>44</sup> A few months later she can state categorically: "There will

<sup>42</sup> See Michael Robinson, *Studies in Strindberg*, p. 11.

<sup>43</sup> See *The Young Rebecca. Writings of Rebecca West 1911-17*, ed. Jane Marcus (London, 1982), p.86; and also John Stokes, "'A woman of genius': Rebecca West at the theatre", in *The Edwardian Theatre*, ed. Michael R. Booth and Joel H. Kaplan (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 185-200.

<sup>44</sup> *The Freewoman*, 15 August 1912, re-printed in *The Young Rebecca*, pp. 53-56;

never be - except among the perverse - any enthusiasm in England for the works of August Strindberg, the foremost European masculinist and hater of women".<sup>45</sup>

My intention here is not to write over again the history of the reception, translations and performances of Strindberg. What I have been attempting to show is how and why a British perception of Strindberg came to crystallize into a form hard enough by 1912-13 to withstand many changes within British culture at large. For Strindberg the dramatist<sup>46</sup> this has a great deal to do with the way drama in England lagged behind the other literary genres in terms of modernity: of finding a form and language for an incohesive, discordant modern world. Until the 1950s drama and theatre, unlike fiction and poetry, were not significantly affected by, because not much interested in, developments outside the British Isles. In many ways T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land* and the novels of Virginia Woolf had more in common with Strindbergian drama - particularly the post-Inferno plays - than with the repertoire of the average serious English theatre. It was only with Peter Hall's production of *Waiting for Godot* in 1955, with the visit to London of Brecht's Berliner Ensemble in 1956, and with John Osborne's Strindberg-inspired *Look Back in Anger* in the same year, that English theatre began to look outwards. In doing so, and discovering Continental drama, it also discovered that on the Continent Strindberg was indeed seen as "the midwife of the modern theatre". It is interesting to see how often the name of Strindberg figures in the issues of *Encore*, the key theatre magazine of those exciting years: Strindberg,

53.

<sup>45</sup> "Cause of Women's Restlessness: Suffragist's Spirited Reply to Male Critics", *Manchester Daily Dispatch*, 23 January 1913, re-printed in *Young Rebecca*, p. 378.

<sup>46</sup> The shortage of good translations, or the absence of any translation of all, of other works is another story; as is indeed the problem of translating the plays.

that is, as spoken of by Continental dramatists and theorists.<sup>47</sup> In theory Strindberg now becomes superior to Ibsen. "Ibsen and Shaw", Tom Milne writes in 1960, "treated sex and its appurtenances as a social fact", whereas to Strindberg sex was "a motive force, something which governed behaviour and was all-pervasive". Hence Strindberg's plays "retain their theatrical power and excitement" (not, one has to interpose, that there was much of this to "retain" in an English Strindberg tradition), while "plays like *The Doll's House*, *Mrs Warren's Profession* and *Misalliance* have dated". And, he concludes, the difference is one of approach: "Strindberg kicks you in the belly from behind"<sup>48</sup> - an image which may be preferable to that of a man who doesn't know the value of cold water, but which in its inherent impossibility comes unintentionally but graphically to symbolize Strindberg's relationship with English culture. For, with sporadic brilliant exceptions - such as Laurence Olivier's Captain in the National Theatre's *Dance of Death* in 1965 - the theoretical interest in Strindberg has rarely been translated into practice. Besides, academic theory soon kicked back, and hard, in a book which is still read by students in British universities: F.L. Lucas's *The Drama of Ibsen and Strindberg* (1962). Here we are back with Ibsen (to whom two thirds of the book is devoted) serving as a stick to beat the allegedly "overrated" Strindberg with; and, if the "avant-garde" prefer Strindberg, "what is the 'avant-garde'? Mainly the front sheep". We are back with the assumption that Strindberg's personality - "neurotic", "demonic" and of course "misogynistic" - overshadows his work, and with a positively Victorian vocabulary of derogation to describe the individual plays. *The Dance of Death* features "cardboard monsters"; *The Ghost Sonata* is "de-

<sup>47</sup> See, e.g., Richard Roud, "Ionesco: The Opposite of Sameness", *Encore*, June 1957, re-printed in *The Encore Reader: A Chronicle of the New Drama*, ed. Charles Marowitz, Tom Milne & Owen Hale (London, 1965), pp. 18-26; 21 (on Artaud and Strindberg).

<sup>48</sup> Tom Milne, "The Hidden Face of Violence", *Encore*, January 1960, reprinted in *The Encore Reader*, pp.115-124; 118.

testable, morbid" and "depraves" the audience; *Easter*, on the other hand, tends "to the namby-pamby". In the final paragraph of the book the difference between the two playwrights again becomes one of moral geography:

[...]it is always with a feeling of liberation and relief that I pass from the shadowy spectre-world of Strindberg, with its shrieks of peevishness or self-pity, its poisonous fungi and rotten, phosphorescent timber, its slithery chimeras and its nightmares-nests, back to the bleak and storm-laden, yet cleaner and keener air that lifts the pages of Henrik Ibsen.<sup>49</sup>

I have quoted Lucas because his book signals the survival of perceptions and discourses about Strindberg formulated early in the century. As I found in the "Nightwaves" discussion referred to earlier in this paper, they survive in the late 1990s. But there are other, more hopeful, signs. Books, articles and translations (again, notably those by Michael Robinson) which in various ways try to explode the old clichés and expand understanding of the art of Strindberg, can now address a British culture which has found a new openness. Post-imperial Britain is more ready to become, like Strindberg, European. As translator and dramaturg I have myself recently had the experience of seeing directors build bridges between Strindberg and British culture. In all four cases - London productions of *Easter* and of three Chamber Plays: *Storm*, *After the Fire* and *The Ghost Sonata* - the directors were young women.<sup>50</sup> Of Katie Mitchell's production the *Sunday Times* reviewer, having admitted that it "almost convinces you that [*Easter*] is a good and viable drama",

<sup>49</sup> F.L.Lucas, *The Drama of Ibsen and Strindberg* (London, 1962), p. 478. Earlier quotations particularly from pp. 305, 473, 396.

<sup>50</sup> *Easter*, directed by Katie Mitchell, Royal Shakespeare Company, Barbican, January-March 1995; *Storm*, directed by Wils Wilson, *After the Fire*, directed by Loveday Ingram, and *The Ghost Sonata*, directed by Georgina Van Welie - all three at the Gate Theatre, January-February 1997.

felt impelled to conclude: "*Easter* is a key work of the period when Europeans began to understand the nature of dreams and the darkness within".<sup>51</sup> Was this a single swallow? The answer has to be Johan's at the end of *Son of a Servant*: "Ask the future!".

---

<sup>51</sup> *Sunday Times*, 29 January 1995.