

¶ Ulf Olsson, *Levande död: Studier i Strindbergs prosa*. Stockholm/Stehag: Brutus Österlings Bokförlag Symposion, 1996. 512

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*Levande död* (Living Dead) is a complex and very challenging scholarly study of some of Strindberg's most important non-dramatic works. Olsson strongly believes that conventional, "mimetic" readings of Strindberg's prose works, that is, readings that attempt to determine the "theme" of a work and then to distinguish between that and the narrative process, have nothing more to reveal about Strindberg. Nor - he feels - can the psycho-biographical approach to Strindberg now teach us anything new. Fully abreast of current thinking about narratology-he has been particularly inspired by Adorno, Bakhtin, and Walter Benjamin-Olsson urges us to *byta läsart*, that is, to find a new approach. He proposes that we open new vistas for Strindberg scholarship by focusing on three basic, interlocking categories: "commodity form (*varuform*)", modernity, and allegory.

"Commodity form" refers to the prevailing conditions of publication that obtained in bourgeois society during Strindberg's career as a writer: literature becomes the place where the private is made public. During the nineteenth century the writer himself became identified with his work and was gradually rationalized to a "product", a "trademark" - the writer as a personality (26). This transformation of literature into a commodity had serious consequences both for art and for the artist. It encouraged - or rather forced - the "modern" writer to "allegorize" his text, that is, to provide his text both with a "narrative surface accessible for immediate consumption" and with "a thoughtful, deeper level, which - on the contrary - implies that the work of art is withdrawn from immediate consumption and is only accessible upon reflection and rumination" (36). For Olsson, modernity is not just the contemporary; it is a process of social change that forever altered the conditions of life. According to Dana Brand, whom Olsson quotes (32), this kind of modernity began in the nineteenth century and made "the phenomenological character of experience [. . .] less unified, coherent, or continuous than it was in earlier historical periods". "A modern person," Walter Benjamin says, "is a man who has been deceived by his experience." Olsson sees Strindberg as a writer who, like Baudelaire, was "modern" in Benjamin's sense of the word.

Acutely aware of this fundamental shift in the conditions of life and of writing, Strindberg perceived that one of the “modern” writer’s fundamental problems is how to deal with the conflict between words: the word, as Falk tells Struve in *Röda rummet*, can never be representative, eternal and symbolic, but is always personal and historically conditioned (64). Olsson’s thesis is that:

*Röda rummet* allegoriserar, genom att utlägga sin egen form på sina gestalter, en kamp mellan två ord. Under ett första skikt, där romanen framstår som en berättelse om en ung mans vandring genom Stockholm och det svenska samhället, skrivs en andra berättelse vars centrum, ordens strid, också är en framställning av en estetisk problematik som gäller för den roman vi läser. Ibland förs denna andra berättelse direkt in i den första, i situationer som fungerar som ledtrådar för en allegorisk läsning av romanen (65-66).

Thus underlying the surface narrative in this novel Olsson finds a level of the aesthetic reflection concerning the opposition between the “truth of realism” and the “hypocrisy of official art” (82). He finds, moreover, similar bi-level, “allegorizing” structures in all of the texts he studies. Olsson’s basic assumption here is that the “modern” work of art must defend itself against “commodity fetishism” by hiding behind the veil of allegory (25), and allegory, he maintains, “lives in the radical distinction between the sign and the signified; indeed, it lives in the fact that these two stages are never identical or harmonic (186). Strindberg’s tendency - in, say, *The Red Room* - to “allegorize,” that is, to resort to the age-old literary technique of letting the events of a narrative parallel and continuously refer to “another simultaneous structure of events or ideas,” foretokens the distinction he was to make (in the 1890s) between the *exoteric* and the *esoteric* aspect of his paintings. In principle, modern allegory functions in the same way as classical allegory, but with one striking difference: [In a modern text like Kafka’s *The Castle*, for example], we sense the presence of allegorization, but we are at first apparently unable to answer the question of what is being allegorized” (46). From *The Red Room* onwards Olsson sees an ever-growing tendency in Strindberg to “allegorize” his prose texts, culminating in *Inferno*, which he

considers true allegory.

Olsson's title, *Levande död* touches upon all three of the categories that constitute his approach. Death in life is closely linked both to "commodity form" and to modernity, which give rise, in turn, to a "conflict between words" and pose the problem of how the author will find a way to say the unutterable, the forbidden. This is the problem Strindberg attacks in the satirical work, *Det nya riket / The New Kingdom*. The solution he found there was to make the reader - no matter how scandalized or morally disturbed he was by what he was reading - a participant in the attack on the corrupt Oscanian society (98). Indeed, Olsson believes that Strindberg's whole aim as a writer was steadily to expand the boundaries of what can be written (*det skrivbara*). In "Dygdens lön" / "The Reward of Virtue" the first story in *Giftas / Getting Married, I*, he significantly extended these boundaries by showing how the "overclass" uses sexuality and morality in order to maintain its power. By the same token, in "Höst" / "Autumn", the story that opens *Getting Married, II*, Olsson sees a similar attack on marriage and the family: "The family as a prison - and that despite the fact that it is patriarchal with specific roles for the man and the woman respectively. As an undercurrent, a systematized slip of the tongue [...] this image of the prison underlies the idyllic surface narrative" (155).

Olsson's reading of *En dåres försvarstal / A Madman's Defence*, which has generally been taken to be embarrassingly autobiographical, gives a good illustration of the role he thinks allegorization plays in Strindberg's prose works. He claims that Axel, the narrator, is by no means August Strindberg, but a "type" in Strindberg's gallery of literary characters, an "idealist" who is always presented as insufficiently realistic. (164). Olsson also sees *Tschandala*, another work that has generally been harshly judged as overly autobiographical, not as a nasty reflection of Strindberg's own racial prejudices, but as a novel based on a "colonial" situation. Since Sweden's modest colonial adventures ended long before Strindberg's time, one does not readily connect him with the colonial point of view that one finds in, say, Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*; but Olsson makes a convincing case for identifying *Tschandala*'s Magister Törner as the Kurtz of Swedish literature: "vad *Tschandala* förefaller mig gestalta är den västerländske intellektuelles möte med det fränstötande, smutsiga, äckliga: med det främmande andra"

(220-221). Read from this point of view, the story gains new and greater significance.

Olsson also finds an interesting similarity between *The Heart of Darkness* and Strindberg's flawed novel, *I havsbandet / By the Open Sea*, which he reads as "an unanswered question" (245). In this case, however, we witness not the triumph or the shortcomings of the colonizer (Inspector Borg), but the adverse effects the meeting with "the other" has on him. No less than Kurtz, Borg is changed by his interaction with "the other", for instead of passively accepting colonialization, here the *främmande* fight back, both in reality and in fantasy. Of course, the novel cannot merely be read as a colonial novel; it can also be read as a male "quest romance": "dess sökande eller expedition gäller åtminstone tre områden: territoriet, kvinnan, språket" (264).

The neglected "scientific" works and the occasional essays that Strindberg wrote during the 1890s (90-tals essäistik), Olsson maintains, clearly reveal the transition from the allegorizing style of *By the Open Sea* to the true allegory he finds in *Inferno*. He finds that an important aspect of Strindberg's scientific method, the search for "correspondences", really amounts to nothing less than a radical allegorization of the world. But what Strindberg sought in these correspondences was not words that would pinpoint a systematic, scientific likeness; rather it was esoteric, personal likenesses that would reanimate a world that had been deadened by scientific classification. Only in this way could Strindberg make the world once more *skrivbar*, "scriptive". Is artistic practice (that is, the symbolization of the world) dead, or do the world and reality lack form and structure and need the artist to shape them? - this is the question Strindberg asks in the essay "På kyrkogården"/"In the Cemetery". In *Jardin des Plantes*, this line of inquiry leads Strindberg to the question posed in Plato's *Cratylus*, namely, to the correctness of names and to the poet's orphic need to rename things so that he may sing life into stones. In a work like "Förvirrade sinnesintryck"/"Sensations détraquées" the colonialism of *Tschandala* is reversed and in Paris Strindberg himself now becomes the savage: "Jaget kan nu lita till sina instinkter, 'avklädd den civiliserade människans dräkt', och därmed också göra uppror mot moderniteten" (300). Writing these "scientific" works and occasional essays in the 1890s armed Strindberg for his

revolt against modernity in *Inferno*.

In all of Strindberg's works that he studies Olsson finds a double movement: underlying a popular story that is easily accessible to a mass audience is an esoteric text that seeks to explore the nature of its own existence. This structure is nowhere more in evidence than in *Inferno*, which both wears the concealing veil of allegory and unveils the world and existence as a divine jest. Olsson places *Inferno* in the tradition of Prudentius's *Psychomachia* and sees it as a double allegory, that is, both as a traditional allegory deeply rooted in the Christian tradition (the wanderer, the pilgrim in quest of faith) and as a "modern" allegory in which the allegorizing force counteracts the traditional allegory and reveals its lack of meaning. The book depicts the confrontation of two sides of Strindberg: Strindberg the Christian and Strindberg the bourgeois individualist (the outsider, the Ahasverus in a Christian world). In other words, it presents the eternal struggle between faith and disbelief, between meaning and meaninglessness (306). The narrating self is - and ultimately discovers that he is - his own real enemy. The poet's need to rename in order to revitalize, a theme that comes up here and there in the earlier occasional essays, becomes crucial in *Inferno*, where one of the functions of the narrator is to "namnge både sig själv och världen, att på nytt skapa dessa storheter" (366).

The interaction between the land of the living and the realm of the dead, a theme that is operative throughout Olsson's book, culminates in *Inferno*, a book for which he finds only one possible reading, "namely, that which clings to the idea that we ever and simultaneously find ourselves among the living and the dead" (337). Early in *Levande död* Olsson cites the famous introductory poem to *Sömngångarnätter / Somnambulistie Nights in Broad Daylight*, in which Strindberg likens his book of verses in the bookseller's window to a poet's heart - dangling from a hook like a calf's heart in the window of a butcher shop; he concludes that this simile epitomizes the situation of the "modern" poet: having placed his heart for sale in a shop window, somewhere in the world a poet is walking around without a heart, that is, as a living dead man (27). Like this poet, Strindberg's protagonists also tend to occupy this border position between life and death: near the end of *The Red Room*, for example, Arvid Falk encounters his own symbolic death, after which he experiences himself as a "living dead" person; from

that point on in the novel, Olsson notes, narratory functions are chiefly left to the other characters. In subsequent works Strindberg's protagonists are even more prone than Falk to experience some sort of "death-in-life". Axel in "Autumn", for example, is "a dead man who tries to desert the realm of death for the land of the living" (155), while another Axel, the protagonist of *A Madman's Defence*, is "a sort of living dead person, whose physical and spiritual existence stops time and again, but who nonetheless continues to talk" (167). In the epilogue to his book Olsson concludes that

den position som här kallats *levande död* sammanförs subjektivitet, allegori och modernitet [...] som levande död kan "författaren" tala som den lägsta, skriva samhället underifrån, för att i nästa stund skriva från en helt annan position, traditionens, konstens. Som levande död ges "författaren" en rörlig form (402-403).

This book contains a comprehensive bibliography of Strindberg scholarship and of relevant literary theory; it also includes both a summary and an abstract in English. Olsson shows a steady line of development in the prose texts that Strindberg produced between 1879 and 1898, and I find his analyses of these texts highly suggestive and almost always completely convincing. Indeed, he shows how Strindberg achieved the "rörlig form" that continues to move us today. This is a very detailed and difficult book - hardly intended for beginners. But for receptive students of Strindberg it *should become a nybörjarbok*, in the sense that it should make us start over, reread our Strindberg and rethink our interpretations of these works.

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