

¶ Egil Törnqvist. *Det talade ordet. Om Strindbergs dramadialog*. Stockholm: Carlssons, 2001. Pp. 262. ISBN 91 7203 408 4.

This book is important and much needed. It fills a yawning gap where approaches to Strindberg's writings – always excepting the monumental work on the edition of his *Samlade Verk* and its offshoots – have leapt straight from the traditionally biographical to poststructuralist ways of thinking about texts, thus missing the close-reading strategies fostered by the now often maligned 'New Criticism'. Egil Törnqvist's book is important also because his close reading of texts is informed by a lifetime's work on Strindbergian and other drama, which gives him a unique grasp of the theoretical and practical problems of analysing language written for performance. The book provides a guide, at once stimulating and authoritative, to understanding why and how 'det talade ordet' (the spoken word) is, as Strindberg himself insisted, the mainspring of his dramatic art.

'Dialogue', in this book, means not just verbal exchanges between two people (although of course Strindberg's plays excel in those) but the whole text of a play, everything intended to be spoken in a performance. An introductory chapter clears the ground of some fundamental inconsistencies which often bedevil the analysis of dialogue. We need to be aware, Törnqvist reminds us, from which viewpoint a text is seen: that of a reader or of an audience; that of readers or audiences new to a play or that of those already familiar with it. It is typical of the clarity with which Törnqvist's exegesis is conducted that, unlike most of us, he refuses to brush any such niggling problems under the carpet. For clarity's sake he also draws the majority of his extended examples from a handful of best-known Strindberg plays – *The Father*, *Miss Julie*, *The Dance of*

*Death, To Damascus, A Dreamplay, The Pelican, The Ghost Sonata* – but overall his range of reference is so wide that by the end of the book the reader has been effortlessly initiated into the entire Strindberg corpus of drama. He or she has also experienced a cumulative sense of the multiple layers, meanings and effects of Strindbergs ‘spoken word’, even as Törnqvist is careful to stress that there are times – in *The Ghost Sonata*, for example – when no theatre audience could possibly apprehend and receive the full charge of every word. Nor, he knows, can a contemporary audience be expected to recognise all the intertextual echoes which he discusses in a chapter (9). Yet this chapter, as it evolves into a full essay on the Bible as a sounding-board in *After the Fire (Brända tomten)*, ought to be required reading for anyone going to see that play.

In the nine chapters that follow the Introduction, Törnqvist proceeds systematically to ask – and answer – just about every question that can be asked about dialogue, moving in the process, and with every awareness of inevitable overlaps between his questions, from the configurations and speech situations of characters on stage (Chapter 2) to ways in which texts generate and interact with subtexts (Chapter 10). Each chapter explores its chosen topic from a multitude of angles. Thus in Chapter 3, ‘Dialogue and Structure’, he starts from the structure of individual passages – beginning with an analysis of the 18 different ‘segments’ which make up the opening conversation between husband and wife in *The Dance of Death I* – and moves to the ways in which correspondencies of passages or iteration of key words may determine the overall structure of a play. Each chapter tends to produce, from its specifics, a wealth of general, and sometimes challenging, insights. Thus in the Chapter (4) which discusses types, functions and interconnections of speeches, we are asked to see *A Dreamplay* as a structure which, while imitating a dream, is in itself ‘rather coherent’. And in Chapter 6, on dialogue in relation to individual characters and roles, we learn among other things – and no doubt to the

surprise of many – that, although in *The Father* there is a thematically functional reversal of expectations of male versus female speech, it is generally not possible to speak of a differentiation between male and female language in Strindbergian drama. No doubt critics preoccupied with gender issues will wish that Törnqvist had spent more than two paragraphs on this point.

The chapter (5) which examines how dialogue relates to action – action on or off stage; action before, during or after the time-span of the play text – evolves into a discussion of the problem of how to decide whether or not a character is a ‘reliable narrator’. How do we tell which of two versions of Jean’s story is true – the pre-coital account of how, as a young boy, he wanted to die for love of Miss Julie, or the post-coital dismissal of this as a fiction built on something he had read in a paper? To this and many other questions Törnqvist has answers that are both sensitive and sane, and he is very much aware that some of the apparently open questions tend to, indeed may have to, be answered only in actual performance. Yet his analysis also alerts the reader to effects which unquestionably are not so much open as double. So, for example, when Gerda, in *The Pelican* explains why she and Axel have returned so soon from their honeymoon, she is unwittingly explaining the perverse relationship between her husband and her mother – or, translating Törnqvist’s words, ‘her explanation is denotatively unreliable, connotatively reliable’.

As a supremely safe guide to Strindberg texts, Törnqvist refuses to generalise when this would be facile. His discussion of Strindberg’s punctuation – in a chapter (7) devoted to all those signs in the material text that are not verbalised on stage: speech headings, stage directions, and so on – is a case in point. Editors and translators are constantly brought up against the question of whether Strindberg’s idiosyncratic ways with exclamation marks or dashes are important indicators or simply the result of carelessness. They will welcome Törnqvist’s sane answer of ‘both-and’ and his advice

to judge each instance on its own merits. Translators will also welcome the book's two Appendixes. The second of these, even as it regrets the losses of nuances and ambivalences often involved in the interlingual translation of Strindberg's dialogue, also recognises that these losses are sometimes inevitable and that there are limits to what a translator for the stage can do to render the multiple effects of a source text. In the same realistic spirit of tolerance the first Appendix, on the dialogue in radio, film and TV productions, accepts the necessity of intralingual translation: modernising Strindberg's language in order to make it accessible to a contemporary audience.

This is a book written in Swedish and, in the nature of its material, for readers with as near native as possible a command of the language. As a milestone in Strindberg studies, as well as a methodological model for any discussion of dramatic dialogue, it deserves a far more general readership. Because it is such a valuable antidote to the impressionistic criticism that Strindberg's language has often invited, it would be churlish to complain that its methodology occasionally protrudes. The one chapter which tempted me to do so was that headed 'Style' where, expecting to find the core of the book, I met instead a somewhat dutiful application of rhetorical terms and categories which did not seem to achieve a great deal of purchase on Strindberg's language. But if this book is a work of taxonomy, therein lies also – as I hope I have made clear – its virtue and its value to Strindberg studies. The finest insights in the book, and the most incontrovertible demonstrations of Strindberg's artistry, spring precisely from Törnqvist's adherence to his methodology: the stunning analysis of the eighteen 'segments' of dialogue in the opening of *The Dance of Death*, for example, or the identification, in *Storm (Oväder)*, of the central character's inability to distinguish between monologue and dialogue as modes of speech. These are only two examples of the many discoveries awaiting the reader throughout this book. They crowd into the last chapter,

‘Subtext’, which did for me all that the chapter on ‘Style’ did not do. Here, as a final example, a systematic reading of the first scene of *To Damascus I* produces a demonstration of Strindberg’s control of his material, to the effect that – to translate Törnqvist – ‘the subtextual, existential level is just below the realistic surface and at times breaks through it’. Strindberg’s spoken – and unspoken – words have rarely been so closely and so well read.

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