

STRINDBERG BEFORE ANNIHILATION: READING THE CHAMBER PLAYS AS DRAMATIC TEXTS

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Abstract

Literary scholars are sometimes reprimanded for reading plays as literary texts rather than texts intended for the stage. To avoid a purely textual approach, it is often argued that you should always “visualize” the action as if it took place on the “theater of the mind”. In this article, I suggest that such a hermeneutics of “mind-staging” is misleading. Referencing theater semiotics and the phenomenological theory of reading of Wolfgang Iser, I argue that such a practice will close the radical openness of the dramatic text, by eliminating its defining indeterminacies. If performance “annihilates” the text by becoming a theatrical event (as suggested by theater semiotics), this will, nevertheless, result in a view of the text as preceding and enduring outside of performance. Thus, the argument from theater semiotics will also come to motivate a purely textual approach to the play as a literary work.

The argument is illustrated with examples from the Chamber Plays of August Strindberg. Building on scholars noting his “carelessness” as a playwright, I argue that a reading trying to visualize the action will encounter several hermeneutical pseudo-problems relevant to the producer of the play but irrelevant to the reader. My first example concerns the sequential distribution of the setting in *The Pelican*: whereas the reader will experience its space as a desolate wasteland (fitting to the theme of the play), the producer, forced to visualize it all at once, will rather experience it as cluttered. My second example concerns the strange dialogue in *The Ghost Sonata*: whereas the literary reader may settle with an analytic description of its weird poetics, the producer must try to make new meaningful coherency out of this very weirdness. The third example regards an authorial mistake in *The Storm*, which becomes a puzzle the producer must solve, although it remains unsolvable for the reader.

Introduction

Occasionally, scholars of literature are reprimanded for reading dramatic texts as *literary* texts, rather than *theatrical* texts intended for the stage. True, there was a time when performance was treated as a secondary and essentially superfluous *re*-production, the mere realization of a theatrical potential already present in the text itself. Yet, the founding of theater and performance studies, now well-established disciplines of their own, has secured the status of performance as a field of study in its own right. Where does this leave the dramatic text?

Here, I will argue *against* the necessity of reading dramatic texts as texts intended for performance. The branching off of theater studies from literary studies has established the theatrical event as a particular field of research in need of its own hermeneutical tools; yet, literary scholars still insist that dramatic texts should be read as proto-theatrical texts. If performance is a particular kind of aesthetical object (it is), the text is, too. Therefore, it is

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equally inadequate to treat the text as the mere blue-print for a not-yet-realized performance as it is to treat the performance as a mere manifestation of textual potentiality.

I will argue my point from three brief examples found in the Chamber Plays of August Strindberg. Certainly, these texts were written *for the stage* – and for a very particular one at that (Strindberg’s anticipated Intimate Theater); and, nevertheless, they operate according to a peculiar *textual* and *literary* logic. Thus, I argue that reading a play has little to do with trying to determine how it would or should be staged. Textual studies and performance studies are equally valid yet must be distinguished due to differences found in their respective objects. Three textual examples are presented, from *The Pelican*, *The Ghost Sonata* and *The Storm*.

Text studies vs. performance studies

In his classic textbook on drama analysis (still being used at several Swedish universities), Gunnar Brandell – incidentally, one of the most sensitive interpreters of Strindbergian drama – asserts that the reader of the dramatic text must “stage the drama, in broad outline, in his imagination, watch it and listen to it within his own mind – just like the author once watched and listened to the performance to which his drama is but the score” (Brandell, 1971, 77; my transl.).

The theory behind such a hermeneutical practice is neatly summed-up by one of the most influential theorists of drama, Manfred Pfister, who states that the “neoclassical dictum: ‘A play read affects the mind like a play acted’, can only be true of the reader who is able to bring the numerous explicit and implicit signs and signals inherent in the literary text to life in his imagination.” (Pfister, 1988, 13) According to the argument, the reader must bring the text to life by imagining the elements of the play as if it was actually being staged – if nothing else, at the “theater” of the reader’s mind.

Theater semiotics would advance a more developed critique against the view that the text always already “contained” its possible performances. Performance was now considered as a distinct phenomenon in need of its own interpretational and analytical methods. As the text was no longer regarded as a total object containing its performance, instead it became a kind of partial object, always unfinished and in need of theatrical completion. Thus, for example, Patrice Pavis maintains that “the reader is always encouraged to imagine the manner in which [a dramatic text] could/should be uttered, to envisage therefore a possible *mise en scène*” (Pavis, 1992, 38).

This elevation of the status of the theatrical event risks a corresponding downgrading of the text as an imperfect sketch or a mere stepping stone in the path towards performance. That the staging is something different from the text as such does not necessarily mean that the text is a performance to come, always in need of physical or virtual (cognitive, hermeneutic) enactment. Rather, the distinction between text and performance must be seen as working both ways.

Consider, in this light, the more radical stance taken by another early semiotician of the theater, Marco de Marinis, in stating that the dramatic text “tends to annihilate itself within the performance, simply because it *becomes* [...] the performance through a process of transcoding which sanctions its transformation into something other than itself, its irreversible annihilation as a literary text” (de Marinis, 1993, 30). Although the text may be the first germinative impulse of the theatrical event, the latter will, eventually, become something entirely different from the text, subsuming certain of its elements while, in the process, tearing itself away from its textual origin.

If this fundamental independency and distinctiveness of the performance was what motivated the formation of the field of performance studies in the first place, it nevertheless corresponds in establishing a similar autonomy of the text. Thus, it is inadequate to state that the text *becomes* performance, for, if the text is annihilated *as text* within performance, it is preserved *as text* outside of it: If theater annihilates the textuality of the text, literary studies remain relevant for studying the text preceding (and outlasting) this very process of annihilation. In this way, the argument from theater semiotics also becomes an argument for purely textual approaches.

Theater is often conceived of as a richer and fuller medium than the mere text, since it operates through a wealth of semiotic, material and multimodal channels. Yet, in a central sense, every performance stemming from a particular text will inevitably come to restrict and reduce the richness of this text. As stressed by Wolfgang Iser, the literary text is governed by indeterminacy to a degree that would never be accepted in relation to instructive texts. True, philosopher John Searle once made the famous claim that the play is not a fictional text proper but rather “a set of instructions for how to do something, namely, how to perform the play”, much like a “recipe for baking a cake” (Searle, 1979, 70). Yet, as every home baker knows, there is nothing worse than indeterminacy, vagueness, ambiguity or irregularity in a recipe – whereas most successful dramas thrive on their equivocality and their tacitness. In literature, Iser notes, outspoken clarity repels the reader, and thus, literary texts are “full of unexpected twists and turns, and frustration of expectations” (Iser, 1972, 284).

The theatrical producers of the play, on their hand, must decide how all such areas of indeterminacy and ambiguity should be reconstructed into a new multimodal whole. In other words, performance must close the openness of the text – a point Iser illustrates with reference to a filmic adaptation of Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* (1749):

While reading *Tom Jones*, [the audience] may never have had a clear conception of what the hero actually looks like, but on seeing the film, some may say, “That’s not how I imagined him.” The point here is that the reader of *Tom Jones* is able to visualize the hero virtually for himself, and so his imagination senses the vast number of possibilities; the moment these possibilities are narrowed down to one complete and immutable picture, the imagination is put out of action, and we feel we have somehow been cheated. (Iser, 1972, 288)

Here, Iser actually points to the fact that the reader does not have to visualize the hero at all – in “sensing the vast number of possibilities”, no “clear conception” needs to (or could ever) be formed. And if literary indeterminacy is annihilated in performance, something similar happens during the reader’s attempt to “visualize” the play on the “theater of the mind”: suddenly, we are forced to decide upon *how* an infinite number of indeterminacies would, could or should come to life.

This fact alone motivates an analysis of the dramatic text as literary text *before* it is annihilated through performance.

Is the stage of *The Pelican* cluttered or desolate?

As a playwright, Strindberg was rather careless – a point that has been recently argued in a dissertation on the Chamber Plays (van Ooijen, 2010, 14–19). These plays, in particular, were

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written swiftly, during a brief span of time, and when Strindberg's publisher or translator would explicitly ask him to go back and revise some unclear detail or inconsistency, the author would simply refuse by stating: "What I have written, I have written!" (cf. Törnqvist & Steene, 2007, 61) Yet, the stylistic flow resulting from this slapdash attitude is precisely what gives these modern classics their singular aura or atmosphere, or what Egil Törnqvist terms their feeling of "half-reality" (Törnqvist 1975, 148): the nightmarish sense of an unstable world always in flux, forever oscillating between dreary mundanity and dreadful monstrosity.

Consider the fourth Chamber Play, *The Pelican* – the only one to actually comply with the modern (post-Strindbergian) notion of "Chamber Play" as a genre. According to Egil Törnqvist and Birgitta Steene, the label would fit most of Strindberg's short plays, since it denotes "a play which, by employing a limited number of characters and adhering to the three unities, would be suitable for production in an intimate theatre" (Törnqvist & Steene, 2007, 18). Yet, the three plays previously labelled "Chamber Plays" – *The Storm*, *The Burned Site* and *The Ghost Sonata* – all contain a large number of minor (not to say superfluous) characters and winding (not to say unwarranted) subplots. Furthermore, they feature meticulously detailed stage designs that also shift from one act to the other, making them utterly unfit for an "Intimate Theater" (cf. Harvey, 2002, 32–33). Whereas most of the actual Chamber Plays hereby actually break with the conception of what a "Chamber Play" should be, in *The Pelican*, on the other hand, the uniform action is restricted to an enclosed room and a brief timespan, and it centers, solely, on the psychological conflict between the four members of a family. Thus, it is the only Chamber Play to actually instill that sense of rigorous reduction later associated with the genre.

Vital for its stark impact is the minimalist and unchanging setting of the play. States the opening stage direction:

A drawing room; door upstage to dining room; door to balcony, partially visible.
Secretaire, writing desk, chaise longue with crimson plush counterpane; a rocking chair. (Strindberg, 2004, 167)

Through its concise brevity, the description gives an immediate sense of a desolate space, the bourgeois home as a haunted wasteland, populated only by dead and isolated objects. From the very opening, this space sets the tone of confined claustrophobia and starving hunger, an emotional void whose inner torment bleeds out through the ominous dash of crimson.

However, this impression is immediately compromised, as the action opens with the Mother entering the stage, taking her seat in an armchair – which, accordingly, must be on the stage, too, although the minimalist description never mentions it. In fact, we will soon come to realize that the initial directions are far from complete, and before the play is over, we will note, as Törnqvist points out, that there must also be a portrait, a tile stove, a palm on a pedestal, a photograph, a table, a bookcase, and a flowerpot in the room (Törnqvist, 1999, 176). All things accounted for, the room suddenly seems really cluttered with stuff, like yet another overburdened salon of 19th Century naturalism. And nevertheless, it is the sense of barren austerity that leaves its impression on the reader.

Törnqvist notes how this gradual distribution of the setting highlights a distinction between the experience of the reader and the theatrical audience, since "what is linear or sequential for the former is simultaneous for the latter" (Törnqvist, 1999, 176). In the theater, we are immediately confronted with the space in its entirety; while, in reading, we never get

to experience all of its elements at once, as a single *Gestalt*. Thus, we also never have to “decide” on what the room actually looks like, and may simply appreciate how fitting the scarce atmosphere of the minimalist stage is to the general mood of the play. No matter how many pieces of furniture are added along the way, the initial impression of static desolation remains, and is further enhanced by the simple fact that both second and third act begin by stating that the décor remains unchanged – yet another suggestive detail withheld from the audience. If we were to visualize the space in its totality, we would have to work against this fundamental impression. One of the great advantages of reading a play, then, is how easily it lets us grasp the mood or atmosphere of the play without having to trouble ourselves with the practicalities of performance.

This difference in phenomenological or hermeneutical approach affects how even the smallest detail is to be interpreted; for, as Törnqvist further demonstrates, the simplest piece of stage direction is ripe with indeterminacy. When it is stated that Gerda takes a seat, we have no way of telling in *which one* of the three possible chairs on stage; and when it is stated that the Son gets up from the rocking chair, we never know at what point he sat down in the first place (Törnqvist, 1999, 175). Whereas the performer must reach a definite conclusion on all such minor details, the reader may pay them little to no attention.

This is confirmed, in a way, by a recent book on Strindberg’s late history plays, where Björn Sundberg lets each analysis of the dramatic texts be accompanied by a thorough chart detailing the relations between all characters on stage during each particular scene. Sundberg accomplishes this by using a literal practice of “hermeneutical staging” where he performs each play on a tiny model theater, reading out the lines and moving about miniature models of the characters in accordance with the instructions provided by the text (Sundberg, 2011, 134). As Sundberg concludes, it is often quite difficult to decide even such basic facts as who is on stage at what moment, since Strindberg is careless in making explicit the entries and exits of each character, and seldom corrects his mistakes or omissions after the fact (Sundberg, 2011, 180). In reading, on the other hand, all spatial relations are necessarily abstract and ambiguous, and we may very well come to a full understanding of the play without having to sort out such tedious details.

Even from this brief example, we may note how the annihilation of the dramatic text as literary text begins already in the process of staging the play on a tiny miniature stage while reading – or, even, in the imaginary theater of the reader’s mind.

Ambiguities and mishaps in *The Ghost Sonata* and *The Storm*

The very benefit of literary analysis, then, is that it may ignore practical solutions and even refrain from any desire to make unambiguous and meaningful what strikes the reader as cryptic. Let us consider another example. In the first act of *The Ghost Sonata*, the Old Man is trying to snare the young Student into becoming a pawn in his personal family vendetta. As they first meet, seemingly at random, the Old Man starts probing the Student in order to suggest a secret bond between the two. Yet, his prying questions seem arbitrary and lacking a clear purpose. Having questioned the Student whether he studies medicine or is good at arithmetic, the Old Man asks: “Are you a sporting man?” The Student, in turn, answers: “Yes, that’s my misfortune...” (Strindberg, 2004, 131) Then, the topic is dropped, never to be picked up again.

During a rehearsal, director Ingmar Bergman admitted that he never could understand those lines, even though this was his third time staging *The Ghost Sonata* (Törnqvist, 2000,

180). Certainly, such confusion must be frustrating for any director, trying to do the playwright justice while having to fit each cryptic element into a new meaningful whole. However, as the text is annihilated in performance, the director may simply leave out any element no longer fitting for the play as theatrical performance: creating a good show is more important than demonstrating absolute fidelity towards the letter of the text. The literary scholar, on the other hand, must take a different approach – yet, his reading does not have to end with a full and consistent reinterpretation but may settle with an analytic account of its use of literary indeterminacy and ambiguity.

For example, in Brandell's own reading of the play, he may simply point out the haphazard nature of the Old Man's questions and the Student's answers, and conclude that the audience is left lacking all meaningful context. Furthermore, Brandell notices how this is part of a general dramatic strategy, which refuses the audience any understanding of what pieces of information will or will not be of importance later in the play (Brandell, 1981, 81–82). In Brandell's apt formulation, Strindberg provides us with "questions without answers", as dramatic dialogue is used to mystify rather than to inform. Whereas the director must seek a way of dealing with such obscurities in a performatively productive way, the literary scholar may simply describe it as part of a typically Strindbergian dramaturgy.

The distinction will also affect how we should deal with pure mishaps on the part of the playwright. The first Chamber Play, *The Storm*, is based on the central conflict between the peaceful yet self-delusional life of the protagonist – the Gentleman – and the disturbances brought on by his noisy new neighbors. At one moment in the play, the Gentleman and his Brother start gossiping, trying to figure out what is *really* going on in the new neighbors' apartment. From behind the closed curtains, a waltz is heard, prompting the Brother's remark: "Always waltzes, perhaps they have a dance school up there, but it's nearly always the same waltz; what is that one called?" (Strindberg, 2004, 45) This remark, in turn, inspires the Gentleman to wax nostalgic on his former life as a married man, since the very same song used to be played in the family home.

Thus, the attention given to the waltz by the Brother has a dramatic function: what the Gentleman still hasn't realized is the fact that his new mysterious neighbor and his former wife are one and the same – it is she who has moved into the apartment above his, bringing "their" waltz with her! Still, there is something weird about the Brother's remark. As Barry Jacobs notes, this is the Brother's first visit since the new tenants moved in, and thus, he shouldn't really know anything about what waltzes they "nearly always" prefer! (Jacobs, 1988, 28) Perhaps, the complaint rather concerns a popular trend, a vulgar obsession with waltzes in general? Yet, if the remark doesn't concern how this particular household tends to repeat this particular piece, why would he ever assume that they are running a dance school (Törnqvist, 1999, 150)? Although simply looking at first, the line proves a real mystery upon closer inspection. How should this puzzle be solved?

Translators and theatrical directors alike seem to take upon themselves to adjust the line according to a new comprehensible context: Törnqvist demonstrates how the text has been altered in order to rid it from unnecessary ambiguity, or how the seeming anomaly has been corrected by simply changing the line or even by putting it into the mouth of the Gentleman, who should know (Törnqvist, 1999, 150–151; Törnqvist, 2001, 221; 248). In his performance of the play, Ingmar Bergman solved the problem by making the two characters two complementary aspects of the same psychological subject (Törnqvist, 1995, 132). Thus, Strindberg's sloppy transgression of the epistemological divide between what one character

should and the other shouldn't know was turned into a subtle aesthetical effect, what Törnqvist terms a "pseudo-dialogue which in fact is a soliloquy" (Törnqvist, 1999, 151). The two become one; problem solved.

Still, it must be stressed that this new dramatic effect solely belongs to the Bergmanian *mise-en-scène*, not the Strindbergian text: the two works remain distinct and function through different logics. In performance, the strange detail – most likely the result of authorial negligence – becomes the key to a secret meaning of the play, suggesting how the two characters really are one and the same; and, in the process, *The Storm* gets appropriated by the Bergmanian oeuvre, which already consists of several films preoccupied with this very theme of psychological doubles and split personalities. Strindberg's text, on the other hand, remains immune to this new interpretive meaning as its annihilation in performance also constitutes an endurance of the text *outside of* performance. Bergman's key unlocks his *mise-en-scène*, but does not fit the text as such, which remains an unsolvable puzzle – or, in Iser's terms, an area of indeterminacy rather than determinate meaning.

Conclusion

Details like these are not of less importance for the reader than for the theatrical audience. Rather, they are of *another kind* of importance. Most significantly, they encourage us to cherish such apparent flaws and failings as a kind of tear in the textual fabric where the author shines through: This is where Strindberg becomes truly visible as a dramatic *author*. Directors may seek to mend such tears, and with good reason: it may very well be necessary in order to stage the play successfully. And yet, the textual tears remain, as vital elements of the play considered as a work of art in its own right. In a central way, then, the reading of the text is what really puts us into touch with the author – before he is annihilated by the theatrical performance of his plays.

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