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Strindbergs Schering

Emil Scherings brev till August Strindberg (1898-1912), original samt översättning och kommentarer av David Gedin och Karin Hoff [Strindberg's Schering. Emil Scherings letters to August Strindberg (1898-1912), Originals, translations and commentaries by David Gedin and Karin Hoff]

David Gedin and Karin Hoff (2025)

Möklinta (Sweden): Gidlunds, pp. 824

Reviewed by: Massimo Ciaravolo

The major Swedish writer August Strindberg (1849–1912) is best known in world literature as a playwright. In fact, he was prolific and innovative in all literary genres and realised early in his career, as an independent author operating on the book market, that contact with translators was paramount, if he was to become a European and transnational writer, beyond the confines of Sweden and the Nordic countries. Numerous pages in his extensive correspondence (twenty-two volumes plus a later, supplementary volume) attest to this. Unfortunately, the unruly Strindberg, constantly on the move in the 1880s and 1890s, did not bother to keep or organise the many letters he received. There is, however, one later exception: he preserved the letters and documents sent by one of his German translators, Emil Schering (1873–1951). Schering became Strindberg's most important correspondent in the later part of the writer's life, from 1898 to 1912, when Strindberg was living permanently in Sweden and was less inclined to travel.

Strindberg was proficient in French and German. His transnational ambitions centred on becoming a European writer primarily

through French, by “conquering Paris”. Some of his masterpieces were written directly in French, such as the novels *The Defence of a Madman* and *Inferno*; in other cases, he translated his own works from Swedish into French, as with *The Father*, one of his major naturalist plays. Strindberg also lived in Berlin, where he met his second wife, the Austrian journalist Frida Uhl. In his letters to Frida, he typically alternates between German – when addressing more intimate, everyday matters – and French, when expressing himself at a higher intellectual level.

Strindberg’s efforts to conquer Paris and secure publication in French yielded some results in terms of European impact and reception. However, his major European impact was due above all to his reception in Germany and Austria, especially during the first two decades of the twentieth century, the heyday of Expressionist theatre. Schering’s rather unique translation project made a fundamental contribution to this development.

David Gedin, lecturer in Comparative Literature at Uppsala University, and Karin Hoff, Professor of Scandinavian Studies at Kiel University, have now co-edited the first complete collection of Schering’s letters to Strindberg. Such a collaboration has proved necessary, as the volume includes Schering’s original letters in German, each followed by a Swedish translation, as well as other documents in German, again accompanied by a Swedish translation (pp. 113–805). Gedin and Hoff have also co-authored the introductory section – written in Swedish and divided into five essays (pp. 7–112) – which offers a significant and carefully contextualised case study. The primary target audience of this work consists of Scandinavian scholars as well as Strindberg scholars worldwide. The letters are, of course, accessible to all readers proficient in German. From the perspective of translation history and translator studies, this book acquires a broader significance.

As Gedin and Hoff point out – and as the letters clearly show – Schering did not simply translate Strindberg’s books into German. Nor was he the first to do so: during the 1880s and 1890s, his German or Austrian predecessors had already selected Strindberg’s most commercially successful works. Schering was so impressed by a German production of a Strindberg play in 1893 that he decided to teach himself Swedish and eventually devote his life and career

to translating Strindberg's *complete works* into German (my italics). He thus became a tireless assistant, agent, and promoter of Strindberg in the German-speaking world. Not only did he find publishing houses willing to embark on such an ambitious translation project, but he also maintained close contact with theatres, managers, directors and actors – among them Josef Jarno and Max Reinhart – who were drawn to Strindberg's northern light within the artistically and intellectually fertile horizon of expectations of the German Avant-garde and Expressionism. What ultimately proved exceptional was that Schering translated an entire oeuvre, integrating it in the German theatrical, literary and cultural canon, as if Strindberg were himself a major German writer among others, "palpably present in the cultural landscape", as Gedin and Hoff put it (p. 81).

As Gedin and Hoff observe, it is impossible to keep precise track of Schering's editions: first, seven volumes published by Verlag E. Pierson in Dresden between 1899 and 1901; then *August Strindbergs Schriften* (36 volumes, Hermann Seemann Nachfolgers Verlag, Leipzig, 1902–06); and finally *August Strindbergs Werke* (approximately 50 volumes, Georg Müllers Verlag, Munich, 1908–30). These series appeared in several, expanded and revised editions; they were continuously in progress and never definitive. Moreover, they were launched when Strindberg was still alive and actively writing. By rough estimate, Schering translated 56 plays, 16 novels, 7 short-story collections, 12 volumes of essays and non-fiction, and 4 collections of poetry by Strindberg (pp. 86, 107).

Despite appearances, this was not a commercial success. Schering endured poverty and marital unhappiness as a result of his rather impractical life project. Harsh economic realities also play an important role in the correspondence between him and Strindberg. Tensions and misunderstandings arose between the two, and one gains the impression that the great writer could not – or did not wish to – fully acknowledge the extent of Schering's sacrifice: Strindberg himself had once endured similar hardship as a writer, and that, for him, seemed sufficient (pp. 19–30). Schering's financial situation improved only after Strindberg's death, when productions of his plays reached a peak in Germany and Austria between 1912 and 1920.

In Sweden, Schering became well known, though in an ambivalent manner. He was acknowledged, yet the existence of Strindberg's (almost) complete collected works in German – published even before a comparable edition appeared in Swedish (the first, edited by John Landquist in 55 volumes, was issued between 1912 and 1920) – elicited both admiration and suspicion. It was, perhaps not surprisingly, Landquist who initiated a tradition of harshly negative assessments of the quality of Schering's translations, a tradition that was later continued with Fritz Paul and Helmut Müssener, among the founders, in different capacities, of modern Scandinavian studies in Germany and in the German language (pp. 71–2, 76–8). As in Landquist's case, albeit for different reasons, they regarded Schering's translations as inadequate. From a historical perspective, these positions are understandable: Landquist's agenda was to establish a 'proper', national tradition of Strindberg scholarship, while the German scholars aimed to found modern Scandinavian studies in Germany relying on a sufficiently high level of proficiency in Swedish.

A further significant aspect, as highlighted by Gedin and Hoff, is that Strindberg, at an early stage of his collaboration with Schering, encouraged his translator to circulate his German translations among colleagues in other countries. Strindberg recognised the importance of European dissemination through Schering. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, German was not only the language of the German-speaking nations; it also functioned as a second language and a language of culture in large parts of Eastern Europe and Russia, as well as in north-western Europe (Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg). Schering thus became the agent who, on Strindberg's behalf and on a voluntary basis, managed these exchanges with translators, editors, and publishers in those regions whenever they expressed interest (pp. 43, 82). This mediating function continued even after the Second World War, for example in Italy, where the first translations of Strindberg's innovative "chamber plays" (1907) were indirect translations based on Schering's German versions.

Gedin and Hoff's descriptive approach offers a less biased and more adequate hermeneutic understanding of Schering's enterprise in its biographical, historical, and cultural dimensions. As such, it amounts to a rehabilitation of the translator, rendering his story and his work visible and his voice audible. For a well-grounded

philological and historical analysis of translations, it is of course legitimate and useful to identify the errors in earlier translations; everything, however, depends on the aims and perspective of such an undertaking. It seems self-evident – and almost superfluous – to insist merely on the fact that older translations contain errors that would not occur were today's linguistic and intercultural competences applied. Moreover, it is a well-known fact that all translations, even the most accomplished, age over time and are eventually replaced by new ones corresponding to a changed horizon of expectations in language, culture, and literature. On the other hand, the historical impact and influence of Schering's translation call for a more thorough understanding, and this book provides precisely such an opportunity. Schering's editions – *August Strindbergs Werke* in particular – constituted an "event" (*Ereignis*), in the sense of Hans Robert Jauss's reader-response theory and undoubtedly exerted a profound "effect" (*Wirkung*). In short, Schering's translations were not flawless, and their shortcomings can be identified (although this is not Gedin and Hoff's primary concern). One might nevertheless ask: was the language of the German Expressionists truly so deficient – or that of Thomas Mann, Franz Kafka, Walter Benjamin, to mention only a few – given that they all admired and engaged with Strindberg's texts in Schering's version?

One aspect that remains somewhat underdeveloped in Gedin and Hoff's work is an explicit theoretical framework grounded in reception and translation studies. The case of Strindberg and Schering would lend itself to a range of applications related to the cultural turn in translation studies, theories of world literature, polysystem theory, and literary translator studies. These perspectives are often implicitly present in Gedin and Hoff's approach. One might even argue that the volume reflects a broader scholarly trend that has repositioned translation at the centre of the literary field. Since the 1990s, translation has received renewed attention within Strindberg studies, and the theoretical assumptions underpinning this shift have circulated widely. More generally, Scandinavian translation studies have made significant contributions to the international debate. In Sweden, one notable example is Nils Håkanson's 2021 essay on translation history and theory, *Dolda gudar* (Hidden Gods), which was awarded the August Prize in the non-fiction category.

Such theoretical perspectives, however, are not spelled out in *Strindbergs Schering*. This is likely the result of a deliberate choice. The authors have given priority to an accurate and thorough historical reconstruction of the relationship between the writer and his translator – or, indeed, between the translator and his writer – as well as to the reconstruction of the translator's cultural context. In this respect, *Strindbergs Schering* represents an admirable achievement and provides a solid and reliable point of departure for further studies that may wish to foreground the theoretical implications of this philologically and historically groundbreaking work.
