

Strindberg across Borders

edited by Massimo Ciaravolo

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Table of Contents

- 5 Acknowledgements
- 7 Massimo Ciaravolo, *Introduction*

WORLD LITERATURE

- 15 Vera Gancheva, *August Strindberg – The Phoenix*
- 31 Ann-Charlotte Gavel Adams, *Constructing Strindberg's Life across Borders and Times*

TRANSLATION

- 41 Elisabeth Tegelberg, *En Strindbergessä i kontrastiv belysning*
- 63 Alexander Künzli and Gunnel Engwall, *Strindberg and Transnationality: The Case of Le Plaidoyer d'un fou*

GENDER, POLITICS AND SCIENCE

- 83 Tobias Dahlkvist, *Strindberg som vansinnigt geni. Strindberg, Lombroso och frågan om geniets patologi*
- 93 Massimo Ciaravolo, *Between Literature and Politics. Strindberg and Scandinavian Radicalism as Seen through his Relationship with Edvard Brandes, Branting and Bjørnson*
- 125 Cecilia Carlander, *Strindberg och det androgyna*

OUTWARD AND INWARD, LOWER AND UPPER REALITY

- 139 Annie Bourguignon, *Var går gränsen mellan jaget och makterna?*
- 151 Deimantė Dementavičiūtė-Stankuvienė, *Across Dream: Archetypical Images in Strindberg's Dream Plays*
- 163 Polina Lisovskaya, *Christmas Eve in Strindberg's Oeuvre*

- 179 Astrid Regnell, *Konstens verklighet i En blå bok*

FORMS OF INTERTEXTUALITY

- 191 Maria Cristina Lombardi, *Grotti and Loki: Two Mythological Beings in Strindberg's Literary Production*
- 207 Andreas Wahlberg, *Början i moll och finalen i dur: Om överträdan-
det av den osynliga gränsen i Strindbergs Ensam och Goethes Faust*
- 219 Roland Lysell, *Stora landsvägen som summering och metadrama*
- 231 Martin Hellström, *Strindberg for Children. A Study of the Plays
"A Little Dream Play" by Staffan Westerberg and "Alone" by
Börje Lindström*

STAGE

- 247 Franco Perrelli, *Strindberg on the Italian Stages of the Twentieth
Century*
- 259 Gytis Padegimas, *Vakhtangov's and Chekhov's Work in Staging
Strindberg's Erik XIV as a Further Development of the Stanislavsky
System and Representation of their own Discoveries*
- 273 Elvyra Markevičiūtė, *A Unique Experience of Interpreting Strind-
berg's Drama in a Production of his Creditors*
- 283 Richard Bark, *Strindberg backstage. Vad sker "utanför" scenrum-
met och på en inre scen i några Strindbergsdramer?*

VISUAL INTERPRETATIONS

- 305 Astrid von Rosen, *The Billposter as Alchemist: A Dream Play in
Düsseldorf 1915-1918*
- 327 David Gedin, *En strippad Strindberg. August Strindberg gestaltad
i serier från Pirinen till Kverneland*
- 347 Contributors and Abstracts
- 371 Index

Introduction

Massimo Ciaravolo

This volume gathers twenty-one contributions by twenty-two scholars from Sweden, Italy, Lithuania, France, Switzerland, Bulgaria, Russia and the United States. Twelve essays are written in English and nine are written in Swedish. Each essay is provided with an English abstract at the end of the volume; when the essays are written in Swedish, their corresponding abstracts are intentionally longer, in order to make their contents more accessible to an international reading public.

The call for papers at the Nineteenth International Strindberg Conference, held in Rome from 5 to 7 June 2014 and entitled, like the present volume, *Strindberg across Borders*, encouraged scholars to explore different dimensions of border crossing with respect to Strindberg's work. The papers and discussions at the conference, involving thirty-five scholars, and the essays collected in the present volume really witness the manifold aspects of border crossing in Strindberg's work, and the variety of possible methodological and theoretical approaches to this aspect of his work. This kind of scholarly reception can be considered as but another result of the generosity of Strindberg's writing. As Vera Gancheva observes in her opening essay – a perfect introduction to the themes discussed in the whole volume – Strindberg's innovative work is more alive and challenging than ever.

Because of such a variety of perspectives and approaches, the essays have been grouped in sections. It is a form of orientation for the readers, as well as an indication of the areas where scholarly research on Strindberg is active at present. It is however also obvious that the proposed sections do not have a compelling value. The essays, on the contrary, cannot help addressing and connecting different facets of Strindberg's work; as a result, they could have been placed in other sections as well. For instance, essays dealing with forms of intertextuality often focus on religious and metaphysical dimensions in Strindberg's work, and they could have found a place in the preceding section, or vice versa. Even in this respect we are encouraged to think across borders and without hierarchies.

A starting point for this volume was the idea that border crossing is a transgression against norms and a questioning of authorities. Strindberg had a deep interest in and a wide knowledge of history, politics, science and religion, but could not be considered either a historian or a politician or a scientist or a theologian. His position as a “layman” was perhaps uncomfortable but guaranteed him the freedom and mobility he needed for artistic creativity and experimentation. If he, when all is said and done, was “just an artist”, what kind of artist was he? A playwright, a writer, a painter and a photographer, and a man with many parallel interests, Strindberg sometimes reminds us of the ambition of the universal Renaissance genius, but endowed with the unruly, anxious and torn spirit of an artist in the age of modernity and advanced capitalism.

Authorship is a real fact as much as a cultural construction and a discourse developing across space and time, and, in the case of Strindberg, across a worldwide space during the twentieth century and up to the present time. Ann-Charlotte Gavel Adams discusses this aspect in her essay, a comparative analysis of two recent biographies of Strindberg, an American and a Swedish one, in which Strindberg’s life is clearly mediated by different horizons of expectation.

The intriguing and problematic transmission/construction of Strindberg’s authorship in world literature involves of course translation. Furthermore, Strindberg was a bilingual author who wrote, at least in some important phases of his career, across the border between Swedish and French. Translation studies offer therefore a fertile ground of investigation, as is shown in Elisabeth Tegelberg’s and in Alexander Künzli and Gunnel Engwall’s essays, which analyze and assess the domesticating strategies when revising or translating some of Strindberg’s works originally written in French.

Besides this, Strindberg was personally committed in the process of designing the image of his own authorship. Tobias Dahlkvist’s essay discusses how this happened through a deliberate interplay with contemporary scientific discourses focusing on geniality, neurosis, degeneration and madness.

Border crossing deals also with the historical condition of moving back and forth over the threshold between «good old times» and modernity. Strindberg was conscious of his contradictions in this respect, and torn between a constant avant-garde attitude, eager to be in touch with the most advanced artistic trends in Europe and conquer new grounds, and a nostalgic look backward, which explains, for example, his perception of a loss of natural space as well as his nostalgia for a lost patriarchal order. Being modern and anti-modern at the same

time was a significant part of Strindberg's experience. Such topics are addressed in my own essay about Strindberg's choice between political commitment and need for artistic autonomy, as well as in Cecilia Carlander's essay about Strindberg and the androgyne. If the androgyne could appear ambiguous and decadent to Strindberg, who often argued for a sharp gender distinction between male and female, this figure was also read by him as the embodiment of a superior unity, hinting therefore at that vertical, metaphysical dimension which is also discussed in the following section.

The later, post-naturalistic and «post-Inferno» phase of Strindberg's oeuvre is clearly the one that attracts the interest and attention of most scholars today. If Strindberg soon saw the shortcomings of positivism and of the idea of linear, material progress, it is in the later phase of his oeuvre that he accomplished an artistic method that enabled him to go beyond the limits of the visible and the tangible. Strindberg's Platonic legacy matched with trends in fin-de-siècle literature towards symbolism, spirituality and religious faith, and a series of binary oppositions become fundamental in his worldview: lower versus upper, visible versus hidden, outward versus inward reality. Still, his language never became vague on account of that, but remained vivid, nervous, precise and concrete, strangely keeping the represented world – whether exterior or interior, material or psychic – very visible and tangible. Four essays are grouped in a section that explores this fascinating and not clear-cut border. Annie Bourguignon argues that a clear distinction between the subjective, inner dimension of the protagonist and the metaphysical dimension of the Powers he refers to, is difficult to establish in the play *To Damascus*. Deimantė Dementavičiūtė-Stankuvienė underscores Strindberg's pessimistic idea of human life as illusion and deception in her archetypal reading of *To Damascus, A Dream Play* and *The Ghost Sonata*. The same idea is considered by Polina Lisovskaya in its intertwining with Strindberg's more atavistic and, as it were, pious Christmas expectations of regeneration, according to his inherited religious tradition; in this respect, Strindberg's novel *Black Banners* becomes central in her analysis. Astrid Regnell considers how outward and inward reality, the objective and the subjective world, interact in Strindberg's idea of the artistic, creative process as expressed in the prose texts of *Zones of the Spirit*.

Strindberg's curiosity is strongly expressed by the image of him as a great reader. The generous admission of his sources of inspiration and influence is also rather typical and recurring, as much as is his «anxiety of influence», when he feels that he is obliged to defend the original and independent character of his artistic output. Strindberg appears in

this sense as an overtly intertextual writer; therefore his work encourages an approach that sees literature primarily as a web of interrelated discourses, inspirations, influences and rewritings, across the borders of the single, self-contained work and beyond its obvious reference to lived experience. One section gathers essays which give primary consideration to this dimension. Maria Cristina Lombardi compares two texts, written in two different phases, in which Strindberg adapts and rewrites the old Norse literary legacy he is so well-acquainted with. Andreas Wahlberg proposes a close comparative reading of a specific event and turning point in Goethe's *Faust* and in Strindberg's autobiographical novella *Alone*, in which the perception of sound plays an important part. Roland Lysell considers Strindberg's last play, *The Great Highway*, in terms of existential and artistic summary and, therefore, as a text charged with echoes from works by other writers as well as from his own works – with metadrama as a result. Martin Hellström focuses instead on Strindberg as a classic and a source for later writers, analyzing the interaction between *A Dream Play* and *Alone* respectively and two Swedish adaptations as plays for children, Staffan Westerberg's *A Little Dream Play* and Börje Lindström's *Alone*.

Lysell argues for the scenic qualities of *The Great Highway*, and Hellström considers adaptations as forms of actualization and interpretation on stage of the respective sources as well as plays in their own right. Their essays represent therefore also a bridge to the next section about Strindberg on stage. How Strindberg's dramatic works have been staged and interpreted outside of Sweden, often meeting culturally distant horizons of expectation, is shown by Franco Perrelli in his survey of Strindberg on the Italian stages throughout the twentieth century. Gitys Padegimas analyzes the famous Russian production of August Strindberg's *Erik XIV* in the 1920s, directed by Yevgeny Vakhtangov and starring Michael Chekhov. Elvyra Markevičiūtė returns to a breakthrough Lithuanian production of Strindberg's *Creditors* in a particular double version directed by the same Padegimas in the early 1980s. Semiotics of theatre are fundamental also in Richard Bark's analysis and interpretation of spaces and movements on stage in a series of Strindberg's major plays from *Master Olof* to *The Ghost Sonata*.

Vera Gancheva mentions a pertinent comment by Ingmar Bergman, according to whom Strindberg thinks with his eyes. The analysis of later visual actualizations and interpretations of Strindberg's work is completed by the last section of this volume. It presents two essays which distinguish themselves for the particular beauty of the images they contain. Astrid von Rosen reads the sketches made by the Swedish scenographer and director Knut Ström for a 1918 production of *A*

Dream Play in Düsseldorf, and she assesses them in terms of Ström's alchemical imagery. David Gedin offers a survey of Strindberg's role in Scandinavian comics. This includes two graphic novels which are adaptations of Strindberg's *The Red Room* and *Inferno* plus a series of minor but always illuminating appearances, which account for the actualization of Strindberg's life and work in today's cultural field.

What Vera Gancheva initially defines as Strindberg's peculiar mobility and dissemination of the self proves therefore to affect the very process of actualization and interpretation of his manifold work across several borders in both time and space.