

AUGUST STRINDBERG: THE MAN *

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OF August Strindberg it seems safe to assert that no artist was ever more personal in his choice of material, and none more impersonal in his treatment of that material. Thus his life and his art are, to an exceptional degree, rendered inseparable. To speak of one, is to imply the other. But I believe that the easiest way to an understanding, both of the man and of his work, lies through an outline of influences and experiences known to have played the part of a refracting medium to the essential spirit of his genius.

The *leitmotif* of his childhood was built out of two jarring notes: misunderstanding and isolation. He was an unwelcome child. Throughout life he has remained unwelcome, misunderstood and isolated. And if at times we find in his work a note of bitterness bordering on hatred, we must recall not only the sad beginnings, but also the subsequent stress and struggle through which he has had to force his way to the point where he stands to-day—the greatest living writer in the Scandinavian North, and one of the greatest in the whole world.

Strindberg's father was a shopkeeper who had gone bankrupt a short time before the child was born, and who had to begin life all over again as a steamship agent. The boy's mother was a servant girl, who had brought three children into the world before her relation to their father was legitimized by marriage. And a couple of months after the wedding August was born. That was in January, 1849.

The family was living in Stockholm, the gay capital of Sweden, but its members had less contact with the rest of the world than if they had been stranded in a desert. The father turned with almost monomaniacal devotion to the task of building up a secure livelihood for himself and those depending on him. The mother was narrowly religious and wholly preoccu-

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pied with the cares of a constantly growing brood. The home was, for years, of the poorest—and as child after child was added to the flock, its three rooms had finally to house ten persons: the parents, seven children, and two servants.

The boy's first remembered sensations, as recorded by himself, were fear and hunger—and of those two, fear predominated. Thus we may guess why so often in later life his indomitable courage has been tinged with desperation. Timid and shy, morbidly sensitive, craving love and justice with equal passion where both seemed denied him, he became from the very start what he has often called himself—one of life's scapegoats. At the age of eight he dreamt of taking his own life because he had been unjustly accused and then tormented into falsely acknowledging himself guilty of the charge. And what hurt him more than the unmerited punishment was the doubting of his word. No other incident in his life seems to have struck such deep roots in his mind as this one, sowing within him a distrust not only of his fellow-men, but of life itself and what lies behind it, that he has never been able to overcome. Plain echoes of that childish experience are heard in one work after another.

His mother's religiosity was of the egotistical kind that refers only to the salvation of the individual soul. The father, being more intellectual, was more passive in his attitude, but hardly broader in his faith. The boy, on the other hand, seems from the first to have fermented with an emotion which, while it sought outlet in religious forms, was really social in its trend. Here again we find a chasm yawning between the boy and his surroundings that helped to swing him toward an extreme of materialistic skepticism before he could find true expression for one of the fundamental tendencies in his nature. And the same influence went far, I think, to pull him back time and again into a morbid jealousy on behalf of his own personality.

When he was thirteen, his mother died, and he mourned not so much her death as the final loss of that tender sympathy which his soul hungered for, but which all his longings had never been able to draw from her. Perhaps it was this first fatal disappointment which doomed him to repeated disillusionment in his subsequent intercourse with the other sex. He himself has said

that he could never tell whether he was looking to a woman for a mother's love or that of a mistress.

Before a year had passed, he was given a stepmother—and once more his soul received a shock never to be forgotten. He tried to like her and make himself liked. In both efforts he failed conspicuously. And the only result was increased estrangement between himself and his father. Thus everything combined to throw him back upon himself, and to further that habit of intense introspection which was to form such a characteristic trait of his art. The one consoling circumstance of those crucial years from thirteen to eighteen was that the financial position of the household became very much improved, so that the boy, after a couple of unhappy educational experiences, could attend a good private school and hope for a university course. But when at last, at the age of eighteen, he departed for the ancient university in the little town of Upsala—Sweden's Oxford—his total means consisted of eight *kronor* (about \$22) which he had earned for himself by tutoring. From his father he received nothing but a handful of cigars and the advice to "look out for himself."

During the greater part of his stay at the university he was wretchedly poor. He did not even have money enough to buy wood for the heating of the garret where he lived. Sometimes he borrowed a sackful from some more fortunate comrade, carrying it home on his own back, and sometimes he stayed in bed for days to keep warm. His first term was almost lost because he had no books and no money to buy any. But worse than all this was the rebellion inspired within him by the futility of the whole academical system. Once he broke away in despair and began to teach in one of the public schools at Stockholm. He was assigned to the lowest grade, and realized quickly that he had exchanged one hell for another. Like "The Officer" in his *Dream Play*, he imagined himself condemned to start the whole dreary routine over again, not as a teacher, but as one of the pupils—bored, scolded and snubbed.

It is of no use here to talk of lacking flexibility or adaptability. Young Strindberg's story is the same one told by one man of genius after another. They are all fitted for some par-

ticular task—and until they find that task, they are helpless. Rousseau, Balzac, Wagner, Ibsen, Shaw, are among those that may be mentioned in illustration. And it is to be well noted that during the period in question Strindberg was firmly convinced of his own inability to write. He had tried, and—“nothing would come.” His family regarded him as a good-for-nothing. And he himself was, on the whole, fearful that their judgment might prove correct.

We can then imagine his surprise and rapture, when, during that temporary absence from the university, he discovered that, after all, the gift of poetical creation was his. It was as if some frozen fountain had thawed out and sent a flood of inspiration through his whole being. In a couple of months he produced several comedies and a five-act tragedy in verse on a classical theme. This he named *Hermione*, and to this day it remains distinctly readable. A one-act verse play was accepted and played at the Royal Theatre. Strindberg was then twenty. A little later another small play, *The Outcast*—a historical prose study undoubtedly suggested by Björnson's *Between the Battles*—won him the attention of King Charles XV and a stipend from the monarch's private purse.

While this spell of sunshine lasted, he returned to the university to make another vain attempt at winning a degree. He read prodigiously—and some of his reading actually overlapped the courses prescribed by the curriculum. But as a rule his mind followed its own impulses. The keynote of his entire existence at that time was an intense intellectual curiosity. “To look through everything, to know everything, was a mania with me,” he said of himself later. That mania has remained typical of his mental attitude throughout all the vicissitudes of his life. And I think it has proved the saving factor more than once when he found himself brought to the very brink of irremediable disaster. Nor has there ever been anything superficial about his insatiable curiosity. Whether searching his own soul or observing surrounding nature, he must needs get to the bottom of things. Thus I found not long ago that he had examined the botanical textbooks in six different languages merely to clear up some obscure point. And the mercilessness of his introspection

is splendidly illustrated by a passage in which he describes a character who is none but himself in slight disguise: "Falk was a vivisector who experimented on his own soul, always going around with open wounds, until he gave his life for the sake of knowledge."

It was during that second stay at the university he made three spiritual acquaintances which became largely determining for his future development. They were the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard's *Either—Or*, which made him forever a champion of the ethical, as juxtaposed to the æsthetical, life conception; Buckle's *History of Civilization in England*, which revealed to him the relativity of truth and the rooting of all ideas in material conditions; and, finally, Eduard von Hartmann's *Philosophy of the Unconscious*, which introduced him to the gospel of pessimism, the acceptance of life as an inevitable and, perhaps, meaningless evil. Since those days Strindberg has travelled many strange paths and worshipped at many new shrines, but still he remains faithful in spirit to these earlier guides; still he proclaims in all his books and plays that art and knowledge are equally subservient to life, and that life itself must be lived as we know best, chiefly because we are part of it and cannot escape from its promptings.

He wrote, too, during that period, but destroyed everything without having made an attempt to get it played or published. Two historical five-act tragedies were among the products thus sacrificed to his growing power of self-criticism. With the death of the king in 1872, his stipend ceased and distress returned. Unable to read, unable to write, unable to do anything but paint—in which art this wonderful man has also reached considerable proficiency without ever having studied it in prescribed fashion—he feared that he was losing his mind. On one occasion comrades had to watch at his bed for several nights while every available candle was kept burning to shield him from the horrors lurking in the darkness. And once the future author of *Inferno*, who was to drift as close to the border-line between the rational and the irrational as anyone may dare without fatal results, actually wrote to a private sanitarium for advice.

In the end he gave up the vain struggle for academical pre-

ferment and returned to Stockholm. A lucky chance took him out to one of the innumerable islands that make the inlet to Stockholm one of the most beautiful in the world. There, during two quietly happy summer months, he wrote his first masterpiece, *Master Olof*, a historical prose drama grouped around the Luther of the Swedish Reformation. Forty years have passed since Strindberg, then only twenty-three years old, completed that work. Forty years of shifting literary fashions have failed to sap its strength or dim its charm. But while it still seems great to-day, even when compared with the epoch-making works of universal literature, it stood unique in Swedish literature at the time of its completion—a landmark proclaiming the inception of a new era.

That play was rejected—scornfully and sneeringly rejected—by the literary arbiters of the Royal Theatre, then the only stage available for the production of such a work. No publisher could be found for it. Not until five years later was it placed before the public in book form, and then in altered shape, after its author had rewritten it five times in compliance with the edict of the critics that verse alone was suitable to the historical drama—an opinion voiced about the same time by William Archer in regard to Ibsen's *Emperor and Galilean*. The first stage performance of *Master Olof* did not occur until 1880, and then on one of the privately managed stages that had begun to spring up in the capital.

For a time the reception accorded his first authentional work of genius seemed to rob Strindberg of the very desire to write. His struggle for mere existence became more trying than ever. At last, after having failed as actor and as a hack writer for several daily newspapers, he obtained a position in the Royal Library. And there he spent his time in studying Chinese and writing monographs on the relations between China and Sweden in the eighteenth century. One of these efforts was even read before the French Institute and brought him a medal from the Russian Geographical Society.

He was twenty-six, and the arch-rebel within him appeared to have received a quietus forever, when he met the woman who was to exercise an influence on his fate comparable to that first

impression of the world's blind injustice which had burned itself so ineradicably into the boy's consciousness. She was another man's wife. Of the vicissitudinous courtship that ensued I shall not speak here. In the end a divorce left the woman free to marry the man who had already been her lover for some time. And throughout the transitory period, as well as afterwards, the passing and the coming husband seem to have regarded each other not only without ill-will, but with real friendship. In the whole matter inhered, however, an ambiguity that must have hurt Strindberg to the quick. For this man, to whose several "marital ventures" jeering references have been frequently made, is above everything else *clean* in all his instincts. And that he had to reach his dreamed happiness through what the world calls a scandal was sure to call forth a reaction sooner or later.

But happiness he had for a time—the first genuine happiness of his life. And under that stimulus he began to write again: first a series of short stories, and then a novel, *The Red Room*. This was his second masterpiece. It established his reputation as a writer, though his own countrymen did their best to overlook the book. In the end it won its way largely through the recognition bestowed on it by critics in the other Scandinavian countries. During the next few years Strindberg's literary productivity was tremendous. But I shall here speak of only one more work from that period—the first of the two short story volumes named *Marriage*. He wrote it in Switzerland, whither he had withdrawn to give himself wholly to his art. The impetus to it came unmistakably from Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, against which Strindberg reacted antipathetically from the first. His immediate object was merely to present modern marriage as he saw it—based not on "ideal claims," but on economical conditions. But as usual he spoke what he held to be the truth with such force that evasion became impossible.

At the instigation of the Queen of Sweden, criminal proceedings were started, not against Strindberg, but against his publisher, and not for "immorality," but for—sacrilegious treatment of the established religion. By hurrying home, Strindberg succeeded in turning the fire on himself. While the proceedings

lasted, the whole country was literally split in twain over the issues involved. It was the old and the new fighting for supremacy. The jury at last brought in a verdict of "not guilty," and the author was acclaimed with a fervor rarely if ever displayed toward a literary man in Sweden. He was thereafter the acknowledged leader of that band of radical poets and artists who called themselves "Young Sweden." But in the midst of all the feasting and shouting, the object of this enthusiasm whispered to himself: "Yes, you cheer me to-day, and to-morrow you will be hissing me." And the main impression retained by his mind was not of the joyous tumult caused by his acquittal, but of the humiliation that had led up to it—for he felt that his aim had been unmistakably pure.

That was in 1884. His marriage lasted seven years longer, but with every passing year the relationship between him and his wife grew more painful. Time and again he tried to break the bond, and as often he returned, drawn back partly by lingering love, and partly by that "link" which held him most powerfully—the children. But not only love for wife and children, but his entire natural bent made it hard for him to seek relief from a burden become unbearable. For he was and is by nature monogamous. And one of the main tragedies of his all too tragic life has just been his inability to realize that ideal of two souls walking side by side through life, bound together by a love that had in it no touch of impurity.

Omniscience would be needed to proclaim the exact degree of responsibility attaching to the man and the woman in that marriage. The hellish tortures which it inflicted on both parties to it have been pictured by Strindberg in his autobiographical novel, *A Fool's Confession*, with a minute exactness and a psychological penetration that have probably never been surpassed. Some of the charges and insinuations contained in that remarkable book may be exaggerated, or even imagined, but to one knowing the man, his uncanny faculty for observation and his irresistible tendency to record the truth in spite of himself, the conclusion seems inevitable that, on the whole, the picture of marital life presented in the book is correct. Where Strindberg made his mistake was in letting himself be tempted by his just

grievances into mistaking the specimen for the species, the individual for the type. When he thought himself arraigning *woman*, his charges were in reality directed against *a woman*—his wife. And his later pictures of married life showed that form of human relationship, not as it must be and always is, but as it may be and often becomes. Personally I believe that he has never written a line that does not contain something of truth in it. But I believe also that frequently—and especially during the period in question—he has mistaken *a truth* for *the truth*.

While the final catastrophe was still impending, he wrote some of his most wonderful dramatic works—the three-act modern tragedy named *The Father*, and his first group of iconoclastic one-act plays, with *Miss Juliet* preceding and surpassing all the rest. During a stay at Berlin, while he was still striving to recover from the shock imparted to his whole system by the divorce from his first wife, he met and courted a sympathetic German woman, a writer also, whose tastes seemed congenial to his own. That second experiment lasted only a few years. It was not so violently unhappy as the first one, but the experiences it implied helped undoubtedly to bring on the crisis which finally overtook Strindberg at the age of forty-five—an age that almost always plays a significant part in the lives of greatly gifted men—and which served to wipe five whole years out of his existence as an artistic creator.

At all times, from his earliest youth to the present day, he has been keenly interested in every aspect of life not only as an artist but as a thinker also. He has studied every branch of modern science from astronomy to sociology. Nature has always been to him a book which he read with never-failing fascination. The comments of other men on that book have also been of interest to him, but at no time has he been inclined to accept them unchallenged. Some day the world will know what a treasure-trove of suggestive ideas lies hidden among Strindberg's scientific and philosophical speculations, even when these appear most fantastic. Not as if I meant to say that he has always been in the right, but I think that, in his criticism of modern science, however uncharitable it be in form, he has always

been on the track of some truth still hidden from the patient plodders in the field involved.

From an early period, when a physician's calling was in his mind and actually led him into the dissecting room and the laboratory, he entertained a passionate fondness for chemistry and its problems. During the time of which I am now speaking those problems engrossed his mind completely. The will-o'-the-wisp pursued most ardently was the transmutability of elements hitherto supposed to be stable and irreducible. Back of this dream lay the older one of *making gold*, and it was with the latter that Strindberg's overwrought fancy became more and more preoccupied. But not for the sake of gain. What he sought, now as always, was truth—and it is as a seeker for truth, for spiritual treasures, that Strindberg should always be regarded, *no matter what we find him saying or doing*.

That strange search of his at Paris in the middle nineties brought him what he looked for, but not exactly in the form that he had expected. For he found not ordinary gold, but—the mystic faith of Swedenborg. Through that faith he won his way once more to health and strength and spiritual balance and creative power. But ere he reached that far, he had nearly sacrificed both life and reason. There is another autobiographical work, *Inferno*, in which he tells of his travels through the nethermost regions of despair and delusion. In all the world's literature there is not another book quite its equal. It is a document that must enter as one of the foundation stones of our coming understanding of the human mind.

Returning to Sweden in the summer of 1896, Strindberg actually spent a couple of months in a private sanitarium kept by an old friend. A year later he began to write again—first of all, the volumes embodying the mental crisis just completed. And then, while all the world was still thinking him lost forever, there followed a period of such miraculous creative activity that soon its results eclipsed all his earlier achievements. Plays, modern and historical, realistic and symbolistic; novels and stories; pamphlets of critical, scientific and political bearing; verse and prose; works of playful fancy and others filled with the deepest pathos—a whole literature, in short, with all its at-

tendant subdivisions, seemed to pour forth in unbroken stream from his fertile brain.

Of his private life since the opening of that final period it is hardly necessary to speak. Even when his fame rose into higher and higher flood tide, there came days of disappointment and sorrow. Too often his efforts—even the best—were met with a lack of understanding, or a premeditated misconstruction, that tempted the berserker nature within him into outbursts like those contained in certain chapters of his latest novel, *Black Flags*, or in the pamphlet entitled *Speeches to the Swedish Nation*. But in the main the tenor of his existence had become determined, and what happened for good or bad might disturb but not alter his general trend. There was a third marriage—a final search for the dreamed ideal. It was the briefest and least turbulent of his marital episodes. Then the solitude closed in around him again—the solitude in the midst of a multitude which he has pictured so touchingly in *Alone*. It was no longer quite unwelcome. He might have been unreservedly happy but for one lack—that of children, *his* children. Not that he has ever lost track of any one of them—there being five in all sprung from the three marriages—but he wanted them always around him.

Toward those children, even more than toward their mothers, his heart has gone out in periods of estrangement and impending separation. To surrender them has brought him deeper pain than any other loss. And yet he has never tried to keep them, because he felt so strongly that children belong primarily to the mother for their own sake. Fear of the mother's unworthiness as mother has raised his anger to a greater degree of fierceness than anything else. For though he never received from his own mother the fulness of love he craved, he has had for his offspring a tenderness and a devotion such as commonly the mother alone is held capable of. He might truly be named the poet of fatherhood—and it is thoroughly characteristic that he named his most poignant tragedy *The Father*, and not *The Husband*.

It is frequently asserted nowadays, that the father's love for the child is more or less acquired, more or less reasoned, while that of the mother is instinctive and spontaneous. Against this view Strindberg carries on incessant warfare. In his eye the

child appears as strongly and as inevitably tied to one parent as to the other. And beneath that tie he sees the individual's craving for continued existence in the child. One of the main issues in that duel of the sexes which forms such a conspicuous theme of his art is the struggle of each parent to impress his or her nature on the child, to the exclusion of the other one's. What his work might have been, if fate had granted him undisturbed enjoyment of that triple happiness which he has repeatedly pictured in such glowing colors—the happiness of home and wife and children—no amount of speculation can reveal. But of one thing I feel sure: that if, at least, he could always have had his children about him, some of his bitterest and most regrettable pages would never have been written.

DEMOCRACY AND THE RECALL

GWENDOLEN OVERTON

IN the life of Mr. Gladstone we find it recorded that, during his maturer years, when he was applied to by earnest young Englishmen for suggestions as to the course of study it would be most advantageous for them to pursue, he was wont to advise that they ponder the working of freedom in America.

One is moved to wish that those among ourselves who occupy positions of authority and influence would more often give like advice to the youth of our own country; for it challenges attention how frequently they appear to feel a deep distrust of that very thing which the greatest English statesman of modern times thought worthy of admiring contemplation.

Sometimes it seems indeed a cause for real concern how little the theory upon which our government rests is to-day the fashion among what one might designate—in paraphrase of a popular term—the intellectual “special interests.” No doubt it should be recognized as the other swing of the pendulum from the pseudo-philosophy of government fashionable among the leaders of thought in the eighteenth century. To-day one achieves a reputation for a distinguished attitude of mind, not by proclaiming the divinity of the popular will, but by placing a low estimate upon the sentiments and motives of the multitude, and predicating of the majority that it must almost necessarily be wrong.

An example of how members of our learned class too frequently feel toward the considerable remainder of their fellow citizens—perhaps also, an example of how the sense of humor may be quenched by draughts of the Pierian Spring—was recently given by one of our prominent college presidents while addressing an assemblage of international importance.

With disdain tempered by compassion he spoke of “that element of the population which cannot tolerate the notion of the country being in the hands of clergymen and professors, of lawyers and philanthropists.”