

¶ Poul Houe, Sven Hakon Rossel and Göran Stockenström (red.). *August Strindberg and the Other: New Critical Approaches*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2002. [=Internationale Forschungen zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft, 63.] Pp. 187. ISBN 90-420-1520-9

“Ring in det nya, och ring ut det gamla”, the booming voice of the actor Anders de Wahl would admonish the Swedish nation at the stroke of twelve every New Year’s Night from 1895/6 to 1955/6, turning a poem from Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* into a Swedish ritual of renewal. Across the world, the millennial year encouraged such ringing out of the old and ringing in of the new – or at least a gesture towards it – in virtually every area of human endeavour, and the now international field of Strindberg scholarship and criticism was no exception. The essays in this volume represent such an act of renewal: they have their origin in a conference held at the University of Minnesota in September 2000, on the theme of ‘Strindberg at the Millennium – Strindberg and the Other’. The aim of the organisers, who have also edited the volume and given it the subtitle of “New Critical Approaches”, was (they explain in their Foreword) to bring together older scholars with those working “on the cutting edge of literary research”, in order to “interrogate Strindberg” and promote a dialogue on new ways of thinking and writing about this great and greatly controversial figure.

The editors’ Foreword leaves no doubt about what, at the millennium, is “old” in Strindberg studies: “established scholarly venues of literary biography, comparative literature, analysis of style and ideas, and the New Critics’ close reading”. No wonder that Göran Stockenström – whose paper on “The World that Strindberg Found: Deciphering the Palimpsest of Nature”, is a meticulously documented analysis of the sources which Strindberg drew on to arrive at, and articulate, a syncretistic understanding of the divine, the macrocosm and the microcosm – told the plenary ses-

sion at the end of the conference that “he had come to think of himself as the meeting’s lone dinosaur”. Yet, judging by the eleven other papers in the volume, he was not as “lone” as all that. Encouraged to focus on Strindberg and the concept of “the other”, or “otherness”, many of the contributors have found it perfectly natural to do so within the old ways of literary biography, close reading, and so on; and new theorizing of “the other”, and of the purchase which concepts of “otherness” give on the works of Strindberg, begins to come to the fore only in three or four papers – although it does so in Poul Houe’s account of the final plenary discussion, in which the “dinosaurs” seem to have stayed silent. It was perhaps inevitable that, whether approached by old or new methodologies, the Strindbergian self, rather than “the other”, should take centre stage; and the volume is all the more valuable for it.

What is particularly valuable about this volume, seen as a whole, is its concern not just with Strindberg the writer/playwright but with a writer who was also a painter, a scientist and alchemist, a linguist and philologist, a historian-philosopher. It is precisely in stressing the interdependence and interaction of those activities that some of the contributors find the self and the other problematized. Evert Sprinchorn, however, in the opening essay, “Strindberg among the Prophets”, has no problem in identifying Strindberg as a unique prophet who anticipated developments in literature *and* science not only in the twentieth but also possibly the twenty-first century. Sprinchorn’s essay is an antidote to any narrow view of Strindberg’s achievement, let alone to the “clinical gaze” of psychiatry which constructed Strindberg as a madman, as eloquently described in Ulf Olsson’s contribution, “Going Crazy: Strindberg and the Construction of Literary Madness”. But Sprinchorn’s sweeping generalizations, enforced by the format of the essay – and entailing a comparative putting-down of such “retrospective” minds as those of Ibsen, T.S. Eliot, Thomas Mann and others – are bound to make some feel that this distinguished scholar “doth

protest too much". Such readers will find it a relief to turn to the specifics of Freddie Rokem's exploration of Strindberg as a philological linguist and in particular of his interest, in his last few years, in Hebrew. As Strindberg attempted to prove the primacy of that language over all others, he was not – Rokem shows – a professional philologist; his interest must be seen as "a mytho-poetic or symbolic form of expression, an additional creative outlet".

In the dialogue, which this volume presents to us, individual essays both complement and contradict each other. Implicitly they "interrogate" each other as much as Strindberg. When Jon M. Berry, writing on "The Alchemical Regeneration of Souls in Strindberg's *To Damascus, III*", interprets one particular play in the light of Strindberg's preoccupation with alchemy, then his discussion of alchemical work, Strindberg's and others', pales somewhat in comparison with Stockenström's magisterial treatment of first-hand material in the essay mentioned above. Ingvar Holm and Harry G. Carlsson both write on Strindberg as a painter, Holm arguing that much of the imagery of the post-Inferno plays comes directly from the paintings, Carlsson that landscape painting is one aspect of Strindberg's coming to terms with the 'other' that is nature. Holm's essay, "On the Road to Damascus: Strindberg as a Painter", turns specifically on an ingenious reading of the Swedish word *udden* which, in a letter, Strindberg uses to describe the pivotal Asylum scene in *To Damascus, I*: pronounced one way – Swedish being a tonal language – it means the pricks against which Saul kicks until he becomes Paul; pronounced another way it refers to the headland in a stormy sea which was a recurring motif in Strindberg's paintings. A pun which is a key both to the thematic structure of *To Damascus, I* and to the interdependence of dramatist and painter. Carlsson's essay, "Landscape as Mediator in Strindberg's Search for the Other", surveys Strindberg's view of landscape in paint and print, and aims to demonstrate how Strindberg in the 1890s arrives at an ultimate reconciliation with nature, not as a

Romantic or a Naturalist but as “emulat[ing] nature’s way of creating”. And where to Carlsson “the other” is nature, to Ann-Charlotte Gavel Adams it is a social and cultural concept; her essay, “Strindberg and Paris 1894-98: Barbarian, Initiate, and Self”, traces the steps by which Strindberg moved, from a position of being a barbarian “other” in relation to Parisian literary culture to a “modernist Self, which has finally won the legitimacy in Paris that Strindberg yearned for”. By different (and “old”) means her essay and Carlsson’s both arrive at an assertion of a final harmony between self and “other”.

Such harmony is keenly questioned by the contributions which engage more fully with contemporary critical and cultural theory. In these Strindberg also becomes more postmodernist than modernist. Gunnar Syrén raises the question of “The Phenomenon of ‘Otherness’ in Per Olov Enquist’s View of Strindberg in *The Night of the Tribades*” and, after a discriminating discussion of the ethical dimensions of Enquist’s treatment of Strindberg, concludes that his play, like so much of Strindberg’s own work, is about “inner” – as against social – otherness. Eszter Szalczter, from a clearly stated position of seeing Strindberg in his texts “simultaneously as actor and spectator, agent and observer of the action”, examines post-Inferno works, including *A Blue Book* and *The Occult Diary*, and finds in Strindberg’s ambivalent relationship with theosophy “a strategy on the author’s part to at once reject and incorporate the Other via role-playing”. Her essay, “Theosophy as Catalyst: Strindberg’s Theater of the Self and the Other”, has much in common with Per Stounbjerg’s, whose title tells its story: “To Eat or Be Eaten – that Is the Question’: Incorporation and Rejection of the Other in Strindberg’s Autobiographical Prose Writings”. In a discussion of a wide range of autobiographical texts, as well as plays, Stounbjerg makes the conference’s theoretical project bear fruit, showing how the “other” is never fully “digested” in, nor “eliminated” from, Strindberg’s texts; how his protagonists are never

autonomous, needing, yet fearing, the influence of others – how, in short, the Strindbergian mode is not a *dialectic* between self and other but an “incorporation and rejection”. Supposedly concentrating on *A Madman’s Defence*, Poul Houe’s essay, “Writing with a Vengeance: *A Madman’s Defence* – an ‘Otherness’ called Suspense”, takes quite a while to make a point akin to Stounbjerg’s and, because the argument supports itself largely on other theorists rather than Strindberg’s text, is nowhere near as lucid, nor as persuasive. But he too ends up with Strindberg’s “composite consciousness”, to define which he draws on Apiah’s definition of postmodern selves as “fragmented, internally conflicted, multiple, and conscious as much of their temporal mutations as of their continuities”.

To say that the words of that quotation could apply also to the composite volume under review is more to praise than to blame. If, as for example Ulf Olsson’s contribution insists, each age is bound by its own discourse, then each age – or generation – will understand, and will write about, Strindberg in its own way. And when generations overlap, as in this volume, ringing in the new does not have to mean ringing out the old. In support of Strindberg’s “impure” texts, Stounbjerg in his essay quotes Adorno on works of art being so creaky because of “the sound of their antagonistic moments rubbing against each other”. That this volume gives out such a sound is a sign both of its own strength and of the compelling and disturbing power of its subject.

*Inga-Stina Ewbank*, University of Leeds