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# Stringberg, the Artist

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## Abstract

At fifteen minutes, *The Stronger* (1889) condenses some challenges in the theatrical production of Strindberg: stage time, non-verbal language or dialogue construction of the plot and characters through the battle of brains between Mrs X and Miss Y. Psychological introspection reveals the multifaceted and contradictory nature of the human being and invites the audience to construct the characters from their subjectivity, one of the most modern shifts in Strindberg's theatrical conception which links with the nostalgia that comes from the loss of the totalising depiction of reality, typical of the spirit of the era in Europe and radical in Scandinavia.

Strindberg knew how to capture and interpret the pulses of his time and the need for new languages to reach the audience, his fellow citizens, and move them, open their eyes and encourage them to change things. This led him to constant experimentation, to always traverse the boundaries of all genres, arts and disciplines to the point of forcing the limits of understanding, as he did in *Inferno*, or in the plays for the Intima Teater.

*The Stronger* is a clear example of Strindberg's commitment to move freely through the unknown and obscure terrain of artistic creation, through the appeal of the abyss that the Artist feels if he gives himself unreservedly to his creative instinct, and how he defends his contemporaneity and challenges our contemporary playwrights.

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*Den starkare* (*The Stronger*) is a one-act play, 15 minutes on stage, two actresses, a table and two chairs to portray a struggle between Mrs X and Miss Y over a man, and with a peculiarity: that Miss Y does not utter a single word.

Needless to say, described thus, it challenges the rules of dramatic art.

Strindberg wrote it in late 1888 and early 1889, after *The Father* (1887) and *Miss Julie* (1888), which were not well received, and the idea was for it to be performed at his recently opened theatre, the Skandinavisk Försöksteater, a Scandinavian Experimental Theatre, in Copenhagen.

At this turn of the decade he changed his conception of theatre. His more naturalistic plays, such as *Miss Julie* and *The Father*, brought about a formal shift in subjectivity, leading to his most experimental chamber, oneiric or surrealist plays, as they are often labelled.

This new conception of theatre is explained in the preface to *Miss Julie* and affects the work of the actor, director, stage, costumes, structure, characters, diction, and so on.

In March 1889, Strindberg also published an article entitled “Om modern drama och modern teater” (On Modern Drama and Modern Theatre), which describes the state of contemporary theatre, where it has come from and where he believes it should go.

*The Stronger* is, as a challenge to performing art at different levels, a good example to illustrate this change.

In order to explore this shift towards subjectivity, we will first examine the formal aspects. And we will start with what is perhaps the most visible of all, the composition in a single act, given that it breaks with the three or five traditional acts and makes the unit of action coincide with the structural unit, and this concentration gives it dramatic strength.

We know that it was not his invention but was inspired by André Antoine and the groundbreaking Théâtre Libre in Paris, a stage for young naturalist writers and a space for creative freedom, where the play *Entre frères* by Guiche and Lavedan was performed as one of the *Quarts d’Heure* due to the surprising length of the play.

In the aforementioned article and preface, Strindberg explains his preference for short plays, for a scene that contains and concentrates everything – like a lecture – as the most effective way, abandoning the five-act plays that occupy an entire evening, laden with superfluous and pompous elements. If the playwright can convey what he wants to say to the audience in a quarter of an hour, three hours are unnecessary. Dilation in time, gratuitous excess of characters or plot digressions sap strength from the theme of the play, which, located at the centre, must make the formal elements gravitate around it.

For the satisfaction of having written a full-length play, he torments his audience by arousing its curiosity about matters it already knows. He inflicts upon the theatre manager the need to maintain a large company. He makes life miserable for those unlucky actors who will play the secondary roles – messengers, confidants and raisonneurs – without whom no intrigue or full-length play can emerge (Strindberg, 1889: 281).

And he goes so far as to say that “a scene, a quarter of an hour seems to be the ideal type of play for today’s audience,” which moves away from the romantic abstractions and long plays that make a thousand detours before they reach the crux of the matter.

The Swedish playwright was wary of intervals because they could distract the spectator:

As for the technical aspects of the composition, I have by way of experiment eliminated the act division. I have done this because it seems to me that our declining susceptibility to illusion would possibly be disturbed by intermissions, during which the spectator has time to reflect and thereby escape from the suggestive influence of the writer-hypnotist (Törnqvist, 2007: 83).

And he suggests that intervals should be replaced by monologues, pantomimes or ballets.

The stage is also affected by this new theatrical conception. For example, in Strindberg’s view, the set cannot be an obstacle to the development of the scene or the work of the actors (fabric doors that move and prevent an angry father from knocking on a door that “makes the house shake,” for example). In this respect, thinking of *Miss Julie*’s set, he had chosen to limit it to “a single set, both so that the characters can take root and integrate into the environment and to break with the luxury of excess sets” (Strindberg, 2017: 234). Therefore, it was necessary to unburden the stage of too many conventions that required an effort of interpretation by the audience (such as believing the pots painted in the backdrop to be real). A simple scenario was far more effective and, above all, evocative. It was not necessary to show everything, much better to suggest, “for not being able to see the whole room or all the furniture leaves us free to conjecture, that is, our imagination is set in motion and completes the picture” (Strindberg, 2017: 234). In the case of *The Stronger*, two chairs and a coffee table are not only sufficient but reinforce

and intensify their communicative power as non-verbal signs and therefore enhance the impression of combat between the two women.

Another no less important factor is that Strindberg's idea when he devised the Skandinavisk Försöksteater was that of a small travelling company, which was easy to move around and put on as many performances as possible. Let us not forget the practical sense that Strindberg demonstrated throughout his career, forced by the need to publish and fill theatres and, of course, this also conditioned his conception of literature. In a letter to August Lindberg, artist and theatre director, he proposed that they find a travelling company together. In the letter, dated 3 June 1887, he sets out his plan; for example, that the company would perform only plays by a certain August Sg., but none of his old repertoire, and among other things mentions: "Writing the plays in such a way that it won't be necessary to lug along any costumes, sets, or props" (Strindberg, 1958: 215).

The proscenium lights were also a problematic element, as they went straight to the retina and dazzled the actors; in addition, it forced them to grimace or look at the sides, or look up at the sky, or directly at the audience and address them as if they were known. In short, it distorted their physiognomy and, as a result, they lost their expressiveness. The gaze, which is the most effective instrument of facial expression, was left unused. Strindberg proposed eliminating the proscenium, adding side lights and enhancing non-verbal language and making more of facial expression.

For the actors, he proposed avoiding excessive makeup because it transforms the face into an immutable mask (terrible for the actor) and forces pompous and grandiose gestures, as the most subtle movements of the soul occur in the face and the audience needs to be able to perceive them.

For him, all these changes would have to serve to achieve a more "natural" theatre, closer to reality, life, the spectator, and in this way the play would be more effective and more useful, would directly reach and move the audience, would make them think and act as a trigger in the process of transformation experienced by society, an era of changes in values and thinking about ourselves both individually and as a group. A phenomenon that the Danish intellectual Georg Brandes would call *Moderne Gjennembrudt* (the Modern Breakthrough) based on a set of portrayals by contemporary writers that were the expression of the spirit of the age (*Gjennembruds Mænd*, 1883). In his portrayal of the Norwegian writer Alexander Kielland, he describes the relations between the literature and society of the time:

There is a widespread opinion that the books currently published in the North are often aggressive, that they contain the ongoing unrest with the established social order, and this provokes even more discontent. The satisfied view it like the fashion of wearing the hair *à la mal-content*. However, the belligerent traits that characterise the good literature of the last ten years are quite deliberate. In our era, the more vigorous literature of the North is necessarily critical of society (Brandes, 1900: 425; free translation).

The portrait is from the year 1882 and, therefore, the ten years of literature full of discontent with the social order to which Brandes refers correspond to the 1870s, when there is a break with the inherited idealistic parameters. The allusions or abstract explanations or mythological backdrops no longer impress, rather things had to be explained as they were. And if the description of reality was aggressive it was not the fault of the new generation of writers; it was reality that was unpleasant. It was with this conviction that Brandes introduced realism and naturalism to Scandinavia through Taine and Zola, with some reservations, and through Saint-Beuve in terms of literary criticism, and thereby imposed the need to describe reality just as it was, to expose the corners that until then had been outside literature. It was necessary to show a set of fields and factors of end-of-century individual and collective life that romantic literature had overlooked, but above all to bring out the affectations of the economic and social system in the living conditions of individuals that had constructed and suffered it, to make visible the contradiction, the existential impasse.<sup>1</sup>

The conception of literature as a tool at the service of society (“literature must ensure that problems are discussed, otherwise it loses its essence” [Brandes, 1871: 5]), argues this writer in the preface to *Main Currents in Nineteenth Century Literature*, is adopted by Strindberg who was also convinced that society was guilty of all the ills suffered by individuals at the end of the century, as he explains in the article “Om det allmänna missnöjet. Dess orsaker och botemedel” (On the General Discontent, its Causes and Cures), in 1884, which begins:

Society, which today takes the blame for being responsible for the suffering of Humanity, is, to put it mildly, overturned, and contains so many contradictions that we can hardly believe we have achieved it naturally (Strindberg, 2003: 14).

This is one of Strindberg’s internal conflicts — otherwise evoked and disputed as one of his contradictions — between, on the one hand, his Rousseauian critique of culture and civilisation as a source of degeneration of society and the human species and, on the other, nature as a harmonious space where humanity can develop and realise itself happily. This conflict is the seed of his work and is evidenced more or less explicitly. In an article entitled “Om realism”<sup>2</sup> (On Realism), in 1882, in a clear and understandable way and yet with a dismissive tone, he expresses his fatigue at having to insist on the tired old diatribe between realism and idealism, and is compelled to respond and defend the choice of subjects. The realists were criticised for dealing with banal and vulgar issues that had no place in literary works, such as the relationship between the two sexes. For the writer of so many short stories and plays in which this is the central theme, the realists not only had the tendency and predisposition to deal with this issue, but it was fully justified

1. Of great interest on this impasse affecting the late 19th bourgeoisie is the book by Franco Moretti *The Bourgeois. Between History and Literature*, Verso: London, New York, 2013, mainly the chapter “The Grey Area” on Ibsen.

2. “Om Realism” was published in *Ur Dagens Krönika*, the journal of the group of realist writers known as the *80-talister*, the writers of the 1880s, in 1882.

since it was one of the most important factors in the human condition; and, above all, because at a time when social conventions affecting the relationship between man and woman were in doubt and subject to debate, everyone was forced to clarify positions. Consequently, it was logical and necessary for realistic literature to take charge and get to the bottom of the question, to take it seriously.

For Strindberg, realism was not a fashion or a literary school, but a form of artistic representation and expression defined by great writers of European literature such as Dante and Shakespeare. In his view, to each era would correspond a different way of understanding reality and, therefore, realism adapted to the forms of understanding of that time. In this sense, the aesthetic creations of the preceding generations can be clearly distinguished from those of his time: the previous ones can give the impression of reality through general and abstract allusions because the senses of readers had been educated to be receivers of this kind of representation. However, the new times were those of the natural sciences and exact sciences, and therefore the way reality was accessed and understood was not abstract and general, but the opposite; it was the age of positivism and specification. And he gives an example: when readers of the late nineteenth century read the words “rose” or “butterfly” in an ancient poem, they do not see in it the abstract concept of their predecessors; rather, they get frightened if they cannot determine which species it is.

Seen thus, literary language had to be modernised in the sense of updating it, of connecting it to the present, and thus bringing it closer to its readers, making it contemporary; incorporating the language closest to the colloquial, including terms referring to modern life and vulgarisms. This is Strindberg’s great contribution as a writer to Swedish literature.

Moreover, he wanted to give literature the rank of science and place it alongside medicine, biology, history or philology; and thereby give it the prestige denied to it as it was considered mere entertainment. If literature as a discipline obtained the status of science, he, as a writer, would in return also occupy a prestigious position in the Swedish cultural field. A clear goal for Strindberg from the beginning.

Therefore, we could say that his work does not harbour the pretension of an aesthetic revolution driven by a reflection on art itself, nor does it have a great interest in the comings and goings of literary fashions and currents, or in formulating great aesthetic reflections. In fact, Strindberg aspired to make it a profession that enjoyed the social prestige of the sciences, a useful tool for stirring consciousness and occupying a relevant place in society that would enable him to earn a living. He had a rather pragmatic conception of literature, which is not opposed to the constant exploration of new artistic forms and the renewal of literary language. The tendency towards naturalness and the submission of form to subject, to the central idea of the work, is what drives the renovating movement, and not a desire to theorise artistic forms.

At the start of the preface to *Miss Julie*, he makes the following declaration of intent: “I have not tried to accomplish anything new [...] but merely

to modernise the form,” and modernising meant bringing the audience, the men and women of his time, closer to it.

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But let us return to *The Stronger*. Strindberg had the clearest approach to writing a good play. In a letter to the writer Gustaf af Geijerstam, dated 18 November 1888, in which he encourages him to write a powerful, striking scene, he tells him what model to follow: “Two people, no intrigue but the strong tension of the battle of brains, of the battle of the souls” (Strindberg, 1961: 166). Then he wrote it, of course. And the striking effect was provoked by the capacity for suggestion and the questions it opens up in each spectator: Which of the two is stronger? Is there really a strong one and a weak one? Or will the game end in a draw?

Each spectator will make their own interpretation and conclusion, and we also include critics in this group. For Strindberg, Mrs X was the stronger because she was more flexible and therefore more adaptable and could take advantage of the situation; on the other hand, Miss Y, as Mrs X reproaches her, “has failed to bend and broken like a dry reed” (Strindberg, 2017b: 116), a view that coincides with Strindberg’s own about the human condition: it is better to be flexible and adaptable; the person that stays rigid as a stick ends up breaking. The reviews published when the play premiered tended to define it as an uninteresting experiment and saw Mrs X as the stronger. However, in a review published in *Politiken* in 1889, Miss Y appears as the heroine. Later, throughout the history of the staging of *The Stronger*, opinion has swayed between the two. And, also, for example, if Mrs X appeared as a nervous and hesitant woman and Miss Y’s silence overflowed with irony and played the role of *femme fatale*, the latter won.

What is clear is that each spectator draws their own conclusions and decides on a victor depending on their way of seeing life and the world, on their values and education; in other words, the performance lies in the spectators, in their perspective. The playwright’s gaze is constructed from the same premises, his worldview, and one is no more accurate than the other. Strindberg asked von Essen (the actress who played Mrs X and the playwright’s wife) to play it following these directions: the woman bends to later rise and go home triumphantly.

Strindberg constructs his protagonists based on an idea of character opposed to the traditional: a simple and immutable character, close to the archetype, which middle class theatre had consolidated on stage. Instead, his characters were contradictory, variable, changing, and their actions and behaviours could have several causes. Therefore, each spectator “will choose according to what is easiest to understand and that best adapts to his ability to judge and usually selects the one that he most easily understands or that best flatters his power of judgement,” as he says in the preface to *Miss Julie* (Strindberg, 2017: 225), and then gives a string of reasons that would have pushed the character to act as she does. This is how Strindberg gives the spectators room so that, depending on their temperament and vision of

human beings, their life experience and obsessions, they imagine and judge the character; that is, they also construct it. With this approach, Strindberg also gives the spectator the possibility to construct the character, assuming that there is no single truth, no absolute truth, a defining feature of the crisis of Modernity in Europe. Mrs X is not an immutable fixed character; on the contrary, we witness her psychological evolution; in her doubts, contradictions and vulnerabilities, we see the individual of the late nineteenth century who can no longer be portrayed as a whole, with a totalising image, without cracks, but multifaceted, made of fragments, “patched souls”, an impressionist painting, an unfinished sketch in the sense of incomplete. Needless to say, this shift towards a subjective view of the character and his ability to perceive and record the spirit of the time in his contemporaries is crucial for the playwright to achieve the goal of reaching the spectator.

Moreover, this exercise in constructing the character from one’s own gaze goes in two directions: the spectators construct the character but, at the same time, also think of themselves at the moment when a character’s behaviour unleashes different feelings in each person — hence Strindberg’s assertion: “If my tragedy makes a tragic impression on many people, that is their fault” (Strindberg, 2017: 225) —, feelings that force them to take a stance, to feel moved in one direction or another and to reflect, comparing themselves, on their own person and thus construct themselves through the character, through the Other.

Defining one’s own identity through the eyes of the others, the relationship with the other, intersubjectivity, is precisely what the characters in *The Stronger* express through dialogue, characteristic of modern theatre according to Szondi, but which goes further in the case of Strindberg.

The need to find his place in society, to enjoy a harmonious relationship with the world is what led him, from the beginning, to construct the figure of the titan/Strindberg against the colossus/society, as Elena Balzamo described in *August Strindberg. Visages et destin*. The writer transfers his personal experience in a general sense, convinced that the individual is in a permanent struggle against society, that this struggle begins with the attempt to fit in, fails and results, after the failure, in two options: rebel or commit suicide/resign oneself. The path chosen by Strindberg is clear... In the first scene of *The Red Room* (1879), his first novel, Arvid Falk, from the Mosebacke viewpoint, with the city of Stockholm at his feet, responds to Mr Struve — who had said to him that the writer “stands outside society” — and he responds: “His punishment for aspiring to stand above it. Moreover, I detest society, for it is not founded on a voluntary basis. It’s a web of lies — I renounce it with pleasure!” (Strindberg, 1912: 19).

Still following Balzamo’s theory, between the late 1880s and early 1890s, when Strindberg wrote *The Stronger*, the field where the battle is fought moves from society to the individual, inside of whom are the same evils of society. The individual against himself; the struggle becomes internal.

And the theatre is the ideal space to stage this struggle. *The Stronger* is not intriguing, but the spectator witnesses a whole psychological journey featuring Mrs X and Miss Y. It is a “battle of brains” where the stronger sucks the



strength of the other: “Mrs X: Your soul crept into mine, like a worm into an apple, ate and ate, bored and bored, until nothing was left but the rind and a little black dust within” (Strindberg, 2017b: 114). Following the thread of what we said above, typical of Strindberg’s characters is the conflict between individuals, the opposition of opposites, between high and low, the conviction that the fortune of one is the failure of the other, an antagonism between characters that also destroys the urge to resolve it. As in *The Stronger*.

In the fifteen minute length of the play, this individual internal conflict is staged in two ways: the two protagonists embody the two attitudes towards the struggle against society, the adapted and the maladapted, the one that develops her role freely and the one who does not. And most importantly, they are not fixed attitudes but we see how Mrs X starts out as the weak one, the one who lives at a disadvantage but gradually exploits the strengths and weaknesses of her opponent and comes out on top, which becomes the defeat of the other. The roles, then, are even interchanged. A struggle that also occurs internally when the individual stands before society with the intention of finding their place in it.

This internal tension intensifies with the phenomenon of modern city life, which in the case of Strindberg coincides with the transformation of Stockholm into a big city. The effects of the industrial and economic revolution on politics, working conditions, the organisation of society, thought, religion and moral values, the cultural field or urbanism transformed the great city into the space where imbalances and frictions occur in the relationship between people and society and therefore causes personal anxiety to the individuals who inhabit it. The monetary value applied to everything, including art, of the capitalist system, opens up an endless range of possibilities for artists to freely develop their talent and make a living from it. At the same time, however, they risk being left in the open, because they are not protected by a job, by a guild, by much more protective pre-capitalist structures. In addition, the city tends to look for rules that govern the chaos of total freedom, to establish timetables that distinguish leisure from work, for example. The citizen most affected by it is precisely the artist, the one who lives or wants to live from art and that the character of Arvid Falk embodies from Mosebacke with the intention of placing himself above society and rebelling against it.

This internal struggle has the particularity that it is fought between two opponents, one of whom spends the whole scene in silence, speaking with non-verbal language: with looks, grimaces, playing with facial expression, objects (the gun, slippers), which fill her responses to dialogue with meaning equal to or more than words. The simultaneity of the theatre’s own signs is used extensively, to the limit of dramatic possibilities. It provides far more room for suggestion, for the participation of the spectators; therefore, challenging them. It is the use of a formal resource, typical of theatrical language, brought to a limit that adds even more tension to the scene and, therefore, shows the extent to which the subject – the battle of brains – conditions the form and not the other way around.

The search for limits, the experimentation that has always been attributed to Strindberg, is a reality, but it does not come from the will to invent a new art, to make new aesthetic proposals for their own sake, but from the will — the need almost — to move the spectators by getting closer to them. For this reason, he calls for an art based on naturalness and subjectivity, and hence it was an art that expressed itself in contemporary terms, that addressed contemporary issues.

However, in order to do so, Strindberg had to fully understand his present, the ills of society and the end-of-century individual (the loss of absolute truths, the fragility of the subject and the impossibility of portraying, as a monolithic whole, the effects of modern life) and seek the language, the form, to express it.

To find these forms, it was necessary to work with total freedom, with the instinct that drove what was done in the Théâtre Libre, where one worked following a single guide, that of art for art's sake.

Working with total freedom is a *sine qua non* condition for the artist because this is how he enters the unknown obscure terrain of creation. Strindberg knew how to create worlds — give me two characters and I will make a world, give me three and I will make it move —, he knew how to shape the visible and the invisible, which the eyes of the creator see but others do not — as the Stranger, the protagonist of *The Road to Damascus*, says.

Strindberg could not give up his artistic vocation, which was linked to the need to find a harmonious relationship with his peers, with society, to find his place so as not to be excluded, despite the risks this posed for the artist. It was therefore necessary to reach them, move them, challenge them through art and, to do so, it was necessary to adapt the language to his time, to his contemporaries, to his modernity. Seen thus, we can conclude that if Strindberg is the great innovator of Swedish literature and language it is thanks to his radical contemporaneity. And it is from this conviction that the whole of Strindberg's work challenges the creators of today, of our contemporaneity.



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