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Section I: The Environment of the Nietzsche Reception in Scandinavia

Introduction

Gewählte Wirklichkeit. – Wie der gute Prosaschriftsteller nur Worte nimmt, welche der Umgangssprache angehören, doch lange nicht alle Worte derselben – wodurch eben der gewählte Stil entsteht –, so wird der gute Dichter der Zukunft *nur Wirkliches* darstellen und von allen phantastischen abergläubischen, halbredlichen, abgeklungenen Gegenständen, an den frühere Dichter ihre Kraft zeigten, völlig absehen. Nur Wirklichkeit, aber lange nicht jede Wirklichkeit! – sondern eine gewählte Wirklichkeit!

(Select Reality. – Just as the good prose writer employs only words that belong to common speech, but by no means all the words that belong to it – this is precisely how select or high style originates – so the good poet of the future will depict *only reality* and completely ignore all those fantastic, superstitious, half-mendacious, faded subjects upon which earlier poets demonstrated their powers. Only reality, but by no means every reality! – he will depict a select reality!)¹

What did Nietzsche see in Strindberg's *Fadren (The Father)*? He saw a landscape that had been abandoned by God the father still dominated by his shadow, the signs of reason confronted by the possibility of madness, the surety of paternity undermined by recent scientific observation, and the human father confined to a straight jacket. For certainly the symbols of masculinity and reason brought to light in what Strindberg called his »naturalistic tragedy« are emptied and obscured by the penumbra cast by nihilism; and so we are confronted with a literature colored by a certain anxiety, a literature that simultaneously calls itself realistic and interrogates the cornerstones of what its environment called the real. For if we agree with Nietzsche and claim that any depiction of reality is the depiction of a »select reality,« it is important that we ask what did Strindberg and his Scandinavian contemporaries regard to be real when he encountered Nietzsche in 1888?

At the time, Strindberg was living in exile in Denmark and had lost his faith in the progressive political programs advocated by the writers of »young Sweden«. He was now a controversial figure marginalized within these progressive circles as he was excluded from the established critical

¹ NIETZSCHE: KSA 2, 1988b, 426, Aphorism 114. The English translation comes from HOLLINGDALE: 1996, 2:114, 239–240.

institutions. He had run afoul of both the authorities and those who claimed to oppose authority. For a brief period, during his 1884 trial for blasphemy,² he had enjoyed a ground swell of popular support. But his stance on women's issues and his rejection of industrial socialism for an agrarian model soon left him isolated.³ With his autobiographical novel, *Tjänstekvinnans son* (*Son of a Servant*), Strindberg seemed to subordinate his exploration of social questions and his work took what most commentators call an inward turn.

However, perhaps his critics have hypostatized this turn inward. For Strindberg's new concerns paradoxically brought the appearances of the world outside into sharper relief. The more naïve »realism« of the early Strindberg, where the author intentionally created the illusion of reality through depicting only the »viktigaste av den mångfald detaljer varav bilden är sammansatt« (most important of the manifold details of which the image is composed)⁴ was in the process of becoming the »select reality« of his »greater naturalism«. For Strindberg had now realized with Nietzsche that »[v]ärldens största författare hava varit realister« ([t]he world's great authors have been realists)⁵, in that their view of reality became superimposed upon the world as text, imposing the illusion of a stable reality on a world in the process of becoming. Strindberg began to appreciate that the issue was the very process of appropriation and that this entailed the organization and masking of motivation. The »real« as such is not the issue. The issue was what Strindberg considered to be the »humbug« of his times, the residual idealism that claimed a trans-historical purchase and gave lie to changes brought on by modernity.

Considering this, and remembering that Georg Brandes introduced Nietzsche to Scandinavia in the spring of 1888 in a moment when the

2 STRINDBERG was put on trial for blasphemy for an ironic paragraph referring to communion in his short story, »Dygdens lön« (The Wages of Virtue). He was acquitted. »Dygdens lön« is collected in *Giftas I* (*Married I*).

3 Sven-Gustaf EDQVIST's *Samhällets fiende: En Strindberg studie* (Stockholm: Tiden, 1961) is the definitive study of Strindberg's politics in the 1880's.

4 STRINDBERG: 1912, 192. The article from which this citation is taken, *Om realism* was first published in *Ur Dagens krönika 2* in 1882. The complete formulation in the original reads: »Realism kallas den riktning inom alla konstområden, då framställaren söker att göra det åsyftande intrycket, det vill säga giva illusion, genom att utföra de **viktigaste av den mångfald detaljer varav bilden är sammansatt.**« The excerpt in bold is translated above. The translation of the excerpt is mine.

5 Ibid., 194.

revolt against realism was at its height, any analysis of the environment of the initial Nietzsche reception must address this struggle against idealism and engage with the concept of the *real*. For it was in this moment that the authors who had answered Brandes' call to place the problems of their societies under debate nearly two decades earlier were now a disillusioned group who were beginning to question the very same aesthetic and philosophical assumptions that had guided their work during the previous decade.

Henrik Ibsen was in self-imposed exile and had abandoned his realism and the social problem play. As early as 1884, with the writing of *Vildanden* (*The Wild Duck*), his attention shifted to an interrogation of the very possibility of a shared conception of reality. This drama marked a turning point in his production on both the level of form and content. The rather straightforward staging and plot development of his early prose dramas gave way to a divided stage and characters that contested each other's understanding of the basic events that unfolded outside of the spectator's field of vision. This play also added the concept of *the life lie* to the catalogue of Ibsenian motifs. With *Rosmersholm* in 1886 and *Fruen fra havet* (*The Lady from the Sea*) in 1888, Ibsen's concerns turned to the power of psychic suggestion and the ability of one mind to dominate the conception of reality held by another.

J. P. Jacobsen had died in 1885. This novelist, who had translated Darwin into Danish and whose work oscillated between scientific exactitude and lyrical abundance, had become the object of a debate about religion upon his death.⁶ In 1888, Victoria Benedictsson, the Swedish novelist, committed suicide in a hotel room in Copenhagen. In a time where the male arbiters of progressive culture had called for freedom for women, her work had been criticized by these men for not being radical enough. The program forwarded by the party of progress had become programmatic indeed. The creators of what Nietzsche called »a select reality« had committed what he would later regard as the deficiency of the »bad philologist«: they had mistaken their texts for actuality.

⁶ Strindberg comments on Jacobsen's death in the fourth volume of *Tjänstekvinnans son* in a chapter entitled »Han blir ateist« (1885) (He becomes an atheist). He writes: »Så kommer Jacobsens död, då man slåss om liket och diskuterar frågan, om han var troende eller ej.« My translation reads: »When Jacobsen died, they fought over the corpse and discussed the question of whether or not he was a believer.« Original citation found in STRINDBERG: 1996a, 193.

Keeping this in mind, I will now trace the parameters of the debate about realism that took place in Scandinavia at the time of Nietzsche's emergence as a philosophical force in Scandinavia. For certainly the discourse of what we call realism depends upon a certain illusion that there is congruency between language as a symbolic interpretation of the world and the world itself. And certainly, Strindberg's *The Father*, designated as a naturalist tragedy by its subtitle, alerts us to our own retrospective over-determination of what realism and naturalism actually were. I contend that Scandinavian realism and naturalism made the bed upon which the Nietzsche reception could lie, and that the vitalist and perspectival aspects of Scandinavian realism contain the seeds of the subsequent loss in faith in realist display. Having lost their faith in the *real*, many Scandinavian literary artists took recourse to a rather dubious notion of authenticity. It is in this environment that Nietzsche enters. If *nihilism truly knocked on the door as the uncanniest of guests*, he wore the mask of Friedrich Nietzsche. For this reason, he is both the timeliest and most untimely of modernity's philosophers. He represents the bourgeois uncanny, offering the appearance of individuality while undercutting the foundation of the subject's grasp on a stable identification.

The seeds of Nietzsche reception in Scandinavia gestated within the particular brand of Scandinavian realism,⁷ a realism that is both bourgeois and attacks the bourgeoisie. This will be the first point of analysis. After this, we will turn to the reception proper and following this, the anti-realist polemic that takes place on the heels of the Nietzsche's introduction to the north will be addressed. It is here that the *Scandinavian Nietzsche* will be depicted. Through this analysis, the position of August Strindberg within the context of the Scandinavian literary environment will be established and Nietzsche's role as a symbol of rupture will be elaborated through a discussion of Scandinavian realism and the subsequent anti-realist revolt.⁸

7 Just as Nietzsche's thought has been received in philosophical terms as a revolt against positivism, in literary terms it can be seen as a revolt against realism. In either instance, in Nietzsche reception it is often the case that the limitations of a claim of objectivity are confronted by the untenability of an absolute claim of subjectivity.

8 I use the term »symbol of rupture« in order to emphasize that Nietzsche takes on a discursive status in the literary production after the spring of 1888 in Scandinavia. The effect of his work does not establish a discourse, but rather is an element of one already established. This is my theoretical bias: like individuals, individual discourses are born in relationship to that which precedes them.