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5

PO Enquist, *Fröken Julie* and deceptive writing

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Among contemporary Swedish authors who have most assiduously and intensely measured themselves against the figure of August Strindberg (1849-1912) and his cultural inheritance, PO Enquist is doubtless one of the most important. One of the most emblematic representatives of Scandinavian documentarism¹ from the 1960s until today, Enquist has been an important voice within Swedish cultural and political debate, and his work has enjoyed considerable international success.²

In 2008 he won the prestigious *Augustpriset* – named after Strindberg – for a second time³ for his autobiography entitled *Ett annat liv* (“Another Life”) in which he retraces, not without moments of self-censorship and gaps in time, the principal stations of his life: from his childhood in Hjöggbölein the 1930s and ‘40s to his struggle with alcoholism in the 1990s, all against the backdrop of the most important events of post-World War II history.

On the centennial of Strindberg’s death in 2012 the publishing house Norstedts put together a one-volume collection of the three works of Enquist’s that most explicitly and systematically give voice to his interest in the *oeuvre* and life of the great dramatist.

The first, in chronological order, of the works to be republished was *Tribadernas natt* (“The Night of the Tribades”), a greatly successful *pièce* from 1975⁴ that marked Enquist’s theatrical debut and provoked heated debate in Sweden – beginning with Olof Lager-

¹ His novel *Legionärerna* (“The Legionnaires”), published in 1968, for many reasons is considered a sort of prototype of the 20th century Scandinavian documentary novel. On Scandinavian documentarism see in particular the volume *Documentarism in Scandinavian Literature*, edited by Poul Houe and Sven Hakon Rossel (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997).

² An overview of Enquist and his work is offered by Ross Shideler, *Per Olov Enquist: A Critical Study* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1984).

³ The first time was 1999 for the novel *Livläkarens besök* (“The Royal Physician’s Visit”).

⁴ The first took place at the *Dramatiska teatern* of Stockholm 27 September 1975.



crantz's article in *Dagens nyheter* – on account of the liberty with which the author questioned the traditional image of Strindberg.⁵ The *pièce* is set during the rehearsals for the performance of *Den Starkare* (“The Stronger”), a one-act play Strindberg wrote during his Danish sojourn for his Scandinavian Experimental Theatre (*Den Skandinaviska Försöksteatern*), which had been modeled on Antoine's *Théâtre Libre*. The principal protagonists in Enquist's two-act drama are August Strindberg himself, his wife Siri von Essen, and the Danish actress Marie David, who Strindberg suspected of having an amorous *liason* with his wife.⁶

The second text to be republished in 2012 was the biography *Strindberg. Ett liv* (“Strindberg. A Life”), which had originally been broadcast in six episodes on Swedish television in 1985.⁷

The third text is that with which we shall concern ourselves here. *Målet mot Fröken Julie* (*The Case Against Miss Julie*) is an essay⁸ in the form of a story, originally published in 1992 within a collection entitled *Kartritarna* (“The Drawers of Maps”). In this text Enquist proposes a rereading of Strindberg's drama, a rereading which is interesting not only in as much as it contributes to rethinking the origin and meaning of the *pièce*, but also in as much as it is an expression of Enquist's own poetics.

Before proceeding to a close examination of the principal motifs of interest in *Målet mot Fröken Julie*, it seems to me to be useful to offer some general information on Strindberg's *Fröken Julie* (*Miss*

⁵ On reactions to *Tribadernas natt* see in particular Egil Törnqvist, *Scenens Strindberg och verklighetens. Per Olov Enquists Tribadernas natt som dokumentärt drama*, in *Literature and Reality: Creatio versus Mimesis: Problems of Realism in Modern Nordic Literature*, edited by Alex Bolckmans (Ghent: Scandinavian Institute, University of Ghent, 1977), pp. 195-211.

⁶ On *Tribadernas natt* see Gunnar Syrén, *Mellan sanningen och lögnen. Studier i Per Olov Enquists dramatik* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2000), pp. 11-62. On the work's diffusion in the Anglophone and Francophone context, see in addition Egil Törnqvist, *Translating Docudrama. Per Olov Enquist's Tribadernas natt in English and French*, in “Tijdschrift voor Skandinavistiek”, 19:1 (1998), pp. 129-148.

⁷ Enquist defined his biography of Strindberg as “en televisions roman” (“a novel for television”).

⁸ This is the way (“en essä”) Enquist defines it in the preface to the volume published in 2012.



Julie). Written in the summer of 1888 during Strindberg and his wife Siri von Essen's stay in Denmark, the tragedy—inspired by the principles of Zola's naturalism⁹—represents the pinnacle of the first experimental phase of Strindbergian theatre. In its famous preface the author reflects upon the role of the theatre and lays the foundations for its renewal.

The dramatic action unfolds during a midsummer night (*midsommar*)—as Perrelli reminds us, “sullo sfondo di un saturnale trasgressivo, durante il quale tutte le gerarchie vengono rovesciate”¹⁰—and primarily concerns three characters: Miss Julie, the servant Jean, and the cook Kristin. Forever lurking in the background of the story, physically absent and yet present, however, is the figure of the count who the characters mention numerous times. Breaching the limits her social position forces upon her, Julie enters into a dangerous game of seduction with Jean who, on account of his social ambitions, seems to yield to her advances while at the same time reminding her of her duties to aristocratic appearances. This, coupled with the servants' whispering about her lascivious behavior, causes her to doubt the integrity of her honor. In this tragic game of vain hopes and painful disappointments, Julie eventually succumbs and although the ending does not explicitly state it, everything seems to suggest that she has decided to commit suicide.¹¹ If *Fadren* (“The Father”)—the other great work of the naturalistic season of Strindbergian theatre—projected the battle of the sexes onto a backdrop of familial tensions (that which Strindberg defined as “hjärnornas kamp”, that is, the battle of the brains), in *Fröken Julie* the theme of class conflict is added to the contrast between man versus woman, which is primarily represented by Julie and Jean.¹²

⁹ The subtitle is in fact “ett naturalistiskt sorgespel”.

¹⁰ Franco Perrelli, *August Strindberg. Il teatro della vita* (Milan: Iperborea, 2003), p. 61. (“Against the backdrop of a transgressive saturnalia during which all hierarchies are turned on their head”). Unless otherwise noted, translations by the present translator.

¹¹ On Strindberg's idea to conclude the *pièce* with Julie's suicide cfr. Gunnar Ollén, *Tillkomst och mottagning*, in *August Strindberg. Samlade Verk. Nationalupplaga* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1984), pp. 305-307.

¹² For an overview of Strindberg's literary activity in the ideological and cultural context of the end of the 1880s see Perrelli, *Il teatro della vita*, cit., pp. 48-82.



In his preface to the 2012 volume Enquist emphasizes how the theme of the interpenetration of life and art is central to the interpretation of Strindberg's work and quotes a letter written by Strindberg to his friend Axel Lundegård after the premiere of *The Father* in Copenhagen ("Det förefaller mig som om jag går i sömnen; som om liv och dikt blandats. Jag vet inte om 'Fadren' är en dikt, eller om mitt liv varit det", p. 5).

An extract from the same letter opens *Målet mot Fröken Julie*:

Genom mycken diktning har mitt liv blivit ett skuggliv; jag tycker mig inte längre gå på jorden utan sväva utan tyngd i en atmosfär icke av luft utan av mörker. Fallor ljus in i detta mörker så dimper jag ner krossad.¹³

The thematization of the relationship between life and art leads to another reflection that is strictly connected to it and is the other great theme running through *Målet mot Fröken Julie*. It concerns the relationship between truth and appearance and the reader's role in the interpretation of that relationship, a theme which occupies a central place in Enquist's poetics.¹⁴

As we shall see, the most interesting aspect of the text I shall consider here is its proposition of a reversal of power relations between the characters of Strindberg's tragedy based upon a redefinition and recalibration of the weight of autobiography in the *pièce's* creation and therefore its interpretation as well. That redefinition arises primarily through a reading of the letters Strindberg wrote in those turbulent months of his life, which the author of *Målet mot Fröken Julie* does not hesitate to define as the "Danish hell" ("det danska helvetet").¹⁵

Enquist is by no means the first to have indicated Strindberg's life as an inescapable point of reference to fully understanding the meaning of *Fröken Julie*.¹⁶ Nevertheless, what distinguishes Enquist's ap-

¹³ Per Olov Enquist, *Strindberg. Ett liv. Tribadernas natt. Målet mot Fröken Julie* (Stockholm: Norstedt, 2012), p. 389.

¹⁴ Cfr. Syrén, *Mellan sanningen och lögnen*, cit., pp. 171-183.

¹⁵ This is the title, for example, of the fourth part of *Strindberg. Ett liv*.

¹⁶ See, in this regard, Gunnar Ollén, *Tillkomst*, cit., pp. 297-301.



proach, and therefore the results of his investigation, is the angle upon which his observation is based. Enquist's premise, in fact, holds that theatrical texts always contain a secret, which it is up to the interpreter to seek. This search, however, is not simply a means:

Har vi funnit hemligheten uppstår lycka, men något dör. Bör vi då finna? Nej, men söka, eftersom det finns en annan god regel: den, att upphör vi att söka, går något förlorat.¹⁷

For, according to Enquist, the secret of *Fröken Julie* is not to be found in the physical space of Skovlyst's residence where Strindberg actually wrote the *pièce*, but elsewhere. The question, then, is where? Is it to be found within the self-same text or within the context that produced it? In the subtext ("i sin egen undertext"), i.e. in the reader's own experience?¹⁸

The essay is made up of a series of concentric circles moving from the outside (the context articulated in various "spaces") towards a center, which is represented by the text and its actualization on the stage.

The search is thus based on the historical-political context of Copenhagen at the end of the 1880s and above all focuses on the relationship between Strindberg and the Brandes brothers who through the daily journal "Politiken" were committed to expressions calling for the renewal of Danish society and culture in a historical moment marked by a radicalization of the debate between conservative forces and the vast progressive front to which the Brandes also belonged. Strindberg is therefore tied to the cultural activities which revolve around the journal, founded in 1884 by Viggo Hørup and Edvard Brandes to be an organ of the capital's radical bourgeoisie.¹⁹

¹⁷ Enquist, *Målet mot Fröken Julie*, cit., p. 392. Another theme present throughout all of Enquist's work, and which is both already rooted in the first literary production of the 1960s and finds its most successful treatment in the novel *Legionärerna*, is that of incessant research.

¹⁸ Enquist, *Målet mot Fröken Julie*, cit., p. 393.

¹⁹ *Ivi*, pp. 397-401.



Strindberg's personal affairs during his stay at Skovlyst, however, risked putting the Brandes' plan in danger, as they had been counting on Strindberg to be a torchbearer of the cultural radicalism they held useful to their objectives. According to Enquist, Strindberg had, in fact, risked being incarcerated due to an accusation of rape brought against him by the under-age Marta Magdalena Hansen, half-sister of the intendant Hansen, the very man who had brought him to Skovlyst in the first place and whom Strindberg had had unjustly imprisoned for a theft²⁰ he did not commit. In Enquist's meticulous reconstruction, Strindberg escapes to Berlin the day after having laid with the girl, but the Brandes convince him to return to Copenhagen. Among the documents used to reconstruct the story is a denouncement from the same Marta Hansen – which the essay's author mentions having received from the Danish actor Frits Helmut²¹ – where she mentions Strindberg's aggression and expresses her desire for his condemnation. This denouncement of hers is accompanied by a letter from the head editor of the conservative journal *Avisen*, Fredrik Hansen, and thereby almost seems to give credence to the idea that, in reality, it all was the result of a political conspiracy ordered by the Brandes' adversaries.²²

Regardless of the letter's content, the accusation was never formalized. And yet its weight was destined to leave a trace in the letters and literary production of those years, already heavily marked by the exacerbation of tensions between Strindberg and the feminine world in the aftermath of the trial surrounding the publication of *Giftas I* ("Getting Married", 1884).

This historical-political contextualization of *Målet mot Fröken Julie* is followed by an analysis of the text itself, which is read in light of the aforementioned autobiographical facts and on the presupposition of the existence of a secret in theatrical texts mentioned above.

²⁰ On the events regarding the young woman of Skovlyst and Strindberg and the affair's repercussions on his work, see Ollén, *Tillkomst*, cit., pp. 300-301. Martha Magdalene Hansen and Ludvig Hansen also appear in the controversial story "Tschandala", published within the collection *Svenska öden och äventyr* (II part).

²¹ Enquist, *Målet mot Fröken Julie*, cit., p. 408.

²² *Ibid.*



For Enquist, an additional element is added to the case of Strindberg on this basic assumption: in his dramas we often assist in the investigation of an insignificant crime (“sökandet efter det felaktiga brottet”),²³ which has taken place through the concealment of fundamental elements. The keyword is guilt. A guilt which is often hidden from the eyes of the reader-spectator by means of shifting attention to lesser offenses, which conceal its presence within the text:

Utgångspunkten är existensen av skuld efter ett minimalt brott, konsekvenserna av detta nästan obefintliga brott är oerhörda, brottet diskuteras med upprördhet, förtvivlan, ofta stark moralism, och dramat tar intensivt ställning till skuldfrågan.²⁴

In Enquist’s view, the passionate apologies in many of Strindberg’s dramas would become more interesting if we could only find the “right light” (“rätt lykta”) under which to search instead of continuing to look under the wrong one:

Skulle vi inte förstå hans ord bättre om vi insåg vad han försökte dölja, och hans försvarstal då få helt andra innebörder? Kanske till och med bli mer gripande och övertygande, just därför? Om brottet ligger utom fokus får nämligen de agerandes åtbörder helt nya innebörder för oss. Den horisontella undertexten, definitionen av det påstådda brottet som desinformation, och identifieringen av det verkliga brottet via försvarstalens språkmantel, ger nämligen helt nya aktörer, och får andra moraliska konflikter att framträda.²⁵

Proceeding from the belief that Strindberg hides the woman’s true guilt, and thus the real drama, Enquist deconstructs all of the supporting elements of the most authoritative thesis that holds the young noblewoman to be a victim of Jean’s social-climbing ambitions:

²³ *Ivi*, p. 416.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Enquist, *Målet mot Fröken Julie*, cit., p. 418.



Det finns en för Strindbergs dramatik fullständigt normal egenomlighet i denna pjäs: nämligen att den förfärliga brottsliga handling som driver fram de desperata planerna på flykt, att ge upp allting och dölja sig i Schweiz, och som till sist leder till Julies död, att denna handling i pjäsen är nästan alldeles osynlig.²⁶

Julie's real offense is another. Especially since, Enquist adds,²⁷ there is no explicit reference to sexual intercourse between her and the servant anywhere in the text, at least not in the sole version approved by Strindberg himself (or rather, the Danish translation, which followed the publication of the Swedish).²⁸

Enquist essentially believes that Julie's aim is to commit suicide and that, with that in mind, she chooses Jean and Kristin to be the innocent agents of her suicidal will:

Fröken Julie vill dö, det är hennes oerhörda drivkraft. För att uppnå detta måste hon uppsöka ett litet brott, förförelsen, som ger henne möjlighet att utse sina bödlar, som är två unga oskyldiga människor. Hennes brott är inte samlaget utan dödspassionen. "Fröken Julie" är en pjäs om hur döden uppsöker livet, och destruerar det.²⁹

This is where the aforementioned inversion of the power relationships between the characters takes place. According to such a reading, in fact, Julie plays anything but a passive role in determining her destiny and that of whoever ends up involved in her plans.

In order to conceal the woman's real intentions, and thus her real guilt, Strindberg seems to have written the preface in her defense with the intent of demonstrating that Jean and Kristin are worthless individuals, and therefore similarly unworthy of any re-

²⁶ *Ivi*, p. 419.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ On questions of a philological nature connected to the constitution of the text of *Fröken Julie*, Harry Bergholz's essay, *Toward an Authentic Text of Strindberg's Fröken Julie*, in "Orbis litterarum", 9:3 (1954), pp. 167-192, remains of great interest even today.

²⁹ Enquist, *Målet mot Fröken Julie*, cit., p. 421.



spect.³⁰ It seems that in some way the excessive clarity of the preface's unequivocal definition of the psychological nature of the characters and their role on the scene intends to cast a veil across the actual complexity of the play and of the relationships between the protagonists. For Enquist, with *Fröken Julie* Strindberg, having ruined the life of two people in Skovlyst, primarily sought to exculpate himself; and, above all, demonstrate that he himself had been the victim ("att han själv var offret").³¹

In the final part of the essay Enquist offers some reflections on his own direction of Strindberg's text at the Aveny Teatret in Copenhagen in the autumn of 1984.

The *démontage* of Strindberg's strategy of concealment of the true tragedy comes about through a linguistic experiment. According to Enquist, if we were to strip Jean and Kristin's answers of any secondary elements, we would not encounter two infantile and unpleasant individuals at all. The experiment in question, however, lacks an analytic aspect and the reader is only given conclusions without any examples illustrating the reasoning behind them.³²

This rereading of Strindberg's drama is interesting not only for the end result but also, and most importantly, for the way in which Enquist arrives at just such a reversal of the traditional view of *Fröken Julie*. For even this text, in fact, is constructed according to a point of view that has its roots in documentarism. The reading is indeed substantiated by letters and documents – including Marta Magdalena Hansen's denouncement – that support the line of reasoning and confer a sense of truth to the text in the reader's eyes.

But the truth, understood as reaching a point of arrival, is for many reasons an antithetical concept to the objectives of writing in Enquist's universe, which assigns more importance to research. In the case of *Fröken Julie*, that which is most important to Enquist is the identification of a new perspective that generates questions and suggests an innovative course of reading which allows for a continuation

³⁰ *Ivi*, p. 422.

³¹ *Ivi*, p. 423.

³² *Ivi*, pp. 422-426.



of the search, thereby adding another tile to the complex mosaic of Strindbergian interpretations. The hermeneutic work and the research that substantiates it constitute an open reflection that proceeds through successive extensions and inversions and the truth, in a certain sense, is irrelevant (“På ett sätt är sanningen också irrelevant; vilken den är förändrar den inte bilden av August Strindberg som människa. Den är redan tillräckligt komplicerad”).³³

The ontological value of truth refers back to the problem of the credibility and verisimilitude of that which is being told, a problem that not only concerns the object of narration – in this case the reconstruction of the events in Denmark and their effect on Strindberg’s work – but the narration itself, that is, Enquist’s. Resorting to documents, indeed, should not necessarily be understood as an indication of veracity. And this is a theme of great importance to understanding documentarism.³⁴ In an article from 1981 that appeared in the magazine *Vår lösen* Enquist declared:

[. . .] vi bör vid det här laget ha lärt oss, att något inte behöver vara sant, bara för att det är dokumentärt. Det är lättare att ljuga med dokumentarism, än med fiktion. Något behöver ju inte vara “sant”, bara för att det har “hänt”.³⁵

In the same article he also speaks of the duty of art which is “att lyfta fram, tydliggöra och gestalta det relevanta i det som har hänt”.³⁶ Art therefore does not have primarily a mimetic function, but serves to clarify and give form to that which the author considers relevant in the story.

Enquist’s story-essay must be understood within the same frame. The experimentation of an innovative point of view from

³³ *Ivi*, p. 421.

³⁴ See in this regard, Rolf Yrliid, *The Elusive Documentary: The Swedish Documentary Movement with an Attempt at Definition*, in *Documentarism in Scandinavian Literature*, cit., pp. 24-35.

³⁵ The quotation comes from PO Enquist, *Tydliggöra eller spegla verklighet*, in “Vår lösen”, 72 (1981), pp. 120-122, here p. 121.

³⁶ PO Enquist, *Tydliggöra eller spegla*, cit., p. 121.



which the construction of the discourse is based on is at the same time a literary game that complies with the rules of interaction with the reader that characterize Enquist's narrative universe. A game, in any event, played at the edge of uncertainty generated by a constant calling-into-question of the assumptions of veracity upon which the whole narrative seems to lean. Let us consider Marta Magdalena Hansen's denouncement, for example. Enquist presents it, together with the accompanying letter, as if it were an unpublished document while at the same time insinuating that there could be doubts as to its credibility.³⁷ Through the disclosure and deployment of a series of details presented as if they were facts, he demonstrates a desire to appeal to the reader's trust, a trust that nevertheless is constantly being put to the test by the presence of explicit textual signals inviting the reader to be careful and, implicitly, to doubt, the only true engine of incessant research.³⁸ Those documents, real or invented as they may be, should be interpreted as narrative elements in the service of the explication and emphasis of aspects of the relationship between life and art in Strindbergian literature from the perspective of a writer who shares with Strindberg some fundamental traits. The theme of the concealment of reality is also central within Enquist's work,³⁹ and is present in

³⁷ Enquist, *Målet mot Fröken Julie*, cit., pp. 412-413.

³⁸ In an interview regarding the novel *Magnetisörens femte vinter* ("The Magnetist's Fifth Winter", 1964), Enquist makes a few observations that well fit the essay we are considering here as well: "Jag försökte konstruera en berättelse med skenbar auktoritet, med skenbar historisk tyngd – men en berättelse som vid närmare granskning visar sig vara artificiell, konstruerad, ohistorisk. [...] Den som går längre in ser att min berättelse är artificiell, förstår att den måste betraktas med misstro – men jag vådjar om tilltro" (29 röster-67. 29 svenska författare intervjuade av Jacob Branting, Björn Håkansson o. Kjell Sundberg, in "Fibs Lyrikklubbs", 126 (1967), pp. 57-59, here p. 58).

³⁹ It is the principal theme, for example, of the drama *Bildmakarna* ("The Image Makers", 1998), in which the young actress Tora manages to confess to Selma Lagerlöf that her novels are an attempt to conceal and cover up the great knot of her life, or rather, her difficult and painful relationship with her father. On *Bildmakarna* see, *inter alios*, Alessandro Bassini, *The Unacceptable Truth. August Strindberg and Selma Lagerlöf in Per Olov Enquist's Tribadernas natt and Bildmakarna*, in "North West Passage", 5 (2008), pp. 131-148.



Målet mot Fröken Julie.⁴⁰ The other great theme that the two Swedish writers have in common is that of guilt, which is intimately connected to that of concealment and which in Enquist too assumes a structural function.⁴¹ One thinks, for example, of *Ett annat liv*, in which the narration of the life of the protagonist – Enquist himself therefore – revolves around the distinction between the age of innocence – *Oskuld* is the title of the first of the text's three parts – and that of becoming aware of one's own responsibility, civic and social, as a writer and, subsequently, one's own errors.

Målet mot Fröken Julie, therefore, is not only an essay on the origins of Strindberg's plays and a contribution to their interpretation. It is also a text which, through Strindberg, tells us about its author and his narrative universe, it too made up of diversions and contradictions, which give substance to a complex hermeneutic game in which the reader is called to reflect, *inter alia*, on the cognitive worth of literature irrespective of the relationship it produces with an ascertainable truth.

Translation from the Italian: Alexander Booth

⁴⁰ “[...] vi innehåller också nästan alltid en hemlighet. En god regel, dock inte inom psykoanalysen, är att människan ska tillåtas behålla denna hemlighet. Annars försvinner hon, eller blir omänskligt tydlig” (Enquist, *op. cit.*, p. 392).

⁴¹ In this regard see Syrén, *Mellan sanningen och lögnen*, cit., pp. 172-173.