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Sjöbergs *Julie*

“I wonder what Yeats had to pay/ in order to do that?” Robert Bly

When Chinua Achebe repeatedly tells us over his long career that we must stop teaching Joseph Conrad because his racism is toxic, we must answer for Conrad’s cultural value or give up on it. The answer is, simply, that without Conrad’s writing we see two polarized camps, first-world ethnic imperialist and third-world revolutionary writing each composed for the already converted. But Conrad gives us fictions where racism and imperialism **weaken** in the vast middle ground which shifts in sympathy away from ethnic imperialism, a weakening without which it is impossible to account for the global transformation which took place in the last century. Of course victims pay first and last. But when “we” deconstruct racism now, it costs us less; Conrad’s characters **pay** for the deconstruction of ethnic imperialism.

Everyone accuses Strindberg of misogyny. For most criticism this is an inert biographical fact, like vegetarianism, whose naming acts as a prophylactic for the critic: ‘don’t blame me, I freely admit that he hates women.’ To say that the patriarchy depends on the legislation of women’s freedom costs us very little, now in the latter half of a fundamental historical shift, but Strindberg’s *Fadren* stands like Conrad’s fiction as a priceless documentation/revelation of this parallel shift because of course Laura and Bertha must pay, but the “hysterical” Ryttnästern pays as well, for what we know now.

Performances of Strindberg are valuable according to how they dramatise this priceless knowledge of who pays, to whom, for what we know now. In a televised interview (available on the Criterion DVD of Sjöbergs *Julie*), Tommy Berggren, who played Jean opposite Bibi Andersson’s Julie in 1969, and is speaking as the director of the 2005 production, defends animatedly the development or extrapolation of submerged elements in the text in order to awaken the audience’s concern for the actors as human beings, or, as I would say, for what they have to pay. “If you want the text, stay home to read it,” is his challenge, especially sobering in a documentary devoted to

the mortal glories of live performance. Yet in the end we are sent away even from the most beguiling performances, back home to where the text is, to read it again.

Alf Sjöberg directed *Fröken Julie* at the Stockholm theatre two years before making the film. Of course two features of film inaccessible to stage performance would be paramount to him, for better or worse: the world outside the kitchen, and the permanent record of voices, gestures, and setting of *this* performance for future audiences. (I do not believe he could have anticipated that his film would be privately available in a format as easily consultable at home as a text).

One simple extension of the play is the turkisk paviljong episode. Textually it is *risqué*, as Jean might say, a complex way of transgressing the distance between himself and Julie even while he laments it as unbridgeable, weakening proprieties by observing them.

Bredvid trädsgårdslanden stod en turkisk paviljong i skuggan av jasminer och överväxt med kaprifolium. Jag visste inte vad den kunde brukas till, men jag hade aldrig sett en så vacker byggnad. Folk gick där in och kom ut igen, och en dag stod dörren lämnad öppen. Jag smög dit och såg väggarna klädda med tavlor av kungar och kejsare, och det var röda gardiner för fönstren med fransar på -- nu förstår ni vad jag menar. Jag ---[*Bryter en syrenblomma och håller under näsan på fröken.*] -- jag hade varit inne i slottet, aldrig sett annat än kyrkan -- men det här var vackrare; och hur mina tankar luppo, så gingo de alltid tillbaka -- dit. Och så småningom uppstod en längtan att en gång hela behaget av -- enfin, jag smög därin, såg och beundrade. Men då kommer det någon! Det fanns bara en utgång för herrskapfolk, men för mig fanns det en till, och jag hade inte annat än att välja den! [*Fröken som tagit syrenen, låter den falla på bordet.*] Därpå satte jag till att springa, störtade igenom en hallonhäck, rusade över ett jordgubbsland, och kom upp på rosenterrassen. Där fick jag se en skär klädning och ett par vita strumpor -- det var ni. Jag lade mig ner under en ogräshög, under kan ni tänka er, under tistlar som stuckos, och våt jord som luktade illa. Och jag såg på er när ni gick i rosorna, och jag tänkte. om det är sant att en rövare kan komma in i himmelen och bli med ängarna, så är det underligt

att inte ett statbarn här på Guds jord kan komma in i slottsparken och leka med grevens dotter!

[August Strindberg, *Fröken Julie och andra skådespel* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1979), 32-3]

On one side of the garden stood a Turkish pavilion in the shadow of jasmine trees and overgrown with honeysuckle. I didn't know what it could be for, but I'd never seen such a beautiful building. People went in and came out again; and, one day, the door was left open. I crept in and saw the hall hung with pictures of kings and emperors, and there were red curtains on the windows with tassels – ah, now you understand! I --- [*Breaks a flower from the lilac and holds it beneath MISS JULIE'S nose.*] I'd never been into the palace itself, never seen anything except the church – but this was more beautiful – and however my thoughts might stray, they always returned there. And gradually I began to long just once to experience the full ecstasy of actually – *enfin*, I crept inside, saw and marveled. But then – someone's coming! There was only one exit – for the lords and ladies. But for me – there was another – and I had no choice but to take it. [*MISS JULIE, who has taken the lilac blossom, lets it fall on the table.*] Then I ran, broke through a raspberry bush, charged across a strawberry patch, and found myself on a terrace with a rose garden. There I saw a pink dress and a pair of white stockings. You. I lay down under a pile of weeds – under, can you imagine that? – under thistles that pricked me and wet earth that stank. And I looked at you as you walked among the roses, and I thought: If it is true that a thief can enter heaven and dwell with the angels, then it's strange that a peasant child here on earth cannot enter the great park and play with the Count's daughter." (*The Plays of Strindberg*, tr. Michael Meyer (New York: The Modern Library, 1964), 130.

Discovered, Jean says only that he threw himself into the ravine and was beaten [*“blev uppdragen och fick stryck”* (33)]. A film dare not forfeit the infinitely complex psychological interaction between Julie and Jean, but the audience to a camera is avid as well of movement, of the things of this world.

Sjöberg would have looked the furthest from the stage where he himself had directed Julie two years earlier to grasp the challenges of film—what is lurking beyond the room? The material world entirely coded as

belonging to the Count: horses, land, roads, buildings, uniforms but also what is becoming in postwar Sweden the exemplary Swedish festival: midsommar.

In the film as we listen to Jean tell this story we see a simple young boy enchanted away from fieldwork by the turkisk paviljon. Seated inside, his hand accidentally and belatedly finds the latrine cover while marveling at the pictures of royal men on the walls and at the window treatments. He looks in the toilet hole and is aghast, but the camera cuts away. We see the censorious uniformed woman he hears as she approaches (she is the one who chased him away from the apple orchard earlier); from the inside we see him trying the window for escape but we do not see his exit through the toilet hole. When he emerges outside, he runs, ending in front of the main house, where he sees Julie sitting in front. The young girl beckons him but he is spotted. He eludes capture by ducking and enters the house, beckoned again by Julie from a window above. The room has a more imposing collection of the same pictures as the paviljon, family versions with milder facial expressions than the aristocracy seen earlier. In this short moment the film successfully depicts two young innocents whose interest in each other is simple, wondering, forthright. A theatre audience or reader **might** question Jean's sincerity at this moment but the film audience cannot mistrust the innocence of the children they see; **at best**, one could think oneself into the distanced and wary critical position, that we see the story Julie certainly believes and perhaps what Jean believes, at least while he tells it, but that we need to keep an eye on Jean.

Of course nothing is more difficult than to portray (or discern) adult sincerity for an audience, on stage or on film. There is reason enough to believe that this is more than a story to Jean, although he discounts it later, and we should believe that Julie feels his story as well, although complimenting him on being such an effective storyteller ("Ni berättar charmant" --34) should make us all equally wary.

When Julie-as-child attempts to shake Jean's hand in greeting, she smells him up close and exclaims "where have you been"? At that point he is discovered again, a mad chase ensues across the Count's considerable property which gathers every available person by calling "thief" ("ta fast tjuven") after him. He is fished out of the ravine, soggy and inert, and the expectant gaze of his uniformed pursuers induces one agricultural laborer among many (whom we take as his father) to whip him with his belt, everyone watching solemnly.

If the text or the theatre have only one room to play with, the film can show the paviljon doubled in the manor house, and the chase after the boy anticipating the chase after Julie and Jean back to the kitchen and ultimately his room (each accompanied by heavy orchestral full-dress chase scene music).

What has Sjöberg discovered submerged in the text, which he has played out by exploiting the possibilities of film, and which we must now think about? **The chase, and the crowd it forms.** We should not be surprised that dramatists think steadily about crowds as well as “personal relationships”, not only the crowd assembled for a performance but mobilising public opinion around their work. Modern dramatists are all like Strindberg with his chemistry gear in rented rooms, they are like pyromaniacs, they play with fire. Bernick in Ibsen’s *Samfunnets Støtter* worries that a local scandal will organise the whole world to denounce him; at the end of the play he risks everything before the crowd. *Folkfiende* is a theoretical meditation on modern sacrificial forms, as I have suggested in my book *Violence and Modernism. Ibsen, Joyce, and Woolf*. John Millington Synge put a mob **onstage listed as a character** at *The Playboy of the Western World* which, as he clearly intended, spreads its infection to the seats and then the streets of Dublin outside in order to forecast the violent consequences of mobilising Ireland into a nation with the methods then on offer.

Sjöberg’s film *shows* Jean as a boy stealing apples as he tells Julie about it, but she replies sensibly that all boys do; you can’t gather a persecuting mob against apple-stealing, and only the whip-wielding uniformed woman chases the boys away, comically, ineffectively, in circles. But the second chase after Jean in the film is no comedy, it shows how a groundless accusation can mobilise the whole community against a little boy.

But it is not just a pick-up crowd that Sjöberg films chasing after Julie and Jean, as it transforms the estate of her own father into a vast hunting-ground for her as quarry--it is midsommar. The film opens with Julie neurotically watching the festive animal spirits of midsommar below. There are several depictions of the midsommar gathering in the film, by themselves hardly distinguishable from the usual filmic, touristic representations: upcast eyes seen from below, faces lined up in an ascending angle, chirpy accordion noises. But Kristin strikes the first note of the ominous result when you don’t quite fit in with the festivities: Strindberg has her reply to Jean’s wondering that Julie would choose the servants’ midsommar over her own family’s

version at a neighboring estate: “Hon är väl likesom generad efter den där kalabaliken med fästmannen” (21).

In fact Jean doesn't fit in either, and the revelers are after him as well as Julie.

If I step carefully here, I can suggest how Sjöberg's emphasis on the conversion of the midsommar festivities into a mob brings us to Strindberg's value as a researcher in human behavior, and the position he deserves in the group portrait of modern writing.

First, care is required in preserving the special status of midsommar in Sweden from the more general weakening of seasonal festival in Europe. “Shakespeare's festive comedies” (I am channeling to CL. Barber here) no longer resonate with contemporary patterns of British popular leisure (except perhaps in Regents Park in London). And “The Cambridge Ritualists” (who saw all fests as residual sacrificial rituals) passed out of favor because they could never adequately provide the theoretical accompaniment for the undeniable interest of **modern** writers in myth and ritual, ancient and modern, without recourse to some impossible scheme of tribal migration or collective unconscious. What is still needed is an anthropological theory that account for similarities and differences in ritual and myth, across cultures and across times. (Of course I wouldn't say this if I didn't have one at hand, about to be introduced).

Strindberg's interest in persecution mania as well as persecution, in possession but also scapegoating (to say no more, and there is a great deal to be said about Strindberg's tremendous, and tremendously nervous intellectual energy and interests) is enough to put him among the great modernists. And what are they all after, theorists and writers together, Ibsen, Strindberg, Freud, Weber, Joyce, Woolf, Eliot: consciously or unconsciously, to become the Darwin of the social sciences (as René Girard has been called by some, which I mention in order to further telegraph my direction).

Darwin represents tremendous intellectual force, care, but also the opportunities provided by the climate, techniques, and delivery systems of comparison characteristic of the nineteenth century. How could one NOT see there was significance in the similarities AND differences in periodic elements, skeletal structures, species, but also myths, languages, and religions obligingly deposited on everyone's study- desk.

But no general theory of the social sciences succeeded in occupying the place which Darwin still occupies in the biological sciences, to organise the partial misses into a coherent theory of human behavior.

This is a vast subject, and I would not forget that I am qualified only in letters, in what Northrop Frye called luminously the secular scripture. So I will work that side of the human sciences. Frye consolidated myth theory and literary theory; he proposed myth as the logical antecedent of literature, dropping the indefensible motivations of myth offered by The Cambridge Ritualists, but not replacing them, putting aside the search for a generative explanation just as many others of his generation did, including Claude Levi-Strauss. René Girard completes what Frye opened up.

Anyone who works in mimetic theory must devise two short introductions, emphasizing either the steps by which Girard arrived at it (literature, anthropology of religion, theology) or a simple generative model. I will do the second in a way that properly calls for shouting out a relevant Strindberg title for every move.

Like many (including the most influential recent neuroscientists) Girard insists that we are mimetic creatures, but he alone emphasizes mimetic violence. Other creatures are mimetic, no doubt hominids especially, but if our increased mimetic capacity carries us across the thresh-hold of hominisation by making learning and culture possible it also carries great danger. If we can copy positive behaviors, what happens when we copy desires for objects which cannot be shared? And what happens when we copy violence, answering violence with violence?

Girard re-theorises the similarities and differences in global rites collected in nineteenth (and twentieth) century fieldwork misread by Frazer, Freud and the Cambridge Ritualists. The near universal origin of each society in sacrificial religion lodges what Frazer called a scapegoat as a founding figure in myth. But once you recognise the motor of mimetic behavior, you can see that the scapegoat is the most economic result of breakaway violence, the melee that engulfs everyone. Violence is contagious; if two fight, how can a third (and then another) keep himself off of either side. The best score is all against one, all united against a common enemy who is sacred in the double sense of profane, the cause of all that is wrong, but holy, insofar as a miraculous peace (of everyone united) follows his demise.

This is the common origin of primitive religion which produces similarities across cultures (perhaps because all-against-one is the very best score for group survival), but also differences because the paradoxical sacer of the victim is interpreted differently in different cultures over time, leading to increasingly powerful kingship systems in one direction, where the holiness of the victim is emphasized, and his persecution attenuated and displaced and finally disappears, or in the other direction, emphasizing the profaneness of the victim, and strengthening the collective enforcement of prohibitions, even perhaps the judicial system.

To be done with it I will say quickly that all prohibitions no matter how bizarre are meant to control envious violence, that all social systems are for the sake of the peace they bring, and all are unstable. To WB. Yeats's unchristened heart we deconstruct them because our life is thought, and we can't help worrying our contradictions. For Girard, Christianity destabilises all persecutory systems by drawing attention to their victims. His "fundamental anthropology" shows the mimetic mechanism, in particular the scapegoat effect, can be generated whenever violence breaks away from cultural or proto-hominid restraints, but cannot achieve stability **now** because we know too much about victimization. The modern world shows at once the greatest attention to victims and the most horrible record of victimization. So we live in a kind of non-culture of deconstructing elaborate social systems by siding with their victims, co-present with emerging and abortive scapegoating that perhaps even made the emergence of both psychology and anthropology a necessity more than an intellectual breakthrough, and certainly explains Strindberg's wry attention at once to his own "persecution complex" but also his last novel *Syndaboken*.

Virginia Woolf does some fundamental thinking about mimetic behavior as it reflects on gender. Behind the exclamation in *A Room of One's Own* "who could deny that we live in a patriarchy" is Mary Beton's morning research notes in the British Library which show only a hostile drawing of Professor von X. Her drawing shows her that she is angry about male precedence, and she asks where the anger came from, a brilliant insight into mimetic (contagious) behavior. It came from Professor von X, but why is he angry, she wonders, unless he is protecting the double credit of being achieved by diminishing hers. Begin to imagine Strindberg's career-long "intimate" theatre as what Girard called Shakespeare's, a "theatre of envy," even of "payback," "revanchen" (Strindberg, *Förord* 12), that Julie's "komplett galen" is wanting what her servants and men seem to have, but

that Strindberg's anger is that women have taken something from men, and that *his* accusation against the half woman comes from the feeling of being half-man.

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