

The Progressive Savage à la Fin de Siècle

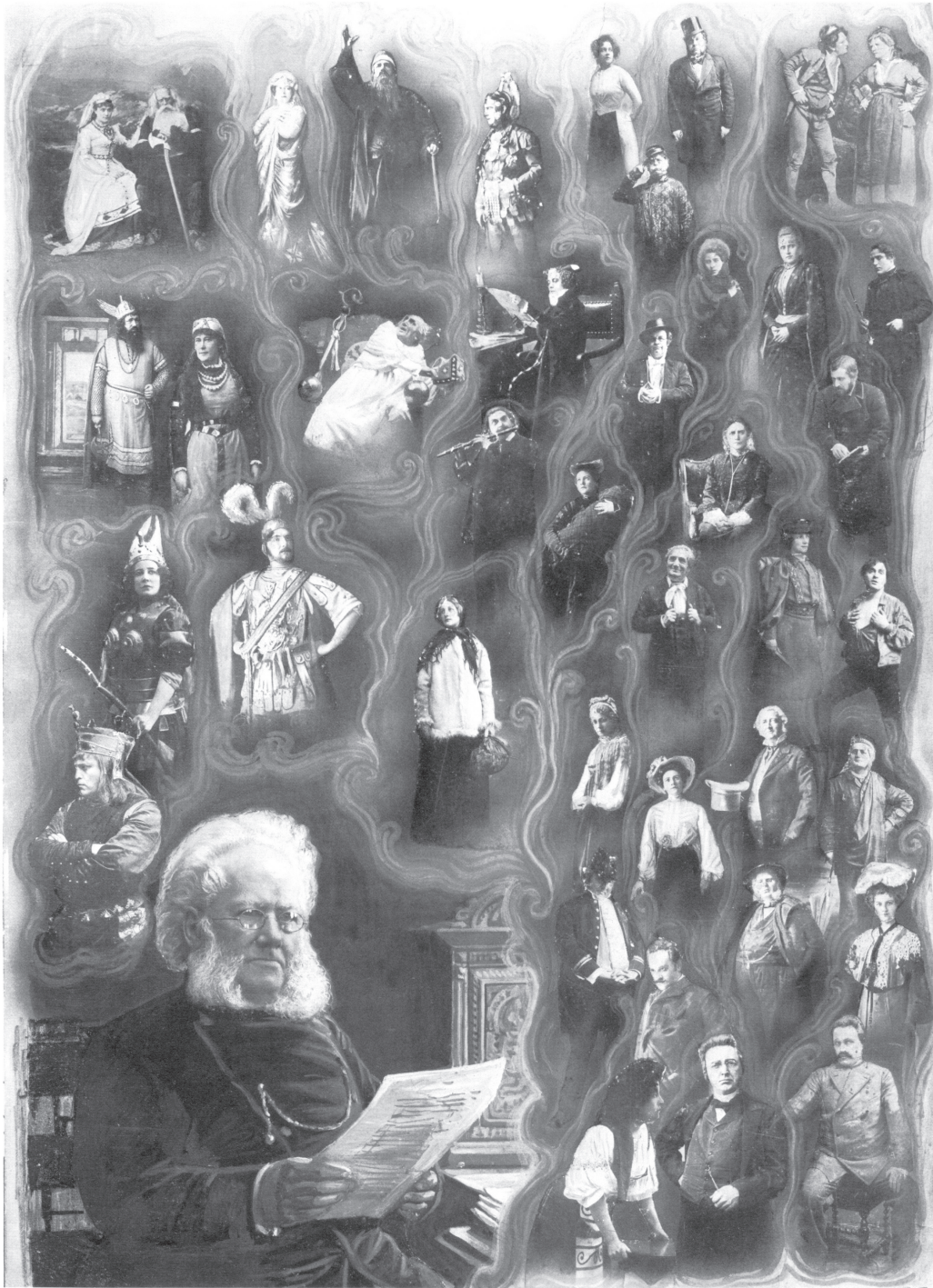
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In considering images of the North, I wish to develop a case that exemplifies the versatility of latent images of the Scandinavian North. I will look briefly at some Continental assessments of two of the most prominent Scandinavian intellectual figures around 1900, August Strindberg and Henrik Ibsen, and point to how they were viewed in terms of the traditional and stereotypical images of the North and its people. The Nordic condition of semi-otherness as seen from a Continental perspective produces tension between the self and the other, resulting in ambiguity – and an oscillation between the approbation and rejection of all things Nordic.

When new artistic influences reached Paris in the early 1890s, it was above all Russian novelists, German philosophers, and Scandinavian playwrights who drew the most attention. Henrik Ibsen was without doubt the single most important name on the Scandinavian horizon, but he also paved the way for others, amongst them Strindberg. Ibsen, and even more so Strindberg, were considered radicals in their respective home countries in their own lifetime, but as representatives of Scandinavian drama they were to be studied as archetypes of their own culture and region. In reviewing certain plays, critics would refer to the faculties of the Scandinavian race or to the influence of the Nordic climate on its inhabitants. Thus even a discussion of staging techniques and new drama around 1900 would include many of the topics detected in imagological studies of the North and the Nordic region.

Two factors stand out when examining how Ibsen and Strindberg were absorbed into a cultural construction of Scandinavia. Firstly, there was a consensus – mainly amongst the negative critics – about the cerebral nature of Scandinavian drama. This was seen in stark contrast to the Latin and Mediterranean theatrical culture where the audience attended in order to be amused. Secondly, the Scandinavian contribution to renewing the European literary canon was met with distrust: how could artists such as Strindberg and Ibsen have a true and deep understanding of European civilization, culture, and tradition? Many saw their radical works as products of unbalanced minds swayed by northern savagery, with little understanding of moderate and tactful sensibility.

By dwelling on the cerebral nature of Northern drama and a Northern



Montage with Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906), surrounded by his most famous dramatic characters.
Källa: www.ibsen.net

understanding of what could be labelled as elite culture as a whole, southern spectators saw a difference between the societies of North and South. According to the Spanish author and diplomat Angel Ganivet, who was stationed in Helsinki in the 1890s, Northern drama was filled with complicated intrigues involving events that were not seen on stage but had to be understood. This was possible for a Northern audience to grasp, 'since they go to the theatre in order to listen and learn', whereas in the South theatre was less pretentious and aimed to entertain. Ganivet stated that 'our theatre is scenic, not intellectual'. This popularized rhetoric conveyed the idea that the *pièce bien fait*, the prevailing genre of chamber plays which set out to give the audience a mimetic experience – they got what they saw – was actually an expression of what was often referred to as Southern or Latin clarity. A barrier was constructed between Latin and Mediterranean clarity on the one hand and a Northern German–Scandinavian, and sometimes even Slavic, 'mist' on the other. What in essence was a conservative critique of the new theatre of ideas came to produce significant material for later North–South imagological study.

August Strindberg's work was first staged in Paris in 1893, with *Mademoiselle Julie* at André Antoine's experimental Théâtre-Libre. It shared the evening with a piece by Edmond de Goncourt, who together with his brother Jules was a leading figure in Paris theatrical life and an ardent defender of the established order and national French supremacy. Goncourt wrote an introduction to *Mademoiselle Julie*, where he quite clearly marked his intention to keep a patronizing eye on this new fashion called Scandinavian drama. After recognizing a certain artistic value in Northern drama he stated, 'I do not find it possible to adapt its qualities to our latitudes. ... Yes, I am convinced that one has to leave, according to the words of Turgenev, the Slavic mist to Russian and Norwegian minds, and not try to force it on our lucid minds.' Besides the peculiar pairing of Russian and Norwegian authors (no mention of Strindberg's Sweden here) within a Northern label as late as the 1890s, Goncourt readily invoked the mental landscapes of Romantic nineteenth-century European cultural mapping, placing the modernist realism represented by Strindberg in the realms of the savage, uncontrolled, and 'genuine' artistic creations of the North.

The modernist theatre of ideas became equivalent to a gloomy, misty, symbolist, and Northern cultural expression stemming from the lands of late Christian mission and minimal Roman Latin heritage. Ibsen's plays were often staged in Paris in a symbolist manner that was perhaps not in keeping with the author's own intentions. In his love for Scandinavian drama, André Antoine's staging created a minimalism in which the audience was practically dismissed in an introvert style of declamation, with the actors sometimes

standing with their backs to the audience. This made Ibsen's plays an easy target for progressive connoisseurs to exercise their intellectual exclusiveness, and an unlimited source of caustic comments for unfriendly critics. When the first ever Ibsen play performed in Madrid – *Ghosts*, played in Italian as *Spettri*, but also known to the audience by its French title *Les revenants* – was



Harriet Bosse as Indra's daughter in Strindberg's *A Dream Play* 1907.
Source: Arvid Paulson (ed.), *Letters of Strindberg to Harriet Bosse*,
New York 1959.

reviewed in the local newspaper *La Epoca*, the reviewer claimed he found the play so boring that he hoped that these particular ghosts (*revenants*) would never return (*revenir*) to Madrid ever again.

Modernist-tainted radical art that put 'questions under debate', as George Brandes put it, was consequently pushed to the fringes of what could be considered European and thus civilised. This had obviously little to do with the phenomenon as such, since such drama was as much or as little a Northern invention as Protestantism had been four centuries earlier. However, it was an effective way of fighting radical modernism from the conservative bourgeois trenches in the so-called theatre battle that raged across Paris in the 1890s. The very act of forming a made-to-measure stereotypical image of Nordic artists embodied the idea of Latin supremacy in cultural matters. The Romantic image of the dreaming, melancholy Northerners was remoulded into a pejorative idea of uncontrolled and semi-savage cultural expression, reminiscent of the depictions in Renaissance chronicles and Tacitus' *Germania*. In

an obituary of Strindberg in 1912, the Spanish traveller–author Julián Juderías stated that Strindberg embodied the uncontrolled Nordic character ‘with the habit of violent contrasts, and unable to appropriate the notion of gradual transitions and subtle graduations’. Here we have the idea of pairing radical modernity and barbarian paganism so favoured in conservative rhetoric. The social questions so scrutinised could be dismissed by referring to the measure of atavistic craziness in all things Northern. The emancipated women in Ibsen’s plays – so widely known and referred to by his contemporaries – were pushed aside in Spain in particular (this was not so much of an issue in France) as unsuitable and incomprehensible in their moral conduct. Such Northern ideas were consequently nothing for a family-centred Latin and Catholic society, according to Angel Ganivet and his like. Ganivet saw that Nordic men had lost their influence in society in the wake of female emancipation.

To conclude, external hetero-stereotypes of the North were upheld and used according to available images in the European tradition of cultural construction. A discussion of modernity and radicalism was to a great extent made into an issue of a North–South divide, obviously much more than reality would suggest. The debate between old and new schools of theatre was not only a reflection of radical realism confronting bourgeois patterns of culture, but was also an arena for the mapping of North and South.

Den ”progressiva vilden” vid sekelskiftet 1900

I artikeln beskrivs hur det skandinaviska dramat, dvs. främst Henrik Ibsens men också August Strindbergs pjäser, togs emot av en latineuropeisk publik. I Frankrike, där en så kallad teaterstrid mellan den etablerade salongspjäsen och den nya ”idéernas teater” rasade under 1890-talet, sågs det skandinaviska dramat som ett uttryck för den senare. Debatten gällde, förutom helt dramaturgiska tvistefrågor, också mera samhällsförankrade politiska spörsmål kring radikalitet och modernitet. I artikeln skärskådas hur den skandinaviska teatern beskrivs ur ett imagologiskt perspektiv, där stereotyper om det nordliga får krydda en debatt som ursprungligen hade handlat om scenkonst. Den latinska klarheten sätts i kontrast mot de ”norska och ryska dimmorna”, och exempelvis Strindberg beskrivs som en halvciviliserad barbar som i sin häftighet representerade en perifer och brutal kulturuppfattning, där sinnet för den europeiska kulturen inte fanns genuint inrotad.

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