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Strindberg's Modern Ecological Subject: "Swedish Nature" Viewed From a Train

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Abstract: August Strindberg's short essay "Svensk natur" ("Swedish Nature," 1901) represents an attempt to redefine Swedish national identity in terms of the country's natural environment. Strindberg follows in the footsteps of his compatriot, Carl af Linné (Linnaeus) in traveling through the landscape with an eye toward describing flora, fauna, and geological features, but Strindberg makes the journey by train, inscribing himself as a modern ecological subject. Both Linnaeus and Strindberg are thwarted in their nationalist projects by the inherent impossibility of drawing political boundaries around natural phenomena.

Key terms: *Blomstermålningar och djurstycken*, Darwin, "Djurens och växternas förstånd," pangenesis, *Fadren* (*The Father*), *I havsbandet* (*By the Open Sea*), Carl Linnaeus, ecological subject, Deep Ecology, Lapland, *Svenska folket*, *Bland franska bönder*, "Svensk natur," *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space* (Wolfgang Schivelbusch),

Around the world throughout 2012, commemorations of August Strindberg's life work were organized, with the emphasis on his significance as a trailblazing modern dramatist. And he was indeed one of the most important figures in the development of Modernism for the stage, but it is unfortunate that beyond Sweden's borders, little is known of Strindberg's work outside the theater. Though his earlier plays (such as *Miss Julie* and *The Father*) are often described as "Naturalist" because of their relationship to Darwinian thought, it is important to note that Strindberg, while an ardent reader of Darwin, was much more of an *actual* naturalist than the literary term implies.

To give one example, while Strindberg was writing his Naturalist plays during the 1880s, he also authored a collection of essays on Swedish flowers and animals, *Blomstermålningar och djurstycken* (*Paintings of Flowers and Pieces on Animals*). To get a sense of the originality of his thinking about natural science, one need only scan the titles of the essays in this volume, one of which is called "Djurens och växternas förstånd" ("Intelligence in Plants and Animals"). Here Strindberg muses that plants may in fact possess a stronger intellect than animals (Strindberg 1985b: 197). Moving even further beyond the parameters of that essay, a question that absorbed Strindberg was how to define life, thought, and intelligence in not only organic, but also inorganic matter. He became deeply involved in chemical (and alchemical) experimentation during the 1890s, publishing in scientific journals in France, and he immersed himself as well in the study of botany, geology, meteorology, psychology, and, yes, evolutionary biology. Strindberg's study of nature informed his literary writing to a significant degree; his play *The Father* revolves around an early (mis)understanding of inherited traits, for instance, drawing on the Darwinian hypothesis of *pangenesis*, which proposes that inheritable traits enter into and remain in the bloodstreams of sexual partners in the form of tiny particles Darwin calls "gemmules." Strindberg's play expresses acute anxiety at the idea that a husband's offspring might carry inherited traits from his wife's early sexual partners (Taggart 1996). His novel *I havsbandet* (*By the Open Sea*) almost requires that the reader keep a scientific dictionary at hand in order to identify Strindberg's precise and detailed references to rock and ice formations, flowers, optical phenomena, and marine life; this narrative pits the forces of natural sciences and modernity against folk belief and superstition. Strindberg's writing thus reflects a thoroughgoing integration of scientific thinking with an innovative literary discourse, and it is in part the author's devotion to scientific exploration that leads him into realms of political discourse, guiding his notions surrounding gender, class, structures of power in society, technology/modernity, and psychology. In this essay I would like to consider one nexus in Strindberg's authorship, where his literary, political, and natural discourses are combined: his writing on nationalism and naturalism. Following in the footsteps of Carl Linnaeus and his journeys of scientific observation through Sweden, Strindberg introduces modern technologies and scientific knowledge in order to pursue a project similar to Linnaeus': a redefinition of the Swedish nation in terms of Swedish nature.

In describing Strindberg's approach to Swedish nature, I want to employ the term "ecological subject." By this I do not mean simply that he takes nature as a topic (subject), but that Strindberg develops a subject position, a notion of subjectivity, which involves a new perspective on the natural world. The ecological subject possesses a particular way of seeing, and a way of representing and giving voice to the non-human environment. Christopher Oscarson observes that in 1907, at the

centennial of Linnaeus' birth, the Swedish critic Oscar Levertin became aware that the voice within Linnaeus' travel essays is not a scientific, objective, dispassionate voice, but the expression of "an embodied and embedded subject" (Oscarson 2007: 405). Linnaeus, in his travels, has his boots on the ground and nose to the earth – it is only because he develops a system for cataloguing living beings that the students of his taxonomy imagine him at a remove, far above what he describes. This idea of the embodied and embedded speaker, moving through nature as a deeply impacted part of the natural world, points toward the dissolution of the boundary imagined between the human observer and observed "nature." It brings us to ecocritic Timothy Morton's question: "How do we transition from seeing what we call 'Nature' as an object 'over yonder'?" (Morton 2008: 73). Arne Naess, the Norwegian philosopher whose work helped launch the Deep Ecology movement, describes the ecological subject in philosophical terms, calling it the "ecological self," which experiences no "cleavage between the self and the surrounding of the self" (Rothenberg 1993: 141-2). As the following discussion will show, it is not precisely the case that Strindberg dissolves into the landscape he describes. In fact, the texts he produces on Swedish nature reveal the ways in which modernity works to drive a wedge between the "object 'over yonder'" and the observer. But Strindberg, fully entrenched in the technologies of the modern world, also works to try to overcome them. His insistence on the lack of distinction between organic and inorganic matter is one indication of his ecological self. And both Linnaeus and Strindberg are on a mission to create a national identity that is defined through Sweden's natural landscape.¹ In that sense they seem to argue for the dissolution of boundaries between the natural and human worlds, a deep identification between selfhood and the environment. At the same time, the insistence on nation as discrete entity within the natural world attempts to redraw the boundaries that an ecological subject position is supposed to erase. The problem for both explorers becomes most evident at Sweden's frontier, which lies in the far North.

Sweden extends along a vertical axis, with north and south defining its most important cardinal points. The phrase often used by Swedes to describe Sweden, "vårt avlånga land" ("our oblong land"), is not particularly lyrical, but it works on a pragmatic level. The country has its concentration of history at its southern end and in the cultural cradle around Lake Mälaren. North of Mälaren's environs begins the great frontier, the territory of Norrland, which occupies more than half of the nation's topographic area, but even today contains only 12% of its population. Trying to pull Norrland, and in particular, Lapland, to a secure place within the bounds of the Swedish national imaginary has been an ongoing project since, one could say, the twenty-five-year-old Linnaeus was dispatched by the state to do some reconnaissance on horseback in 1732. He was an inexperienced equestrian, with pitifully little knowledge of Lapland, its customs, language, or topography, but a huge capacity for observation and description of nature.

Linnaeus' journal account of his travels to Lapland describe an entertaining series of one fiasco after another, from lice-infested fish, to several near-brushes with death through mishaps in the hostile landscape, to severe gastric attacks brought on by reindeer cheese. This is the embodied and embedded Linnaeus described by Oscar Levertin, the Linnaeus who travels, observes and writes entirely from a subject position that has been pummeled and permeated by the climate, natural obstacles, food and water of the far north. His body is marked and made up by these things, as all human bodies are composed of their environments. His writing brings this fact to the reader's attention in an unambiguous way, but it also seems that at every turn, he would like to reject the imbrication of this wild natural world and his civilized self. By the end, when he stands on a mountainside extolling the beauties of Norway in the far distance, one does not have the sense that Lapland has been successfully sutured to the Swedish nation through the intervention of Linnaeus as scientific observer. On the contrary, though he dutifully collects rocks and sketches flowers and records meteorological phenomena, the overwhelming impression given of the north is precisely its unredeemable foreignness, its otherness.

Yet Linnaeus' journeys – to Lapland, to Öland and Gotland, and to parts of western and southern Sweden – do form the backdrop for a particular kind of national consciousness. Linnaeus' travels present a paradox in that they aim to invent an image of a unified and unique and free-standing Sweden through the observation of what are, after all, highly disparate cultural and natural phenomena, arbitrarily resident within political boundaries that shift significantly, even within

¹ For a discussion of Linnaeus' interest in national politics, see Koerner 1994.

Linnaeus' lifetime. For instance, his last journey, in 1749, is to Skåne, which had only become part of Sweden in 1720, in the wake of extended military conflict. We find two contrasting environmental optics in Linnaeus' travelogues: one a close-up, magnifying-glass observation of plants, animals, and minerals, and another nearly aerial, cartographic optic of systems and taxonomies, which he attempts to limit to a kind of national narrative, but which inexorably escape into a global perspective. It is a bit of a conundrum.

And then Strindberg, in his own way, 150 years later, follows in Linnaeus' footsteps. In 1881 he begins a two-volume project, *Svenska Folket* (*The Swedish People*). One chapter of the second volume is entitled "En resa i Sverige under frihetstiden" ("A Voyage in Sweden during the Age of Liberty"), and in this chapter there is very little original writing by Strindberg. Instead he simply creates a frame for the re-telling of Linnaeus' journey through Västergötland, Bohuslän, and Dalsland, paraphrasing and quoting from Linnaeus' journal. At various times Strindberg refers to Linnaeus as his "teacher," and to himself as one of Linnaeus' disciples, but it might be more accurate to say that Strindberg makes Linnaeus a prophet for Strindberg's own reading of Sweden. What seems most interesting about his citation of Linnaeus in *The Swedish People*, is one key modification he introduces into the journey. Noting that Linnaeus and his companions must travel on horseback, he writes that his journey, in order to "leave out inconsequential details" must "proceed at the pace of a speeding train," arriving at the relevant station (in this case, Enköping) ahead of Linnaeus' crawling horses (Strindberg 2002: 167)². The introduction of the iron horse into the Linnaean narrative modifies the optic of nationalism and natural science in intriguing ways.

Strindberg's approach to combining rail travel with a form of naturalist observation is, at first glance, rather perplexing. One can hardly make close-up, detailed observations of natural phenomena from the distance of a train window moving at high speed. Rather than wandering over field and meadow at will, one is limited to those areas surrounding train stations and rail lines, rushing past the rest of the country. This is the cultural shift noted by Wolfgang Schivelbusch in his *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space*: "[The] intensity of travel, which enjoyed its cultural apex in the 18th century and was memorialized in the genre of travel writing, is brought to a halt by the train" (Schivelbusch 1986: 9). Schivelbusch would claim (and it seems a logical claim) that speed and distance prohibit the imbrication of observer and nature demanded by the notion of the ecological subject. But Strindberg's introduction of train travel into the practice of observation of the environment allows him to try to take the entirety of a national landscape into his purview, rather than isolated features of land or flora or fauna within immediate reach. His is a project that tries to eliminate the limitation of the ecological subject's anchorage in the space within the body's sensory range. It is a project riven with paradox and destined to be more provocative than successful, but in fact Strindberg does shift from his metaphorical allusion to rail travel in *The Swedish People* to an actual practice of scientific investigation by rail in his 1886 project, *Bland franska bönder* (*Among French Farmers*). There the speed of modern rail travel allows him to (almost) make good on his project to investigate an entire nation's agricultural practices in a single summer, while the layout of the French railway system helped define the provincial demarcations that underlie Strindberg's claims about regional differences in farming practices, ethnographic distinctions, and so on. And as for the optic of the train window, he explains that it is certainly possible to make scientific observations from a train compartment, assuming that one already is well acquainted with what one is likely to see:

"It has become a truism to say that you can't see anything from a train window. And it is true that an uninterested eye only sees hedgerows and a line of telegraph poles. But after three years' training in the habit of seeing, I have been able to describe and draw landscapes, farmhouses, and tools from Germany, France, Italy, Switzerland, [...], Denmark and Sweden. I would not advise anyone to describe a foreign landscape *merely* from a train window, because the prerequisite for doing so is to

2 Oaktat de endast framforslas på hästrygg, måste färden, för att vi skola kunna utelämna oväsentligheter och följa vår berömd professor, gå med iltågsfart, och vi äro sålunda redan framme vid Enköping (Strindberg 2002: 167). All translations from Swedish in this essay are my own.

know everything in advance. The autopsy will simply be a verification of what one already knows" (Strindberg 1985a: 81).³

Strindberg's view from the train, therefore, should not be seen as a viewing, but a reviewing. Having apparently decided that rail travel offers an optimal vehicle for scientific observation, provided the observer already knows what he is looking at, Strindberg emulates Linneaus' journeys once again to produce an astonishing little essay, published in 1901, called simply "Svensk natur" ("Swedish Nature"). "Swedish Nature" employs the existing rail-lines of Sweden to create an overview of Swedish geology, coasts, plants, animals and fish, waterways and more, all in twenty-six book pages. Strindberg's approach is simple; he gets on a train at the southern end of Sweden, in Lund, and begins to follow the railway northwards, getting off at stations where he wants to mark shifts in landscape and vegetation for his readers.⁴ It happens that these shifts often occur at provincial boundaries; we see an example of this kind of transition when he enters Östergötland, a province Strindberg will describe as transitional, in terms of its vegetation, between southern and northern Sweden. At each station he disembarks (apparently, for he frequently notes when "we" are getting back on the train) and, looking around, begins to describe his immediate surroundings: a birch growing on the bank of a lake, for instance. But this immediate detail unfolds first into a description of the surrounding phenomena that would not necessarily be visible from the station (the dark lake grass and stones under the water, for instance), and then moves into much more expansive accounts of other plant life, the rocks and soil under the surface that bring forth specific plants, the wind and sea currents that produce particular effects, and so on. And then we get back on the train and move to the next important juncture. Occasionally Strindberg doesn't bother to get off the train, as we can see in some of his descriptions: "Heather, rock, juniper, short pines, wet meadows, harsh pasture land, scattered stones, scurfy briches; those are my snapshot notations while the train hurries down to Herrljunga" (Strindberg 1985c: 254).

What seems to be a train's eye view, in other words, evolves into a bird's eye view (to describe coastal formations) and a geologist's cut-away view (which then moves closer to evaluate individual minerals), as well as a botanist's view of trees and floral species. Strindberg's ecological subject has an all-encompassing eye, not unlike Ralph Waldo Emerson's "transparent eyeball" (Emerson 10).⁵ But while Emerson's eye transcends an individual subject's perspective to achieve a god-like universality of vision, Strindberg's optic engages the mechanistic model of the train's windows and train's stops, clicking through views like a camera's shutter. He then pieces together the individual glimpses to constitute a filmstrip, a running narrative that integrates numerous perspectives (and in those perspectives, numerous disciplines). The train voyage exists simply to allow the naturalist to move rapidly through the landscape in order to identify moments of transition that roughly conform to the traditional cultural boundaries of Swedish provinces, skipping over what Strindberg called "inconsequential details" in his account of Linneaus' earlier journeys. But in looking at the landscape through the train window, he also shows how any modern traveler (who has been informed by the essay "Swedish Nature") might come to understand what he sees as he rolls past. Here is Strindberg's image of a modern train traveler as observer: "A person who has traveled by train between Vänersborg and Gothenburg has probably noticed these unprepossessing embankments of gray stone that follow the river and the railway in two almost parallel chains" (Strindberg 1985c: 254). And "Swedish Nature" addresses precisely this train traveler, the modern Swede who may or may not be

3 Det har blivit en trossägen att man ingenting ser från kupéfönstret. Det är sant att ett ointresserat öga endast ser en häck och en rad telegrafstolpar. Men efter tre års övning och vana att se, har jag från kupéfönster »refererat» och tecknat landskap, flora, bonthus och redskap från Tyskland, Frankrike, Italien, Schweiz, Tyrolen, Danmark och Sverige. Jag vill därför icke tillråda någon att beskriva ett främmande land *endast* från kupéfönstret, ty villkoret för att kunna göra det, är helt enkelt att veta allt förut. Autopsien blir endast en verifiering av vad man känner.

4 Readers of Selma Lagerlöf's popular 1907 children's narrative, *Nils Holgerssons underbara resa genom Sverige* (translated as *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*) will recognize a similar strategy: a bad young boy is shrunk to the height of a tabletop as punishment for his wickedness, and he travels from the southern tip of Sweden up to Lapland on the back of a goose. This novel was commissioned originally as a geography textbook for Swedish children and remains one of Lagerlöf's most celebrated works.

5 "Standing on the bare ground, -- my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite spaces, -- all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God" (Emerson 1983: 10).

seeing some of this landscape for the first time, but is certainly seeing it in this particular way for the first time. But the text urges the traveler to come out of the train, to experience and understand the thing that seems to stand at a distance, but is actually a part of the traveler, an integral part of the observer.

Our odd trip rushes ever northward, putting on steam to race through the empty northern reaches of Sweden (for, as Strindberg reminds us on several occasions, "Sweden is big, and time is short"). And it seems clear that one of the objects of the voyage is to create an image of a unified and unique nation (Stor-Sverige/Greater Sweden), working not on the basis of national mythologies, but focusing instead on the natural environment as a bedrock for the nation. This becomes clearest perhaps when Strindberg approaches a part of Sweden that is most strongly identified with national cultural mythologies: Lake Silja in Dalarna. "In encountering Silja, first of all we must scrape clean the old image we bear in our memory of [the lake], erase tradition and history, forget [the legends of kings], look past the traditional costume, the church boats with fifteen pairs of oars, the eternal Maypoles and so on, and just see it as an interesting object for the topographer, the geologist and natural historian" (Strindberg 1985c: 263)⁶ Not quite clear where this quotation begins.

Briefly, this passage describes what Strindberg performs throughout the short essay: an erasure of the historical narrative of Sweden in favor of a inspection of the environment that shapes the way the Swedish people have lived. Likewise, he makes an argument that the national colors ought to be changed on the basis on Swedish nature: rather than blue and yellow, red and green would be more apt. "Red is the color of iron," he writes, "and green the color of the forest; iron and forest, that is the whole country in two words" (Strindberg 1985c: 270).⁷ But do his own observations bear him out?

The problems with his methodology are apparent from page one of "Swedish Nature," for the landscape refuses to be unified as a nation, something that becomes obvious as Strindberg traces the many botanical and geological discontinuities and transitions throughout the country. Not only does the idea of "nation" break down under his detailed descriptions of the lack of cohesion between landscapes, but the insertion of the train and the iron network laid over the country by the railway increases the sense of a landscape broken down into stations and fly-over zones. And then Sweden, as Strindberg describes it, also refuses to be uniquely Swedish. The essay opens:

"A northern Swede [by which he means someone from anywhere north of Skåne] who has only traveled by night train through Sweden's southernmost province in order to get to the European continent and then, after several years in Germany or France, undertakes a few outings in southern and western Skåne, in the beginning will notice with astonishment that he has not come home" (Strindberg 1985c: 245).⁸

This returning Swede, who in fact sounds suspiciously like August Strindberg in his particulars, can not recognize his own country because, as Strindberg goes on to say, it too closely resembles the coast of France. Other parts of Sweden resemble Germany and Switzerland and Scotland, we find as we go along, all on the basis of their natural features. Part of Skåne, the first province he visits and the one that seems most foreign to the returning northern Swede, is, as Strindberg is at pains to explain, geologically of a piece with Denmark, the nation to which it used to belong. And in Skåne, he also visits a cultivated garden with palm trees, magnolias, and bamboo, a veritable stronghold of exoticism that suggests the possibility of more non-Swedishness at the heart of Sweden. This garden, in fact, brings up strong associations with Linneaus for those who are familiar with Linneaus failed patriotic attempts to raise coffee and silkworms near Uppsala.

6 Men allra först äro vi nödsakade renskrapa den gamla bilden av Silan som vi bära i minnet, utplåna tradition, hävd och historia, glömma Engelbrekt, Gustav Vasa och Dalkarlarna, förbise daldräkten, [...] kyrkbåtarna med femton par åror, de stadigvarande majstängerna och så vidare, samt endast betrakta den som ett intressant objekt för topografen, geologen, och naturhistorikern.

7 Rött är järnets färg och grönt är skogens; järn och träd, det är ju hela landet i två ord.

8 En uppsvensk, som endast på nattåg genomrest Sveriges sydligaste provins för att komma ut till Europas fastland och sedan, efter flerårig vistelse i Tyskland och Frankrike, företager några strövtåg i det södra och västra Skåne, skall till en början med förvåning märka, att han icke kommit hem.

The Sweden Strindberg describes, ultimately, has something deeply in common with the Sweden Linnaeus described, in that it both purports to be a free-standing and cohesive territory within firmly delineated national boundaries and it refuses to be contained or described by political boundaries. It exists as part of an ecosphere, a global organization of climates, tides, mineral deposits, plant and animal species crossing borders at will, an endless flow of water that moves through the atmosphere and around the globe. The project of natural observation, which interests both writers deeply, finds itself at odds with the national projects to which both are also devoted. Strindberg attaches himself to the railway not only as a modern convenience that will allow him to map the entirety of the nation in less time than it took Linnaeus to ride through Lappland, but also as a way of mapping out a modern Sweden for modern Swedes, disencumbered of the baggage of historical mythology. But it is illuminating to note that the far reaches of northern Sweden escape both writers. Linnaeus is stymied by the absence of roads and maps, his own lack of knowledge regarding the language and customs, the difficult weather, the dearth of digestible food. Strindberg is able to make it as far as the train lines extend, up to Åre in Norrland, where he is able to see and describe a Swedish mountain landscape from the safe distance of the train station. But what remains beyond his sightlines at the Åre station must be saved for a later narrative. He remarks the presence of a great confluence of rivers and their importance to the nation, and concludes, inconclusively: "And so it is a decisive point of the country's topography we have within our sights, and if we take this point of departure for new observations as a natural conclusion point for this project, we know precisely where we should continue another time" (Strindberg 1985c: 271).⁹ And so Lapland remains just beyond our reach, just as the natural ecosphere of the nation called Sweden extends beyond its bounds. Strindberg is working on his novel *By the Open Sea* as he publishes "Swedish Nature," and a reader of both texts is struck by the huge flow of scientific knowledge expressed in them, the catalogue of Linnaean Latin binomials coupled to Swedish nomenclature, the extensive descriptions of geological formations and ocean currents. And in both texts, too, there is a modern subject, a person of deep learning in natural science, who finds himself at odds with historical legends and folk culture. And both protagonists, in the end, are swept away by the vastness of their object of study and their inability to describe its limits; perhaps this, indeed distinguishes the presence of the ecological subject.

⁹ Det är således en för landets topografi avgörande punkt vi fått inom synhåll, och om vi taga nya utgångs punkt för nya betraktelser som en naturlig avslutning för dessa, så veta vi precis var vi skola fortsätta en annan gång.

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