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Arnold Weinstein: Northern Arts

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INTRODUCTION

Genombrott [breaking through] is a familiar term in Scandinavian literary history, designating a generation of writers appearing in the last few decades of the nineteenth century, linked loosely together by a common assault against the bourgeois values and assumptions of their age. In 1883 Georg Brandes coined the term “the modern breakthrough” to convey the profound new vistas and initiatives that we associate today with the names Ibsen, Strindberg, Jacobsen and Bjørnson. Derived from the language of military warfare, the term has a recognizable historical and sociological significance, even if it has been used in later periods to define emerging new artistic movements. Like all labels, indeed like reform movements themselves, the originary virulence and contestation seem to have faded through the passing of time.

This book is an effort to reconceive *genombrott*—breakthrough—in such a way as to illuminate the violence and reach of the concept, to shed light on the extreme performances and extreme stakes of Scandinavian literature: its obsession with power, its entangled view of God and Patriarchy, its search for freedoms at once artistic and moral. If we can see *genombrott* as a radical structural and thematic concept, rather than a strictly sociological one, then the boldest features of Scandinavian literature and art from Kierkegaard to

our day come startlingly into focus. These issues are stark and bristling: how to bring the godhead to language; how to graph the flowing currents—neural, affective, cultural, electric—that animate and link subject and environment; how to annihilate the old forms of behavior and expression that wall us in, so as to make something new; how to resist the father’s law so that the children might be free.

Among the breakthroughs implied by this volume may be added yet another: the need to bring the often astonishing productions of Scandinavian art and literature to the attention of a larger literate public. Having studied, researched, and taught these Scandinavian materials for several decades now, I remain struck by the relative obscurity or exoticism that keeps them on the margins of both English-language and European literary discourse. Even the work of the most canonical figures—Ibsen, Strindberg, Munch, and Bergman—remains shockingly unrecognized and under-appreciated by the general public; all too often they are known for single isolated masterpieces—*A Doll House*, *Miss Julie*, *The Scream*, *The Seventh Seal*—or else dealt with only in specialist publications with a limited professional audience. Yet each figure of this quartet should be understood as absolutely seminal in the development of Western theater, painting, and film. Other figures such as Kierkegaard, Hamsun, and Lagerkvist are known in their distinct spheres but rarely get attention beyond that of scholars. And then there are others of absolutely first rank—the painters Ernst Josephson and Lena Cronqvist, the children’s writer Astrid Lindgren, the poet-novelist Tarjei Vesaas—whose remarkable work demands wider recognition.

This book is not a history of Scandinavian literature and art, nor is it a full-scale account of the specific figures it treats. Instead, I have elected some of the most startling Scandinavian performances in literature, painting, and film over the past two centuries, and have tried to show how much is startling about them. *Startling* is not a term customarily associated with this culture; “brooding” or “melancholy” might more

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quickly come to mind. But there is in this body of work an intellectual and artistic restlessness and daring that is so powerful, so varied in its forms yet insistent and even transgressive in its operation, that it constitutes a chapter in Western cultural history that we have yet to read. Each of the texts I study sets out to reconceive—often to explode—our most essential relationships: the religious, the social, the sexual, the marital, the familial, the personal, the representational. In every instance they break through forms and boundaries taken to be real or felt to be coercive. They record much ruin. They point beyond, elsewhere. They startle.

To substantiate my claims, let me offer a few words about Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, for it serves as something of a gateway into this book, as well as a model for much that follows. Kierkegaard's obsessive meditation about Abraham's covenant with God—a covenant that defines faith as a willingness to sacrifice/murder one's son—defies all standard codes, not just ethical but familial, tribal, and lingual. Here is a story one has thought one understood, but the Danish philosopher is at pains to show how fraudulent our "knowledge" is, how unspeakable these matters are, since they resist both logic and language. The most overt lesson I draw from Kierkegaard concerns the rupture between the human and the divine: God's entry into one's life is wreckage. Then there is the nature of His command: to sacrifice that which is most precious, as a sign of one's belief; in this requirement one sees an infanticidal injunction that not only runs in filigree throughout Ibsen's entire theater (a theater filled with dead or doomed children) but seems to constitute a paradigm of patriarchal power: the law of the father(s) versus the life/future/freedom of the child. In addition, quite intriguingly, Kierkegaard indicts our narrative habits as being unequipped to tell this story, that is, to tell it in such a way as to convey its violence and shattering power. We already know the outcome, he says, and therefore are blind-sighted to the actual ferocity and drama that went into this event on the "front side," that

constitute its ultimate significance. But the final significance of *Fear and Trembling* as regards both Scandinavian thinking and the book I have written is this: Kierkegaard reconceives “understanding” itself as not only subjective and affective but as grounded in terror and awe; in this sense, the very title of Kierkegaard’s text is what is most eloquent and profound about it: *fear and trembling* are the signs of recognition, understanding, and truth. We shall have occasion to see just how far-reaching and unhinging this cognitive model is in the coming chapters.

All the chapters seek to unpack and play further the central issues Kierkegaard raises. Roughly speaking, they can be divided into three related categories. We begin with a nineteenth-century and a modern text that explore the impact of the divine as it crashes into the human: *Fear and Trembling* is our radical introduction to the Scandinavian mind-set, for it interrogates disaster, from beginning to end, as we seek to get our heads around infanticide-as-God’s-will; Pär Lagerkvist’s tale, *The Sibyl*, is seen as the twentieth-century counterpart to Kierkegaard’s story of Abraham’s covenant, but now bristling with gender connotations, so that the theoretical term “phallogocentrism” comes to us literally as the god’s ravishing of a young woman. Both are extremist ventures, end-game performances of a sort, testing the limits of vision, ethics, and language in one’s dealings with the godhead. It does not seem exaggerated to say that both texts have a terrorist dimension to them, inasmuch as divine injunction may be at war with moral life, inasmuch as the commanding deity may lodge within us as well as in the beyond.

I then discuss two canonical texts that stage the dynamics of patriarchal power: Strindberg’s early masterpiece of 1887, *The Father*, and Ibsen’s late, haunting play of 1894, *Little Eyolf*. Each of these dramas displays, in revolutionary theatrical fashion, the dying antics of father figures coming undone: ideologically in Strindberg, psychologically in Ibsen. Neither Strindberg nor Ibsen set out to humble fathers, quite the con-

trary. But what they wrought is a different matter, because these two plays stage a crisis in authority and belief, and the confident male of the play's beginning—confident in his power, in his self-knowledge—is altered almost beyond recognition when the curtain descends. Each stages a wreckage. I read these two key plays as emblematic of their authors' entire theatrical output: Strindberg's Darwinian, naturalist drama already beckons to the surreal works ahead, and Ibsen's progressive display of a man's inner wiring offers his richest portrayal of the hold of the past as the force that turns life ludic.

I close this first segment of the book by focusing on two works that reconceive Power altogether, by meshing the physical and the psychic and the moral, by crucially reminding us (in our ideologically driven culture) that the political is only one way (out of many) for understanding or measuring the coercive, sometimes inhuman forces that bathe and govern human life. Strindberg's tortured autobiographical *Inferno* (1897) takes place of pride as an unclassifiable, experimental "occultist" text that links alchemy and psyche, that foregrounds thinking/feeling and electricity (yes, electricity) as the motor forces of both machines and bodies. But Scandinavians are not as bereft of humor as they are often made out to be, and I turn to Lars Gustafsson's modern spoof, *The Tennis Players* (1977), a delicious retelling of Strindberg's story, still outfitted with metaphysics yet turned to whimsy, now located in the American heartland: Texas. But the swollen self-portraiture of the earlier text has now become a meditation on different machines such as computers and nuclear weapons. I have not used the term "breakthrough," but it is obvious that each one of these works is about boundary smashing, and the mix of destruction and new vistas that may follow from it.

Boundary smashing can be a motivated activity, and when the young do it against their elders, it can have distinctly Oedipal characteristics. The next segment of the book deals with quests for freedom and liberation. "Going Through the Wall"

takes an actual moment—the atelier of a Finnish artist in Paris in 1883 when carousing artists played the scene of Hamlet’s ghost by literally *going through the wall*—and then goes on to unpack the ramifications of this echoing gesture in the work of four principal players: Ernst Josephson and August Strindberg who were there, Shakespeare’s Hamlet who is the model, and Ingmar Bergman who recast exactly this story in his culminating film of 1982, *Fanny and Alexander*. All these figures make their peculiar bid for independence, enabling us to see that the “walls” betoken the law of the Fathers, the conventions of one’s medium, and finally the confining surface of human flesh. It seems fair to say that this study of wall-smashing constitutes the purest version of my larger thesis about the exploratory energies and breakthroughs of Scandinavian literature and art.

Hamlet plays, Josephson goes mad, Strindberg celebrates virtuality, and Bergman’s Alexander succeeds in his version of freedom via parricide. But Scandinavian literature rarely highlights the empowerment of children. The chapter on “the child’s revenge” will rehearse the sacrificial plot seen in both Kierkegaard and Ibsen—a self-evident theme in the philosopher’s text but an unilluminated, puzzling, and provocative issue in the playwright’s works—in order then to sketch out what countermoves might be possible. I locate these countermoves in two quite different places: in the famous children’s stories by Sweden’s most beloved author, Astrid Lindgren, and in the paintings of the Swedish contemporary artist Lena Cronqvist. Whereas Lindgren’s Pippi Longstocking is known all over the world, I focus instead on her more probing stories dealing with damaged children seeking some kind of freedom or maneuvering room: Mio in *Mio My Son*, Rusky in *The Brothers Lionheart*, and Ronia in *Ronia the Robber’s Daughter*. As for Cronqvist (whose powerful work deserves far more recognition in this country), I begin with her depictions of parental dying in order to close with her strange and “emancipated” renditions of triumphant little girls, given to us as a bold war-

rior race that puts the old in their place, sometimes with a ferocity common only to children, in order to live and play.

Another chapter traces Oedipal longings in an altogether different way. Knut Hamsun's early ground-breaking novel of 1890, *Hunger*, prophetically stages a war against the laws of both God and flesh, seeking in writing, imagination, and performance, diverse ways to get clear of all constraints. This book, all too easily seen as either a rendition of the down-and-out artist or as an early stream-of-consciousness fiction, is better understood as a quasi-postmodern text, celebrating the powers of virtuality and imagination in their mad, hilarious joust with reality and necessity.

A fourth chapter about the insatiable will-to-freedom (and its disturbing consequences) focuses on two seminal works of the 1960s: Tarjei Vesaas's spellbinding novel, *The Ice Palace*, an account of love, fusion, death, and grieving as experienced between two eleven year old girls, and Bergman's most self-reflexive, Picasso-like opus, *Persona*, in which the boundaries that separate two women are transgressed in a fluid vampirish fantasia of merging and scripting. Whereas Bergman's film has achieved international canonical stature, Vesaas's book—at once lyrical and limpid, possessing the density and resonance of the Benjy section of *The Sound and the Fury*—may well be unknown to the English-reading public. In these two texts, the father/son anti-Oedipal dyad is no longer in play; but we now see the darker, death-dealing, and cannibalist dimensions of this absolute quest for freedom, and we are left to ponder what kind of hunger drives these figures past their own bounds.

A final chapter is devoted to the larger career and gestalt of two paramount Scandinavian artists, Edvard Munch and Ernst Josephson, for each of them "writes large" the dramas of subjecthood, power, and expression that have been at issue in this book. Munch is our premier painter of affective and psychic states, of moments when the subject is altered by forces that range from libido—"puberty," "jealousy," "anxi-

ety," "the scream" are among the names he gives to his paintings—to swirling water and convulsing sky. Munch, like Strindberg and Bergman, produces an art of siege, of takeover. Less well known is the radical way in which Time is figured in these paintings: the time of trauma as it moves from injury to art, the project of making visible the temporal dynamic of all somatic lives, the strange temporality of the works themselves, as Munch conceived them. As for the lesser known Josephson, his fateful trajectory from highly skilled portraitist to surreal visionary stands as the culminating emblem for "breakthrough" in Scandinavian art and literature. More than any of the other figures examined here, he illustrates—in his person, his sanity, and his legacy—the challenge, stakes, and consequences of going through the wall, of "genombrott." His late work, misleadingly termed "the sick period," replays the Kierkegaardian imperative of a covenant with the divine, so that the medley of forces governing life— affective, spiritual, aesthetic, historical, and ideological—moves into arresting visibility.

I elected to close my book by returning to its most vexed and virulent writer, Strindberg. The Strindberg who interests me here is neither playwright nor poet, but the painter who produced a series of works at the turn of the twentieth century that defy all classification. In them, the artist eschews all figurative and narrative logic, but instead lays the paint on the canvas in thick gobbets, producing landscapes and seascapes of rare beauty and power. These works were unfathomable (and un-sellable) when first seen, but today they speak to us with great immediacy. More modern than anything else in his oeuvre, these paintings may begin with a Turner-esque sense of nature, but ultimately they point to Jackson Pollack and action-painting, to an art that no longer requires any referentiality whatsoever. All the grand themes dealt with in this book—God, Patriarchy, Libido, Nature, Revolt—receive here their purest and most naked form: art itself as making/revealing power.

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This book has something of the unruliness and variety of culture itself: prose, theater, children's tales, painting, film. My texts are, albeit in differing ways, all extremist texts, all committed to storming the fortress of convention and received views, by reimagining the place and nature of the human subject, as well as its vexed relationship to the world that contains it. To be sure, this is a selective grouping of Scandinavian materials, and there are countless important works that I do not discuss. Nor is this traditional literary history with its movements and schools and trends; such studies have their place, and I have benefited from them in writing this book. But my aim here is different: my intention is to go for what seems to me most full-blooded and daring in this large, and largely unknown, culture. This book contains nothing exotic, nothing about trolls or the midnight sun; rather, my effort is to convey the reach and sheer power of this northern fare, by showing how pioneering and magisterial and, yes, startling these texts are. They are on a par with the most distinguished work produced in Europe and America over the past two centuries. The *genombrott* theme is our open sesame to these materials, for it makes visible their unity and boldness, as well as their powerful family resemblances.