Strindberg with Brandes in the Red Room:
Literature as Radical Politics

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Abstract
While Swedish author August Strindberg used his literary works to critique Swedish society but only occasionally commented explicitly on political systems, his close friend across the Sound, the Danish writer Edvard Brandes, opted to pursue radical political reform through active participation in national politics, both as a member of the Danish parliament and founding member of two of Denmark's most liberal political parties at the time, as well as through his journalistic work. Drawing on their extensive personal correspondence and Strindberg's first novel *Röda Rummet* (*The Red Room*; 1879), this article examines Strindberg and Brandes's respective views on how literature and radical politics relate to each other and to their shared historical context. What did the two men have in common? What motivated Strindberg to eschew political activism in favor of scathing literary works? Why did Brandes choose to subordinate his literary production to political office? Which approach to achieving political change was more effective?

Keywords
August Strindbergm, Edvard Brandes, *Röda Rummet*, Modern Breakthrough, Sweden, Denmark.

For a writer coming of age in Scandinavia in the 1870s, even a writer who would go on to remake Swedish literature as August Strindberg did, there was no more influential figure than the Danish literary critic Georg Brandes. The manifesto of a socially-engaged literature that Brandes had proclaimed in his treatise on *Hovedstrømninger i det 19de Aarhundredes Litteratur* (1872) resonated with young, idealistic writers, like Erik Skram, Victoria Benedictsson, and Strindberg, among many others, who saw the corruption and inefficiency of government and society as a problem to be tackled head-on through literature. Strindberg openly credited Brandes with having 'varit mig en väckare en gång' (been an awakener for me at one point) (Borup 1939: 7), but the clearest evidence for Strindberg's affiliation with Brandes's 'Modern Breakthrough' is Strindberg's debut novel, *Röda Rummet* (1879; *The Red Room*), which clearly and satirically articulates the author's highly critical views of late ninteenth-century Sweden's self-serving political establishment and elite society.

The novel's realistic style and contemporary setting established Strindberg as a literary innovator in the naturalism movement, while its critical tone brought him to the attention of Georg Brandes's younger brother and close collaborator Edvard, a prominent Danish journalist and politician who became one of Strindberg's staunchest allies and closest friends. Morten Borup, the editor of Strindberg and Brandes's lengthy correspondence, explains that Strindberg 'har aldrig haft en samtidigt så inflytelserik, begåvad och verksam vän som Edvard Brandes' (has never had a friend who was simultaneously as influential, gifted and effective as Edvard Brandes) (Borup 1939: xii). Brandes and Strindberg shared similar progressive ideals, but differed on how to achieve them. While Brandes played a leading role in the struggle to democratize Denmark's political culture, as one of the founding members of both the *Venstre* and *Radikale Venstre* parties and as a long-term member of the Danish parliament and goverment minister, Strindberg regarded literature as his preferred tool for promoting political change. In this article, I argue that Strindberg's satirical critique of Swedish government in *Röda Rummet*, when viewed in context of the ideals of the Modern Breakthrough in general and his friendship with Edvard Brandes in particular, demonstrates Strindberg's skillful

use of literature in the service of radical political reform.

In both Sweden and Denmark, the final decades of the nineteenth century were ideologically turbulent, fraught with competing political and aesthetic ideologies. While Strindberg was in his early twenties, writing his first plays, the Brandes brothers emerged at the forefront of the cultural revolution in Denmark, primarily as a result of Georg's provocative lectures on modern literature and his outspoken liberal views on social issues, but also because of Edvard's journalistic and political activism. Following their lead, the writers of the Modern Breakthrough showed that literary and political revolution went hand in hand, an approach that *Röda Rummet* exemplifies. The mantra of the movement was that by bringing problems to the attention of the public, literary texts have the power to motivate the people to demand change. This was facilitated by the systemic shifts toward a democratic political structure in Scandinavia that came about over the course of the nineteenth century. In 1848-49, Denmark had transitioned from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy, with a bicameral legislature, but it took more than half a century to implement *Grundloven*'s democratic reforms and civil rights in practice. In 1866, Sweden replaced its traditional unelected four-chamber parliament (*Ståndsriksdagen*), which shared power with the king, with a bicameral parliament (*Riksdagen*) elected by national, wealth-weighted voting (also known as census suffrage). Reformers heralded the dawn of a new day for the common man's involvement in the political system, but in actuality the new *Riksdag* differentiated itself initially very little from the old one in terms of social composition and continued to serve the interests of the wealthy at the expense of the masses. The regressive nature of this 'reform' initially brought about a reactionary turn in Swedish political life, but the trend toward parliamentarism began to accelerate in the 1880s, due in large part to economic development that increased the number of eligible voters, thereby increasing the possibility of meaningful, more egalitarian reforms. Against this backdrop, Strindberg's political commentary in *Röda Rummet* is significant for channeling public discontent with the status quo of Swedish politics in the 1870s.

In the novel, Strindberg takes an ironic look at several facets of

Swedish political life, beginning with the bloated Swedish bureaucracy. As a 'Konglig Sekreterare' and therefore a Swedish bureaucrat himself, Strindberg had first-hand knowledge of the workings (or rather failure to work) of the Swedish bureaucracy. The reader learns in the first few pages of the novel that the novel's idealistic protagonist Arvid Falk has been employed in a range of government departments, including the Board of Distilleries, the Department of Inland Revenue, and the Administration of Civil Servants' Pensions, but there is never any work to do, for Falk or anyone else, in any of them. Driven by his sincere earnestness to work and contribute in meaningful ways to society and the state, Falk cannot rest until he finds a situation where he can be of use. He explains to the journalist Struve:

> Men når jag såg dessa massor av tjänstamän, som krälade på varandra, rann den tanken på mig, att det verk, som skulle utbetala alla dessas löner, dock måtte ha något att göra. Jag skrev följaktligen in mig i *Kollegiet för utbetalandet av Ämtbetsmännens löner.* (Strindberg 1981: 11)
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> (But when I saw those masses of employees, crawling all over one another, the thought flashed upon me that the department in charge of paying all those salaries must surely have something to do. I therefore applied to the Board for the Payment of Civil Service Salaries.) (Strindberg 1967: 5).

Falk's first impression of 'dette fullständigt och väl organiserade ämbetsverk' (Strindberg 1981: 12) (this comprehensive and well-organized government department) (Strindberg 1967: 5), however, is memorably ridiculous, approaching Kafkaesque absurdity. Having arrived at eleven o'clock, the offical opening time of the office, Falk discovers two porters sprawled across a table reading *Fäderneslandet (Fatherland).* They offer minimal acknowledgment of Falk's arrival and refuse to show him around on the pretext of performing their duties. Although there are several porters on staff, these two cannot absent themselves because:

> Övervaktmästaren hade semeseter, förste vaktmästaren hade tjänstledighet, andre vaktmästaren hade permission, den tredje var på Posten, den fjärde var sjuk, den femte var efter dricksvatten, den sjätte var på gården, 'och där sitter han hela dan'; för övrigt 'brukade aldrig någon tjänsteman vara uppe förr än vid ettiden'. (Strindberg 1981: 12)
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> (The head porter was on holiday, the first messenger was on leave, the second was off-duty, the third had gone to the post, the fourth was ill, the fifth had gone to fetch some drinking water, the sixth was in the courtyard 'where he stays all day' and anyway 'no official ever arrives until nearly one o'clock'.) (Strindberg 1967: 6)

Rather than openly excoriating the inefficiency of a system that rewards indolence and self-indulgence, Strindberg infuses Falk's narrative of the encounter with dry sarcasm: 'Därvid fick jag en vink om det opassande i mitt tidiga, störanda besök och en erinran om att vakmästarne även voro tjänstemän' (Strindberg 1981: 12) (This gave me a reminder of the impropriety of my disturbing early visit and a reminder that the messengers too were civil servants) (Strindberg 1967: 6). Though many critics argue that Strindberg's depiction of the situation is a caricature and therefore less confrontational than an outright attack on the system, the message is nonetheless clear: the term civil servant is synonymous with laziness and corruption.

The physical space of the office itself is suffused with evidence of political excess, while the staff members exemplify self-interest and inefficiency. The department occupies an impressive suite of sixteen rooms, with sixteen birchwood fires blazing merrily in sixteen porcelain stoves, though no employees are yet present. The functionaries supported in such luxurious state include the extra-ordinaries, copyists, notaries, clerks, the auditor and his secretary, the state attorney, the registrar, the keeper of the archives and the librarian, the accountant, the cashier, the procurator, the protonotary, the protocol secretary, the actuary, the recorder, the assistant under-secretary, the under-secretary, the secretary, and the president, who

has not been seen in the office in years. The sheer absurdity of such a redundance of positions is further heightened when Falk discovers, as the fortunate inhabitants of the comfortable office finally arrive around noon, that the bureaucrats are in fact all the same people from the other pointless, unproductive offices where Falk has previously worked.

The wastefulness is not limited to the number of staff or their working conditions; it is shown to be endemic throughout Sweden's bureaucratic system. After an unpleasant interview with the actuary, who is also the registrar at the Inland Revenue Department and who spends the entire time breaking in a new pipe and reading the newspaper, Falk attends a meeting of the committee on supplies in the protonotary's office, which has been running for three weeks already. Three clerks are taking minutes and samples from manufacturers litter the table. Discussion is lively and peppered with patriotic speeches, but it is also fraught with conflicts of interest; for example, the protonotary owns shares in the Gråtorp scissor company, for which reason that brand of scissors is ordered. The scale on which these officials waste time and materials is staggering: 'Provskrivningen med stålpennirna hade fordrat en hel vecka, och protokollet över densamma hade slukat 2 ris papper' (Strindberg 1981: 15) (The writing test with the steel nibs had taken a whole week, and the minutes concerning this had swallowed up two reams of paper) (Strindberg 1967: 9), but the clincher is the staff's sublimely self-righteous hypocrisy. Falk is stunned to see everyone leaving in a great rush as the clock strikes two, only to be informed by a senior notary, 'En ämbetsmans första plikt, herre, är att vara punktlig, herre!' (Strindberg 1981: 16) (The first duty of a civil servant, Sir, is to be punctual) (Strindberg 1967: 10). Once again, Strindberg's contempt for the inefficiency and self-congratulatory dishonesty of the civil service is driven home by irony.

Even more disturbing to Falk than the bureaucrats' unethical behavior, however, is their callous contempt for the people and state they claim to serve. Falk earns disapproval by being industrious – 'man tyckte inte om flitigt folk. Sedan fick jag aldrig något arbete mer' (Strindberg 1981: 16) (they did not like industrious people. After this I never got any more work) (Strindberg 1967: 11) – and must endure an entire

year of bitter humiliations, during which he is mocked for his belief in the ideals of democracy and equality. Falk tells his acquaintance, the journalist Struve, whom he admires for his progressive opinions, that:

> Allt vad jag ansåg löjligt och smått behandlades med högtidligt allvar, och alt vad jag vördade som stort och berömvärt häcklades. Folk kallades för pack och ansågs endast vara till för garnisonen att ha att skjuta på vid förefallande behov. Man smädade öppet det nya statsskicket och kallade bönderna förrädare. (Strindberg 1981: 16-17)
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> (Everything that seemed to me ridiculous and trivial was treated with pompous gravity, and everything I revered as important and worthwhile was caviled at. The people were referred to as the mob and didn't count except as a garrison – there to be shot at if necessary. The new government was openly reviled and the peasants were called traitors.) (Strindberg 1967: 11)

Strindberg makes it clear that it is not just or even primarily the bureaucrats' self-interest and laziness that bothers Falk; instead, it is the 'Asymmetrie zwischen dem, was vorgestellt wird, und dem, was in Wahrheit passiert' (assymetry between what is represented and what in reality takes place) that disturbs Falk and which Strindberg takes as a point of depature for a 'Kultur- und Gesellschaftskritik, die nach Veränderung der Wirklichkeit strebt, indem sie die Repräsentationsformen des Politischen zu zerschlagen versucht' (a cultural and social critique that strives to change reality by attempting to destroy the representative forms of the political) (Köpnick 1992: 86). By exposing the falseness, indolence, and self-importance that pervades the civil service, Strindberg puts the responsibility for demanding reform in the hands of his readers.

Falk learns first-hand that direct confrontation is counterproductive, however, as a means of addressing a systemic problem. After a few months of humiliation and discontent, Falk cannot endure the hypocrisy of his colleagues any longer and bursts out with an impassioned defense of the much-maligned 'oppositionshundarne'

(dogs of the opposition). As a result, his colleagues ostracize him and he decides, idealistically but naively, to give up his stable, potentially lucrative position as a civil servant in order to write literature. When he confesses this decision to Struve, who has been a leading voice for progressive politics as a contributor to the left-wing paper *Red Cap* but who, as the reader soon learns, has lost his position and shifted his allegiance to the conservatives and the *Grey Bonnet*, the latter protests that civil service is 'en bana som ger både ära och makt' (Strindberg 1981: 11) (a career that gives you both honour and power) (Strindberg 1967: 5), to which Falk replies bitterly, 'Ära åt dem som hava tillvällat sig makten, och makten åt de hänsynslösa' (Strindberg 1981: 11) (honor to those who have seized the power and power to the unscrupulous) (Strindberg 1967: 5). The irony, of course, is that Struve profits from Falk's situation by writing up his comments and publishing the account, 'på 4 spalter à 5 kronor spalten' (Strindberg 1981: 18) (in four columns at 5 crowns per column) (Strindberg 1967: 12). On the whole, the newspaper industry comes across in the novel as biased and unreliable, driven by self-interest and greed, no better than the bureaucrats and politicians.

Strindberg's second target of political satire is the heart of Swedish government, the *Riksdag*. The king and royal family are entirely absent from the novel, reflecting the redistribution of political power to the parliament as a result of the constitutional reforms of 1809 and 1866. Falk is disillusioned with the corruption of government bureaucracy, but still nourishes idealistic hopes in the parliamentary system and the integrity of politicians. He regards himself as living in a new age, 'Anno III, med romerska siffor, ty det är nu tredje året som den nya representation sammanträder och vi skola snart se våra förhoppningar förverkligade' (Strindberg 1981: 10) (the year III, in Roman figures, for it is the third year of the new parliament, and we should soon see our hopes realized) (Strindberg 1967: 4). When he is assigned by the *Red Cap* to assist in reporting on the Second Chamber's meetings, he feels a sense of solemn awe at being in the place 'där "det fria ordets män skulle åhöra hur landets heligaste intressen diskuterades av dess värdigaste medlemmar"' (Strindberg 1981: 87) (where 'the men of free speech hear the country's most sacred interests discussed by its

worthiest members') (Strindberg 1967: 78). Despite Falk's expectations that the members of Parliament might at least be punctual, since they are well-paid, he faces a repeat of his experiences as a bureaucrat. Aside from himself, the chamber is empty until well past the hour, and when the assorted politicians and clerks finally arrive, Falk discovers that the clerks are none other than the same bureaucrats he had known at the Board for the Payment of Civil Service Salaries, up to the actuary himself. The business dealt with is trivial, from Jon Jonson's application for leave to go home and plant potatoes to a royal proposal to create five new clerkships in the Board for the Payment of Civil Service Salaries and sixty new cavalry commissions. Falk is shocked to discover that no members of the opposition party are even present, but, as he learns from the *Red Cap* reporter, 'Här kommer man och går, som man behager' (Strindberg 1981: 90) (Here people just come and go as they please) (Strindberg 1967: 81), to which Falk replies, 'Det är ju precis som ett ämbetsverk! (Strindberg 1981: 90) (Just like the Civil Service) (Strindberg 1967: 81). Falk's idealistic view of government integrity is sorely shaken by the realization that the parliament is no better than the corrupt bureaucracy.

The politicians' self-interested indifference to the suffering of common people is confirmed when Sven Svensson takes the floor to argue for an improved Poor Law. This is the cue for all of the clerks, the reporters, and the President of the Chamber to take their lunch break, leaving Sven Svensson speaking to an empty room, aside from those of his colleagues who regard him 'som ett underligt djur' (Strindberg 1981: 93) (as if he were a wild beast) (Strindberg 1967: 84). The *Red Cap* reporter explains that Svensson is not useful to any party or for any deal-making, so no one pays him any attention. No one even knows what he says, because 'han har aldrig blivit refererad i någon tidning och ingen har brytt sig om att se efter i protokollen' (Strindberg 1981: 93) (he has never been reported in any newspaper and nobody has taken the trouble to look at the records) (Strindberg 1967: 84). Being an idealist with a weakness for the underdog, Falk stays to listen and discovers a rarity: 'en ärans man, som sin väg ostraffligen vandrar och som frambär de förtrycktes och misshandlades klagan – som ingen hör på' (Strindberg 1981: 93) (a man of honour whose life

was irreproachable voicing the complaints of the oppressed and the downtrodden – while nobody listened) (Strindberg 1967: 84). Despite Svensson's integrity and selflessness his efforts have no effect on policy or practice: 'Ingen har något att invända, talet leder icke till någon åtgärd, det är som om det aldrig skulle ha varit' (Strindberg 1981: 93) (No one opposed the speech; it had led to no action; it was as if it had never been made) (Strindberg 1967: 84). By contrast, when Anders Andersson makes the ethically untenable proposal that the King be made liable for all joint-stock companies whose statutes he had sanctioned, there is an impassioned debate in the chamber both for and against the proposal.

Though there is not space to discuss it in detail here, it is important to note that Strindberg's political critique in *Röda Rummet* is not confined to the formal apparatus of government, such as the Swedish parliament and the massive, unproductive bureaucracy, but also encompasses elite society's habits of extortion, self-aggrandizement, and deception, which facilitated and legitimized the corrupt political system. Much as in Denmark in the same period, nineteenth-century Swedish society and politics were in a state of upheaveal and transition to the social democratic model that would ultimately prevail in the 1930s and 1940s, but in the final decades of the nineteenth century, reactionary political views experienced a resurgence and the progress of democratic ideals had temporarily stagnated. Rapid industrialization in Sweden in the mid-nineteenth century had brought concomitant economic gains, particularly in the 1870s, to a small class of Swedish businessmen and industrialists, among them Alfred Nobel, which formed an influential 'Geldaristokratie' (aristocracy of money) as Lutz Köpnick terms it, 'die dem politischen und gesellschaftlichen Leben Schwedens deutliche Stempel aufprägte' (which left clear marks on Sweden's political and social life) (Köpnick 1992: 89). In *Röda Rummet,* this *nouveau riche* class is represented by the characters of the storekeeper-turned-corporate executive-turned banker Carl Nicolaus Falk; his demanding, pretentious, pseudo-feminist wife, who involves herself in charitable works of dubious effect solely for the sake of her own reputation; and the self-important subscribers of the marine insurance company Triton, who are motivated at least as much

by vanity and greed as by charitable love for 'nödställda likar som drabbats av olyckan' (Strindberg 1981: 125) (suffering folk who had met with disaster) (Strindberg 1967: 115).

Across the Øresund, *Röda Rummet* made such a strong impression on Edvard Brandes that he wrote to Strindberg directly to express his enthusiasm for it, recognizing in him a fellow radical and compatriot in the fight against outdated morals and reactionary politics. In his first letter, Edvard Brandes praised Strindberg's debut novel for its acute realism: 'Der er talrige Steder deri, der ere skildrede med en saa mægtig og illuderende Virkelighedssans, at man føler dem som Selvoplevelse' (There are many scenes in it which are described with such a powerful and allusive sense of reality that one feels that one has personally experienced them) (Borup 1939: 4). The aesthetic qualities of *Röda Rummet* as a pioneering realist novel are indisputable, but Strindberg's affiliation with the Brandes brothers and the reformist agenda of the Modern Breakthrough reminds us that it is also a politically significant text. Strindberg responded to Brandes's letter with confirmation that many of the scenes in the book, particularly the satirical ones, 'äro byggda på full verklighet--till en del. Alla siffror i Andra Kammaren äro tagna ur Riksdagens Protokoll! Bolaget Triton's berättelse är aftryckt delvis ur det störtade Neptuns tryckta berättelser o.s.v. Derföre skreko ljusets fiender "att det var lögn!" ty se, det var sanning!' (are based on absolute reality – to an extent. All of the figures from the Second Chamber are drawn from Parliament's protocoll! The Triton Company's report is taken in part from the great Neptune's published reports, etc. That is why the enemies of light scream "it's a lie!" For you see, it was the truth!) (Borup 1939: 6). Brandes notes that he particularly admires *Röda Rummet* for its 'glødende Sandhedskærlighed' (burning love of truth) and for its ability to give 'Læseren Lyst til at være med i Kampen mod Hykleri og Reaktion' (the reader the desire to take part in the struggle against hypocrisy and conservatism) (Borup 1939: 3). He admits in particular to admiring Strindberg's courage in speaking out so boldly: 'Som dansk har jeg maattet undres over den Frihed, hvormed De har rettet Deres Angreb; en saadan Fordomsfrihed og Uafhængighed overfor Politik, Religion og Samfundsmoral vilde næppe her i Kjøbenhavn være lønnet med den Anerkendelse, som

Deres Bog heldigvis har fundet' (As a Dane I was astonished at the freedom with which you directed your attack; such a lack of prejudice and independence with regard to politics, religion, and social morals would hardly be rewarded here with the recognition that your book has fortunately received) (Borup 1939: 3).

For his part, though he disputed the perception that Sweden was more accepting of liberal ideals than Denmark, Strindberg eagerly welcomed Brandes's support, writing 'Eder vänskapsfulla skrifvelse har varit mig till stor uppbyggelse og glädje, både derför att Ni är en framstående man och en framstegsman och derför att jag står ganska ensam, så godt som allena i den strid jag berömmer mig af att ha tagit upp' (your friendly letter has been a source of great inspiration and delight for me, both because you are a prominent man and a man of progress and because I stand completely solitary, as good as alone in the struggle I commend myself for having taken up) (Borup 1939: 4). In Strindberg, Brandes saw 'den Mand, som skal vække Sveriges Literatur, som skal være Fører for den nye Tid' (the man who shall awaken Sweden's literature, who shall be a leader in the new age) (Borup 1939: 8). In Brandes, Strindberg found validation for his progressive social and political views and confirmation that he was part of a larger, international movement to bring about radical social and systemic change.

The friendship between Strindberg and Edvard Brandes was thus more than just a personal relationship, it was also an ideological alliance, 'en gemenskab i strävan' (a shared striving), as Borup describes it. This cooperation positioned itself in implicit opposition to the idealized, ceremonial, and ultimately failed movement toward pan-Scandinavian unity in the early- to mid-nineenth century epitomized by Esias Tegnèr's crowning of Adam Oehlenschläger as the king of Scandinavian poetry in Lund cathedral in 1829. Instead, this new, modern, pragmatic cooperation represented

> en ny form av skandinavism: en skandinavism, som inte hade något at skaffa med stämningsväckande anföranden på festlige möten men var inriktad på vardagens kamp för gemensamma idéer; och vars mål inte var stärkandet av någon nordisk

> nationalitetstanke men segern för ett tänkesätt och för en stridande litteratur (Borup 1939: 11).
>
> (A new form of Scandinavianism: a Scandinavianism that had nothing to do with sentimental speeches at festive meetings but was aimed at the daily struggle for common ideas; and the goal of which was not the reinforcement of a conception of a Nordic nationism, but rather the victory of a way of thinking and for a militant literature).

While this alliance was in part simply a matter of a shared ideal of bringing about a more just, democratic society in their respective countries, there was also an element of conscious organization involved. In his initial letter to Strindberg, dated July 21, 1880, Brandes mentions a nascent collaboration between Danish and Norwegian literary modernists, including his brother Georg, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, and Alexander Kielland. He notes that he hopes Strindberg would join 'vort Program' (our program), as 'vi vilde meget ønske Dem som Forbundsfælle' (we would very much want you as an ally) (Borup 4). In his return letter, Strindberg responded to this invitation with an enthusiastically positive affirmation of his interest in such a 'Samvirken' (cooperation) (Borup 1939: 7). Brandes was very involved in attempts to bring about the publication of *Röda Rummet* in Danish and Norwegian, in hopes of establishing 'en kraftigere Forbindelse mellem dansk og svensk Ungdom, mellem Landenes Politik og Literatur' (a stronger connection between Danish and Swedish youth, between the countries' politics and literatures) (Borup 1939: 14). In this spirit, he invited Strindberg to contribute to the left-leaning Danish journal *Morgenbladet,* which he did beginning in 1882.

It is a common trope among scholars that Strindberg was not a political writer, but that view disregards both the satirical political commentary that pervades *Röda Rummet,* considered above, and Strindberg's self-characterization, in his first letter to Edvard Brandes in July 1880, as 'socialist, nihilist, republikan allt som kan vara konträrt mot de reaktionära!' (socialist, nihilist, republican, in short anything contrary to the reactionaries!) (Borup 1939: 6). Given that Strindberg

both produced political texts and characterized himself as a political activist, it makes little sense to deny that Strindberg's work can contain a political dimension. However, the novel's depiction of the impotence of well-meaning, honorable men to accomplish meaningful change through parliamentary action, while selfish men exploit the system for their own gain, illuminates the fundamental difference between Brandes's and Strindberg's views about the value of direct involvement in politics.

Shortly after they began corresponding, Brandes was elected to the Danish parliament, which proved to be the first step in a long career in elected office in Denmark. His description of the Danish parliament, in a letter to Strindberg on August 14, 1880, closely resembles the conditions in the *Riksdag* as described in the novel: 'Der er ikke en Idee mere i Rigsdagen, intet socialt Formaal fremmes, medens man øser Penge ud til Hær og Flaade og samtidigt driver den imbecileste Udenrigspolitik' (There are no more ideas in Parliament, no social goals are promoted; money is lavished on the army and navy, while pursuing the most idiotic foreign policy) (Borup 1939: 9). Brandes's letters are, in general, full of commentary on the political affairs of 'dette fromme og fede Land' (this pious and pudgy country) (Borup 1939: 19), but in a letter from December 20, 1881, Strindberg warns him not to forget that politics are subordinate to literature in the quest to effect change:

> Den fråga som kan afgöres med en votering är icke någon stor fråga och eger intet af evighet i sig: derför bör icke begåfvede män slita sönder sig på små tillfälliga frågor. Litteraturen är deras fält, ty der få de tala till punkt utan att bli afbrutna och slippa lösa sina idéer i gräl! Der är din plats! Utom det att den är behagligare! Gå på och skrif, Du! – Det är bättre! (Borup 1939: 22)
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> (Any question that can be decided by a vote is not an important question and has no eternal dimension: that is why talented men should not wear themselves out on small, inconsequential matters. Literature is your field, for there you can make your point without being interrupted and losing sight of your ideas

> in the melée! That is your place! It is also more comfortable! Go and write, my friend! – It is better!)

While Brandes was convinced that his participation in Parliament had the potential to be of value, if only by allowing him to understand better what was going on in his country, Strindberg argued that he could make more of a difference through literature. After reading one of Brandes's plays, Strindberg writes, 'Du skall bli teaterförfattere, ty teatern är ett helvetes vapen, men radikal skall du vara!' (You shall write for the theater, since the theater is a devilish weapon, but you must be radical!) (Borup 1939: 27). If ensuring Brandes's literary legacy were his aim, Strindberg may have been right. Well after Brandes entered Parliament, he continued to write for the stage, but his political activities proved more compelling and more enduring, as evidenced by the fact that he is remembered in Denmark today for his contributions to Danish politics and not for his plays.

Unlike Edvard Brandes, Strindberg's interest was not in holding political office, but rather in challenging preconceived notions and received truth in order to change society, however radical the means required. In this respect, he resembled Edvard's brother Georg, who was similarly disinterested in participating in the processes of government, but deeply committed to exposing problems through his writing and thereby stirring up public opinion in favor of reform. For his part, Strindberg explained his revolutionary attitude in a letter to Edvard Brandes, 'Jag skulle vilja ... vända upp och ner på allt för att få se hvad som ligger i botten; jag tror att vi äro så intrasslade, så förfärligt mycket regerade att det inte kan utredas utan måste brännas upp, sprängas, och så börja ett nytt!' (I would like to turn everything upside down to see what lies beneath it; I believe that we are so entangled, so terribly regimented that it cannot be done without burning everything up, exploding it, and starting anew) (Borup 1939: 6). In her analysis of the fluctuation of Strindberg's political views, Elena Balzamo explains that although Strindberg was 'alltför impulsive för at tänka eller verka politiskt …, ändа var hans intresse för politiken – stundtals, särskilt under 80-talet – både brinnande och äkta' (much too impulsive to think or act politically …, yet his interest in politics – in certain periods,

particularly during the 1880s – was both fervent and sincere, 13). Rather than endorsing a political party or platform in order to bring about political change, Strindberg tried to accomplish his political-reformist aims through his literary work instead. As Balzamo documents, one his most frequently expressed political opinions in a range of texts from the 1880s, deal with the oppression of the lower classes by the upper (Balzamo 2010: 15). Strindberg's capacity for empathetic identification with the suffering of his fellow men, particularly the plight of the poor being crushed under the heels of the upper classes, drove him to fight their battles with his pen.

Strindberg's passionate resistance to the conservative status quo, along with the public furor his work so often provoked, came at an emotional cost that ultimately put an end to his political activism. Already in 1880 he confessed his doubts about his own usefulness to any political cause, writing to Edvard Brandes:

> Hvad gagn åter ett parti skulle kunna hafva af mig det törs jag icke förutsäga: Jag tror det blefve ringa, ty jag håller ännu på att plocka ihop bitarne af min spräckte kruka, är mig icke fullt klar, förefaller mig vara endast ett conglomerat af kasserade öfvertygelser, har slagits att jag blifvit trött, är tyvärr så mycket 'Talent' att det etiske aldrig vill rent fram, eller så skeptisk vorden, efter att ha sett de mesta som jag svärmat för vara i grunden flärd, att jag knappt har mer än mitt stora sköna hat qvar til allt förtryck och all förgyld uselhet! (Borup 1939: 5)
>
> (I dare not predict what gain any other party would have of me: I think it would be little, since I am still occupied with picking up the fragments of my cracked pot, am not really clear about who I am, seem to myself to be nothing more than a conglomeration of discarded convictions, have become tired, am unfortunately so much of a 'talent' that the ethical can never completely emerge, or have become so sceptical after having seen that most of what I have been excited about is essentially vanity that I have little more than my lovely large hat remaining for all oppression and gilded misery!).

Strindberg's intense intellectual and literary engagement with politics in the 1870s and 1880s, in which *Röda Rummet* plays such a central role, was followed by such emotional fatigue and cynicism that Strindberg became disillusioned with politics and avoided writing about them, which explains the widespread view of him as apolitical.

Yet even though Strindberg professed to believe, as he tried to persuade Brandes, that literature could serve as an effective way to influence political discourse, his novel sends a more ambiguous message. *Röda Rummet* is full of characters, including Falk, who fail to find fulfillment or make a difference in the world through literature or art. The choice between politics and literature that Strindberg suggests Brandes make echoes Falk's ultimately disastrous and disillusioning decision to pursue literature as an antidote to his political frustrations. Instead of finding spiritual liberation and power to change the world, Falk discovers the oppression of poverty, the humiliation of selling out to earn enough for a meal, and the ignominy of utter failure, in love and in life. He does manage to get one volume of poems published, to popular acclaim, but it is more by accident than intent. He surrounds himself with bohemian artists, the denizens of the eponymous Red Room, who philosophize about art but are ultimately driven to compromise their ideals in order to survive. Falk suffers for his initial political and artistic idealism; he sees his dreams crushed, the people he admires exposed as greedy, vulgar, dishonest, and immoral, and his friends destroyed by poverty and despair. With the undertaker Borg's brutal assistance, Falk 'recovers' from his idealism, returns to polite society after his squalid bohemian adventure, and picks up where he left off, with a comfortable position at a girls' school teaching Swedish language and history, along with various bureaucratic sinecures in the Board of the Purveyance of Hay for the Cavalry Regiments, the Department of Death Duties, and the Committee on Brandy Distilleries. Parliament's reorganization of the bureacracy involved doubling the number of posts and doubling all salaries, putting Falk in a financial position to marry. He is free of fixed opinions, making himself agreeable to colleagues and dining companions alike. He has not entirely forsaken his artist friends; he makes his way to the Red Room on occasion to see them, but he does not discuss politics at all.

Though Falk's fate would seem to problematize any reading of *Röda Rummet* as supportive of political activism, there is more to Falk, and the novel's political agenda, than meets the eye. As Falk's friend Borg writes to the painter Sellén at the end of the novel, Falk's passion for political action still simmers beneath the placid surface of his utterly conventional life:

> *Aldrig läser han en tidning, aldrig vet han vad som händer i världen; och at blive författere synes han helt och hållet ha slagit ur hågen. Han lever blott for sin tjänst och sin fästmö, som han avgudar; men jag tror icke på allt det där. Falk är en politisk fanatiker, som vet att han skulle brinna opp, om han gav luft åt lågan, och derför släcker han den med stränga, torra studier; men jag tror icke det lyckas honom, ty hur han lägger band på sig så fryktar jag en gång en explosion.* (Strindberg 1981: 289)
>
> (*He never reads a newspaper, never knows what is going on in the world and seems to have entirely given up any idea of becoming a writer. He lives only for his job and his fiancée, whom he worships. But I don't believe all this. Falk is a political fanatic, who knows he'd burn up if he fanned the flames, and so he smothers them with hard, dry work – but I don't think he'll be successful in this. Because of his restraint I fear an explosion some time.*) (Strindberg 1967: 274)

Despite his 'conversion' to a socially acceptable, apolitical stance, and unlike the aimless nihilists and self-serving conservatives that surround him, Falk seems to still believe on some level in his power to change the world through politics. His potential for radical political action endures, though his approach has changed. Borg finishes his letter to Sellén with a report of having seen Falk, dressed in a purple cloak and feathered hat like any dandy, sitting at the foot of the throne during the reading of the annual King's Speech in Parliament. To Borg, the look in Falk's eyes plainly declared his rebellious challenge, 'Vad vet M:tet om rikets tillstånd och behov?' (Strindberg 1981: 289) (What does

H.M. know about the state of the country and its needs?) (Strindberg 1967: 275). The glint in Falk's eye may well have been mirrored in the author's own as he wrote those words, for the satirical political critique that pervades *Röda Rummet* reveals that Strindberg knew well that there are more ways to challenge authority, whether that of the king, parliament, or societal norms, than through open confrontation. While direct attacks invite direct retaliation, Strindberg's strategy of destabilizing the status quo through irony and oblique mockery is much harder to combat. Activism disguised as witty entertainment may be the most radical kind of politics of all.

Note

All translations from the Swedish are my own unless otherwise specified.

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