

AUGUST STRINDBERG:

Ockulta dagboken.

Boxed set: *August Strindbergs samlade verk*, Nationalupplagan, vol. 59.1, Established Text, pp. 302; vol. 59.2, Facsimile, pp. 302; vol. 60, Commentaries, pp. 528. Edited and with Commentaries by Karin Petherick and Göran Stockenström. Electronic Edition available at *Litteraturbanken.se*

Norstedts, Stockholm, 2012.

ISBN: 978 91 1 304349 4.

Ockulta dagboken was the diary Strindberg kept from February 1896 through to the summer of 1908. When the diary opens he is moving into the Hôtel Orfila in Paris; the final entry but one finds him moving house from Karlavägen to the apartment in Drottninggatan 85 that was to be the last home of what was by any standards a peripatetic life. The twelve years that intervene are filled with occult interpretations of everyday incidents, mysterious knockings on walls, proofs of the existence of the unseen powers, mystic numbers and colours, alchemy and dreams, as well as some of the ordinary stuff of diaries. And then there is Harriet Bosse, his third wife: 'När jag såg Harriets skönhet, som ibland kunde vara "överjordisk", så bävade jag' (When I saw Harriet's beauty, which could sometimes be "out of this world", I trembled). His relationship with her, both the real one and his later dreams/delusions, is central, a centrality made clear by the number of entries she has in the index: twice as many as almost everyone else with the exception of

Anne-Marie (Lillan), the daughter Harriet had with Strindberg.

The original in which all this is found consists of a folder of 282 hand-numbered loose sheets, some eighty drawings and doodles and a hundred or so pasted-in newspaper cuttings, all of which Strindberg kept in a paper bag on which he had written: 'Ockulta Dagboken 1896-1908. Bör icke utlånas; icke tryckas; icke deponeras i offentligt Bibliotek' (The Occult Diary 1896-1908. Not to be lent out; not to be printed; not to be deposited in a public library). He changed his mind about that at least once when short of money, but ultimately the diary did remain out of the public eye for fifty years until 1962. The parts of the diary that deal with his marriage with Harriet Bosse were published as long ago as 1963 and a black and white facsimile was published in 1977, but now we have the whole thing. It would be hard to overstate the skill and erudition – not to mention the tenacity and patience – brought to the task of establishing and editing this strange hotchpotch of a text by its two editors, Göran Stockenström and the late and sadly missed Karin Petherick.

Ockulta dagboken, together with *Hemsöborna*, brings to a close the great thirty-year project to produce the seventy-two volumes of the National Edition of Strindberg's works. What a worthwhile project it has proved to be, with excellent texts, along with commentaries and notes by leading scholars, appearing in uniform and elegantly simple volumes. All of this makes the choice of publication method for *Ockulta dagboken* all the more peculiar. It comes in a three-volume boxed set, consisting of volume 59.1 (the established text), 59.2 (a coloured facsimile of the original notebook), both of these volumes being folio sized to match the original, and volume 60 (commentaries), this volume being in the same octavo size as the rest of the National Edition and containing a long essay by Göran Stockenström and copious and essential notes by Karin Petherick. So far so good. But only 999 volumes were printed and, as is almost unnecessary to say, they have already sold out. Of these the first 99 were a numbered and leather-bound collectors' edition selling at SEK 9999. The final touch was to auction the volume numbered '1' – it achieved SEK 20,000, the money thus raised being donated by Norstedts to the good cause Lawyers without Borders. All this was no doubt excellent publicity but has left

the majority of potential readers, reviewers included, reliant on the electronic version that has been made available via *Litteraturbanken*. Electronic reading may be fine much of the time but proves to be less than convenient when what the reader wants/needs is to have all three volumes open on the desk simultaneously in order to move back and forth between them.

It is, of course, easy to smile at the occult beliefs that inform the diary from start to finish, to dismiss the whole thing as an example of that stew of Swedenborgianism, occultism, theosophy and oriental mysticism so popular as the nineteenth century became the twentieth. In his lengthy and stimulating essay Stockenström suggests that perhaps the best way for us to approach *Ockulta dagboken* is in the spirit of the quotation from the Talmud that Strindberg places on the title page: 'Om Du vill lära känna det osynliga, så iakttag med öppen blick det Synliga'. 'The invisible' is the symmetry, the meaning or purpose, the linking element, that lies behind and binds the seeming disorder of existence. It is this search that in its own strange way makes Strindberg's occultism scientific; it is part of the urge to find a synthesis between natural science and religion.

Inevitably, though, we do have to ask the question whether the publication of *Ockulta dagboken* adds much to our knowledge of Strindberg the man or Strindberg the writer; is there much point to it, that is, beyond the completion of the National Edition and an act of piety to the great writer? As one reads the diary initial doubts that these jottings, however meaningful they may have been to Strindberg, have anything to give to anyone else gradually fade as the reader becomes aware of something too easily forgotten: that this diary runs parallel with the writing of twenty or so plays, including the greatest, as well as a dozen or more prose works, and acts as a kind of subconscious commentary on that creative process. And that the diary also lays bare the story of a man who has fallen disastrously and inappropriately in love – and lost. The final entries in the diary in June, July and August 1908 have an utterly poignant sense of loneliness. He complains of unbearable stomach pains (the cancer that killed him a few years later), wants to die, notes his move from Karlavägen to Drottninggatan 85 and the writing of *Siste Riddaren* for Dramaten. Then he dreams of Harriet:

‘Fasans dag! ... Med fasans natt! Plågades i fem timmar! Drömde om H – t, ärbart, vackert; såsom när hon en gång knöt på mig en halsduk och efteråt kysste mig på munnen som sitt barn’ (Horrendous day! ... And a horrendous night! Tormented for five hours! Dreamt about H – t, honourably, beautifully; like when she once wrapped a scarf around me and then kissed me on the mouth like her child).

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