

LISBETH STENBERG:

*I kärlekens namn – Om människosynen, den nya kvinnan och
framtidens samhälle i fem litteraturdebatter 1881-1909*

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PETRA BROOMANS, ed.:

From Darwin to Weil: Women as Transmitters of Ideas

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In her thought-provoking book, the product of much painstaking research, Lisbeth Stenberg argues that the writing of the history of Swedish literature around the turn of the twentieth century needs to be more open and thus more effective than it currently is. Her approach has been inspired by Mario J. Valdés who, in a volume co-edited with Linda Hutcheon, *Rethinking Literary History: A Dialogue on Theory* (2002), advocates the replacement of the type of literary history that is closed with a literary history that is 'an open process of investigation'. In Stenberg's view, the established version of the history of Swedish literature around 1900 is a neat example of the former. In particular, her study challenges the standard accounts and roles of what has traditionally been perceived as two key elements of the history of Swedish literature around this time: the Modern Breakthrough, here limited to the period 1880-87, and the Strindberg 'feud' in 1910-12. Stenberg tackles this task by undertaking detailed examinations of five major debates between 1881 and 1909, all of them revolving around the representation of 'the New Woman' in Swedish literature and so consistently highlighting gender along with perspectives on the role of literature and the interface between literature and politics. Reinhart Koselleck's *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts* (2002) underpins some of Stenberg's detailed analyses, as do several of the works of George L. Mosse.

During the relevant period literary value, Stenberg argues, was assigned on the basis of structures of power that were directly related to those thwarting women's struggle for equality. At a time when more women in Sweden were beginning to emerge as authors, the notion of an autonomous literary field, prevalent in Sweden from around 1890 but existing in France from as early as 1850, could be used to marginalise women writers. A well-known Swedish example is Alfild Agrell, who enjoyed considerable success with her dramas in the

1880s, but whose subsequent work failed to win acclaim. Stenberg persuasively demonstrates why it is necessary to go back to the sources for a history of Swedish literature between 1881 and 1909 that is rather more balanced than the one the standard textbooks provide. Unfortunately, however, Stenberg has chosen not to sketch in any information about the version provided by the standard textbooks, thus missing the opportunity to profile her findings more emphatically and also leaving the reader to supply a fair amount of information herself/himself.

The five debates selected are (1) the debate arising from the publication of Amanda Kerfstedt's short story 'Synd' (Sin) in 1881; (2) the debate on morality that was an important dimension of the Scandinavian Modern Breakthrough, chiefly in the 1880s; (3) the debate about naturalism in 1893 involving Ellen Key and some of her critics; (4) *Ibsenfejden* (the Ibsen controversy) of 1898; (5) and the debate caused by Annie Åkerhielm's publication of a series of articles on 'Den nya kvinnan i litteraturen' (The new woman in literature) in 1909.

Georg Brandes's emphasis on the importance of subjecting contemporary issues to debate made him a pivotal figure in the Scandinavian Modern Breakthrough. Stenberg, however, highlights the role of a critic such as Sophie Adlersparre (1823-1895). With Rosalie Olivecrona she founded in 1859 *Tidskrift för hemmet*, the first women's journal to appear in any Nordic country; she was instrumental in founding Fredrika Bremer-förbundet in 1884; and in the 1880s she, too, played a decisive role in encouraging and supporting a number of women writers who were exploring aspects of contemporary society in their texts. Like Adlersparre, Eva Fryxell (1829-1920) was prominently engaged in the early phase of the women's movement in Sweden. Both Adlersparre and Fryxell perceived literature as a means towards solving social issues, and consequently their reviews and other texts on contemporary literature tended to have a markedly prescriptive dimension. When Kerfstedt published her controversial short story 'Synd' in 1881, Adlersparre defended her against those claiming that the text, about masculine double moral standards, could not be regarded as literature, preferring instead to highlight the innovative dimensions of the work which, she argued, had the potential to initiate

social change. Fryxell played a prominent role in the Swedish branch of The Federation for the Abolition of Regulated Prostitution that Josephine Butler had founded in Britain in 1875. Stenberg makes the plausible suggestion that the formation of the Swedish *Federationen* in 1878 played an important role in foregrounding the issues about sexual morality that were to become so prominent in Scandinavian literature up to 1887. Brandes translated John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* into Danish, and Stenberg reads his distancing, in the preface to the second edition (1885), from the notion that the high moral standards expected from women should also be expected from men, in the context of the campaign against regulated prostitution run by the Swedish Federation at the time.

Ellen Key (1849-1926) played a central role both in the debate on naturalism in 1893 and in the Ibsen controversy five years later. Stenberg profiles Key in recurring conflicts with representatives of the women's movement in Sweden, with Key's gradual embracing of a Nietzschean individualism causing much controversy. Drawing on Koselleck, Stenberg demonstrates how slippages in Key's language, with shifts in the connotations of familiar words, made the task of countering her arguments a difficult one. Key, for example, had abandoned Christianity in 1880 but continued to use a Christian vocabulary, a complex problem for a women's movement that still, around 1900, included prominent Christian elements and so was strongly opposed to Key's notion of Eros. Like Key, Annie Åkerhielm (1869-1956), author of a series of controversial articles on the New Woman in literature published in *Stockholms Dagblad* in 1909 as well as prose fiction and other texts, is difficult to categorise in the context of modern political parties and affiliations, and Stenberg's study of her series of articles is a welcome addition to our understanding of this undoubtedly influential writer.

One of the most interesting sections in Stenberg's book is her background chapter on women in popular education and the left-wing / workers' movements, a study of the nexus of literature and popular education for women as debated and reflected in *Folkbiblioteksbladet* (1903-1911) and *Morgonbris*, the latter published by the Social Democratic women's organisation from 1904. The chapter is a

persuasive illustration of the role of alternative history writing, and so is the chapter on the Strindberg 'feud' and the role of the construction of Strindberg as a national hero in suppressing the contributions of women. But here as elsewhere Stenberg ought to have been more generous with summaries and pointers to the development of arguments so far. Moreover, the organisation of the chapters of her book, which all have a range of subsections merely distinguished by headings in different-sized fonts, makes for unnecessary confusion about the overall structure. The chapters should also have been labelled as such. If the use of a stylised flower on the left-hand page to signal a new chapter on the right-hand page is a means of flagging up the innovative dimensions of this counter-history, the device is simply so impractical as to be counter-productive.

The volume edited by Petra Broomans studies women as transmitters of ideas, the focus being on the Dutch-speaking region and Scandinavia in the period 1880-1950. The book has emerged from a workshop held in October 2006 as part of the project 'Scandinavian literature in Europe: The influence of language politics, gender and aesthetics', which is based at the University of Groningen. In Broomans's definitions, cultural transfer is a one-way activity, i.e. when a text is translated from one language into another, while cultural transmission is a reciprocal process, with cultural and literary information being shared. As translators and in due course also reviewers, journalists, editors of journals, publishers and literary agents, women have played – and are playing – key roles as cultural transmitters, yet relatively little research has been done in this field. As Broomans points out, a 'transnational cultural transfer and transmission history has not yet been written', but as this volume indicates, such a project would have the potential to be both fascinating and important. .

As the title indicates, *From Darwin to Weil* ranges widely. Janke Klok explores Camilla Collett's role as a cultural transmitter; Liselotte Vandenbussche, Griet Vandermassen, Marysa Demoor and Johan Braeckman study the work of the Flemish writer Virginie Loveling (1836-1923); Ebba Witt-Brattström writes on Laura Marholm (1854-1927); Ester Jiresch investigates the contribution made by Margaretha Meyboom (1856-1927) who translated, among others, Selma Lagerlöf

into Dutch; Geraldine Reymenants focuses on the contribution by women to the Flemish Catholic periodical *Dietsche Warande en Belfort*; and Marta Ronne considers the role of the critic Margit Abenius (1899-1970) in introducing the work of Simone Weil (1909-1943) in Sweden.

Obviously the contributions of these women were important, and often also bold and innovative. But to highlight the complexity of their work, and also for the sake of onward cultural transmission, quotations should have been given in the original languages throughout, followed by translation into English. Unfortunately the texts are in no way consistent in this respect, nor is the name of the translator into English always given. But these are minor quibbles. *From Darwin to Weil* presents itself as the first in a series. I for one am very much looking forward to the next volume.