The Mold of Writing: Style and Structure in Strindberg’s Chamber Plays by Erik van Ooijen (review)

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repetitions constitute the underlying subject of the text (a subject that, appropriately enough, emerges gradually, floating to the surface and exposing itself in such a way that, in the end, one is forced to address it, even if only by way of a postscript).

As with any such project, there are the occasional errors: they range from the somewhat problematic (such as “Bakhtin” appearing as “Bahk-tin” [15]; “Caravaggio” as “Carravagio” [155]; or Pompeii’s disaster taking place in 79 BC rather than AD [54]) to the merely unfortunate (such as inconsistent usage of the possessive apostrophe [e.g., Tacitus’s / Tacitus’ (4, 6)]; various extra spaces [10] and extraneous punctuation [142, 143]; or production issues such as poor crops [5]). These mainly minor issues do not detract from the overall usefulness of the volume, which includes both endnotes and bibliography, as well as a robust index and sixty black and white photographs.

In this unique melding of historical, archaeological, and aesthetic fields, Sanders provides us with a valuable tool through which we can come to consider more deeply our own temporal and material existence. The truth revealed by the bog bodies—that the temporal pasts of our human experience are both universal and simultaneously universally inaccessible—is one well worth engaging, as is this highly-recommended read.

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Erik van Ooijen’s The Mold of Writing is a dissertation, which means that you can expect it to have a clear, transparent organization, to be up-to-date and explicit in its relation to the relevant scholarship on Strindberg’s five Chamber Plays, to be neither immodest nor excessively modest, and to be a usable contribution to the field. It is.

Van Ooijen writes in English; his English is very good (I am an English professor). Where he quotes at length from Strindberg scholarship in Swedish he translates, but gives the original in the footnotes. Even his references to French theory use the standard English translations. This book resets the discussion of the Chamber Plays among Strindberg scholars; by extending itself into English, it brings English readers up-to-date on the issues, which are important.

The book takes up the five titles that Strindberg fully endorsed as Chamber Plays: Stormy Weather, The Burned Lot, The Ghost Sonata, The Pelican,
and *The Black Glove*. Each chapter is devoted to an individual play, in this sequence; each chapter usefully summarizes its direction and intention first.

Although he keeps all the main scholarship on the Chamber Plays engaged in his discussion, even quoting from dissertations published one or two years before his own, he nominates Egil Törnqvist as the preeminent, strategic Strindberg scholar with whom he must (persistently) agree or disagree.

Van Ooijen’s subject is “glitches” in Strindberg, specifically in the Chamber Plays, and what they can tell us about Strindberg’s writing and our commitment to reading him. The special alarm to English readers is that translators have regularly normalized Strindberg’s glitches, cutting off a large reading public and performances from what these signature disruptions might mean.

The Old Man in *The Ghost Sonata*, for example, tells the Student that he has heard only one other person mispronounce “windows” (*vinduer*) as he does. Dramatically, this binds their fates very clearly and quickly, for the other person mentioned was the Student’s father, and the Student quickly realizes that he is talking to the man who ruined his family. Yet the Student did not utter the word “window,” so most translators silently amend this regrettable howler by the master. Ezra Pound would have told them to “Wipe your feet.”

In a larger sense this (unconscionable) “treason” is a symptom of the clichés which govern literary judgment, which suggest that if you publish a lot it can’t be very good (or if you publish very little it must be very good, having profited from your demanding critical sense). Ibsen as a counter-example is always hovering over Strindberg, particularly Ibsen’s regular production of a play every two years with no distracting essays on horticulture, mysticism, or metallurgy. But if you invoke Ibsen you should remember instead his singularly positive appreciation of Strindberg. Ibsen treated Strindberg with a continuous respectful attention he gave no other living writer. He always kept his eye on Strindberg.

*The Mold of Writing* keeps its eye on Strindberg’s plays by proposing a hypothesis for what Strindberg actually writes. The title depends on van Ooijen’s early distinction between mold as form or container and organic mold that grows on or in or all over its host. (Van Ooijen quotes approvingly Strindberg’s own approving comments on mold as writing, as style). Genres are forms, and Strindberg’s writing gets all over them.

To his credit, to Strindberg’s and the reader’s profit, van Ooijen does not beat this clever mold/mold distinction to death: his scheme throughout is to limit interpretation (not spread it) wherever it would hide Strindberg’s singularity. Prismatically, he writes “Strindberg writes fast, and he leaves his
texts as they are. Thus it is suggested how the event of writing is turned into a poetics or a principle of production” (178).

Van Ooijen includes *The Black Glove*, which is often ignored, a special case of the casual treatment of Strindberg in English. Van Ooijen suggests it is not simply that it was written two years later; the play is too positive, too sentimental to fit the Strindberg stereotype of the terminally mad and resentful genius.

In his final settling up with Törnqvist, van Ooijen writes:

Repeatedly the plays are treated as ingenious puzzles demanding an elaborate interpretation to become intelligible, and the interpretational grids that are applied will often come to contradict the compositional principles they set out to elucidate.... The image of the weave as it is presented by Strindberg in *The Burned Lot* calls less for complex interpretations than for a simple affirmation ..., seeing the weave itself: we see the order of disorder as such, which is life rather than chaos. (200)

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The boom in Scandinavian crime fiction is a commonplace of the contemporary literary marketplace, and many readers of *Scandinavian Studies* have probably felt the impact in one way or another. Such readers may want to familiarize themselves with this book since scholars in all Scandinavian studies fields (in the USA, at least), no matter how remote from contemporary popular culture, are liable to be asked by others on their campuses about contemporary crime fiction. There is widespread awareness of the boom; here is a serious, quantitatively-grounded analysis of it. Berglund’s book is a vital contribution for those working in the fields of crime fiction, contemporary literature, and book history. It is particularly welcome as the rapid growth of interest in crime fiction draws scholars from other fields, who may lack the requisite background knowledge of the genre, its literary history, and its place in popular culture studies. Berglund’s valuable study offers a current knowledge base of the scope of the field’s primary material over the past several decades in Sweden.

Reviewers of crime fiction often try to avoid “spoiler alerts” by not giving away the ending or other vital pieces of information, and this book inspires some of that feeling. How does the crime-fiction genre relate to literary fiction in Swedish publishing as proportion of titles published, as total sales,