

Weinstein, Arnold. 2008. *Northern Arts: The Breakthrough of Scandinavian Literature and Art, From Ibsen to Bergman*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 523 pages. ISBN: 978-0-691-12544-2.

This ambitious, broad-sweeping, and profoundly engaging book aims to provide an account of the so-called “modern breakthrough” in Scandinavian art and literature. “Breaking through” (*gjenombrott*), as Weinstein notes, is a term generally associated with the influential Danish literary critic and philosopher Georg Brandes. Weinstein focuses on a small, select number of examples from literature (Kierkegaard, Ibsen, Strindberg, Hamsun, Gustafsson, Vesaas, and Lindgren), art history (Munch, Cronquist, Josephson, and Strindberg) and film (Bergman), which he deems to be “the most full-blooded and daring works” (9). They share a kind of “family resemblance” he argues, and he considers all of them to be “extremist,” “startling,” “daring,” “transgressive,” “unconventional,” “restless,” and “shattering.”

The author’s self-described “comparatist approach” allows him to intertwine and combine a diverse set of modern figures, as well as visual media, and he acknowledges in the introduction that “this book has something of the unruliness and variety of culture itself” (9), and in a subsequent chapter he claims that this approach “is legitimate if it produces results” (228). This allows him to unabashedly include—often with great power and critical intelligence—Walt Whitman, Wallace Stevens, William Faulkner, William Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde, Samuel Beckett, Emily Dickinson, T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, William Blake, Franz Kafka, along with James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Ernest Hemingway and many other canonical authors within his analysis of modern Scandinavian culture.

There are certain points, however, where this “unruliness and variety,” the author’s zeal and dramatic flair, his willingness to take interpretive risks and to impose daring generalizations is deeply problematic. Weinstein never calls any of these select works “avant-garde” or “dystopian,” but he argues consistently for their groundbreaking importance, boldness, and common logic. He seems committed to a monolithic Scandinavian mindset or *zeitgeist*.

Weinstein wrestles with a number of big themes and profound critical issues: the dilemma of origins, critique of patriarchy, centrality of the body, the nature of the ego, the wound and fissure of being human, the relationship between the divine and the human, the crisis engendered by representation itself, the nature of human agency, and the alterity of the world and the self. Metamorphosis and Power (as well as the lower case “metamorphosis” and “power”—Weinstein uses

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both but never adequately explains why) assume a dominant role in this weighty tome consisting of 523 pages. In his concluding chapter he makes the argument that “the ideological order—indeed the cosmic order—is what is at stake in every one of the texts studied in this book” (441).

Weinstein’s argument employs a number of key binaries such as divine/human, infinite/finite, reason/occult, comic/tragic, self-preservation/annihilation, pagan/christian, self/other, flesh/spirit, adult/child, law/anarchy, surface/depth, inward/outward, Protestant/Catholic, north/south, health/sickness, hope/despair, light/dark, attraction/repulsion, pleasure/pain, egoism/altruism, and nature/culture despite his concerns to resist such binaries and to avoid clichés.

There are a surprisingly large number of typographical and editorial infelicities: rear-ranging, Ginsburg, Pollack, Kurasawo, Jaeger, Redilon, Hanny, Krogh, Novik, Kuhn, Marcel Réda, Olso, Christiana, Furstenberg, Brantley, Ketty Rindsdorf, absinth, lago, Naess, chtonice, gothic, Everett Spinchorn, Gavel Adams, Edgar Allen Poe, Soderstöm, Maj-Brit Wadell, Sandstroem, Per Maeleng, Carl Sandberg, *Arbeidstidskrift*, Durckheim. In Norwegian, “to throw up” is *å kaste opp* (249) and not *kasta op*. Italics are used inconsistently for non-English words as well as idiomatic expressions, and poetic license best describes the punctuation. The index is also deficient, inadequate, and occasionally seriously flawed, such as the conflation of the American poet Carl Sandburg at 486n15 with the contemporary professor of Scandinavian studies and film at UC Berkeley Mark B. Sandberg whose article on Hamsun is cited in the preceding note 485n14. Mark B. Sandberg is omitted entirely from the index whereas Carl Sandburg never appears anywhere in the text! *Little Eyolf* is attributed to Strindberg (516)! Such problems are too numerous to list.

The complete lack of colour illustrations is unfortunate given the author’s keen insights into the dazzling palette of many of the artists examined. Significant omissions from the notes include Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko* (NY: Harper Icon, 1973), Reidar Dittman, *Eros and Psyche, Strindberg and Munch in the 1890s* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1982), Mary Kay Norseng, *Dagny* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), and Sixten Strömbom’s seminal *Nationalromantik och Radikalism* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1965).

Among the other errors Josephson’s mother’s name was spelled Gustafva and not Gustava as Weinstein has it. Weinstein refers to Edward Steichen’s landmark 1955 exhibition *The Family of Man* at MoMA in New York City as *The Age of Man* (235). Ibsen’s *Little Eyolf* is mistakenly dated at one place in the text as 1994 (44). Ernst Josephson first traveled to Eggedal, Norway in 1872, and not 1871, as the author claims (182, 358, 369). Weinstein mistakenly states that Josephson “lived another eighteen years” (379) following his discharge from the hospital in Uppsala on April 16, 1890, but Josephson died in 1906.

Weinstein's use of such terms as *ludic*, *oneiric*, *truck*, *cargoing*, *cashiers*, *traffic*, *circuits*, *conduits*, *larded*, *delicious*, *gifts*, *wildings*, *birthings*, *economy*, *eco-system*, *gestalt*, and *commerce* borders on the excessive and, after a while, becomes wearisome. His argument also sounds, at times, increasingly like an *apologia* with its repeated claims that the work "deserves more attention" (6, 116), "deserves to be better known" (183, 379, 438, 460), "deserve a wider audience" (211), and that they "have yet to garner the recognition they deserve" (445).

There are a number of places in the book where slight amplification or greater specificity seems warranted. Johan Huizinga, who introduced the notion of *Homo ludens*, is never identified, nor is Aksel Sandemose whose notion of "Jantelov" is also discussed in some detail (197). The author never discusses nor provides any insights into the significance of the fact that Tarjei Vesaas wrote in Nynorsk, a rural dialect that is one of modern Norway's two officially recognized languages. The so-called "Protestant Imaginary" which Weinstein identifies as shimmering "throughout the works studied in this book" (12) deserves further analysis and unpacking. Weinstein characterizes Munch as a cubist, but it is unclear to this reviewer what he intends by this claim, what is gained by it, as well as how it supports his overall thesis. It is impossible for me not to recall that in 1977 when Lars Gustafsson wrote *The Tennis Players*, Bjørn Borg, the Swedish sensation, completely dominated the sport, and was an international celebrity.

There are many remarkable insights such as his remarks that: "photographs of Munch are fascinating things" (321); and "the role of art is to break through the complacent forms ... which have molded so many of our received views about self and world" (458), as well as his assertion that "nothing is ever simple or unadulterated in the human psyche" (99). His observations about the importance of the Jewish legacy in early modern Scandinavia are extremely perceptive and warrant further study (e.g. the Bonniers, Sachs, Oscar Levertin, Ernst Thiel, Hannah Hirsch, Georg Pauli, Pontus Fürstenberg, Charlotte Mannheimer, Conrad Pineus, Isaac Grünewald, in addition to Ernst Josephson). It was surprising to this reviewer that Weinstein never discusses Hamsun's enthusiastic support for the Third Reich and the Nazi occupation of Norway, nor his controversial ideas about race and gender.

In several instances the author mistakenly characterizes the artistic medium used. He calls Munch's *Murderer in the Avenue* (1919) a "watercolor piece" (347) but the picture is, in fact, oil on canvas. Even more problematic is Munch's work described by Weinstein as "the tremulous water color, [sic] *Self-Portrait at 2 a.m.* (1940) depicting a decrepit, infirm, pallid, chair-bound, dressed-up figure looking anxiously up as the shadow of death enters the room, wondering if the moment has come" (334). Sue Prideaux, who appears to be one of Weinstein's key sources for his analysis of Munch, describes this work as an "oil on canvas" (365). Her work is extremely problematic, however, and it is certainly cause for concern

that no such painting exists by that title in the recently published four-volume *catalogue raisonné* edited by Gerd Woll.

In his analysis of one of Josephson's drawings Weinstein describes Niord as the "Norse god of fertility" (422), although this role is most commonly attributed to Niord's daughter Freyja. Niord, who rules the motion of the sea and winds, is associated with seafaring and fishing, and hence, he holds a ship's rudder. This weakens his remarks about its phallic significance.

Ernst Josephson is a hinge figure in Weinstein's analysis. He argues that "Josephson's example epitomizes the rationale of this volume: this art refigures over time—over his time from sanity to sickness—what it means to have a body, what it means to have a soul" (438). Weinstein is somewhat evasive and vague, however, about what he calls Ernst Josephson's "tortured sexuality," "homosexual longing," and "repressed libido." While he notes that Josephson contracted syphilis, and acknowledges his failed "liaison with Ketty Rindskopf" (368, 508), there is no mention of Josephson's other great female infatuation, Ada Ramström, whom he had first met in Mariefred, Sweden, and later visited in Norway. While Weinstein notes the importance of Josephson's uncle Ludvig, the famed theatre director for the artist, he omits the fact that Ludvig and Henrik Ibsen were friends and frequent correspondents.

Weinstein also fails to mention that Josephson was a very close friend of the Norwegian artist Christian Skredsvig (1854-1924), who first recommended that Ernst Josephson and Wilhelm Peters visit Eggedal because of its unspoiled landscape and rich folk culture. Skredsvig later accompanied Josephson to Seville, Spain, as well as France. Their common interest in poetry and literary memoir must have strengthened their friendship. Skredsvig, who was also a close friend of Edvard Munch, provided a very poignant account of Josephson in his 1908 memoir *Dage og Nætter blandt Kunstnere*. While Weinstein alludes to Josephson's literary and journalistic work, he never discusses this in detail or with any great specificity. An in-depth critical analysis of Josephson's books of poetry, dramatic verse, polemical essays and numerous letters is warranted, and it is surprising to this reviewer that Weinstein does not undertake such an exercise. The Finnish composer Jean Sibelius, in fact, composed music for the collection of poems *Svarta Rosor* in 1899. It is interesting to recall that the Norwegian artist Henrik Sørensen, who was born in Sweden and who always maintained close ties to Swedish culture, also painted a version of Josephson's *The Water Sprite* in the 1920s. Sørensen's *Myllarguten* (1926) shares much in common with the painting as well. Pär Lagerkvist was also a close friend of Sørensen and he painted his portrait twice.

Occasionally the author's remarks become formulaic, platitudinous and somewhat vacuous, such as his description of Munch's *The Sick Child* as "a haunting picture of a haunting" (318), or his claim that "breaking through is inseparable from broken through" (395, 429, 440), or "I do not believe this is even intentional on the author's part, inasmuch as playwrights are as drawn to play as moths are

to light” (91), and furthermore, “life is a merry-go-round, and we are the moving horses” (124). Weinstein cannot resist the temptation to call Hamsun’s *Hunger* “a delicious book” (246).

“Breakthrough” and its various permutations—break through, breaking through, and broken through—as repeated incessantly by Weinstein, seem so all-encompassing and vague as to lose its specificity and meaning. It becomes a kind of QED (*quod erat demonstrandum*) at the end of each section of each chapter. In the final chapter Weinstein can’t resist a final formulaic reiteration—as if his crucial point has been forgotten—he states “Breakthrough over and over” (444).

I am left to wonder where Ludvig Holberg, Arne Garborg, Hilda af Klint, Ivan Aguéli, Halldór Laxness, Sigrid Undset, Selma Lagerlöf, Isak Dinesen, Thorbjørn Egner, Elsa Beskow, Alf Prøysen, Odd Nerdrum, Jens F. Willumsen, Per Kirkeby, Bo Widerberg, Roy Andersson, Jørgen Leth and Lars von Trier—to name only a few striking examples—would fit within his thesis. Can it also explain such contemporary international literary sensations such as Henning Mankell and Stieg Larsson? Does the decision by the Finnish artist Axel Waldemar Gallén to change his name to Akseli Gallen-Kallela lend further support to Weinstein’s claims regarding the porosity, instability, and fluidity of identity? Furthermore, it is worth recalling that Knut Hamsun was born Knud Pedersen; and Laxness was born Guðjónsson.

This reviewer is reminded of the fact that Scandinavian cultural circles were relatively small, and they were characterized by a great deal of interaction, camaraderie, and exchange. Writers and artists were in frequent contact, and the borders between their respective disciplines were themselves quite fluid. Many artists were writers, and many noted writers were also artists. Ibsen also painted and sketched, but this is never discussed by Weinstein. Because of their peripheral location, travel and study abroad (not just on the continent, but also in North and South America) became the norm for almost all Scandinavian intellectuals. Exile, in other words, and a longing for home also played a significant role for a very large number of Scandinavian artists and writers. They absorbed impulses from a wide variety of sources. National Romanticism, a term mentioned only once by Weinstein, played an important role, especially in Norway and Finland as the desire for political independence gained momentum. A deeper and more nuanced examination of these issues and their consequences for “the modern breakthrough” is needed in my opinion. Pan-Scandinavianism and the belief in a common Nordic heritage was almost always tempered by the urge to posit quintessentially national and regional characteristics. These too were met with scorn and derision on more than one occasion, and the tension between the cosmopolitan and the provincial was a recurring theme in Scandinavian Modernism.

What if there are no essential “unresolved bristling forces that constitute the ground zero of life” (24) as Weinstein seems to suggest? Are not boredom,

monotony, absurdity, and seeming indifference—in short, a failure “to startle in any way”—also an aspect of Scandinavian Modernism? Ultimately, he adopts a kind of optimistic, humanist position, and he posits a faint hint of order and hope, a new vista or dimension, an ultimate truth beyond the maelstrom of chaos. The law of *genombrott*, Weinstein argues, reveals “new territories, new dimensions” (197). He believes that there is a Spirit at “the core of our being” (39), as well as “that there is a special light in Scandinavian literature and art: it emerges through the darkness, and it is the light of labor and reflection” (440-41). Above all, he argues that “Darkness seeds [sic] light” (459). I suspect that Weinstein would also contend that darkness cedes light. Yet, what if an indescribable, non-representable Nothingness is the only alternative to Being? What if wall smashing, wreckage, and ruin are just that and nothing more? Is it logically necessary that a “new constellation, a new eco-system, comes into view?” (112).

The field of Scandinavian Studies is indeed fortunate, however, to have such a passionate and articulate advocate as Arnold Weinstein. He poses many superb questions, grasps the big issues, and provides a number of fascinating insights in *Northern Arts*; it is a must read for anyone interested in Scandinavian Modernism. It deserves praise, critical reflection, close scrutiny, and hopefully, it will stimulate the next generation of scholarship.

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