

OCKULTA DAGBOKEN—SOURCE BOOK FOR ESOTERICA AND MODERNIST THEATRE IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

ANN-CHARLOTTE GAVEL ADAMS

ÄNTLIGEN—AT LONG LAST, Strindberg's *The Occult Diary* is published in a new and complete English translation, based on the definitive edition of *Ockulta Dagboken* in Samlade verk from 2012. It has been a long journey of many years and many revisions, starting with Karin Petherick's monumental effort in the early 2000s, which was left unfinished at her death in 2009. Now at long last, international Strindberg scholars, theatre professionals and readers interested in esoterica will have access to a reliable diary text in English, which they can study or peruse for hints and clues to Strindberg's spiritual and philosophical explorations in Paris and his artistic reorientation during the 1890s, leading to his post-*Inferno*, modernistic dramas.

My primary focus will be on the first part of the *Diary*, when Strindberg lived in Paris. I will attempt to address two questions: 1) What is an occult diary? 2) Who are the presumed readers of this new English edition?

The first question that Americans ask me when they see or hear of this volume is: "What is an occult diary?" That is not easy to cover in one sentence. It is a diary that records daily events which somehow seem unusual or prescient, and readings that may yield clues to how to interpret the world around us. The aspects of searching for a meaning was central to Strindberg at this period of his life in the 1890s—as it was to many of his contemporary writers and artists in Paris.

The *Diary* started out as a notebook of peculiar events. Somewhere

along the way, Strindberg decided to add the word “Ockulta” above “Dagbok”—on the title page. It was a deliberate addition—in the context of the time. This is worth exploring further. Today, “occultism” has mostly pejorative connotations in Western culture. It did not in the literary and artistic hub of Paris in the 1890s. It was an umbrella term that included all kinds of secret esoteric societies, and pseudo-scientific explorations such as alchemy, astrology and black magic. Occultism was the dominant esoteric–philosophical–religious movement of the time. Science had been making mind-boggling discoveries. W.C. Röntgen’s discovery of X-rays in 1895 was as incomprehensible then as Artificial Intelligence is today, and people were trying to make sense of this new world of baffling scientific discoveries they were living in. Artists and writers were looking for new formulas to interpret the world around them and to express it in their art and writing. In a letter of 22 July 1896, Strindberg defined this new movement which he called “occultism” as “studiet af alla de fenomen som ej kunnat förnekas, men heller ej kunnat förklaras”.¹

The emerging interest in occultism in Paris intrigued Strindberg. It was not an obscure movement.

The symbolist magazine *La Plume* dedicated a whole issue, 15 July 1892, to “La Magie” with Docteur Papus as special editor. *La Paix* reported on 19 June 1893 the incredible number of 50,000 active alchemists in Paris alone in 1893. The magazine *La Revue des revues* announced on 15 May 1894—perhaps somewhat ironically—that not only did the occult societies publish in more than 50 different magazines and newspapers, but they also had their own photographer and even a talented painter, James Tissot, for whom the spirits obligingly posed.

Strindberg was particularly intrigued by Docteur Papus, the charismatic leader of L’Ordre Martiniste, the Martinist Order, a medieval secret order that he had resuscitated. The day after Strindberg moved into Hotel Orfila and started his *Diary*, he wrote on 22 February 1896 to Torsten Hedlund, a Swedish theosophist and publisher, and asked

¹ Strindberg, Brev 11, p. 285.

how Hedlund's theosophy related to the "scientific occultism" of *L'Initiation*, the journal of the Martinists, with Docteur Papus as the foremost representative. Hedlund responded in critical terms and warned Strindberg against Docteur Papus and against joining any of the occult societies in Paris. Strindberg responded reassuringly on 3 March 1896: "Jag tillhör ingen af Societeterna och känner icke Papus ännu. Synes dock han är friare, följaktligen ödmjukare än Lotus-partiet."² But Papus and Strindberg were soon to come into closer contact.

Docteur Papus was working hard at recruiting intellectuals and celebrities for his Martinist Order, among them the Russian Tsar and Tsarevna who were visiting France in the spring of 1896. This same spring, Strindberg was being looked at seriously as a potential member, in his capacity as a well-known author, and a compatriot of Emanuel Swedenborg, who was held in high esteem by the Martinists. In the March 1896 issue of *L'Initiation*, the editor-in-chief Sedir (pseudonym for Yvon Le Loup) mentioned Strindberg in a review of *Sylva Sylvarum* and called him "un des plus célèbres parmi la pléiade cosmopolite qui met en émoi nos cerveaux latins depuis ces dernières années." He also mentions him as a compatriot of Swedenborg.

In addition to writers and artists, occultism also attracted members of the upper echelons of society, the nobility, the intelligentsia, and even the clergy. One of the aspects that made occultism so appealing to a sophisticated public was that it put Man at the centre of the universe, which the occultists saw as a great design of interconnected phenomena. This central position raised Man to an almost equal level with God. In alchemy, for example, the mere attempt to make gold is a testimony to Man's belief that Man has power over nature. The same can be said for the interest in and use of black magic by the occultists, which Richard Cavendish in his book *The Black Arts* calls "a titanic attempt to exalt the stature of man, to put man in the place which religious thought reserved for God".³ Guy Michaud in his three-volume

² Strindberg, Brev 11, p. 136.

³ Cavendish 1967, p. 1.

work on French symbolism, *Message poétique du Symbolisme*, stressed that critics should not underestimate the important role that occultism played for the French symbolists. According to Michaud, it satisfied a need among the symbolists for something that was at the same time spiritual and scientific, mysterious, and revolutionary.⁴

One year into keeping the *Diary*, on 7 August 1897, Strindberg wrote to his friend Eugene Fahlstedt, who was then in the midst of translating Strindberg's novel *Inferno*, the first fictional work after his long period of silence: "Om du söker nyckeln till den underliga bok Du håller på att öfversätta, så läs G.H.T för torsdagen den 5e Augusti, Bref från Paris om Ockultismen, särskildt om Martinisterna som äro lärjungar af Swedenborg. Forts. utlofvad."⁵

Strindberg was referring to a two-part article in *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning*, on 5 and 9 August 1897, on the fashionable occult societies in Paris by his friend Erik Sjöstedt, who was the Paris correspondent for the newspaper. The articles were based on interviews with Docteur Papus about the different occult groups in Paris, in which Strindberg's work is also mentioned with great respect.⁶ There are indications that Strindberg himself may have inspired or suggested the article to Sjöstedt, perhaps to put his forthcoming book, *Inferno*, in its proper international context. Strindberg points out that the fashionable Martinists were disciples of Swedenborg, and being seen as a compatriot of Swedenborg served Strindberg as an entry ticket into the occult societies.

Swedenborg is key to *The Occult Diary*: Emanuel Swedenborg is probably Sweden's internationally most widely known writer and philosopher—more famous than Strindberg. A chapel in Paris had been dedicated to Swedenborg, somewhat to the surprise of Strindberg. He had not yet read anything by Swedenborg at this time, but he soon discovered that it was an advantage to be associated with Swedenborg—as his compatriot.

⁴ Michaud 1947, p. 371.

⁵ Strindberg, Brev 12, p. 139.

⁶ Strindberg, Brev 12, p. 139.

It is no coincidence that Strindberg—at the top of the title page of the *Diary*—later added in large letters: “Ne Fais Plus Cela”, a quote from the two-volume French translation of Swedenborg’s Latin original by A.J. Pernetty, *Les merveilles du ciel et de l’enfer et des terres planétaires et astrales par Emmanuel Swedenborg* (1782). The second volume is most often referred to as *De Telluribus*. In March of 1897, Strindberg immersed himself in Swedenborg’s works in Pernetty’s translation. He made notations and underlines in the books, which he kept in his library to the end of his life. On 21 March 1897, Strindberg wrote a long passage in the *Diary* with quotes from Pernetty:

Read today and yesterday in Swedenborg about the Spirits on Jupiter and was thereby enlightened in respect of many wonderful things which have happened to me this past year. For instance about Esprits censeurs et correcteurs which torment man from evil to good by means of pains in the hand (NB! my hand affliction) in the foot (see March 19) or in the epigastric region (stomach catarrh 1883, 84) ---- It all fits!⁷

“Ne fais plus cela!” is a quote from *De Telluribus* and is the advice of “Esprits censeurs et correcteurs”, the chastizing spirits on Jupiter: “Don’t do this again”. It is likely that Strindberg added the quote “Ne Fais Plus Cela” on the top of the title page of the *Diary* at this time, in March of 1897. The importance of *De Telluribus* for Strindberg has been thoroughly explored by Göran Stockenström in *Ismael i öknen* (1972). He argues that Strindberg’s discovery of the chastizing spirits, during this so-called “March experience” confirmed to him the existence of a benevolent providence and thus a hope for the possibility of atonement. This hopeful notion became the decisive factor allowing Strindberg to push aside his feelings of guilt, according to Stockenström.⁸ Susanna Åkerman, of Swedenborgsbiblioteket in Stockholm, has written an in-depth article on the importance of Swedenborg’s

⁷ Strindberg 2022, p. 19.

⁸ Stockenström 1972, p. 93.

“tuktoandar” for Strindberg, entitled ‘Strindberg’s Inferno and the spirits of Jupiter’ (unpublished).

The occult theories and ideas that Strindberg encountered in Paris fascinated him and continued to do so for the rest of his life. But his involvement with occultism seems to have been one of curiosity and fascination rather than one of conviction. After he returned to Lund at the end of 1896, Strindberg shared his ideas with Axel Herrlin (the first professor of experimental psychology in Sweden), who also was interested in occultism through his studies of dreams, hallucinations and hypnosis. In his book *Från Sekelslutets Lund*, Herrlin remembered that Strindberg occasionally expressed a certain scepticism regarding occultism: “With three quarters of my being, I believe in the reality of these constellations, but the fourth quarter of my mind wonders if this, after all, is not a product of my own imagination.”⁹ After several times changing his mind as to the future resting place for the *Diary*, Strindberg penned on 7 March 1908 that it might be deposited with the Swedenborgian Congregation (The New Church) in Stockholm.

The second question of my initial inquiry was: Who might the presumed readers be of this new edition of Strindberg’s *The Occult Diary*? An English edition of Strindberg’s *The Occult Diary* will make it available not only to readers in the English-speaking countries of the world, but also to the millions of others who are interested in literature, theatre, esoterica and Swedenborgian societies. According to the World Economic Forum in 2015, English is the most widely spoken language worldwide, with 375 million native speakers and a total of 1.5 billion people who read and understand English.

For an American audience, there will likely be interest coming from a couple of pockets of Strindberg passion in the US. As a multi-faceted artist and writer, Strindberg has inspired passion and enthusiasm among literary scholars, theatre professionals, and most recently among cartoon animators, the group behind the popular YouTube

⁹ Herrlin 1936, p. 162, my translation of: “Med tre fjärdedelar av min varelse tror jag på verkligheten av dessa konstellationer, men med fjärdeparten av mitt jag spørjer jag mig, om detta ändå inte till sist blott är min egen tankelek.”

series *Strindberg and Helium*. This new English translation may also spark an interest among some literary-inclined Swedenborgians (there are 8,000 of them in the US), and many others with deep interest in esoterica.

Scandinavian Studies departments and Drama departments at American universities are natural centres of Strindberg interest. These departments have produced several important Strindberg scholars and translators. At the University of Washington, Walter Johnson (1905–1983) opened a new focus in Strindberg scholarship by translating all twelve of Strindberg's historical dramas to English in the 1960s and '70s and claiming him to be equal to Shakespeare in his monograph *Strindberg and the Historical Drama* (1963).

At the University of Minnesota, the late Göran Stockenström (1937–2020) focused on Strindberg's later dramas in the volume he edited, *Strindberg's Dramaturgy* (1988). At the sesquicentennial (150 years) of Strindberg's birth in 1999, he hosted an international Strindberg conference, which resulted in an edited volume of the presented papers, *August Strindberg and the Other* (2002). Stockenström also collaborated with Karin Petherick on the translation of *The Occult Diary* and contributed to the commentary in the Swedish edition in *Samlade verk* (2011).

At university Drama departments, one of the great names in Strindberg translations and drama studies was Evert Sprinchorn (1923–2022) of Vassar College, with his two-volume edition *Selected Plays by August Strindberg* (1986, 2012), and his influential book *Strindberg as Dramatist* (1982). Another monumental name as Strindberg translator and scholar is the late Harry Carlson (1930–2012) of Queens College at the City University of New York, with his very performable translations of Strindberg's plays and his influential book *Out of Inferno: Strindberg's Reawakening as an Artist* (1996). But the era of influential Strindberg scholars at American universities seems to be fading as the Humanities lose ground to STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) studies.

In the world of theatre, there have been passionate pockets of Strindberg enthusiasts, such as The August Strindberg Society in Los

Angeles (TASSLA), with beloved David Patch (1932–2016) as president and artistic director. It was started in 1984 on a whim, typical of David, and it continued to be active until he died in 2016. As David told the story of the founding of TASSLA in an online interview: he was walking into an event, where the guests greeted him as a genius. He immediately retorted: “I am not a genius—but August Strindberg was.” The response he got was: “Who’s August Strindberg?” David countered by asking: “Did you guys go to college? If you don’t know who August Strindberg was, you ought to give back your college degrees.” Then he went back home and made up some membership cards in the name of The August Strindberg Society of Los Angeles, which he gave out to anybody who wanted one. And so TASSLA was born. David Patch was much loved by theatre people in the Los Angeles area and beyond, and he is greatly missed.

In New York another passionate pocket of Strindberg passion is still alive and kicking: The August Strindberg Repertory Theatre, founded by the enthusiastic Robert Greer, who graduated with a degree in Music and Electrical Engineering from MIT in 1975. One week after his graduation, he headed to Harvard Square for a roast beef sandwich, stopping along the way at a bookstore for something to read during lunch. He picked up a collection of one-act plays by August Strindberg. And I quote: “After I ate the sandwich, I stayed four and a half hours reading and drinking coffee. —When I finished the book, I slammed my fist on the table and said, ‘I’m going to become a director.’”¹⁰ For the past 35 years, Greer has been artistic director of the August Strindberg Repertory Theatre. Under his direction, the theatre has been committed to productions of the less-often-performed plays by Strindberg, in new translations and interpretations that illuminate the plays for today’s American audience. His latest production was *Creditors*, which just finished a run from 27 April to 4 May 2023. Greer has said: “What drew me to the theater was Au-

¹⁰ Karagianis 2017.

gust Strindberg. The man was brutally honest. [...] His truth and integrity definitely were what attracted me.”¹¹

The Centennial of Strindberg’s death in 2012 was a catalyst for a flurry of Strindberg productions and publications in the US. Rob Melrose, then artistic director at Cutting Ball Theater in San Francisco, produced the entire series of Strindberg’s Chamber Plays, entitled “The Strindberg Cycle”—with the generous support from The Barbro Osher Pro Suecia Foundation. The University of Minnesota Press issued a new edition of Evert Sprinchorn’s *Selected Plays by August Strindberg*, with a new introduction by Ann-Charlotte Gavel Adams and Anna Westerståhl Stenport. *Scandinavian Studies*, the journal of the Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study, published a special issue: *August Strindberg: A Hundred-Year Legacy*, with Anna Westerståhl Stenport and Eszter Szalczner as editors, with articles by Massimo Ciaravolo, Ulf Olsson, the present author and others. The Northwest University Press published *The International Strindberg: New Critical Essays* in 2012, also edited by Anna Westerståhl Stenport.

Yale University Press also came out with a lavish and highly readable—but unfortunately flawed—volume in 2012, called *Strindberg: A Life*, by Sue Prideaux, with many photographs, maps, and colour plates of Strindberg’s paintings.

The question is now: Who will read and use this new English edition? A positive review in *Scandinavian Studies* 2024 by professor Susan Brantly suggests potential future readers. Brantly calls the new edition in English of *The Occult Diary* a necessary tool to understand Strindberg’s post-*Inferno* drama, and states that now there is no excuse for any non-Swedish-reading theatre scholar not to be familiar with the Diary, particularly since it is available in a free and open access online version. Brantly praises the visual qualities of the edition as it is typeset to match Strindberg’s *Diary* page by page. Previous excerpts in English lacked this visual quality and were therefore of limited usefulness for understanding Strindberg’s later revolutionary

¹¹ Karagianis 2017.

drama.¹² This positive review by a prominent scholar such as professor Brantly might spark some interest at Literature and Drama departments at American universities. But, as mentioned, Language and Literature departments are shrinking at American universities and being absorbed into larger Modern Language departments. There are only two Scandinavian Studies departments left: one at the University of Washington in Seattle and the other at the University of California at Berkeley. Drama departments still seem to be clinging to life. Then there is the indefatigable Robert Greer who will certainly be inspired, after he receives his copy. It is being considered by the cartoon animator group that created the YouTube episodes on *Strindberg and Helium*. In Minneapolis, Akvavit Theatre produces plays by new Scandinavian playwrights. They might also be inspired by this volume.

There are also pockets of deep and sincere interest in esoterica in the US, evidenced by the never-ending output of art publications such as *On the Spiritual in Art* (Tuchman et al. 1986) by art publishers such as LACMA, and new editions of works such as *The Illuminated Books by William Blake*, by prominent academic publishers. The exhibition of Hilma af Klint's paintings at the Guggenheim in New York in 2019 was very successful, attracting more than 600,000 visitors. A new English biography (2022) on af Klint by German art historian Julia Voss is now available at most university and museum bookshops. The esoteric in art has a big following in the US.

Another audience might be many Swedenborgian societies in the US, which count about 8,000 members. The Facebook page of the Swedenborgian Spiritual Community of Puget Sound has more than 500 followers.

This beautiful volume is waiting to be discovered in more pockets of Strindberg passion in the US.

¹² Brantly 2024, pp. 139–140.

REFERENCES

- Åkerman, Susanna unpublished. 'Strindberg's Inferno and the spirits of Jupiter'.
- Brantly, Susan 2024. 'August Strindberg. The Occult Diary: Paris 1896–Stockholm 1908', review, *Scandinavian Studies* 96:1, 139–140.
- Carlson, Harry G. 1996. *Out of Inferno: Strindberg's Reawakening as an Artist*, Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Cavendish, Richard 1967. *The Black Arts: A Concise History of Witchcraft, Demonology, Astrology, and Other Mystical Practices Throughout the Ages*, London: Pan Books.
- Gavel Adams, Ann-Charlotte & Anna Westerståhl Stenport 2012. 'Strindberg and the stage', introduction in Evert Sprinchorn ed. & trans., *Selected Plays by August Strindberg*, 2 vols, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Herrlin, Axel 1936. *Från sekelslutets Lund*, Lund: Gleerup.
- Houe, Poul, Sven H. Rossel & Göran Stockenström eds 2002. *August Strindberg and the Other. New Critical Approaches*, Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi.
- Johnson, Walter 1963. *Strindberg and the Historical Drama*, Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Karagianis, Liz 2017. 'Music major directs New York's August Strindberg Theatre', MIT Alumni Profiles, 31 July, <https://alum.mit.edu/slice/music-major-directs-new-yorks-august-strindberg-theatre>, accessed 22 October 2025.
- La Paix*. 19 June 1893.
- La Plume*. 15 July 1892.
- La Revue des revues*. 15 May 1894.
- Michaud, Guy 1947. *Message poétique du Symbolisme*, vols 1–3, Paris: Librairie Nizet.
- Pernetty, A.J. 1782. *Les merveilles du ciel et de l'enfer et des terres planétaires et astrales par Emmanuel Swedenborg*, Berlin: G.J. Decker.
- Prideaux, Sue 2012. *Strindberg: A Life*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
- Sedir (Yvon Le Loup) 1896. Review of *Sylva Sylvarum, L'Initiation*, *Revue philosophique des hautes études*, March.
- Sjöstedt, Erik 1897. 'Bref från Paris om Ockultismen', Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning, 5 & 9 August.
- Sprinchorn, Evert 1982. *Strindberg as Dramatist*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
- Sprinchorn, Evert 1986. *Selected Plays by August Strindberg*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota press.
- Stenport, Anna Westerståhl ed. 2012. *The International Strindberg: New Critical Essays*, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.
- Stenport, Anna Westerståhl & Eszter Szalczer eds 2012. *August Strindberg: A Hundred-Year Legacy*, special issue of *Scandinavian Studies* 84:1.
- Stockenström, Göran 1972. *Ismael i öknen. Strindberg som mystiker*, *Historia litterarum* 5, Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.

- Stockenström, Göran ed. 1988. *Strindberg's Dramaturgy*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Strindberg, August 1969. *August Strindbergs brev 11*, ed. Torsten Eklund, Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag.
- Strindberg, August 1970. *August Strindbergs brev 12*, ed. Torsten Eklund, Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag.
- Strindberg, August 2012. Samlade verk 59:1, *Ockulta Dagboken*, eds Karin Petherick & Göran Stockenström, Stockholm: Norstedt.
- Strindberg, August 2022. *The Occult Diary*, eds Per Stam, Ann-Charlotte Gavel Adams & Gunnel Engwall, Stockholm: Stockholm University Press.
- Strindberg and Helium*, <http://www.youtube.com/@strindberghelium>.
- Tuchman, Maurice et al. eds. 1986, *On the Spiritual in Art. Abstract Painting 1890–1985*, New York: LACMA & Abbeville Press Publishers.
- Voss, Julia 2022. *Hilma af Klint. A Biography*, trans. Anne Posten, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- World Economic Forum 2015, www.weforum.org.