



Moses revisited. August Strindberg's and Edvard Munch's dramatic use of the figure of Moses

by Camilla Storskog

In his work *Moses, der Mann aus Ägypten*, the German theologian Johannes Lehmann calls attention to the complexity of the biblical portrait of Moses: "Depending on method and motivation, the profiles of Moses can be very differently outlined. Whether Jew or Christian, and however literally one takes the Bible to write a biography of Moses, several can be elicited from the very same text [...]".¹ The biblical Moses is an orphan, a prince and a fugitive; he is a rebel, a leader and a lawgiver. Although August Strindberg's and Edvard Munch's almost contemporary rewritings of Moses may have led the authors in opposite interpretative directions and to distinct readings of this mythical character, their representations of the man merely endorse Lehmann's statement. Strindberg's play, *Genom öknar till arvland* (*Through Deserts to Ancestral Lands*, written in 1903 and published posthumously in 1918), draws so close to the biblical hypotext as to become a dialogic transcription of the story of Moses as known from the Pentateuch.² In a little known dramatic piece entitled *Den fri Kjærligheds By* (*The City of Free Love*) written by Munch around 1905, the Moses character is instead brought into a madcap satire directed at the Norwegian *Bohème* and their idea of social reform. The two plays fall back on the same biblical data, though they exploit different registers of interpretation: Strindberg's drama stems from a long tradition of *biblical retelling*, a notion that Brian Britt (2005: 92) extends to

¹ "Je nach Methode und Motiv kann man völlig verschiedene Mosesbilder zeichnen. Selbst wenn man — gleich ob als Jude oder als Christ — die Bibel wörtlich nimmt, kann man mit denselben biblischen Texten ganz verschiedenartige Biographien des Moses schreiben [...]" (Lehmann, 1983: 9). *Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.*

² This is one of the reasons why the drama has been neglected or scorned by the critics. Svensson (2000: 61) briefly comments on its critical reception. Wikander (2009) discusses the play in relation to Strindberg's historical drama.



cover any stylistically unpretentious rewriting of the traditional Bible stories and a narrative mode in its own characteristic of the biblical style; instead, Munch's hypertextual practice, with its clear parodistical intents, puts into action the model of *biblical allusion* (Britt 2005: 92).

In Strindberg's dramatic transliteration of the biblical text it is the absence (rather than the presence) of originality and creative ambition that is worthy of note. A method of approaching and understanding the figure of Moses in the play may then concentrate on this character as representative of certain Strindbergian archetypes, appearing at different times and with different intensity in the works of the writer. As an intellectual disavowed by his own people, Strindberg's Moses is preceded by the portrayal of the Swedish reformer Olaus Petri in the play *Mäster Olof* (*Master Olof*, 1872) and followed by Socrates and Jesus in the two plays that together with *Genom öknar till arvland* compose *Den världshistoriska trilogin* (*The Trilogy of World History*, 1918). Furthermore, the Moses character is related to the protagonists in Strindberg's late historical plays in which, as Massimo Ciaravolo (2009: 157) writes, "monarchs and leaders are uncommon individuals in the hands of a divine will providentially ruling the destinies of nations and of the world".

Munch's biblical allusion relies on a host of often distorted motifs and quotes from the Exodus. However, the artist's intentions are not to deconstruct or to scorn the textual source: the device of turning biblical characters and elements upside down rather acts as a lever to overthrow his former friends and poke fun at their bohemian ideal of free love. The figure of Moses, which is introduced at the end of the play with the function of *deus ex machina*, therefore comes across as a humorous reversal of the qualities demonstrated by the biblical hero and serves Munch's purpose of mocking his first *maestro*, painter and writer Christian Krohg, elevated to a lawgiver of Mosaic stature in this satirical commentary on the social environment of the Kristiania *Bohème*.

When, in 1903, Strindberg turned to the story of Moses, he had for some time been considering the idea of casting the history of the world in a literary form. This project was further fuelled by the tensions that had come to change his religious thinking during and after the spiritual crisis of the Nineties, commonly referred to as Strindberg's *Infernokris* because of its uncovering in the novel *Inferno* (1897). Strindberg's superstitious belief in invisible powers was followed by a return to religion that came out as a non-denominational faith in God. This new faith in the divine providence, drawing on readings from the Old Testament and on the works of the 18th-century Swedish mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg, replaced the fatalism that had controlled his life during the years of the crisis. Strindberg now set out to try to convince himself that the way of the world, which earlier had appeared to him similar to the haphazard plot of a *Räuberroman* (Strindberg 1996: 352), was made up of correspondences and synchronies and guided by the divine hand of the Creator.



Strindberg's search for a literary form that would host his theory of "God in history"³ first resulted in an essay titled *Världshistoriens mystik* (*The Mysticism of World History*, 1903) soon followed by the work on the dramatic trilogy and the short story collection *Historiska Miniaturer* (*Historical Miniatures*, 1905) that opens with *Egyptiska tråldomen* (*The Egyptian Servitude*), a tale culminating in the birth of Moses.⁴ Already in the decade following Strindberg's death in 1912, critics turned to the 1903 essay in their attempts to interpret the post-*Inferno* production.

Världshistoriens mystik is relevant to our discourse as it reveals the central role of Moses in Strindberg's historical and providential thinking. Here, just as in the trilogy and in the short stories, the point of departure is indeed Moses, seen as a man who not only formed his own people but the entire history of humanity. The very same image of Moses is reflected by Elie Wiesel (1976: 181-2), who writes about the biblical hero as a "man who changed the course of history all by himself", whose "emergence became the decisive turning point" and whose "influence is boundless" and "reverberates beyond time". Strindberg uses the life of Moses as a touchstone for history: biographical episodes are turned into archetypal events destined to repeat themselves in disguise on the world stage for generations and centuries to come. As a result, when Strindberg records noteworthy historical events around the year 1000, he writes: "The Jews thrive under the Arabs (there was a time when Moses was a Bedouin under his Arab father-in-law, Jethro)"⁵; on the subject of the Vikings' contemporary "discovery" of America, Strindberg comments on the logic of a divine plan, which had established "[...] that Leif Eriksson was only to detect the new land of Canaan before the new Israel was allowed to enter, confirm its existence and hide the secret until the chosen one would appear"⁶; he further concludes that the 15th-century earthquake that partly destroyed China had been foreshadowed by the biblical one that swallowed Korah and his people according to the book of Numbers. All these episodes, which to Strindberg are bearers of prefigurative value, are present in his dramatisation of Moses's biblical biography.

Supposing that the study of archetypal characters in Strindberg's works may serve as a key to reading the play, I will concentrate on Moses as an example of a leader subject to God's will. As such, the character falls within the very idea of *mystik* (mysticism) discussed in Strindberg's essay on the history of the world. To Strindberg *mystik* is nothing but *den medvetna viljan* (the conscious will), explained thus: "The fact that man does not know what he is doing is his excuse, but this should also serve to teach him that he is but a tool in the hands of someone whose intentions cannot be

³ "Gud i historien" (Svensson 2000: 17) is Strindberg's own expression to describe what he considers an extraordinary scientific discovery.

⁴ See Lombardi 2011 for a discussion of the underlying dramatic structure in these short stories

⁵ "Judarne, trivas under araberna (Moses var en tid beduin under sin svärfar araben Jetro)", (Strindberg 2004: 22). An English translation of Strindberg's essay is available in Robinson 1996: 181-222.

⁶ "[...] att Leif Erikson blott skulle bespeja det nya Kanaans Land innan det nya Israel fick draga in, konstatera dess tillvaro och gömma hemligheten, tills mannen kom som ägde kallelsen", (Strindberg 2004: 22).



understood, although he looks after man's best interests".⁷ From this perspective, the figure of Moses goes back to Strindberg's portraits of great national and spiritual leaders such as the reformer Olaus Petri or King Gustav Vasa in the 1872 and 1899 plays, and points forward to people's guides such as Birger Magnusson or Sten Sture, to whom Strindberg dedicated the dramas *Bjälbo-jarlen* (*Earl Birger of Bjälbo*) and *Siste riddaren* (*The Last of the Knights*) in 1909. On the subject of Gustav Vasa, the king who freed Sweden from the Danes in 1500, Strindberg claimed that he had wanted to tell the story of "how God guided him from the Danish prison through Dalecarlia, and how he faced great dangers to free his country from slavery".⁸ The allusion to the biblical Exodus (evident in the quote) again proves the emblematic role of the Moses myth in Strindberg's world-historical view, while the portrait of Gustav Vasa as a monarch who surrenders to the incomprehensible divine will draws on, and anticipates, the figure of Moses: "I do not understand why my obedience is punished; but I submit to the superior wisdom which is beyond my comprehension".⁹ In Strindberg's roughly outlined profile of Moses, several scenes highlight the very human nature of a man who had been given supernatural powers and revelations of the divine. Scene 17 is introduced by an episode (absent in the biblical passage at its source), which shows Moses presenting himself to his people as their master, thus arousing an outburst of God's wrath. When God intervenes, Moses abides by his authority. His acceptance of the destiny of being a tool in the hands of the Lord does not, however, verge on the tragic neither in Strindberg's play nor in the Bible. On the latter source Hillel Barzel (1974: 124) comments: "If Moses seems to be in conflict with his God, it is not a tragic conflict; he accepts God's command. This acceptance leaves no doubt as to which of the two has primacy in the Bible's system of values".

The interpretative grid that Björn Sundberg skilfully applies to the above-mentioned plays from 1909 turns out to be a useful tool in the examination of this archetype. In *Bjälbo-Jarlen* and *Siste riddaren* the figure of God's middleman blurs with the one of the ploughman serving the man who has been elected to harvest. In the case of Birger Jarl, his own son was to become the king of Sweden while Sten Sture prepared the ground for the founding father of the Swedish nation, Gustav Vasa, whom Sundberg (2003: 178) defines as "the one possessing the necessary qualities for the new era, those that Sten Sture lacks, rooted as he is in the ideals of a past epoch".¹⁰ The idea of the ploughman serving God and his fatherland is easily adapted to Moses, who had been elected to lead his people to the Promised Land, though destined all

⁷ "Att människorna icke veta vad de göra är deras ursäkt, men detta skulle även lära dem inse att de äro redskap i någons hand, vars avsikter de icke kunna förstå, men vilken ser på deras bästa", (Strindberg 2004: 54).

⁸ "[...] huru Gud förde honom ur fångenskapen hos Juten upp till Dalarne; och huru han genom många farligheter slutligen befriar sitt land ur trældomen", cit. in Robinson 1992: 56.

⁹ "Varför min lydnad nu straffas, fattar jag icke; men jag böjer mig för den högre visdomen som går över mitt förstånd!", (Strindberg 1992: 284).

¹⁰ "[...] han som äger den nya tidens nödvändiga egenskaper vilka Sten Sture själv saknar, rotad som han är i en förgången eras ideal".



the same not to enter it and to die the very moment his vision came true. Commenting on Moses's destiny, Lehmann (1983: 262) claims that the story of his death serves first and foremost to introduce his successor. Within this view, the two final scenes in Strindberg's play gain importance: the former is dedicated to the calling of Joshua, the latter to the death of Moses. Moses first blesses his successor with words referring to Deuteronomy 31: 23: "Depart in peace and do not forget the words of the Lord: 'I have called you: be strong and courageous'".¹¹ As Moses dies with the vision of the Promised Land before his eyes, Strindberg instead recurs to a quotation from the Gospel of Luke, 2: 29-30: "Lord, now lettest thou thy Servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation".¹² The second passage, extracted from the New Testament, refers to the moment when Simeon, who has been fighting death for a long time, finally holds the child Jesus in his arms and realises that his dreams have been fulfilled: through the birth of the Messiah salvation has come to Israel and to all people. Strindberg's play thus ends on the notes of a Moses figure symbolising the love for his people and for the nation. The episode prefigures the coming of Christ, to whom the last play of the trilogy was to be dedicated and who had been announced by Moses according to Strindberg's above mentioned essay *Världshistoriens mystik*.

In the vast, fragmentary and little known written material that Munch left behind upon his death, the play *Den fri Kjærligheds By* stands out for its completeness.¹³ The drama, which alternates prose and rhymed verses, can be divided into nine scenes¹⁴ and comes across as a satirical exposure of the ideal of free love maintained by the Norwegian *Bohème* and by Tulla Larsen, with whom Munch had been emotionally involved at the end of the century. Munch cast himself in the role of the protagonist, a minstrel and a wanderer in conflict with *Dollarprincessen* ("the Dollarprincess"/Tulla Larsen) and with the beastly population of the imaginary city, moulded on the bohemians, his former friends: the writer Gunnar Heiberg is *Skjødegrisen* ("The lap piglet"), an idolised gilded suckling pig; the critic Sigurd Bødtker is depicted as a bony dog; the 1903 Nobel Prize laureate in literature, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, is disguised as billy goat-poet; Oda Krohg, the unfaithful wife of Munch's teacher, is *Bidronningen* ("The queen bee") while her husband, painter Krohg, deputises as *Den moderne Moses* ("The modern Moses").

The idea of the play seems to have been unleashed by the dramatic ending of Munch's affair with Tulla Larsen, an episode that had brought along the feeling of

¹¹ "Gack i frid och förgät icke Herrans ord! 'Se jag haver bjudit dig: Du skall vara fast och frimodig", (Strindberg 1996: 70).

¹² "Herre, låt nu din tjänare fara i frid, ty mina ögon hava skådat din härlighet...", (Strindberg 1996: 71).

¹³ A digital archive of Munch's written material is currently being prepared at <www.emunch.no>. I wish to thank research assistant Hilde Dybvik for having called my attention to a second, roughly outlined, version of *Den fri Kjærligheds By* (T2803) in which *Den moderne Moses* appears only briefly.

¹⁴ Cfr. Næss 1973: 153.



having been betrayed by the couple's common friends, all siding with the woman.¹⁵ In a letter to a friend, Munch alludes to this betrayal when describing his private hell with a biblical metaphor drawn from Genesis: "I was sold by my brothers; and although I am no Joseph I became a warrior in the land of the Pharaohs".¹⁶ The vitality of the biblical imagery is testified to in the play by Munch's numerous references to motifs present in the book of Exodus. The use of the hypotext draws on the principles for parodistic disguise: in place of the quails that fell over the Jews' camp in the desert there are fried pigeons descending over the City of Free Love; as a substitute for the golden calf, a fat and greedy gilded piglet is worshipped in this lustful society. And as the Dollar Princess proclaims herself queen of the city, her line mimicks the passage from Exodus according to which no man will ever see God's face and stay alive: "The poor wretched sinner dares to survive / Though he has seen me, the Goddess [...]".¹⁷ Lastly, the burlesque revision of the biblical source is sanctioned with the introduction of a meek and modern Moses.

The apparition of Moses as Supreme Judge in the final scene of the play wraps up the grotesque satire. In the characterisation of the figure, Munch exploits the stereotyped Mosaic identity shaped around the man of the law. The resurrection of Moses the lawgiver, as well as its immediate distortion, is based both on the affinity this role has with the painter Krohg and on the information transmitted by the biblical account of the events that took place on Mount Sinai. As the author of the nine commandments of the *Bohème*, partly mirroring the Mosaic Decalogue, Krohg had indisputably laid down the law within the bohemian community of Kristiania.¹⁸ The connection is further justified by the information contained in the biblical text according to which God, together with the ten commandments, also dictated a set of regulations regarding sexuality and wedlock to his servant. The wisdom reflected by the Mosaic law is subverted and brought to the point of absurdity to fit the quibbling rules regulating the ethics in the City of Free Love. According to this new logic, the minstrel is found guilty of having kissed the Dollar Princess only once instead of the twenty times as prescribed by law, which also establishes the duty to divorce before getting married and to marry only when the twosome is bored stiff together. The paradoxical sentence with which our modern Moses condemns the minstrel, a confusing mixture of contradictions and dillydallying, is yet another detail that certainly matches Moses's biblical biography. According to Exodus 4: 10 Moses is "slow of speech, and of a slow tongue" and because of his difficulty to find words and giving

¹⁵ Næss (1973) offers the biographical background to the drama and comments on its structure. Lathe (1983: 204) briefly comments on similarities between Munch's play and the genre of the operetta and also finds analogies with Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*.

¹⁶ "Jeg solgtes af Brødrene; og tiltrods for ikke at være en Josef blev jeg Kriger i Faraoernes land", cit. in Bang 1946: 19.

¹⁷ "Den elendige fattige sanger vover at leve / enda han har seet mig Gudinden", (Munch 1981a: 67). For an English translation of the play see Munch 1981b: 61-76.

¹⁸ The bohemian commandments appeared in the journal *Impressionisten* 8, 1889.



them utterance in need of a spokesman, Aaron, who is similar to the supporting judge next to Moses in Munch's drama.

Let us now take a closer look at the parodic rewriting of Krohg and the reuse of the biblical source in the creation of a modern Moses. Summoned to deliberate in the lawsuit filed against the minstrel guilty of having neglected the Dollar Princess, a drunken Moses enters the court beaming with joy because for once, in this upside-down world, his wife has betrayed thirty lovers to kiss her husband. He is then presented with the attributes necessary to undertake his task: the throne, the tablets with the law, the beard and the horns — all iconographic elements recurring in artworks dedicated to this biblical hero. It is specifically the horns that allow Munch to draw an analogy between the character in the drama and his two inspiring models. However, in the Hebrew text of Exodus there is no reference to these horns that have helped to identify Moses in visual representations of the prophet at least up to the Baroque era.¹⁹ The horns at Moses's brow instead seem to rise from the Latin Vulgate's erroneous interpretation of Exodus 34: 29 and 35, verses that in the Hebrew original only mention the light (a sign of the encounter with the Lord) that shone from the face of Moses descending Mount Sinai. As Sir Thomas Browne, among others, has explained, the three-letter root that in Hebrew indicates "to shine" was confused in translation with the one recurring in the Semitic word for "horn" with the result that Moses's crown of light turned out to be a horned forehead²⁰ Drawing on the iconographic tradition in the depiction of Moses, Munch carries out yet another conceptual jumble with parodistic intents, performing a "decrowning" of the hero in the comic and carnivalistic sense that Bachtin (2003: 124-6) has attributed to this notion. Since the authority of Krohg/Moses depends on the man's practical experience of the behavioural norms defined by the law, the horns in the play also become those of the cuckold. As such they symbolise the legendary infidelity of the painter's wife Oda Krohg, a celebrated *femme fatale* involved with several members of the *Bohème*, among others Gunnar Heiberg, the gilded pig in the play.

The accused minstrel ends up reaching the conclusion that to the modern Moses freedom to love is only for women, yet another detail in the drama reversing and inverting the concept of marital fidelity present in the Mosaic law, which, as Nathaniel S. Lehrman (1963: 70) observes, "for the first time in the evolution of contemporary society presented the sexual relationship of a woman to her husband, and to him alone, as a positive, enduring religious ideal". The play ends with the death of the minstrel, ostensibly finished off as socially dangerous and guilty of breaking the Mosaic Law — a punishment the legitimacy of which is actually justified in several passages of the Pentateuch.

¹⁹ A horned Moses appears e. g. on a stained glass window in the Cathedral of Notre-Dame, Chartres (panel no. 17, 1205-15), at Claus Sluter's Well of Moses (Chartreuse de Champmol, Dijon, 1396-1405) and in Michelangelo's statue for the tomb of Pope Julius II (San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome, ca. 1513-15).

²⁰ <<http://penelope.uchicago.edu/pseudodoxia/pseudo59.html>>



In conclusion: Strindberg and Munch frequented the bohemian milieus of Berlin during the winter of 1892-3 and met again in Paris in 1896. Munch made several portraits of Strindberg, Strindberg reviewed Munch's art and turned him into a central character in the novel *Inferno*.²¹ Appearing under cover as "the Danish painter", Munch functions as an adversary and a frightful reminder of the protagonist's bohemian past, in the same way as the Polish writer Przybyszewski, "Popoffski the Russian" in the novel. After they both had left behind the "bad company" of the bohemians, which had brought about the alienation from the Lutheran faith in the case of Munch and concurred to unleash Strindberg's *Inferno*-crisis, the solid heritage of a biblical culture common to both artists resurfaced in their work and thinking. Strindberg proceeded to elaborate the theory of coherence in the chaos of history, which would lead him to the study of characters such as Moses, while Munch, from a worldly point of view, reverted to the same biblical source, disrupting it with burlesque deformation.

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²¹ For further information on the relationship between Strindberg and Munch, see Svenæus 1967 and 1969.



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