

Chapter One

Writing a Life: An Approach to Strindberg's Project

He has dived under, in the Autobiographical Chaos, and swims we see not where.
– Carlyle: *Sartor Resartus*

In the bravura discourse on writing which forms the improbable introduction to a correspondence in which he will inscribe himself on the heart of his first wife, Siri von Essen, Strindberg declares: '*A writer is only a reporter of what he has lived*' (I:190)¹. The emphasis already placed on this sentence in the original has helped to foster the notion that, when writing, Strindberg merely transcribed remembered experience from the text recorded in his mind directly to the page in front of him. It is as if the rudimentary phonograph which furnishes his late experimental novella, *The Roofing Feast*, with an underlying structural image for its stream of consciousness technique, provides the critic with an apt metaphor for this recording and writing process. Just as the machine reproduces the music that is already traced on a cylinder so, each time the novel's protagonist awakens, 'the cylinder in the phonograph of his mind began to move again, emitting all his latest memories and impressions, but strictly in order exactly as they had been "recorded"' (44:61). If for Rousseau memories are ineffaceably 'gravé dans mon âme',² for Strindberg they are ineradicably printed upon the mind, and sustained by what he had come to regard as the authority of Swedenborg, his later work assumes 'that every least thing that a man has thought, willed, spoken, done or even heard and seen is inscribed on his eternal or spiritual memory; and that the things there are never erased.'³ However difficult it may be to decipher, the past always takes the form of writing, at times uncomfortably lucid and conveniently linear, as in the instance from *The Roofing Feast*, at others burdened with resistance and only

A line with many coils upon it
like the image of a script
on blotting paper – back to front –
forwards and backwards, up and down
but in a mirror you can read the script (51:80).

In every case, however, this trace is the precious and indelible sign of an individual life and presence. As the Teacher in the dramatic fragment, *The Isle of the Dead*, points out, memory is 'our capital', the reading required of us if 'we are going to make use of our true dreams or our experiences!' It is the place where each man's story is written even as he lives it, an account which is at once a personal narrative and a moral ledger, a codex of his life and the index of his vice or virtue. Without the written text there would be no man: 'If in one moment you could lose all remembrance, you would be like a book with white pages, less than a new-born child, and have to begin all over again!'⁴

Indeed, it is all too easy to capitulate to such images and accept at face value a conception of writing as the mere and immediate transcription of the lived into the written, especially when they are reinforced by the arguments with which Strindberg fervently advanced the utilitarian aesthetic he adopted during the 1880s. Even when composing historical fiction he insisted that 'the warp is always taken from my own life' (VII:154), and since he invariably maintained that writing predicates the experience of the writer as its foundation ('to be able to portray every facet and hazard of life one must have lived it' (46:72), he states, in *A Blue Book*), he frequently contends that an author's only proper and possible subject is himself. Like Rousseau, who argued that 'Nul ne peut écrire la vie d'un homme que lui-même. Sa manière d'être intérieure, sa véritable vie n'est connue que de lui',⁵ he claims the autobiographical prerogative and extends it to other genres. Apparently disdaining the lure of invention, he asserts the precedence of the experimental autobiographical narrative, *The Son of a Servant*, over the fictional *The People of Hemsö*: 'Not a novel, for the genre is false, we only really know fragments of other people's lives, and can only write one novel, the one about our own life' (VI:335). And what he particularly values is the author's presence in the text. After reading Edvard Brandes's play *Superior Force (Overmagt)*, he tells him: 'Of all the things you've written, this seems to me the most full of life, because you have given something of yourself. And what else should one give, when one knows so little about others!' (VII:33), and more than twenty years later he criticises Birger Mörner for having failed to achieve the drastic display of his 'entrails' [*inälvör*] that alternately disgusted and compelled him in his own writing: 'I've now read your book! All right! But you must write about yourself, about the important, remarkable things you have yourself experienced.... But you don't want to, because opening your belly is painful (=Harakiri).'⁶ In fact Strindberg repeatedly stresses the continuity between living and writing, and even their identity. In a disarmingly simple observation from the Inferno period, he informs Torsten Hedlund that he is 'returning to [his] book! Although it is not a book; it is a life!' (XI:100), while he explains to his sister, Elisabeth, that the art of the writer depends not upon invention but on the uninhibited exploitation of personal experience. To write

does not mean 'making up things that have never happened; to write means relating what one has lived', and what endangers such an undertaking is not a lack of ability, since 'anyone with education can write, that is to say, put his thoughts on paper', but reticence, a reluctance to give oneself 'to the paper' and so achieve 'the greatest form of pleasure and comfort' (III:41–2) as one's reward for releasing what is within.⁷

For his insistent misgivings about the moral propriety of imaginative writing are accompanied by a personal drive towards exposure and introspection which links the early assertion that 'what we have been seeking to compile for thousands of years is the natural history of the human heart, and everyone can and must make their contribution' (I:198), with the later declaration 'imaginative writing will gradually cease to exist. The future should see the setting up of offices at which at a certain age everyone anonymously handed in a truthful biography [sic]; it could become the data for a real science of man if such a thing were needed.'⁸ In any case, Strindberg was well-equipped to engage in continuous and rigorous introspection, and he often claimed to have mastered the complex art of regarding himself and his life objectively. Indeed, what distinguished him from critics of his subjectivity was, according to a letter of 1895, precisely his ability 'to objectify [him]self' (X:351), a faculty he bestowed in turn upon The Unknown in *To Damascus* (29:175) and The Stranger in the chamber play *The Burned House*, who describes how he 'now regarded [him]self as another, and observed and studied this other and his fate, which made me insensible to my own suffering' (45:106), and in later years Strindberg frequently envisaged the past he had lived through as if it were the plot of a superior dramatist in which he was both actor and spectator, or the text and its reader. An expert in what Nietzsche termed 'the art of staging and watching ourselves,'⁹ he thus caused Falkenström, one of the figures in whom he contrived this objectification, to remark in the novel *Black Banners*: 'It has in fact seemed to me from an early age that my life was staged before me so that I would be able to observe all its facets. This reconciled me to my misfortunes, and taught me to perceive myself as an object' (41: 196).

Several factors, to which Strindberg himself sometimes draws attention, nurtured this tendency. There was what he once called 'that damnable old faith of duty and asceticism', his early pietism, which his Norwegian colleagues, Bjørnson and Jonas Lie, both regarded as the fundamental stratum of his character. To Lie the engaged polemicist he knew in the early 1880s, who advanced the claims of a socially conscious, scientific literature at the expense of the imagination, was a concealed but fanatical Pietist, passionately attracted to martyrdom, while Bjørnson perceived that regardless of his later experience, Strindberg remained, morally at least, faithful to the Pietism of his youth.¹⁰ And when, in *The Son of a Servant*, Strindberg came to analyse the religious

perspective which in spite of everything continues to animate the text in which the judgement is made, he refers himself, if somewhat disparagingly, to 'Christianity's individualism, with its eternal burrowing into the self and its imperfections' (18:239), and indicates how 'Christianity's egotistical criticism of the self had accustomed him to occupy himself with his self, fondle it, cosset it, like another beloved person' (18:271). 'This habit of self-examination, which he derived from Christian soul-searching' (18:213) acted as a stimulus, both to the continual inspection of himself in the mirror of his words, and in a lifelong inclination to identify with a series of Romantic protagonists (Karl Moor, Manfred, Cain) who have in common a disposition 'to appear interesting in their own eyes' (19:99), and in whom he also saw himself reflected. As Nils Norman has observed, in his astute study of Strindberg's early religious ideas and experience:

That the psychological training involved in evangelical Christianity was of enormous significance for Strindberg as a writer, is obvious. When Strindberg became a Naturalist in the eighties, this also meant a return to behavioural patterns which had been implanted in him during his evangelical years. The confessional vein, which is already apparent in his early writing, but which first comes to the fore as a dominating feature in *The Son of a Servant*, has his youthful religious self-scrutiny as its self-evident precondition.¹¹

In Strindberg's case, therefore, the autobiographical enterprise is clearly related to the introspective religious tradition which Georges Gusdorf calls 'pietist', a nonliterary tradition initially, consisting of works written with no explicit artistic intent or thought of publication, in which various individuals recorded their spiritual life in writing. However, the scrupulous observation of his thoughts and motives, which the believer was encouraged to perform, prepared a context in which later writers (Gusdorf points to Rousseau, Herder, Goethe, and Kierkegaard) thought and wrote. Thus spiritual autobiography moved from the private domain of correspondence and diary (at the most, confidential texts open only to a select group of readers such as Strindberg wrote for his youthful mentor, Edla Heijkorn), via exemplary and cautionary personal histories, to the commercial world of published literature, a trend which, in the 1880s, and culminating with *The Son of a Servant*, Strindberg sometimes suggests he is anxious to reverse. As Gusdorf writes:

Le rôle du piétisme, dans l'histoire de l'autobiographie, aura été de susciter une conversion de l'attention vers l'espace du dedans... Lorsque diminuera la part de l'exigence religieuse, celle de la psychologie augmentera d'autant. Et l'autobiographie littéraire modern naîtra de la désacrilisation de l'espace du dedans. Ceux qui ne s'examinent plus devant Dieu et en

fonction de Dieu verront s'ouvrir à leur curiosité, à leur inquiétude, une région autonome de l'être humain.¹²

But if the habit of constant self-scrutiny originally encouraged the combination of self-assertion and public confession that characterizes so much of Strindberg's autobiographical writing (the one resisting and the other conceding the guilt he had become accustomed to seek and find), the desire to bear witness, which leads him to the extraordinary claim that he not only tells the truth but is the truth ('But in me there is a brutal animal instinct for truth... which compels me to be truth' (IV:168)), finds additional encouragement in both Kierkegaard, whose 'subjective demand for truth liberated and encouraged the Strindbergian subjectivity',¹³ and the theories of Naturalism.

The discovery of Kierkegaard, whose impact on the young Strindberg is documented in volume two of *The Son of a Servant*, acted as a further spur to self-analysis and moral self-scrutiny, provided an example of how to distribute and objectify the different sides and drives of the self among invented and pseudonymous characters, and introduced him to the idea of experimenting with standpoints and to seeing his life as a series of stages, as well as to the art of 'living immured within one's own personality to be one's own witness, one's own judge, one's own prosecutor, to be in oneself the one and only!'¹⁴ In Kierkegaard's description in his *Essay in Experimental Psychology*, *Repetition*, of the young man who was captivated by the theatre 'and desired to be himself carried away into the midst of that fictitious reality in order to see and hear himself as an *alter ego*, to disperse himself among the innumerable possibilities which diverge from himself, and yet in such a way that every diversity is in turn a single self',¹⁵ there is, too, an anticipation not only of Strindberg's method of characterization but also of the species of shadow play into which he enters in *To Damascus*, in order to project himself and the events of his life in the mirror image of the stage. Moreover, Kierkegaard offered Strindberg grounds for regarding his passion for writing as a calling (*kallelse*), a sacrifice (*offer*), and a duty (*pligt*), so partly allaying that 'distaste for art' (IV:144) which always haunted him as 'Ghosts from my youth, when I was a pietist' (II:362). By placing his production in the category of the ethical rather than the aesthetic, he was able to accept the 'indescribable' pleasure writing gave him, as well as 'this wonderful turning inside out of the soul... which is the precondition of art' (I:325).

By purporting to represent the real and not the beautified, Naturalism also assuaged, if only temporarily, the same misgivings. With its scientific pretensions, what he termed 'this microscopic view which wants to penetrate to the core of the matter' (II:357), afforded a theoretical framework for his native disposition, and Nietzsche's malicious description of the current literary trend as one in which 'the showy words are: ... being "scientific" (the *document*

humain: in other words, the novel of colportage and addition in place of composition)¹⁶ provides an apt summary of Strindberg's many comments on the need to abandon a literature derived from the imagination during the 1880s. Not that he was the first to argue the scientific and documentary value of autobiographical writing at the expense of fantasy and invention: in *Monsieur Nicolas*, Restif de la Bretonne had claimed 'Ce n'est pas pour m'historier que j'écris, mais pour démontrer les causes et les effets des actions humaines. Voilà ce qui nécessite une foule de détails. C'est un livre utile qu'on lit ici, et s'il est amusant, ce n'est que son second mérite.'¹⁷ But with *The Son of a Servant*, Strindberg certainly embarks upon the single most extended attempt at the scientific literature which possessed the imagination of his French contemporaries. Flaubert's remark, 'Quand on aura, pendant quelque temps, traité l'âme humaine avec l'impartialité que l'on met dans les sciences physiques à étudier la matière, on aura fait un pas immense',¹⁸ and Zola's demand for 'une littérature expérimentale' in which 'l'écrivain est un chirurgien qui, pour aller jusqu'au cœur, coupe dans la chair d'une main paisible et ferme, sans fièvre aucune',¹⁹ preface Strindberg's argument that literature 'ought to emancipate itself totally from art and become science' (V:339); and the four volumes, in which he dissects himself in accordance with the prevailing view of the writer as a counterpart to the surgeon or physiologist, are in fact continuous with the scientific investigations to which he afterwards devotes himself. They represent an attempt to proceed beyond the constructions he accused Zola of having placed on observed or invented lives (and the criticism of Zola for pretending to know 'what goes on in other people's heads' (18:456) in the Foreword signals the autobiographical nature of *The Son of a Servant* in a discussion which otherwise deflects precise generic identification), while as 'an attempt at the literature of the future' (18:455), they approach the 'livre de pure analyse' which Edmond de Goncourt believed might represent 'la dernière évolution du roman'.²⁰

Conceiving his life as a scientific project, each of Strindberg's principal autobiographical ventures is therefore not only a Kierkegaardian experiment with standpoints but a text in which he is 'Laborator und Experiment-objekt auf demselben Mal' (XIII:262). *The Son of a Servant* is considered 'a development of the naturalist novel, incorporating history, psychology, social milieu, together with the writer's opinions on the matter' (V:295), 'an attempt to emancipate literature from art' in which the author 'has merely taken the corpse of the person I have known best and learned anatomy, physiology, psychology, history from the carcass' (V:344). The next stage, *A Madman's Defence*, is the outcome of 'an experimental psychological analysis' (VI:242) in which Strindberg transforms himself and his environment into a field of research, cultivates the virus of jealousy, explores the hinterland of insanity,

and turns his private life with Siri von Essen into a public laboratory in which he tests his views on marriage, so accomplishing an extreme instance of that type of *dédoublement* often encountered in Naturalism where, as Maupassant observes of the writer, 'Il semble avoir deux âmes, l'une qui note, explique, commente chaque sensation de sa voisine de l'âme naturelle, commune a tous les homes'.²¹ In *Inferno*, meanwhile, he embarks upon 'the study of man' (XI: 104) to which he redirected his attention after the spectacular investigation of the natural world and man's place in nature which he conducted in the early 1890s, and writes up the experimental data gathered in the letters to Torsten Hedlund and his *Occult Diary*, while *Alone*, written in 1903, incorporates a theoretical blueprint by means of which he seeks to explore and disarm his future as well as placate and preserve the past.²²

In any case, of course, Strindberg palpably fails to achieve that impartial and impassive detachment from his material which a number of contemporary writers considered appropriate to the objectivity that was an essential component of the experimental method as understood by contemporary science.²³ Indeed, the impersonality of the experimental method, which 'aura pour résultat de faire disparaître de la science toutes les vues individuelles pour les remplacer par des théories impersonnelles et générales',²⁴ posed a direct threat to the self which Strindberg guarded so jealously and whose preservation and distinction is one of the underlying purposes of his autobiographical project. As Claude Bernard stressed in his *Introduction à l'étude la médecine expérimentale*, the treatise on scientific method which exerted so potent an influence on Zola's *Le roman expérimental*: 'L'expérimentateur doit alors disparaître ou plutôt se transformer instantanément en observateur.'²⁵ But to disappear was an option Strindberg rigorously declined, and like the grounds upon which Naturalism eventually proved inadequate to the questions he asked of it, in part precisely because of the dilemmas inherent in a literature which affects 'la nudité d'une leçon d'anatomie',²⁶ these tensions in his approach to writing will shortly require elucidation, for it is often in relation to the easily accepted metaphors and images through which Strindberg describes his project that, on investigation, it becomes most discrepant and opaque. Nevertheless, it is clear that in the conception of literature to which he so often gestures, that is, a combination of the kind of autobiographical and confessional material which both Herder, in 'Von Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele', and Goethe, in his desire for a history of the personality, wanted to see collated and published, and the *document humain* advocated by the Goncourts and Taine, the role of the imagination in writing is normally treated as secondary to the facts of the author's life:²⁷ 'Of course, you have the freedom to use your imagination,' he remarks, in a significantly concessionary addition to his letter on writing to Siri von Essen (I:198). It serves to augment what

life offers and provides 'the protective disguise' (VII:138) when the material to hand is too intimate for immediate publication, as is strikingly the case with his almost contemporaneous account of events at Skovlyst in 1888 in the novella *Tschandala*, where he literally dresses up his revelations about his landlady, her bailiff lover, and his own entanglement with the latter's sister, in seventeenth-century costume.²⁸ Otherwise, however, at least until after he develops a modernist aesthetic during the Inferno period, Strindberg continues to maintain that 'the imagination, which has been regarded as creative, that is to say, able to make something out of nothing, is only the gift of organization, which arranges the memory's greater or lesser wealth of impressions and puts each of them in its place.' (17:193)

Prefaced by such statements, it is perhaps not so extraordinary to recall that, until recently, it was an accepted practice in Sweden for the actor who played The Unknown in *To Damascus* to wear a mask representing Strindberg's features. In its immediate erasure of all difference between the writer and his text, this custom affords an eloquent image of the long tradition of biographical criticism in Strindberg studies, where the writing is generally mapped neatly back on to what is known of the life it ostensibly transcribes. That what is known is often only recoverable through Strindberg's highly personal account is, however, a nicety which leaves such criticism largely unruffled. In its concern to identify the text with its author and to reconstruct from it only the image of its progenitor, it attributes any noticeable discrepancies in the transcription of known facts to the realm of authorial inadvertency, and habitually glides from the names of the characters to those of Strindberg and his contemporaries. Thus Strindberg's first biographer, Erik Hedén, illustrates his discussion of *The People of Hemsö* with a recent photograph of 'Gusten in *The People of Hemsö* as an old man', and even Torsten Eklund grows so frustrated with the discrepancies between *A Madman's Defence* and the facts of Strindberg's life that consideration of the work's veracity provokes the resigned comment: 'Moreover, the material is clearly designed with an artistic aim.'²⁹ In this critical tradition, life and work are understood to reflect one another without significant distortion, and a text like *The Roofing Feast* can therefore easily be reduced to the status of a transparent report from Strindberg's third marriage.³⁰

Since the interval between the events of Strindberg's life and the material of his writing is certainly traversed more rapidly than with most authors, criticism is not unjustified in observing this proximity; but in its tendency to annul all difference and engage with novels and plays only as forms of more or less impeded autobiography, this approach denies many texts their potential polyvalency of meaning as literature. Indeed, it even negates the possibility of an imagined literature since, as Kierkegaard points out, 'all

poetic production would *eo ipso* be rendered impossible and unendurable, if the lines must be the very words of the producer, literally understood.³¹ Unfortunately, however, where Strindberg is concerned, impurities abound and fact and fiction are frequently only imperfectly distinguished, either through the impassioned carelessness of an author personally engaged in the recorded events, as in *A Madman's Defence*, when the equivocal figure of 'fröken Z' is inadvertently unfrocked towards the end of the text as her real life original 'Miss David' (ED:247), or with intent, as when, in retrospect, he deliberately aligns his later destiny as it is recounted in *Inferno* with the fate of the central character of his first major work, the historical drama *Master Olof*³². Thus an alternative critical method, which regards even *A Madman's Defence* and *Inferno* as fictional entities independent of the life of their creator, also affords too partial an approach. Eric Johannesson's penetrating study, *The Novels of August Strindberg*,³³ for example, provides an antidote to the excesses of the biographical tradition which is of great service in demonstrating the artistry with which Strindberg composes his narratives, but it cannot account for the duplicity with which he moves back and forth, from one domain to another, either in the relationships a text proposes between the lives of actual persons in a real environment and its own internal narrative logic, or the uses to which it was put by its producer. Generally, disguises are transparent or bestowed on a system of minimal displacement (in the *Inferno* material, for instance, Poles become Russians, and Norwegian painters, Danes); footnotes and textual allusions sometimes direct the reader to other fictional or non-fictional segments of the developing corpus of texts to which Strindberg signs his name; and even in achieved works of fiction (for example, in the statement 'They lived in Norrtullsgatan, to the left of Observatory Square' (14:40), in the short story, 'The Rewards of Virtue', or the Student's remark, 'I'm said to have come into the world in the middle of bankruptcy proceedings' (45:153), in *The Ghost Sonata*, both of which evoke information about Strindberg's early life that is explicitly developed in *The Son of a Servant*), there are rents in the text through which his life flows. They are solicitations in which he draws attention to himself, apertures where he allows himself to become visible to the eyes of his contemporaries and to the critical gaze he intends should one day trace his whole career. For he frequently maintains that he is only to be apprehended in the entirety of his writing ('My writings are me!' (XV:223)), and that the truth about him is to be found not in the world, but in 'the thousands of printed pages' (19:278) wherein their author is dispersed, to be constituted subsequently from what Michel Foucault terms '[the] relationships of homogeneity, filiation, reciprocal explanation, authentication or... common utilization'³⁴ which exist between the various texts.

Hence his concern that nothing he wrote be lost or overlooked, as in one of his several premature testamentary letters (on this occasion to his short-term collaborator on the ironic comedy, *Comrades*, Axel Lundegård) in which he urges him to see that 'my collected works, *everything* I have written, every word from newspapers, almanacs, at home and abroad, including my letters, are published when the time is ripe, in Flensburg, Leipzig, Copenhagen or Chicago' (VI:297). Every word must be available for the reader to be in a position 'to see as deeply into a soul as can be seen' (VI:298), for like Kierkegaard he conceived of the work as a whole, shaped and orchestrated and yielding itself only to the informed reader. It is a play of signifiers in which he has 'multiplied himself (*polymeriserat sig* – 18:459), and where his self is distributed throughout the totality of texts from which 'the enlightened reader' (18:459) may reconstruct the author and his life amid the cluster of Johans, Axels, Falk(-enström)s, and their companion Teklas, Marias, Gustavs, and Borgs, characters in whom Kierkegaardian pseudonymity is sometimes coupled with Balzacian recurrence in novels, plays and autobiographies: 'And if his collected works are ever published,' Strindberg writes, of one of these multiplications, 'not a word should be changed, but all the contradictions resolved in the common Kierkegaardian title: Stages on Life's Way' (40:46).³⁵

This is Strindberg's larger project, which establishes a context in which all his writing demands recognition as in some degree autobiographical. And, of course, most writing accommodates such a reading. Thus Nietzsche considered every great philosophy 'a confession on the part of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir';³⁶ Derrida's continuing deconstruction of Freud has uncovered the autobiography in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as well as in *The Interpretation of Dreams*;³⁷ and works of fiction offer innumerable opportunities for the pursuit (if not the capture) of the author since, as André Maurois observes, 'la création artistique n'est pas une création *ex nihilo*. C'est un regroupement des éléments de la réalité. On pourrait montrer facilement que les récits les plus étranges, ceux qui nous paraissent le plus loin de l'observation réelle, comme les *Voyages de Gulliver*, les *Contes* d'Edgar Poe, la *Divine Comédie* de Dante ou l'*Ubu Roi* de Jarry, sont faite de souvenirs.'³⁸ Indeed, an invitation to trace latent or overt transpositions and transformations of lived experience into writing that does not necessarily advertise its autobiographical substance is implicit in most post-Classical literature where the reader is encouraged to discern not only what Edward Said has called the 'idiolect' that signifies the 'irreducible individuality' of the author,³⁹ but also the more or less submerged fragments of the great confession which, since Romanticism, it has been the custom to seek and find in literature: as Strindberg retorts, to criticism of *To Damascus*: 'Why does Norddeutsche Allg. Z. go on about autobiography? Doesn't Goethe state in *Aus meinem Leben* that all his work

was a Confession? Isn't Faust a diary?' (XIV:223). But this pursuit entails a vastly more sophisticated process than the tradition of biographical criticism normally allows for. If the author's life lurks at the base of a literary work, where it provides the deep structure of experience retailed in the text, then no more than literature as a whole is a simple reflection of the society of which it is part, does this underlying sequence of events appear in the text without refraction, distortion, addition, and inevitably subtraction. Besides retaining a sense of the text's diversity, therefore, following the autobiographical trace involves a recognition that the obvious signposts of intent in a text may prove misleading, and that the transfer of a life into the text of its written inscription inserts it into a circuit of communication where it is traversed by other forces, the demands and constraints of language and genre, and what Roland Barthes calls 'the image-repertoire, which oversees, controls, purifies, banalizes, codifies, corrects [and] imposes the focus (and the vision) of a social communication,⁴⁰ as well as by those forces which the narrator does not know, or knows only obscurely, his unconscious and the prevailing ideology, which constantly undercut any desire he may have to fit the word neatly to the world. As Strindberg knows from his own self-study, characters are 'conglomerations of past and present cultures, scraps from books and newspapers, fragments of people, torn scraps of fine clothing that has become rags, in just the same way that the soul is patched together' (23:104), and he proceeds with what Paul de Man has termed the blindness which yields insight,⁴¹ whether he is writing autobiography or fiction.

To comprehend Strindberg's enterprise, therefore, requires neither the simple matching of fact to fiction, nor the removal of his work to an independent realm for contemplation as a series of self-contained realities, but an eye for the unarticulated forms which mediate its production, for the non-transparencies in the text, and for those symptoms of an unseen meaning which may reside even in the most prominent and constant of his images, in for example his claim to be the lucid purveyor of truth or the bearer of a spectacular destiny. In the interplay between the lived and the written, moreover, it is the work that illuminates the life, not the reverse, and for the reader both constitute texts to be interpreted. As Fredric Jameson notes:

It should be observed that, where the older biographical criticism understood the author's life as a context, or as a cause, as that which could explain the text, the newer kind understands that 'life' or rather its reconstruction, precisely as one further text in its turn, a text on the level with the other literary texts of the writer in question and susceptible of forming a larger corpus of study with them.⁴²

But it requires, too, an awareness of the context in which writers were prepared to render up their lives to a literature in which the reader expected to discover the figure of its author in the text. For although an extreme instance, Strindberg's flagrant exposure of himself to the public gaze, in which he attempts to convey 'my story stark naked' (VIII:188), was only conceivable because it encompassed a potential inherent in the literary institution of a period for which writing was published and read as essentially self-revelatory. In a market where the novel was the dominant article of self-display, Maupassant, in remarking that 'nous ne diversifions donc nos personnages qu'en changeant l'âge, le sexe, la situation sociale et toutes les circonstances de la vie de notre *moi*,'⁴³ might still imply that diversity and even invention remained an option, but a comment by Edmond de Goncourt in his *Journal* (the publication of which was itself a symptom of the time), betrays the growing impatience with invention, at least on the part of a sophisticated reader: after criticizing Zola for the kind of 'fabulation' with which Strindberg also took issue, he observes that 'Je ne suis intéressé que par un roman où je sens dans l'imprimé, pour ainsi dire, la transcription d'êtres en chair et en os, où je lis un peu ou beaucoup des mémoires d'une vie vécue.'⁴⁴ In an earlier period, Shaftesbury had already lamented that 'The whole Writing of this Age is become indeed a sort of Memoir-Writing',⁴⁵ but Strindberg now frequently took up this development in defence of his own practice, as when, in a letter urging the publication of *Miss Julie* and *Creditors* upon a publisher who recoiled at what he took to be their character of improper private revelation, he pointed out that 'in our days everything is intimate and Confessions are the height of fashion' (VII: 144), and went on to remind him of recent examples, among them Zola's *L'Oeuvre*, (with its 'pretty intimate scenes in bed with his wife'), Goncourt's *Les frères Zemganno*, Jonas Lie's *Ett Samliv*, and Victoria Benedictsson's *Pengar*, in which he detected a transparent account of the writer's marriage, down to 'her husband's hairy chest'. This claim is repeated some five years later, again with reference to *Pengar*, in order to defend the exposure of his own marriage in *A Madman's Defence*' (IX:224), and a similar argument is used to exonerate writing à clef in the essay 'On the General Discontent' ('Om det allmänna missnöjet'), where he includes both Dante and Dickens among the 'out and out scandal-mongers' (16:46). Apart from indicating that Strindberg's manner of reading resembled Goncourt's, however, and that his approach to a text was often vehemently partial, the evidence he marshals does suggest that contemporary writers at least sometimes invited such attention. In short, Strindberg's writing is part of a movement in which the textual encounter between writer and reader seems more immediate than hitherto. At times, in *Inferno* or Maupassant's 'La Horla', Hamsun's *Hunger* or Huysman's *En Route*, where the writer assumes the burden of the experience recounted in his text with minimal pretence, this writing resembles a *document humain*,

and it is therefore not surprising that, in what Conrad describes as a ‘task which mainly consists in laying one’s soul more or less bare to the world’ where ‘everyone who puts pen to paper for the reading of strangers... can speak of nothing else’ than himself;⁴⁶ this trend should coincide with the development of the kind of purposeful occultation practiced by Henry James and Mallarmé, who wished to preserve both literature and themselves from too direct and impertinent a gaze.

This approach applies particularly to the more modest of Strindberg’s projects, that selection of his works which in later years he suggested should be published under the collective title ‘The Son of a Servant’ as a continuous account of his ‘life’s saga’ (XIII:28). The 1909 preface to the second edition of the original *Son of a Servant* is evidently written as a foreword to the whole sequence, as it is enumerated in an unwieldy conception he sent to his German translator, Emit Schering, in 1904:

One thing, while I remember it. If I die soon, will you collect and publish, in *one volume*, under the title ‘*The Son of a Servant*’ these works:

1. The Son of a Servant
2. Time of Ferment
3. In the Red Room
4. (Fourth part of this work, manuscript at Bonniers)
5. Die Beichte eines Thoren
6. The Quarantine Officer’s Second Story (from Fagervik and Skamsund)
7. Inferno
8. Legends
9. Alone
10. The Occult Diary since 1896
11. Correspondence, letters.

This is the only monument I desire: a black wooden cross and my story!
(XV: 38)

That the project represents more than a passing whim is confirmed by similar lists to his publisher, Bonnier, and the writer Gustaf af Geijerstam (XV:42, XIII:28), and among his surviving papers a further reformulation of the table of contents is written on a concept entitled ‘The Son of a Servant (to be published after my death with this title in one volume).’⁴⁷

Given the ambiguity which surrounds the nature and genre of every one of these texts (the refusal in the 1886 Foreword to identify *The Son of a Servant* as ‘novel, biography, memoir... apology... confession’ (18:452), for example; the narrative frame of *A Madman’s Defence*, with its duplication of writers between the preface and the text; the claim of *Inferno* to be only a transcription of

the Narrator's diary; the extraction of the pseudo-fictional 'The Quarantine Master's Second Story' from the autobiographical novel, *The Cloister*, which was not published until after Strindberg's death; and the way in which the first person narration, absence of names, and fictional inclusions places *Alone* in the no-man's land described by Philippe Lejeune in his recent influential attempt to establish the generic boundaries of autobiography on the basis of the writer's contract with his readers as 'Pacte = 0: non seulement le personnage n'a pas de nom, mais l'auteur ne conclut aucun pacte, – ni autobiographique, ni romanesque'),⁴⁸ it is evident that Strindberg nevertheless experiences a need to distinguish these writings from the remainder of his production in what represents a kind of autobiographical pact with those who study his work. Although he may sometimes yield to the temptation to relocate a work in the domain of fiction, it exhibits, for all the flux of categories that now exists in the relationship between autobiography, *Bildungsroman*, *roman intime*, confessional novel, case history, self-analysis, diary, and letter, a desire to achieve a coherent, consequent, and continuous account of his life. And it is precisely in relation to these works which most obviously seek to take possession of their author's past self and the life he has lived, that the image offered by The Unknown's Strindberg mask reveals a fine irony. For however closely writing retraces the events it records, and whatever the degree of veracity it achieves, it simultaneously covers over and masks the life it is employed to recover. Language displaces the past: the past is replaced by language and the genres into which it settles, and which in turn impose a shape not only on the past but on a reader's response to its reproduction. Thus language interposes itself as a screen between the reader or spectator and the events projected in it, and it is by no means a gratuitous play on words to see, in any subsequent account of the lived experience, both a further recovery and a fresh re-covering. For, more evidently than most discourses, the autobiographical demonstrates that writing is secondary. Even in cases of almost immediate transcription (for example, in those parts of Anais Nin's *Journals* in which she attempts the instantaneous capture of experience 'before it is altered, changed by distance or time'),⁴⁹ whatever incites the writer to write is separate usually in place and always in time from the act of recording. What is narrated or described is developed, enriched, and impoverished as it is transposed into the domain of the written; moreover, autobiography is not a one-way mirror but a composition, and the image of the self that is captured there is not a reflection but something created by the act of writing, an act which is itself an event in the life, an action which produces rather than reproduces the life.

Although part of the writer's life, therefore, and capable once written, of playing a role in the inauguration of other texts, autobiography remains a supplement. That is, it follows after the life it narrates until it reaches a

point where, by a neat reversal, it becomes the life narrated. For the obsessive autobiographer such as Rousseau or Strindberg, writing is partly a means of organizing identity, of recuperating the dispersed fragments of personality, and, through the mediation of language, of creating his own image in the cohering structure of literature, and almost any event may stimulate a revision or a fresh attempt. A single page of Strindberg's favourite Lessebo writing paper survives as witness to one such aborted attempt. It merely lists a handful of dates, 1849, 1857, 1867, 1877, 1893, 1901, 1904, in a column down the page, all of which (except tantalizingly and provocatively the second) are easily associated with significant events in the succession of birth, university, marriage, and divorce, which form the most obvious chronology of his life.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, in another inventory, headed 'Excremental hells' (*Träckhelveten*), the reading of Swedenborg's *Arcana Coelestia*, where those who once delighted in sensual pleasures are described as finding their *post mortem* delight in sewers, urine and dung, has provoked a further recapitulation in search of continuity and order that is governed by the idea of an excremental hell. Before issuing in the Swiftian disgust which sometimes characterizes his later writing ('Children enter the world in excrement, live their first years in excrement'), and in an urgent addition in crayon in which he once again demands to know 'Who am I?', the list succeeds in incorporating a large reach of the past among places which he has repeatedly described in the autobiographical sequence and *To Damascus*:

The dustbin in the yard at Clara, where I played as a child by the toilets.
 Loviseberg, cowshed, cesspits, tobacco plantation, putrid ponds with leeches and dead cats:

Norr tullsgatan 12. In the flat. Grev Magnigatan.

Lästmakargatan – the dining room window was directly opposite the toilet. Norrmalmsgatan in an old whore house with the toilets beneath an open sewer.

The situation when Baroness W. declared her love for me and the old codgers W. went through the room with the out-house lantern
 Skovlyst: Excremental hell and Swine hell.

Dornach: Excremental hell.

In Gravesend: the closets.

Rue de la Grande Chaumière opposite the toilet.

Orfila opposite one; above one; and a view over 150 toilets

The yard at Madame Charlotte's where we ate between the dustbins and the toilet.

The Rose Room at Klam was directly opposite the toilet.⁵¹

But as even this minor example suggests, the image of the self and its past established in language gradually replaces its source, and the natural

sequence of events in the life becomes an interpreted series, a retrospective reconstruction which confers on the discrete particulars of existence the coherence, order, and elaboration of a destiny. What is unwritten, meanwhile, becomes the un-lived, and each recorded moment or fact is a component of the image comprehended by the text. Thus one of the main drives articulated in Strindberg's writing, the instinct for truth which provokes 'a hazy desire to rip off one's clothes and go naked' (16:110), which is often advanced in evidence of his autobiographical probity, is itself an element of the personal myth embodied in the writing. Whether, as in the 1880s, he appears in the guise of the iconoclastic rebel, Loke, or, after his Inferno experiences, as the reluctant prophet, Jonah, Strindberg, the truth-sayer, who unmasks the web of deceit and lies with 'the simple, raw language of truth' (54:227), is only one aspect of the almost archetypal self-projection which his writing has imposed upon his: readers. And hence what matters is not to ascertain whether what Strindberg writes is true or false in any pedantic, literal sense; what matters is only what he wrote of himself either wittingly or not, of what may be deduced from both the sequence of autobiographical works and the totality of his writings since they hold not merely other versions of himself but belong to the single endeavour to apprehend his experience of the world. Eventually rejecting Naturalism, he would maintain that the natural world had not developed like a Darwinian chain but formed a complex lattice-work of relationships: 'The plants are not developed like a chain but... the whole is a net' (27:679). His life, too, as he lived and wrote about it, came to resemble not a continuous linear progression of events but a network of discontinuities, repetitions, and contradictions for which he sought a more sensitive means of self-representation than the developmental Naturalist account, with its stress on physiological and psychological cause and effect, one that was alert to the often unconscious, seemingly trivial, and apparently random fragments of being as well as to its steady, onward flow.

Moreover, if it is the continuous desire to represent himself in language which eventually convinces Strindberg of the need to go beyond Naturalism, it also accounts for his refusal to confine himself to the customary autobiographical model, that is, the single retrospective text involving a return to childhood and the retracing of the writer's origins and development, which distinguishes autobiography as a genre from related forms such as the historical memoir (in which the emphasis, as Strindberg himself observed in commenting on the exclusion of events surrounding his trial for blasphemy in 1884 (19:227), is placed on an account of external matters rather than on an examination of the personal life), the short episode or *souvenir* (which covers only a period in the subject's life), the intimate journal, auto-portrait, essay or diary (all of which are discontinuous or do not take the form of a retrospective prose narrative).

According to Philippe Lejeune, it is this singleness 'qui rend particulièrement solennel et émouvant l'acte autobiographique.'⁵² A man can produce only one such autobiography, Lejeune argues, for in writing of himself he will become, if he has not already done so, once and for all, who he is. Having reconstructed the unity of his life in time, the prospect of change appears at an end, if only in the closure achieved in the consummation of the autobiographical act in which he has given his one life its definitive form.⁵³ This is the singular task which Strindberg performs in *The Son of a Servant*, which he often regards as a book composed in the face of death, the vivisection of a corpse in which he achieves the posthumous perspective of the comprehensive autobiographer who falls back upon his origins in the face of a foreclosed future and dissects his naked body: as he wrote, to Edvard Brandes:

If you only knew how pleased I am that my book has made an impression on you. For all my demagogism, I think I am too genteel to write for the mob. I have cut a caper before, I have no doubt been an unwitting clown, who 'put it on', who dressed up, made faces, anything to attract people's attention. But this time I regarded myself as dead, paid no heed to the inquisitive snout of the common herd, forgot myself more than it seems... and tried to be the most difficult thing of all: honest. (V:350)

In his study of Stendhal, Lejeune notes how 'sans doute l'idée de la mort (mort affective... et après 1830, mort sociale) était-elle nécessaire pour briser un instant le dynamique système de relais vers l'avenir, et induire un retour aux origines,'⁵⁴ and his analysis is suggestive of the context in which Strindberg sought a way out of the 'mort sociale' of the trial arising from *Getting Married* by writing his autobiography. 'I regard myself and my talent as dead and am now writing the saga of my life in a peculiar form of novel', he tells Brandes, 'I believe that in that way I will be able to analyse myself and discover what makes me tick' (V:306). Indeed, each autobiographical volume is written 'confronted by death' (18:458) or 'devant la mort' (IX:339), but this is underlined in the case of *The Son of a Servant* by the fiction of seeing his life as past, a fiction partly sustained by his use of the third person to objectify himself as 'Jo/han'⁵⁵ and regard himself, at least in theory, from the standpoint of a research scientist writing a report on an unusually interesting case.

However, in later years Strindberg adds further instalments in other narrative modes and from greatly altered perspectives. When, therefore, Lejeune asserts, of the traditional autobiographical model, that 'ce récit une fois écrit il sera difficile de la recomposer autrement. Aucune approche fraîche et directe du passé ne sera plus possible, on ne pourra plus le voir qu'à travers le récit qui en aura été fait',⁵⁶ he is in fact describing precisely the situation of intertextuality which Strindberg contrives. His past is written and rewritten,

lived and relived, across a succession of texts that comment upon each other as well as upon the life they record. The method is dynamic in order to encompass change. Continuity and discontinuity, which Francis Hart sees as the essence of autobiography since, as he argues, ‘effective access to a recollected self or its ‘version’ begins in a discontinuity of identity or being which permits past selves to be seen as distinct realities, yet only a continuity of identity or being makes the autobiographical act or purpose meaningful’,⁵⁷ are dialectically related, so that the narrator is constantly confronting himself as he was, as he knows himself no longer to be, but as (once written) he cannot easily escape or disavow. ‘My disharmonies’, he tells Schering, ‘reside in the impossibility of stitching my previous points of view together with my present ones’ (XV:146), a difficulty that is compounded by the republication, either in new editions or in translation, of works embodying opinions he now abjured. But subscribing as he does to the post-Romantic ideology of unfettered, organic personal development, and contemporary as he is to the debate on evolution, it is not surprising that Strindberg should expect and value growth and change, both in society and the individual. To bind himself to a single standpoint or a fixed programme would undermine his often-vaunted ‘freedom to “grow” freely’ (VII:39), and in a letter of 1894 to his old friend, Littmansson, he defends the mutability for which his contemporaries frequently criticised him by arguing what is perhaps the central tenet of his undertaking:

You bore the seeds of growth within you, but you didn’t cultivate your self with brutal egoism. You couldn’t create several persons out of yourself; you couldn’t like Münchhausen and I, pull yourself up by your hair and lift yourself out of your scepticism; you couldn’t search out yourself and use it to correct the other conventional selves which others had poked down into your soul; you couldn’t rise above your self. (X:150–1)

When, therefore, Robert Saytre writes of Henry Adams (who likewise procured a posthumous perspective for himself by adopting the third person form in his autobiography) that ‘the Education is not a response to some other experience, not a way of memorializing some other insight or achievement that has given life significance; it is a response to that moment in life at which an examination of life became essential’,⁵⁸ he could be describing *The Son of a Servant*, which represents the necessary ‘balancing of accounts with the past’ (19:250) to which Strindberg was compelled by the encounter with Darwin, Socialism and Atheism that he describes in the final volume. But also implicit in the final pages is an awareness that Johan will not remain as he is at the point at which the book concludes. Consistent with the view that growth is continual, Strindberg continually outgrows himself. What begins as a summing up, therefore, becomes in the course of its writing, the grounds of ‘a later enterprise,

whatever that may turn out to be' (19:250), and when he completes the text he is on the point of taking leave of Johan: when next encountered, in *A Madman's Defence*, he has become Axel.

Moreover, once the initial autobiography catches up with the life at the moment of writing, the texts produced thereafter (*A Madman's Defence*, *Inferno*, *Alone*) foreshadow modernism. They become the substance of the life itself. The life is lived with the writing in mind, and the latter becomes not an addendum to experience but part of the event, no longer the documentation of the career in recollection but something calling attention to itself, to its career as text, to its own life as part of the autobiography of its writer, a central event more important now than the events recorded in it, or rather, constituting a version of events to which his future life must consequently conform. In the narration of *Inferno*, one observes the situation described by Robert Adams with reference to *Ulysses*, of 'the presence of the artist within the work of art, not simply as an overt and dramatic character (Stephen Dedalus), but as the *terminus ad quem*, the retrospective arranger, the manipulator of the characters, and perhaps even the secretive and willful manipulator of the manipulator',⁵⁹ and since he is living through the writing of the text, what appear to be possible transformations and deformations of the past become Strindberg's present experience. Thus this all-pervasive intertextuality affects the relationship of all his other texts to those of his autobiographical sequence and to the life they variously apprehend. When reproduced in literature the events of this life have already been worked over and winnowed, in memory. They undergo further changes, elisions, compression, displacement, and extension in the process of transformation, and depending upon the genre chosen, similar material assumes a different form in separate works.

Furthermore, the exploration of analogous material in different literary texts has placed a figured screen between the writer and his past, and the wife Strindberg depicts as his own in *A Madman's Defence*, for example, is not only regarded in the light of the theories advanced contemporaneously in the essay volume, *Vivisections*, but refracted by the images of Bertha in *Comrades* and Laura in *The Father*. As Maurice Gravier rightly points out, therefore, *A Madman's Defence* should not be considered as merely the key to the dramas of the same period; this narrative is also constituted by the texts which surround it and which (in *Miss Julie*, *Creditors*, and *Playing With Fire*) it colours in turn, and it is therefore equally appropriate to enquire not in what way the novel provides a biographical explication of the plays but

... dans quelle mesure le travail que Strindberg a fait pour dessiner les personnages de *Camarades* ou de *Père* ne l'a-t-il influencé, lorsqu'il évoquait dans la *Plaidoyer d'un fou* les rapports et les faits et gestes de la baronne, d'Axel et du Capitaine.⁶⁰

The Father, for example, certainly implants the idea of a wife who tries to destroy her husband by driving him insane into the evolving narrative of Strindberg's own marriage, where it feeds upon misgivings he had long entertained regarding his mental stability. The drama thus transfers from the stage to his private life, as one of the letters to his friend Pehr Staaff, in which he explores the literary possibilities of this material, makes clear: 'It will be interesting to see the outcome of the drama' (VI:266), he declares, with his customary appetite for experience he can turn to literary account. And if, therefore, some five years later he complains 'I have been married for 13 years – and don't know who I've been married to' (VIII: 177), it is not unreasonable to attribute his doubts to the practice of literature, with which his life is so easily confused. As he remarked, on one much-quoted occasion: 'I don't know if *The Father* is a work of the imagination, or if my life has been' (VI:298).

The question raised by Strindberg's writing is thus not how faithfully it reproduces its anterior experience or the accuracy with which it reflects the real but rather, how well does he in fact know himself when, in the otherness of the written text, the writer is also written, the subject is also an object, and the discourse of the self is not single and irreducible but dialogic and even polyphonic? The mask *he* adopts with his use of language may be precisely that, and what therefore now demands investigation are the ends to which he employs his writing and how he can adequately represent himself in a medium, language, which he in fact considers inherently mendacious.