

## Chapter Four

### Plot and Counter Plot, or Reading and Composing the Text of the Self

Life is that which comes already constituted in literary language.  
– Roland Barthes

My life has always tended to take the shape of novels...  
– Strindberg to Hedlund

#### I

In her analysis of the way in which the modern critical notion of intertextuality has supplanted the concept of intersubjectivity, Julia Kristeva observes that ‘tout texte se construit comme mosaïque de citations, tout texte est absorption et transformation d’un autre texte.’<sup>1</sup> Each new work invites interpretation through its relation to other texts, which provide codes and conventions with which it can be read by a subjectivity which is in Roland Barthes’ provocative description ‘déjà lui-même une pluralité d’autres textes, de codes infinis, ou plus exactement: perdus (dont l’origine se perd).’<sup>2</sup> Moreover, even the most personal utterance reaches the receiver as a cultural as well as an expressive inheritance. Not only the language at an author’s disposal, but the forms to which he succeeds and the contemporary discourses through which he interprets and renders his lived relation to the world, the discourses that is, which constitute the system of intelligibility in his text, are suprapersonal. The text produced can therefore be apprehended in its interplay with other texts, both literary and non-literary, rather than by its reduction to a private and personal utterance that recedes into an author’s subjectivity, a subjectivity that is in any case largely composed of a montage of ideas, attitudes, and emotions which the writer has in common with his society, his class, and his profession.

In relation to the writing of autobiography, where the writer’s life is itself a text to be read, interpreted, and re-written, these ideas assume a particular resonance, for it is in the transcription of the discursive formations and determinacies that have ‘written’ the life of the autobiographical subject into the text of the autobiographer that this general intertextuality becomes most palpable. The narrated life encompasses both a text to be read by the writer in the profusion of data accumulating in his wake, and the production of a more

specific reading of other texts, first by the writer who decodes the patterns whereby the past becomes readable according to the available modes of insight and representation, and then by the reader, who brings his own experience of other texts to bear on recreating the relative stability of the writer's self-projection as it is assembled and takes shape in the figures of the text.

Indeed, Strindberg frequently drew attention to the way in which the self is composed of a plurality of texts, of how identity is produced by a multiplicity of competing and complementary discourses. In *The Red Room* characters are already described as an amalgam of 'ragged scraps' (*traslappar* – 5:236), an image that is developed in a self-analytical letter to Bjørnson in 1884, where Strindberg inventories his own 'ancient rats' nest of a soul, where scraps of old Christianity, shreds of art-worshipping paganism, shavings of pessimism, splinters of general world contempt lie jumbled together' (IV:144),<sup>3</sup> and with the writing of *The Son of a Servant* he discerns, in what in *The Roofing Feast* he will call 'this patchwork canvas of upbringing, textbooks, people, newspapers' (44:79), the script of a written corpus in which the self appears to be a veritable mosaic of quotations from a multitude of familiar and unfamiliar sources. Like Miss Julie and the other major characters, who 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), Johan is the formation of what in the *The Occult Diary* and *Inferno* Strindberg comes to portray as literally the currents that flow through him. A site traversed by forces and events rather than an individuated essence, he emerges as 'a patchwork' encompassing 'a quadron of romanticism, pietism, realism and naturalism' (18:92), and just as Strindberg's evolutionary methodology encourages him to regard every individual as 'a geological record of all the stages of development through which his ancestors had passed' (19:46), which means that Johan bears the phylogenetic traces of his European past, of Arian ideas of caste, Christian asceticism, Renaissance hedonism, and an enlightened scepticism, so his ontogenetic history reveals him to be the offspring of his 'blood inheritance, temperament, position in society' (19:189), that is to say, as a contemporary article bearing the unique signature of a particular childhood. He is the legatee of a personal inheritance, but an inheritance that is also fostered by the public discourses, religious, social, scientific, philosophical, and artistic, of the period in which he lives, both as they contribute to his formation and as they provide the codes and conventions which establish the parameters within which his life may be represented in an autobiography. For as Michael Sprinker has pointed out, the written self is primarily 'the articulation of an intersubjectivity structured within and around the discourses available to it at any moment in time.'<sup>4</sup>

Since an autobiography is itself an event in the life it relates, a distinction between the way in which contemporary discourses inform the life related and their role in the method of its relation is difficult to maintain. In *The Son of a Servant*, Johan is, as the Narrator observes, 'a mirror which reflected every ray that struck it' (18:127). Consequently, any comprehensive account of this 'history of a soul's development 1849–67' requires not only evidence of his 'inheritance from his mother, father and wet nurse; the situation during pregnancy; the economic circumstances of the family; the attitudes and beliefs of his parents; the nature of his acquaintances, his school and teachers, his friends, his brothers and sisters, and household servants and so on' (18:452), as the Author acknowledges in the preface, but also of his encounters with specific and dispersed currents of nineteenth-century intellectual and political history, as is indeed the case in the later volumes, where Johan reflects in turn the rays emitted by Byron and Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer and von Hartmann, Darwin and Spencer, Rousseau and Marx, as well as the more diffuse but no less penetrating light cast upon him by Pietism, Socialism, or Naturalism. Like many autobiographies from Vico's *Autobiografia* onwards, a large part of *The Son of a Servant* is a text about texts, a book that traces and examines the origins of its own discourse in the discourses of other writers, and hence emphasizes the paradoxical lack of originality in the unique life of its subject. The text would, he told Bonnier, include 'the story of the origin of all my works, including commentaries on the circumstances in which they were written, their milieux, the ideas behind them, and their execution' (VI:18). Thus it also includes an account of the works that generated the discursive practice now known as 'Strindbergian'. But as the narrative converges upon the present of its narration, it becomes evident that these formative influences also constitute the same texts which the autobiographer has at his disposal to contrive the reconstruction of his life. It is by their light that he reads and writes his life; as he informs Bonnier once again: 'I have simply taken the corpse of the person I know best, and made readings in anatomy, physiology, psychology, history on the carcass' (V:344).

Moreover, in the projections which the individual writers make available, and especially in the scripts to be discovered in Myth, Literature, History, Psychology, Religion, and Superstition, Strindberg has access to an abundance of blue-prints for his own recovery. Literary or other models, which facilitate the perception and creation of character, offer a multiplicity of parts in which to find himself as the appropriate hero of a Case History ('after having read Maudsley's *Maladies de l'Esprit* I have a complete diagnosis of myself' (V:333), he writes enthusiastically, in 1886) of a *Bildungsroman*, a Drama of Redemption, or as the agent (or victim) of Nemesis. Even single words such as 'calling', 'sacrifice', or 'suffering' function as metaphorical projections that help

him to organize his experience within a narrative framework that lends purpose and consequence to the succession of his acts, and from his conception within the defining ideology of the patriarchal family, which imprints upon him the lineaments of his own family romance, and which he later acknowledges is a plot that went awry ('I was born for family life and a mate – and look what happened', he notes in the diary, 6 September 1901), to the Pietist text which promises him the chance of being born again, to Kierkegaard's dialectical notion of 'Stages on Life's Way', to the history countenanced by current evolutionary theory, and finally in the destiny implicit in the eschatology of Swedenborg and the infernal topographies of other authors (for to ascertain where one is may establish a narrative system, incorporating notions of guilt and atonement, and suffering and punishment, which extends not only to the facts of his own life but to the lives of those among whom he lives), Strindberg has on hand a series of more copious intellectual paradigms. They offer elementary modes of coherence, cultural models that form part of his birthright and endow him with a number of *a priori* plots by means of which he can examine the data of his experience under a series of titles ('The Son of a Servant', 'Inferno', 'To Damascus') that already possess the ability to intend what follows. Determined to discover 'the whole equation in which my life can be solved' (XII:324), he tries on different views and vocabularies, and experiments with diverse ways of seeing, an approach for which he finds authority and a terminology in Kierkegaard, but which is fostered by his own questing temperament. He constantly betrays a tendency to see his life as a journey, and to interpret it in terms of stages, phases, or epochs. 'Thanks for good company on this stretch of the way, and be happy if you can' (VII:92) is his leave-taking from the poet, Verner von Heidenstam, one in a succession of correspondents in whom he confides his progress, for he is embarking upon 'new phases of my fragmentary life' (VII:72), 'new stages on life's way' (VII:108) and will now be travelling in different company. Meanwhile, many years later, in a remark that also conveys his conviction that the writer must have experienced all of life in order to portray it, he explains to his translator, Schering, that he is 'nur ein Dichter der sein Pilgerfart durch alle Stationen Menschlicher Entwicklung lebe um Menschen schildern zu können!' (XIII:262). And it is in this context that he regards himself as a 'scrupulous researcher' who undertakes 'experiments' (40:45) in which he uses his own life as the field of his research. 'I want to test everything, but not to retain it all' (X:154), he tells Hedlund in 1894, and like Voltaire, whom he praises because he 'experimented poetically with every problem' (17:277), he sees writing as an opportunity to examine and project different points of view. 'After having experimented my way through socialism' (VI:162), he adopts the aristocratic radicalism which he associates with Nietzsche ('I intend to experiment poetically with it for ten

years' (VIII:32) he tells a correspondent in 1890), ultimately abandons his atheism as 'an intellectual experiment which promptly failed' (XII:324), and then recommends his readers to 'Leave your own self, if you have the strength, and adopt the point of view of a believer; pretend that you believe, and then test that belief to see if it corresponds with your experiences' (46:21).

Moreover, whereas he often claims that 'the contradictions in my writing are a result of my having adopted different points of view in order to be able to see the question from many sides' (VII:92), he also stresses the historical relativity of truth, 'of truth as something in the process of eternal development' (19:28), from the application of his enthusiastic early reading of T. H. Buckle's *History of Civilisation in England*, in *Master Olof*, to the Hegelian account of Pater Uriel's life in *To Damascus III*. Thus he notes that an author's career ought to be responsive to the pressures of his time, a whole of several aspects: 'A writer should be an adequate expression of his age; if he lives in – through – several epochs he will have several physiognomies.'<sup>5</sup> Hence any coherence in the material he collects and analyses depends upon the model with which he is currently working, and upon 'the desire for order of the mental apparatus' (19:180), and either in their most extended form, as the projection of a comprehensive destiny indited by Nemesis, or the laws of Nature, or the hand of God, or only as mere taxonomies of order, such as he discovers in the Tarot pack or the *Kabbala*,<sup>6</sup> each positional reading that this tireless observer and indefatigable interpreter makes of his career derives its authority from the text against which it is being read. Indeed, the bibliomancy to which he sometimes resorts, particularly after 1895, is ultimately only a specific mode of his characteristic search for textual authority, one that will reveal (or so he hopes) the definitive plot of his life. 'Read Isaiah Chapter 54, opened at random, which seemed as if it had been written especially for me' (XI:274), he confides to Hedlund. In what he reads he finds himself and his destiny: as he frequently remarks, of his experience: 'it was written' (XII:135).<sup>7</sup>

But if the assumption behind much of his later writing (namely that 'in old age, when the eye can finally see, one discovers that all the little curlicues form a design, a monogram, an ornament, an hieroglyph, which one can now read for the first time: this is [your] life' (45:97)), is no tone in which Strindberg has sufficient confidence in practice to withstand the temptation of continually supplementing his earlier accounts, it nevertheless remains possible to perceive in this succession of superimposed images the legend of their author. For underlying all the attempts to revitalize his life is the power of narrative to animate the past in the present of the reader. The paradoxical nature of this reversal is suggested by Sartre in *La Nausée*, where the biographer and historian Roquentin defines living as 'une addition interminable et monotone'.<sup>8</sup> In life, he argues, days are tacked on to days in a succession without point or purpose, as

a brute accumulation of accident and circumstance. Occasionally, a particular event or the sense that one phase of life has ended may encourage the subject to interrupt the onward flow, to pause in order to estimate his position and take a temporary reading of the situation. But it is only the extended practice of narrative that transforms duration into orientated and meaningful time and endows life with a sensible coherence. According to Roquentin, narrative is a universal characteristic of man: 'un homme, c'est toujours un conteur d'histoires, il vit entouré de ses histoires et des histoires d'autrui, il voit tout ce qui lui arrive à travers elles; et il cherche à vivre sa vie comme s'il la racontait.'<sup>9</sup> But the writer, with his professional awareness of the available plots and the devices and subtleties of storytelling, is particularly adept both at finding himself and his destiny already described in the pages of literature and myth, and of seeing his life in terms of writing at the moment of experience, as well as in retrospect.

That literature, and novels in particular, contribute substantially to the way in which life is understood (or, Cervantes and Flaubert might argue, how it is readily misunderstood) is a point that has recently been made with great eloquence by Philippe Sollers:

LA ROMAN EST LA MANIERE DONT CETTE SOCIETE SE PARLE; la manière dont l'individu DOIT SE VIVRE pour y être accepte ... Notre *identité* en dépend, ce qu'on pense de nous, ce que nous pensons de nous-mêmes, la façon dont notre vie est insensiblement amenée à composition. Qui reconnaît-on en nous sinon un personnage de roman? (Qui reconnaissez-vous en moi qui vous parle sinon un personnage de roman?) ... Le roman, avec le mutisme de la science, est la *valeur* de notre époque, autrement dit son code de référence instinctif, l'exercice de son pouvoir, la clef de son inconscience quotidienne, mécanique, fermée.<sup>10</sup>

Through novels the individual can discover something of the complexity and multiplicity of life, may recognize himself and his contemporaries, and find the technical means to frame and articulate his own story. But more specifically: in the nineteenth century the conception of the world as a network of signatures, as what Strindberg once called a 'cryptographie céleste' (27:436) in the handwriting of God, had been largely superseded by a world in print, a world, moreover, that was rendered visible and made comprehensible through the very novels which helped produce the situation to which Sollers refers. If the realistic novel in general aspired to the accurate reproduction of the world it frequently claimed to mirror, both Balzac, in *Illusions perdues*, and Strindberg, in *Black Banners* and *The Red Room*, depicted the manner of its writing, the way in which works were transformed into products and personal experience immediately written up in literary form. And even after he had returned to

the belief 'that the whole of creation is planned and sometimes expressed in a kind of code' (46:272) which is visible in nature, Strindberg not only retained the view advanced in the Foreword to *The Son of a Servant*, that all notions of the other are fictional in so far as 'character only exists as representations of other people', and hence requires the same combination of deduction and imaginative speculation that gives life to characters in literature, but also continued to approach his own experience in terms of fiction and drama since they, too, are a major source of information about his own life. For his stance is continually interrogative ('I still ask: how the hell did I get here? And what am I doing here?' (XI:313)) and literature the ground upon which he prosecutes his inquiry. 'What's behind all this?' he wonders, in a letter to Pehr Staaff during his eventful stay on the Frankenau estate at Skovlyst in 1888. 'I don't know, but I will try to sort it out in a novel' (VII:131). Moreover, having translated his perplexity into a text (in this instance the story 'Tschandala'), the implication is that he can then interpret the meaning of his experience, although (as an entry in *The Occult Diary* for 7 May 1904 indicates) the intelligence the text communicates is not always entirely clear: 'Have read *Inferno* and *Legends* again in a reverent frame of mind, but I still don't understand the intentions of Providence – if we are to suffer in order to learn or if we are to be punished and frightened off'.

A persistent problem, therefore, and not only in the period after 1895, when its solution is pursued more urgently, is to what extent he figures in an already prepared script composed by God or by Nemesis, or whether (if it is not merely an accumulation of events amassed by chance) he is the author of his own life. Regarding his contemporaries, it sometimes seems to him as if 'there was a consequence and an order in their lives' (37:60) whereas it is only by writing that he can achieve 'an impression of an intended design' (38: 192) in his own. Occasionally, his reading reveals his life already accommodated by a pre-existing plot. He finds himself and his second wife, Frida, in the text of *Louis Lambert*, for example ('das Buch ist für mich und Frida-Mama geschrieben, oder von uns Beide' (XII:28) he tells their daughter), and again in Bulwer-Lytton's novel, *Zanoni*:

Lese jetzt Bulwers Zanoni! mit Entsetzen! Alles is da: Ich, Frida, Mädi. Und noch: der Dämon verfolgt den Armen Zanoni (eine Reincarnation) jede Moment wenn Er sich aus der Materie heben will und in der Einsamkeit sich in frommen Gedanken versenkt. Geht Er aber in lustigem Gesellschaft, da flieht der Dämon! So genau me in Fall!

Und Zanoni hat ein ockultes Kind, der ihn immer anschauet mit ihren grossen ruhigen Augen. Und ihre Mama flieht den Zanoni aus Furcht fur 'das Unbekannte' in seiner Person. Er ist Rosenkreutzer, macht Gold, ist zwei tausen Jahre 'jung', kann nicht sterben weil er die Lebens-elixir

getrunken! Er sucht immer seine Viola, und die flieht obschon Sie ihn  
liebt! Les' mir das Buch!

Fillide (Aspasia) ist auch da! (XII:80)

Usually, however, he is the plotter of his own destiny and can sometimes be observed creating a situation in his life that conforms to his current standpoint on, for example, the nature of woman, her rights, and the institution of marriage, and then (as in *A Madman's Defence*) reproducing the text he has prompted in a book.

Moreover, once a text is written life expectantly follows the course it predicates. This is particularly the case with the interaction between certain plays and the autobiographical works which they follow or precede, until in the mind of the author, as in the eyes of the reader or spectator, any clear distinction between invention and a record of events, is erased. For as an enlightened reviewer of *The Father* commented in the satirical journal *Figaro* shortly after the play appeared in 1888, for its author, reality was one with the construction of his imagination:

Nevertheless the book certainly makes a gripping if not very satisfying and hardly truthful impression. Although we feel that the writer has curiously enough experienced or, it is perhaps more correct to say, believed he has experienced what he has portrayed. Although – even stranger – he seems first to have portrayed it and then believed he has found its image in reality.<sup>11</sup>

Strindberg, the reviewer observed, had difficulty determining whether life or literature took precedence, a problem which his own comments on the play in the testamentary letter to Lundegård reveal, and a detailed analysis of the rapid succession of naturalist works during this period would indicate how *The Father* elaborates upon its author's 'personal circumstances' (VI:141) and then, once written, constitutes an image of the past that superimposes itself upon the present and influences the distribution of roles in subsequent works, the wife he portrays in *A Madman's Defence*, for example, being a refraction of the image of Laura, and of Berthe in *Comrades*.

Similarly, the confusion of categories to which *Figaro's* reviewer alludes becomes especially acute with Harriet Bosse's almost simultaneous assumption of the role of The Lady in *To Damascus* on stage and, by marriage, in its author's life. The situation is full of intrigue. Harriet enters a dramatic text in which she repeats lines that evoke, on one level, the period of Strindberg's second marriage to Frida Uhl. But the events which this text encompasses were, as Frida Uhl herself observed, themselves adapted from a previous script. In her memoirs she recalls how her life with Strindberg seemed to follow an already

developed scenario in which (and the prohibition which he placed on each of his wives regarding their reading his books, from the fourth volume of *The Son of a Servant* onwards (VI:103), suggests that he was not unaware of the predictive, anticipatory nature of certain texts):

The past swallowed up the present, the shadow ate up the reality. Sometimes Strindberg assumed situations between us which did not exist, and which could not. But for him they were real, exactly as they occurred in his dreams. Then he could say to me something which I had already read and recognized. In his eyes I was wearing his first wife's clothes and acted, according to him, exactly as she would have acted.<sup>12</sup>

With Harriet's entrance, however, the drama of *To Damascus* was no longer only a formation of the past, with one level superimposed upon the other, but something lived forward from day to day by the playwright and the actress who animated a figure of the dramatic text. Indeed, with his appeal to her that she decide the fate of The Unknown in the as yet uncompleted third part of the play in progress, Strindberg in fact temporarily relinquished the denouement to her since she was asked by Strindberg to decide whether the hero married, died, or entered a monastery. And as an accomplished actress, she (like Frida) appreciated her role – at least upon the everyday, if not the astral, plane which also engrossed Strindberg. As Guy Vogelweith has observed, Harriet's presence meant that

L'auteur va donc vivre dans la réalité le dénouement d'un drama qu'il avait commencé d'écrire. Il va faire selon l'inspiration d'une femme qui aura joué le rôle de la Dame et qui accepte maintenant de devenir son épouse. Il y a là comme une rencontre insoupçonnée des possibilités sans nombre que promet une réalité encore neuve et des ressources si imprévisibles de la création littéraire.<sup>13</sup>

For it was always the writing of literature that mattered most to Strindberg, and from the outset he protected himself against the possibility of a debacle in life by erasing the distinction between dream and reality and emphasizing the value of any experience as matter for literature. 'Suppose it is all make-believe (*dikt*), and remains so?' he muses, of his relationship with Harriet, in *The Occult Diary* (1 March 1901), 'What then? Then I shall write a poem (*dikt*), which will be beautiful!'

The notion that life is already literature, or that it naturally composes itself into novels and dramas, is therefore one that Strindberg often entertains. He is always alert to the appearance of 'new novels in reality' (IX:93), and complementing his own unremitting self-scrutiny there is a constant inclination to view any episode in which he plays a part in literary terms. Detaching himself

from centre stage for once, he spends much of 1893 following what he calls 'the story of Aspasia' (IX:202), his name for the events surrounding the turbulent career of the Norwegian, Dagny Juel, among the writers and artists in the circle around Strindberg and Edvard Munch at the Ferkel tavern in Berlin. 'Oh, it is a novel! She lays waste families and men' (IX:188), he exclaims delightedly, as Dagny passes from one man to another. But shortly afterwards, it is the theatrical possibilities that attract him in what he observes: 'I think you ought to introduce Heiberg right now in the fifth act to resolve the Aspasia drama' (IX:199), he suggests to Adolf Paul, who plays the role of dramaturge, just as he shortly recommends the arrest of Dagny Juel for prostitution as an apt *coup de théâtre* (IX:352), one that remains unused, however, until he employs it himself in the third act of *Crimes and Crimes*. Nevertheless, in fresh information about Dagny's further circulation among the Ferkel group, the eventual author of *To Damascus*, in which the final scene of part one repeats the location of the first by way of all the other settings through which the protagonists have passed in the early scenes of the play, recognizes a masterly finale to the structure of life's events: 'This ending satisfies me completely. Chapter I: Munch-Juel in the Ferkel ... Chapter XII Munch-Juel in the Ferkel... (end!?)' (IX:347).

And after 1895 in particular, he continually stresses the theatrical dimension of his experience, sometimes assuming the one role he fills with complete assurance, that of the dramatist ('The poet sits and sees himself in certain scenes. Discovers that he has been given roles'),<sup>14</sup> at others pausing only to speculate on the intentions of the dramatist in whose plot he finds himself. 'Who stages these scenes for us, and with what purpose?' (XII:273), he wonders, in 1898: 'Is it possible that everything terrible I have experienced has been staged for me?' on 24 January 1901; while in *Black Banners*, Falkenström observes that 'It has actually 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' (41:196). Frequently, he recognizes the stage setting before the event occurs (thus, on arriving in Lund he recognizes it as his Canossa and realizes 'it is here I have to drain my cup to the dregs' (28:180)), and whatever the occasion, the laws of life and those of drama appear to him as one. As he writes to his daughter, Kerstin: 'Scenesveränderung kommt in allen Dramen vor, Personenwechsel auch aber im letzten Akt kommen doch Alle zum Vorschein und der Verfasser darf keinen Einzigen vergessen. So ist das ewige Gesetz des Dramas und des Lebens!' (XIV:41). And it is, finally, this sense of life as both a series of scenes and as 'staged' (*satt i scen*) for him, as something in which he acts but at which he also spectates, that facilitates the accomplishment of the dramatic form of *To Damascus*, a vehicle of self-scrutiny and a pilgrim's drama in which the familiar scenes are repeated, a vehicle which is capacious and supple enough, moreover,

to accommodate additional episodes as the drama of his life continues to unfold beyond the point at which the first part concludes.

## II

If this characteristic erasure of the boundary between the written and the existential self enables Strindberg to suggest that the ego is an imaginary construct composed of multiple projections and introjections and apprehended as a character in the literature which affords it so many of its incarnations, the text which perhaps illustrates most clearly how life assumes the guise of literature, and how it is domiciled by the ensemble of symbolic systems with which its culture provides him, is the epistolary novel *He and She*. More immediately than most texts, it exemplifies the complex intertextuality of Strindberg's experience into the written text of his life, which is already perceived in terms of literature. Moreover, as he points out to Bonnier in 1886, that year was not the first occasion he had contemplated publishing the letters written by the protagonists of the marital drama which followed rapidly upon his first meeting with Siri von Essen and Carl Gustaf Wrangel: 'For our own sakes, and for the sake of our children, my wife and I have often thought of publishing our correspondence during the rupture in 1876, anonymously and with no names, under the title, *He and She*' (V:356).

In arguing the prompt publication of *He and She* as part of the 'famous portrait of my career while I'm on the go and interested' (V:356), Strindberg described the projected volume as 'an intimate novel (*själsroman*), not invented and arranged, however, but lived' (V:357). The remark indicates the blurring of categories at which the book contrives, and the uncertainty which surrounds its genre and the domain (whether fact or fiction, public or private) to which it belongs. These are all matters which preoccupied Strindberg when, in 1886, he considered the propriety of including the letters concerning his early acquaintance with Siri von Essen within the general framework of *The Son of a Servant*, where they had a natural place after the third volume, 'In the Red Room'.

When he first broaches the idea, he points out to Bonnier that life itself connives at a dramatic plot ('Part 3 runs from 72 to 75 and ends with the fatal chance which sent the hero, then Royal Secretary and extraordinary amanuensis to Norrtullsgatan 12, where he saw his future wife' in the context of his childhood home) and therefore what he now terms 'the so unusual and high romantic drama' (V:356) ought to assume its rightful chronological place in the text to which it belongs. Furthermore, this idea is given immediate encouragement by the discovery that in 'these remarkable documents' he has on hand 'a whole volume' (V:357) virtually ready and waiting for the press. The letters emerge as an example of his thrifty literary housekeeping, and any

suggestion of opportunism in his purpose is conveniently disarmed not only by the theoretical standpoint from which he regarded the writing of imaginative literature in the mid 1880s, but also in the categorical '*A writer is only a reporter of what he has lived*' (I:190) in the highly contrived discourse on writing with which he had initiated his correspondence with Siri von Essen in 1876, and which was originally intended to form the opening section of *He and She*. Anticipating Bonnier's objections, and the suggestion that he veil the material by recasting it as fiction, he maintains that were he to 'construct a novel now, it would be coloured by new points of view and become untruthful' (V:357). And while he concedes that publication would entail an intrusion upon the privacy of other people ('but, unfortunately, one does not possess one's experience in isolation'), he regards the scientific nature of his project as a value that transcends the personal: 'The question arises, however, if the interests of a number of private individuals should not be set aside in order that such an important matter as the truthful account of the whole of a man's life may for once see the light of day' (V:356). Or as he develops both points a few weeks later, when Bonnier's disapproval of the scheme was plain:

Apart from that [encroaching upon the privacy of others] the collection of letters has great psychological interest and, to put it bluntly, seems to me better than any novel. A novel would always look like self-defence and would occasion contradictions, misinterpretations, and not be in keeping with the grand and unique work I have now accomplished. A man's life in 5 vols. (VI:17-18)

In the light of *A Madman's Defence*, which would eventually absorb so much of the material whose publication Bonnier would not now countenance unvarnished, in the form of letters, the idea of a novel as a form of self-defence is an example of prescient self-criticism. But even in the text of the letters which Strindberg prepared for publication in 1886 (and which only appeared posthumously in 1919, after he had stubbornly continued to insist on their essential place in his *œuvre* in the contract for his Collected Works, which he drew up with another Bonnier, a year before he died) the issue is not without ambiguity. If the implications of his overtures to Bonnier are that the letters should therefore appear unaltered, then even the suggestion that they be published anonymously, or as he later proposes, with asterisks replacing the names of the correspondents, is itself a significant concession to a fictional mode: as he remarks, 'One can of course believe they are fabricated letters' (VI:17). In fact, as in 'The Quarantine Master's Second Story', that other hasty adaptation of an autobiographical text into a fictional guise, the published version of *He and She* is full of inconsistencies in nomination and detail. Since the correspondence is to form part of *The Son of a Servant*, the letters

originally written by Strindberg himself are allotted to Johan. Meanwhile, Sofia In de Betou, Siri's cousin, who was cast in the role of the other woman in the Wrangel household by the more than affectionately familial feelings she aroused in Carl Gustaf, is dubbed 'Mathilde' in the correspondence, as she will be in *A Madman's Defence*, a detail which prompted the editor of Strindberg's collected works, John Landquist, to christen the other two, hitherto unnamed protagonists, Gustav and Maria, when he prepared the manuscript of *He and She* for publication. Even so, identification is not so much obscured as merely confused (and as Strindberg suggested, 'the public ought to be kept in ignorance as to whether it is a matter of actual events or mystification' (VI:74)). Sometimes asterisks give way to authentic initials ('The Honourable Lady E. v. E.' (55:146) indicates Siri-Maria's mother, Elisabeth von Essen, for example, while on page 206, best wishes are sent to 'A. and H.', Strindberg's sister Anna and her husband, Hugo von Philp), at others there is a marginal displacement in their attribution (thus Algot Lange becomes 'Herr A'). But in any case, the mention at intervals of *Master Olof* and 'Uncle Augis' (55:64) would have dispelled most contemporary doubts as to the identity of author and hero.

What he achieves, therefore, is an uneasy blend of document and epistolary novel, carelessly prepared and uncertain of purpose. By the addition of a title, a subtitle, and several chapter headings ('Under fire', 'Unsuccessful Flight', 'A Fly in the Ointment', 'On Fire', 'Men of Honour', 'Separation', and 'Beautiful Weather') which pace events from suspense, to climax, and on to resolution, the published text displays a narrative shape hardly discernible in the short term composition of the successive letters, a shape, moreover, and a title which evokes a specific literary model. For if, in his first letter to Bonnier regarding the correspondence, Strindberg referred in passing to George Sand and Sandeau as an earlier instance of the publication of such intimate material, the text itself makes clear that, even at the time of their original composition, it was George Sand's relationship with de Musset, as imaginatively chronicled in the epistolary novel, *Elle et lui*, that he had in mind both in writing and arranging these letters, the deft reversal of precedence in his title, along the lines of Paul de Musset's rejoinder, *Lui et elle*, notwithstanding.

In this way, a series of private communicative acts, at first sight apparently unrelated to the organized text of a literary work (but which were nevertheless conceived in the light of an already published correspondence) are transformed into a printed book, to be bought and sold as one among the many articles produced over the signature of August Strindberg. And even though he shuns ('No foreword and no notes' (VI:17)) the editorial apparatus accorded the epistolary novels of, for example, Richardson and Goethe, the letters are detached from the original circuit of communication in which they appeared and endowed, by their publication in book form as part of a sequence of

works displaying characteristics of the dominant marketable literary genre of the day, with the substance and difference of literature. They are cut off from the communicative presence of their authors, who did of course meet in the intervals between letters in order to augment, qualify, and very necessarily clarify their respective texts for each other, and delivered up to the interpretative ingenuity of the reader.

But this ingenuity is severely tested. For even a cursory comparison of the letters as they appear in *He and She* with those written by Strindberg as they are printed in the first volume of Torsten Eklund's scholarly edition of the correspondence, reveals a significant number of variations in order, and many inconsistencies of detail. Thus, on this level alone, the reader is confronted by a degree of confusion and opacity in the text which would be unacceptable were this in fact a contrived novel. If, for example, Eklund's arrangement of the sixty surviving letters written by Strindberg to Siri von Essen, her mother, or her husband during the period covered by *He and She* (1 July 1875 to 25 June 1876, that is between letters ninety six and one hundred and sixty seven in Eklund's edition) is taken as correct (and inevitably certain ascriptions of date remain hypothetical even after a close scrutiny of the textual evidence), then putting aside the nine letters which Strindberg purposefully excluded from his compilation, the sequence of the remaining fifty one in the order established by Eklund emerges as 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 14, 16, 10, 13, 15, 17, 18, 19, 11, 12, 21, 20, 23, 24, 25, 27, 28, 29, 26, 31, 32, 34, 30, 36, 33, 35, 37, 39, 40, 41, 46, 44, 45, 47, 48, 38, 50, 49, 51, in Strindberg's version, and the possibility of confusion is naturally compounded by similar omissions and relocations in his preparation of Siri von Essen's letters.<sup>15</sup> Thus the reader is not only not in possession of much of the necessary background information to which the writers were privy, and which the author of a genuine epistolary novel would have been obliged to work into the text, either in the form of editorial comment or in the letters themselves; the two main sequences of letters, those which pass between Johan and Maria, do not always even correspond with one another. That the book remains readable at all, therefore, depends firstly upon the nature of the generalized effusions contained in many of the letters, which allow the incorrigible interpreter of texts to comprehend them according to the codes of sense and feeling they nevertheless contain, and secondly because in *He and She* specific allusions and even the precise course of events are to some extent recoverable because the reader also has access to the work of commentators or to Strindberg's own retrieval of the situation in *A Madman's Defence*, which is, however, hardly an unimpeachable source, and one which also depends upon the sequence reconstituted in these letters by his evidently faulty memory.

But if mistakes arise in chronology, despite all the precautions taken by Strindberg in the pencilled comments he appended to both sets of

correspondence,<sup>16</sup> the omission of specific letters was certainly intended. These omissions were made in order to point particular aspects of ‘the so unusual and high romantic drama’ rather than from prudence. For if the removal of several pages devoted to Johan’s relationship with a former mistress is a deliberate and to some extent surprising suppression of written evidence by Strindberg (it is excised physically from the letter printed in I:216, too), the deletion of the phrase, ‘I never suffered when I lay outside your bedroom – oh yes, once!’ (I:288), in one of Johan’s letters, avoids a possibly risqué association that would confuse the purity of his love with what is portrayed as Gustav’s sensual behaviour, behaviour from which, in this letter, as elsewhere in the correspondence, he is concerned to distinguish himself. Similarly, a sequence of three letters (numbers 146 to 148 in Eklund’s edition) are unromantic, concerned with practical affairs, and sometimes irritable in their concern to ‘put aside all lovers’ quarrels’ (I:318), and they are thus deleted by Strindberg because, like several of Siri von Essen’s letters following her return from the journey to Copenhagen, which marked her initial separation from Wrangel, their inclusion would have complicated as well as deepened the sweep of the romantic drama on which he was focusing. They raise problems beyond those with which the published letters engage. Not until *A Madman’s Defence*, for example, was Strindberg prepared to confront or raise in print the possibility that ‘She’ remained physically close to her husband even after she had declared her love for Strindberg himself, and the way in which her leaving with him compelled her to abandon her first child was (like the death of their own first child in the custody of a nurse, two days after birth) something he also remained unwilling to face. Again, when Johan exclaims, ‘What does Providence mean by the enormous sufferings and trials it has imposed upon us?’ (55:166), the thrust of his question suggests involvement in a moral predicament that would have been undermined by the accompanying and deleted reference to the actual cause of his distress, namely the unwillingness of his landladies in Kaptensgatan 18 to rent the rooms adjacent to his own to Siri, whereas when he passes over the visiting card on which he has written

I am coming to you tomorrow at noon, 20 years older – an outlaw – disinherited – mother and fatherless – alone in the whole wide world – but faithful to my promise still in good spirits – Be indulgent to me! Be kind for God’s sake even if you have your own sorrows. You are two – I am alone! (I:270)

he actually sacrifices an opportunity to give substance to the image of Johan as a homeless and accursed wanderer, and hence to relate the later impersonation of ‘*The Son of a Servant*’, Ishmael, to the Byronic image which these early letters often project, no doubt because it would introduce the complexities of

his troubled relationship with his family (a topic on which the later volumes of the autobiography, and not only *He and She*, are strikingly reticent) into a text in which he wished to focus upon the 'Affaire W-----'.<sup>17</sup> Thus, while some of the material a reader would expect to see provided as essential to the plot of a fully developed epistolary novel (such as Mathilde's letters to Gustav, for example, which Maria mentions on page 89, and the disturbing letter of Gustav's which is referred to on several occasions (pp. 142, 144, 183) and which causes great disquiet when Johan makes its contents known to others) are not included because Strindberg did not have access to the originals and refrained on aesthetic grounds from invention (and were this a genuine epistolary novel, such letters would have offered an opportunity of developing the parallel plot at which, even so, *He and She* sometimes hints in its allusions to the affair between Gustav and Mathilde),<sup>18</sup> there is considerable editorial, if not authorial, interference in the text that remains.

The domain occupied by this text is therefore difficult to locate with precision. Strindberg operates with uncertainty. Refusing an explicit pact with the reader, he takes advantage of conventions developed in order to give an impression of substance to invented characters by apparently protecting them with a considerate anonymity, and evokes the appearance of invention by masking a real situation with some of the accoutrements of fiction. But if Strindberg's indeterminate practice is ultimately acceptable because the writing and reading of novels has blurred a fine distinction between life and literature, the foundation of his enlacing of fact and fiction has its source not in the editorial work of 1886, but in the writing, and even the living, of the experience the letters record.

The literariness of these letters is, of course, suggested by frequent quotation from, and allusion to, a variety of literary texts. They include passages from Heine, Goethe, Longfellow, Topelius, and Dietrichson, and in their original form, as private communications, the use of quotation was even more copious.<sup>19</sup> It is also stressed by their use for stylistic exercises, whose exuberant virtuosity, at least in Johan's contributions, draws attention to the nature of the letters as writing. That it proved so easy to transform them into something resembling an epistolary novel was facilitated by the opening 'Monologue', dated 1 July 1875, with which Strindberg first introduced himself to the Wrangels in the guise of a conventional, faded Byronic Romanticism. It provides the letters with an introductory self-portrait in which inevitable and dramatic events are prepared for by the image it projects of its writer as one 'who seems born to wreak destruction' (55:5), after having been presented at the font by the Devil himself. By turns playful and self-indulgent, Strindberg cultivates this demonic impression and sustains the tempo with a succession of performances, including letters in French, English, and German like the one written at Dalarö,

when he jumped ship to abort his attempted escape to Paris from feelings he could no longer master, which was addressed to ‘Herr Jesus von Nazareth! Himmel, Milchstrasse, rechter Hand (von Gott gerechnet!)’ (55:28). In such letters he sometimes depicts himself in the third person or takes advantage of the dramatic present which the epistolary form permits, whereby the virtual contemporaneousness of the event and its narration is given a striking immediacy. This is so in the Dalarö letter, where the writer records the effect of drinking absinthe on a fellow guest during the time it takes him to write his letter (and most probably the guest is an imagined reflection whom the writer’s own predicament is projected, as in the obviously more sophisticated use of the Beggar in *To Damascus*), and again in the hurried note to Maria, now on her way to Copenhagen, which is written at ‘The Inn in Katrineholm, 5 minutes after the train’s departure for Malmö’ (55:177).

In composing a diplomatic letter to Maria’s mother, meanwhile, Johan includes the parenthetical commentary on his text which Strindberg had originally provided for Maria’s benefit and his own delight (55:146f), and within the compass of individual letters he stresses the dynamism of events by the use of a rapid succession of registers. Thus, on the eve of her departure for Denmark, Johan opens with a passage of elevated rhetoric in which he bids Maria ‘welcome to the league of those who suffer and struggle and conquer in the name of the Eternal One’ (55:174), moves on to dispense practical advice on how she might profit from her stay in Copenhagen, and then, after playfully suggesting he has something distressing to tell her, leads his now captive reader towards the declaration: ‘I love you’ (55:176).

In the same letter, he also employs literary allusion with great subtlety to a more serious end when he takes one of Kierkegaard’s favourite texts, the tale of Abraham and Isaac, which is discussed in *Fear and Trembling*, in order to convince Maria of the virtue of sacrificing her daughter. What the occasion demands, he writes, is ‘a sacrifice as great as Abraham’s, when he gave his child for the sake of the Lord – Rest assured he demands as little of this sacrifice from you as He demanded it of him. He only wants to try you – chasten you – see *if you are worthy!*’ (55:172). The Hand of the Lord, he claims, is implementing His design in their lives; she must not resist, and in return for this sacrifice she will experience ‘this wonderful turning inside out of the soul – which is what art demands’ (55:173). As for the physical turn their relationship has taken, which is so at odds with the notion of the chaste, non-sensual partnership originally sketched in the letters that distinguish their affair from Gustav’s inartistic pursuit of his cousin, this is defused by a conventionally poetic natural image and a further appeal to God. Where Maria had urged, ‘let us forget all things earthly’ (55:117), and feared that physical contact would ‘soil this holy fire, drag what is heavenly in the mire’ (55:103), Johan points to ‘the

swallow which sweeps the gravel when storms approach' and 'God himself' who 'could descend to earth and dwell among us', among those who 'grub and dig in what we call the prose' (*det vi kalla prosan*, 55:172). Why, then, should they hesitate to abandon the discourse of poetry for prose: 'What belongs to heaven can endure becoming earthly for a moment' (55:172).<sup>20</sup>

But the evident ease with which the letters are transformed into an epistolary novel undoubtedly has its basis in the very events they record. The shaping of the material, however slight, in which Strindberg indulged when preparing the letters for publication, was performed on material recognized from the outset as already on its way from a raw state into literature. The events in themselves constitute a novel en *plein jour*. From the beginning, the protagonists were aware of themselves as participants in a drama, or as characters in a novel. As Anna Philp recalled, 'They suited one another well, with their artistic and literary interests'<sup>21</sup> and the tone and direction of what follows is already set by the letter on writing, entitled 'The Art of Becoming a Writer', with which Strindberg first approached Siri von Essen, and in which he insists repeatedly upon the facility with which experience can be turned into literature: 'He who has lived through something has something to relate, he who has something to relate *is a writer!*' (I:190).

Indeed, Siri reveals herself a competent pupil, both at learning how to find consolation for suffering in literary composition ('I have now truly noticed that when one grieves, the safest method is to let one's sorrow flow away by means of the pen. When I was able to write down my pain, the weight on my breast became lighter' (55:180)),<sup>22</sup> and in recognizing the literary nature of the situation. When Strindberg (who on one occasion compliments Gustav on his 'excellent way of playing your role of martyr in this play' (55:119)) eventually comes to write *A Madman's Defence* he will be implementing an idea that had already occurred to Maria, who remarks, 'someone ought to write a novel about this – if I had the courage to get to grips with it, I would do it' (55:101).<sup>23</sup> Shortly afterwards, meanwhile, the aspiring actress, Siri-Maria, perceives the situation to be a drama of parallel plots and neat exchanges, a contemporary comedy of manners (*pièce rose* rather than *noir*) in which the main participants are all finally united with the partner they desire:

Why should I be so cruel as to deprive him (Gustav) of compensation for the freedom he grants me? You are my betrothed – she is his – also betrothed (nothing else). It is quite charming!!! The situation is superb – he falls still more in love with her-she with him... he will himself request his freedom, I – go along with it – we separate as friends – and then nothing else remains in order to round it all out properly, than to celebrate our weddings together in complete harmony – on the same evening – and go about together like affectionate brothers and sisters. (55:154)<sup>24</sup>

In fact the attempt to give their story a literary form was hardly delayed. Among the letters in the Royal Library are two drafts in which Siri is seeking to transform one phase of her experience into poetry, the more rhythmical of which reads:

Jag stod vid fönstret ensam, så ensam stod jag der  
 Fast *han* fans uti rummet, fast barnet var mig nära.  
 Det hängde på mitt hufvud ett vemodstak – så tungt.  
 Och tanken den var mattad, men än var...<sup>25</sup>

More pertinent, however, is the intention, encouraged by Strindberg among a profusion of suggestions for translations (of François Coppée's *Le Passant*, and from the Norwegian), a travelogue portraying life in Helsinki, and for articles 'for Dagligt Allehanda on the theatre and other things' (I:319), that Siri write a short novel utilizing events in progress. He had continually encouraged her to write ('Well write then! It is your duty as a woman to give your opinion on questions which men have never been able to express themselves' (I:192)) at the expense of her passion for the stage, from which he sought to wean her, and in 'The Art of Becoming a Writer' he demonstrated precisely how she could usefully transform her experience into literature, firstly by pretending that she was merely writing an intimate letter, and then, whenever necessary, by employing a kind of Stanislavskian transfer of emotion from an event in the past to material in the present, in order to rekindle faltering inspiration. Now, to flesh out the novella in fifteen chapters for which he provides the plan which Karin Smirnoff later published in her account of her mother's marriage to Strindberg, *Strindbergs första hustru*,<sup>26</sup> he discovers an immediate use for the real letters she has already written to him. 'Les lettres – toujours les lettres!' he exclaims, in the outline for a narrative which, presumably in order to veil and distance the intimate nature of the material, was to be – like *A Madman's Defence* – written in French, the characters rechristened Armand, Cécile, Caroline, Inez. Catching events on the run (for as he reveals, the outcome is as yet unknown because un-lived: 'la fin – qui sans doute se fera voir avant que la nouvelle sera achevée'), what he sketches is a romance in the spirit of the letters, 'cette correspondance intime des âmes, ce saint amour, ce feu sacré par lequel le jeune auteur va être guéri de ses erreurs fatales et retourne à la vertu et ses Muses, reconcilié de ses anges dechus, ses idéales cassés, et en croyence sur ce qu'il y a de beau et de bon.'<sup>27</sup>

This redemption of the poet by a woman whom destiny has thrown in his path introduces a motif to which Strindberg will often return, notably in the first part of *To Damascus*, where Maria's role is taken by another Madonna, Eve, whose 'voice sounds like my dead mother's' (29:13), and at whose feet The Unknown, another accursed and homeless writer, like Byron's Cain a fugitive

and vagabond on earth<sup>28</sup>, also contrives ‘to become a child again’ (29:23). But in the draft of the novella, as in the letters of *He and She*, the script which Strindberg prepares is not uniquely his own. It is an expression of what in *The Son of a Servant* he calls ‘the desperate devil worship of late romanticism, which saw in woman the saviour, the angel’ (19:130), and, as Ulf Boethius points out, his specific conception is for ‘a story in the spirit of George Sand, both the plot and the ideas recall her novels’,<sup>29</sup> most pointedly, *Elle et lui*.

Strindberg had George Sand’s epistolary novel on loan from the Royal Library from February to September 1876.<sup>30</sup> It was reading he eagerly shared with Siri von Essen and together (somewhat ominously) with one of the key nineteenth-century texts concerning adultery, Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*,<sup>31</sup> and a medieval Swedish text, the ‘Love-letter from Ingrid Persdotter’, which he quotes at length in his historical study, *The Swedish People*, and also has in mind in that other reworking of the material of *He and She*, the play specially written for Siri, *Herr Bengt’s Wife*, Sand’s book forms the immediate literary intertextuality of their correspondence. Indeed, on several occasions it seems to offer a basis for their intrigue. Responding to Sand’s account of her relationship with Musset, in which ‘elle’ (Thérèse) seeks vainly to save the fallen and baneful *poète maudit* ‘Lui’ (Laurent), whose predicament as a post-Byronic hero he shares, Strindberg uses the letter in which Johan first writes openly of his feelings for Maria to develop a prominent theme from *Elle et lui*, namely the fine distinction between love and friendship. However, he foresees a more fortunate outcome to their own situation than to the one in which the dissipated Laurent finally escapes the tutelage of Thérèse. ‘But we have a duty which is greater than love – read *Elle et lui* to the end – do – I am Lui – but you are better than Elle and you can govern me’ (55:111), he tells her, addressing her shortly afterwards as ‘You who can give this country its greatest writer’ (55:115). Meanwhile, her reading of Sand’s text prompts Maria to an alternative interpretation, which she puts forward in the course of her own declaration, written at the same time as Johan’s (and well before *Miss Julie!*): ‘I would trap you in order to arouse wicked passions in you – for the pleasure of seeing you at my feet like a slave and then to play the magnificent and charming woman à la Thérèse!?!’ (55:86). In fact, Maria’s insight into the self-deluding mechanism of reading and the danger of mistaken identities appears for the moment to be greater than Johan’s; as she points out, when the image of the text fails to accord with the woman of the world: ‘You had read the book, it was another Thérèse you saw in me’ (55:87).<sup>32</sup>

Thus, even if he had not yet achieved the public notoriety of George Sand or Musset, which was the precondition for the transformation of that relationship into common literary coinage,<sup>33</sup> *Elle et lui* provided Strindberg with an early, pre-Naturalist example of the profit to be made from the public exploitation of the

private domain as marketable literary merchandise. But where a recent editor refers to *Elle et lui* as ‘cette étonnante version hagiographique’ of ‘l’histoire vraie’,<sup>34</sup> what distinguishes Strindberg’s book from Sand’s is that the letters he uses were not reconstituted after an interval of twenty years, in response to a rival account (Musset’s *La Confession d’un enfant du siècle*) but appeared as immediate Romantic transcriptions employing the codes of Sand’s novel. Reading *Elle et lui*, itself the distillation of prevailing Romantic attitudes, gives Johan and Maria access to the means of fashioning their own lives. It is there they discover formulations for their own experience and precedents for the situations in which they find themselves, both as regards the collapse of frail and cherished distinctions and the formulae of piety, sophistication, and tact by means of which they gain a purchase on experience and convey it to others. These include a sanction for their rejection of convention in favour of a life in art,<sup>35</sup> for ‘She’ a role at first chaste as a sister and then as ‘une maîtresse tendre comme une mère’,<sup>36</sup> and for ‘He’, the aspect of a divided self, torn between the abyss and childlike innocence, in thrall to Satan (‘j’ai rendu à Satan ce qui appartient à Satan, c’est à-dire ma pauvre âme’) and reduced at an inn in Florence by ‘un accès de fièvre cérébrale’<sup>37</sup> to a condition resembling Johan’s on Dalarö, from which Laurent awakens to see Thérèse in the company of the manly Palmer, much as Johan saw Maria with the martial Gustav, standing beside his bed.

With its speculations on ‘une mère prudente, un ami sérieux, une première maîtresse sincère’,<sup>38</sup> *Elle et lui* is in fact hardly more certain of the roles taken by its protagonists than the actors in *He and She*, where on one occasion a confused Maria addresses Johan as ‘My own beloved – own friend – brother – betrothed – or whatever I should call you’ (55:163). In writing, at least, the parts of lover and mistress are replaced by other nominations, on a sliding scale of intimacy and responsibility. Once again as in *Elle et lui*, the most common are mother and child (‘When I write, I want to be great; otherwise let me be your little child, and you cannot imagine how much you mean to me in every way, as a mother, a sister – anything you like, but not my mistress! Let me be your child’ (55:165)) or brother and sister (‘fate which has in you sent me the brother I have lacked ever since my childhood’ (55:71), Maria tells him, adding later: ‘I love you with the devotion of a sister, without coquettish caprices, without anything that could be called a forbidden love’ (55:86)),<sup>39</sup> the latter disposition of roles being one which Strindberg later examines in *Creditors*, where another Gustav describes how his wife was stolen from him under cover of an artful nomenclature. When the lovers sense their illegitimate passion awake, he explains:

... they become uneasy, their consciences are disturbed, they think of him [the absent husband]. They look for protection and creep behind the

fig-leaves, play at being brother and sister, and the more physical their feelings become, the more spiritual are the surroundings they invent for themselves.

*Adolf*: Brother and sister? How do you know that?

*Gustav*: I guessed it. Children usually play at mummies and daddies, but when they grow up they play brothers and sisters. To hide what must be hidden! – And so they take a vow of chastity – and then they play hide-and-seek – until they find one another in a dark corner, where they are sure no one can see them! (23:207)

Moreover, just as Gustav's formidable omniscience here and in his suggestion, shortly afterwards, that the lovers 'feel within themselves that *someone* sees them through the darkness' (23:207), helps to clarify in retrospect the unease that fosters the circumlocutions of *He and She* (and in a note omitted from the novel, Strindberg informs Siri that 'Now there is only You and I and God!' (I:320)),<sup>40</sup> so the parlance of these letters affords glimpses of other roles that also emerge in many later texts, notably the poet and his muse, the plebeian and the aristocrat, and the swineherd and the princess, as they inform *Herr Bengt's Wife*, *The Father*, *Miss Julie*, and *A Madman's Defence*, where we are told: 'The son of the people has conquered the white skin, the commoner has won a girl of breeding, the swineherd has mixed his blood with that of the princess' (MD.121).

### III

The question of roles, of which part and in what script one appears, is, of course, complex. How one is regarded by the other may well decide one's own assumption. Thus, in a letter omitted from *He and She*, Strindberg writes, in some perturbation, 'Answer me! Do you consider me your betrothed or your lover or your friend? I must know for the sake of my destiny and in order to clarify my unpleasant role!' (I:320). Usually, however, he is responsible for the distribution of parts, which are generally legitimized by literary inspiration. Behind his reading of the situation there lies his reading. For example, Thérèse's final letter to Laurent, in which she concludes:

Dieu condamne certains hommes de génie à errer dans la tempête et à créer dans la douleur. Je t'ai assez étudié dans tes ombres et dans ta lumière, dans ta grandeur et dans ta faiblesse, pour savoir que tu es la victime d'une destinée, et que tu ne dois pas être pesé dans la même balance que la plupart des autres hommes. Ta souffrance et ton doute, ce que tu appelles ton châtement, c'est peut-être la condition de ta gloire.<sup>41</sup>

‘Génie’, ‘grandeur et faiblesse’, and in particular, ‘douleur’, ‘destinée’, ‘souffrance’, and ‘châtiment’, are all key terms tantamount to switch words or nodal points of compressed meaning in the field of discursivity, whether French or Swedish, whereby Strindberg recovers his life. Among countless other texts, *Elle et lui* mediates a corpus of Romantic attitudes by means of which the writer identifies himself, and the experience recounted in these letters substantiates itself according to expect a firms that are fostered by the socially given text of the world in which their writers live, and by means of the general cultural text which enables both Strindberg and Siri to communicate with one another, and, eventually, with a wider literate public.

Moreover, those words about which meaning clusters at its most intense, program or initiate a reading of events that renders experience legible and endow it with coherence and purpose. The letter written on the eve of Maria’s departure for Copenhagen is in fact a dense matrix of meaning, employing almost the entire current register of interpretation, which permeates not only this correspondence and Strindberg’s early works in general, but recurs throughout his production. Particularly notable is the complex of signification formed by his appeal to the concepts of suffering, as a sign of distinction and elevation, a source of and a spur to achievement, of genius and ‘the magnificent halls in the temple of Art’ (55:111), of a sacred calling, opposition to which represents ‘a sin against the H. Spirit’ (I:199), of martyrdom, which is really ‘sweet’ and ‘the reward of genius’ (55:114), and of sacrifice, the pain of which validates the pleasure which art affords.<sup>42</sup>

It is not, of course, difficult to trace the provenance of these ideas. Out of a general Romantic inheritance there emerges a familiar compound ghost of influence, embracing Ibsen’s treatment of the notion of the poet’s calling and the skald’s gift of sorrow in *Brand* and *Pretenders*, Kierkegaard, Byron, Schopenhauer, and von Hartmann. In the latter two, for example, with their determination to uncover the inborn error that man exists in order to be happy, Strindberg finds philosophical authority for the intelligence that Byron depicts poetically, namely that

Sorrow is knowledge; they who know the most  
Must mourn the deepest o’er the fatal truth,  
The Tree of Knowledge is not that of Life.<sup>43</sup>

And this expression of ‘the ancient myth of the tree of knowledge’ wherein ‘conscious life was pain’ (19:60), which Strindberg discusses in *The Son of a Servant* and quotes among the preliminary notes for *Inferno* (another text which, like Byron’s *Cain*, divides the path of love from the way of knowledge) is also developed, with the encouragement of Kierkegaard, into a belief that the writer represents mankind precisely because of the extent and depth of his

suffering. In the passage in *Repetition* in which he discusses one of Strindberg's principal later identifications, Job, Kierkegaard observes:

Nowadays people are of the opinion that the natural expression of sorrow, the desperate language of passion, must be left to poets, who as attorneys in a lower court plead the sufferer's cause before the tribunal of human compassion.<sup>44</sup>

This represents a notion that Strindberg stresses both in the letters of *He and She*, where he urges Maria to 'suffer, suffer, so that your heart wants to break; it doesn't break, it merely increases in size! – You must suffer everything if you wish to be an artist' (55:174), and in *A Blue Book*, in the text 'The Poet's Sacrifice'. The writer is thus both 'the representative of the human race' (I:201) and someone for whom life is 'staged before him... in order that [he] should both suffer and describe it' (XV:356).

But the language in which Strindberg presents himself in *He and She* indicates a still more far-reaching dimension to the context in which he reads life. The most persistent incarnation in these letters, and one that is associated with the conception of Nemesis which colours the opening monologue, is the view of himself as one who is 'born to wreak destruction' (55:5). This is expressed to the point of tedium, in the form of a self-consciously melodramatic literary pose which occasionally suggests the element of Romantic titanism in Strindberg's work, an element that reaches its full amplitude in the second part of *To Damascus*, when The Unknown wishes, quite literally, to have the last word:

I am the destroyer, the annihilator, the world-burner, and when everything lies in ashes I shall wander starving among the ruins and rejoice at the thought: it is I who have done this, I who have written the last page in the history of the world, which can thereby be considered at an end. (29:175)<sup>45</sup>

Besides Cain, The Unknown's antecedents in this established repertoire of roles by now includes Merlin and Robert le Diable; but even the earliest instances of what Brandell follows Strindberg in calling his 'crisis religion'<sup>46</sup> are formulated in terms of recognizable religious and mythical categories. In the Dalarö letter, he already sees himself on the way to Damascus. 'The Lord has struck me', he exclaims, but 'the cry Saul! Saul! never came' (55:33); the defiant and scarred Jacob of the later autobiographical volumes and *To Damascus* is even now a familiar: 'I have rebelled against God – I have blasphemed – I have fought against him like Jacob... but now the tendon of my thigh is paralysed' (1:238), he informs the Wrangels, and again, 'If I meet him I shall wrestle with him, however paralysed I am already in my left side!' (1:238); while in his many

references to his 'stony way', 'station after station', and 'the thorns in the wreath pressing into my brow' (1:324-5), he displays an evident readiness to view his life in the light of Christ's.

Writing in an age when Renan had transformed Christ into what Albert Schweitzer described as 'eine lebendige Theaterfigur'<sup>47</sup> it was, as Nils Norman points out, 'a short step' for Strindberg 'not only to associate [events in his life] with episodes in The Gospels but also well-nigh identify himself with Christ.'<sup>48</sup> And he did so not in the spirit of an *imitatio*, but in the terms of a Naturalist identification in which he recreates Christ in his own image. Indeed, throughout his life, Strindberg had occasion to read his experience in this way. As a writer and 'the representative of the human race', he is already 'a kind of Christ' (I:201) and so continually forced to 'empty another chalice' (IV:103). 'Now when I go up to Jerusalem, perhaps my Golgotha, to keep the Passover, alone, without disciples' (VII:37), he writes, on the eve of his return to Stockholm in 1888, and in 1894 he castigates the Judases among the writers of the 1880s who have betrayed him, and advises his old friend Littmansson: 'If you are really serious, if you wish to make anything of yourself... then take up your cross and follow me' (X:131). 'Soon I shall go to eat the lamb of the Passover at the Ferkel before I go to Golgotha in Plötzensee' (X:7), he tells his irreverent fellow reveller, Bengt Lidforss, while only a year later, in the midst of the Inferno crisis, he adopts a different tone but the same register to inform Hedlund, 'I want to return home again, after I have been up to Jerusalem and spoken to the people' (XI:81). The role, moreover, is one that merges naturally with the projection of himself and the writer in general as a scapegoat who assumes the burden of general suffering, and in particular with the most sustained and comprehensive of his self-images as 'the son of the huts and tenements – *The Son of a Servant* – Hagar's – the desert's' (XIV:144), with its clear association of his identification both with contemporary impoverishment and the Biblical narrative of Ishmael, in which he habitually found a correlation for his own destiny. For all these roles are associated with the wilderness; each (whether Christ, scapegoat, or Ishmael) is an outcast in the desert to which Strindberg saw himself condemned even before writing the first volume of his autobiography.<sup>49</sup> 'My way leads into the wilderness, without friends, without being permitted to have any friends' (V:110) is a recurrent plaint. It crops up both as a casual image ('je n'étais plus seul dans le desert', he comments, in a letter to *Le Figaro*, after discovering Jollivet Castetot's *La Vie et l'âme de la matière*), and as a carefully primed account of his destiny, as when, in 1900, he writes to Nils Andersson: 'My greetings to Herrlin! Tell him I never attain harmony! But it is in the nature and idea of Desert wandering never to arrive!' (XIII:265).

But whether or not he pauses to make a specific association with Christ or an Old Testament predecessor, the use of these and similar images is typical of the way in which Strindberg promptly sees his experience in terms of myth and legend. In even the most apparently casual statement, as Harry Carlson suggests, what begins as a chance series of associations immediately assumes a form and a context. The symbol develops into myth and the myth into cosmogony within the space of a few lines.<sup>50</sup> Or at least, the identification appears spontaneous because, as the bearer of the appropriate cultural information, and having already allotted himself a role, his surroundings and the people he encounters are rapidly composed into the context he expects. With his mind on matters infernal, it is not surprising that the landscape around Klam in Austria, where he is staying with his parents-in-law, should remind him of Dante's *Inferno* or that the dog discovered on the threshold of Munch's house in Paris suggested Cerberus to him. And in many of the notes preserved in the Royal Library, it is possible to observe how he enlists a number of interrelated identifications in order to explore and ascertain his situation. Thus in the drafts for a play entitled 'Mäster Ensam' (Master Alone), he tried on a number of familiar guises he had used elsewhere in his plays (Merlin, Robert of Normandie, Hercules, Socrates), before, in a typical instance of cross-fertilization, he settled momentarily upon 'Socrates and Omphale' and proceeded to apply it to current matters:

Socrates against a disorderly world. However he behaves, he is criticised. If he lives with a woman, he is tormented; if he is loving towards her, he is called sensual; if he is as restrained as he would like to be, he is mocked as decrepit. If he lives alone, chaste, he is called depraved. If he goes to women, he is called lecherous. If he is indifferent as regards religion, he is called a godless blasphemer; if he is religious, he is called a hypocrite when he cannot bring his life and faith into harmony (which is an impossibility.) The envious commit wrongs against him and when he does not want to suffer wrongs even against himself, he is called envious.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, as Carlson again remarks, 'Thinking mythopoetically was not a momentary, periodically recurrent aberration, it was as natural for him as thinking dramatically,'<sup>52</sup> and alongside the correlations which he fashions for himself, those with whom he lives are also allotted roles into which they, too, disappear, or are raised, like Strindberg in his own particular assumptions, to the status either of 'dramatic personae', such as Yeats also described in a volume of his *Autobiographies*, or of participants in a mythical or literary text from which, as Omphale, Beatrice, or Cinnober, they cannot escape.

Having made the identification, however, Strindberg then builds upon it with great care and industry. His description of the landscape around Dornach and Klam leads him by means of etymological speculation and association

(‘törnetagg’, ‘törne’, ‘törnestigen’ – prickle, thorn, way of thorns) to recall the wood of the suicides in the *Inferno* and so confirm a link with Dante’s poem, while in general terms it evokes both the crown of thorns and ‘the field of thorns’ (28:176) to which his destiny appears to have condemned him. Moreover, the *document humain*, *Inferno*, is – as Eric Johannesson suggests – perhaps the most literary of all hells,<sup>53</sup> the outcome of assiduous research in which Strindberg ransacked not only Dante but also Virgil, Swedenborg, Byron, Hesiod, the *Rigveda*, Viktor Rydberg’s *Undersökningar i germanisk mytologi* and *Medeltidens magi* as well as Balzac, Wagner, and Péladan, in order to confirm, and to confer shape on, his own infernal experiences. The metaphor of hell controls the narrative, accounts for what material is developed and what is omitted, and governs the course of events. Incidents that are insignificant in themselves gain in substance and meaning only by the narrative in which they are placed, where they are worked over and written up as events plotted and paced with conscious literary intention. The title and chapter headings indicate this procedure, of course, but two minor and amusing instances may exemplify Strindberg’s practice. One is the dramatic irony at which he connives when the goldmaker is reduced to beggary; another occurs in the retouching in which he indulges in the description of the scenery around Dornach. Along with such infernal trappings as the remorseless mill, the goat’s horn, a sinister broom, and the miller’s boys, ‘as white as the false angels’ (28: 135), he comes across a wooden building of which he writes:

It was a low, oblong shed with six oven doors.... Ovens!  
 Good God, where was I?  
 The image of Dante’s hell rose up before me, the coffin with the sinners  
 being baked red hot – and the six oven doors! (28:134)

This description, with its allusion to Canto 9 of the *Inferno*, is based on an entry in *The Occult Diary* for 9 September 1896, which also incorporates a sketch of the forbidding building (in fact, in commonplace reality a malodorous pig-sty) made at the time. However, the sketch reveals that initially Strindberg noticed and drew eight openings. Only afterwards, possibly when composing *Inferno*, were two of these crossed out to bring it into line both with Dante and with the mystical interpretation of numbers since, as an insertion beneath the drawing points out, ‘6 = a bad number’.

*Inferno*, however, represents only the culmination of a period of close reading in which Strindberg scrutinized every occurrence in order to penetrate to the text which lay beneath the surface. Probably the most striking of the many examples of the ingenuity with which he pursued his researches, and the detail on which he founds his reading, is the extraordinary venture into comparative biography which he conducted in the letters to his daughter Kerstin, *The*

*Occult Diary*, and *Inferno*, where he traces a network of relationships between himself, Napoleon, and the Greek hero, Ajax. Initially playful, this speculation becomes an experimental field of research in which he enlists the resources of history, mythology, etymology, number magic, and iconography, in order to establish a correspondence that would also substantiate the eschatology of guilt and suffering on which he is concurrently working. This whole topic has been studied by Nils Norman in his exemplary article, 'Strindberg och Napoleon', which demonstrates that 'in Strindberg's mythical world, however bizarre it might seem, there was a logic of symbols,'<sup>54</sup> and only the kind of detail in which Norman recovers Strindberg's own minute tracing of the etymological and mythological correspondences which link the three figures can adequately convey the reach and precision of his method. But a limited example of the kind of symptomatic reading in which Strindberg excelled can be seen in a letter to Hedlund, in which he reads his life according to the text of astrology. Born under the sign of the ram, and hence predestined to be a scapegoat ('This sign represents the sacrifice' (XI:281)), he perceives that 'Every success is followed by sufferings; every trace of happiness is smeared with dirt; every encouragement is a mockery, every good deed punished with the cross', and that this is a prescription that establishes the unmistakable contours of his own destiny. But the sign also signifies renewal, and he gains some encouragement from its Cabbalistic and Biblical implications. Moreover, in a reference by Manilius to 'The Ram, famous for its fleece of gold', he discovers not only a correspondence to his current interest in alchemy, but also to his 'first performed play, *In Rome*, which deals with Jason, whose statue with the golden fleece was Torwaldsen's first'. Likewise, the jewel related to this sign is the amethyst, his own favourite, notwithstanding that his is 'in pawn in Paris for 3 francs', and among other pertinent factors he recognizes in the Martian provenance of the Ram ('Out of his mouth went the two-edged sword') an affinity with 'the motto of my first publication [*The Freethinker*] – I am not come to bring peace but the sword'.<sup>55</sup>

It is naturally tempting to regard Strindberg's recourse to myth solely in terms of psychology, either to discern throughout the capacious embrace of the Great Mother, as is unfortunately the case in Harry Carlson's otherwise often stimulating study, *Strindberg and the Poetry of Myth*, or, like Donald Burnham, to stress the purely therapeutic value of his identifications. Burnham maintains, for example, that 'by means of these outer representations [Strindberg] was able to confront, work through, and gradually accept the reinternalization of his conflicts.'<sup>56</sup> It is certainly true that symbols and myths permitted Strindberg to reorganize himself and his relationship to his experience; in *Inferno*, *Legends*, and *Jacob Wrestles* the use to which he puts the figures of Jacob and Job, allowing the one largely to replace the other as his involvement in events passes from passive suffering to active engagement, provides one obvious example. But the

stress placed by Burnham on the therapeutic underestimates a number of other factors, among them the amount of sheer play in his speculations, and – in cases where Strindberg relies on detailed if idiosyncratic research – the purely literary dimension. For it is in literature that the reorganization takes place. Strindberg's use of myth is situated within a recognizable literary tradition, and its primary purpose is to provide him with the means of organizing a literary text rather than the reorganization of the existential, unadulterated text of himself.

Furthermore, many of the identifications she makes, among them the comprehensive image of himself as 'The Son of a Servant', are not so much therapeutic as the means of self-aggrandizement. They confer distinction, elevate him to a singular destiny, and ultimately contribute not to the revelation of his hidden or unknown self but to the screen across which his image flits in one (dis)guise or another. They are, as Gunnar Brandell has indicated, 'conceptions to which Strindberg has recourse for self-defence when his situation appears unendurable',<sup>57</sup> and the fear that the assumption of many roles might deprive him of his own identity, that he would become featureless, like the figure of his story, 'Jubal Without an I', was not without foundation. The multitude of incarnations in which he deposits some aspect of his experience, from Ahasverus, Asmodeus, Christ, Hercules, Jacob, Job, Jonah, and Joseph to Tobias, The Flying Dutchman, Loke, Starkodd, Svarte Balder, or Ån, Cain, Ishmael, Merlin, Napoleon, Robert le Diable, and Satan, are components of a multiple image, the contents of what amounts to a theatrical wardrobe composed in language and providing a looking glass in which, somewhat in the manner of the experiments with superimposed photographic images of his contemporary, Francis Galton, to which Strindberg alludes on the first page of *The Occult Diary*, an urimage might be perceived. But if this is the promise, the example of *To Damascus* is salutary. Caught up in the median order of symbols, he confronts himself as 'The Unknown'. The final signified eludes him because it belongs not to literature but to the real. 'We all travel incognito' (51:30), the Hunter admits in *The Great Highway*, and the epitaph with which the play concludes, 'a cursory inscription' (51:100) written in the snow, is only a final gesture, one more version of the myth with which, above all others, Strindberg has been engaged, the myth of himself.

For the remarkably consistent portrait which emerges in the successive representations of himself throughout his life is a personal myth, based upon a system of private associations. In the biography he evolves for himself, he frames a portrait in order to represent himself in the form in which he wishes to be regarded, both by himself and by others. The act of symbolization removes him from direct participation in the events he records. If it facilitates his reorganization, it also places him at a distance; that is, it replaces the event

with an account of it in which it enters the domain of the imagination. To quote Lacan:

The drama of the subject in the verb is that he faces the test of his lack of being. It is because it fends off this moment of lack that an image moves into position to support the whole worth of desire: projection, a function of the Imaginary.<sup>58</sup>

Moreover, since he is neither the creator of the symbols nor the founder of the myths which he employs to convey this image, but their inheritor, in using them, he is formed by them. Wherever he finds himself, he discovers precedents, from Joseph in Potiphar's house in several of the naturalist novels and plays, to Saul on the road to Damascus, and thus, as Ernst Cassirer writes

The more richly and energetically the human spirit engages in its formative activity, the farther this very activity seems to remove it from the primal source of its own being. More and more, it appears to be imprisoned in its own creations – in the words of language, in the images of myth or art, in the intellectual symbols of cognition, which cover it like a delicate and transparent, but unbreachable veil.<sup>59</sup>

In the versions of himself which Strindberg transcribes, he sees therefore not himself but his reflection as it is fashioned by his desires and his regrets. In short, he is a prisoner of the mirror in which he regards himself.