

### 3. Life Plots and Letters

Peter Brooks begins his valuable study of narrative, *Reading for the Plot*, by pointing to the way in which ‘we live immersed in narrative, recounting and reassessing the meaning of our past actions, anticipating the outcome of our future projects, situating ourselves at the intersection of several stories not yet completed’.<sup>1</sup> With no Oedipal allusion intended, this study echoes Brooks and takes place at the intersection of the three roads of inquiry alluded to in the title.

The first of these, ‘life’, points towards the past. It refers to the way in which a writer orders and recovers his or her lived experience in the form of autobiography. The second, ‘plots’, concerns itself with how the writer (and more particularly the nineteenth-century dramatist) confers significance upon his material by means of plot as a way of organizing and interpreting the world. The third aspect, ‘letters’, acknowledges the emphasis which Strindberg customarily placed on letter writing as a model for writing in general. As he outlines the rudiments of this aesthetic with disarming simplicity in a letter to his sister Elisabeth, in 1882:

If your heart is full and you cannot speak, then write! Every educated person can write, that is, commit their thoughts to paper. You can write letters; a good and true book is a letter. Writing is not inventing, making up something that has never happened; to write is to relate what one has lived. Anyone who relates what he has lived is a writer and serves his fellow men by telling them about what may occur in life. [III, 41; 1, 97]

Characteristically, too, the epistolary form will concern itself with the life of its writer, following the dual need that Strindberg feels for self-expression, on the one hand, and the ordering, or plotting, of experience, on the other. Moreover, given the sheer abundance of his correspondence (as Kerstin Dahlbäck observes, the letters are, in this respect at least, Strindberg’s principal genre),<sup>2</sup> and taking into account the concern that Strindberg frequently expressed in his correspondence about the significance of the various plots, both sinister and literary, which he discerned in his life, the letters are clearly fundamental to these two earlier preoccupations. Indeed, in his letters Strindberg may be apprehended as the obsessive reader as well as writer of his life.

Although far more complex an issue than is generally recognized, the autobiographical element in Strindberg's writing is clearly crucial. Towards the end of his career, he himself privileged a series of his works in different genres as the basis for a continuous and authoritative account of his life, to be called *The Son of a Servant*. The sequence was to include not only the four volumes with that general title, written in 1885–86, but – in chronological order of the life recalled – the novels *A Madman's Defence* (1887), *The Cloister* (written 1898 but not published until 1966),<sup>3</sup> *Inferno* (1897), *Legends* (1898) and *Alone* (1903), the *Occult Diary* he kept between February 1896 and 11 November 1908, and his collected correspondence.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, as in this letter to Elisabeth, he frequently implied that writing involved only the more or less direct transcription of lived experience into words, even if he does go on to concede that 'to relate is not merely to place events in sequence; one must also have something to say with the narrative, throw light on an aspect of life. The art of the writer lies in ordering his many impressions, memories and experiences, in leaving out the unimportant things and giving prominence to the main ones' [III, 41; I, 97]. Consequently, in Strindberg's case, criticism has not been slow to elide all difference between the writer and his text by mapping what has been written neatly back onto what is known of the life he lived, and then to read the unstable compound of the text as established fact rather than fiction, whereas here, as in the work of other Romantic and post-Romantic writers from Goethe to, for example, Claude Simon, there is in fact a ceaseless tension between reference and fiction in both autobiographical and imaginative discourses.

Nevertheless, like Rousseau, with whom he has a great deal in common, Strindberg demonstrates a persistent personal desire to discover and reveal himself in writing, a desire which is fostered by his early Pietism and endorsed by a combination of other impulses derived from the discourses of Kierkegaard, Naturalism and contemporary psychology. Moreover, he consistently entrusts himself to writing in preference to speech because (again like Rousseau) that is the medium in which, unmolested by others, he may forge an identity and control his destiny. Both *The Son of a Servant* and the *Confessions* demonstrate how, without writing, identity is undermined and fretted away by the summary conception which others mistakenly form of their authors, mistakes which speech, however truthful, is unable to dispel. In place of the treacherous impermanence of the spoken word in which the speaker is dissipated, both men resort to writing in order to re-appropriate the sense of themselves which eludes them in their spoken intercourse with other people.

In part this doubtless stems from what Strindberg, with one eye on a Darwinism that he otherwise distrusts, calls 'the instinct for differentiation, to be no one but oneself' [VII, 247; I, 304]. Almost by definition autobiography

seeks to establish its author's singularity and predicates the authenticity of its discourse on the grounds that the autobiographer has a uniquely privileged insight into the details of the life in question. 'We know no more than one life, our own' [SV 20, 373], Strindberg insists in the 'Interview' originally designed to accompany the first volume of *The Son of a Servant*, and that is one's right and proper subject when, by the same token, no one else can know it. Hence the claim, often made in justification of autobiography, and especially by autobiographers, that the person who has lived a life is the one best able to re-tell it. And hence, too, the authority it is seen to possess as a primary text. For even though an autobiography always remains secondary, in the sense that it necessarily (or ostensibly) retraces the life its subject has already lived, the autobiographer is engaged upon a project in which he becomes, by writing, the author of his own life, a kind of self-progenitor whose account of himself takes precedence over all others and the authority to which all later accounts usually refer. Indeed, confronted by the common patrimony of the language into which they are forced to translate themselves when they write this account (a language they share with their readers and critics) autobiographers sometimes speculate on the possibility of a form of utterance that is unique and personal to themselves. Thus, Rousseau felt the need for 'a language as new as my project',<sup>5</sup> and his role as the model autobiographer is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in this desire to secede from a common, shared discourse and inaugurate his own.

However, what happens in practice is something else. The text affords its author only a temporary refuge, and the identity he or she is seeking to establish or maintain is forever deferred and unstable, thus prompting the compulsive autobiographer (Strindberg, Rousseau, Stendhal, Leiris or Ivar Lo-Johansson) continually to multiply the texts in which this elusive singularity is sought. Indeed, in his continual search for self-definition, the autobiographer seems regularly to disappear into the text of which he is nominally the master. As his intimate, lived experience passes into language, it is mediated by the inter-relationship between the signifiers, which come in time to stand for the lived experience. And as language displaces the past and the person it is employed to represent, as it creates the facsimile which replaces the original, it establishes a metaphorical narrative which secretes and accretes meanings in a framework that subsumes the particles of autobiographical detail implanted in it. Private experience enters the public domain of language and then the formal contract of a literary genre, where it is enhanced with conceptual figures and stylistic devices as an item in the literary institution and able in turn to foster other discourses – like the one that is developing here. It is the signifier which moves into the foreground. The empirical facts of the life are transformed into artefacts, sequence is endowed with meaning and condensed into design, and

the autobiographical act of exhibiting oneself in public remains what it has always been, a metaphor. The autobiographer remains behind that discourse that he or she leaves after him, and becomes a figure of the text. Or as Derrida remarks, in his essay 'The Purveyor of Truth':

Exhibiting, baring, stripping down, unveiling – this is an old routine: the metaphor *of* truth, which is as much as to say the metaphor of metaphor, the truth of truth, the truth of metaphor.<sup>6</sup>

If by using language the autobiographer places himself within the common patrimony he shares with his fellow speakers, he also employs it to relate a narrative or plot a drama in which the roles, though seemingly personal, are to some extent already scripted and cast. If autobiography represents in a particularly acute form what Hayden White calls 'the apparently universal need not only to narrate but to give to events an aspect of narrativity',<sup>7</sup> the way in which the single life may be shaped or plotted, and the roles in which the writer may recover himself, are culturally as well as personally determined, according to models which, until recently, the autobiographer was most likely to discover in other books. It is hardly surprising that Rousseau, for example, dates the unbroken consciousness of his own existence from the time of his earliest reading. Reading offers a template against which the autobiographer may measure his personal experience. Although there is a danger that the plots he follows may distort experience, confer a spurious authority upon it, or come between the writer and what may be deemed to have taken place, it is to some degree a question of inserting oneself into what seems the most appropriate of available plots, of reading one's experience in the light of existing models in which, however indistinctly, it is possible to discern what Peter Brooks terms 'a line of intention and a portent of design that hold the promise of progress toward meaning'.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, as *The Son of a Servant* and *Inferno*, those two compounds of Strindberg's multifarious reading, amply demonstrate, even a title has the ability to intend much of what follows.

In fact Strindberg was obsessed by plots and plotting. Perhaps the fundamental question which preoccupied him throughout his life concerned the nature of the plot in which he was embroiled, or whether, indeed, there was one, and not merely a random accumulation of encounters and events, particles of experience without form or meaning. For what disturbs him is the sight of any blank, plotless space – of, for example, the empty seascape, so different from the cluttered profusion of the Stockholm archipelago, off Luc-sur-mer at which he gazed in horror in 1885 (a true *horror vacui*) and which, as Gunnar Brandell has suggested,<sup>9</sup> helped precipitate his experiment with atheism – or any white, unsignifying sheet of paper upon which no sign of authorial life has been inscribed. Hence, too, his failure ever entirely to abandon representational

painting, as he seemed frequently to be on the verge of doing, to omit, for example, the lonely poisonous mushroom clinging tenaciously to the bottom right hand corner of the painting of that name, from 1893.<sup>10</sup>

However, after the demise of the patriarchal family romance into which he saw himself born (and which, in many respects, he spent a lifetime seeking to reconstitute), and following the failure of the Pietist scenario in which he sought to locate himself during his early years, one is compelled to recognize that this attempt to live without a script according to the possibility that, as he puts it in *The Son of a Servant*, 'everything was simply jumbled up with one thing piled on top of another, the laws of chance and necessary whims and no plan to creation' (SS 19, 244), was an extended period of crisis no less crucial than the more notorious events of the Inferno period during the mid-1890s when he discovered the designing hand of an omnipotent experimental artist in nature and concluded that it was presumably this same artist in providence who managed the deeper syntax of his own experience in what now appeared to him to be the stage-managed events of his unfolding life. It was now, too, when Strindberg began to erase still further the boundary between life and art, and dream and waking experience, and to interpret the interface between his subjectivity and the world about him according to a type of free associational technique, that he indulged in the most insistent speculation on the identity of the author of the script in which he featured, as well as (no New Critic, he) upon the nature of this author's intentions. 'Who stages these events for us, and to what end?' he wondered, in a letter to his friend Axel Herrlin in 1898 [XII, 273; 2, 622], in which he pondered the significance of recent events in both their lives. At times he attributed an active role to himself, as when he claimed to have 'put his entire life on stage in order to become a dramatist';<sup>11</sup> at others he regarded himself more as a character: 'The whole of my life often seems to me to have been put on stage so that I might both suffer and portray it'. And sometimes, as in the following entry in the *Occult Diary* during January 1901, he quite simply cannot decide where the boundary between art and life, or author and character, lies:

Have been reflecting on my life: is it possible that all the terrible things I've experienced have been staged for me to enable me to become a dramatist and portray all kinds of mental states and possible situations? I was a dramatist at twenty. But if my life had passed quietly by, I should have had nothing to write about.<sup>12</sup>

The last of these reflections only reaffirms a tendency to see the world in terms of literature which Strindberg displayed throughout his life. Not only does he suggest that a turbulent personal experience is a necessary precondition for the value of what a writer produces; he also habitually regards any event as

already essentially either a scene in a drama or an episode from a novel. Life, in fact, imitates literature rather than vice versa; it has a natural propensity to assume literary form, and the writer's task is largely a case of recognizing the genre inherent in the material. Thus he informs his sister Elisabeth that her 'life has at least three periods – childhood, youth (with step-mother) and your experiences out in the world' [III, 41; 1, 97], while in the 1894 Vivisection 'La Genese d'une Aspasie' he describes how an experienced writer initiates a novice in the rudiments of his craft:

Having moved into the same house, the master devoted himself to giving the poor wretch a thorough education, getting him to narrate the story of his life, showing him where the profitable motifs lay. 'That is a drama,' he instructed him; 'there's a short story, and there a novel.' [V, 22; SE, 93]

Significantly, the starting point both in the Vivisection and the letter remains the course of the writer's own life; it is from there that one begins. But like the vampires of his later texts, like Zachris in *Black Banners* (1904) and Hummel in *The Ghost Sonata* (1907), Strindberg did not draw back from speculating in other people's experiences as well. Although he reacted strongly against the possibility of being caught up in someone else's plot himself (note his outraged reading of both *The Wild Duck* and *Hedda Gabler* in which he thought he recognized a bowdlerized version of himself in Hjalmar Ekdal and Eilert Løvborg respectively), he had no such scruples about utilizing what he observed in others. Witness, for example, the delight with which he viewed the events surrounding the figure of the Norwegian pianist and writer Dagny Juel, his original Aspasie, in 1893. 'Oh, it's a novel! She lays waste families and men, compels men of talent to embezzle money, to leave house and home, their duty and careers' [IX, 188; 2, 456], he exclaims enthusiastically as he records her impact on their mutual acquaintances at the tavern he christened 'Zum schwarzen Ferkel' in Berlin, where she was introduced by the painter Edvard Munch, after having already enchanted Strindberg's young scientist colleague, Bengt Lidforss, somewhat earlier in Sweden, and where, following a brief intermezzo with Strindberg himself, she eventually married the *fin-de-siècle* Polish writer Stanisław Przybyszewski. Moreover, as she passes between the male members of the Ferkel circle (or is passed around – the sexual politics of this episode are highly ambiguous and deeply compromising to someone who, like Strindberg, was clear that any initiative had to be masculine), Strindberg finds the same kind of formal satisfaction in the course of these events, as they occur, that he will one day take in structuring several of his later dramas in the form of a circle, much as Schnitzler will do in his celebrated sexual merry-go-round, *Reigen*, in 1900. For here, as in part one of *To Damascus* or the partial recapitulation of this period in his life in *Crimes and Crimes*, the first and final

scenes echo each other: 'This ending satisfies me completely,' he tells another of the actors in this drama, Bengt Lidforss: 'Chap. I: Munch-Juel in the Ferkel... Chap. XII: Munch-Juel in the Ferkel... (End!?)' [IX, 347]

Not that the dramatist in him does not feel drawn to intervene, however. A few days later, on 10 January 1894, he suggests that Przybyszewski should revenge himself on Juel by having her arrested as a prostitute: 'Poland ought to take care of that Aspasia business himself, as the married man's revenge! A policeman – a cab, the Rathaus, then the courts – and so: off with her head!' [IX, 357]. As a *dénouement* he finds this so attractive that he employs it himself against the *demi-mondaine* Henriette in Act Four of *Crimes and Crimes*, written some five years later, in 1899.

Life, then, can be read like fiction, one watches it unfold 'just like when reading a novel or watching a play' (aldeles som vid romanläsning eller åseendet av en pjäs [SV 50, 248]), and the conventions governing the two domains are in many respects the same. As he wrote, in 1901, to his daughter Kerstin, who had, or so he maintained, 'led me through Inferno as my Beatrice, by way of gorge and path of lamentation, through anguished nights and evil days':

All plays contain changes of scene, and changes of *dramatis personae* too, but in the last act, they all reappear, and the author mustn't forget a single one of them. Such is the eternal law of drama, and of life! And woe to him who forgets it! So now you know! [XIV, 41; 2, 675–6]

On the one hand, he is seeking here to excuse his failure to respond to his young daughter's most recent letter ('Forgive me, but I was ill with fever when your last dear picture arrived. Do you think I could ever forget you, you who led me through Inferno...' [XIV, 41; 2, 675–6]). On the other, he is describing the dramaturgy employed that same year in the play that himself thought most warmly of, *A Dream Play*.

The question therefore arises to what extent Strindberg did in fact stage-manage his life. Certainly, as a writer who drew heavily and copiously upon the primary capital of his own experience, there is a frequent need to replenish his otherwise rapidly depleted stock of ready material. 'Better, however, an unhappy marriage than none at all. One goes through it and comes away more experienced than before, and experience is capital', the entrepreneur Smartman declares at the close of *Black Banners* [SV 57, 219], and Strindberg, too, evidently considered the events he sometimes instigated in all three of his marriages as capital (*kapital*) to be translated into chapters (*kapitel*).

This is also the case with the Inferno crisis, the turbulent and (melo) dramatic period through which he effected his passage from the naturalist texts of the late 1880s to the incipient modernism of the late 1890s and early 1900s. These years in Berlin, Austria and Paris, during which he largely



abandoned belles lettres and devoted himself to a variety of alternative activities, including his painting and alchemy, may reasonably be regarded as in certain respects a skilfully crafted and dramatically effective *peripeteia* in the middle of his career. Throughout the Inferno period, it is evident that Strindberg is reviewing his experiences with a mind to publication. In May 1896, for example, he is intent on producing what he describes as a 'book about all that I have "seen" and experienced since last December' [XI, 193; 2, 554]. And however alarming these experiences are there is no doubt, as he monitors them in his correspondence (and most particularly in the letters addressed to the theosophist Torsten Hedlund at *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning*) that he continues to function as an author, accustomed to publishing an account of his experiences on a market that is often as capricious and enigmatic as the script of the unfolding events he is seeking to decipher. On one level, the central phase of the Inferno period is inaugurated as a business project in which Strindberg secures a period of relative financial stability that will enable him to conduct the experiments with the data of his own life that form the basis of *Inferno*. For with the help of Hedlund in Sweden, he receives a privately donated sum of 1,200 kronor, paid to him in monthly instalments and even, on occasion, directly to the locations where the Parisian scenes in the drama of his life are being acted out – the Hôtel Orfila and Mme Charlotte's Crémérie in the rue de la Grande Chaumière [XI, 135–8]. As surety, he offers various promises of future writing:

I abandoned literature in order to escape being superficial; but no one, least of all I, escapes his destiny. I shall, however, try, and suggest this consortium as follows: that I write a series of letters directly from memory and my notes, without a thought for the paper and its readers, but so that every letter will form a chapter in a future book, which, if you like it, I then offer you, and for no honorarium unless it promises to bring in something. [XI, 138; 2, 547–8]

Traces of this plan remain in the letters Strindberg wrote to Hedlund between 6 and 22 July 1896 on manuscript paper paginated consecutively from 1–59 across the intervals of their composition and despatch. They evidently encompass a provisional attempt to organize some of the material later incorporated in the early chapters of his autobiographical novel. (Compare, for example, the opening paragraph of the letter dated 7 July 1896 [XI, 245; 2, 568] with chapter one of the novel.) Furthermore, having abandoned himself to the events of the Inferno period, he knows precisely when it is opportune 'to re-establish contact with life' [XI, 310] in order to resume the potentially profitable exploitation of his experiences in literature. In fact both the beginning and the end of this phase of his life demonstrate a remarkable combination of self-awareness and business acumen. The letter from Austria in which he re-



opens epistolary contact with Hedlund was written immediately before his move to Paris, one day (23 July 1894) after he had informed the most intimate recipient of his Austrian correspondence, his old friend Leopold Littmansson, that he didn't 'know what fate now holds in store for me, but I feel "The Hand of the Lord" poised above me. A change is in the offing, upwards, or straight down to the centre of the earth, who knows about such things!' [X, 152; 2, 487], and he followed it with another in which he referred to his urgent need for 'raw material, observations, preferably my own, because I cannot depend on other people's' [X, 206–7; 2, 501]. Becalmed in his literary career, he requires fresh impulses and identifies Hedlund as a likely means to his literary and personal renewal. However, having primed what did in fact turn out to be an effective avenue to the material support that his undertaking required, he was equally astute, some four years later, in recognizing when the vein he was exploiting had been exhausted. 'My religious struggles are over and the whole Inferno saga at an end,' he told his current literary editor, Gustaf af Geijerstam, in March 1898 [XII, 271; 2, 621–2]. It was now time to write for the theatre again.

A detailed study of this extended act in Strindberg's life would need to consider his choice of settings carefully, of how the locations where the different scenes of the Inferno drama are played out have been admirably selected in order to enhance the action long before they are used as the backdrop for *Inferno* or *To Damascus*. There is a dramatics of place in Strindberg which he exploits in life as well as in literature. Zum Schwarzen Ferkel in Berlin, Dornach and Klam in Austria, the Hôpital Saint-Louis and the Hôtel Orfila as well as the Jardin des Plantes and the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris and the small town atmosphere of Lund all provide the fitting scenery for the events enacted in each of them well before these events are written up in literary form. Indeed, in retrospect Strindberg characteristically implies this even as he suggests that the skilful plot of his unfolding life derives from another source. 'I am compelled to admire the refined skill which has selected this place for my prison,' he writes of Lund at the beginning of *Legends* [SS 28, 211], where he relishes the irony that brings him to the town at precisely this moment in his career, a middle-aged man who ought to have more in common with the professors there than with the students who welcome him, a *déclassé* intellectual who is praised by these students just when he has himself jettisoned the radical ideas with which they associate him, and become their opponent: 'This is rather neatly arranged, and as a dramatist I have to admire the fine composition of this tragicomedy. Truly, a well-made scene' [SS 28, 213].

But perhaps of equal significance to the way in which Strindberg contrives a suitable *mise en scène* for each act of his life is the fact that each stage of his career can generally be associated with a specific correspondent. A shift of

direction, a change of outlook, is almost invariably accompanied, as with the transfer of his correspondence from Littmansson to Hedlund, by the opening and closing of a major sequence of letters. 'Why have I written all this now?' he wonders, in one of his first letters to the up-and-coming Swedish writer, Verner von Heidenstam: 'Perhaps because I felt the need to clarify my present position before embarking on an important new epoch in my life' [V, 111; 1, 189]. In fact, the backbone of his correspondence, at least until after the Inferno crisis, is made up of a number of these often suddenly commenced and abruptly terminated sequences in which he keeps his chosen correspondent informed about selected aspects of his life with almost daily reports, each letter taking up the tale even as it is unfolding. Moreover, in some cases such as the letters to Pehr Staaff in 1887 in which he vivisects his relationship with Siri von Essen and charts the disintegration of their marriage, it is clear that he is discovering, or inventing or recomposing this life in the very act of writing about it. It is as if he allows the words to have their say, unleashes them on a line of speculation, and follows where they care to take him in what is effectively a trial run for the text they conjure up, the autobiographical fiction *A Madman's Defence*, which he wrote later that year.

Given the emphasis which Strindberg placed on letter writing as a model for writing in general, for example in the extended epistle on writing which initiates his correspondence with Siri von Essen [I, 186–96; 1, 36–43], his own letters are obviously of particular relevance to a project in which the boundaries between the different discourses he employs seem to dissolve into the single unremitting activity of writing. Nor is it surprising that he always conceived of them as an essential part of his work, particularly of that unwieldy collection of autobiographical texts that he wished to see published in one volume as 'The Son of a Servant'. For in offering what appears to be the possibility of a true *multiplicité du moi* in terms of the different aspects and projections each correspondent may elicit, the letters represent perhaps the ideal method of self-representation if, as Strindberg frequently points out, character is not singular but several, not one but multiple, not fixed and substantial but a fluid coalescence of numerous and varied texts – those 'conglomerations from various stages of culture, past and present, scraps from books and newspapers, bits and pieces of different people, shreds torn from fine clothes that have become rags, patched together just like a human soul' of which he writes in the Preface to *Miss Julie* [SV 27, 105]. However, although Strindberg frequently uses an extended sequence of letters as a kind of mirror in which to observe and analyse himself, his correspondence in practice often resembles a monologue rather than the dialogue normally evoked by an exchange of letters. Indeed, in telling Eugène Fahlstedt, his fellow student at Uppsala, 'I don't expect an answer to this letter. For there isn't one' [I, 122; 1, 26] or in pointing out to

the Norwegian novelist Jonas Lie that, 'You don't need to answer all the letters I shall sometimes bombard you with. I simply ask to be allowed to deposit them in your *escritoire* as documents, which you may take out in my defence when I am vilified before a larger public than the Swedish' [IV, 180; 1, 143], he acknowledges that his correspondence is sometimes not primarily intended to provoke a full and reciprocal communication.

At its most intense, this practice produces a form of externalized inner monologue, a type of public self-address in which Strindberg contemplates his situation and inspects himself. In a succession of correspondences, he deftly secures a balance between intimacy and distance which permits him to concentrate upon himself. Thus, in the crucial stages of the *Inferno* crisis, he uses Torsten Hedlund as a screen onto which he projects his inner turmoil in order to interpret it. The similarity with the relationship between analyst and analysand is striking; so, too, is a parallel with the almost contemporary situation contrived by Freud in relation to his friend Wilhelm Fliess through which, largely by letter, he conducted his extraordinary self-analysis. Both Freud and Strindberg cast their correspondents as the distant intimates of their intellectual isolation, largely uncomprehending blank screens designed to receive what each of them extracted from themselves by experiment, introspection and free association and then transferred to paper: 'Read what I write without criticism, without resistance, and don't prevent me from running on,' he tells Hedlund, in 1896, 'for I am growing as I write this, and maybe you will too' [XI, 240; 2, 567]. However, what Hedlund was expressly forbidden to do was to place his own constructions on the material with which Strindberg supplied him. As always, the latter resisted other interpretations of his own story. He refused the transference, and when Hedlund became too intimate, he broke off the relationship in a letter which confirms the one-sided nature of their correspondence: 'Your appearance in my life always seemed to me like a mission, and your person, which I do not know and have never seen, always remained an abstraction to me... [now] your role in my life [seems] to be played out' [XI, 393; 2, 600].

Note how Hedlund is allotted a role and becomes a figure in the drama of Strindberg's life. The latter had used Hedlund, whom he never met, whose age, even, he badly mistook, believing him to be some twenty years younger than in fact he was, as the more or less silent witness of the unfolding story of his life, a blank page on which he traces and retraces its possible plot. These letters have many other functions. They solicit information, afford moments of catharsis, act as substitutes for conversation, allow Strindberg to experiment with different points of view. But their prime impulse is the emplotment of his life, its induction into narrative and drama. And while their abundance and immediacy may suggest that the pulse of life is closer to the surface here than

in the extended composition of his novels and plays, it would be a mistake to assume that Strindberg inevitably reveals himself more openly in them than elsewhere. They, too, are already secondary to the experience he exploits, experience which may itself be being lived with literature in mind. As Richard Ellmann remarks, at the outset of his biography of Joyce, 'the life of an artist... differs from the lives of other persons in that its events are becoming artistic sources even as they command his present attention'.<sup>13</sup> But in Strindberg's case, as in Joyce's, this need not be regarded, as it so often is, as a damaging failure to transcend experience and abandon himself to art. Rather, he was so overwhelmingly responsive to the claims of art that he could not leave the raw material of life untreated. It was as if everything he encountered, all that he experienced, had to be brought into stories or focused and placed in dramatic form. Like Alrik Lundstedt, the artistic hero of his novella 'The Romantic Organist on Rånö' (1888), Strindberg remained uneasy until he had found some form or formula to accommodate what he had seen, felt and heard. Only then – and the word recurs frequently in this context throughout his life – was he momentarily calm (*lugn*).

In this respect, he emerges as the antithesis of his close contemporary, Chekhov. In his plays Chekhov expends a great deal of artistry on establishing a radical difference between life and art. Thus, for example, in the consummately crafted third act of *Three Sisters* Masha, having just confessed her love for Vershinin, the man who simply chanced across her path in Act I, remarks: 'What's going to become of us? When you read a novel, everything in it seems so old and obvious but when you fall in love yourself, you suddenly discover that you don't really know anything, and you've got to make your own decisions'.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, in the final act of *The Seagull* her namesake also stresses the futility of considering her hopeless love for Trepliov in literary terms: 'All this is just nonsense. Love without hope – it only happens in novels'.<sup>15</sup> For Chekhov there is no plot, no underlying pattern, no script to rehearse in life, where every effect obediently follows from its cause and where every event unrolls as it must, coherent in every detail, as it does in art. Which does not mean that experience is random, simply that, as he states:

the things that happen on stage [should] be just as complex and yet just as simple as they are in life. For instance, people are having a meal at the table, just having a meal, but at the same time their happiness is being created, or their lives are being smashed up.<sup>16</sup>

However, the point that Chekhov makes, with great insistence, is precisely the absence of any direct correlation between the lives people live and those undertaken by the characters encountered in books. Like Don Quixote and Emma Bovary, his Soliony in *Three Sisters*, who apes the behaviour of

Lermontov's heroes, demonstrates the folly of any such close reading when he kills Toozenbach in a duel. Where, in Strindberg, a character's experiences naturally fall into literary shape, Chekhov uses literature to make a point of undermining such identifications. To Sasha, for example, in his early play *Ivanov*, the protagonist is a Hamlet figure, a superior man to be worshipped or redeemed; to Dr Lvov, however, he is a Tartuffe, a man both selfish and hypocritical. But Chekhov's point, as he indicated in a letter about the play, is that there are many Ivanovs. He is a most ordinary man, not a literary hero at all.

Strindberg, on the other hand, is always acting a role, playing a part, seeing himself and those about him as the figures in scenarios derived from literature and myth. Even those texts nominally termed Naturalist reveal a definite literary or mythical deep structure, evoke the presence, in the lineaments of their characters, of previous incarnations. Where *Miss Julie* is concerned, for example, the complex intertextuality of her identity is extended by the range of associations that she and Jean bear. Not only are they the swineherd and princess of fairy tale but Actaeon and Diana (the name of Julie's thoroughbred dog which mates with the gatekeeper's mutt and prefigures her own fall as the Nöjd episode foreshadows the principal action of *The Father*), Joseph and Potiphar's Wife and – even more ominously – Adam and Eve. As Jean makes plain, in the long, seductive speech to Julie with which the first phase of the play approaches its climax, the Count's estate represents the Garden of Paradise where young boys not only scrump apples but also dream of possessing beautiful young girls, and the play as a whole, in which Julie steps down from her elevated position into the mire of human sexual relations, is a re-run of the Fall of Man. The patriarchal Count whose 'unhappy spirit hover(s) above and behind it all' [SV 27, 109] is thus an Old Testament deity, kept artfully offstage but of whose omnipresence an audience remains aware through the ever-present riding boots that Jean has to polish, the bell at which he cringes, and the speaking tube via which, at the end of the play, he announces himself from on high to the fallen couple on stage.

In *The Father*, meanwhile, the Captain and Laura play the roles of Hercules and Omphale and Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, and it is therefore no wonder that in the frequently quoted letter about the play which Strindberg addressed to Axel Lundegård on 12 November 1887 he should complain of being unable to distinguish between waking and sleeping, of how his 'life and writing have got all jumbled up' and he is unable to tell 'if *The Father* is a work of literature or if my life has been' [VI, 298; 1, 255]. What he has achieved by this intermingling of life and fiction greatly resembles the conclusion of Pirandello's play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* in which the boundary between art and life, or madness and sanity, and illusion and reality has been

deliberately blurred, and the spectator cannot determine whether the young girl and boy in the drama are dead or only acting.

And yet, is this so extraordinary? Is what Strindberg makes of his life in terms of literature the impure and sullied art that it is sometimes claimed to be? As Roman Jakobsen observed, in his reflections on the death of Mayakovsky, in the essay 'On a Generation that Squandered its Poets': 'Is there any one of us who doesn't share the impression that the poet's volumes are a kind of scenario in which he plays out the story of his life? The poet is the principal character, and subordinate parts are also included; but the performers for these later roles are recruited as the action develops and to the extent that the plot requires them. The plot has been laid down ahead of time right down to the details of the dénouement'.<sup>17</sup>