

10. 'New Arts, New Worlds!': Strindberg and Painting

Writing to his fiancée, Felice Bauer, in 1916, Kafka turned aside from his own concerns to commiserate sincerely with her: 'It really does seem too much that you should attend a regular course of lectures as well,' he wrote. 'And lectures on Strindberg at that! We are his contemporaries and his successors. One has only to close one's eyes and one's own blood delivers lectures on Strindberg.'¹

Kafka was writing just as the great wave of productions of Strindberg's dramas that swept through Germany in the years shortly after his death in April 1912 was about to break – in 1912–13, for example, there had been 281 performances of his plays there; in 1915–16 there were 789, and in 1922–23 there would be 1,024.² Kafka was therefore not alone in having Strindberg in his blood; he was a contemporary enthusiasm shared by (among others) Schoenberg and Karl Kraus, for whom Strindberg meant not only the plays but also novels like *Gothic Rooms* and *Black Banners* or the autobiographical fictions *Inferno* and *Jacob Wrestles*, which Schoenberg seriously considered making the subject of an opera.

Strindberg's international reputation rests, of course, on his plays, but this central European response to his work only confirms how, in this country, our knowledge even of the plays remains for the most part slender and partial. Of his dramatic works in several genres, only a handful – some four or five – are performed here with any regularity – *Miss Julie*, *The Father*, *Creditors*, *The Dance of Death*; the sequence of twelve plays on subjects from Swedish history, which includes a number of his finest works as a dramatist, is largely unknown while several of the major plays with which he helped to establish the basis of theatrical modernism – *To Damascus*, *A Dream Play*, *The Ghost Sonata*, or *The Pelican* – have rarely occupied the British stage. Whereas Strindberg impacted powerfully upon the work of (for example) Artaud and Max Reinhardt or O'Neill and Giorgio Strehler, he has had little direct influence here, either upon English dramatists or directors.

Not surprisingly, therefore, his achievements in other areas have gone unrecognized, although as an historian he wrote, in two volumes, the first still readable history of Sweden from the point of view of its people rather than its

kings, and he originally made his reputation not as a dramatist but as a novelist, with *The Red Room*, an iridescent narrative of contemporary Stockholm life that is by turns comic, pathetic and satiric, and in which the influence of Dickens and Balzac is adroitly balanced. Like its successor, *The People of Hemsö*, it is, moreover, a book that belies the common reproach that Strindberg's work is entirely self-obsessed and lacking both imagination and humour, as indeed do many of his short stories on both historical and contemporary themes. The sequence of autobiographical fictions, meanwhile, beginning in 1886 with the naturalist dissection of his early years in the four volume *The Son of a Servant*, and concluding in 1903 with an evocative portrayal of old age and the artistic process in *Alone*, forms the backbone of his life's work, and an informed response to any one aspect of this multifaceted project ultimately benefits from a knowledge of its other manifestations, which include several volumes of poetry, works of satire and political polemic, studies in natural history, and essays in sociology, psychology, history, alchemy, natural science and linguistics. He was also a significant photographer and painter.

It is partly this sheer variety which discourages familiarity. Even as a playwright Strindberg shows none of the consistency, in form as well as in focus, that characterizes the work of his close contemporaries Ibsen or Chekhov. Whereas Ibsen may develop and refine the uses to which he puts the dramatic form that he adopts for the scenic portrayal of contemporary life, there is common generic ground between all the plays in the sequence from *The Pillars of Society* to *When We Dead Awaken*; Strindberg, on the other hand, confronts us with what appears to be a radical discontinuity between the naturalistic works of the late 1880s and the modernist dramaturgy of his later plays, beginning in 1898 with the first part of his trilogy *To Damascus*. Indeed, what renders Strindberg's achievement as a dramatist so striking is that having brought one form (the extended naturalist one-acter) to maturity in *Miss Julie* and *Creditors*, he then abandons its comparative security in order painfully to effect the modernization of what remains his primary medium during the late 1890s and early 1900s. Of his near contemporaries in any art, perhaps only Yeats achieves something similar, although on nothing like the same scale.

Ultimately all of Strindberg's work forms part of a single project, but it is appropriate for once to concentrate upon one of its less well-known aspects, his painting. This also happens to have been central to the way in which he negotiated the transition from nineteenth-century structures of feeling in the dramas of the 1880s to an achieved form of theatrical modernism in *A Dream Play* and *The Ghost Sonata*.

Strindberg is frequently seen as unusual among writers who paint in that unlike the majority of such authors, he expresses himself in painting not only though his choice of subject matter but also, and perhaps more significantly,

through the materials he uses, of the colours as colour, or the use to which he puts the structure of the paint itself on whatever surface he happens to be working. His pictures, that is, are painterly rather than literary, and rely on the inherent expressiveness of the medium in which he is working rather than on any anecdotal dimension. There is certainly some truth in this: in what are perhaps his most achieved paintings, those he produced during the mid-1890s, such as *High Seas* [Hög sjö, Paris, 1894] or *The Verdant Isle* [Den grönskande ö, Dornach 1894], Strindberg comes close to abandoning virtually every trace of descriptive representation; in these works where, it has been argued, there is sometimes a striking anticipation of abstract expressionism, it is the medium rather than the subject that preoccupies the viewer. Nevertheless, it is equally true that throughout his career as a painter, he concentrates on a limited number of recurring and evidently very personal motifs, many of which, though painted much later on in his life, derive from early impressions – the seascapes and seamarks, towers or trees and wreath-framed grottoes of the Stockholm archipelago – which are as eloquent about the nature of his individual vision as any of his writings. As he wrote of his painting in the autobiographical fiction *The Son of a Servant*, 'One should paint one's inner feelings and not keep copying sticks and stones that in themselves are insignificant and could only assume any real substance by passing through the furnace of the perceiving and feeling subject' [SV 21, 10], an outlook that would ally him with the inward turn away from what was rapidly regarded as the superficiality of realism by, for example, both Van Gogh and Edvard Munch, who remarked: 'nature is not only what is visible to the eye – it also shows the inner images of the soul – the images on the back side of the eye,' and in such paintings as *Heathland* [Svedjeland, Dalarö, 1892] or *Seascape with Cliff* [Marin med klippa, Paris-Passy, 1894], the subjects are very much a pretext for the emotion felt at the time of their creation.

Nevertheless, Strindberg was certainly unusually sensitive to the particular demands of painting as an art with its own distinct rules, a sensitivity that was fostered at least in part by his early experiences as an art critic. During the 1870s he wrote frequently and with increasing insight about painting in the Swedish press, progressing rapidly from narrative accounts of a painting's subject matter, like his 1872 essay on two historical canvases by Mårten Winge and George von Rosen, to an appreciation of the painterly qualities of a canvas, as in his comments on one of the foremost nineteenth-century Swedish watercolourists, Egron Lundgren. Lundgren, Strindberg wrote, in a review in *Dagens Nyheter* in May 1876, 'was a painter – a colourist – and all the things in life he took up were presented in the magic light that he was able to produce with such material means as water and paint dyes' [SV 4, 211]. According to Sixten Strömbom, whose two-volume *Konstnärsförbundets historia*³ remains

the standard history of Swedish painting during this period, Strindberg was the only nonprofessional Swedish writer on painting of his generation with the ability to be an art critic in the modern sense of the word. In 1876, for example, he was among the first to introduce the Impressionists to Sweden, in a series of articles in the leading Swedish daily newspaper, *Dagens Nyheter*, even if he did indulge in some characteristically irreverent comments about the pictorial *galenskap*, or insanity, of these painters in the process [SS 4, 145–57]. Although his own painting owes little to the Impressionists, he could see that they painted nature as it appeared to the eye, in movement, thus anticipating the paintings of his own maturity, like *The Danube in Flood* [Översvämning vid Dornau, Dornach 1894] or the elemental *Snowstorm at Sea* [Snöstorm vid havet, Paris 1894], which were painted according to what he called the ‘teleology of chance’: one ‘work[s] like nature, not from nature,’ he would maintain [XI, 215], and thus depicts a world in constant motion: ‘The old school,’ he wrote, ‘sought to create an illusion of reality by faithfully rendering nature in every detail – the new painters sought the overall impression and to present nature not as it was but *as it appeared to the poetically observing eye*. It was... the impression, not the meaningless object itself that they sought to reproduce’ [SS 4, 139].

Hence, as he wrote, in another of his early reviews, ‘If we start from the simple truth that a painter is a painter, then the assessment of a painting is bound to hang in large measure on how it is painted’,⁴ and his mature art criticism is distinguished by a willingness to concentrate on the qualities of the painting as such. ‘Artists,’ he observed, ‘never talk with one another about a painting except in terms of how “it is made”, and for them the value of a work of art resides only in whether or not “it is well made”; as for the subject matter, or anything elevated, that does not concern the painter’.

Strindberg’s insights were undoubtedly fostered by his close acquaintance with a series of painters, beginning, in 1870, with Per Ekström, on whom he based the character of Sellén in his novel *The Red Room*. Subsequently, he enjoyed lasting friendships with a number of important Swedish artists, including Richard Bergh, Karl Nordström, and Per Hasselberg, in whose company he enjoyed a freedom from the rivalry that sometimes accompanied his relationships with other writers. But his principal source of knowledge was, of course, his own painting. This falls into three main periods, of which the second emerges in retrospect as the most significant, and in order to clarify his overall achievement as a painter, it is useful to review its development here.

Beginning in 1871, when he spent the first of several summers on the island of Kymmendö in the Stockholm *skärgård* – the archipelago which remained for him the touchstone of natural beauty throughout his life – he produced a number of works in the early years of the decade. These are mainly

unpretentious drawings and studies from nature, but they culminate, in 1874, in *Seascape by Moonlight* [Marin i månsken, Stockholm 1874], the first of his paintings to which he appended his signature on the front, in which the free and full modelling of the waves, the nonchalant asymmetry of the pale moon, and the blue-green light of the sky echoed in the dark green water has encouraged comparison with later developments in painting rather than with any contemporary models. Perhaps with the seascapes of Emil Nolde in mind, the art critic Göran Söderström has pointed out that, 'Instead of the striving for contemporary naturalism we have [here] a painting pure and simple, an artifact that subordinates form to colour and expression. This is a highly independent work, an expressionist forerunner in Swedish art'.⁵

Although Strindberg retained close contacts with a number of artists during the 1880s, including the important colony of Scandinavian painters that had been established at Grez-sur-Loing, near Paris, he appears not to have painted again until the early 1890s. Then, in the wake of the collapse of his first marriage, and with the Swedish theatre manifesting scant interest in staging his recent naturalistic dramas (*Miss Julie*, for example, which was written in 1888 had to wait until 1906 for its first professional production in Sweden), he returned to painting and also sculpted, while staying among artist friends at the resort of Dalarö, south of Stockholm. Originally, he used whatever came to hand – book covers, cardboard, the zinc plates of an accumulator – a practice that was in keeping with his spontaneous and direct way of working in, for example, a curious prefiguration of Magritte, the so-called *Double Picture* [Dubbelbild, Dalarö 1892] in which one image appears to have been superimposed upon another to create a dual impression of framing and immediacy. Whatever the case, however, these hard surfaces responded better than canvas to the technique he now adopted of applying the paint with a palette knife, or even his fingers, rather than a brush, and there are in fact only two known paintings on canvas from 1892. Strindberg would later praise Rubens because his pictures appeared to be 'built' with a knife rather than 'stroked' with a brush [XVIII, 81],⁶ and here, for the first time, he allowed the material and the colours to determine the form of each painting, and relinquished all pretence of naturalism. Although each painting retains a recognizable motif, the powerful emotional charge of these works derives as much from the way in which they are built up according to the formal properties of the pigments themselves as from their subject matter.

When Strindberg left Sweden in 1892 for his second extended sojourn on the continent (he had previously lived in France, Switzerland, Germany and Denmark between 1883 and 1889), he continued to paint. In Berlin, for example, he sent the painting *Night of Jealousy* [Svartsjukans natt, Berlin 1893] to Frida Uhl, the young Austrian journalist who was shortly to become

his second wife, with the dedication, ‘from the (symbolist) painter August Strindberg. The Painting [he wrote on the back of the canvas] represents The Sea (below on the right), Clouds (above), a Cliff (left), a Juniper Bush (top left, and symbolizes: A Night of Jealousy.’ This is the first time that Strindberg provides an explicit symbolic interpretation of one of his paintings, although in fact the actual painting lacks any evident symbol: it is, rather, a characteristic internal landscape of the soul, an expression of powerful, barely contained emotion, and it was only subsequently that he identified its esoteric significance with this inscription.

The same applies to the paintings he produced in Austria in 1894, to which – in a frequently quoted letter – he attributes two levels of significance, one exoteric and the other esoteric. ‘It is in fact a new (that’s to say, old kind!) of art which I’ve invented and call *L’art fortuite*’, he told Littmansson:

I’ve written an essay on my method. It is the most subjective of all art forms, so that in the first place only the painter himself can enjoy (= suffer) the work because he knows what he meant by it, as do the chosen few who know the painter’s inner (= outer) a little (= a lot). Each picture is, so to speak, double-bottomed, with an exoteric aspect that everyone can make out, with a little effort, and an esoteric one for the painter and the chosen few. It should be pointed out that the pictures were painted in a half-dark room, and cannot on any account stand a full light; they appear best in strong fire-light or a half-dark room.

All the pictures are painted using only a knife and unmixed colours, whose combination has been half left to chance, like the motif as a whole. [X, 177; 2, 494]⁷

Created directly on the canvas from a combination of the materials used and the painter’s subjective and spontaneously expressed impulses, these paintings display a remarkable independence of prevailing artistic norms and in several instances carry Strindberg to the verge of an art, with no specific representational content. Although, as in *Wonderland* [Underlandet] painted in Dornach in 1894, or the later so-called *Yellow Picture* [Den gula hösttavl] which dates from a later phase of activity in Stockholm 1901 he may adopt a familiar compositional motif from the Barbizon school in which a central area is framed by a wreath of foliage, such motifs are now barely recognizable. Indeed, only in the painting he subsequently entitled *Golgotha* [Golgota, Dornach 1894], is there a readily identifiable representational element, to be discerned in the three masts of a sinking ship on the right of the canvas, some two-thirds down – an image, incidentally, that is later deployed in both *To Damascus* and *A Dream Play*. At the time the canvas was painted, however, he was more interested in the dark cloud formations in the almost uniformly coloured canvas, where one can clearly discern for the first time the influence of Turner,

an artist with whom he could have become familiar at first hand during his abortive honeymoon with Frida Uhl in London, in 1893. So unconcerned was Strindberg by the naturalistic aspects of this painting that the three masts were in fact added to the composition to provide a kind of focus for the accidentally achieved figure of a man in a billowing cape, standing on the cliffs to the left, looking out to sea, which he only noticed after he had, as he previously thought, finished the picture. As in all the paintings of this period, the esoteric meaning is no more intentional than the exoteric: what he actually does is retrospectively to allow his conscious mind to devise a meaning for what his unconscious has already created. The spectator Strindberg contemplates what the artist Strindberg has wrought. The meaning reveals itself only in the act of contemplating the picture, not in the act of painting it.

It was during this period that Strindberg came closest to working as a professional painter. He was certainly no Sunday dilettante and a times he even sought to live off his painting. He exhibited in Stockholm in 1892, in Berlin in 1893, when two of his canvases were hung with several by Munch in the *Salon des refusés*, after they had been rejected by the conservative Berliner Kunstverein, and in Gothenburg in 1895. And when, in 1894, he set his sights on conquering Paris, he arrived with a collection of his paintings, which were designed to make his reputation and help finance his stay. Once there, too, he accepted commissions from the art dealer, Willy Grétor, who provided him with paints and a studio in Passy: 'Am now a painter in Paris,' he told Birger Mörner proudly, in 1894, '[I]ve sold for 400 Francs, though not to Swedes. Am being encouraged to exhibit at Champs de Mars. I am painting small decorative *panneaux* on cardboard. Have 10 ready. Do you think it's worth sending [them] to Örebro or Lund; (or Malmö) and will you help? They cost 35 kronor apiece with gold edged frame... Easily understood motives and sympathetic colours' [X, 265].

Although he sometimes writes slightly of his work, and soon recoiled in trepidation from Grétor, whom he discovered to be a confidence trickster and art forger with, or so Strindberg suspected, designs upon his life, it was at this time that Strindberg produced a number of his best paintings, including the fine *Beach Scene* [Strandbild, Passy 1984] and *Seascape* [Marin, Passy 1894], and the outstanding *Snowstorm at Sea* and *High Seas* mentioned above, before he once again abandoned painting for several years. In this latter work, he has jettisoned the repertoire of naturalism: the picture is done with dry paint, possibly mixed with plaster of Paris to produce a high relief, and the only colours are dark grey and a browning white. A burner or paraffin lamp has been used to impart the warm effect of black soot and the whole is built up around a spiral movement such as Turner frequently used to create a sense of movement, that 'turbulence and wrath' which Ruskin identified in many of

the latter's canvases, including the now lost *Off the Nore: Wind and Water*. As in Turner, this technique gives the composition a unique tension, affording the canvas 'a centre of turbulence' a source or centre of movement from which the picture seems to take its energy.⁸ In such paintings as *Danube in Flood*, this centre may be identified with the isolated clump of trees reflected in the water that surrounds them, and one may relate the use of such a seemingly insignificant 'storm centre' with Turner's practice in (say) *Snow Storm, Steam Boat off a Harbour's Mouth* of 1842, a canvas of which he remarked that 'I did not paint it in order to be understood', and where he exploits a patch of blue-grey sky seen through the storm, just above the ship, as the focal point of calm around which the clashing elements of the whirlwind revolve.

Why did Strindberg paint? The simple answer, one that he gives himself, is that he turned to painting in those periods when he found writing impossible. In the early 1890s, for example, he was both disgusted by what seemed to him the personal implications of naturalism, which entailed depicting in revealing detail not only the writer's own private life but also the lives of those closest to him, and written out since he had temporarily exhausted the experiential capital which, he believed, it was the writer's duty to utilize in his works. Similarly, in his third, and final, period as a painter, during the first years of this century, a downturn in the interest shown by the Swedish theatre in his recent plays coincided with a crisis in his third marriage to the Norwegian actress Harriet Bosse. Quite clearly, therefore, painting provided him with a crucial means of self-expression when writing failed him. As he observes in *The Son of a Servant*, of his first attempts at painting: 'He got himself going by painting; from a need to see his hazy feelings take form, perhaps also to find a concrete way of expressing them, for the small, crabbed letters lay dead on the paper and were incapable of revealing as openly what he felt. He had no thought of becoming a painter, showing in an exhibition, selling paintings or the like. But going to the easel was like sitting down to sing' [SV 21, 9–10].

However, it is not simply that Strindberg turned to painting for relief in periods when, for one reason or another, he found writing problematic; the real significance of painting in his career is that it afforded him the freedom to experiment without the immediate risk of failure to which such experiment might have led had he continued writing. According to *The Son of a Servant*, even his earliest experience as a painter benefited his writing. Describing his autobiographical persona, Johan, he recalls how:

[One] November a shipwreck occurred under particularly picturesque circumstances, and Johan was present at the inquiry and its attendant feasting. The whole setting was so new and picturesque that he felt an urge to depict it, but brushes and paints no longer sufficed; he had to turn to his pen, and so he wrote several articles for Stockholm's liberal morning paper.

Painting had somehow sharpened his vision, enabling him to perceive details acutely and, by accumulating and arranging them, to evoke in the reader a vivid picture of the event. [SV 21, 82]

Strindberg's visual imagination, pictorial sense, and eye for detail, so evident in an early work like *The Red Room*, were not dependent upon his painting, although the latter may have refined them further. There is however, no doubt that painting played a central role in the process of growth and artistic renewal that he underwent in the six years between 1892 and 1898, a period during which he wrote no plays and almost no other works of fiction. As Harry Carlson has pointed out, 'in the later 1890s a new faith in the power of the visual imagination, together with a changed attitude toward nature – thinking it, seeing it, and feeling it as form – were vital mediators in the renewal of his art' in general,⁹ and it was in large measure via his paintings, and the essay, 'The New Arts! Or the Role of Chance in Artistic Creation', in which he glossed the aesthetic that lay behind them, that the renewal of his art as a dramatist was effected.¹⁰ As in the scientific and alchemical experiments of these same years, where the substances that appeared under his microscope or in his crucible sometimes resembled the form and colour of his paintings, and were endowed by Strindberg with a similar ability to transform themselves into each other according to what he identified as the capricious laws of nature, he was seeking a vision of the world that would serve as a new basis for his writing. Indeed, there are numerous affinities between his painting and (for example) his experimental photography, like the celestographs that he produced during 1894, working without a camera and exposing photographic plates that had already been immersed in developing fluid directly to the night sky in order to obtain as direct an Image as possible, uncontaminated as he saw it by the subjectivity of the human eye or the shape of a camera lens.¹¹ His paintings, these photographs and the gold that he was convinced he had produced both by the wet and the dry processes of an idiosyncratic chemistry were not the aimless residue of accident but an essential part of the personal revaluation of all values in which he was engaged at the time. In short, Strindberg's palette, like his crucible, was one of the vessels where he forged a new world, and the residue that accrued in the bottom of the one sometimes resembled the scrapings that remained upon the other.

Strindberg had in fact always been attracted to science. In his early years, and still more intensely during the 1880s, he had often expressed misgivings about the pleasure to be gained from works of art, and in particular imaginative literature, which he considered essentially duplicitous, unlike his touchstone, nature, which at that time he considered artless. His youthful Pietism, compounded by a very personal reading of Kierkegaard, for whom

the ethical is elevated above the aesthetic, and further strengthened by a militant utilitarianism which argued in favour of an art that was devoted to social or scientific ends, had frequently led him to distrust the imagination and disparage its works as irresponsible play. 'Literature,' he argued, in 1886, 'should emancipate itself from art entirely, and become a science... writers [should] learn their craft by studying psychology, sociology, physiology, history and politics. Otherwise we'll become mere dilettantes' [V, 339; 1, 202]. The long-standing conflict between these views and his own creativity was one of the many reasons for Strindberg's prolonged silence as an imaginative writer in the mid-1890s, and it also accounts, at least in part, for the urgency of his commitment during these years to both scientific speculation and painting.

For where painting was concerned Strindberg was sometimes prepared to sanction the notions of play and pleasure, and to waive the kind of photographic realism that he initially expected of the writer, but seldom reproduced himself. 'Those of you who first and foremost desire a photographic fidelity to nature,' he wrote, in one of his early reviews, where he addressed the limitations of a documentary realism in painting, 'take a look at [this painting by] Cantzler. It makes no difference whether you look at it through an opera glass or go in close. Does it achieve the illusion of reality in every detail? At first, yes, but with that everything is said and done; a pine looks like this, a flower like that, a tree-stump thus, and there's nothing else to say; it becomes as boring as a completed puzzle, and one listens in vain for the invisible music of colour' [SV 4, 204–5]. And again, writing about the luminous landscapes of the Swedish artist Carl Fredrik Hill (1849–1911), he remarked how 'everything flows, is mystical. The eye works, seeking a firm point, which is never found. Therein lies the pleasure'.¹¹

Like the element of imaginative play in both the creation and the reception of the work of art, this pleasure, what Roland Barthes would call *jouissance*, is central to the theory of artistic creation that Strindberg developed in his essay on 'The New Arts', which he wrote in Austria in 1894 to introduce the paintings that he brought with him to Paris to what he rightly anticipated might be a sceptical public. Indeed, like many of his works during this period, the essay was written in French, and *jouissance* is precisely the word that he uses for an art in which meaning continually multiplies and where closure seems constantly deferred. Unlike Cantzler's detailed realism, for example, which loses its power to please once there is nothing new to be seen, he describes how, in 'modernist paintings'

... one sees at first only a chaos of colours; then a likeness begins to emerge; it resembles – but no, it resembles nothing. All at once a point defines itself, like the nucleus of a cell; it grows, the colours group themselves around it, accumulate; it forms rays which sprout branches, then twigs,

as ice crystals do on a windowpane... thus the image is presented to the spectator, who has participated in the act of procreation of the picture. And even better: the painting is always new; it changes according to the light, never wears out, and is rejuvenated by the gift of life.¹²

In describing here the creation of one of his own paintings, *Wonderland*, the anti-naturalistic aesthetic on which these pictures are based is evident. As works of art they no longer pretend to present the lineaments of a realistically observed world or even, as Zola argued art should, reproduce a corner of creation viewed through a temperament. Rather, they comprise what Hazlett chided in Turner, namely 'the representation not properly of the objects of nature as of the medium through which they were seen.' Governed merely by a vague design in the artist's mind, such paintings emerge from the interplay between the materials he is using and his own rapid interventions with palette knife or fingers, and much in the process is left to the intervention of chance. Once finished, the spectator's imagination is then free to complete what the artist has produced by unconscious means.

Strindberg had touched on these theories two years earlier, in a brief letter to his friend, the painter Richard Bergh, in which he coined the phrase *skogsnufovismen* to describe this new art form: 'I have a number of oil studies to show you, painted from the imagination,' he told Bergh. 'A "new direction" that I have discovered myself and call *skogsnufovismen*' [IX, 40]. The customary English translation of *skogsnufovismen*, 'wood-nymphism', is hardly adequate, and need not be retained here, but a passage in 'The New Arts' helps clarify what Strindberg had in mind: 'You all remember the fairy tale about the boy out strolling in the woods, who comes upon a wood nymph [or *skogsrå* in Swedish]. She is as beautiful as the dawn, with emerald-green hair, etc. As he draws closer she turns her back, which now resembles a tree stump. Clearly, the boy never saw anything but a stump, and his lively imagination invented all the rest.'¹³

The capricious creativity in evidence here suggests that phenomena are no longer to be seen as passive objects awaiting recovery by the recording artist but intense agents in the drama of the mind that has released them. What this passage also implies is that Strindberg now perceives nature as a fellow maker and creator. Hence he no longer feels compelled simply to transcribe what he calls 'the banal facts' of the phenomenal world: nature remains his touchstone but instead of reproducing an artless landscape in circumstantial detail, as he had accused Cantzler of doing, he sets out to emulate what he understands to be nature's own artistic practice; in short, not to create works of art that imitate nature, but to emulate nature and create new works as he believes nature itself does, with prodigal turns of fancy. Moreover, if nature comprises a series of works of art, then this supposes a creator whose handiwork, as Strindberg

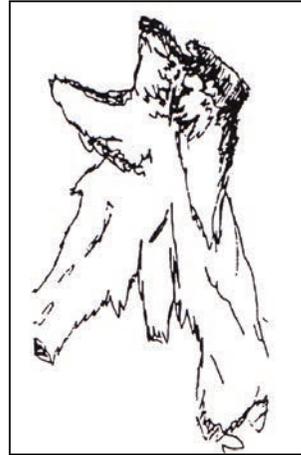
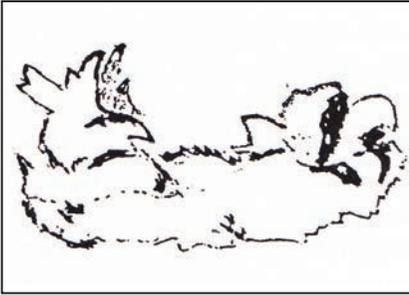
studies it in detail in the miniature universe of the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, is to be discerned in what, in another letter, he calls 'nature's own visible pictures' [XI, 157], those images or artifacts in the natural world that bear a striking resemblance to his own artistic caprices. Thus, beginning with chance he has paradoxically discovered design, so infinite does what he calls the coherent pattern in the great, apparent chaos now appear to him. In short, the natural world is a modernist work of art, to the external eye an apparent chaos but one in which the internal eye can everywhere discern a world of similarities, coincidence, and repetition in every thing; the universe appears to him as a vast sign system with its creator's signature impressed on all things, from a moth's wing to the surface of meteors and the shells of crabs, and from the atomic weight of metals to the circumstances of his own life, which he was now once more prepared to try to recover in literature, in the autobiographical fiction *Inferno*.

From the end of the previous decade, with the novel *By the Open Sea*, Strindberg had in fact been exploring, with ever greater urgency, a tension between chance, coincidence and discontinuity on the one hand, and order, relationship and coherence, on the other, and the personal drama of his life during these years should not be seen as a mental and emotional crisis that he passively suffers and patiently endures but a process that is actively encouraged and frequently prompted by Strindberg himself. His life is a *skogsnufovistisk* work of art, lived as he admits in *Inferno*, in an improvisatory manner, which makes it more amusing, and the picturesque events of his bohemian existence during this period, including his tragi-comic courtship and marriage to Frida Uhl, which ended on a traffic island outside the department store Printemps in Paris, among a potpourri of *fin-de-siècle* Satanists, Alchemists, Theosophists and Black Magicians, easily diverts attention from other aspects of a process in which the middle-aged Strindberg painfully renews himself and embarks in search of that new world which inspired him in the canvases of his friend, Gauguin. 'I, too, am beginning to feel an immense need to turn savage and create a new world,' he told Gauguin, at the end of a long letter that Gauguin used as the preface to a catalogue of his paintings that were sold at the Hôtel Drouet in February 1895, just prior to his final departure for Tahiti [SS 54, 329; 2, 531]. Or, as a fugitive note in Strindberg's hand from this period affirms: 'Tired of the world. Created a new one' (Led vid världen. Skapade mig en ny).

The first literary product of this new approach was his *Occult Diary*, which he began in 1896 and continued until 1908. With its various insertions, sketches and later additions, the Diary is not only a catalogue of this universe of signs but a repository of *objets trouvés*, ready-mades and *frottages*, a kind of Merzbau of the mind that the succeeding generation of Hans Arp, Max Ernst and André Breton would have recognized as *l'hasard objectif* of Surrealism,

those apparently random happenings which nevertheless betoken an underlying order in life. There is, for example, considerable similarity between Ernst's account of frottage in *Beyond Painting* (1948) and Strindberg's proposal in one of his letters to illustrate the Book of Job in an occult fashion with illustrations that would look like a piece of paper that had been crumpled and rubbed with charcoal [XI, 288]. Likewise, there is common ground between Arp's definition of 'The "law of chance" which embraces all laws and... can only be experienced through complete devotion to the unconscious',¹⁴ on which he drew in creating his *Papiers déchirés* (Torn Papers), and Strindberg's comment in a letter to the Theosophist, Torsten Hedlund, on how 'One sometimes gets interesting and living pictures by crumpling paper or tinfoil. But one must not do this with intent; just take care to observe the result when it occurs. One receives a letter or parcel which makes this or that impression. One crumples up the paper and throws it in the wastepaper basket without further thought. Don't you think that the hand which crumpled it up was unconsciously steered and expressed great emotion, perhaps [in] a whole series of images?' [XI, 289].

Of all Strindberg's literary texts, it is the autobiographical fiction *Inferno* which most strikingly records the details of this *skogsnufovistic* world. Among some lumps of coal left over from his chemical experiments, for example, he discovers what he describes as 'a splendid group of two drunken gnomes in billowing garments embracing each other, a masterpiece of primitive sculpture' [SV 37, 71], and when he shows them to his artist friend (in reality Edvard Munch but portrayed here thinly disguised as the Danish painter 'handsome Henrik'), the latter mistakes them for a group of figures by the Norwegian artist and illustrator Theodor Kittelsen (1857–1914). On another occasion, pillows crumpled by chance, unconsciously, during a restless night assume human shapes in the manner of Michelangelo, and even the pansies in his window box seem to nod at him mockingly after his attention has been drawn to a lithograph of a Viking ship in which the various human figures are depicted with pansies instead of heads. Again, walking down a Paris street he describes 'the statue of a knight pointing to an inscription in charcoal on a whitewashed wall. The intertwined letters F and S made me think of the initials of my wife's name [Frida Strindberg]. She loves me: still! A second later a light dawned upon me when the inscription decomposed before my eyes into the chemical symbols for iron and sulphur (Fe and S) and revealed to me the secret of gold' [SV 37, 69]. That Fe and S reveal the secret of a substance which in chemical nomenclature begins with the initial letters of his own first name, Au, is a coincidence that not even Strindberg appears to have noticed, although elsewhere, in a note on goldmaking from this period he observes, in green crayon: 'Hôtel Orfila, 1896. 1896 = 196 = [the atomic weight] of Au'.



'These are faithful sketches of the baked, half-burnt [pieces of] coal discovered in the cheminee, Hôtel Orfila, late winter 1896, Paris. When the painter Munch saw this coal, he asked: 'Who has made these?'

[He] said they resembled the trolls in Norwegian folk-tales, as Werenskiold and Kittelsen have drawn them.

The originals are in a box and more faithful than these copies.'

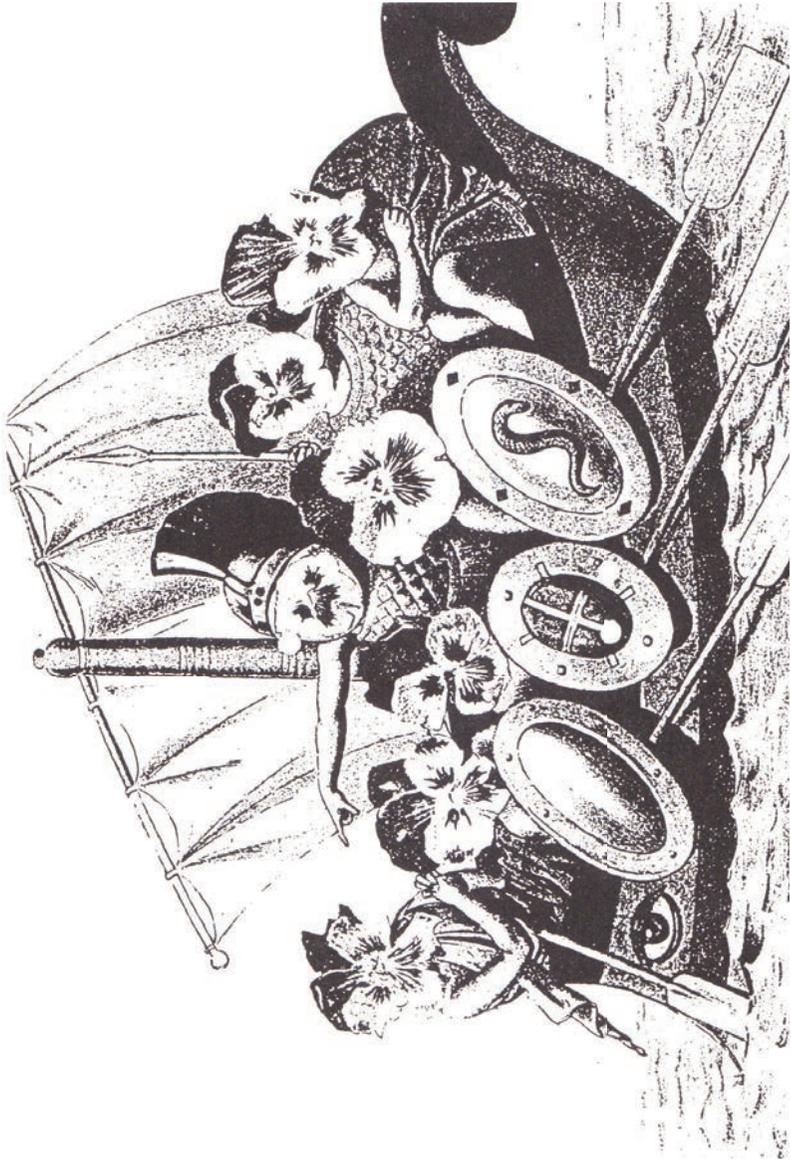
Charcoal sketches. Trolls. Hôtel Orfila, 1896.

Nothing, in short, lacks significance, and everything in Paris, down to the detritus of its streets, is pregnant with meaning. Unlike Strindberg's first major prose narrative, *The Red Room*, which follows so many great nineteenth-century novels in dealing with the first encounter of a young man from the provinces with the duplicity of urban life, *Inferno*, as it maps the unconscious, subterranean life of the city, looks forward to the modernist fictions of James Joyce or (since this is Paris) André Breton's *Nadja* (1928) or Louis Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926). As is the case with Bréton and Aragon, the metropolitan landscape, with its street signs, window displays, hoardings, and privileged places, as well as its chance encounters, random events and *objets trouvés* evokes a magical causality, in which the ridiculous associates with the sublime and the marvellous erupts within ordinary life.

In conclusion however, and as an indication of the way in which Strindberg's *skogsnuftvismen* might function in the hallucinatory but still mundane world of his later drama, I should like to conclude with a brief comment about one of his most complex works, *The Ghost Sonata*, which was written in 1907, over a decade later than the period on which I have been focusing. One of the most prominent of the many motifs which Strindberg's associational method inserts into the intricate patterning of this masterpiece of theatrical modernism, is a large statue of Buddha, with a bulb on his knees, from which there rises the stalk of an Ascalon flower. It stands on the tiled stove in the Daughter's room, where the final scene of the play is set, a room that is also filled with hyacinths. Quite clearly, both the statue and the flowers are significant, and the Student, who by this stage of the play has emerged as a commentator on its action, in fact discourses at length on their meaning:

The bulb is the earth which rests on the water or lies in the dust;... Buddha thus sits with the earth on his knees, brooding over it, watching it grow outwards and upwards, transforming itself into a heaven. This poor earth shall become a heaven! That is what Buddha is waiting for! [SV 58, 212]

No doubt! And most eloquent! But it is worth remembering that among Strindberg's various notes and drafts for the play in the Royal Library in Stockholm there is a double-sided handbill from the Stockholm Export-Import Firm of Paul Peters. On the first side it carries an advertisement for 'One of nature's wonders in the world of flowers!', namely a *Sauromatum venosum* whose bulb produces a flower without needing to be planted in the earth or moistened. On the reverse, it advertises a statue of Buddha with a *Sauromatum venosum* at his feet. The Buddha on its own costs 2 kronor 50 öre, with the bulb 3 kronor 75. Postage is free but packing costs an additional 30 öre [SgNM 4:4, 4]. Was it chance that delivered this piece of junk mail to Strindberg's door? If so, he made excellent use of it.



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Vänd!

Advertising flyer, Paul Peters Import Business, p.1

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Advertising flyer, Paul Peters Import Business, p.2