

Chapter Six

Conclusion

Bless me... whose greatest suffering was the pain of not being able
to be the one I wished to be.

– *The Great Highway*

With Strindberg the problem is always where and how to conclude. Protean not only in the multitude of characters he animates and the guises he assumes, but also in the variety of genres and fields of discourse in which he compiles the body of writing that now represents him, the difficulty is that in this written universe, as in the intractable world of fact and experience with which he, like Henry James, was confronted, ‘relations stop nowhere’.¹ But then Strindberg was rarely able to reach a permanent conclusion himself. Having composed his own epigraph with great solemnity in *The Great Highway*, he confounded expectation and violated propriety yet again by instituting the political feud, known as ‘Strindbergsfejden’, which he left to reverberate in his wake, and the successive segments of his autobiographical project indicate not merely a voracious appetite for new experience, but the insufficiency of the several strategies whereby he sought to recapture his life and preserve the identity he valued so highly.

In its sheer extent, this writing represents what Strindberg’s contemporary, Walter Pater, described as ‘that continual vanishing away, that strange perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves’,² a process to which the committed autobiographer is particularly condemned. For in contemplating the now distinct image he has just produced in order to endow himself with the definition for which he yearns, the baffling nature of this written other repeatedly prompts the query directed by The Unknown to the Beggar at the end of the second part of *To Damascus*: ‘Are you you or are you me?’ (29:225). ‘I have seen a hundred portraits of myself and have always asked: is this me?’ (XI:152), Strindberg told Hedlund, at the height of his Inferno crisis, and when the splitting or multiplying of identity through which the self seeks to apprehend itself is compounded with the uncertainty which a multiplicity of assumed roles may foster in the mind of their nourishing author, recognition is placed in still further doubt. Either he feels himself slipping towards the domain of fable or the words to which he delegates himself render an incomplete,

distorted, or misleading account that compels him to embark upon another. And yet, although it is continually resumed and terminated only by the event which necessarily lies outside the text approaching it, in that death which Walter Benjamin sees as 'the sanction of everything the story-teller has to tell',³ this inconclusive autobiographical pursuit of the self entails its constant displacement into the vehicles through which it is filtered, screened, interpreted, and designed: into language, where the autobiographer is present not in person but as a figure of the text in words in which he transcribes or invents the past in order to represent himself as he believes he is or wishes to be seen; into literary genres and the plurality of codes in which, to the extent that they are conventional, the individual experience they recuperate is depersonalized and stereotyped; into roles, which dramatize the tension between writing as a surrogate life and its tendency to come to life independently of its nominal creator by conferring on the discrete particles of experience in their narrative enchainment not the unity of a life through time but the unity of the text; and into a network of witting or unwitting literary and mythical identifications in which, as Job, Faust, or Oedipus, a unique story becomes a tale, and hence a destiny, which its teller shares with others, as indeed Northrop Frye's plural reference to the *pharmakos* figures encountered 'in stories of artists whose genius makes them Ishmaels of a bourgeois society'⁴ nicely implies.

In retrospect, too, it is easy to discern how Strindberg's autobiographical enterprise, which puts in doubt both the notion of autonomous identity and the ideology of a unique existence which autobiography is ordinarily assumed to predicate,⁵ is related to what is currently termed the 'deconstruction' of the idea of a fixed and substantial selfhood undertaken by Nietzsche and Freud, as well as to a modernism in which (for example, in Musil, Proust, or Joyce) the persona of the author outside the work carries almost as much dramatic weight as the supernumeraries within it, and which explores other forms of plausibility and order beyond the principle of continuity applied almost universally in the nineteenth century, in the belief that in every sphere continuous sequence, inflexible order, and eternal law prevailed. And yet, unlike for example Yeats, with whom he had at one time much in common, Strindberg belittled neither Naturalism nor the nineteenth century even when he had moved beyond them. 'The nineteenth century is doubtless the greatest of all centuries. It is the age of great discoveries and inventions, constitutions, parliamentarism, and social revolution' (54:378), he declared, in 'The Mysticism of World History', and it was by insisting upon the notions of growth and development which permeated organicist, determinist, and evolutionary thinking that he probed the limits of what could be said and thought within the discourse in which he first sought to inscribe himself, and so pressed Naturalism until it yielded the material of its own undoing. As he enquired: 'Why scoff at Naturalism when it has

shown itself capable of inaugurating a new stage in art, and has been accorded the possibility of growing and developing?' (28:59). For it was by applying the Naturalist model, with its emphasis on physiological and psychological cause and effect, on heredity, environmental forces, and the unconscious as well as conscious systems of meaning which the individual inherits as the field of his development, that Strindberg derived a conception of the self in which discontinuity, the unconscious, the irrational, and the indeterminate predominate, where discourse is lacunary and character the unstable mosaic of 'conglomerations', 'fragments', and 'torn shreds of once fine clothing' that he defines in the foreword to *Miss Julie*, where the individual is depicted as the product of impersonal forces and the discourses that flow through him.

Thus, like J. P. Jacobsen, Strindberg discovers that in 'The real history of a human being's development... the characters will seem to lack coherence', that 'in reality there are individual sides in people which do not hang together',⁶ and that even if the laws of nature should prove consequential and rational, they nevertheless manifest themselves in the individual by unconscious and irrational drives, as 'an unconstrained break out of repressed instinct' (23:105) which overwhelms both the individual and the social and moral categories designed to buttress his world. Like Dreiser's Carrie Meeber, the Naturalist protagonist is very much 'a waif amid forces' and hence, as Richard Chase remarks, 'at the mercy of circumstances rather than of himself, indeed he often seems to *have* no self,'⁷ for what he does is at once himself and yet, on the unconscious level at which his fate is already decided, not himself. Determined, his determinations are not necessarily his own, and Johan can never 'be who I wanted to be' because from the outset 'his way was necessarily determined by his blood inheritance, temperament, [and] position in society' (19:189), and as the choice less subject of 'inherited instinct' (19:41), he is always prevented by the encrustations of his family, period, religion, and culture from attaining what Strindberg sometimes refers to as 'his right, his better self' (19:42) because what he regards as his genuine self is repressed, proliferates, and vanishes in the multiple forms he gives himself or has imposed on him.

As time passes, moreover, his life mounts up not as a chain of events but a network of relationships, a densely textured web of meaning, and to interpret it he requires (but again, it is Naturalism, with its focus on the quotidian and superficial which opens a way to the mysterious in the mundane)⁸ a more refined instrument for the collection and analysis of the trivia of which it is composed, and he seeks by means of analogy and the collage-like appropriation of the real world in the fabric of *The Occult Diary*, to disengage the significance of events from the superficiality of their notation, to interrogate and decipher the often enigmatic graphism of the world in which the cryptic text of his life seems to him also to be written. This is of course the context in which Strindberg's

kinship with Freud is most apparent, but it would be equally appropriate to quote Nietzsche's contemporary comment, 'Against positivism, which halts at phenomena – "There is only *facts*" – I would say, No, facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations',⁹ or to anticipate Proust who, in claiming that 'ce livre, le plus pénible de tous à déchiffrer, est aussi le seul que nous ait dicté la réalité',¹⁰ stressed the task of the interpreter in penetrating the surface at which a literature content with merely describing the world is arrested. It is not the life as a succession of natural events that possesses meaning but the interpreted series into which it is transformed, and whether in fiction, autobiography, or science all perception is, Strindberg tirelessly maintains, a subjective projection. 'The only thing that exists is the self (le culte du moi), and of the world and 'the others' I know nothing except through the self (X:150). Every organ or instrument of perception frames the world it perceives and dictates what and how it is apprehended. They extend the self into the world and reduce the world to an extension of the self. And if as Strindberg senses, with a customary nod in the direction of Schopenhauer, that 'what we imagine possesses a higher reality', it is because 'Reality cannot penetrate within me and be expressed again without having taken form as idea or imagination. Thus we know reality only through our idea of it, and therefore our representations of an apprehended reality vary so enormously' (40:288-9). But hence, too, Strindberg's delighted recognition in a world so insistently shaped and designed by his own needs and desires, of plots and scenarios already imprinted upon the otherwise inchoate multiplicity of events in which he was both actor and spectator.

But however they are apprehended, both the text of the self and the text of the world whose imprint it bears, are arranged, schematized, framed, and translated into a language which facilitates their temporary identification, and it is there, where he attempts to represent himself to himself in the essentially auto-generative act of self-interpretation, that Strindberg at once writes and then reads his life, before he again relinquishes his identity and the life he has lived to the reader or spectator who will, on occasion, attempt to reconstitute an image of this 'rival to Orpheus' (28:81) as it is dispersed throughout the series of texts in which, like Beckett's *Unnamable*, he implicitly entreats this other to 'equate me... with him whose story this story had the brief ambition to be.'¹¹ Brief, however, it is not, and as the author of an unsigned review of Strindberg's letters has so finely observed, when seeking to convert the raw material of his life into literature, Strindberg repeatedly comes upon his life already arranged and written by 'Life's designing purposes much as a fictive character is subject to the author's will; and one realizes, with a sense of awe that of course this is what happens when Niels Lyhne's prayer is answered':

Life, a poem! But not in the sense that one 'wrote' one's life instead of living it. How meaningless that would be, empty, empty, empty. This

hunting for oneself, sharply observing one's own trail – in a circle of course; this pretense of throwing oneself into the stream of life, while at the same time sitting down and angling for yourself, and fishing oneself out in some curious disguise or another! If only something would take one in its grip – life, love, passion – so that one no longer 'wrote' but 'was written'.¹²

In short, as Strindberg writes his life, Life writes Strindberg.