

AUTOBIOGRAPHIC FULLNESS

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I will discuss first-person writing about illness in the late nineteenth century by approaching it from two opposite and somewhat extreme positions, represented by the Scandinavian authors August Strindberg and Jens Peter Jacobsen. Strindberg, obviously, is internationally known, whereas Jacobsen is prominent primarily in Scandinavia and the Germanic countries. He was read by Joyce and Kafka, amongst others, was translated into German by Rilke, who learned Danish in order to do so, and was celebrated as a precursor of European Symbolism. All Strindberg quotes are from: *Inferno and From an Occult Diary*, Hamondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1979, translated from Swedish by Mary Sandbach. All Jacobsen quotes are from *Niels Lyhne*, London: Penguin Classics, 1990, translated from Danish by Tiina Nunnally.

THE REFERENTIAL STATUS OF THE AUTHOR IN THE LATE 19th CENTURY

Late modern notions of the de-subjectification of art and literature are difficult to sustain when dealing with the late 19th century, a time when the lives of authors were much more publicly known than is the case today. One can point out at least three reasons for this. Firstly, that authors – at least in Scandinavia – appeared as prominent participants in topical political debates. Secondly, that literature had a more out-standing status as a source of cultural entertainment at this time, when the theatre was its only competitor, than later. And thirdly, that authors and mass media formed an alliance at this time: a number of authors started writing for the papers and thus contributed to their enormous expansion. On the other hand, the papers increased the popularity of the authors by writing about them.

In general, authors of the late nineteenth century operated in the same intervening space between the public sphere and the private sphere as the icons of electronic mass media do today. Using the dramaturgic notions developed by the sociologist Erving Goffmann for understanding social life, one can claim that they performed 'on-stage' in their writings, while 'back-stage' information about their private life circulated freely. Readers could not avoid gaining knowledge about authors' private lives, and this knowledge could not avoid affecting the readers' perception of what they read.

AUGUST STRINDBERG'S AFFECTIVE AESTHETICS

"I invite the reader who thinks this book is fiction to view the diary that I have kept every day since 1895, and of which this is merely an extended and structured extract." With these words, August Strindberg finishes his 1897 autobiographical novel *Inferno*. It is quite an intriguing remark since, on the one hand, it establishes what Philippe Lejeune refers to as an autobiographical pact between Strindberg and the readers of the work, while, on the other hand, it seems to intimate that the readers have reasons to doubt that *Inferno* is autobiographical. Following Strindberg's advice, such reasons would certainly occur.

Strindberg wrote consecutive autobiographical works throughout most of his career. While his life is always displaced in the texts, the relationship between them becomes definitively complex at the moment the autobiographical work catches up with life at the moment of writing. From this moment, writing becomes an event in itself in the life that is the subject of the works. Likewise, as the Strindberg scholar Michael Robinson notes, 'life is lived with the writing in mind'. Life becomes writing, and writing becomes life – and issues of representation and authenticity, as that posed by Strindberg himself in the statement I just quoted, become somewhat misplaced.

One of the things that moves into the focus of attention of his autobiographical writing is its affective aesthetics. This is the case in *Inferno*. As the title suggests, *Inferno* depicts a journey through Hell, following in the footsteps of Dante. The focus is on the narrator's experience of being exposed to an endless number of mystical incidents – or plots – that obstruct all his enterprises. Not able to understand and thereby master these, he is at the complete mercy of them, until he finds a 'key' to reading them in the writings of the Swedish 17th century scientist and theosophist Emmanuel Swedenborg.

Inferno presents itself as a depiction of a conversion to a philosophy of renunciation in the face of the chaos that characterises the world experienced by the narrator. But it leaves its readers with the impact of this experience: horror and repulsion. In my understanding of Strindberg's autobiographical novel, its main achievement is to communicate how the societal changes brought about by modernity are embodied by the individual in the form of a crisis of perception; a crisis that has been theorised by, amongst others, the medical historian Karin Johannisson.

Penetrating *Inferno* is the hesitation that Tzvetan Todorov defines as the main characteristic of the genre of fantastic literature, between mutually exclusive natural and supernatural explanatory models. In this example, the narrator is once again exposed to attacks by ... yes, by what?

"I wake up. A clock in the house strikes two, a door is shut and ... I am drawn from my bed as if by a vacuum pump that sucks at my heart. Hardly have my feet touched the floor than a stream of electricity is discharged upon the nape of my neck, pressing me to the ground. I struggle up, grip my clothes, and tear out into the garden, a prey to the most horrible palpitations." (182. Translation modified by JLJ)

The fantastic hesitation in *Inferno* is nourished, on the one hand, by the reality markers of the depiction, its intensity and its attention to detail, and, on the other hand, by its insistence on linguistic ambiguity. The heart-sucking pump and the electric shower must be seen as metaphorical intimations that want to remain just that, intimations of something the narrator is not able to identify. The aposiopesis – the sudden break off of the discourse

expressed by the three dots – marks the passage from a realm of reliable perception to a realm of hesitation. And this crisis of perception lies at the heart of my reading.

When *Inferno* was published, passages like the quoted were perceived as documentation of how persecutory delusions can develop explosively within an individual in crisis. Since then, a tradition within the work's reception history has been preoccupied with diagnosing Strindberg on the basis of his writings. One reason why I believe this is an unrewarding approach to *Inferno* is that Strindberg himself clearly indicates that it can be read as an illness narrative, thereby turning illness into an intended textual effect.

Throughout the work, the narrator questions his own sanity, and a number of hospitalisations and attempted treatments form part of the narration. Viewed in the light of the representation of the crisis of perception, the role of this illness narrative of *Inferno* is to uphold and to prolong the hesitation of the work. Thus, the attitude of the narrator to the question of his sanity continually shifts between dismissal: "The peacefulness that succeeded [...] is proof that it is no illness that has struck me" (177. Translation modified by JLJ); to doubt: "[Is it] An illness?" (182); and, confirmation: "This is quite enough to awaken all the apprehensions and dark imaginings to which a sick mind is prone." (236. Translation modified by JLJ)

My point is not to question whether Strindberg was ill; what is known about his life generally depends on what he himself has written about it. My point is that the illness narrative of *Inferno* must be perceived as a strategy of writing that forms a vital part of the work's expression of the crisis of perception. In doing this, the illness narrative moves the focus on illness from the concrete to the general, from the individual to society.

JENS PETER JACOBSEN'S 'AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FULLNESS'

Jens Peter Jacobsen's 1880 novel *Niels Lyhne* is *not* a first-person narrative, Jacobsen does *not* establish autobiographical pacts with his readers, nor does he involve his biography as part of a strategy of writing. In a letter concerning the genesis of the novel, Jacobsen states that he of course uses real-life models for his fictional characters, but also – and with a characteristic artistic self-esteem – that he is sufficiently skilled for the models not to be discernable in his writings. Nevertheless, *Niels Lyhne* provides a productive counter point to Strindberg's *Inferno* in a discussion of autobiographical writing in the late nineteenth century.

An expression of the apparent discontinuity between life and work in Jacobsen's novel is his portrait of the protagonist's aunt, who suffers from tuberculosis and dies from the disease in the novel. The depiction's most striking feature is the complete absence of symptoms. The aunt's beauty remains unchallenged by the disease, and she dies a Romantic *belle mort* without, it seems, any relation to it.

Jacobsen was himself a consumptive, and he wrote the portrait during a stay at a sanatorium in Switzerland. As becomes clear in his letters, his stay was in detail marked by the disease. In the letters, Jacobsen describes the beneficial influence of the climate, the lifestyle and the treatment, but also how his work on *Niels Lyhne* wears on slowly, laboured as it is by sleeplessness, headaches and momentary coughing attacks. He writes about a woman in exactly the same situation as himself, but for whom the disease has no practical influence on her daily life.

Even though *Niels Lyhne* does not address tuberculosis explicitly, an autobiographical presence expresses itself in Jacobsen's novel via the disease, and this makes it possible to read it as a – very resistant – first-person narrative.

I will focus my attention on a concrete example. As a countermeasure to the disease, the aunt has been prescribed a stay at the provincial manor where the protagonist grows up. One day, she has asked the twelve year-old Niels Lyhne to pick her a bouquet of flowers. When he steps into her sick room, he seems to enter directly into an exotic sexual fantasy, featuring the aunt in a fantastic gypsy dress lolling on an ottoman in a rather provocative position. The sight completely overwhelms Niels Lyhne, who matures instantly. When he addresses his aunt, it is with a voice, 'that surprised him, there was such a resonance to it.' The aunt senses the change and sends Niels away, but as she does so, she marks him by spraying him with perfume, the smell of which saturates the air in the sick room. With this, she apparently infects him with her disease. His reaction to the meeting is described in this way:

"With hurried, uncertain steps Niels raced through the house up to his room. He was completely bewildered, he felt such a strange weakness in his knees and a strangling sensation in his throat. Then he threw himself on the sofa and closed his eyes, but could find no peace. There was an incomprehensible restlessness in him, his breathing was so heavy, as if in fear, and the light tortured him even though his eyes were closed." (24. Translation modified by JLJ)

This description is more than an expression of a pictorial convention that connects falling in love with disease. This is a specific expression of the phenomenological sensation of suffering from tuberculosis, as it appears, for instance, in Jacobsen's letters: the weakness, the strangling sensation in the throat, the restlessness, the difficulty in breathing.

Furthermore, by pointing out *how* the aunt transfers the symptoms of her disease to Niels Lyhne by spraying him, Jacobsen gives a precise description of what the German physician Robert Koch proved in 1882, that is, two years *after* the publication of the novel, namely that tuberculosis is a bacteriological disease, which is transferred by droplet infection via the respiratory organs. This futuristic, pre-empting aspect of *Niels Lyhne* – which is found in other specific literary works, and which has been theorised by Gilles Deleuze in his *Critique et Clinique* project – this aspect is important, because it ultimately implies that

literature cannot just be perceived as the appropriating medium of the ideas and notions circulating at its time, but, in some instances, shall be seen simply as the creative point of departure for these ideas and notions.

By 'autobiographic fullness' – the title of this paper – I refer to the kind of autobiographical referentiality expressed in this passage. Autobiographic fullness is a relative notion, not an absolute one. It does *not* refer to irreversible references to the biography of the author which one has to either dismiss completely or focus on completely as a reader, but to a referential 'added value' which is actualised to various degrees by the reader, depending on his or her knowledge of the author's life, and which *can* be incorporated in the reading, *if* it has a productive effect on it.

Taking the metaphorical infection of the protagonist as a starting point, one can use the concept of autobiographic fullness to trace the development of disease through the 'body' of the novel. If the illness narrative of Strindberg's *Inferno* is a strategy of writing, *Niels Lyhne* can be perceived as an illness narrative via a strategy of reading. Having opened one's eyes to it, it is, for instance, difficult *not* to pay attention to Jacobsen's references to respiration when depicting love: "He loved her as something as impossible to live without as the breath of life" (149), he writes in one place. And in another: "Calm, healthy, and breathing deeply – that's how beautiful it was to love, love with all your soul." (151). The autobiographic fullness of these references has an intensifying effect on the depictions. Being consumptive, Jacobsen had a more concrete experience than most of how, precisely, it feels to be without 'breath of life', and how complicated the actual act of breathing itself can be.

The concept of autobiographic fullness can also, finally, be related to the form of this novel. Regarding its overall composition, one can claim that it undergoes an emaciating process. Narrative passages become increasingly dominant at the expense of descriptive passages throughout the novel, to refer to Georg Lukács' distinction, and Jacobsen's supremely plastic style 'stiffens': the complex syntax simplifies, the exuberant pictorial language fades, and the fluctuating rhythm becomes rigid. The 'skeleton' of the novel, its mere plot, starts protruding. It is, again, difficult *not* to perceive this process as a consequence of the development of Jacobsen's disease. This development placed an increasing pressure on his work on *Niels Lyhne*, and while it took him 3 ½ years to write the first two thirds of the novel, he finished the last third in just two months.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, Strindberg claims autobiographical presence in *Inferno*, but is in fact not really there. What *is* made present in the work is the crisis of perception of modernity: a crisis founded on the hesitation between, on the one hand, a supernatural model of explanation, and on the other hand, a pathological model of explanation, that is, the question whether the narrator is ill. Strindberg thus makes use of the illness narrative as a strategy of writing. Jacobsen, on the other hand, refuses autobiographical presence in *Niels Lyhne*, but at the

same time suffuses the novel. This is made clear when the novel, via the concept of autobiographic fullness, is perceived as an illness narrative, which in this case is understood as a strategy of reading.

Despite occupying opposed and somewhat extreme positions in the field of first-person writing about illness, the two works seem to me to achieve a comparable effect, namely to communicate illness in context. In Strindberg's case, the context is societal, in that he articulates illness as what the sociologist Talcott Parsons terms a 'sick role', a social role amongst others social roles. In Jacobsen's case, the context is individual, in that he articulates how illness penetrates all aspects of individual life. Placed side by side, they provide a penetrating *and* encompassing insight into first-person writing about illness in the late nineteenth century.