

¶ Vilgot Sjöman. *Mitt personregister. Urval 98*. Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1998. 404 p.

Is it a coincidence that novelist and filmmaker Vilgot Sjöman's memoirs, *Mitt personregister* [My Name Index/lit. My Index of Persons], appears at the same time as Lars Norén's new play titled *Personkrets 3:1* [Circle of Persons 3:1]? Perhaps not. It is certainly tempting to see both titles as symptomatic of the cultural mood in Sweden in the last final gasps of the twentieth century. The European Union seems to have thrown the country back upon itself. The outer world exists mostly to confirm the need of an inner-directed focus on individual lives - one's own and those of a close circle through whom one gains a sense of self and understanding or a certain visibility. Society consists of groups of individuals engaged in acts of mutual voyeurism.

The title of Norén's play refers to a register defined simply by a number suggesting the first circle in Dante's inferno. It takes us to a group of derelicts and outsiders, whose lives are circumscribed but also

verified by their surroundings and who travel back and forth in a time consciousness that is both a form of nostalgic longing and painful despair. Their past emerges as bitter-sweet memory and, above all, a burdensome specter. Vilgot Sjöman's memories have the same ambivalent quality and are juxtaposed to what he calls "Efterkontroll" (Check-up), a verification process "in so far as such a thing is possible." Like Norén's characters in *Personkrets 1*, Vilgot Sjöman's professional persona moves away from his lower middle class origin to approach a sphere that separates conventional morality and social taboo. In Norén's play, alcohol and drugs test the patience of the good citizen, but alcohol and drug abuse also reveal the moralistic forces within the addicts; in Sjöman's case, the theme of sexual obscenity challenges existing censorship codes, culminating with the making of the voyeuristic film *Jag är nyfiken-gul* [*I am Curious, Yellow*], a work however that was prompted by the "censorship forces within a Puritan like my own inner self."

Sjöman describes *Mitt personregister* as "anti-memoirs". His "publisher," quoted on the inside cover, responds by calling the book a biography over Ingmar Bergman. Bergman is indeed the prime mover in Sjöman's file over people who have shaped his professional life. This is implied already on the book's cover, displaying a photograph taken during the shooting of Bergman's *Nattvardsgästerna* [*Winter Light*], when Sjöman kept a detailed diary, published in 1963 as *L-136*, named after the film's production number. The photograph shows Ingmar Bergman hovering over Sjöman who is seated at a table with a thick sheet of writing paper in front of him. In one hand he holds a pen, ready to write; the other hand covers his mouth in a gesture suggesting he has been interrupted in his thought and is now listening. He appears both hesitant and tense compared to Bergman, whose arm rests comfortably on Sjöman's shoulder in a pose that exudes protective touch and interfering control. The photograph confirms Sjöman's own statement on the inside cover that Ingmar Bergman, who was supposed to be the red thread in his memoirs, grew into a hawser. For the reader however it provides a fascinating account of a lifelong relationship that began in Sjöman's adolescence and became symbiotic for him but not for Bergman.

One might compare Sjöman's dependency to actor Erland Josephson's response to Bergman, whom he met as a teenage schoolboy when the five year older amateur director came to his and Sjöman's school to direct both of them and their selective group of classmates in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. As a nine year old child, Josephson had played the part of director Peter Quince at his family's summer residence. More than fifty years later he would perform the role of stage director Henrik Vogel in Bergman's TV play *Efter repetitionen* [*After the Rehearsal*]. Though convinced that he was chosen to impersonate Bergman, Josephson in no way confuses his own professional identity with that of Bergman but rests comfortable in his own metier and muses at his recollection of their first encounter:

At age seventeen I was back in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* again. I did Oberon in my school, the North Latin school. Ingmar Bergman directed. We were still amateurs. Peter Quince lived in symbiosis with what was to become Henrik Vogel. (*Sanningslekar* [Truth games]. Stockholm: Brombergs, 1990, p. 73)

In contrast to Josephson's tone of egalitarian professionalism and camaraderie, Vilgot Sjöman remains an anxious schoolboy, seven years younger than his mentor who will play the part of Big Brother all his life. The role-playing is staked out from the beginning with Bergman advising his young adept about scriptwriting:

That same summer Ingmar Bergman had turned 25. He invited me for coffee at the Norma restaurant a stone's throw from the North Latin school. [...] He talked about the love scene in the second act: - *Believe me*, you can't go that far. In that moment a gap opened between us. It was not simply that he was seven years older than me and knew so infinitely more about women and sex. He also read my text from that perspective. He seemed to see my characters naked on the stage and that had never been my intention! What had I imagined then? The truth is: I had no idea. For I had no experience whatsoever in what he was an expert at - to see the actors before him as they took care of the text. All I had done

was sit there in a foggy mist, writing page up and page down. What a lesson! (p. 27)

Sjöman played King Theseus in the school production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. While Erland Josephson was singled out by Bergman as a future professional actor, Sjöman was patronized, forgot his few lines, perspired and stuttered: "My body shakes. What will happen now? Ingmar grabs hold of the situation; though calmly, without rushing up and making a scene. There is only a deep sigh: - ... *but Vilgot!*" (p. 29)

The autobiographical genre has been the subject of extensive international research since the 1960s and was the topic of a doctoral dissertation in 1997 by Christina Sjöblad, University of Lund. The tendency has been to blur somewhat the distinction between an autobiography and a first person novel in which real events are barely fictionalized. The prototype in Sweden was Strindberg's *Tjänstekvinnans son* [*The Son of a Servant*], subtitled "the Evolution of a Soul", which in turn rests on the subjective example of Rousseau's *Confessions*. Works using the author's own name as his autobiographical persona, on the other hand, have usually been referred to in Sweden as "memoarer", a term that has gained a broader meaning than in the Anglo-Saxon world where the "memoir" genre suggests witness accounts by statesmen and other professional and public figures. When Ingmar Bergman's *Laterna magica* [*The Magic Lantern*] was published in 1988, it was referred to in Sweden as his "memoarer", while the English edition subtitled the book "An Autobiography," thereby emphasizing its inner-directed, subjective voice and its relative absence of analyses and accounts of public matters.

Vilgot Sjöman's *Mitt personregister. Urval 98* is a hybrid between "autobiography" and "memoirs". It is definitely focused on the inner development of "a soul" but it also attempts to objectify Sjöman's self-analysis by "testing" his subjective memory at the time of writing against available facts, such as diary notes, memos and specifically dated printed material. The purpose of this juxtaposition of Proustian *déjà-vues* - "preferably functioning without the help of letters and other papers" - and preserved witness accounts is a form of verification or truth-seeking process. As suggested earlier, the psychological unfolding,

bringing together present memory and past event, is counter-balanced by a detective-like double-checking of the remembered material. But it is also Sjöman's own self-protective method. As readers we are never allowed entry into his most deeply subconscious world where the real demons dwell. His "efterkontroll" serves the purpose of setting the limits as to how far he wants to invite us into his personal sphere. "Efterkontroll" has the effect of a meta-interruption, a *Verfremdungseffekt* that takes the readers back into an outer reality of presumed facts, where they are forced to assume the gaze of the voyeur Vilgot Sjöman, objectifying himself and creating a distance between his outer and inner self, and between reader and text.

Sjöman's approach contains its own structural paradox: In telling his life story he constructs an extended timeline between present memory and verifiable past event. But he also stalls the inner flow of his account. Reading his memoirs is like being constantly nudged by someone looking at the text over your shoulder, and doing so with a certain mechanical regularity. Is it not like Bergman's shadow interrupting again? One hesitates to compare Sjöman's composition to that of Ingmar Bergman in *Laterna magica*, since Bergman is, in good time, such an ever-present specter in Sjöman's imagination. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that a comparison is revealing. *Laterna magica* is simply a far more artful and, possibly, humble work than Sjöman's *Mitt personregister*. By relying on both an oscillating temporality - travelling freely between past and present - and a circular structure, ending his account in a vision of his dead mother about to give birth to her son Ingmar, Bergman sets out on an uninterrupted life journey that engages the reader more than Sjöman's intellectually conceived composition.

But we risk missing the real point of Sjöman's memoirs. The voyeur in him is stronger than the self-confessor. His index list of persons rests on a curiosity to understand the people who have been important to him, for only then can he understand his own relationship to them. The Other points the way to the Self. Hence the many accounts of Ingmar Bergman's involvement with women. Vilgot Sjöman assumes the role of peeping Tom. It is symptomatic that as a young and would-be script-writer he finds himself reduced to a third party in Paris when Ingmar

Bergman, sent down by SF (the film production company) to help Sjöman finish a film script, arrives with his would-be third wife, Gun Grut. The adolescent Sjöman does not always choose the role of onlooker; it is foisted on him until, in the case of Bergman, he comes to see himself, vicariously, as Bergman's shadow.

Other cultural personalities pass revue in Sjöman's book: writers like Olle Hedberg and Lars Göring, directors like Alf Sjöberg, producers like Kenne Fant and Göran Lindgren, actors like Gunnar Björnstrand and Lena Nyman. But none of them play the crucial role of Ingmar Bergman. Sjöman is well aware of this: "I want to be seen; of course. But I want to be seen by none other than him. *How come?*" (p. 110)

*Mitt personregister. Urval 98* is an attempt to provide us with a key to that question but not the final answer. It is however an invaluable guide into the Bergman era of Swedish culture - up to the very last page, where Sjöman does yet another repeat performance of Bergman by ending his life account with a reverential bow to Strindberg, the way Ingmar Bergman ended his autobiographical film *Fanny and Alexander* with an homage to *A Dreamplay*.

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