This is the era of show-biz autobiographies as big as the eggs of their authors. So Arthur Miller weighs in at 600 tall pages and Elia Kazan at 290 smaller, looser pages. It is not as if he had had a less eventful life or were a lesser artist—on the contrary. But in an autobiographer conscience is a double virtue: it bespeaks skill in the writer and unpretentiousness in the man. It also means that he does not feel compelled to tell everything he ever did, saw, thought, but leaves a few empty spaces to be filled in by the reader. It is a charming, old-fashioned politesse, like leaving a last mouthful on one's plate: the one is a tribute to the host's generosity; the other, to the reader's imagination.

The two salient features of this autobiography are its unusually skillful construction and the simple beauty of the writing. If you add to this the evenhandedness of Bergman's life, the hard-earned wisdom with which he can now contemplate it, and the candor with which he relates both the good and the bad about himself—without false modesty or vain self-justification—you have before you the stuff of great autobiography.

First, the construction. It resembles Bergman's film Wild Strawberries in its nonchronological progression, only it is much more daring. It begins with the birth of Ernst Ingmar during the Spanish influenza epidemic of 1918; a sickly infant, he is not expected to live. Soon the boy is four and wildly jealous of his new-born sister. Next, he is a grown man scanning pictures of his childhood, and forward again to 1965, his third wife (out of four or five, depending on whether you count the quasi-marriage to Liv Ullmann), Gun, who was in some sense raped by her ex-husband, elicits the following comment: "There are moving pictures with sound and light which never leave the projector of the soul but run in loops throughout life with unchanging sharpness, unchanging objective clarity. Only one's own insight inexorably and relentlessly moves inwards toward the truth." So the inner life is cinema, too.

Second, the quality of the writing itself, full of apergus and ironies, evocations of people or places or situations with utmost economy and understated elegance. Here, for example, is a bit from Ingmar's final reunion with his older brother, Dag. As children, they had fought with fratricidal rage, Dag knocking out Ingmar's two front teeth, Ingmar setting Dag's bed (with Dag in it) on fire. In the very next subchapter, Dag is 69, paralyzed, and barely able to speak. He has been consigned to Greece, and he and his Greek wife have come to Färö (Sheep Island) to visit Ingmar and his wife:

He remembered much more than I did. He spoke of his hatred for Father and his strong ties to Mother. To him, they were still parents, mysterious creatures, capricious, incomprehensible and larger than life. We made our way along overgrown paths and stared at each other in astonishment, two elderly gentlemen, now at an insuperable distance from each other. Our mutual antipathy had gone, but had left space for emptiness; there was no contact, no affinity. My brother wanted to die, but was at the same time afraid of dying; a raging will to live keeping his lungs and heart going. He also pointed out that he had no chance of committing suicide because he could not move his hands.

And the narrative goes on from there, with the same incisive terseness, with the same artful alteration of small, concrete things and big, transcendentally awesome ones. The same sense of architecture for building up a paragraph to a shattering climax or a sobering anticlimax.

But Bergman can be just as effective with a comic episode. In Paris with Gun, after a fancy lunch of kidneys flambé and a visit to the theater, comes the ascent of the Eiffel Tower:

Now as we stood at the very top of the Eiffel Tower, gazing over that famous panorama, countless colon bacilli struck. We were both afflicted with terrible internal spasms and rushing for the lids, where large notices stated that they were closed for two hours in sympathy with the protracted strike of the workers in the public cleansing department. We made our way down the winding staircase with no possible chance of preventing a catastrophe. An incredibly obliging taxi driver spread his newspapers...
out on the back seat and conveyed this semiconscious stinking couple to their hotel, where for the next twenty-four hours, crawling from the bed across the floor, we alternately and jointly embraced the latrines. Until then, shyness in our love had prevented us from using the bathroom convenience, and when in need we had parted off to the considerably less luxurious arrangement in the corridor. At one blow, all discretion was swept away. Our physical misery undoubtedly brought us closer to each other.

Here again Bergman understates consummately. The striking bacilli are clearly but subtly contrasted with the workers’ strike, as is the latter’s being in the “public cleansing department” with the lovers’ private, intensely suffused state. And there are splendid details such as embracing the bowl “alternately and jointly.”

Bergman, as mentioned, is terrific also with thumbnail descriptions and characterizations. Thus “... Serge Lifar, the aging monster in L’Après-midi d’un faun [sic, but blame this on translator and publishers], a fat whore with moist open lips, shamelessly radiating all the vices of the 1920’s.” In one way, of course, “all the vices of the 1920’s” is absurd: what vices are limited to a specific decade? Yet it is also true: the decadence of that period seems somehow gaudier, more purple, than that of any other in recent memory. And what about the following, on the work of the director—in this case a fever-ridden young Bergman: “... he showed nothing. It is a dereliction of duty to let private afflictions obtrude at work. Your mood must be even and forceful, but, on the other hand, indefinable creative desires must not be encouraged. You have to rely on careful preparation and hope for better things.” I love that last sentence, pitched exactly midway between matter-of-factness and irony.

Bergman’s is an arduous life, the slow divestment of the terrible constraints imposed by a troubled Lutheran minister’s household in puritanical Sweden. Escape into art was not easy; there was penury for a long time. Success, in both theater and films, came in sudden spurts; but there were always dread relapses into failure. A few directors and producers, the odd critic, and one dead writer—Strindberg—helped and sustained Ingmar; but there was lurking incomprehension all around, and the series of setbacks that made a young man who could take everything save humiliation suffer horribly. There were also the women, often his actresses or other co-workers, who became lovers or wives and helped or impeded artistic evolution. Here, for instance, is Bergman with Ellen, his second wife, to whom he lied constantly: “For brief moments between battles, we felt a profound fellowship, the sympathy and forgiveness of the body.” How nicely that is worded!

There are detailed accounts of the income tax scandal Bergman was unjustly enmeshed in and of his ensuing nervous breakdown; remarkable vignettes of other people’s and his own experiences working in theater and film; evocative sketches of meetings or collaborations with Garbo, Ingrid Bergman, the conductor Issey Dobrown, the aging actor Lars Hanson (who is not named), Laurence Olivier (they did not hit it off), and great Swedish directors such as Alf Sjöberg and Olof Molander. When Bergman became director of Dramaten, he had to fire Molander though, along with Sjöberg, Molander had been one of his heroes; the incident is told with devastating honesty and is painful even to read, much less to live. There are entrancing episodes of work experiences, ludicrous or inspiring or both at once.

From a tormented and exultant child, Bergman develops into a neurotic and difficult young man whom success doesn’t lastingly appease or tame. Loves and marriages come and go, as
do triumphs and failures; the suggestive leaps by which the story proceeds—through reminiscences, echoes, flashforwards—somehow manage to turn discursiveness and disjointedness into the compelling self-portrait of a restless stalking mind. Past, present, future are abolished, and there is only a stretch of synchronicity over which the memory roams freely in search of connection and comprehension.

Bergman believes in ghosts, and there are several arresting ghost (or otherwise fantastic) stories. But he is also an atheist, albeit with relapses into some sort of half-belief. The struggle with God leaves him “with a calming message. You were born without purpose, you live without meaning, living is its own meaning. When you die, you are extinguished. . . . A god does not necessarily dwell among us increasingly capricious atoms.” But note that “necessarily.” And he never denies the life of the spirit. From his pastor father, Bergman learns (in an incident he incorporated at the end of Winter Light) that “irrespective of everything [specifically: physical illness], you will hold your communion. It is important to the churchgoer, but even more important to you. We shall have to see if it is important to God. [Again the uncertainty, disguised as playfulness.] If there is no other god than your hope as such, it is important to that god too.” This writing can hold its own against anybody’s.

That is Bergman hopeful. But there is also Bergman dejected, fighting the weakness of age and sympathizing more and more with Master-Build Solness climbing the church tower despite his vertigo in “the urge toward the impossible.” And he goes on: “Failure can have a fresh and ardent taste, adversity stirs up aggression and shakes life into creativity which might otherwise remain dormant. It’s fun to cling to the northwest wall of Mount Everest. Before I am silenced for biological reasons, I very much want to see that I have not been questioned. Not just by myself. That happens every day. I want to be a pest, a troublemaker, and hard to pigeonhole.”

Here again the attitude toward life and, by implication, death, is, if not cheerful, at least stoical. But Bergman wouldn’t be Bergman if the opposite were not also true. Take this passage, perhaps the most moving in the book, where he tries to talk about his current and doubtless last wife, Ingrid, the only fully mature woman he was ever involved with. He finds he cannot write about her. Then he recalls Ovid’s tale of Philemon and Baucis (which he gets slightly wrong) and goes on, infinitely movingly:

My wife and I live near each other. One of us thinks and the other answers, or the other way round. I have no means of describing our affinity. One problem is soluble. One day the blow will fall and separate us. No friendly god will turn us into a tree to shade the farm. I have a talent for imagining most of life’s situations. I plug in my intuition and my imagination and appropriate emotions pour in, colouring and deepening. Nevertheless I lack the means of imagining the moment of separation. As I am neither able nor willing to imagine another life, some kind of life beyond the frontier, that perspective is appalling. From somebody I will become a nobody. That Nobody will not even have the memory of an affinity.

This strikes me as enormously powerful in its understatement. But, then, Bergman is precisely the master of the hint, the suggestion—of what is said without being spoken. When he and Ingrid left Sweden over the income tax mess—just as Strindberg had left under a different sort of cloud—they tried Hollywood for a while. Bergman learned “Barbra Streisand telephoned and asked us whether we would like to bring our bathing gear with us for a little party by the pool. I thanked her, put down the receiver, turned to Ingrid and said: ‘Let’s go back to Faro at once . . .’” Nothing is said. Everything is said.

There is a wonderful love of nature and childhood informing this book, which may come as a surprise to those having only a cursory knowledge of Bergman’s work. But the twin passions that thread their way through the autobiography are the theater and the cinema. Bergman went to the Royal Dramatic for the first time at age twelve. Subsequently, as its director, he would sometimes go to sit in the seat in the dark, empty house and “give in to nostalgia.” For “this great auditorium lying in silence and semidarkness was—after great hesitation, I think of writing ‘the beginning and the end and almost everything in between.’ It looks silly and exaggerated in print, but I can’t find a better way of putting it—the beginning and the end and almost everything in between.”

And what of the movies? When Ingmar was even smaller, nine or ten, a very rich aunt gave him a cinematograph—a toy film projector—which he thought he was getting from her on Christmas, to his brother instead. It was what he had wanted most, and the injustice of it crushed him. Later that night he woke up Dad and gave him all his hundred tin soldiers for the cinematograph. As he projected his first little film loop, his excitement was indescribable. Near the end of The Magic Lantern, he talks about his private screening room on Filö and the films the Swedish Cinema-theque lends him: “Sixty years have gone by but the excitement is still the same.”

In sundry interviews, Bergman has said that film was his demanding mistress, but theater his cozy, loyal wife. Well, he managed the amazing feat of keeping both wife and mistress happy—not to mention himself. Neurotic as Bergman was all his life (though less so as he grew older), bounded as he was by chronically upset stomachs, insomnia, and a host of intermittent ailments, he nevertheless always came through for himself, for his art, for the world.

That would Joan Tate, the translator, had done likewise. But not only is this translation full of sometimes arcane Britishisms, it is also devoid of knowledge of film, theater, even grammar. Miss Tate gives us “two-acters” for two-reelers, “Goethe’s Margareta” for Gretchen or Marguerite, such barbarisms as “virtuous Bavarians,” “and nor,” “when I asked him . . . he had at once accepted,” “a mutual existence,” “period of time,” “intriguing objects,” “hellish stimulating,” and many more.

REMEMBERING AMERICA: A VOICE FROM THE SIXTIES

Richard Goodwin was the boy wonder of the Kennedy White House, a young and very liberal aide with direct access to the President. Later, after meddlesome stints in the State Department and the Peace Corps, he returned to the White House as Lyndon Johnson’s chief speechwriter. He quit in late 1965, soon was criticizing LBJ publicly for intervening in Vietnam, signed on with Gene McCarthy’s campaign in 1968, and finally jumped ship to join Bobby Kennedy. That’s his claim to fame. Goodwin thinks the years when he was a big deal in Washington were better than the years since then, when he wasn’t. That’s only human nature, I guess. Reporters who covered him in those days tell me he had a big head. After reading his book, I can confirm that he still does.

So many pages (543), so little to say. The basic theme, which is what Goodwin spent his time on in the sixties and how wonderfully important it all was, is the stuff of a fat magazine article.

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Johnny, the key word, is missing from the title of Marlene Dietrich’s famous song, Claudel’s The Tidings They Brought to Mary (as it is known in English) becomes The Annunciation to Mary, and so on. Since the American edition does not use the British pages, we must assume that copy editing is equally dead on both sides of the Atlantic.

It would take much more than that, however, to dim the pleasure of this book. In nine lines, Bergman can encapsulate what went wrong with his marriage to the pianist Käbi Lareste (of whom, bizarrely, we get only a rear view among the inadequate selection of illustrations), but the true writer reveals himself even in the briefest of snatches: “I was sitting in my workroom in Filö and it was raining, that soft quiet summer rain, as if it were going to rain all day, the kind that doesn’t exist any more.” That three-part build-up from physical description, through psycho- logical impression, to metaphysical nostalgia—there you have the true writer at work. In any medium, Bergman is the kind of artist that hardly exists any more. □