Helland in Retrospect: Ten Essays on Ibsen

Frode Helland

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Preface

Since completing what was in 1998 the first doctoral dissertation on the works of Henrik Ibsen to have been produced in Norway in twenty years, Frode Helland has made an invaluable contribution to the field of Ibsen studies. His scholarly production spans many phases, including an interest in the ironic, the aesthetic, the melancholic, the political, and the global Ibsen. In recent years his studies in English on Ibsen in performance have reached audiences as far flung as the stage productions he has investigated—from Argentina to Zimbabwe, with stops in China, Iran, and India along the way. He has been indefatigable in building up and maintaining a global network of scholars interested in Ibsen, and in addition to directing the Centre for Ibsen Studies for many years, he has edited numerous collections of conference proceedings that showcase the work of these scholars.

In reflecting over Frode's many contributions to the field as he nears the milestone of turning sixty, it struck us that there is much value in his early scholarship, but that because most of this was written in Norwegian, it has not reached the international readership it deserves. For this reason, we determined that a *festschrift* consisting of translations of some of the most representative and interesting of these early studies is the best contribution we could make to a celebration of Frode's career.

This volume contains ten newly translated scholarly works arranged in roughly chronological order and accompanied by very brief introductions. We have selected from a wide variety of genres, from scholarly articles to book and theater reviews, and even Frode's written response to the evaluation of his doctoral dissertation carried out by the esteemed Ibsen scholars Inga-Stina Ewbank and Atle Kittang. Because the citation practice has varied from essay to essay, we have chosen to compile a single list of works cited for the entire book. We have also updated all references to Ibsen's works in the original language to *Henrik Ibsens skrifter* (*Henrik Ibsen's Writings*), the critical scholarly edition of Ibsen's writing produced by the Centre for Ibsen Studies between 2005 and 2011. The advantage of this is that this edition is openly accessible

online for anyone who wants to consult Ibsen's original texts at https://www.ibsen.uio.no.

What has struck us in looking back over Frode's career is first and foremost his meticulous and intelligent close readings of not only Ibsen's plays, but also of the work of other Ibsen scholars. What comes across is a highly critical, but also generous and at times quite humorous, attempt to get at the heart of Ibsen's dramatic production. For those of us who have had the privilege of working directly with Frode for many years, it has been a sincere pleasure to reconnect with his earlier scholarship and make it available to a broader audience for the first time. We hope that this collection will convey the many joys—and occasional terror—of exploring Ibsen in direct dialogue with Frode.

Finally, we the editors would like to extend our sincere gratitude to John David Crosby for his translation work and to Andrea Regine Meyer for her meticulous editing. This book would not have been possible without their efforts.

Giuliano D'Amico, Ståle Dingstad, and Ellen Rees

Oslo, September 2024

Articles

Irony and Experience in *Hedda Gabler*

This is not strictly speaking a new translation, but rather a lightly edited version of an English-language article, "Irony and Experience in Hedda Gabler," *which was published in* Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen *in 1994. The article is based on Helland's master's thesis from 1992, "Erfaring og ironi: En studie i Ibsens* Hedda Gabler" *("Experience and Irony: A Study of Ibsen's* Hedda Gabler*), which demonstrated enormous scholarly potential and immediately put him on the map as an emerging scholar. In this innovative reading, Helland takes up the many challenges inherent in interpreting* Hedda Gabler *by focusing on the play's profoundly ironic nature. In particular, he directs attention to how the metatheatrical "play-within-the-play" destabilizes any attempt at a fixed interpretation, or indeed of the subject or of existence broadly understood. Helland's interpretation thus challenges earlier attempts to shoehorn* Hedda Gabler *into a harmonizing or idealist reading.*

Hedda Gabler is a difficult text. The challenges it poses to reception are such that interpreters have even failed to agree on what it is really "about," or what case it was making. Is it a purely naturalistic study of a frustrated woman, a critique of a fossilized bourgeoisie, a farce, a black comedy, or a great symbolic tragedy? In what follows, I shall propose a reading of the play which I hope may contribute to a "solution" to some of these problems.[1]

My reading will seek to support the claim that *Hedda Gabler*, in modernistic fashion, presents an experiential problem, a problem that past criticism has largely overlooked or failed to develop. The problem of experience has been a characteristic of modernism from Baudelaire to the present and has exercised theorists of modernity from Nietzche and Marx to Lyotard.[2] Experience becomes problematic in the modernist context because of the critical position

[1] This paper is a reworked excerpt from my master's thesis *Erfaring og ironi. En studie i Ibsens Hedda Gabler* (Experience and irony: a study of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*) (University of Oslo, 1992).

[2] See for instance Benjamin 1974a.

in which it places the *subject*. A subject's experience of the world is no longer either self-evident or unified. Experience is fragmented because it cannot accommodate the continuity of a unified life or its links with the past, the future, or society. Adorno described the condition as follows:

> The world appears under the sign of the loss of meaning as one that [...] can no longer be experienced. I believe that the overwhelming experience of this loss of an ostensibly secure metaphysical meaning is nothing other than the unconscious feeling of the impossibility that the world can still be experienced. [...] Experience is precisely the unity-creating continuity that shapes such a concept as meaning, or even brings it forth in the first place. Modernity is the expression of a historical state of consciousness that is no longer capable of such continuity. (Adorno 1973, 76)[3]

With the very unity of the subject threatened under modernity in a different sense than before, unified experience itself also comes under threat. Its vulnerable position makes it a theme not only for philosophy but also for art. However, the nature of the problem places very special demands on presentation, both in art and in theory. The transition to modernism in art is characterized by formal change: *presentation* becomes more indirect. Emphasis on this point is essential to my analysis of *Hedda Gabler*. Irony is a significant element in the play's presentation. Close attention to how irony marks both parts of the play and the work as a whole is necessary to its understanding. *Hedda Gabler* presents experience that can find no direct expression: the experience of the "impossibility" of experience. Irony casts an ambiguous light over all the characters in the play and demonstrates how their experiences of reality and experience break down. This is made particularly clear in the play's virtually Socratic ending; it leaves us with questions in an insuperable negativity, not with answers in a redeeming positivity.

The characters all seem in their various ways to be cut off from the experi-

[3] "Die Welt erscheint im Zeichen des Sinnverlustes als eine, die sich [...] nicht mehr erfahren lässt. Ich glaube, dass die überwältigende Erfahrung dieses Verlustes eines vorgeblich gesicherten metaphysischen Sinnes, nichts anderes ist als das seiner selbst nicht bewussten Gefühls der Unmöglichkeit, dass die Welt noch erfahren werden kann. [...] Erfahrung ist eben die einheitsstiftende Kontinuität, die so etwas wie den Begriff des Sinnes prägt, oder ihn überhaupt erst hervorbringt. Die Moderne ist der Ausdruck eines geschichtlichen Standes des Bewusstseins, das einer solchen Kontinuität nicht mehr mächtig ist" (Adorno 1973, 76).

ence of the world or of their own lives as meaningful wholes. *None* of them relate actively to experience as a project with future potential, and especially not the main character, who spends the whole play quite literally enclosed in "Tesmanian" space and cut off from the world of action. The exclusion of the characters from experience is also *manifested* in the relation between the audience (reader) and the stage (text). The problem of experience as embodied in the text is reflected in the concealment off-stage of all important and decisive acts or events: they only exist as second hand narrative. The spectator (reader) is thus, like Hedda, denied experience of the play's major events.[4] Just as the play's main character is insulated from reality, so the audience is denied the experience of the action in the play.

So, we see this more profound aspect of the problem of experience ironically *demonstrated* in Ibsen's text: its presentation is indirect. The discussion below will concentrate on aspects of the play that serve to illustrate the ironic negative modernity of the text, both in themselves and at a higher metadramatic level.

"Play-within-the-play"

In a stimulating essay on Ibsen's use of the "play-within-the play," Daniel Haakonsen (1971) called attention to the prominence of this device in Ibsen's later drama, i.e., the frequency with which the characters dissemble in such a way that it becomes clear to the reader – at once or in retrospect – that they *are* dissembling. They are seen to be acting, so that in effect their parts are played twice over, creating a play within the play. In Ibsen's plays this dramatic convention typically occurs in the constant attempts of characters to create more favorable impressions of themselves than the facts warrant. But Haakonsen's argument goes much further than simply demonstrating the occurrence of plays-within-plays in Ibsen, or showing how characters are exposed. He is out to show that Ibsen "employs a peripheral scene as a preparation for something more central in the play. [...] the scenes we are talking about lead towards and prepare us for a reversal (*peripeteia*)" (Haakonsen 1971, 110). According to

[4] An important (sole) exception, of course, is the burning of the manuscript. It is significant that the only act to be presented "directly" is so destructive. But the fact that it takes place on stage also points to a difficulty regarding credibility, as can be seen if we ask ourselves what we would have believed if Hedda had only said that she had burned the papers, and we had not seen her in the act?

Haakonsen, the peripeteia comes about because the scenes

> are, to begin with, an expression of man's freedom [...] at first the character himself plays the part; later Life or Fate comes in to direct an action which the characters are forced to participate in if they are to act out their roles to the end and thus be true to themselves. (Haakonsen1971, 112–113)

Haakonsen's principal contention, then, is that in Ibsen's plays, the function of "the play-within-the-play" is to foreshadow the larger tragic actions that he sees as fundamental to the plays. Seen in this light, the scenes are adduced in support of the view of Ibsen as an idealistic writer of dramas of fate, whose protagonists are obliged to submit to a larger design in the form of "a transcendent norm" and "objective order" (Haakonsen 1971, 115–116). The essay on Ibsen's use of the play-within-the-play accordingly concludes with the assertion that

> The real context for the play-within-the-play then is not the moral code of bourgeois drama, but the greater tragic stage where man has to measure up to his destiny and effectively play his part in a larger order of thing. (Haakonsen 1971, 117)

This is not the place for a full discussion of the interpretation of *Hedda Gabler* as an idealistic tragedy, but my discussion below of "the play-within -the-play" in two of its scenes is an implicit criticism of that position. Before I move on to those scenes, permit me briefly to call attention to a second – and very different – view of the "playwithin-the-play."

In his great book on German baroque tragedy, Walter Benjamin (1974b) showed that the play-within-the-play was a prominent convention both in baroque and (early) Romantic writing. Benjamin relates this to the pronounced worldliness of tragedy, a result of the theological situation of the time: man's loss of his place in an eschatological scheme. Benjamin relates the emergence of the idea of life as a dream or illusion – "Leben ein Traum" – so prominent in the baroque period to this theological or philosophical context.[5] The loss of the promise of grace and forgiveness in the divine plan implies the idea that

[5] "Wo das Mittelalter die hinfälligkeit des Weltgeschehens und die Vergänglichkeit der Kreatur als Stationen des Heilswegs zur Schau stellt, vergräbt das deutsche Trauerspiel sich ganz in die Trostlosigkeit der irdischen Verfassung" (Benjamin 1974b, 260).

life is a dream and that it is all play-acting, illusion. The consequences for art are evident, among other things in the radicalized use of plays within plays in European literature.[6]

According to Benjamin, this is a matter of a completely radicalized play within the play, not only manifested in the character's dissembling but also more openly revealed in his reflections on the part he is playing, and implicit in the context of a play. The playwithin-the-play is thus decisively linked to reflection, referred to by Benjamin as "that canonical artistic medium" for "the romantic drama from Calderon to Tieck" (Benjamin 1974b, 262).[7] Reflection is introduced into the work of art in such a way as to make the character's reflexivity infinitely ironic:

> It repeats itself infinitely and shrinks the circle it encompasses immeasurably. Both aspects of reflection are equally essential: the playful reduction of the real as well as the introduction of a reflective infinity of thought into the closed finiteness of a profane space of fate. (Benjamin 1974b, 262)[8]

The infinite indeterminacy of the play-within-the-play leads to a breach of illusion that underlines the play-like aspect of life itself. In this art form, the "play-within-the-play" becomes allegorical; such scenes "turn the stage itself into an emblem of illusion" (Rosen 1988, 148).[9] This view of "the play-within-the-play" thus differs radically from Haakonsen's. Where the latter sees it foreshadowing the monolithic necessity and transcendental values of the drama of fate, Benjamin and Rosen see the opposite: an infinity of play, reflection and fragmenting breaches of illusion. Let us keep both views in mind as we

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[6] In addition to his example from German tragedy, Benjamin focusses on the importance of the convention to Calderon. Charles Rosen showed the centrality of the convention in Shakespeare's tragedies in his essay "The Ruins of Walter Benjamin" (1988). This aspect of Tieck's work is discussed by Peter Szondi (1978, 25ff).

[7] "jenes kanonischen Kunstmittels" and "das romantische Drama von Calderon bis Tieck."

[8] "Ins Unendliche wiederholt sie [i.e. reflection] sich selbst und ins Unabsehbare verkleinert sie den Kreis, den sie umschließt. Gleich wesentlich sind diese beiden Seiten der Reflexion: die spielhafte Reduzierung des Wirklichen wie die Einführung einer reflexiven Unendlichkeit des Denkens in die geschlossene Endlichkeit eines profanen Schicksalsraums."

[9] Like Paul de Man, Rosen accepts Benjamin's view of allegory as "not just an artistic technique but also [...] a corrective to art. By its discontinuity of image and meaning it rejects the false appearance of artistic unity, the fusion of meaning in the symbol, and presents itself as a fragment, a ruin" (Rosen 1988, 151).

consider how the device functions in *Hedda Gabler*.

One of Haakonsen's "play-within-the-play" examples comes in the well-known "hat scene" in Act One, in which Hedda offends Aunt Julle by pretending she thinks her new hat belongs to Berte. In Haakonsen's words, Hedda "pretends" and "plays the cruel little play within the main action" (Haakonsen 1971, 111). As it stands, this important insight can readily be accepted; but for a full understanding of what goes on in the scene, one needs to examine the whole of this encounter between Hedda and the Tesman duo a little more closely.

As the scene opens, the two women exchange cordial and friendly greetings, but the warm atmosphere does not last. When in answer to Miss Tesman's inquiry Hedda replies that she has slept "Tolerably," Tesman promptly objects that when he got up, he saw her "sleeping like a log" (Ibsen 2019, 300). This claim by her husband to know the truth even about the quality of her sleep is not well received and prompts a counterattack to distract attention: "Ugh, look – the maid has opened the veranda door. There's a veritable ocean of sun pouring in here" (Ibsen 2019, 300). (It may incidentally be worth noting that Aunt Julle refrains from remarking that it was *she* and not Berte who, with the best of intentions, opened the veranda door.) It is Hedda's strategy in the face of any threat to her reserve and independence to launch a diversionary counterattack, which often appears both malicious and unmotivated. The "hat scene" offers a prime example, but before discussing it we should look more closely at what immediately precedes Hedda's attack on Jørgen's old aunt.

Aunt Julle produces the pair of Tesman's worn-out old slippers that she has been keeping for him. He almost forces them on Hedda in an absurd attempt to make her share his delight at getting them back. He wants her to partake of the "many memories" they have for him (Ibsen 2019, 301). When Hedda refuses to be ensnared in the intimacy of the slippers, Tesman accuses her, "Yes, but I think now that she's part of the family [...]" (Ibsen 2019, 301). There are two sides to his words, both of which call for comment. For one thing, he is clearly trying to make Hedda conform to the unit to which she now *belongs*, as it were body and soul. He speaks of her belonging to the family, like a house or a grand piano, and not as belonging in the family, as an independent part of it, or the like. At the more formal level, it is also important to register how Tesman talks about her in her own presence, and over her head, the way foolish people often treat children. This may make it easier to see why, in order to evade the attempt to trap her in the stifling intimacy of family and slippers, Hedda interrupts him with the remark "we'll never be able to get on

with [the maid] [...] Look at that! She's left her old hat lying on the chair. [...] Just think – if anyone came and saw that" (Ibsen 2019, 301).

So, we see the representatives of "Tesmanism" seeking to force Hedda into their world like a decorative property, and Hedda strongly resisting and even resorting to cruel counterattacks. As this conflict unfolds between Tesmanian entrapment and Hedda's almost desperate resistance to it, several details in the scene also serve to undermine both aunt and nephew. We see them being disloyal: Julle lets her faithful maid take the blame for the open door, and Tesman does not reveal that he and not Julle put the hat on the chair.[10] However, the "conflict" in this scene does not end with an offended Aunt Julle sweeping up her things and marching out. First, she and Jørgen both point out that it is a smart new hat, as Hedda, too, admits:

> HEDDA. Very elegant and charming.
> TESMAN. Yes, aren't they? What? But, Auntie, do take a good look at Hedda before you go! Look, how elegant and charming *she* is! (Ibsen 2019, 301. Emphasis in the original.)[11]

Tesman's speech is remarkable in a number of respects. At first glance, it amounts to a further insult to Aunt Julle: her hat and parasol must appear rather less charming in implicit contrast to the charming Hedda. But the rest of the scene reveals that Tesman intends the speech to refocus attention on Hedda so that he can go on circumscribing her in the circle of the narrow Tesman horizon:

> TESMAN. [...] have you noticed how plump and buxom she's got? How she's filled out during the trip.
> HEDDA (*walks across the floor*). Oh, drop it –!
> [...]
> TESMAN. Yes, Auntie Ju, you can't see it that well when she's wearing that dress. But *I*, who have occasion to –

[10] See also where Tesman even places the blame for the misplaced hat squarely on his aunt: "[...]you can be sure Auntie Ju won't ever do it again" (Ibsen 2019, 303).

[11] HEDDA. Smukt og nydeligt er det.

TESMAN. Ja, ikke sandt? Hvad? Men, tante, sé da rigtig på Hedda, før du går! Sé, hvor smuk og nydelig *hun* er! (Ibsen 2009b, 30–31. Emphasis in the original)

> HEDDA (*by the glass door, impatiently*). Oh, you have occasion to nothing!
> TESMAN. It must be the mountain air in the Tyrol –
> HEDDA (*curtly, interrupting*). I'm precisely the same as when I left.
> TESMAN. Yes, so you insist. But there's no way you are. Don't you agree, Auntie? (Ibsen 2019, 302. Emphasis in the original.)[12]

Tesman's insult of Julle, then, is an attempt to recommence the project of enclosing Hedda in the intimate sphere where he is master. For want of a better word, one might call it Tesman's "intimization" of Hedda, suggesting both the intimacy in which he wants to trap Hedda and the intimidating effect this has on her. His words emphasize that he not only has access to Hedda's most private life but can also pronounce on its condition with authority regardless of what she thinks or says. He has *occasion*. And indeed, the outcome of the struggle in the scene, despite Hedda's violent counterattack, is her defeat. Aunt Julle realizes that Hedda has little chance of evading life in Tesmanian intimacy or maintaining her own independence now that, as indicated by her changed appearance, she is pregnant.

If one sees it as a play-within-the-play, the scene takes on a significance far beyond demonstrating that Hedda treats Aunt Julle badly, giving rise to tension between them. As a play-within-the-play, it invites attention to more than what the superficial events themselves contain. The reflexivity of the play-within-the-play radicalizes the search for meaning: an interpreter is forced to ask what the action means. I subscribe to Haakonsen's claim that in order to understand the play-within-play scenes, one must ponder how they relate to the play as a whole. But in my specific reading of that relation, between the

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[12] TESMAN [...] har du lagt mærke til, hvor fyldig og frodig hun er ble't? Hvor svært hun har lagt sig ud på rejsen?

HEDDA *går henover gulvet.* Å, lad da være –!

[...]

TESMAN. Ja, tante Julle, du kan ikke så godt sé det, nu hun har den kjolen på sig. Men *jeg*, som har anledning til at –

HEDDA *ved glasdøren, utålmodig.* Å, du har ikke anledning til nogenting!

TESMAN. Det må være fjeldluften der nede i Tyrol –

HEDDA. *kort, afbrydende. Jeg er akkurat nu, som da jeg rejste.*

TESMAN. Ja, det påstår du. Men nej såmæn om du er. Synes ikke du også, tante? (Ibsen 2009b, 31–32. Emphasis in the original)

little play-within-the-play and the whole text of which it forms part, I disagree fundamentally with Haakonsen, as I have already indicated. My disagreement relates especially to the interpretation of the events that follow the peripeteia, which comes when Tesman again concentrates attention on Hedda by inadvertently alluding to her pregnancy. I cannot find much justification in the text for Haakonsen's proposed interpretation of the peripeteia:

> This first play within the main action quickly changes into a kind of ritual which one must simply accept. With the authority that the situation gives her, the aunt takes Hedda's head in both hands and pulls it down towards her. She kisses Hedda on her hair while she intones a priestly benediction: "God bless and keep Hedda Tesman." Suddenly new laws come into play biological, familial, and others – which with an automatic right take over Hedda's playing and bind her even more strongly than she was at the beginning. (Haakonsen 1971, 111)

It is clearly true that in the scene Hedda does try to assert her own freedom and autonomy, while the scene ends in the opposite, namely "victory" for Julle and the Tesman spirit, whose representatives defeat Hedda's attempt to keep her distance. Here – as at the end of the play – Hedda is the loser in the struggle between liberation and "intimization." Having said this, I also wish to register my disagreement with Haakonsen's favourable view of the part played by Aunt Julle in the scene. His interpretation presupposes that she acts in accordance with something objective or higher which gives her an "automatic right" to complete this crushing victory over Hedda's project of secession and independence from the implications of belonging to the family. The difficulty of arguing that the text accords Miss Tesman any such objective "right" emerges if one quotes the *whole* of the speech to which Haakonsen alludes:

> MISS TESMAN (*has folded her hands and stares at her*). Lovely – lovely – lovely Hedda. (*Goes over to* HEDDA *and takes her head in both hands, bends forward and kisses her on the hair*) May the Lord God bless and protect Hedda Tesman. For Jørgen's sake. (Ibsen 2019, 302)[13]

[13] FRØKEN TESMAN *har foldet hænderne og stirrer på hende*. Dejlig, – dejlig, – dejlig er Hedda. *(går hen til hende, bøjer med begge hænder hendes hoved og kysser hende på håret)* Gud velsigne og bevare Hedda Tesman. For Jørgens skyld. (Ibsen 2009b, 32)

This is Miss Tesman's celebration of her and her foster-son's victory over Hedda Gabler, making her the object of a virtually ritual initiation into the Tesmanian universe, as Mrs. Hedda Tesman. The incantation emphasises her paramount quality as a family possession: "lovely." There is an almost violent undertone to Julle's acts and words here; she uses power and emphasizes Hedda's subjection and by using both hands and making her bow her head before kissing her hair, she underlines Hedda's "loveliness" as her most valuable quality as Mrs. Tesman, and – perhaps most important – she pronounces her "blessing" over Hedda Tesman "for Jørgen's sake."[14] It is clear in practically every scene that Hedda struggles to resist such enclosure. Aunt Julle's speech shows that she has good reason to do so, declaring as it does that Hedda's only place and value within this universe is as a "lovely" pendant to Mr. Tesman, an object with no intrinsic merit: "for Jørgen's sake."

The play-within-the-play in this scene should thus be viewed as a first highlighting and foreshadowing of Hedda's struggle and future defeat, while at the same time it subjects the forces ranged against her to critical irony. Julle is exposed to dramatic irony when, in her ritual celebration of the General's daughter's submission as a "lovely" adjunct to the family, she reveals her own motives and feelings for Hedda: "for Jørgen's sake." Her benediction, then, is not driven by any higher motive that Hedda "must accept." Hedda on the contrary accepts none of the norms and motives that guide the attempts of the spokesmen of Tesmanism to reduce her to a "lovely" property. Similarly, although Hedda's attempt to achieve an independent distance is not left unquestioned, it is difficult to read into the text any "criticism" or undermining of it. Hedda becomes the victim of an ironic situation, since her attempt to emancipate herself results in her defeat. Both in my concrete interpretation of the scene itself, and in my view of how it refers to the whole, I therefore differ from Haakonsen, although I agree with his main point that there is a "play-within-the-play" here, the significance of which extends beyond itself and refers to an overarching level of meaning in the text.

This should also serve to establish that, in its reference beyond itself and reflection of the whole, the scene breaks the fictional illusion. In this respect, one might be tempted to recall that reflexivity of play that Benjamin draws at-

[14] The symbolic significance of forcing someone to bow his or her head scarcely needs further comment.

tention to in baroque and romantic theatre. The fact that acting – both by Hedda and Julle – is so heavily accentuated in the scene presents an obstacle to Haakonsen's interpretation. The dissembling and performances by the two women create a break with the fiction that makes it difficult to accept an interpretation in which the playing is held to be in harmony with an underlying "objective order." But one cannot apply Benjamin's analysis of baroque theatre as it stands to Ibsen's text. The vast distance between their historical and social contexts is enough to prevent such a strategy. Ibsen's text, too, resists a simple transfer of Benjamin's analysis. In Ibsen, the play-acting does not lead us off into the indeterminacy of infinite reflexivity, as it may appear to do in Benjamin's examples from Calderon and Lohenstein or in Szondi's examples from Tieck's comedies (Benjamin 1974b, 260–263; Szondi 1978, 26–27).

However, to complete our discussion of "the play-within-the-play" in *Hedda Gabler* we must also examine a second scene in which this point is made even more prominently, and where at the same time a clearer connection can be seen between the problem of experience and the irony in the play. The scene is the one at nearly the end of the play in which Hedda with evident irony imitates Tesman's tone of voice and speech mannerisms. Having just heard Brack's menacing conclusion that she must submit to his will voluntarily and acquiesce to the inevitable, she crosses to the desk where Jørgen and Thea are working:

> HEDDA (*suppresses an involuntary smile and mimics* TESMAN*'s tone*). Well? Any success, Jørgen? What?
> TESMAN. Oh, God only knows. There's months of work in all this.
> HEDDA (*as before*). No, just think! (*Runs her fingers lightly through* MRS ELVSTED*'s hair*). Isn't it strange for you, Thea? You're sitting here with Tesman now – just as you used to sit with Eilert Løvborg.
> MRS ELVSTED. Oh God, if only I could inspire your husband too.
> HEDDA. Oh, that will come – with time.
> TESMAN. Yes, you know what, Hedda – I do believe I'm starting to sense something of that sort. But you go and sit over there with the judge again. (Ibsen 2019, 376)[15]

[15] HEDDA *undertrykker et uvilkårligt smil og efterligner Tesmans tonefald.* Nå? Lykkes det så, Jørgen? Hvad?

What strikes one first here, of course, is that Hedda is being ironic in the simplest sense of the word: she makes ironic fun of the slightly ridiculous Tesman and Thea. Thea's speech about inspiration creates a doubly ironic effect, undermining *both* her former inspiration of Løvborg (which proved rather illusory) *and* the idea of inspiring the unimaginative Tesman. Hedda's ironic play in this scene invites the reader to laugh at the pair of them and their efforts to reconstruct the fragmented manuscript. For the last time in the play, the project of (re)constructing experience as a unified continuity in a coherent sequence is ironically undermined (see below).

However, it is also clear that, in addition to its immediate impact, there is something more to the way in which Hedda *acts* in this scene that calls for special attention. The "play-within-the-play" is more prominent here than anywhere else in the text. Hedda playacts quite openly; she is explicitly ironic and dissembles in such a way that the dissembling itself is foregrounded. Or, to express it more figuratively: she dons the ironist's mask and wears it in a way that accentuates the mask itself. The text brings this out both in the stage directions and in the speeches, with Hedda smiling the ironist's secretive smile and imitating Tesman's language: she "suppresses an involuntary smile, and mimics Tesman's tone," and adopts Tesman's catch phrases "well" and "what?"

Her *playing* in a manner that calls attention to the playing as such also points up the fictionality of the text. Playing in the play emphasises – and thus breaks – the fiction. The nature of the play as play is brought out when fictionality multiples. In view of the current fashion for "romantic irony" and the infinity of play in the baroque that has followed in the wake of American deconstructionism, it might seem an obvious next step to apply Benjamin's account of a "playful reduction of the real" and "reflexive infinity of thought"[16] to Ibsen's text. But to do so would be ahistorical. The function of "the play-within-the-play" in *Hedda Gabler* is not to underscore the conception of life

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TESMAN. Vorherre véd, du. Det blir ialfald hele måneders arbejde, dette her.

HEDDA *som før.* Nej tænk det! (*farer let med hænderne gennem fru Elvsteds hår*) Er ikke det underligt for dig, Thea? Nu sidder du her sammen med Tesman, – ligesom du før sad med Ejlert Løvborg.

FRU ELVSTED. Å gud, hvis jeg bare kunde beånde din mand også.

HEDDA. Å, det kommer nok – med tiden.

TESMAN. Ja, véd du hvad, Hedda, – jeg synes virkelig, jeg begynder at fornemme noget sådant. Men sæt så du dig hen til assessoren igen. (Ibsen 2009b, 200–201)

[16] "spielhafte Reduzierung des Wirklichen" and "reflexiven Unendlichkeit des Denkens."

as a dream or everything as illusion following from the loss of an eschatology and a faith in the "presence" of the transcendent. Instead of trying to annex an earlier epoch to Ibsen's text, one should be on the look-out for its *modernist* emphasis on the autonomy and distance of art that this scene, among others, manifests in the play. At this abstract level, play-within-play amounts to early modernism's demonstration against itself as art and illusion. And it demonstrates in *opposition* to its given reality, which was a different one for Ibsen than for Calderon. Clearly, however, the "allegorical" reflexivity of playing displaces our ultimate understanding: in both cases, the playing within the play stands in the way of a redeeming synthesising interpretation. The theme of wholeness can only be presented negatively.

The uncritical application here of baroque or romantic uses of this theatre convention would moreover not take Hedda's situation in this scene sufficiently into account. Reading the scene in relation to what precedes and follows it, one cannot fail to sense and attach importance to the despair underlying Hedda's behavior. Mrs. Tesman's ironic posture in this brief scene is a last desperate attempt to find a footing where she need not surrender completely to all the "all too absurd" Tesmanian farce (Ibsen 2019, 366). Hedda seeks the contact with Tesman that now appears to be her only salvation, without giving up a certain independent reserve, displayed in the ironist's superiority. This, however, proves to be an unattainable aim, which is completely undermined in the text. Hedda tries out the possibility of subordinating herself to the Tesmanian way of life while retaining an ironist's distance and advantage. She is incapable of subjecting herself to Tesmanian captivity without displaying a last shred of reserve: irony. Tesman is now the only person who could protect her from Brack's threat but cannot do so unless she abandons her distance and confides in him unreservedly. Thea has assumed the place where Hedda might have sought protection, and to win it back from her Hedda would have to make concessions that she is either unwilling or unable to make. Failing to understand Hedda's purpose, Tesman contributes to his wife's downfall by thrusting her back upon Brack.

The ironic attitude affords Hedda no shelter at all, because by adopting it she leaves herself completely cut off from the reality surrounding her. Her move to radicalize the play-within-the-play in fact leaves her more defenceless than ever, in the face of the greatest pressure: trapped between voluntary submission to Brack on the one hand and the realization of the absolute negativeness of her ideal of "beauty" on the other. Thus, we see how even in this case the play-within-

the-play marks no complete departure from the textual fiction. It never stands out as an independent feature but instead is carefully woven into the text.

This account of what is at stake in this play-within-the-play enables us to discern in the text a critique of irony; Hedda's adoption of a completely ironic posture by the same token withdraws her from every *relationship* and thus leaves her defenceless. An absolute ironist may (like Hedda) be equipped with negative insight or experience, but at the same time the infinite distance from reality that total irony implies precludes any action in that reality or indeed any adequate response to it. In his treatise on irony, Kierkegaard makes a similar point in *his* critique of the absolute ironist: "To the ironic subject, given reality has completely lost its validity; to him it is an imperfect form, a total embarrassment. But on the other hand, he does not possess The New" (Kierkegaard n.d., 275. See also 271 and 291).

Taking her playing within the play to such an extreme that she appears for a moment to be completely divorced from reality or her own situation, Hedda appears to be the kind of "ironic subject" Kierkegaard had in mind. Because of this, she is distanced not only from Brack's threats, but also from her jealousy of Thea and from those ridiculous aspects of Tesman's personality that had previously been so irritating to her. This short scene shows her to be completely distanced, but also completely cut off, from experience. This also prevents her from possessing "The New:" she cannot relate to the future. The freedom she appears to have achieved from what Tesman stands for – and that she previously appeared to have sought – leaves her completely paralyzed, incapable even of relating to her own experience. The modern problem of experience can find no solution in the absolute distance of the complete ironist from that very experience.

This critique of the ironist's posture also serves to show more clearly how this scene refers back to the first "play" scene, discussed above. In both scenes, Hedda's struggle not to be assimilated in the Tesman way of life is subjected to irony. The radical critique, also of irony, in the later scene thus refers back to her defeat in the earlier one. It also becomes a comment on the elements in the action that set Hedda's downfall in motion: her play with other characters' destiny as well as her own. The two scenes refer to each other.

The study of the play-within-the-play in *Hedda Gabler* accordingly reveals a very complex set of problems that goes right to the heart of the play. Both internally, within the scene in which it occurs, and in its relation to the text as a whole, the play-within-the-play displays the central importance of irony in the play and its close connection to modernist treatments of the problem of experi-

ence. In choosing above to draw on both Haakonsen's and Benjamin's views on this dramatic convention, I was seeking to call attention to both aspects: the close connection between the whole and its parts, and the negative, ironic breach of illusion that the play-within-the-play brings about. Against Haakonsen's intelligent demonstration of the relation between the inner play and the encompassing whole, I set Benjamin's (and Rosen's) argument that the breach of illusion that the play-within-the-play invariably entails introduces an ironic reflexivity which it is difficult to reconcile with the redeeming positivity assumed by Haakonsen. I hope I have given a convincing account of this in relation both to the particular scenes in question and to the totality of the text.

The fragmented Manuscript

Before moving on to a conclusion to this analysis of *Hedda Gabler*, I shall give Ejlert Løvborg's manuscript and its function and position in the text closer consideration than it usually receives. In traditional interpretations, Løvborg is often seen as a surprisingly unambiguous and positive figure. Among the reasons for this, no doubt, are his association with the vine-leaf ideal, and the great faith in his powers and talent entertained by several other characters. But a further important reason for the occasionally overblown impressions of Løvborg is the central – if riddling – place given to his unpublished manuscript.[17] It often appears to have special characteristics attributed to it, from which Ejlert is then allowed to "borrow" his alleged positiveness and greatness. This is the move Sandra Saari makes when she claims that Løvborg

> has come to terms with the past [...] Having fully recognized and articulated the past, Løvborg is freed from it and freed for "the real thing," which involves risk, involves exercising one's freedom by acting in a manner that has not already been publicly sanctioned or approved because it is merely a reiteration of the past. (Saari 1977, 301)

[17] For example, Errol Durbach's assertion about Løvborg that "He seems, in many ways, a Spenglerian before Spengler – a prophet of decline, dissolution and collapse, for whom the destiny of the future is a death of spirit, failure of conviction, and loss of nerve" (Durbach 1982, 38). See also Charles Lyons' *Hedda Gabler. Gender, Role, and World* (1991, 113).

It remains a fact, which ought to be acknowledged, that we hardly know anything substantial either about the previously published book or about the manuscript; all the text tells us is that the successful book deals with the past and that the theme of the manuscript is the future. We also hear of Thea's (and Tesman's) great respect for it, and that Løvborg expects on the strength of it "to gain a victory over" Tesman "[i]n the public's opinion" (Ibsen 2019, 333).[18] Apart from what we know about its subject, the high esteem in which the manuscript is held thus stems from three highly unreliable advocates in the text. Judgements of Løvborg are probably also affected by the contrast to the inferior and subservient Tesman.

If, however, one pieces together what little information there is about Ejlert Løvborg's work, one gets a rather different picture from the usual one of the visionary intellectual whose work is a successful amalgamation of art and science. When the play opens, Løvborg has published a book on the past which brings history "right up to the present day" (Ibsen 2019, 331). He has also completed a sequel in manuscript in which he deals with what is to come: "the forces that will shape our civilization" and "how that civilization will progress into the future" (Ibsen 2019, 332).[19] This ought to lead to the conclusion that, far from representing the ideal future intellectual, Løvborg represents a *pre-modern*, outdated approach to his science. He regards history as a continuum, a unified sequence, and believes one can acquire an overall picture of past and present from which one can extrapolate an extension of the sequence into the future. Ejlert Løvborg is a pre-modern intellectual in two ways: he shares neither modernity's characteristic sense of a *break* with the past, nor its perception that reality is too opaque or fragmented to be grasped in its entirety. He can therefore undertake a book on the future as a *continuation* of the historical past. He clings to the illusion that reality is so thoroughly surveyable and transparent that one can learn not only what it *is* but even what *will* be.

Focusing exclusively on what the text has to say about the manuscript, one is led to the inescapable conclusion that it amounts to a doomed and slightly pathetic project to "save" the unified continuity of experience in conditions that have already rendered the attempt impossible. There is thus a keen and

[18] "Nej. Jeg vil bare sejre over dig. I folks mening" (Ibsen 2009b, 101).

[19] TESMAN. Ja men, kære Ejlert, – den går jo lige til vore dage! [...]
LØVBORG. Det første er om fremtidens kulturmagter. Og dette her andet – *(blader længere frem)* – det er om fremtidens kulturgang. (Ibsen 2009b, 97)

apposite irony in the complete dissolution, in flames, of the work that was meant to link together and create continuity in something that had already fallen apart.

It should also be clear that there is a metonymic connection between the manuscript and its author; this is a connection that is permeated with irony. Just as the manuscript is over-estimated in the second and third acts of the play, so the greatest admiration and reverence for Løvborg is expressed early in the play. But in both cases the text leaves a slight suspicion that this "greatness" may be without foundation. When Ejlert's attempt to order experience in a unified continuity is deconstructed in the fire, his personality is also dissolved for good. Løvborg dies in the attempt to save the manuscript, and himself, from definitive decentering. The play's weakest "I" needs the strongest version of coherence to survive, and there is a close mutual relation between their breakdowns. Precisely his failure to realize that the break with the past is final is part of the picture of Løvborg's downfall. The man who seeks to recreate an intellectual continuity between past, present and future is himself destroyed when a continuity is reasserted with his own personal past. Such continuity is false, and therefore fatal. By the end of the play, the "thinker" Løvborg and his product have been equally disintegrated: the man is dead, and his unifying work only exists as the negation of unity, loose scraps, fragments. This significant aspect of the ending should be taken seriously and not explained away, especially since it is consistent with the direction the play has taken. The fragmentation of the manuscript towards the end is appropriate, both in relation to Løvborg himself and in view of the text's specifically modern treatment of the problem of experience. The (sparing) information in the text about the subject of the manuscript, and its condition at the final curtain, are thus highly relevant to the interpretation of the play.

Through the manuscript, as through numerous other elements in the play, the text *points* ironically to the modern experiential problem. The manuscript and its fate in the text clearly refer both to the problem of experience and to the irony. In addition to this reference to what I have sought to establish as the play's double theme within the text, it is also tempting to attribute a self-referring, metapoetic aspect to the role of the manuscript in the text. Løvborg's manuscript is the play's metacommentary on itself.

It is important in this connection to bear in mind that the manuscript is a *text-within-the-text*, and a text, moreover, that relates fundamentally to the play's themes. It is also important to note the close connection between the manuscript

and a problem of interpretation, namely that the play constantly problematizes whether a unified understanding can be reached regarding the text-within-the-text. The manuscript is only given fragmentary readings, first when Løvborg reads aloud to Tesman for about an hour (before the guests arrive at Brack's party), and finally when Hedda "peers into the wrapping, pulls some of the pages halfway out and looks at them" before burning it (Ibsen 2019, 361).[20] And the ending leaves the interpreters, Tesman and Thea, engrossed in the impossible project of putting the work "together again" (Ibsen 2019, 370) by "bringing order to" the fragments and loose sheets (Ibsen 2019, 374).[21] The manuscript is not "read" until reading as a unifying activity has become impossible.

At the end of the play, the manuscript only exists as a fragmented whole, open to interpretation. The play ends as the interpretation begins. The interpretative project as such has been shown to be impossible. The idea of putting the manuscript "together again" by putting the fragments "in order" has been ironically undermined in the text. The existence of the manuscript brings out a metapoetic effect, namely the text's own commentary on itself. It questions its own interpretation by ironically putting the interpreter in Tesman's place. The text itself thus seems to undermine the project of interpreting it as a harmonious whole: it suggests its own lack of unity. Through the manuscript, the text rejects the idea of the work of art as a harmonious unit, providing an ironic pointer to how the play is to be read. In its exposure of the irony of Tesman's project of putting the manuscript "in order," the text can be said to undermine any interpretation of the play that does not take into account the impossibility of harmonising a text the fundamental concern of which is the embodiment of disharmony.

The disharmony of the Ending

The play's mysterious ending is intimately related to the problems I have been attempting to elucidate. The general and abstract significance of Ejlert Løvborg's manuscript is given a concrete manifestation by the ending. The riddling and negative nature of the ending serves to underline yet again the text's ironic presentation of the modem problem of experience.

[20] "[Hedda] *kikker lidt ind i omslaget, drager nogle af bladene halvt ud og ser på dem*" (Ibsen 2009b, 167).

[21] "sættes sammen igen [...] bringe orden i andres papirer" (Ibsen 2009b, 188, 196).

Before her suicide, Hedda faces the hopeless prospect of losing even the relative security and freedom of her marriage; she will forever be at Brack's mercy. For Hedda to accept that would mean breaking with everything she had lived for or by, the dream of something different and better ("vine leaves"). Instead of desecrating herself, too, she therefore realizes her own ideal triumph over negation ("beauty"). She points to liberty in the very act of making it impossible.

In view of the arguments above, an ending in the negativity of suicide might have been sufficient reason to disregard or tone down the play's ironies, ambiguities and paradoxes in order to seek some concluding synthesis in tragic negativity. But the ending places considerable obstacles in the way of any redemptive interpretation. Many critics of *Hedda Gabler* have found fault with its ending. It offers, so the argument runs, no concluding words of wisdom or pointed remark to guide the interpreter and provide the basis for a redemptive overall reading. Permit me to take a closer look at this problematic ending:

> *A shot is heard from within.* TESMAN, MRS ELVSTED *and* BRACK *jump up.*
> [...]
> TESMAN (*shouts to* BRACK). Shot herself! Shout herself in the temple! Just think!
> BRACK (*almost paralysed in the armchair*). But God have mercy – people don't actually *do* such things! (Ibsen 2019, 377. Emphasis in the original)[22]

The most striking thing about these two concluding speeches is their comic effect. They have usually been seen as a final exposure and undermining of the two representatives of a narrow and conventional bourgeois society. Tesman and Brack are made ridiculous by the helpless and rather pitiful phrases with which they respond to this radical departure from all the limiting class prejudice they represent. But this view of the closing exchanges raises more questions, for instance about the need for them if all they contribute is something that the play has already made more than abundantly clear. Seeing that Tesman says "Just

[22] *Et skud høres derinde. Tesman, fru Elvsted og Brack farer ivejret.*
[...]
TESMAN *skriger til Brack*. Skudt sig! Skudt sig i tindingen! Tænk det!
BRACK *halvt afmægtig i lænestolen.* Men, gud sig forbarme, – sligt noget *gør* man da ikke! (Ibsen 2009b, 202–203. Emphasis in the original)

think" twenty-nine times and "What?" eighty-five times before the suicide, how likely is it that it appears again here merely to remind us of a point so often underscored earlier? And is the repetition itself the only point of Brack's echo of his recent remark about what, in his opinion, people can say but not do? The implication of a simple and somewhat superficial reading of the final speeches along these lines is that they are in fact both superfluous and distracting.

At the same time, this widely held view of the final speeches as a concluding contrastive exposure of Tesman and Brack to laughter points to a more fundamental problem posed by this ending, namely the fact that it is comic and not tragic. Surprisingly often, no conclusions are drawn from the observation that the play ends in an ironic, travestying style. But in Ibsen closing speeches are always of the utmost significance. And in *Hedda Gabler* their primary function is to counter the pathos of the suicide. No sooner does the off-stage shot invite indulgence in magnificent pathos, than the ironic double meanings of the closing lines withdraw the invitation. The curtain comes down, not on tragic stature, but on an ambiguous ironic smile. It is not that the "last word" is missing from *Hedda Gabler*, but that it is difficult to see, if one is dazzled by the tragic fact that a young pregnant woman takes her own life. If one focuses on what the text does after the suicide, one can hardly avoid the conclusion that the last word is precisely irony or ambiguity. The play does not leave Hedda's realization of her negative ideal unquestioned. In its pathetic final speeches, the text comments on itself, once again leaving the interpreter at a loss. By permitting Hedda's selfrealization in a tragic death to be followed by ironic laughter, the text precludes any redemptive reading in which she is seen as the tragic heroine. What we are left with after the curtain is ambiguity and contradictions, which project their own light back onto the rest of the text.

The ironic ending makes it impossible for the negativity of Hedda's ideal of "beauty" to be transposed into a positive key. It is wholly negative, and as such also a total defeat. The text insists on its own negativity when the irony of the final speeches dissolves any positive potential. The text brings the play to a consistent conclusion by dissolving or travestying Hedda's purely negative ideal into ironic laughter. We are left with a definitively negative statement, a breach pure and simple, casting no positive light on the whole, on that which is "all too absurd" (Ibsen 2019, 366).

Against the background of this reading of the play's ending, the final speeches can be seen as a metacommentary on the text itself: "Just think," but also "people don't actually *do* such things." Brack's words take on a metapoetic dimension; they express something about the play itself, underlining the fictionality of the

text. People don't do such things, and the text itself is neither a realistic nor a mimetic work of art. It depicts a world that is opposed to reality but is not itself intended to initiate action. The text finally underlines not only its own condition as art, but also the distance between art and reality. Modern art has outgrown the naive belief that art could lay down guidelines for human behavior. Art as such "solves" no problems, although it may be said to pose them. Read closely, *Hedda Gabler*, like a Socratic dialogue, leaves one with questions. The text's ironic ending signifies that the problems and paradoxes shown are real in the sense of having no unambiguous or redeeming solutions. By insisting that it is art, the work of art justifies its own ambiguity and inconclusive significance.

This is, at the same time, an advance. By pointing to its own nature as art, the text also calls attention to its context, to what lies outside it, to what it is not. In the very act of insisting on itself, the work of art re-establishes the relationship that it appears to seek to break off:

> The becoming of art refers its concept to what it does not contain. [...] Art is interpretable only by its law of motion, not by invariants. It defines itself in relation to what it is not. (Adorno 1973, 12)[23]

By insisting on itself as a linguistic fiction, and tied as it is to language, literature underlines its own ties with that reality which language constitutes. In this sense, pure art is an oxymoron. This may seem entirely abstract, a dialectical exercise, but my purpose is material enough: to question the conclusion which my own reading may appear to lead to, i.e. that the play's ending "proves:" that what we are contemplating is total unstable irony. The ironic seif reference of the work of art does not necessarily imply that it can be said to de-contextualise itself in a sort of "free play of the signifier."

Concluding Remarks

However it may be, it should be clear by now that the irony in *Hedda Gabler* merits the description unstable. It is a recurrent feature of the play's irony that

[23] "Das Gewordensein von Kunst verweist ihren Begriff auf das, was sie nicht enthält. [...] Deutbar ist Kunst nur an ihrem Bewegungsgesetz, nicht durch Invarianten. Sie bestimmt sich im Verhältnis zu dem, was sie nicht ist."

it cannot be pinned down as an unambiguous or stable statement or integrated in a coherent interpretation. This applies not only to many of the play's isolated speeches and situations, but also to higher levels of the text. *Hedda Gabler* is an ironic work, containing within itself no privileged vantage points that are safe from irony. All the characters in the play are subjected to its ambiguous light.

In the above, I discussed several important elements in the text that appear to point to and comment on their own status as ironic in a manner that supports a view of the irony as unstable. A reasonable interpretation of the closing speeches would properly emphasise that they are ironic. The play concludes in an irony that prevents its being seen as a harmonious rounding off of the problems that have arisen throughout the course of the text. Similarly, Ejlert Løvborg's manuscript appears to suggest an ironic reading, since at the end of the play obstacles stand in the way of its interpretation. The text's undermining of Tesman's intention to put the fragmented text "in order" parallels the difficulty of interpreting the play's text. If the text had made Tesman's complete reconstruction of the (false) coherence in the manuscript's continuum from past to present to future seem either possible or desirable, it would by the same token have contradicted the play itself as a modernistic presentation of the problem of experience. A play that made a problem of seeing experience as a meaningful whole, without at the same time opposing an unambiguous, unifying and harmonious interpretation, would inevitably be self-contradictory. The unstable irony in *Hedda Gabler* should be seen as part and parcel of the play's problem and statement, akin to what Peter Szondi has called "formal statement" (Szondi 1956).[24]

But does this also mean that the flames of reflexivity have been allowed to consume the text to such an extent as to completely deconstruct it in the name of irony seen as total or absolute? Shall we be obliged to conclude that irony becomes so absolute that any efforts to determine the content, directions or problems in the text run up against an irony that points in all directions at once? Does the text define itself as indefinable, unreadable? Some so-called deconstructionists apparently argue that *all* irony is by definition absolute or total. Even Paul de Man appears at times to take this absurd position.[25] It is a

[24] "formaler Aussage."

[25] "Irony possesses an inherent tendency to gain momentum and not stop until it has run its full course; from the small and apparently innocuous exposure of a small self-deception it soon reaches

mistaken view for a number of reasons, probably the most important of which is that it is self-defeating in the straightforward sense that it dissolves its object. What possibility remains for showing, say, that a text is ironic if all texts are totally ironic and "unreadable" by definition? "Where everything is irony, it has become pointless to speak of irony" (Japp 1983, 26).[26]

Although I have already concluded that the irony in *Hedda Gabler* is unstable, I hope my analysis showed how the irony in the play relates to the textual statement. It has a pervasive *function* within the whole of the text. At no analytical level does the play's irony break away into a separate entity, which has "no other purpose, but is its own purpose" (Kierkegaard n.d., 271). The play's irony serves to bring out or suggest what I have sought to define as the play's complex problems. Even where the text appears to refer to its own unstable ambiguity, this bears a functional relation to the text's utterance: the lack of stability has an expressive function as an important element in the play's statement, as a *presentation* of the problem of experience. Despite the instability and indeterminacy of the irony in the play, the conclusion to be drawn from the analysis must be that the irony in *Hedda Gabler* is neither total nor absolute in any reasonable sense of those words. Neither the direction nor the significance of the irony is, as far as I can see, at risk in the play. Far from taking on the self-sufficient meaning of endless play, the irony is an integral part of the "direction" of the text.

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the dimensions of the absolute" (De Man 1983, 215). De Man's repeated insistence on the necessity of thorough close reading of texts – of concrete rhetorical analysis, as free as possible from theoretical premises which might steer the analysis away from the literary text – appears in this instance to come up against a general theory that all irony is absolute or total.

[26] "Wo alles Ironie ist, ist es sinnlos geworden, von Ironie zu sprechen."

This Is Not a Pipe

By Frode Helland and Arnfinn Åslund

This early piece, written with fellow student Arnfinn Åslund, who is now an associate professor at the University of South-East Norway, is marked by sharp wit and humor, but it is at the same time a work of serious scholarship. It appeared in 1996 in Bøygen*, a literary studies journal edited by students at the University of Oslo. Despite its humble origins, "This is not a Pipe" is one of the most carefully considered attempts at engaging with the potential of the "inheritance" motif in* Ghosts *– a theme that continues to concern Ibsen scholars today. Through its tongue-in-cheek reference to René Magritte's iconic painting, the article also seeks to test the potential and limits of Freudian-inspired literary criticism, a trend that dominated scholarship in Norway in the 1990s.*

Brecht found it laughable that Ibsen's *Ghosts* was still staged in theaters after the invention of Salvarsan. He believed that the play had become irrelevant and meaningless as soon as medical science had made Osvald's suffering unnecessary; the problem in the play had become a superficial one after the illness could be cured with a simple visit to the doctor.

Brecht's viewpoint is obviously hopeless for several reasons. It represents a far too superficial determination of what constitutes an artwork's relevance, and it effectively removes all art that is not topical in the simplest sense. Yet it still touches on something important in *Ghosts*, namely the fact that Osvald's illness, in many ways, represents a central intrigue in the play. Without any pretentions to providing a comprehensive interpretation, we will therefore limit ourselves in the following text to an examination of precisely the disease and its genesis.

In this examination, we will take for granted that the approximate consensus within the reception regarding it being syphilis is correct. Now, admittedly, there is not complete agreement that this is the case. Derek Russel Davis claims, for example, that Osvald's illness is of a psychological nature,

and that it relates to schizophrenia and not syphilis.[1] However, this seems to be an interpretation with weak textual support, particularly in the depiction of the illness. A more common interpretation involves attempts to downplay the actual illness in favor of abstract concepts like 'fate' or 'inheritance.' The specific illness and its very origin are thereby reduced to a random occasion for the more fundamental 'tragic' fact that Osvald is afflicted by something beyond his control, an inescapable fate. This interpretation, nevertheless, seems to be less satisfying given the very concrete nature that the text ultimately gives to the illness. It also opens the door to critics like Brecht, who cannot accept 'abstract' suffering without a foundation in a valid concrete reality. Therefore, it may be necessary to investigate how Osvald could have contracted the illness. The fundamental distinction here lies between theories that assume the illness is acquired and those that assume it is congenital. Naturally, there appear to be several possibilities:

1.

It may be appropriate to start with the hypothesis that appears to be the most common, namely that the illness is congenital. Yet what is not common is to emphasize the fact that if Osvald was doomed from birth, Mrs. Alving *must* be the primary source of infection. If a child is born with syphilis, the disease (initially) can only originate from the mother.[2] Mrs. Alving has therefore had syphilis herself for at least twenty-six years. And it is highly likely that she, in turn, was infected by her husband. This also seems to be something Mrs. Alving acknowledges, as she says to Osvald "that your father was a broken man before you were born" (Ibsen 2016, 254).[3] She is therefore also correct in saying that, when all is said and done, it was the father who must be blamed for all the misery in this home.

This interpretation also has the advantage of explaining how Osvald "has been worm-eaten" from birth (2016, 238).[4] However, it faces the serious problem that we then encounter (at least) two characters in the play who, despite

[1] See Davis, 1970 What happens at the end of the play is that Osvald regresses "to a state of childlike dependency" which could only be cured by the analyst (1970, 381).

[2] Michael Meyer has pointed to this possibility (Meyer 1971, 488).

[3] "en nedbrudt mand før du blev født" (Ibsen 2008, 508).

[4] "... der har lige fra fødselen af været noget ormstukket ved Dem" (Ibsen 2008, 475).

both having had syphilis for "twenty-six or twenty-seven years," have not yet reached the final stage of the disease.

But there is more. If this is correct, the scene would quickly be filled with syphilitics. Thus, Pastor Manders would be the only character in the play without syphilis, as he is the only one who *can* be untouched by the disease that stems from the chamberlain.[5] However, it remains likely that all the other main characters are haunted by ghosts, if in Osvald's case it is a congenital form of syphilis. Regine is younger than Osvald and would herself have been infected by her syphilitic mother. Similarly, there is every reason to believe that the carpenter Engstrand is infected, unless one were to believe the unlikely scenario that he did not demand his conjugal rights with his wife, Johanne. The more people who have been infected for such a long time, the less likely it becomes that they have not yet become so ill that the diagnosis would have been made long ago. Yes, it is possible that they could *all* have had the disease for over twenty years without reaching its final stage, but it is highly improbable. It is even less likely that all these individuals could have spent either their entire lives or a significant portion of their lives as syphilitics without the diagnosis being made long ago.

In addition to being medically valid, this interpretation of the disease has an advantage: it helps to explain some of the play's shock value. Since its publication, *Ghosts* has provoked reactions, partly because of the perception that it is a consistent attack on the idea of the family. And this interpretation of the disease's genesis certainly does not underestimate the play's negative power. The result of Osvald's illness being perceived as congenital is that the stage is populated with syphilitics. They all carry the infection they condemn; the answer to the questions they ask is constantly circulating within their own bloodstream. They are all blind carriers of ghosts. In the struggle for enlightenment, Mrs. Alving is as condemned as her son. In medical terms, they are all as corrupted as Engstrand. They wander blindly around in a completely hopeless situation, where the ghosts are destroyed from the very beginning, so to speak.

A positive solution is thus as impossible for Regine as it is for Osvald; the best that they can hope for is "the sun." Yet this understanding of the history

[5] This is likely the most plausible reading, but it should nevertheless be noted that this reading is based on a particular interpretation of the relationship between Manders and Helene Alving. It assumes that he not only sent her back to her husband, but also that he resisted the temptation to sleep with her when she came to him "and cried: 'Here I am, take me!'" (2016, 228). It is quite possible that he did not 'take' her and thus escaped syphilis, but this cannot be said with *certainty*, something that is hinted at throughout the text.

of the disease has, simultaneously, the aforementioned weakness in the somewhat implausible notion that so many syphilitics could be so utterly blind. Because, as in Osvald's case, the disease is something that can open the eyes of the blind, and thus it seems unlikely that he is the only one with this self-awareness of his own downfall. Moreover, it could be questioned whether this possibility weakens the power of the play. For how interesting can it be said to be that these worm-eaten people are unaware of their own situation? Does the play not then become reduced to an endless dark farce, where the infection in their blood has long ago rendered any effort towards insight futile, almost ludicrous? In such a case, the notion of the "joy of life" perhaps also loses its last trace of anything positive and transcendent.

The claim that syphilis is congenital in Osvald is indeed medically plausible, but it is impossible given the context. Even though it might be tempting to imagine all the actors (except one) as syphilitic "ghosts" or revenants of the Chamberlain, it is statistically nearly impossible for syphilis to remain latent for so long in so many people. Mrs. Engstrand's death could potentially support such a thesis. However, people die from reasons other than syphilis. The correct interpretation must therefore be the one that implies the fewest possible characters in the play have syphilis. We therefore move on to the second group of hypotheses, all of which share the basic assumption that the disease is acquired.

2.

It might be beneficial to begin this kind of question with the most common route of transmission. That is, of course, that Osvald himself is responsible for his affliction. He has been too careless in his interactions with prostitutes and contracted the disease outside the family. Although this interpretation seems to weaken the familial tragedy in the play, the text also allows for this possibility. When Osvald recounts his meeting with the doctor in the second act, he indeed asserts that the disease must be self-inflicted: "I have myself to blame!" (2016, 239).[6] This statement could not have been made if Osvald had lived in a way that precluded the possibility of being infected. Admittedly, syphilis can be transmitted more incidentally through droplet transmission, which requires

[6] "Selvforskyldt, altså!" (Ibsen 2008, 476)

poor hygiene involving glasses, cutlery, etc. However, this is considered a rare transmission route, and Osvald would not have needed to associate it with "those youthful years spent in life-hearted, blessed happiness" and his "own folly" (2016, 239).[7] He feels guilty about something. Osvald clearly has an idea of when he might have become infected; the syphilis did not occur impersonally and randomly, like catching a cold after being in a crowd. He wishes he could "undo everything" he's done (2016, 239).[8] We must also remember that when we are invited to believe that Osvald is innocent and that he carries his father's infection, this is conveyed through his mother's wishful thinking. She wants to hold on to the boy's innocence. We should therefore view Osvald's somewhat harsh advances towards Regine in the dining room as a denial of his idealized portrayal of the joyful youth life. He has embellished his biography a bit in front of both his mother and the pastor. There is nothing unusual about that. It would have been more remarkable if he had immediately started talking about visits to brothels, and so on. He thus reveals his true nature before Regine. What the play shows is different from what is said. If Osvald's behavior in the dining room is representative of his artist's life in continental Europe, which there is every reason to believe, it is evident that he has infected himself. But of what does the tragedy consist? Is this an interpretation that dissolves the intrigue and is therefore unlikely? Absolutely not. The only difference is that Osvald's 'inheritance' lies in his character, and only in that. Thus, it is not about inheritance but environment, meaning Mrs. Alving must take much more of the blame. Osvald has grown up 'fatherless' and has a poorly developed superego, psychoanalytically speaking. The tragedy is further increased by Mrs. Alving's attempt to "save" her son by sending him away at the age of seven, which may in fact have contributed to worsening him. It is also worth noting that when Mrs. Alving recognizes her son as his father's ghost, this is not related to a physical resemblance, but his behavior and his inability to control his impulses. After the advance, which is possibly witnessed by Mrs. Alving ("[a]s though deranged, she stares towards the half-opened door" (2016, 221)),[9] Osvald seems as unconcerned as if something entirely ordinary had happened: "Osvald can be heard coughing and then humming. A bottle is un-

[7] "Dette jublende lyksalige ungdomsliv [...] egen ubesindighed" (Ibsen 2008, 476).

[8] "gøre det ugjort altsammen!" (Ibsen 2008, 476)

[9] "Hun stirrer som i vildelse mod den halvåbne dør" (Ibsne 2008, 441).

corked" (221).[10] The tragedy will be further intensified by the fact that it is Osvald himself who has ensured his own downfall, precisely when he wanted to escape from his home, from the dark memories, to seek out the joy of life and so on. Exactly in this moment he reproduced his father's behavior because he had never had a real father. And he knew no other way. In this sense, the play is a character tragedy, where nemesis asserts itself through the character precisely during his attempt to escape it.

Several other sources of infection are quite possible, but they require that some additional characters in the play must or might have been infected. The disease is, as mentioned, either congenital or acquired. If it is acquired, this could d alternative we have considered as both possible and likely – or the acquisition could have occurred at a young age, which is the next alternative:

3.

For the possibilities are not yet exhausted, and several sources of infection are conceivable. The infection occurred innocently and at a young age. Supporting this is the fact that it can take twenty years from infection to the outbreak of the third stage (but hardly twenty-seven). If the father is the original carrier, he could have been infected after Osvald's conception, so Mrs. Alving does not necessarily need to be infected. She blames herself for not being able to bring "any Sunday sunshine into his home" (2016, 253).[11] If she suffered in the marriage and was in love with another, it is quite possible that she did not have relations with her husband: "I'm afraid I made this home unbearable for your poor father, Osvald" (253).[12] Mrs Alving does not need to have been infected by her husband. Yet how could Osvald have been infected? This is where the pipe comes in; let us look. The way Osvald is introduced in the first act, as is well known, almost intrusively ties him to it; he arrives on stage "smoking a large meerschaum pipe" (208).[13] Given our knowledge of Ibsen's almost calculated stage directions, it should be clear that the pipe is not simply a random or innocent object. Generally, in Ibsen's dramas, the visual elements in the texts participate in the play's meaning. And this should be even more evident

[10] "Osvald høres hoste og nynne derinde. En flaske trækkes op" (Ibsen 2008, 441).
[11] "søndagsvejr ind i hans hjem" (Ibsen 2008, 507).
[12] "Jeg er ræd, jeg har gjort hjemmet uudholdeligt for din stakkers far, Osvald" (Ibsen 2008, 508).
[13] "røgende af en stor merskumspibe" (Ibsen 2008, 416–417).

in this case, given that the pipe is explicitly attributed further significance in the play. It is connected to Osvald's only conscious memory of his father:

> OSVALD: Yes. I was quite small at that time. I remember I went up to father's private room one evening, he was in such a bright, ebullient mood.
> MRS ALVING: Oh, you remember nothing from those years.
> OSVALD: Oh yes, I remember distinctly, he took me and sat me on his knee and let me smoke his pipe. Puff, boy, he said – puff properly, boy! And I smoked as hard as I could, until I felt myself go quite pale and the sweat break out in huge drops on my forehead. Then he roared with laughter –. (2016, 210)[14]

As a "quite small" child, Osvald had to smoke his father's pipe. Interpreters of the play were early on aware of the possibility that this childhood memory could be the memory of the actual infection situation. Ibsen was criticized at the time for believing that the infection could be transmitted in this way, notably by Carl Ploug, who wrote a critique of the play in *Fædrelandet*. Yet, contrary to what Ploug thought, it is indeed possible that the infection could be transferred directly from father to son in this way. That the pipe is there to symbolize the source of infection cannot be ruled out. Furthermore, this possibility has the advantage of not simultaneously implicating all the other characters in the play. It makes Osvald's suffering a purely paternal inheritance, unmediated by others, while also making his fate something individual within the text. If this is a correct understanding of the situation, Helene Alving is also justified in her belief that it is her husband alone who must bear the responsibility for the misery. As the French doctor says to Osvald, it is the sins of the *father* that repeat (2016, 238).

Yet while such a source of infection is medically possible, it is far from probable. Contracting the disease in this manner would require an extraordi-

[14] OSVALD: Ja. Jeg var ganske liden dengang. Og så husker jeg, jeg kom op på kammeret til far en aften, han var så glad og lystig.

FRU ALVING: Å, Du husker ingenting fra de år.

OSVALD: Jo, jeg husker tydeligt, han tog og satte mig på knæet og lod mig røge af piben. Røg gut, sa han, – røg dygtigt, gut! Og jeg røgte alt hvad jeg vandt, til jeg kendte jeg blev ganske bleg og sveden brød ud i store dråber på panden. Da lo han så hjertelig godt –

(Ibsen 2008, 420–421)

nary amount of misfortune, to put it mildly.[15] Even though this interpretation of the incident with the pipe may provide a scientifically plausible explanation of the disease genesis, it has obvious aesthetic weaknesses. For if we are to understand it in this way, Osvald's fate is reduced to an instance of bad luck, which of course significantly weakens the tragedy of the play. Thus, it is not a matter of a general ghost-theory about fathers' sins recurring in their children, but rather that this boy unfortunately was unlucky. The contingent nature that the disease's genesis acquires thus turns the play's central intrigue into an unintended but regrettable coincidence. There may indeed be questions about how aesthetically interesting it can be that Osvald was infected by an unintended incident, a rather crude joke from a drunken man. And perhaps this is why the author himself found reason to refute this interpretation. According to William Archer, Ibsen denied that this was the pipe's function in the text:

> "No," he said, "My only intention with the pipe was to show that the only thing Osvald could remember about his father was that he made him throw up - and that, I think, is about the worst thing one *can* remember about another."[16]

Yes, this is certainly not a pleasant childhood memory, especially if one doesn't have other nicer ones to balance it out. Yet, still, is this the "only intention" that the pipe has, or could it also have a different tone?

4.

The final possibility is, then, that this is *not* a pipe! We will now try to clarify as to how this should be understood. If we give Ibsen credit for being right that the purpose of the pipe cannot be to pinpoint it as the literal source of infection, while, at the same time, it maintains a significance and

[15] Evert Sprinchorn has attempted to increase this likelihood by pointing out that "the father may often have kissed his son, the son may often have used his father's drinking glass." Sprinchorn, Evert 1979. "Science and Poetry in Ibsen's Craftmanship," *Scandinavian Studies* 51 (4). But it remains established that this is an unlikely source of transmission, even if one introduces such supporting assumptions that this was just one instance of contagious contact between father and son.

[16] "Nei," he said [sic], "min eneste hensigt med piben var at vise at det eneste Osvald kunde huske om sin far var at han fik ham til at kaste op – og det, synes jeg, er omtrentlig det værste man kan huske om en anden." (Archer 1931, 464. Italics original)

importance in connection with Osvald's illness, a different and new picture arises.

The inheritance from the father is highly central in *Ghosts*, and the pipe seems to be strongly linked to the problems of this legacy. In other words, the only thing the son remembers about his father is that he was made to smoke his pipe, and it made him throw up.[17] It is remarkable that Osvald remembers nothing else about his father other than this one memory, considering that he was between six and seven years old when he was sent away. That episode with the pipe was so strong that it overshadows everything else in his memory. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Mrs. Alving, whose memory is otherwise quite clear, strongly denies that what Osvald says could be true. She not only claims that Osvald has no memories "from those years," she says to Manders:

> MRS ALVING: Dear me, it's just something Osvald has dreamed.
> OSVALD: No, Mother, I certainly haven't dreamed it. Because – don't you remember – you came in and carried me off to the nursery. Then I was ill, and I saw that *you* were crying. – Did Father often play pranks like this?
> MANDERS: As a young man, he was certainly full of the joys of life. (2016, 210. My emphasis.)[18]

As mentioned earlier, droplet transmission is a possibility. We also note that Osvald's name is composed of *Ås* and *vald*. Not only does it mean something similar to "the one who rules," it is also a pun on the Latin *os*, meaning mouth. *Oral* is the adjectival form of *os*. Yet the pipe is still a difficult source of transmission. It is unlikely that Osvald would get infected from smoking his father's pipe. And how could it be so traumatic that he would repress all memories of his father, turning his childhood into a black hole? It is more likely that his

[17] Osvald, in the final act, explicitly says this: "(*impatiently*) Oh Father – Father! I've never known anything about Father. The only thing I remember about him is that he made me throw up once" (2016, 256); "(*utålmodig*) Ja, far – far. Jeg har jo aldrig kendt noget til far. Jeg husker ikke andet om ham, end at han en gang fik mig til at kaste op." (Ibsen 2008, 513)

[18] FRU ALVING: Kære, det er bare noget Osvald har drømt.

OSVALD: Nej, mor, jeg har aldeles ikke drømt det. For – kan du ikke huske *det* – så kom du ind og bar mig ud i barnekammeret. Der fik jeg ondt og jeg så, at *du* græd. – Gjorde far ofte slige spilopper?

PASTOR MANDERS: I sin ungdom var han en særdeles livsglad mand –

(Ibsen 2008, 421)

father – who, according to Mrs. Alving, "After nineteen years of marriage he was just as debauched – in his desires at least" (217) – abused his son in another way. The pipe, therefore, is, in a direct sense, a phallic symbol, while the oral alludes to a type of sexual activity. Smoking his father's pipe covers up a sexual assault. It may be worth noting what Osvald says about his diagnosis in Paris: he uses "worm-eaten" to describe his own condition.

What kind of 'worm' has eaten Osvald? What kind of worm is it that has injected the boy with its deadly poison? This points in the same direction as the metaphor of the pipe. Thus, the father-son relationship stands in sharp relief to the obvious incest motif elsewhere in the play: Engstrand-Regine, Osvald-Mrs. Alving, Osvald-Regine. This could explain how he, but not his mother, was infected. It also implies that Johanne, Regine's mother, may have been infected, which could explain her early death. Osvald's strong memories from the smoking episode are due to a metonymic-metaphoric transference, enabling an emotional investment in a less harmful transgression. This can explain his monstrous repression, and it can explain his mother's anxiety that he might remember: "you remember nothing from those years [...] it's just something Osvald has dreamt," and so on. This complex is also in accordance with modern research on incest; many assaults are discovered at the dentist, due to the child showing an excessive aversion to having objects inserted into the mouth.[19]

Mrs. Alving's strong expressions about the conditions at home also suggest that something unspeakable has happened. And she justifies sending Osvald away with wording that is related to the smoking metaphor: "I felt sure my child would be *poisoned* just by breathing in the *air* of this infected home" (219, our emphasis.).[20] Thus, the justification links *poison* to the *mouth*. At the same time, we see a duality in Mrs. Alving's claim that it was good for Osvald to get away, so he wouldn't stay at home and become "spoiled" (211).[21] And how does one become *spoiled*? By pampering taking on a harmful form. If we emphasize the dramatic connotation, "spoiled" can therefore be interpreted as pampering in the form of violence, the crossing of a boundary, a taboo, something that can also be implied in the statement that the home was "infected."

[19] Furthermore, this possibility is in accordance with Ibsen's own words: that what Osvald 'remembers' – albeit in a displaced form – *is* actually "the worst" one *can* remember about one's father.

[20] "Jeg syntes, barnet måtte *forgiftes* bare ved at *ånde* i dette tilsølede hjem" (Ibsen 2008, 437).

[21] "forkælet" (Ibsen 2008, 422).

Elsewhere in the play, expressions such as "abyss" (Manders) and "inconceivable" (Osvald) are used (217, 238–239). We might also ponder the fact that he was troubled by "the usual headaches" (238) during his upbringing, as this could indicate that the disease was congenital. However, firstly, not all headaches are related to syphilis, and secondly, "growing up" (238) is different from early childhood. He could relatively quickly begin to suffer from headaches. The second stage can occur as early as six to eight weeks after infection, and headaches are typical of this stage.

Another aspect that aligns with this fourth possibility (which could be called 4b) is hinted at in several places: that Pastor Manders is Osvald's biological father. This could be the wrong track, but much suggests that, at the very least, a physical possibility exists that he could be the father. Regardless of whether he is or not, it appears clear that this issue is so contentious that Manders, first, invests a striking amount of energy in denying that there has been anything physical between him and Helene, while she replies by saying: "We forget easily who we once were" (2016, 228).[22] Then, he is conspicuously eager to assert the physical resemblance between Osvald and the chamberlain. When Mrs. Alving, on the other hand, emphasizes that Osvald instead has a "priestly" expression about his mouth, he does not deny it but immediately shifts this toward "my colleagues" (210).[23] He also stayed away from the Alving home for many years, which suggests that there is something more beneath the surface. He was presumably afraid of himself, Mrs. Alving, and the chamberlain. Indeed, if his goal was solely to avoid any suspicion, he should have interacted with the couple as usual, as if nothing was wrong. Another point supporting this direction is that Manders is referred to as "the cuckoo" in the final act, although this point has been lost in English translations that mistakenly render "Gøken" as "old goat" (248). Notably, a cuckoo is a kind of bird that lays eggs in other birds' nests. Could Osvald be the offspring of Manders the cuckoo?

Given this paternity, we are 'revisited' by the following lines: The chamberlain is infected by a woman other than Mrs. Alving. If we strictly adhere to those mentioned in the play, this source of infection could indeed be Regine's

[22] "En går sig selv så let af minde" (Ibsen 2008, 454).

[23] "presteligt [...] mine embedsbrødre" (Ibsen 2008, 420).

mother. She died relatively young and may well have had a 'past.'[24] However, this theory presupposes that Osvald was infected by Alving after he had relations with Johanne. Osvald, son of Manders and Mrs. Alving, is then infected by Mr. Alving. He and Regine, therefore, are not relatives. Regine, however, could also carry the infection, transmitted from their mother. If Regine were to go work in her stepfather's brothel, she could then spread the infection to many new 'chamberlains' before she even experiences an outbreak.

If we are to adhere to the transmission routes that seem to align best with the text, alternatives two and four are the most likely. Alternative four (with or without 4b; Manders' paternity) also seems to provide the greatest depth to the overall "ghost" motif. It also strengthens the clear incest motif in the play. This is central to the play almost from its opening. The possibility outlined here further supports, even radicalizes, a motif that can be said to be pervasive in the play. Perhaps, then, this alternative is preferable? It is also likely the alternative a critic of Brecht's type would prefer, as it remains both medically plausible and unfortunately very relevant today.

[24] This is also Regine's point in the final scene, when she says that she has "thought as much sometimes" about her mother being "that sort" (2016, 254) (Ibsen 2008, 509).

A Reply from the Doctoral Candidate

Helland defended his doctoral dissertation, The Play of Melancholy: A Study of Henrik Ibsen's Late Plays (Melankoliens spill: En studie i Henrik Ibsens siste skuespill) *at the University of Oslo on 28 January 1998. His dissertation was examined by two prominent Ibsen scholars, Inga-Stina Ewbank and Atle Kittang, who, as first and second "opponent" respectively, presented their critiques and questioned candidate Helland in a public defense. In Norway, it is fairly common that the main aspects of particularly notable doctoral defenses are subsequently published. In this case, Helland's fiery rebuttal to Ewbank and Kittang appeared in the journal* Edda. *As the journal editors point out, Helland was the first Norwegian scholar to have defended a dissertation on Ibsen in twenty years.*

A public defense is a peculiar thing, at least from the doctoral student's perspective. It is far removed from what Gadamer has called a "genuine conversation." One must endure hearing a lot of nonsense, one must endure holding back more or less voracious responses, just as one must also endure being at a loss for words when criticism hits hardest. In hindsight, however, as is well known, most debates can be won. The debate I had with my two opponents, a little over a year ago, I have "won," with resounding victories in the time that has since followed. But I will try to free myself here from the wild self-righteousness one can succumb to in the late hours of evening, just before falling asleep.

It is therefore with pleasure and respect that I want to thank my opponents for their thorough criticism, a criticism from which I have learned a lot. With equally certain pleasure, I thank you for the praise and recognition that this dissertation received during the defense. With somewhat less pleasure, I must initially concede to the opponents on one matter: the dissertation is too long. The ambition and meticulousness – by which I stand, and in which I believe I have succeeded – has resulted in, at the same time, a rather cumbersome reading experience. Furthermore, I believe that some of the opponents' objections stem from them "drowning in details," as my first opponent puts it.

Theater and Text

Writing about dramatic texts presents some additional challenges compared to other genres. The difficulty lies in, among other things, how the text acquires a scenic reality when read. The dissertation's focus, however, is textual; my concern is the interpretation of my reading, rather than the performance aspect. In other words, the material or empirical evidence of the dissertation consists of the texts, Ibsen's written products. As many previous researchers have pointed out, there are also striking features of the text one can only grasp through a reading or re-reading. The alternative to this type of text-based procedure is, as I see it, an analysis of scripts, specific performances, or similar materials, through theater studies. The plays are therefore treated as closet dramas through a text-based analysis.

Furthermore, this is historically defensible; all the works were published as books *before* they were performed as theater. That the texts were meant to be read was also a central point for the Ibsen commentator to whom both my esteemed opponents give top priority, namely the author himself. For, if he was concerned with casting and other theatrical matters, one could more rightly claim that it is when he speaks about his "books" and "writings" where things "catch fire." And in what has been called his literary "testament," he asserts that it is only by "appropriating the works – *reading* and living through them," that one can understand them (Ibsen 2010a, 509–510. My emphasis.).[1]

Yet based on the reading, I have also tried, to the best of my ability, to reflect the theatrical and scenic aspects in interpretation. It is therefore with a certain astonishment that I note the claim of my first opponent that the dissertation "completely overlooks the dramatic-theatrical dimension of the text." This claim is, in my opinion, effectively refuted by all four analyses in the dissertation. For even though it is not my main concern, scenic or dramaturgical issues are also addressed in the dissertation, with great emphasis on "tone, facial expressions and movements." However, it is, of course, always with a focus on the "language of the body" as indicated in the text, that which is (also) textually present.

If I were to try to be more specific now, I can point to the dissertation's analysis of the first scene in *Lille Eyolf*. The analysis emphasizes, among other things, how Alfred Allmers enters the stage "leading *Eyolf* by the hand" (Ibsen

[1] "tilegne sig værkerne – *gennemlæse* og gennemleve dem" (Ibsen 2010a, 509–510).

2014a, 94. My emphasis.).[2] In this context, it is important how the father, as soon as he notices Asta and Rita "let[s] go of [Eyolf]," (Ibsen 2014a, 95),[3] who is thus left standing with his crutch while the adults warmly greet each other. This has not been previously commented upon in secondary literature on the play. However, it is important to note how Allmers, as soon as he arrives in the scene, releases his crippled son and turns his back on him. The way the adults interact with the child Eyolf is then analyzed in detail. And the analysis highlights this central point in the text: that the child Eyolf is neglected or made invisible on the stage. Only the analysis of "the text as dramatic scenarios" can bring out this crucial point, which is so important, not least because it can also shed light on Eyolf's fate. Because it is only from the perspective of the text as stage and theater that one can perceive how, throughout the play, from the moment the father "lets go" of him, turns his back on him:

> there is only one person who addresses Eyolf directly without any kind of pretention, who speaks to him unprompted, for his own sake, namely: the Rat-Woman. The others speak to him only to the extent that he addresses them or says something "avledes," played down. When the Rat-Woman leaves the room, so too does Eyolf disappear from the consciousness of the adults. He has become invisible to the adults even before he disappears "unnoticed…out to the right." (Helland 1997, 269–270.)

This is important for the staging of the play, not just for textual analysis.

It may seem, however, that the disagreement between us here is of a more fundamental nature. Ewbank says that she "inevitably must ask how a director could explain to an actor, in the midst of grappling with Solness' complicated role, that his melancholy 'is used topologically, not psychologically.'" I do not, however, believe that is would be without significance for an actor to have knowledge about, for example, the topos of melancholy. Yet if that is to be understood as a hermeneutic principle for a dramatic analysis, then we may not agree. What a director might say to the actors is rather irrelevant to dramatic analysis. In the same way, textual analysis may reveal things that are irrelevant to the drama's staging. In my opinion, this is neither problematic nor strange.

[2] "ledende *Eyolf* ved håden" (Ibsen 2009c, 400. Helland's emphasis).

[3] "slipper Eyolf" (Ibsen 2009c, 401).

Often in analysis, one may arrive at conclusions that simple cannot be realized on stage; in reading, for example, ambiguities and paradoxes may seem unsolvable, whereas on stage one must make a choice between one or the other.

The first opponent's actor-oriented interpretive doctrine, as far as I can see, is in great danger of resulting in a sort of thought control. This applies not least to texts such as those I discuss in the dissertation. Ibsen's dramas indeed contain several interesting cases of what one might call a conflict between text and stage. The texts contain elements that are quite difficult to imagine on stage. Two examples immediately spring to mind. It is not entirely easy to envision how one could convey on stage that Irene's eyes "appear to be without the power of sight"[4] especially since she is simultaneously described with "droop[ing]" eyelids (Ibsen 2014a, 247).[5] For the reader, however, it is quite clear. Similarly, it would be quite difficult to convey on stage how Gunhild Borkman's hands are "[d]elicate, transparent" (Ibsen 2014a, 157).[6] In the theater, it may inded be challenging to instruct an actor on how to make their hands translucent. In an analytical reading, however, it can easily become significant – and it *holds* significance within the *text*. Furthermore, it is only by considering the "dramatic reality" of the texts that such problems become visible and subject to reflection.

Some comments should, however, be tied to the readings that constitute the first opponent's evidence for the claim that the dissertation essentially reasons the dramatic element away. She claims, for example, that my demonstration of how the fight between the two nearly-dead sisters in *John Gabriel Borkman* is without object – in the sense that Erhart cannot be considered an independently existing, living person for the two of them – is entirely logical, but nonetheless a kind of "desk logic." Yet it is not without object, especially since this point is practically expressed explicitly in the text. This is not "interpreting away the exceptional in this scene," but rather bringing out some of the exceptional aspects of the scene and the play: that these two 'mothers' love their child (who is 21 years old) in a destructive, deadly manner. They relate to him as a prop in their lives, and not as a dynamic, reconfigurable existence. They draw him into a state of "death in life," so important in the play, and something with which Ewbank agrees.

[4] "synes uden sékraft" (Ibsen 2010c, 188).

[5] "øjenlågene sænkede" (Ibsen 2010c, 188).

[6] "fine, gennemsigtige" (Ibsen 2010b, 11).

She is, however, particularly dissatisfied with my analysis of Hilde's performance in the third act of *The Master Builder*. I cannot recapitulate the dissertation's reasoning in detail, but the main issue is important enough: that Hilde behaves in a way that must appear theatrical to the spectator. This is also important when we analyze the relationship between Hilde and Halvard. While the master builder in the preceding acts maintains an ironically tinged distance from Hilde's narrative and behavior, his critical distance increasingly diminishes as he becomes captivated by the game she enacts for him. When Ewbank, against this reading, posits that we "see living people on the stage who 'interact,' who dynamically influence each other, and whose 'transition' from one line to the next occurs *between* the words," I am either misunderstood or her reading of Ibsen's text is quite different from mine. For my point is not so absurd as to assume that when it is stated in a stage direction that a character smiles, it must be assumed that she smiles until she is characterized as crying in the next act. However, Hilde clearly

> displays one image of herself after another in a manner that ostentatiously emphasizes the presentation of the image itself. A solemn tableau, followed by a statuesque one, then solemn again, intense, melancholic, immovably somnolent, scintillatingly happy; she neither progresses nor transitions from one state to another, but rather mechanically (and manipulatively) presents one image after another. And Solness stares fascinated at the spectacle she performs for him. (Helland 1997, 193)

All these dramatic shifts occur within the same scene, in just a few moments. Both in the study and in the theater, it is important to observe how Hilde transitions from one pose to another here. It is equally important to reflect on what Hilde achieves with her game (which is not insignificantly manipulative), and how her their interaction, both in harmony and in opposition, affects the master builder – for example, in his perception of his wife, Aline (see footnote 29 in Helland 1997, 166).

Where the dissertation, with varying success, attempts to balance between theater and text, "drama" and "reading," the first opponent nonetheless objects that Helland "has stared so blindly at the reflexivity of meta-drama that he has also lost sight of the drama." The evidence given for this claim is, in my opinion, insufficient. The opponent cites, for example, the following as the dissertation's interpretive result regarding the scenes addressed here: "the play pres-

ents only itself, becoming purely meta-point or purely allegorical." If this is to be highlighted, I would prefer it be made clear how the sentence begins, i.e., "*It appears to be approaching the point when the play*..." The following sentence, too: "Pushed a bit further, conceivably, we could be reduced to such an overarching meaning: life is but art, or, life is but a play [...]." And, immediately, in the following sentence, I point out that "the text manages to maintain the enigmatic balance that is this play's strength." So, rather than present pure and abstract "meta-drama" and "drama," the point is to keep both aspects alive in the analysis.

What the first opponent seems to consider empty meta-points also has a direct impact on the perception of the text as dramatic reality. What is central to the play is the fact that Hilde plays her role; acting as a painter of the purest *tableaux vivants* with her changing poses, much like how her stories blend both fact and fiction, truth and lies. Furthermore, it helps cast a sharply ironic light on the community that so many interpretations have wanted to see. Admittedly, Ewbank is undoubtedly correct that Ms. Wangel and her master builder "feel a sense of 'community'" which for them is "deep" enough, but for both the spectator and the reader it must be important that the sense of the community does not mean the same for those who share it. I hope and believe, after the first opponent's objections, that the dissertation shows how the interpretative community they share is a sham, in that they do not assert the same meanings equally. Without this insight, I believe it would be difficult to understand the play's ending, especially Hilde's final lines.

However, I am glad that the first opponent agrees that "there is indeed quite a lot of meta-drama in these plays." And even though I feel that she is somewhat one-sided in repeatedly claiming it is blind to everything else, I will gladly admit that my analysis of Solness exaggerates this aspect. But so it goes when one discovers something new, or at least something previously understated; one becomes too fond of one's own perspectives. Likewise, I am happy to concede that I make these four plays "more distinctive" in relation to other Ibsen dramas "than they are." I am just as happy, however, that she agrees that these plays "naturally, in many ways, form a 'group.'"

I share her regret that other Ibsen texts are largely relegated to footnotes, if that. At the same time, I have indeed conceded that the dissertation could have been somewhat shorter... Not without regret, I also accept her observation that the dissertation could have benefitted from a broader contemporary and European historical perspective. However, I think she goes a bit too far in say-

ing that the dissertation is characterized by a "vacuum" in a historical and literary context. For even though I have with heavy heart (and, probably in some cases, heavy hand) omitted reflections in this context – for example *Hamlet*, Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, or Pirandello (though mentioned briefly) and Thomas Mann – there is certainly no question of a vacuum. To mention just a few illustrative examples, Nietzsche occupies an important place in my analysis of *The Master Builder* and *John Gabriel Borkman*, just as Rodin, Signorelli, Munch, the Bible, J.P. Jacobsen, "Jugendstil," or Art Nouveau all play certain roles in my presentation. Nonetheless, there is much left undone; many *stones left unturned*.

Interpretation, Allegory, Melancholia

The second opponent's criticism "focuses more on theory than on empirical evidence," and I am pleased that he found the dissertation so theoretically "challenging." The concepts that Kittang discusses are interconnected in the dissertation's analytical groundwork, but here I will address, as he did, each concept individually.

Yet, before the second opponent presents his most important objections, he chooses to discuss (partially) biographical questions concerning the selection of texts. It is not clear that it "should be important in this type of dissertation" to make questions about "connections and divisions within an author's work" a primary concern. However, since both opponents raise this issue, I may not be arguing "vigorously" enough. The dissertation certainly argues more extensively than the impression given by the second opponent, when he suggests that "Helland [hints] at three different reasons for limiting oneself to Ibsen's last four plays." Here, it may suffice to refer to the first opponent's attempt to refute the dissertation's limitation on five different points than those Kittang highlights.

As both opponents are so biographically oriented in their contributions, it may be worthwhile to pause and reflect on this point. The author Ibsen is indeed quoted a handful of times in the dissertation, both from a distance and with full awareness of what this entails. Letters and interviews never appear as any sort of definitive answer for interpretation, so, in my opinion, there is a certain ironic light shed upon the second opponent's statement that "of course, one can discuss how much weight should be given to such statements." In the

dissertation, these statements are not given any particular weight. However, this does not mean that the author's statements about his own work are the *only* ones that *cannot* be given weight at all; he cannot, in principle, be given greater weight than, for example, Ewbank, Kittang or indeed Helland, even though Ibsen's utterances inevitably carry more prestige and aura than ours.

Nor can I find any major methodological problems in studying an author's body of work, "despite the fact that the author theoretically no longer has any hermeneutic role to play." For adhering, based on logical and epistemological reasons, to the view that the study object or research subject is the texts, not the author, does not mean that the works are without an originator. Surely the notion that the author is 'dead' as an authority or as an interpretive *telos* in the study of the text, does not imply some kind of hyper-anarcho-postmodern postulate about the human subject or individual as pure fiction, that we are each infinitely many, merely random assemblages of free floating desire machines? Nor can I see how one necessarily becomes linked to "New Criticism" for this reason. The dissertation's methodological foundation regarding authorial intention relies more heavily on Heidegger, Gadamer and Adorno than Wimsatt and Beardsley.

While I do think both opponents somewhat miss the target here, I certainly admit that the methodological and theoretical problems are not 'solved' with this approach. It is clear that the ascetic attitude towards text external factors that chracterizes a philological approach to textual studies can be taken too far, something the dissertation attempts, surely with varying success, to reflect upon and contextualize in several ways. Therefore, I am happy to endorse Kittang's precise observation that "Helland's dissertation on so many levels revolves around [...] *the problem of interpretation*." By extension, the second opponent has several critical remarks that I readily accept without much resistance.

Before I attempt to modify his criticism on certain points, I want to acknowledge that he is right in suggesting that the dissertation may indeed overburden the concept of allegory. Yes, in certain parts of the analysis of *The Master Builder*, there is little doubt that the author of this dissertation almost overemphasizes his points about allegory, allegorization and allegoresis. I am not willing, however, to throw the baby out with the bathwater and deny what is fundamentally valid. Therefore, I must also address some comments on the second opponent's criticism.

When he uses the public defense as an opportunity to settle scores with "the Benjaminian turn," in which Benjamin's "perspectives" were "radicalized"

by de Man and his followers, I cannot help but say that he could find, almost point-by-point, support for his argument in the dissertation he so criticizes. The dissertation, however, attempts to maintain the significant distinction between Benjamin and de Man, with which Kittang appears less concerned. Therefore, the introduction emphasizes that "Benjamin's interpretation of allegory has the great strength," in contrast to de Man, "that he continually seeks to circumscribe the historical content of experience, which proves relevant to the discussion of Ibsen's modernity, even though Benjamin's subject is the Baroque period" (Helland 1997, 25). These are viewpoints that are explored and elaborated upon throughout the dissertation, which, among other things, should weaken the claim that Benjamin's analysis of German Baroque tragedy "simply finds itself again in the art of modernity."

The argument would seem to require a rather forceful reading to claim that the dissertation establishes "the Benjaminian allegorical understanding" in de Man's formulation "as a paradigm for the ontology of language."[7] By suggesting such a reading, the opponent appears to overlook how the dissertation, in addition to its deconstructionist elements, consistently emphasizes the reconstructive inquiry into the historical content of experience (see, for example: Helland 1997, 198ff). If this dissertation were to constitute a standard deconstructive "free-play" analysis, this would directly contradict the dissertation's central theory of modernity and criticism. I therefore must say that I "miss the strong arguments for why allegory should be characterized by the principle that 'everything can mean everything'" in the dissertation's reasoning. For, when the second opponent claims somewhat unoriginally that the relationship between sign and meaning in an arbitrary allegory is the same as an "unmotivated relation," I simply cannot agree. In the German definition from which I cite, "*will-kürlich*" (and particularly in the philosophy of German Idealism) includes the meaning of "freedom." And we probably agree that there is greater

[7] Since it is the second opponent himself who opens this can of worms—through his self-portrayal as someone who has "never quite come to terms with 'the Benjaminian turn'[...] and who hasn't managed to get on the same wavelength with what happens, for example, with Paul de Man," etc. – it is difficult here not to ask him to allow me "a somewhat brusque formulation: this opinion is formulated against better knowledge." Because it is not in the dissertation being discussed here, but rather in Kittang himself, that there has previously been much talk about "the principled unreadability of all language" (Kittang 1988, 66). (See: Kittang, Atle. 1988. "Allegori, intertekstualitet og ironi. Dag Solstads skrift i Knut Pedersens beretning," in *Mellom tekst og tekst*, edited by Odd Martin Mæland, 51–70.)

freedom of movement in allegory than, for example, in symbolism. Furthermore, it is not the case that this "Willkür" in allegory implies a total "free play of the signifier" where everything can mean anything. To draw another parallel, neither is it the case that when Saussure (and many others with him) talks about the arbitrariness of the sign, it necessarily means that the linguistic sign can mean "anything." Furthermore, from the example Kittang has highlighted from the dissertation, it should be quite clear that we are talking about motivation in the relationship between sign and meaning: "youth" cannot mean "everyone," which the dissertation also does not claim.

However, one of the fundamental positions of this dissertation is that questions of this nature cannot be decided *in abstracto*; the concrete implementation must be the basis for discussion. As I have already noted, I understand that the second opponent is "puzzled" and believes that the concept of allegory becomes too expansive in the thesis (for example, in the analysis of what happens with Hilde's arrival). The salient point lies, therefore, in Solness's statement that he "walks around dreading terribly" because he has been so lucky:

> It makes me so afraid – so afraid, day and night. Because at some point the turn must come, you see. [...] It will come from the younger generation. [...] The turn will come. I can tell. And I feel it drawing closer. Someone is going to shout: Get out of my way! And then all the others will come charging after, shaking their fists and yelling: make way – make way – make way! Oh yes, you'd better watch out, Doctor. One day the younger generation is going to come here and knock on the door – [...] then it's all up with Solness the master builder. (Ibsen 2014b, 21–22)[8]

It seems evident that Solness is expressing himself figuratively or metaphorically here, and that the narrative has an important symbolic ambiguity. Here, I have tried to use the concept of allegory to grasp the text's figuration here. Perhaps this is too fanciful in isolation, but there are also other reasons beyond those connected to this scene alone. Firstly, the question of interpreting Solness's

[8] "Både sent og tidlig gør det mig så ræd, så ræd. For engang må da vel omslaget komme, skønner De. [...] Det kommer fra ungdommen. [...] Omslaget kommer. Jeg aner det. Og jeg føler at det nærmer sig. En eller anden gi'r sig til at kræve: træd tilbage for *mig*! Og så stormer alle de andre efter og truer og skriger: gi' plads, – gi' plads, – gi' plads! Jo, pas De bare på, doktor. Engang kommer ungdommen her og banker på døren - [...] så er det slut med bygmester Solness" (Ibsen 2009a, 244–245. Emphasis in the original).

narrative in the text is raised by Dr. Herdal, as mentioned by Kittang. Additionally, the ambiguous narrative receives a concrete representation *on stage*, given that *Hilde* knocks on the door immediately after Solness's line. Moreover, it is important to note how the narrative also involves a kind of prefiguration: it is a prediction but a fairly open one. Furthermore, later in the act this develops through the Master Builder's statement that "the younger generation [...] will spearhead the turn! Come under a new banner, so to speak" (Ibsen 2014b, 34).[9] This decoding of the banner – an (allegorical) sign that must be decoded – is represented by youth and captivates Solness obsessively. Finally, he tells Hilde that he has a "use" for her, as *she* arrives "under a new banner, so to speak." Thus, he intends to pit "the young against young, in other words!"[10] Or, as expressed in *Emperor and Galilean* (and *The Lady from the Sea*): "sign versus sign" (see Helland 1997, 113ff).

In light of how Solness's narrative initiates a longer development of a story that seems to have clear allegorical components, I applied the term accordingly. And not without reason, although it was probably presented with too few explanatory reservations. Thus, the second opponent has a point here, at least in isolation. But if he is partially correct in claiming that my terminology here is too bold, it must also be said that his own alternative interpretation does not appear to be stronger. As I understand it, it is far too simplistic when he argues that Solness, quite simply and literally, "thinks about the situation in which he is, where an independent Ragnar Brovik could compete against him," and that these are "simply *his thoughts*." If this is the correct understanding of the scene, then it loses this vivid aspect. Furthermore, the ironic interpretation that Kittang is looking for in this dissertation also disappears.[11] In Solness's narrative, "the younger generation" takes on a figurative quality that renders its reference uncertain, open, and, therefore, constitutes an irony within the text. It is precisely this ambiguity that the second opponent so eagerly wants to eliminate.

The second opponent's criticism of the dissertation's use of the concept of melancholy is far more challenging to address. This is partly because he ex-

[9] "Ungdommen [...] kommer i spidsen for omslaget. Ligesom under en ny fane" (Ibsen 2009a, 275).

[10] "Ungdom imod ungdom altså –!" (Ibsen 2009a, 275).

[11] For example: "when a question of interpretation is raised again, and—for once—is ignored by Solness, an evident dramatic irony is created: he does not see the danger that Hilde represents" (Helland 1997, 100).

presses himself in the form of postulates, and partly because, in several places, arguments are made against positions that I cannot find expressed in the dissertation. As an example of the latter, the dissertation subscribes to the belief that melancholia "contains precisely the 'proper' experience of modern life as being a life without meaning." The dissertation makes no pretense of predicting 'proper' experiences. However, especially in light of the persecution and compulsion to normalize melancholia, there may indeed be reason to emphasize that melancholy can be seen as "something more than just an individual symptom that prevents a happy adaptation: 'the medicating of melancholia forgets, nonetheless, that there are conditions in the world and existential situations where melancholy is an appropriate attitude.'"[12]

It might be more interesting to consider what underscores both opponents' criticism of the dissertation's understanding of melancholia. It appears to have greatly troubled them that the dissertation seeks to focus on melancholia through both melancholia's topos and tradition, rather than psychology and psychoanalysis. In fact, the first opponent even claims that "psychology" in the dissertation is almost a "swear word." This last term surprises me. Because it is expressly stated in the dissertation that psychoanalysis "must be considered a critical and demystifying science," and the criticism of psychological interpretations of Ibsen often draws its support directly from Freud (Helland 1997, 55). Furthermore, it is Freud's discussion of "Mourning and Melancholia" that guides much of the analysis of *Lille Eyolf*. Yet even if the dissertation is not written under the belief that these texts can be analyzed without psychology, this is not its main focus or guiding principle, which I do not regret. The downplaying of the psychological is justified in the texts themselves, in that they resist certain forms of psychologization.

It is thus the melancholy topos, the classical melancholy tradition, that underpins the dissertation's use of the very concept. Here, Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl's *Saturn and Melancholy* is a central work, much more so than, for example, Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. This is primarily because of its consistent empirical orientation, and I have tried to uphold this empirically concrete aspect throughout the dissertation. Although this tradition, stretching back a millenium, is certainly characterized by contradictions and dissimilarities, the prevailing result among Panofsky et al. is one of striking unity and constancy.

[12] Helland 1997, 253–254. The citation is from Hartmut Böhmes' article in "Profil" (1992, 28).

However, from such a rich tradition, one could easily end up in the position of forcing everything to appear uniform, or, in other words, seeing everyone as melancholic. The dissertation is nevertheless consciously aware of such a danger. Furthermore, I cannot find that the second opponent provides significant, concrete examples that the textual material has to any degree been unduly forced.[13]

His criticism therefore takes a different direction when he argues that the diversity within the melancholy tradition renders it fundamentally questionable: "to use a concept with such diverse content as a tool for interpretation has both advantages and disadvantages. Like fishing with a fine-meshed net [...it's], easy to find melancholic traits in any literary character. Sometimes it is too easy." Thus, Kittang's treatment of the melancholy topos becomes the subject of a "Popperian" critique: it can encompass everything; melancholy is so diverse that it tends towards lacking "falsifiability criteria." Yet this is not the case in the dissertation. Moreover, I think it must be permissible to point out the problems the second opponent encounters here when he wants to be a Popperian about empiricism, but not about theory, especially since he wants to defend psychoanalysis. I assume he does not accept Popper's entirely parallel (and, in my opinion, very weak) critique of Freud and psychoanalysis.[14]

The second opponent further offers several interesting reflections on allegory, myth, melancholy, critical readings of melancholy, text and character that I cannot possibly clarify in a comprehensive manner here. He identifies several ambiguities in the dissertation that are worthy of such criticism. For example, the relationship between myth and allegory is sometimes quite fluid. Nonetheless, as the opponent also points out, the main argument should be clear enough; it may result in significant consequences whether the characters' mythologization of existence is determined as "symbolic" or "allegorical." As one of the central positions of the dissertation is that it is the characters, and not the text, who allegorize, it is odd that Kittang argues occasionally that the distinction between character and text is unclear.

Some of this confusion, however, may be attributed to the opponent himself. For example, when he poses the question as to whether the plays are "funda-

[13] In my opinion, it is telling that his only concrete example lies in one of my footnotes with somewhat careless remarks. I thank him for the criticism, which has resulted in the removal of this footnote in the upcoming book version. It has been removed as it, among other things, does not affect the main argument in the slightest.

[14] See, for reference: Popper, Karl R. 1963. *Conjectures and Refutations*. London: Routledge.

mentally critical of ideology or myth, i.e., critical of melancholy or not," he implies that melancholy and myth are the same from the dissertation's perspective, which they are not. He also goes too far in his desire for clarity when he argues that faced with the ambiguity of melancholy, one must choose between two possibilities: either it is purely positive or purely negative. I do not see a significant problem in asserting that melancholy in the texts can appear as an "adequate reaction" to a modernity where life threatens to stiffen, to die, indeed, as an expression of an insight and *at the same time* recognizing that the texts also imply a critique of melancholy. In part, this is because melancholy sometimes consists of a reproduction of evil, for example in the form of a radical withdrawal from one's own life. Surely one can allow oneself to be that dialectical, for as Kittang himself aptly says: "the position of Ibsen's text in relation to its owndramatic world of actors and actions is not unambiguous (either critically revealing or uncritically idealizing) but complex." The same dialectical point can also be applied to the opponents' considerations regarding a theory of modernity. If modernity, as it is portrayed in the last four Ibsen dramas, is consistently critical, negative and skeptical, surely this does not imply a "tendency [...] toward regressive ideological positions"? Ibsen's critique of modernity is a critique based on modernity's own terms, even if it does not present positive judgments or constructive alternatives.

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I began by asserting that a public defense is not a "genuine conversation," especially considering its written aftermath. But at the same time, it should be emphasized that a public defense is a great privilege, at least when one is as fortunate with one's opponents as I was. I owe them a great debt of gratitude for sharing their knowledge and intelligence, allowing this poor doctoral candidate to receive the necessary correction.

On *Peer Gynt*, with a Constant Focus on the Concept of Dramatic Irony

The title of this essay alludes to Søren Kierkegaard's treatise from 1841, On the Concept of Irony*, and just as Kierkegaard surrenders Socrates to irony, so Helland surrenders Peer. The concept of dramatic irony has its own history, which Helland outlines from the Anglican bishop Connop Thirlwall to James McFarlane. Helland argues that* Peer Gynt *is dominated throughout by unintended dramatic irony, which springs from the mismatch between what a person says and thinks and what is the case. The reader and the audience know more about the situation than the protagonist himself. Helland's essay can, moreover, be read as a defence of the qualities of* Peer Gynt*, with its polemic against an Ibsen tradition that has regarded the character Brand as morally more worthy.*

Introduction

Irony is "a crafty fellow," says Søren Kierkegaard (1989, 248). This fact can be quite unpleasant for those who wish to write about irony, something that can be illustrated by the title of this article. It was chosen to signal that I will herein discuss irony theory, and not just Ibsen's text. However, such a title can simultaneously seem pretentious, thereby containing an irony that might strike *me* hard. Indeed, it can give the impression that I believe myself capable of explaining dramatic irony, while at the same time engaging with what is perhaps Ibsen's most complicated text. And if that were not enough, the title may also give the impression that I plan to engage with Søren Kierkegaard throughout, since it mimics the title of his master's thesis. The discrepancy between title and concrete execution contains ironic possibility, and the victim of this irony can easily be me. *My own* work can take on *another* (ironic) form.

Furthermore, it is such that anyone who sets out to say something about *Peer Gynt* must be careful not to become a victim of *the text*. Like all genuinely

strong texts, *Peer Gynt* has a tendency to already contain ample amounts of irony directed at the interpreter. In Ibsen's text, for example, it is stated that "when the starting point is weakest / The result is often the most original," something an interpreter must internalize in their work (Ibsen 1972b, 359).[1] But these conditions, which I have pointed out as at least potentially ironic, can at the same time constitute a good starting point for a modest discussion of some problems of irony.

Peer Gynt and Irony

In the following, I will investigate a fundamental thesis that Ibsen's dramatic poem from 1867 not only constitutes an ironic text but also reflects upon both irony and the ironist. The most natural entry point to this issue lies in the opening scene, in the very first line: "Peer you're a liar!" (Ibsen 1972b, 255).[2] Though not an ironic statement, it nevertheless indicates that the text demonstratively begins by establishing the distinction between various levels of language. In this case, it is a distinction between truth and falsehood. The opening line points towards a central theme in the text as a whole: the problematic and unstable nature of language, which also implies difficulties in maintaining the truth value of speech in a system with clear boundaries between true and false, literal and figurative meaning, referential and fictional truth. And as the conversation continues, irony also comes to the forefront in several ways. When his mother accuses Peer, he responds:

> PEER (*without stopping*): No I'm not!
> AASE: Well, swear it's true, then.
> PEER: Why should I swear?
> AASE: You see, you daren't! I never heard
> such a pack of lies.
> PEER (*stops*): The whole thing's true!
> (Ibsen 1972b, 255)[3]

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[1] "hvor Udgangspunktet er galest, / blir tidt Resultatet originalest" (Ibsen 2007, 647).

[2] "Peer, du lyver!" (Ibsen 2007, 481).

[3] PEER GYNT (*uden at standse*): Nej, jeg gjøre ej!
AASE: Naa, saa band paa, det er sandt!

Peer vehemently denies that he is lying; every word he speaks is true. But he refuses to swear to it. He hesitates to make his claims of truth too absolute and unequivocal, creating a clear ironic ambiguity or vacillating ambivalence in his statements. Even where he energetically insists that he speaks the truth, he holds back to remain partially aloof.[4] And this aloofness is indeed foregrounded in what follows: the very question of truth is increasingly set off in parentheses, made to float. When Peer recounts the tale of the buck-ride, both the critical listener Aase and the no less critical reader are joyfully swept up in the story, to such an extent even that many have been tempted to argue for the story's truth, in a poetic and aesthetic sense, even if does not accord with reality. What begins as a white lie – moreover, in a quoted form, with clear and well-known references – gradually acquires a more ambiguous status.

However, the floating nature of the ironic subject Peer is also manifest in the exposition's narrative and on a thematic level. First, Peer almost floats away over Gjendin Ridge: "We tore along / The ridge together through the wind. / I've never ridden such a pony!" (Ibsen 1972b, 256). This is said both ironically and ambiguously, before he discusses the actual flying:

> The buck
> Shied half-round and jumped sky-high
> Out into space with both of us!
> (*Aase totters and reaches for a tree-trunk. Peer Gynt continues*:)
> Behind us, the black wall of mountain,
> Below us, the bottomless ravine!
> First we bored through the layers of fog,
> Then sliced across a flock of seagulls,
> Sent them screaming in all directions.
> And down and down and down we went

PEER GYNT: Hvorfor bande?

AASE: Tvi; du tør ej!

Alt ihob er tøv og tant!

PEER GYNT (staar): Det er sandt – hvert evigt Ord!

(Ibsen 2007, 481)

[4] The stage direction above may also be interesting in this context, as it underscores the fleeting, moving nature of Peer, as he answers "*without stopping*." He moves away from his utterances in motion, until Aase's repeated accusations stop him. He stops, but he is not still, and not for long.

Until I saw straight underneath me
A gleam, as white as the buck's belly. –
Mother! It was our own reflection
Hurtling up towards the lake's
Glassy surface, as fast as we
Were both careering down to meet it.
AASE (*gasping for breath*): Peer! God keep me! Be quick, tell me –
PEER: Buck from above, and buck from below,
Collided in a volley of foam.
And there we splashed about for hours
Before we somehow got to shore
On the north side: the buck swimming,
Me hanging on. And I came home.
AASE: And the buck, what happened to the buck, Peer?
PEER: Eh? He's probably still there.
(*Snaps his fingers, turns on his heel, and adds*):
If you can find him, you can have him.
(Ibsen 1972b, 257)[5]

[5] Bukken gjorde halvt omkring,
satte med et Himmelspring
udfor Dybet med os begge!
(Aase vakkler og griber efter en Træstamme. Peer Gynt bliver ved)
Bag os Bergets svarte Vægge,
under os et bundløst Slug!
Først vi kløvte Lag af Taager,
kløvte saa en Flok af Maager,
som igjennem Luften vigende
fløj till alle Kanter skrigende.
Nedad, uden Stands, foer Toget.
Men i Dybet glittred noget
hvidlet, som en Rensdyrbug. –
Moer, det var vort eget Billed,
som igjennem Fjeldsjø-Stillet
opp mod Vandets Skorpe piled
i den samme vilde Fart,
som i den vi nedad kiled.
AASE *gisper efter Vejret:* Peer! Gud fri mig –! Sig det snart –!
PEER GYNT: Bukk fra Luften, Bukk fra Bunden,
stangedes i samme Stunden
saa at Skummet om os klasked.
Ja, der laa vi nu og plasked. –
Langt om længe, du, vi naade

This "image" of Peer and the buck floating between heaven and earth is important to the drama in several ways. It sets the tone: the ironic, ambiguous and reflective nature of the text mirrors its main character. Furthermore, the travel motif is introduced, which is prevalent throughout the poem. And not least, the motif of the mount is introduced here, which is significant in all parts of the drama. "You can tell who's well-born by the bloodstock they ride," says Peer both on the back of the pig and on horseback in the Sahara (1972, 294, 345).[6] Furthermore, he himself is a horse for Aase over the brook in Act I, as he transports her to the realm of the dead, and, in Act V, he rides on the boat's hull.

Yet this introductory image is important because it also clearly emphasizes the vacillating nature of Peer the ironist. This vacillation is indeed significant for many scholars of irony, especially for the most important one in this context: Søren Kierkegaard. In his dissertation on irony, he famously argues that irony is the position of Socrates – and irony is a position, he says – which "continually cancels itself; it is a nothing that devours everything, and a something one can never grab hold of, something that is and is not at the same time, but something that at rock bottom is comic" (Kierkegaard 1989, 131). Among other reasons, this is why he prefers the Socrates of Aristophanes to the Socrates of Plato or Xenophon. He particularly emphasizes how the clouds symbolically highlight the changeable, ambiguous and elusive nature of the ironist, while Socrates in the play *The Clouds* is also literally floating between heaven and earth, in a hanging basket. As Kierkegaard says:

> Whether he is in a basket suspended from the ceiling or staring omphalopsychically into himself and thereby in a way freeing himself from earthly gravity, in both cases he is hovering. But it is precisely *this hovering* that is so very significant [...] *The ironist*, to be sure, is lighter

nordre Landet paa en Maade;
Bukken svam, og jeg hang bag ham; –
jeg foer hjem –
AASE: Men Bukken, du?
PEER GYNT: Aa, han gaar der vel endnu; –
(knipser i Fingrene, svinger sig paa Hælen og tillføjer)
kan du finde ham, saa tag ham!
(Ibsen 2007, 484-485)

[6] "Paa Ridestellet skal Storfolk kjendes" (Ibsen 2007, 547, 628).

> than the world, but on the other hand he still belongs to the world; like Mohammed's coffin, he is suspended between two magnets. (Kierkegaard 1989, 152. My emphasis.)

To say that Peer often navel-gazes in a way that makes him detached from the concrete present would not be an exaggeration. And in his tale of the buck-ride, he appears to be floating in a literal sense. The fleeting and floating nature of Peer's relationship to reality is foregrounded in many ways in the text. This is also evident in his association with the clouds in the subsequent scene. Here, Peer overhears some villagers talking about a boy with a "drunk" father and a "crack-pot" mother:

> PEER (*softly*): Was it me they were talking about?
> (*with a forced shrug.*) Well, let them!
> I don't suppose slander's likely to kill me.
> (*He throws himself down on the heather, and lies for some time on his back, his hand behind his neck, staring at the sky.*)
> What an odd-shaped cloud! It looks like a horse.
> With a man on its back – and a saddle and bridle.
> And just behind, an old hag with a broomstick.
> (*he laughs quietly to himself.*)
> It's Mother! She's cussing and carrying-on;
> 'You beast, you beast! Do you hear what I say, Peer?'
> (*his eyes eventually close.*)
> (Ibsen 1972b, 268-269)[7]

[7] PEER GYNT *sagte*
Var det mig, de snakked om?
(med et tvungent Slæng)
Aa, lad dem snakke!
De kan da vel ikke Livet af mig rakke.
(kaster sig ned i Lyngbakken, ligger længe paa Ryggen med Hænderne under Hovedet og stirrer opp i Luften)
For en underlig Sky. Den ligner en Hest.
Der er Mand paa med, – og Sadel – og Grime. –
Bagefter rider en Kjærring paa en Lime.
(ler smaat ved sig selv)
Det er Moer. Hun skjælder og skriger: dit Bæst;
hejda, Peer! – –
(lidt efter lidt lukker han Øjnene)

When faced with words that most might find deeply hurtful, Peer responds with detached irony. He engages only briefly with the actual content of the words, before distinguishing between word and deed. Words are, after all, just words; "slander" cannot "kill" him. He therefore maintains an ironic stance towards this gossip. Not only does this show that Peer has the strength to rise above this slander, his lack of ability (or willingness) to see anything as definitive is also revealed. Just as he refuses to "swear" by truth in the opening scene, in which he hesitates to let his words take on a finality of a speech act, he applies the same mechanism to others' words, thus hovering in relation to the transience of words. The continuation is therefore quite logical. He "throws himself down on the heather" and stares up at the sky and the clouds, so easy to shape with a fleeting, interpretive gaze.[8] In relation to the clouds, he ironically plays with his mother's condemnation of him as a "beast." This relationship with the clouds thus contributes to emphasizing Peer's free and ironic attitude towards reality, while also making it clear that the text's irony has something to say about the ironist himself...

The crucial point here, however, is how the narrative exposition of the play can be said to highlight irony as a significant context and conceptual horizon. The opening line underscores a linguistic duality, dissolving the relationship between true and false, literal and figurative meaning. As elsewhere in the poem, it seems difficult, impossible even, to slow this constant movement and determine what is meant within the text. Likewise, Peer is characterized in several ways by a fleeting incompleteness or intangible ambiguity. In other words, he is elusive. Yet, as with Kierkegaard, Peer's elusiveness is not absolute or beyond reality. He falls, and in this falling, another element is introduced that must be presented and commented upon: the *duplication* of the image. The image rises from the bottom towards Peer and the buck as they fall: "Buck

(Ibsen 2007, 504)

[8] "Clouds superbly characterize the utterly flabby thought process, continually fluctuating, devoid of footing and devoid of immanental laws of motion, that takes all kinds of shapes with the same aberrant variability of the clouds: at times resembling mortal women, at times a centaur, a panther, a wolf, a bull, etc. – resembling them but, please note, not actually being them, since the clouds are nothing but fog or the dim, self-affecting, infinite possibility of becoming anything that is supposed to be, yet unable to make anything remain established, the possibility that has infinite dimensions and seems to encompass the whole world but still has no content, can accept anything but retains nothing" (Kierkegaard 1989, 133-134).

from above, and buck from below" (Ibsen 1972b, 257).[9] As he falls, Peer sees the image coming towards them, something he also reflects upon. The image of Peer's journey floating through the air is also a self-duplicating one, a reflexive movement. This is of critical importance in any reasonably advanced theory of irony; irony is a reflexive, self-duplicating movement of self-reflection. It allows one to playfully stand apart from oneself in pretense, demonstrating a sovereign ability to maintain a distance.

This double image of the buck from above and below has been interpreted in various ways. A popular interpretation finds the image as an expression of the duality in Peer's nature, the split between body and soul, between a higher and lower self, between human and animal. The point of such an interpretation is, obviously, that the text shows how Peer must unite these aspects within himself, to become a whole person, an integrated personality. These interpretive possibilities will be set aside for now; instead, it should simply be emphasized that the text objectively presents a self-duplication. This entails the ability to remain aloof, to maintain a distance from oneself and reflect aesthetically over the image, or rather images, even while falling. And as the buck "collided" into the surface, a new image emerges. It is not, however, the image of a synthesis or unity, but rather, as the text says, "the foam," something airy, bubbles on the water's surface. Or perhaps also a form of irony?

The well of irony in these opening scenes is not yet emptied. Not only does the narrative present the main character as an ironist and object of irony's critique, but his explicit critic, Aase, is also subjected to irony in the text from the very beginning. She accuses him both directly and indirectly (or ironically) of lying, but as Peer's story continues, she no longer laughs "scornfully." The stage directions describe how she "involuntarily" makes exclamations and gradually gets so caught up that she becomes "giddy [...] totter[ing] and reach[ing] for a tree-trunk [...] gasping for breath" (Ibsen 1972b, 256, 257).[10] The dramatic irony thus clearly reveals Aase's weakness for her son, her inability to stand firm and maintain a grasp on reality, and her delight in the fabrications of fantasy.

As we can see, we touch upon a radically expanded conception of irony here, in which it is no longer perceived as something purely linguistic or rhe-

[9] "Bukk fra Luften, Bukk fra Bunden" (Ibsen 2007, 485).

[10] "spotsk [...] uvilkaarligt [...] svimmel [...] vakkler og griber efter en Træstamme [og] gisper efter Vejret" (Ibsen 2007, 482-485).

torical, but rather an existential phenomenon. And once again, we find ourselves with Søren Kierkegaard and his double view on irony. On one hand, he was a critic of irony, but at the same time, he himself, as he says about Socrates, was "dedicated to irony" (Kierkegaard 1989, 6). Furthermore, he distinguishes between two phases in the development of irony, where the first represents Socrates – and is historically justified – while the second, unjustified phase is embodied by the German romantics. The first appearance of irony for Socrates is nothing less than:

> [...] the very incitement of subjectivity, and in Socrates irony is truly a world-historical passion. In Socrates, one process ends and with him a new one begins. (Kierkegaard 1989, 211)

In other words, Socrates' view, according to Kierkegaard, was that "Irony is a qualification of subjectivity" (Kierkegaard 1989, 262). Through his infinitely negative irony, Socrates introduces subjectivity, which he "used...to destroy Greek culture" through irony's negativity (Kierkegaard 1989, 264). Kierkegaard argues more concretely that Socrates undermined the orthodoxy of Greek society, wherein individuals in pre-Socratic philosophy were subservient to greater forces such as fate and necessity. For subjectivity to emerge as something free and independent, the negativity of irony was necessary, as Kierkegaard notes in Thesis XI: "Socrates drove all his contemporaries out of substantiality as if naked from a shipwreck, undermined actuality, envisioned ideality in the distance, touched it, but did not take possession of it" (Kierkegaard 1989, 6). In his analysis of Socrates' defense, Kierkegaard seeks to show how Socrates, adopting a completely ironic stance, will break away from and dissolve society, state, family, and substantiality. Herein lies the "Truth of Irony" (Kierkegaard 1989, 324). Yet, this analysis applies not only to this historical-philosophical level, but also the existential level of the individual. Just as the birth of subjectivity on a world-historical scale requires irony, so too does the liberation and birth of the individual demand a negation of irony, as we see in Thesis XV: "Just as philosophy begins with doubt, so also a life that may be called human begins with irony" (Kierkegaard 1989, 6).

If we look at Ibsen's dramatic poem, it would not be unreasonable to claim that such a negative liberation of irony often characterizes the course of the first act. We have seen how the text introduces Peer as ironically floating and freely fabricating his relation to reality. We can further note how he finds him-

self on the outskirts of society, in a sort of "outsider position,"[11] which he seeks to engage with ironically. This is repeated when he arrives uninvited and unwanted at Hægstad farm, when it becomes clear that his relationship to that which is given places him in opposition to society. Initially, the villagers want to "chivvy him about all the lies he tells," but the punishment quickly takes a more tangible form, as they want to "deal with him [...] flay him [and] hang, draw, and quarter him" (Ibsen 1972b, 280–281).[12] Before things go further, however, Peer disrupts the entire wedding celebration by running off with the bride. And the bride abduction is no random act in this context. Abducting a bride, taking her with him, sleeping with her, and thus cheating the groom out of his wedding night – these acts represent a decisive and fundamental transgression. It is an act that places him outside society for good. Indeed, by abducting the bride, one could say that Peer negates the entire "substantiality" of this peasant society. That which is taken as a given holds no weight, and the result is that he becomes an outlaw, isolated from the social order.

In this crucial scene, we reacquaint ourselves with Peer the seducer. However, his seduction in this scene, as with the Woman in Green later, is marked by irony. Even though he seduces Ingrid and thereby breaks with the normative foundation of society, there still lies a possible lifeline for the seduced. By holding onto Ingrid, he could still choose to save himself. It is thus revealing that at the beginning of Act II, he leaves her as well. This is also significant in Kierkegaard's image of the ironist as a seducer. As he says about Socrates:

> one perhaps would dare to call him a seducer, since he infatuated the youths, awakened longings in them but did not satisfy them, let them flare up in the thrilling joy of contact but never gave them strong and nourishing food. [...] when it was accomplished, in the same instant the relation had reached its peak. He did not give more, and while the young man now felt inseparably bound to Socrates, the relation changed so that, as Alcibiades aptly describes it, Socrates became the beloved rather than the lover. (Kierkegaard 1989, 188, 191)

[11] His mother Aase criticizes him in the opening scene precisely for not participating in the most labor-intensive phase of farm work, and thereby he evades society's "laws."

[12] "Lad os heller gjøgle med alle hans Løgne! / Smeden vil dænge ham! / Flænge ham! / Hænge ham!" (Ibsen 2007, 524-525).

Thus, from its opening, *Peer Gynt* gestures towards irony as a horizon for understanding, encompassing irony as a stylistic, linguistic and rhetoric phenomenon, as well as an existential one. The first act signifies such a radicalization of irony, moving toward the point where it consists in a complete negation of the given. Irony thus approaches "position as one of complete isolation" (Kierkegaard 1989, 146). But just as important is that irony also contains truth, not only as poetic richness and abundance but also in relation to subjectivity or personality: Every life worthy of human dignity begins with irony.

Some Attempts Towards a Theory of Irony

Even after a brief discussion of the play's beginning, a vast array of irony and forms of irony emerges. Therefore, it may be worthwhile to return to the theory of irony. As is well known, irony has its origins in classical rhetoric. Etymologically, the concept of irony comes from the Greek *eironeia*, which means, according to the Duden *etymologische Wörterbuch*, "feigned ignorance, dissimulation" (292).[13] This classical definition dominated the conception of irony until the Romantic reinterpretation and expansion of the concept. Until then, it was not only seen as a limited phenomenon but also considered inferior. According to Ernst Behler, it was a "swear word" ("*Schimpfwort*"), used derogatorily to describe sly and hypocritical individuals (Behler 1972, 17).

The rhetorical understanding of irony is as follows: The speaker pretends, simulates and gives the impression of being less intelligent than they are. They mean the opposite or at least something different from what they say. The ironic statement, therefore, means something different – ironically – than it does in its usual or literal meaning. Irony is a trope whose meaning is different from or simply the opposite of what the statement appears to say if taken at face value or naively. The fundamental meaning of linguistic or rhetorical irony is thus: a statement with at least two meanings: A) the literal one and B) the true or real one, where the speaker pretends to mean A) in such a way that it becomes clear they mean B). Thus, the "formula" for irony becomes A=A/B.

This formula comes courtesy of Uwe Japp's book *Theorie der Ironie*, in which he claims that:

[13] "*Erheuchelte Unwissenheit, Verstellung.*" All translations from German are by the editors.

> all other forms of irony are derived from irony as a mode of speech. Any system of irony assumes this simple figure of speech, in which someone says one thing and means something else. In this sense, we recognize verbal irony as the linguistic foundation of other forms of irony – or, if you will, the semiotic "home" from which the other ironies have emigrated, establishing themselves independently in literature, life, and the world itself. (Japp 1983, 37)[14]

Even though I will problematize this thesis below, the idea that irony is founded on rhetoric serves as a solid foundation for understanding irony as a concept. It works as a starting point because rhetoric's understanding of irony accounts for its *dependence on context*. Furthermore, rhetoric is inherently concrete and dependent upon how it is used. Irony is inextricably linked to a linguistic or extralinguistic context, gaining meaning as irony only through its close relationship to a specific context. In other words, without a context or knowledge of a practice, it is impossible to determine whether a statement should be understood as ironic or not. In this contextless ambiguity, however, the ironic interpretation is as plausible as the non-ironic one. Without knowledge of a statement's context, one cannot prove that something is ironic, but nor can one prove the opposite either. The infinitely ironic interpretation thus stands stronger the less we know about the context of a statement.[15]

Despite this rhetorical starting point, I will not pretend to provide an entirely comprehensive definition of irony. Indeed, it is probably impossible to give a definition inclusive of all forms of irony while simultaneously excluding anything that is not irony. This is a view shared by most modern works on the subject, even those aimed at defining it. In *The Compass of Irony*, however, D.C. Muecke offers a more detailed definition of irony than Uwe Japp.[16] As the rhe-

[14] "Alle anderen Ironien [sind] von der Ironie als Redeform abgeleitet. In jedem System der Ironie ist diese einfache Figur der Rede, in der jemand etwas sagt und etwas anderes meint, vorausgesetzt. Insofern erkennen wir in der *verbalen Ironie* den sprachlichen Grund der anderen Ironien – oder, wenn man so will, die semiotische "Heimat," aus der die anderen Ironien ausgewandert sind, um sich in der Litteratur, im Leben und in der Welt selbständig zu machen (sich zu verselbständigen)."

[15] Therefore, de Man's results should not be surprising when he almost explicitly suggests that one should disregard context. See, for example, chapter 1 in: de Man, Paul. 1979. *Allegories of Reading. Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

[16] Muecke, D.C. 1969. *The Compass of Irony*. London: Routledge. See also: Muecke, D.C. 1973.

torical definition is somewhat vague and abstract, a level of specification is necessary. Muecke asserts that irony always contains three formal elements. First, irony is a double-layered or two-storied phenomenon, in which the lowest level is the literal meaning, and the higher level is the real, indirect content. Second, there must always be an opposition between these two levels, such as what is meant versus what is said. Furthermore, irony always involves a notion of innocence or naivety, thus allowing for the possibility of missing the higher level.

A fitting and somewhat innocent example can be found in Aase's skepticism at the beginning of Peer's story. He claims he met the buck west of the Gjendin Ridge and describes how it dug in the snow, and Aase responds, "Of course!"[17] (Ibsen 1972b, 255). She does not mean this to be true, but rather the opposite. A more interesting example can be seen in all the praise Peer receives during the dinner at the beginning of Act IV. Becoming increasingly intoxicated, Peer talks about himself and his grand theories, when von Eberkopf comments:

> You have a view of life which puts you
> Into the category Thinker
> [...]
> You measure the whole by a single form.
> You focus every random fact
> Until they become the radicals
> Of a central life-philosophy. –
> And you've not been to a university?
> (Ibsen 1972b, 328)[18]

It is both tempting and common to read this line ironically. It also fits well with Muecke's conception of a double-layered utterance. We find, initially, the

"The Communication of Verbal Irony" in *Journal of Literary Semantics* (2); Muecke, D.C. 1982. *Irony and the Ironic*. London: Routledge.

[17] "Ja rigtig, ja" (Ibsen 2007, 482).

[18] De har et Blik paa Livets Gang,
der hæver Dem till Tænker-Rang.
Med samme Norm De alting maaler.
De spidser till hver løs Eragtning,
saa hver og en gaar ud som Straaler
fra Lyset af en Livsbetragtning. –
Og De har ingentid studeret?
(Ibsen 2007, 601)

lower level or literal meaning: the claim that Peer's perspective on life elevates him to the rank of "Thinker," which is surprising, as he has never studied. The real meaning, however, is that Peer is a self-important fool, or, as he is referred to later in Act IV, "a scoundrel"[19] (Ibsen 1972b, 335). Thus, the two opposing levels show a clear opposition. The line also contains a blatant element of naivety: Peer does not notice the exaggerated falseness in the praise he receives.[20]

Yet even though Muecke's definition is more detailed and specific than a simple rhetorical definition, it still does not solve the main problem: namely, that the definition of irony is too broad. It does not sufficiently distinguish itself from related phenomena. The definition, for example, cannot explain why von Eberkopf's remark should not simply be classified as a mere lie. The liar also pretends, and what he says has two levels – one "true" and one "false" – that are in opposition to each other, and he exploits the innocence of the person to whom he is lying.

Many have attempted to solve this problem by emphasizing the intension of a speaker in the definition of irony. In this sense, the distinction between lying and irony lies in intention: the liar strives to conceal the higher or real level, whereas it is the ironist's intention for the higher level to be perceived – if not by everyone, then at least by some of the listeners or readers. Attempts to define irony in this way have often drawn on the language philosopher H. Paul Grice.[21] His theories of language are fundamentally structured around the speaker's intention to communicate a particular message.[22]

A Grice-inspired definition of irony has several advantages. In addition to clearly distinguishing irony from, for example, lying, it avoids making irony a

[19] "en Slyngel" (Ibsen 2007, 613).

[20] A more naive reading might argue that von Eberkopf and the others, in fact, mean what they say when they lavish Peer with praise. This is not a sustainable interpretation, but it can be interesting as it illustrates, at the same time, how irony permeates the text. Even with a naive reading like this, the irony does not disappear; perhaps it becomes even stronger, as with an interpretation like this the text would contain a more complex *dramatic* irony that targets both Peer and those who praise him.

[21] See, for example: Tanaka, Ronald. 1973. "The Concept of Irony," in *Journal of Literary Semantics,* vol 2. His understanding of irony is that it "is determined by the speaker's intentions in saying something in respect to certain audiences" (1973, 47).

[22] See, for example: Grice, H.P. 1978a. "Logic and Conversation." In *Syntax and Semantics: Speech Acts Volume III*, edited by Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan. New York: Academic Press; or Grice, H.P. 1978b. "Further Notes on Logic and Conversation." In *Syntax and Semantic 9: Pragmatics*, edited by Peter Cole. New York: Academic Press.

phenomenon completely governed by rules. As Muecke emphasizes, one must "resist the view that irony is a linguistic and stylistic category subject to rules or constraints and should rather stress its freedom from these" (Muecke 1973, 41). By linking irony to a speaker's intention, one shifts it from the simple ironic speech act to one independent of "universal" rules for language use.

But defining irony based on a speaker's intention is also highly problematic. Firstly, one would then overlook a central aspect of all irony, including linguistic irony: it can be unintentional. This aspect is often exploited for polemical purposes; one reads something as if it were meant ironically, even though it is obviously meant very seriously, with the intention of ridiculing the serious standpoint. For example, Vinje used this tactic in his review of Bjørnson's *Arne* (Vinje 1916, 323ff).[23] This kind of ironicizing relies entirely on the possibility of unintended irony. In other words, one can see irony even when it is *not* intentional. Irony' secret power lies, of course, in the fact that the ironized perception was not intended as ironic. One such example may perhaps be seen in Peer's characterization of Begriffenfeldt, the director of madhouse. Peer, while still believing that madhouse is "Scholar's Club," describes him as follows: "He really is / A wonderfully gifted man; almost / All he says is incomprehensible" (Ibsen 1972b, 365).[24]

This remark, unlike the previous one, cannot be seen as intentionally ironic. However, the irony in the remark undermines not only the speaker, Peer, but also the object of his admiration, Begriffenfeldt. Irony undermines Peer because his admiration, and his rationale, appear ridiculous. Consequently, the ridicule also affects Begriffenfeldt. This is indeed a significant mechanism of irony in everyday language: someone says something without intending it to be ironic, while the listener perceives it as irony. In this way, through the knowing smiles of others, one can become a victim of one's own unintended irony.

The successors to Grice within pragmatics have attempted to address the issue of unintended irony by introducing a sort of secondary intention. That is, they argue that the intention in cases of such unintended irony lies with the listener, who essentially inserts the irony into the utterance. This is hardly satisfactory, however, as it merely shifts the problem. Moreover, both Ronald

[23] See, in addition, my article "Nokre merknader omkring ironi, som språkleg fenomen" ("Some Remarks About Irony as a Linguistic Phenomenon"), in *Norskrift* Nr. 62.

[24] "Isandhed, en yderst begavet Mand; / næsten alt, hvad han siger, gaar over ens Forstand" (Ibsen 2007, 655).

Tanaka and Grice explicitly emphasize the *speaker's* intention. Moreover, this problem would not occur for Grice, as he believes that such things simply are not part of language or communication. He would probably not even accept calling this irony, as it would only represent a breakdown in communication and would therefore not pose any real problem.

The main objection to this view lies in the fundamental problem inherent in describing language based on intention. This view of language overlooks what can be referred to as the "Wittgensteinian" perspective, namely that an utterance always arises from and is bound to a linguistic *practice* or convention. It is not solely the intention that determines the meaning of a linguistic utterance; it is primarily the convention, or the adherence to rules that users of language are bound to in their language use and engagement with the world. It is by virtue of such rule-following that we determine whether something is irony or not. Therefore, one can also conceive of an utterance that the speaker has intended as ironic, but it is not irony because it does not meet the requirements set by the linguistic game. A can remain just A, or perhaps become B in Japp's definition. The relationship between A and B can be overturned or distorted in such a way that one's own relationship can take on a different form. Intention does not guarantee successful irony, as most people have likely experienced uncomfortable encounters like this.[25]

In addition to this more logical objection, there is the problem that intention-based theory cannot account for irony in literature. Or, at best, it can only account for the most obvious and least interesting cases of irony in fiction. This may especially apply to drama, something to which I shall return. But for now, I will conclude this brief discussion of some linguistic attempts to define irony by fitting it into a roughly scientific model. Here, the most common response to irony's tendency to expand is either, as Grice does, to greatly narrow the concept of irony or to give up the claim to saying anything comprehensively and restrict oneself to describing only intended linguistic irony.

This is too conceptually narrow, however, especially for someone wishing to discuss *Peer Gynt*. Irony throws a wrench in the works, at least in rigid models, and in *Peer Gynt* the uncontrollable characteristic of irony is fully evident. One

[25] The foregoing, however, does not imply that I would argue for the absurd view that irony has nothing to do with intentionality in the broad hermeneutic sense. Irony, as mentioned, relies on a linguistic-social rule-following practice and, in this sense, entails an intentional act. See also Linda Hutcheon's *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (1995, 11ff, 116ff) .

case of this expansive and uncontrollable irony can be seen in connection with Peer's theory of existence as a kind of ethical zero-sum game: "'he who does / No ill does good' [...] That my past mistakes will be overlooked / And my virtues be seen to outweigh my sins" (Ibsen 1972b, 331).[26] First, it should be noted how Peer's statement constitutes an ironic twist on Christ's own words: "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters" (Matthew 12:30). In relation to Jesus' absolute demand for total commitment, Peer represents the opposite – compromise and half-heartedness. This ironic relationship can, of course, be interpreted in various ways, yet the text's point is not necessarily to show that Peer is wrong and orthodox, pietistic Christianity is the only solution. The matter becomes more complex, however, with von Eberkopf's enthusiastic response, when, "clinking glasses" with Peer, he says:

> How invigorating it is to hear
> Of a life-principle put into practice
> Released from the dark night of theory,
> Uninfluenced by external protest!
> (Ibsen 1972b, 331)[27]

Here, the irony targets both subject and object. von Eberkopf speaks ironically by praising a life-principle that might appear to be simply a lack of principles, and this appears to target the object of his praise, namely Peer. Whether the irony is intended or not is of no importance. More interesting, however, is how this statement also contains a broader form of irony, a kind of meta-irony. von Eberkopf, in fact, advocates a certain way of interpreting Peer, which has also been the dominant way of interpreting *Peer Gynt*, as a text, namely as the staging of a "life-principle," albeit not so removed from "the dark night of theory." This mode of reading *Peer Gynt*, as a somber, ethical-religious text, has therefore been anticipated by von Eberkopf, and combined with a "Begriffenfeldtian" interpretive strategy, where everything Peer says is perceived as

[26] "hver den, som ej gjør ondt, gjør godt [...] jeg kan holde mer end mangen, /med Dyder mine Synder Stangen" (Ibsen 2007, 606).

[27] Hvor det er styrkende at høre
et Livsprincip i Scene satt,
forløst fra Theoriens Natt,
urokket af det ydre Røre!
(Ibsen 2007, 606)

"an allegory!" (Ibsen 1972b, 364). Now, it remains uncertain as to whether it poses an insurmountable problem for an interpretation to be ironically anticipated by von Eberkopf or Begriffenfeldt, but it might be worth considering whether this ironic turn towards the interpreter also carries a warning.

Romantic and Dramatic Irony

This tendency toward extension and expansion is often evident in dramatic irony. The discrepancy or contrast between that which is expressed, and the expression's real meaning creates a foundation here. The pretense that appears to characterize irony is, however, *not* consciously or intentionally expressed in cases of dramatic irony – or it is at least very rare. But before we delve deeper into dramatic irony, a brief historical account may be useful.[28]

The concept of dramatic or tragic irony is surprisingly young. Dramatic irony, as *we* understand it today, is found in neither antiquity nor the Romantic era. Aristotle does not use the term irony when discussing tragedy. The Romantics do, but in a very different sense than our contemporary understanding. Our notion of irony in drama is therefore post-Romantic, even though it likely originates as a continuation of Romantic reflections.

The notion that there are "dramatic" and "tragic" forms of irony first appears in lectures given by Adam Müller in Dresden in 1806.[29] In these lectures, he distinguished between two forms of irony: tragic and comic. According to Müller, the task of dramatic irony is to unite tragic and comic elements through the poet's omnipresence within the work. This should then elevate the spectator "into the higher ironic sphere, from where the creation of the master is observed in the most divine tranquility" (1967, 198).[30] As one can see, this is a kind of divine irony. It is primarily present in comedies, from Aristophanes onwards, but also in Shakespeare's tragedies. Müller wants to contribute to a "salvation of dramatic irony"

[28] I owe much to Ernst Behler's short book on the subject (1972). See, however, also Manfred Frank's *Einführung in die frühromantische Ästhetik* (1989) and G.G. Sedgewick's *Of Irony: Especially in Drama* (1935).

[29] Müller, Adam. 1967. "Über die dramatische Kunst. Vorlesungen gehalten zu Dresden 1806," in *Kritische/ästhetische und philosophische Schriften I*, edited by Walter Schroder and Werner Siebert. Berlin: Luchterhand.

[30] "in die höhere ironische Sphäre, von wo aus die Schöpfung des Meisters in göttlichster Ruhe betrachtet wird."

("Rettung der dramatischen Ironie"), and claims that the tragicomic is the essence of dramatic art, because in it one encounters an exchange between "excessive laughter and deep tragic emotions" ("[u]nmäßiges Lachen und tiefe tragische Empfindungen") (1967, 198, 182): "Therefore, the discerning spectator cannot say, after the true depictions of dramatic art, whether it was play and irony or earnestness that led him to the heights of life" (1967, 187).[31] It should be apparent that this does not represent a developed theory, but instead loosely constructed – if interesting – idealistic claims about drama, with particular emphasis on Shakespeare, that emphasize the correspondences between drama and the theater of life.

August Wilhelm Schlegel argued against this in his 1808 lectures on dramatic art and literature in Vienna, claiming that "Where the truly tragic occurs, all irony indeed ceases" (Schlegel 1923, 141).[32] Thus, for the eldest Schlegel brother irony and tragedy were incompatible. He could, however, accept that there was irony in abundance in what was called "romantic drama," such in Shakespeare and Calderon. This was because it was believed that one could find in these playwrights a combination of the comic and the tragic in a sort of equal balance. The serious element must be balanced by the playful, comic. Schlegel claims in the same lectures that Shakespeare's comedic elements – where irony is active – constituted "the antechamber of poetry" ("das Vorzimmer der Poesie," 1923, 142). By this, he means that irony mediates between comedy's lightness and tragedy's inevitable fate, which demands strict seriousness.

Further, he claims that the irony in Shakespeare, as in narrative prose, is an expression of the author's presence in their own work. Thus, in romantic drama, irony can be found not only in individual characters but can permeate the entirety of the action. Here we find the beginnings of a theory of dramatic irony, but the philosophical foundation for this theory is the same as for the other Romantics. August Wilhelm Schlegel therefore asserts that this ironic authorial presence in Shakespeare is an expression of the fact that the author should "not himself be captivated by the depicted subject, but rather float freely above it, and that he could, if he so wished, unrelentingly destroy the beautiful, irresistibly alluring illusion that he had conjured up himself." (1923, 142).[33] In this sense, irony is an expression of human self-reflective freedom.[34]

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[31] "Daher kann der sinnvolle Zuschauer nach den wahren Darstellungen der dramatischen Kunst nicht sagen, ob es Spiel und Ironie oder Ernst war, was ihn auf die Höhe des Lebens geführt."

[32] "Wo das eigentlich Tragische eintritt, hört freylich alle Ironie auf."

[33] "nicht selbst in dem dargestellten Gegenstande befangen sey, sondern frey über ihm schwebe,

But he asserts nonetheless (and perhaps therefore) categorically that tragedy is fundamentally incompatible with irony.

The elder Schlegel does not seem to share his younger brother Friedrich Schlegel's universal concept of irony, but views irony more as a literary technique, albeit rather undefined and vague, that is limited to romantic literature. Of course, this view provoked debate. For Friedrich Schlegel, as for Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand Solger, it would have been something of a catastrophe to exclude irony from the highest form of art, namely classical tragedy. For Solger, and, presumably, for the younger Schlegel, irony is the essence of art and thus must also be present in the heart of tragedy. For Solger, jest and seriousness, comedy and tragedy, play and melancholy are opposites that must be dissolved by the divinely free yet worldly subject; and this occurs through irony. As Ernst Behler has pointed out, for Solger irony "does not consist of artistic tricks and figures, but rather expresses a mood of finitude, melancholy, and transience that enlivens the work and manifests itself in aesthetic creation" (Behler 1972, 142).[35] This is thus not a particularly useful or productive concept of irony. And it is also typical that Solger and Schlegel have almost no concrete development of irony from a literary work.[36]

Romantic irony is, however, also important in *Peer Gynt*. It is clearly present in several of the work's meta-poetic elements. For example, in Act IV, Peer sits and admires Anitra's enticing dance while reflecting on beauty: "But what is beauty? A pure convention, – / Value depends on where and when" (Ibsen 1972b, 348).[37] Ibsen himself claimed in letters to Brandes and Bjørnson that "the conventions of beauty" (Ibsen 2007 12, 355)[38] are not something one should take seriously, or feel obliged to follow. Regardless of any biographical context, there are good reasons argue that this scene reflects upon beauty more generally, and that it thus thematizes itself in an ironic form. Peer's aesthetic

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und daß er den schönen, unwiderstehlich anziehenden Schein, den er slbst hervorgezaubert, wenn er anders wollte, unerbittlich vernichten könnte."

[34] See also Frank 1989, 33ff.

[35] "in artistischen Kunstgriffen und Figuren besteht, sondern eine das Werk beseelende, in der ästhetischen Schöpfung selbst sich bekundende Stimmung der Endlichkeit, Wehmut und Vergänglichkeit zum Ausdruck bringt."

[36] There are, of course, some exceptions regarding Friedrich Schlegel. For example, in his review of Goethes *Wilhelm Meister*.

[37] "men hvad er Skjønhed? En Vedtægt kun, – / en Mynt, som er gangbar till Sted og Stund" (Ibsen 2007, 631).

[38] "Skjønheds-Vedtægterne" (Ibsen 2007, 12, 355).

reflection constitutes a rupture, pointing to a reflexive freedom of the subject in relation to the given, the genius's infinite and free creative power. At the same time, the text reflects an insight into death, into the fleeting nature of everything, including beauty and art: and consequently, into *Peer Gynt* itself. Another and perhaps clearer case can be found in the same act, where Peer reflects on his life in light of the loss of Anitra: "'Forward or back, it's the same distance; / 'Out or in, it's equally narrow', – / As I once read in some high-flown article. –" (Ibsen 1972b, 359).[39] Not only is this a self-quotation of one of Peer's lines from earlier in Act II, as indicated by the use of quotation marks, but the "high-flown article" – the "aandrigt Skrift" ("spirted scripture"), as Ibsen puts it in the original – is none other the text *Peer Gynt* itself. And who can say this, from which position can such a characterization come? I believe one can see the infiniteness here.

The prime example of this form of romantic irony, not just in *Peer Gynt* but arguably in all of Norwegian literature, is found in the scene with the Strange Passenger. This is also the most thoroughly analyzed text extracts in Norwegian literature, and I will not delve into the somewhat curious question of who the Strange Passenger actually is.[40] Yet, the way in which the Strange Passenger's lines continually invite meta-dramatic speculations has been underemphasized. He claims to look "for the seat of dreams" in Peer's corpse and further explains that "where I come from the comic style / Is valued as highly as the pathetic" (Ibsen 1972b, 386). He remarks further that "The multitude / Whose dust sleeps in the grave, don't wear [buskins] day in, day out" (Ibsen 1972b, 386), which quite clearly throws us into the realm of dramatic theory.[41]

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[39] "'Atter og fram, det er lige langt; / 'ud og ind, det er lige trangt'; – / saa tror jeg der staar i et aandrigt Skrift. – (Ibsen 2007, 647).

[40] See, for example, Clemens Petersen's review of *Peer Gynt* in *Fædrelandet* (30.11.1867); Svendsen, Martin. 1922. "Den fremmede passager i *Peer Gynt.*" *Edda*; Haakonsen, Daniel. 1967. *Henrik Ibsens 'Peer* Gynt.' Oslo: Gyldendal; Elster, Jon. 1981. "Grunnforskning i humanitiske fag," in *Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi Årbok 1981*. Oslo; Føllesdal, Dagfinn, Lars Walløe and Jon Elster. 1984. *Argumentasjonsteori, språk, vitenskapfilosofi*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget; Lunden, Kåre. 1985. "Er humaniora vitskap?" *Nytt norsk tidsskrift*, 2; Hauge, Ingard. 1986. *Den fremmede passasjer. Studier i Henrik Ibsens dramatikk fra Peer Gynt til Fruen fra havet.* Oslo: Aschehoug; Elster, Jon. 1987. "Tolkning – Kunst eller vitenskap?" *Nytt norsk tidsskrift*; Lunden, Kåre. 1987. "Tolkning – forskning eller diktning?" *Nytt norsk tidsskrift*, 4; Aarseth, Asbjørn. 1988. "Finnes det en sannhet om den fremmede passasjer?" *Nytt norsk tidsskrift*, 2; Tjønneland, Eivind. 1989. "Den fremmede passasjer – et estetisk problem?" *Agora*, 2-3.

[41] In Ibsen's original, this line reads: "gaar ej till Hverdags paa Kothurner" (Ibsen 2007, 691). "Kothurner" can be translated as "buskins," and are the footwear associated with ancient tragedy.

Hermann Hettner, for instance, in his 1852 book *Das moderne Drama* – a book assumed to have been read by Ibsen – asserts that modern drama can no longer tread on buskins (Hettner 1852, 207).

But most important in our context is, of course, his concluding remark to Peer: "a fellow doesn't / Die in the middle of the fifth act" (Ibsen 1972b, 386).[42] This is romantic irony, and it is an irony that points beyond the work itself while simultaneously destabilizing its meaning. Indeed, it opens an abyss of meaning. The Strange Passenger says something that only one person — the author – can say. But it is not the author who says it; the awareness that this is fiction, that the speakers are characters in a dramatic poem and not real, living people, is presented through the Strange Passenger. During Peer's greatest existential crisis so far in the drama, where life and death are at stake, the line breaks with fiction, so to speak, over the heads of the characters themselves. Additionally, the fact the Strange Passenger's line represents a falsehood is a further complicating element; the cook has just died, along with a whole lot of other people, "in the middle of the fifth act." The situation is not made any simpler by the conclusion Peer draws regarding what has been said: "So I got it out of him at last. / What an unpleasant moralizer!" (Ibsen 1972b, 386).[43]

In this scene, we are at a point in the text where the irony threatens to become absolute or infinite. And although Ibsen famously claimed that the scene was merely inserted as a 'caprice,' it is an important part of the text. But it is not a given that this is enough to conclude that the infinite nature of romantic irony infects the work, as it were, giving it a radically indeterminate character of total irony. If many or a majority of the lines were ironic in this indeterminate way, the play itself would become 'unreadable,' without anchors or direction for understanding. The background for these rather cautious remarks regarding the relationship between the local and the global within the text is of course that, following in the wake of Deconstruction's revitalization of the Romantics' reflections on irony, there has been a marked tendency to let such local 'abysses' swallow the totality of the text. And Paul de Man himself must take some responsibility for this kind of possibly overly bold reading, given his claim that irony "possesses an inherent tendency to gain momentum and not to stop until it has run its full deception it soon reaches the dimensions of the absolute" (de Man 1983, 215).

[42] "man dør ej midt i femte Akt" (Ibsen 2007, 691).

[43] "Der slap det ud af ham tillsidst; – / han var en traakig Moralist" (Ibsen 2007, 691).

For despite de Man's repeated insistence on the necessity of the close reading of texts through a concrete rhetorical analysis, as free as possible from theoretical prejudices that might steer the analysis away from the literary text, he seems here to launch a general theory of irony as absolute. He appears to initially judge the question of irony's status in *any* text; if one first discovers ironic elements, one cannot "stop until it has run its full course," and "reaches the dimensions of the absolute" (de Man 1979, 16). At the moment one recognizes there may be irony in a text, one cannot "stop" until the total or infinite irony reveals itself. This is a rather peculiar stance, especially as irony is something that, in some form or another, can be detected in most literary texts. One might thus reasonably question the point of continuing to study literature, since, in what appears to be the consequence of de Man's view, every study ends in the same inevitable result: irony is total. That de Man does not perceive this as problematic raises another issue. In *Allegories of Reading*, he asserts that "the whole of literature" acts in the same way, reflecting its own "unreadability," suspending understanding, and so on. Therefore, he argues that demonstrating this in new texts "will in fact be the task of literary criticism in the coming years" (de Man 1979, 17).

For de Man, irony constitutes a kind of trope of tropes. Etymologically, trope means "turning" in a double sense. It is this indeterminate turning away from a literal meaning that fascinates de Man. Despite his astute discussions of irony in literary and philosophical contexts, his thinking about irony often risks devolving into a new form of schematism, where all analyses are predestined to end. *Allegories of Reading* concludes with the assertion that "Irony is no longer a trope but the undoing of the deconstructive allegory of all tropological cognitions, the systematic undoing, in the other words, of understanding. As such, far from closing off tropological system, irony enforces the repetition of its aberration" (de Man 1979, 301). This is not among the most instructive or concrete of statements, but it is typical enough. It might be tempting here to quote Uwe Japp, who says that it is meaningless to talk about irony when everything is irony. Yet, de Man himself touched on this point towards the end of his life. In a letter to Wlad Godzich, he writes that "Irony is a dangerous term, because people think they know what the word means and this forecloses all understanding. 'Reading' is much better" (Waters 1989, lxxiii). And one could perhaps agree with him, albeit in a somewhat more ironic manner...

It should, however, be emphasized that of course irony in literary texts does sometimes occur as de Man describes it, although the notion that it always

does is *overly* ironic. Certainly, the irony that emerges in the scenes with the Stranger Passenger is a romantic irony, undermining any attempt to fit the scene into an unambiguous interpretation, for instance, emphasizing the "awakening" aspect of the Strange Passenger's statement about "angst." But we will set aside for now the question of whether the infinity of this irony affects the text of *Peer Gynt* as a whole – we must now return to dramatic irony.

Interestingly, it is first in the article "On the Irony of Sophocles" written in 1833 by the Anglican bishop Connop Thirlwall, that we find the modern definition of dramatic irony. Thirlwall understands this idea is new, as he opens the article by saying, "Some readers may be a little surprised to see irony attributed to a *tragic* poet" (Thirlwall 1833, 483). He apologizes, too, towards the end of the article for any resistance against his idea of tragic irony, which might be seen as "a modern [idea], and that instead of finding it in Sophocles we have forced it upon him" (1833, 531). Nevertheless, this concept of tragic or dramatic irony was accepted within a few years and it still stands.

Thirlwall distinguishes between three forms of irony: verbal, dialectical, and practical irony. Verbal irony is rhetoric's classical spoken form, while dialectical irony has most typically been expressed in Plato's dialogues, in which irony, according to Thirlwall, completely permeates a mental totality. In contrast to these two forms, practical irony is independent of all forms of speech, and needs no assistance from words, as Thirlwall says. This is quite a comprehensive form of irony. One of his examples concerns how we sometimes eagerly await something we have worked long and hard to achieve, only to experience it as a great disappointment when the goal is achieved, while things we completely disregard may become of the greatest importance for us. This form of irony therefore ranges from everyday situations to relationships between states, and ultimately the relationship between God and humans. The perspective one has or should have on practical irony is compared by Thirlwall to:

> the look which a superior intelligence, exempt from our passions, and capable of surveying all our relations, and foreseeing the consequences of all our actions, would have cast upon tumultuous workings of our blind ambition and our groundless apprehensions, upon the phantoms we raised to chase us, or to be chased. (1833, 487).

This is probably not important for the contemporary form of the concept of dramatic irony, but it may be interesting to see the connection between dra-

matic irony and "teatrum mundi," or the Baroque and Renaissance notion of the world as an unreal theatre, and life as a dream. That this is the model for dramatic irony becomes clear when Thirlwall says that the playwright is:

> the creator of a little world, in which he rules with absolute sway [...] From this sphere however he himself stands aloof. The eye with which he views his microcosm [...] will be that with which he imagines the invisible power who orders the destiny of man might regard the world and its doings. (1833, 481).

It is the author's divine power and overview of the little world he creates that forms the basis of the theory of dramatic irony. But the theory has an important additional element, namely that the playwright, unlike God, is not completely free; he is constrained by circumstances. What we today might call context limits the playwright's free rein over the little world. Within Greek tragedy, for example, heroes had to be tied to legends and tales that were more or less already understood by the audience. This is an important aspect of irony in drama; it presupposes a certain movement back and forth, a certain memory and a certain anticipation, retrospection and foresight. The material of tragedy was well-known to the audience then, as it is now; a reasonably educated spectator does not wonder about what is going to happen to Oedipus, Antigone, Hamlet, or Lear, but perhaps one wonders a bit in regards to Peer?

Given these premises, Thirlwall can show in detail the varied richness of Sophocles' irony. This is an irony that lies not only in the many ambiguous lines, but also in the situations that arise. For example, from the very beginning Oedipus exerts all his power to find and punish the guilty – who is himself, which the audience already knows. But there is often irony in the form of ambiguous or multiple meanings within the lines that dominate a drama, and this is also the case in *Oedipus Rex*, a drama overflowing with such examples. The conversation between Tiresias and Oedipus is just one of many. As is well known, the play contains a complex interplay between "blindness" and "insight," which gives rise to many ironic lines.

130 years after Thirlwall, James McFarlane defines dramatic irony as a discrepancy within the text between what is said and what is the case, where "what is the case" is communicated to the spectator/reader directly through other lines, or indirectly through gestures, actions, or stage directions. The basic form of dramatic irony is thus understood as follows: "a secret shared by one char-

acter with the audience, a secret from which the other characters are excluded, a secret which thus lends extra meaning to every remark that passes on stage" (McFarlane 1966, 39-40).[44] As we have seen, intended, conscious irony is not the dominant form in *Peer Gynt*. There are not many examples of such intended irony, where a character deliberately says something that does not align with the facts, and where knowledge of what is the case is shared by the audience and the character. I have already mentioned some of the examples of this. This form of irony, when it appears, is usually quite simple and straightforward in the sense that it is not difficult to see what is "actually" meant. It is stable and "cancels itself," as Kierkegaard says (1989, 248).

In *Peer Gynt*, the dominant form of irony is of a more complicated character, namely *unintended*, dramatic irony, which arises from a discrepancy between what a person says (and thinks) and what is actually the case. The speaker becomes an involuntarily victim of an ironic effect of what he himself or she herself says. McFarlane has formalized this form of dramatic irony as follows: "a character: says = thinks ≠ the case" (McFarlane 1966, 43). In this form of irony, there is an identity between the line and the speaker's consciousness – he appears sincere – but their consciousness does not align with the actual circumstances. Given the discrepancy between sincere speech and the world of the text, this unintended irony undermines the speaker. The reader's knowledge of the context causes many lines in *Peer Gynt* to directly target the speaker, who then becomes a victim of their own – unintended – irony. Indeed, it might be the case that *all* the characters in the play are targeted by this form of irony at some point during the play. Here I will highlight just one example from Act IV, in which Peer reflects on his new situation:

> To be yourself on the basis of gold
> Is like trying to build a house on sand.
> [...]
> A prophet; now there the position is clearer.
> You know at least what footing you're on.
> If you prosper, it's you – not your pounds,
> Shillings and pence – that gets the applause.

[44] In addition to McFarlane's essay "Meaning and evidence in Ibsen's Drama" (1966), see Mitsuya Mōri's "Ibsen's Dramatic Irony" (1971, 118) and Wayne C. Booth's *A Rhetoric of Irony* (1974, 150-151, 255).

> You are what you are, and no nonsense;
> You're not indebted to luck or chance[.]
> (Ibsen 1972b, 347)[45]

If ever Peer is unsure, relying purely on luck and chance, it is probably here.

In addition to this form of unintended dramatic irony, we find numerous examples of ironic situations and unintended irony that target someone other than the speaker. This latter form of irony represents a variant of the type we've been discussing so far. It can be described as a sincere statement about the world that exposes *the person being discussed* as well as the speaker to irony's subversive effect. Examples of this include Begriffenfeldt's praise of Peer in the fourth act, where he is declared both emperor and the emperor of the self. Another example could be Aase's concern about whether she has been too strict with her boy. These dominant forms of irony in the play differ from simple, intentional irony in that they are more indeterminate or ambiguous. They cannot be easily defined as coherent statements. Such deeply ambiguous irony cannot be settled by transitioning from one univocal meaning to another.

The End: Irony's Critique or Critique of Irony

We thus see how irony is more or less omnipresent in the text. Now, I have of course not "discovered" the irony in *Peer Gynt*. It has always been acknowledged, but there has been a clear tendency to underemphasize it. The really central question is, however, whether and how dramatic irony in the play is connected to the message of the text. Somewhat oversimplified, it is often thought that irony is there to criticize Peer the ironist or aesthete; that is, that the text, among other things, shows through irony how Peer is unable to be

[45] Være sig selv paa Grundlag af Guld,
det er som at bygge sit Hus paa Sandet.
Profet; se, det er en klarere Stilling.
Da ved man dog paa hvad Fod man staar.
Slaar man an, saa er det *en selv*, som faar
Ovationen, og ej ens Pundsterling og Shilling.
Man er, hvad man er, foruden Snakk;
man skylder ej Slump eller Tillfælde Takk,
(Ibsen 2007, 629)

himself, how he cheats in existence, how he is a troll that "goes round and about," avoiding all crucial existential choices.[46] The goal for all of the text's and the protagonist's ironic twists and turns is thus for Peer to become himself, to form a deeper, sincere, personal, existential and/or religious relationship with himself and his own life. Irony in this case is perceived as what drives the protagonist forward, revealing his half-hearted and inadequate nature, living at an arm's length from his own life. This is one possible reading, and it is by far the most common. But there are still a few problems that must be discussed.

The first concerns the main idea and consistent theme of the text: "to be oneself." The question of the subject, its relationship to itself, and the external world, can be seen as the great question of the nineteenth century, from Kant to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Despite the immense complexity of the question, *Peer Gynt* has often been approached with a rather simplistic (Kierkegaard-inspired) doctrine about subject, choice, and existence.[47] Ibsen the taskmaster aims to teach his protagonist (and us) through a philosophical *via negativa* to choose with seriousness and sincerity, and, not least, to face the consequences of that choice. Or, put another way: Peer should have stayed with Solveig, the teenage girl who shows up after they have exchanged two or three sentences, worked through all his difficulties and lived a dignified life of labor and sacrifice. I cannot help but find this interpretation somewhat... disappointing? Moreover, there is a determinative fundamental problem with this reading's condemnation of Peer, namely that it tends to undermine the text and the sense of lively abundance, vitality, richness and ambiguity that makes it so refreshing to read even today.

Implicitly at least, it has been assumed that the text demonstrates how Peer should have become either some sort of "nine-fingered farmer" or Brand. But even Brand is subject to quite devastating (ironic) criticism. On the other hand, it is is precisely through a project of evasion, by escaping commitment, that the nine-fingered farmer loses his finger. Moreover, his project of being himself

[46] See, for example: Bryndhildsvoll, Knut. 1988. "Das Nachleben der romantischen Ironie in Henrik Ibsens 'Peer Gynt' – Der Einfluß Kierkegaards." In *Studien zum Werk und Werkeinfluss Henrik Ibsens.* Leverkusen: Literaturverlag Norden M. Reinhardt.

[47] For a thorough analysis that implements such a perspective, see Dagne Groven Myhren's article "Hverken eller og Enten eller. Et bidrag til belysning av personlighetsproblematikken i Henrik Ibsens *Peer Gynt*" (1979), and Hans Ording's "Ibsen og Kierkegaard om "å være sig selv" (1928).

through sacrifice is constituted through mutilation, perhaps even a form of castration. More importantly, this text presents a *multitude* of complex versions of what it means to be oneself. The world of the trolls and the Old Man of Dovre is one such version.

Interestingly enough, the "troll scenes" begin by posing a question similar to that posed by the play itself: "Is it true?" (Ibsen 1972b, 292). The Woman in Green's question points to an important theme both within these scenes and in their relation to the rest of the play. The question of truth or falsehood is at stake in several ways in the troll scenes. The text allows for the possibility that it is all untrue in the sense that it lacks reality, occurring only in Peer's mind, from the moment he "rushes forward and collides with a rock" and "falls and lies on the ground motionless" until he lies "asleep by the wall" and "wakes up with heavy eyes" (Ibsen 1972b, 292, 305).[48] Yet, at the same time, several characters from the Troll King's hall reappear later in the play, in different contexts. Peer encounters both the Woman in Green and the Troll King in later scenes that are crucial to the story, which should indicate that they have a different and more "real" status within the fiction of the text.

After the question of truth is posed, the conversation between Peer and the Woman in Green continues with both of them boasting unrestrainedly about themselves and their origins. She claims that she ordinarily wears "silk and gold" to which Peer quickly retorts that it looks to him "like shoddy and straw" (Ibsen 1972b, 293). She then explains the method that applies to the "Ronde folk": "everything we own / Has two different ways of being looked at" (Ibsen 1972b, 293). And within this ambiguous, ironic form, Peer can feel right at home:

> WOMAN IN GREEN: Black can be white, and the ugly beautiful.
> PEER: Big can seem little, and filth seem clean.
> WOMAN IN GREEN (throwing her arms round his neck): Oh, Peer, I can see we were made for each other.
> PEER: Like a leg and breeches, like [hair and comb].
> (Ibsen 1972b, 293)[49]

[48] Later in the play Peer also says: "Bøjgen, som jeg slog i Skallen, – / det vil sige, jeg drømte, – for jeg lå i feber" (Ibsen 2007, 651). This can be rendered literally as: "The Bøjg, whom I hit on the skull, – / that is to say, I dreamed, – because I lay in a fever."

[49] DEN GRØNKLÆDTE: Svart tykkes hvidt, og styggt tykkes vent.

The troll's exclusive focus on ironic discrepancy, wherein everything "has two ways of being looked at," has the function of making everything appear to be "beautiful." In this sense, the troll's gaze is not one of ironic double vision, but rather a levelling perspective that makes everything the same, albeit equally grand. The prerequisite for this way of seeing the world is further, that one relates strictly "omphalopsychically," to use Kierkegaard's term again (Kierkegaard 1989, 152). The troll's way of being oneself means that within the world's 'double nature' (*tvefold*), one constantly relates so freely that everything appears grand. Interpreting the world in this way presupposes a peculiar form of blindness; that one sees only the self and its advantages.[50] The first vow the Troll King demands of Peer is that he "banish from [his] mind / Everything outside this kingdom" (Ibsen 1972b, 295). Enclosed in one's own kingdom and cut off from everything foreign, even the valley outside, the troll's gaze can make everything beautiful and pure, even though the food is likely excrement and the women bestial. The "potent, thundering" word "*sufficient*" must be part of Peer's "coat-of-arms" (Ibsen 1972b, 296).[51] Yet, as Peer cannot manage this, and his human gaze allows him to constantly see things from more than just one perspective, he must be scratched in the eye so that *everything* he sees "will be rich and strange" (Ibsen 1972b, 298).[52] And it is the permanence of this operation that causes Peer to reconsider. For a while, he could probably feel at ease within an interpretive universe like this, but he wants the freedom to change his mind, to see things from another perspective.

The troll is self-sufficient ("seg selv – nok"), completely navel-gazing, it enjoys only its own familiar context, at a safe distance from the other, the foreign. The rich man and the pure egoist Peer, as we meet him at the opening of Act 4, is another version of being oneself. Surprisingly often, it has been thought that what Peer does not understand is that he himself is merely a version of the trolls. In this case, one agrees with the Troll King, who in the final act says to Peer:

PEER GYNT: Stort tykkes lidt, og skident tykkes rent.
DEN GRØNKLÆDTE (falder ham om Halsen): Ja, Peer, saa ser jeg, vi to passer sammen!
PEER GYNT: Som Benet og Brogen; som Haaret og Kammen.
(Ibsen 2007, 546)

[50] Yet, it is not this simple, as Dovregubben also knows about the valley and what lies outside; his insistence on this border presupposes knowledge of what lies beyond the border and the other. Dovregubben's project presupposes a *difference* between troll and human, mountain and valley.

[51] "'*Nok*,' min Søn, det kløvende, stærke
Ord maa staa i dit Vaabenmærke" (Ibsen 2007, 550).

[52] "tykkes gjildt og gjæv" (Ibsen 2007, 555).

You've lived as a troll without admitting it.
The word I taught you gave you the power
To hoist yourself up to the top of the ladder; [...]
Wait; I can show you in black and red
How the *Bloksberg Post* applauds and reveres you;
As the *Hekle Mountain Times* has done [...]
The writer makes a point of the fact
That horns and tails are of small importance
As long as a good skin-grafting is there.
'Our sufficiency,' he concludes, 'gives a man
The hall-mark of the troll,' and then
He goes on to quote *you* as a fine example.
(Ibsen 1972b, 408-409. Emphasis in original.)[53]

Their kinship is clear enough in terms of egoism and self-glorification. But one should nonetheless remember what constitutes the main difference between Peer and the trolls: the ability and will to change perspective. Furthermore, one should reflect on the fact that the first to apply this interpretation to Peer is the Troll King himself. In light of his peculiar troll hermeneutics, one should exercise some caution before adopting his perspective on Peer's nature. The ironic Peer is even more liberated from the given; he has the ability to see things as *both* black and white. It is also important that Peer does not fear that which is foreign; he has ventured out into the world, in encounters with difference, which to be sure often take on a highly ironic character.

Regarding the common view that *Peer Gynt*, as a study of what not to do, shows what it is Peer messes up – namely, the chance to fully and truly be him-

[53] Som Troll har du levet, men stødt holdt det hemmeligt.
Ordet, jeg lærte dig, har satt dig istand
till at svinge dig tillvejrs som en holden Mand; [...]
Vent; her skal du se med rødt paa sort,
hvor «Bloksbergs-Posten» dig lover og priser;
og det samme har « Heklefjelds-Tidende» gjort
Skribenten drager den Sandhed frem,
at det lidet kommer an paa Horn og Hale,
bare en forresten af Huden har en Rem.
«Vort *nok*», saa slutter han, «gier Troldets Stempel
till Manden», – og saa nævner han dig, som Exempel.
(Ibsen 2007, 724-725. Emphasis in original.)

self – one should not least remember how the text also provides a critical and ironic portrayal of the consistent, fully-formed, and self-identical personality. At the end of Act IV, the text illustrates how the self or personality can be cultivated to the point that it becomes a prison, as we see in the depiction of the madhouse inmates. After Peer heedlessly claims that he has always tried to be "myself, in every respect," Begriffenfeldt introduces him to several individuals who have this as their sole project (Ibsen 1972b, 368). For, these individuals cannot be "[a] little bit here and a little bit there," as Brand puts it (Ibsen 1972b, 89). Rather, they are:

> a man's himself with a vengeance;
> Himself, and nothing else whatsoever; –
> The self full sail, full speed ahead.
> Each one shut up in the cask of self,
> Immersed in the fermentation of self,
> Hermetically sealed with the bung of self,
> The barrel pickled in a bath of self.
> No one has tears for the other men's pain;
> No one accepts other men's notions.
> (Ibsen 1972b, 368)[54]

The text, moreover, illustrates how the unwaveringly cultivated personality borders upon madness. To fully be oneself in self-identity involves refining the self at the exclusion of everything else, so that the self becomes "[f]ull of himself, not another thing" (Ibsen 1972b, 370).[55] The fully-formed personality, which is only ever itself, avoids the dialectical encounter with the other, wherein the self is at stake, and thus represents an identity *without* any difference or otherness. In evaluating

[54] sig selv aldeles forbandet;
sig selv og ikke det ringeste andet; –
man gaar, som sig selv, for fulde Sejl.
Hver lukker sig inde i selvets Tønde,
i selvets Gjæring han dukker tillbunds, –
han stænger hermetisk med selvets Spunds
og tættner Træet i selvets Brønde.
Ingen har Graad for de andres Veer;
ingen har Sans for de andres Ideer.
(Ibsen 2007, 660)

[55] "Af *sit eget* er han fyldt, og af det alene (Ibsen 2007, 663).

the text, the fact that it also shows the obvious dangers of an idealistic worship of subjectivity it seems important, in that only fanatically being oneself in this way is represented as sheer madness. Further, these scenes also contain a meaningful and ironic anticipation of the Button Moulder's definition: "To be one's self is to kill one's self" (Ibsen 1972b, 411).[56] In the madhouse scenes, this good dialectical definition is made so grotesquely literal – through the suicides of the Fellah and Hussein – that it must be of importance in interpretation. Now, it is hardly reasonable to claim that the ironically literalized version of the Button Molder's doctrine of personality causes everything to dissolve into endless ambiguity. Rather, it appears impossible to consider one without the other and that they both modify and nuance each other. The text not only criticizes Peer's unpredictability and partial inconsistency, but also makes the fully formed and thoroughly self-identical personality equally the target of the text's irony.

If one continues to examine the many places in the text where the focus is on being oneself, one will consistently find this ironic ambiguity. Yet the text itself has seemingly provided a solution to all these problems and ambiguities, and this solution lies in the conclusion. As Act IV ends, Peer "sinks down unconscious," and is crowned by Begriffenfeldt as "the Emperor Self" (Ibsen 1972b, 374).[57] Yet as Act V opens, we meet the protagonist again, this time as "a vigorous old man with ice-grey hair and beard" (Ibsen 1972b, 375).[58] He has thus partially rebuilt himself after his great fortune went "to the devil," but he will not remain "the rich old rascal" for long (Ibsen 1972b, 376);[59] the final act builds in tension as Peer moves from one crisis to the next.

Such a built-up sense of crisis has often been pinpointed in the so-called "onion scene," in which Peer is believed to have come to the frightening realization that he is without a core.[60] On the other hand, this scene has been criticized more recently by Jan Kjærstad, who, in both articles and fictional works, argues that Ibsen has created a poor metaphor here because an onion is constitutively without a core.[61] The onion is not a core but rather a layer of leaves.

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[56] "At være sig selv, er: sig selv at døde" (Ibsen 2007, 729).

[57] "(*synker i Afmagt*) [...] selvets Kejser" (Ibsen 2007, 668–669).

[58] "*en kraftig gammel Mand med isgraat Haar og Skjægg*" (Ibsen 2007, 671).

[59] "foer Fanden i Vold. [...] / den rige Styggen" (Ibsen 2007, 673–674).

[60] See, for example, Haakonsen 1967, 153.

[61] See, for example, Kjærstad's novel *The Seducer*, where he writes: "It's a poor look-out when an author comes up with a bad analogy, but it's even worse when such an analogy is given credence

Therefore, it constitutes a bad metaphor for a particular person's negative trait of being without a core: *all* onions are like that. I believe, however, that both interpretations miss a crucial aspect of the scene. Firstly, it should be noted how, as the scene begins, Peer "laughs inwardly" before saying "You soothsaying jackass! / You're no Emperor; you're an onion" (Ibsen 1972b, 396).[62] When he then wishes to "peel" himself, he says this in a lightly humorous tone, under the premise that he is an onion (and thus without a core). He then "takes the onion and peels off the layers," which depicts his multifaceted life: "shipwrecked man," "gold-digg[er]," "ancient-historian," "prophet," and so on (396).[63] And the playful lightness seems not to have disappeared when he asks the rhetorical question "[w]ill the heart of it never come to light?":

> (*He pulls the whole onion to pieces.*)
> My god, no, it won't! Right to the centre
> It's all made of layers – but smaller and smaller.
> Nature is witty! [...]
> A peculiar business, this whole affair!
> Life, they say, has a card up its sleeve.
> But it disappears when you try to take it,
> And you've something else in your hand – or nothing.
> (Ibsen 1972b, 396–397)[64]

In light of this self-ironic laughter, Peer plays a little game with the coreless onion,

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and adopted as some sort of moral guideline, not to mention being elevated to the status of a kind of national emblem. Who in the world would expect to find a kernel in an onion? I mean, it's nothing but a bundle of *leaves*! Botanically speaking, it's the absolute height of nonsense!" (Kjærstad 2006, 110. Emphasis in the original. Translated by Barbara J. Haveland.)

[62] "ler indvendig." [...] "Du gamle Spaamands-Gjøg! / Du er ingen Kejser; du er en Løg!" (Ibsen 2007, 704–705).

[63] "Havsnødsmanden," "Guldgraver," "Oldtidsgransker," "Profet" (Ibsen 2007, 705).

[64] *(plukker hele Løgen opp)*
Nej-Gud om den gjør! Till det inderste indre
er altsammen Lag, – bare mindre og mindre. –
Naturen er vittig! [...]
Underligt Stell, det hele Røre!
Livet, som det kaldes, har en Ræv bag Øre.
Men griber en till, sætter Mikkel paa Spring,
og en fanger noget andet – eller ingenting.
(Ibsen 2007, 705–706)

and without any order or chronology reflects on the changes in his life. It is no less important that the conclusion he comes to is not that he has failed but, rather, that "Nature is witty" and life "has a card up its sleeve." It suggests that the world and life are something ironic, in which the subject is free, yet unable to perceive the larger pattern in a decisive way that can hinder one from "capturing" something other than what one had hoped ("or nothing"). And for this reason, the onion indeed serves as a *good* metaphor. The ironist (maybe like the modern subject itself?) has no core but can still enjoy the richness in the changing forms of life. Or as Kierkegaard says: "we see how Socrates does not peel off the husk in order to get to the kernel but scoops out the kernel" (Kierkegaard 1989, 45).

Things, however, become quite critical for Peer when he meets the Button Moulder and is forced to see the end, to look his own death in the eye:

> BUTTONMOULDER: [You will] be melted down. [...]
> Your grave is dug, your coffin reserved.
> The worms will luxuriate in your carcass,
> But my orders are to fetch your soul
> On my master's behalf, as soon as I can.
> (Ibsen 1972b, 401)[65]

It seems important to note that the death he is confronted with here is a radical annihilation. He is to cease completely, "be melted down" and "merge with the masses," obliterated as himself and as an individual. In the face of this possibility Peer protests and seeks continual postponement by "borrow[ing] myself for a bit," to "prove to you / That I was myself all through my life" (Ibsen 1972b, 405) Using the text's photographic metaphor, he attempts to prove that he was first a positive, and later a negative. As we have already seen, Peer's primary witness, the Troll King, fails him, after which Peer seeks "a heated room" at The Thin Man's (414). But even here, Peer cannot present his case with the right strength, for the room must not be:

[65] KNAPPESTØBEREN. Du skal smeltes om. [...]
Din Grav er gravet, din Kiste bestillt.
I Skrotten skal Ormene leve gjildt; –
men jeg har Ordre till, uden Dvælen
Paa Mesters Vegne at hente Sjælen.
(Ibsen 2007, 712)

> Not too much heat;
> And I'd like a permit to leave again
> With no trouble – what they call 'no strings' –
> If a better position offers itself.
> (Ibsen 1972b, 414)[66]

Peer is led through a series of ironic situations where dramatic irony continuously reveals that he achieves the opposite of what he desires – or appears to desire – even though he is constantly very fortunate in whom he encounters along the way. The irony in the scene with The Thin Man is that Peer presents his case so half-heartedly that he obviously does not qualify for a place in hell.[67] For, clearly The Thin Man is looking for a well-qualified candidate, who "has been himself, all his nights and days," namely: "Peter Gynt" (Ibsen 1972b, 416) Yet even this excellent opportunity to present his candidacy is squandered by Peer, who now misleads The Thin Man: "What a pleasure it was to pull his leg" (Ibsen 1972b, 417). Even at this point in the play, Peer seems, at the very least partly, to play his role ironically, and he does not take the melting ladle so seriously that he is unable to find a strongly ironically-tinged pleasure in deceiving the only one who could have secured him an exception in the form of a warm room. He maintains an ironically detached stance even towards his own death.[68]

But Peer is pressed further and famously claims that on his grave "they can write above it: "Here lies No one" (418). This must be said to be an intense realization – if indeed it is intended seriously – and Daniel Haakonsen might therefore be correct in suggesting that "the audience is not unprepared for the possibility that Peer's arc may take a new turn" (Haakonsen 1967, 155). It seems just as important, however, that when Peer in the end 'chooses' Solvejg, this constitutes anything but a free choice. For when Peer "this time" chooses to go "[s]traight," it is a choice that is so compulsively necessary that it can

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[66] Ikke for varmt; – og helst
Adgang till at gaa igjen frank og frelst, –
Rett till, som man siger, at træde tillbage,
naar der byder sig en Lejlighed till bedre Dage.
(Ibsen 2007, 735)

[67] Even his own "murder" of the cook is portrayed as: "In a shipwreck [...] I more or less robbed the cook of his life" (Ibsen 1972b, 415).

[68] For reference, see Kierkegaard's analysis of the *Apology*: 1989, 79-95.

hardly be considered a choice anymore (Ibsen 1972b, 420). In the end he chooses in order to avoid the cessation of choice, of possibility: death or the casting-ladle. Nor is it unimportant that Peer's intention in seeking out Solvejg is not that she will forgive or save him, but that the woman he betrayed will be able provide "the list of [his] sins" (419).

Moreover, it is peculiar how little emphasis there is on the fact that Solvejg, in the final scene, is depicted as clearly *blind*. The person who literally is unable to see, who is blind to Peer and knows nothing of his journey through life, is at the same time the only person who can vouch for him. Yet, it is of course not certain that this observation leads to the conclusion that Solvejg's status is entirely undermined by irony in the text. Particularly as the concept of the blind seer, from Oedipus onwards, is a kind of literary topos. Nevertheless, it seems important in Ibsen's version that only the one who cannot see and known, is in a position to say anything positive about Peer's being. His status as himself is only possible to maintain through the fanaticism of blind love, as Peer also points out:

> PEER GYNT. [...] Where was I myself, the entire, true man?
> Where did I have God's mark on my forehead?
> SOLVEIG. In my faith, in my hope, and in my love.
> PEER GYNT (*recoiling*). What are you saying? Quiet! You're mocking me!
> You have mothered that thought of the man yourself.
> (421)[69]

It is thus an explicit point in the text that the image of Peer as a whole and true personality is Solvejg's *product*.[70] The text's irony thus creates difficulties for a straightforward interpretation that aims to show that Peer has an inherent status as a fully formed personality, which Solveig carries and upholds, so to speak. For if this implies that the text criticizes Peer's far too unfettered ima-

[69] PEER GYNT. [...] Hvor var jeg, som mig selv, som den hele, den sande?
Hvor var jeg, med Guds Stempel paa min Pande?
SOLVEJG. I min Tro, i mit Haab og i min Kjærlighed.
PEER GYNT (*studser tillbage*). Hvad siger du –? Ti! Det er gjøglende Ord.
Till Gutten derinde er selv du Moer.
(Ibsen 2007, 745)

[70] That Solvejg claims that the boy "in there" also has a "father" does not change this.

gination and generally non-committal attitude toward that which is factually given, then the interpretation will necessarily encounter significant reflexive problems. Solvejg is namely the one who, perhaps more than anyone else in the play, has lived based on an image, on a fantasy that has little to do with reality. Her fantasy about Peer is also explicitly created in the text as she, like Peer earlier, has listened to Aase's stories:

> SOLVEIG (*to Aase*). Tell me some more.
> AASE (*drying her eyes*). About my son?
> SOLVEIG. Yes, all of it!
> AASE (*smiling and lifting her chin*). All? You would soon get tired.
> SOLVEIG. You'll get tired of telling it long before
> I'm tired of listening.
> (Ibsen 1972b, 288)[71]

Solveig knows exactly how to build on the unreality of stories, which there is every reason to believe are fantastical, given Aase's portrayal of her son in other contexts. And mother Aase's tales about "everything" bear fruit in the young woman, something she also tells Peer in the third act:

> SOLVEIG. One message you sent by little Helga;
> Others came with the wind and silence.
> More came with all your mother told me.
> They grew and multiplied in my dreams.
> (311-312)[72]

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[71] SOLVEJG (*till Aase*). Fortæl mig lidt mere.
AASE (*tørrer øjnene*). Om Sønnen min?
SOLVEJG. Ja; –
AASE (*smiler og knejser med Nakken*). Alting? – Trætt blev du da!
Solvejg. Før blir I trætt af Talen at føre,
end jeg af at høre.
(Ibsen 2007, 537-538)

[72] SOLVEJG. Bud har du skikket med Helga lille;
flere kom efter med Vind og i Stille.
Bud bar din Moer i alt hun fortalte,
Bud, som yngled, der Drømmene dalte.
(Ibsen 2007, 575)

Much emphasis, perhaps *too* much, has been placed on the differences between Peer and Solvejg. But from this perspective, the fact that Solvejg *can* choose is important, and she makes a decisive choice. For the rest of her life, she stands by this choice. Solvejg can in this sense be said to embody a Kierkegaardian personality. Her choice is conscious, final and, carries the weight of its consequences. She is thus a radically unified and unchanging personality, guided only by her choice. Peer, however, is *manifold* and his choices are never final; they are temporary and lack full personal commitment. Peer, the ironist, contrasts with Solvejg, the ethical-religious individual. Through Solvejg's faith, hope and love, Peer can further be saved, because she has preserved the image of the whole and true Peer, which he himself has betrayed in life.

What many overlook in this argument, however, is the fact that what is at least as striking – and perhaps at least as important for interpretation – as the differences between the two of them, are the *similarities*. The primary similarity between them, their structural similarity, lies in their profound inclination towards fantasy, toward the unreal. Where Peer's many "choices" are constituted by his ability to remain ironically detached, to stand free and poetically in relation to that which is given and his own life, Solvejg's choices are just as disconnected from reality. Choosing Peer is based only on an entirely ephemeral foundation in his person; she knows him only through Aase's fantastical tales. Moreover, Solvejg is probably the character who, more than any other in the play, lives on an image, a fantasy. In her choice there is as well a parallel to Peer, for just as we have seen that his departure from the village can be associated with the image of Kierkegaard's ironist, this is also highly applicable to Solvejg. Indeed, she breaks with her entire community, the "substantiality," when she chooses Peer, and she insists on the freedom of isolation to cultivate the the image of fantasy throughout her life.

At this point in the analysis, one must make reservations regarding how parallel Peer and Solvejg are in their attitude towards reality, and the fact that they both live off of fantasy's unreal images. Before one claims that Solvejg illustrates how one should not put fleeting fantasy before reality, one must solve the problem that lies in the fact that, strictly speaking, it is *Solvejg* – even more than Peer – who does precisely this. It seems clear based on the text that Solvejg too – both in her relationship to reality and in her relationship to fantasy – can be defined as an ironic existence in Kierkegaard's sense. On might imagine that this problem is 'solved' by reading the Solvejg-character as an expression

of how irony is a necessary condition for subjectivity. Irony provides the necessary distance, gives the negation of the given, which is the precondition for the life of the personality. Solvejg thus also appears in a more positive light: her ironic distance to the given, her break with her family and past, are what give freedom and consequence to her personal choice of positivity and fulfillment. Irony is overcome in her; it is a "controlled element" (Kierkegaard 1989, 237). Peer, on the other hand, remains fixed in the nothingness of irony. The problem, however, is that the positive "something" (Noget) on which Solvejg's standpoint is based is still constitutively empty. The definite "something" on which and for which she lives is a fantasy image, the result of rather free fabrication. And equally important is how the imaged of Peer that she vouches for, is her private creation, something to which she is a "Mother."

It therefore appears difficult to accept a reading in which fantasy, poetry, and irony are given a strongly negative value. This is not only because irony is to a great degree central, even at the end, but because a reading that removes irony in the name of existential seriousness undermines what makes *Peer Gynt* such a fabulous text, namely "[t]hat indulgent cheerfulness [...] that lively form," as Daniel Haakonsen calls it (1967, 18). The game itself, the joy, the ambiguity, and the richness cannot and will not be negated by a reader's seriousness.

In part for this reason, it is crucial that we acknowledge how undeniably central and radical the concept of irony is to Ibsen's text. As I have attempted to show, it undermines the interpreter's attempts to let the text fall into a placidly edifying and positive lesson about the duties and demands of a cohesive personality. Ibsen's dramatic poem is fundamentally open and ambiguously playful, and this is especially evident at the end of the play. As "the curtain falls," most things remain open, even the question of whether Peer lives or dies. That things do not fall into place in the end is also made explicit in the Button Molder's final line about meeting "at the last cross-road," while Solveig sings that she will watch over Peer as he sleeps and *dreams* (Ibsen 1972b, 421).

In conclusion, it should be noted that in *Peer Gynt*, we encounter a well-known logical problem or paradox, which takes the following form: can a literary work – a work of art – criticize fantasy and art? Can an ironic work itself criticize irony without falling into an ironic paradox? Can art avoid letting art have the last word? And yet, on the other hand, perhaps one could say (and maybe this is Kierkegaard's point against Hegel's position?) that it is only through irony that the ironist *can* be criticized?

Henrik Ibsen and Politics: *A Doll's House*

Ibsen wrote political dramas from the beginning to the end, yet this fact was long underplayed in Ibsen research. Many twentieth-century scholars claimed that Ibsen's plays rose above time and place and were thus less concerned with the significance of everyday life. Helland takes concrete action against this tendency, re-reading the politics of A Doll's House *closely and demonstrating that, in a fundamental way, it does away with societal norms. Helland is thoroughly pedagogical and focuses on the politics of domestic life, especially the family, financial relationships, and gender. Deep in the details, Helland emphasizes that Nora's problem is neither outdated nor reduceable to something individual or private. It is the norms and laws that apply to this society that are at stake in the play. Of Ibsen's contemporary dramas,* A Doll's House *is among the more optimistic, as Nora takes seriously the consequences of her insight and shows that change is possible.*

> "...an aspect of a critique of ideology will also become inescapably necessary for research into Ibsen."[1]

The underlying thesis for this article is that Henrik Ibsen wrote political dramas, from start to finish. And what could be more appropriate from such a perspective than to bring *A Doll's House* into this discussion? It may even seem obvious, but this has not always been the case. As is well known, there have been times when people have wanted to downplay, even nearly ignore the political aspects of the play. This stems from the notion that the essential elements of Ibsen's drama lie beyond politics, and that any political element found in the text merely represents something superficial, a kind of "opportunity" to dig "deeper" and find the "real."[2]

[1] "… óg eit ideologikritisk aspekt vil vera uomgjengeleg nødvendig for Ibsen-forskinga" (Hageberg 1980, 134).

[2] See, for example: Høst, Else. 1946 "Nora." *Edda,* vol. 46 (1); or Haakonsen, Daniel. 1957. *Henrik Ibsens realisme*. Oslo: Aschehoug.

When this kind of universalization of Ibsen's text has been called for, by removing particular and concrete elements, support has often been found in Ibsen's own words. Namely, his speech during his seventieth birthday celebration, hosted by the Norwegian Association for Women's Rights (*Norsk kvindesaksforening*). When he was praised for, among other things, his contributions to women's rights, the writer replied:

> I [...] must disclaim the honor of having consciously worked for the women's rights movement. I am not even quite clear as to just what this women's rights movement really is. To me it has seemed a problem of mankind in general. (Ibsen 1964, 337)[3]

I believe the best way to view this is as a telling example of Ibsen's somewhat ambiguous "instinct" as an agent for his own career. He obviously understood the importance of not being unequivocally placed in one camp. Being reduced to a single position would not increase the chances of further canonization of his dramas. Perhaps more disheartening is how this statement has at times been treated as a kind of profundity by (male) Ibsen scholars.

Yet the desire to express something more universal by downplaying gender in *A Doll's House* can be seen as destructive in a literal sense, once the play's intrigue collapses. This intrigue relies precisely on the fact that people have genders and are therefore treated differently based on their gender.[4] This does not mean, however, that the play does not carry universal significance; it is by insisting on the universal that Nora is *human*, that she can criticize the treatment to which she is subjected *as a woman*.

Even today, one can encounter objections to the play that claim it is outdated. The final scene was the basis for the play becoming Ibsen's first major *succès de scandale* at the time. Understandably so, since in 1879 there were a total of nine divorces in Norway (Rekdal 2004, 21). That is not the case today, and thus the argument is that the play's point and ending are therefore considered unremarkable. But firstly, it is not entirely true that it

[3] "Jeg [...] maa fralægge mig den Ære bevidst at skulde have virket for Kvindesagen. Jeg er ikke engang paa det Rene med, hvad Kvindesag egentlig er. For mig har det staaet som en Menneskesag" (Ibsen 2010a, 516–517).

[4] For reference, see Unni Langås' understanding: "Ta bort kjønnet i stykket, og plottet forsvinner" (Remove gender from the play and we lose the plot) (Langås 2005, 115).

is very normal for a woman to leave her husband and children – the common scenario is rather that the man, voluntarily or not, leaves, while the woman stays with the children. Secondly, and more importantly, it should be emphasized that the play's analysis of the relationship between genders is independent of the issue of divorce itself. The play is not outdated by divorce statistics, just as the Western divorce rate has not eliminated every structural inequality between genders. There is little to suggest that the increased possibility of divorce has removed or resolved what constitutes the political core of *A Doll's House*.

This may seem of little interest when isolated, but a reason to address such "prejudices" against *A Doll's House* is that they exemplify two conclusions or understandings about the play, which the play itself addresses. The first of these conclusions is that what matters is universal, what encompasses us all, and not specific or incidental. The second is the notion that everything is basically fine now, these old-fashioned problems are solved, and we can therefore move on. An important reason to read *A Doll's House* attentively may be that the play asserts something different. Ibsen's 1879 play can, in that case, teach us something. In any case, a central point in *A Doll's House* is that what seems obvious and natural may turn out to be something quite different.

The Doll House

The title of this play alone says a lot, at least for those familiar with Ibsen's works. The noun "doll" (in Norwegian "*dukke*") appears a total of eleven times in Henrik Ibsen's oeuvre. Each instance is associated with a form of subjugation or lack of autonomy. Being a doll, being treated *like* a doll, engaging in a relationship *like* a doll, or "literally" playing with dolls always points to a form of unfreedom and lack of self-determination in Ibsen's imagery.

In Norwegian, then as now, the term is "dollhouse" ("*dukkehus*"), just as it is in English. When Ibsen replaces house with home for the play's dolls, it naturally has significance. The two nouns "house" and "home" are, for Ibsen, semantic opposites. *When We Dead Awaken* is typical in this respect. Early in the play, Maja refers to the couple's residence as the "lovely new house," and her husband, the sculptor Rubek, responds with "[o]ur lovely new *home*, shouldn't one say?" (Ibsen 2014d, 240. Emphasis in the original). The world

Ibsen depicts, however, is such that it offers little opportunity to speak of a home at all, and Maja also "prefers to say house" (2014d, 240).[5]

In Ibsen's world, the house is merely "just some place to live" as it is termed in *The Master Builder* (Ibsen 2014b, 7).[6] The home, on the other hand, denotes an almost utopian possibility. Therefore, the title of Ibsen's first major social drama, *A Doll's House* (in Norwegian, *A Doll's Home*), is so interesting. The Norwegian title asserts that the play is about a home for dolls. But in Ibsen's imagery, this is a contradictory formulation, an oxymoron. There can be no home in which doll relationships dominate. Thus, the Norwegian title initially signifies an impossibility. The doll's "home" can only be a "house."

Exposition: Economy and Gender

In the following discussion I want to draw attention to the following three general questions:

- The importance of economic relationships
- The question of what is natural
- The question of ideology, or discursive hegemony

When analyzing an Ibsen drama, it is always a good method to begin with the opening scenes and place great emphasis on them. This is, of course, because it is here that the playwright must capture the audience and readers, as the opening scenes must engage the viewers and simultaneously direct their attention in specific directions. The opening of this play is typical of Ibsen's dramatic technique in this regard.

The first stage direction indicates that the action begins in "a comfortably and tastefully, though not expensively, furnished room" (Ibsen 2016a, 109). We are thus placed in a bourgeois home, and three things are accentuated in the first sentence regarding this bourgeois room: it is both cozy and tasteful,

[5] FRU MAJA. [...] nye, dejlige hus –
PROFESSOR RUBEK *smiler overbærende.* Egentlig skulde man vel si'e: vort nye dejlige *hjem.*
FRU MAJA *kort*. Jeg siger heller hus. [...] (Ibsen 2010c, 173, italics original).

[6] "tilholdssted" (Ibsen 2009a, 213).

but not expensively furnished. All three aspects are important elements for understanding the initial situation in this drama: those who live here know how to arrange their surroundings to create a good home, but with frugality.

The action thereafter begins with the main character of the play arriving, carrying "a number of parcels," and behind her comes a porter carrying a Christmas tree. It is Christmas, and Christmas has several important meanings that contribute to the play's significance: a) Christmas is primarily *the* most important *family* holiday, b) it has *religious* significance and a religious message, c) it is a time when some social mechanisms are suspended (which is important for the possibility of the plot in the play), and d) it is a time for secrets, with hidden and benevolent deceit in the foreground. Thus, Christmas is an important aspect of the play on different levels.

Nora's first action on stage is to pay the porter. His fee is 50 øre (half a crown), and Nora gives him a whole krone. A 100% tip can be said to be generous. She is, in other words, not stingy. This small action can be seen as indicative of Nora's character. Regarding the further significance of this – if any – there are two opposing ways to view the matter. One might argue that this shows Nora does not let her need to save (that is, to hide money to pay Krogstad) affect others, which is consistent with her version as presented to Mrs. Linde: when Nora saves, she only takes from herself, from what would otherwise cover her needs. The opposite view is that this shows Nora's sense of extravagance, undermining her claims that she has had to be so frugal. This can be left aside for now, but the fundamental significance of Nora's payment to the porter emphasizes that money plays a role, even within a cozy bourgeois home.

Next, we have the frequently noted forms of address Helmer uses when speaking to his life partner. In this first scene alone, we hear "song-lark," "squirrel," "spending-bird" and "songbird" in various renditions (Ibsen 2016a, 110–111). All these little animal names can have different meanings, including ones that are not clear at the beginning of the play. One thing is certain, however: one does not normally speak to one's equal in such a manner.

Then, of course, there are the macaroons. They are introduced in the very first scene, with an emphasis that demands some commentary. They are also ambiguous and can be given opposing interpretations in a reading of the text. As I see it, however, the significance of the macaroons in the text lies primarily in their indication of something deceitful about Nora. She can and does hide certain things from her husband, which in itself is important. She keeps some-

thing to herself; she has a private space. In other words, the primary significance of the macaroons is that Nora acts directly contrary to Helmer's wishes and demands. This is a point that is further elaborated and developed when Helmer interrogates her more closely on the matter. He demands that she look him "straight in the eyes" and asks no fewer than four times if she has not "been on the rampage" at the town's confectioner and "gnawed a macaroon or two," while Nora just as many times lies directly to his face, culminating in the concluding assurance: "[i]t would never occur to me to go against you" (Ibsen 2016a, 113).[7] Thus, five times in a row, she lies to him – something the audience knows, since she has just eaten macaroons on stage.

The macaroons are a clear indication of Nora's deeper rebelliousness and ability to keep something to herself. Lying is certainly not entirely good, but in this context, it shows Nora as a woman who can act with a certain sovereignty in relation to a controlling and authoritarian husband. This is also important because it contributes to the credibility of the transformation that characterizes Nora in the final act of the play. From the very first scene in the text, she is portrayed as someone who can act on her own initiative.

One fundamental yet rarely emphasized feature of all these different aspects of the play's opening is the significance of economics. The fact that economic relations permeate society – even far beyond the economic sphere in the strict sense – is, of course, an underlying theme in much of *A Doll's House*, and in the opening scenes it is almost constantly emphasized. In the first conversation between the Helmers, Nora suggests that they borrow money, which gives Torvald the opportunity to present his view on such a practice:

> Suppose I borrowed a thousand kroner today, and you frittered it away in the Christmas week, and then on New Year's Eve I got a roof tile on my head and I lay – [...] you know my thoughts on this issue. No debts! Never borrow! There's something unfree, and so something unlovely, that comes over the home that's founded on loans and debts. (Ibsen 2016a, 110–111)[8]

[7] "stivt i øjnene"; "grasseret"; "gnavet en makron eller to?"; "Jeg kunde da ikke falde på at gøre dig imod" (Ibsen 2008a, 220–221).

[8] "Sæt nu jeg lånte tusend kroner idag og du satte dem overstyr i juleugen og jeg så nytårsaften fik en tagsten i hodet og lå der – [...] du ved, hvad jeg tænker i det stykke. Ingen gæld! Aldrig låne! Der kommer noget ufrit, og altså også noget uskønt over det hjem, som grundes på lån og gæld" (Ibsen 2008a, 215–216).

At this point in the play, Helmer is completely unaware of the danger lurking in his own home, or rather: the danger that lies in Krogstad's hands. Furthermore, and thus even more importantly, his worldview is fundamentally characterized by uncertainty, by an intrinsic sense of risk. As the German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992) argues, much of what characterizes today's reality, in the age of globalization, can be summarized by the concept of the risk society. As Beck illustrates, there are good reasons to believe that this sense of risk goes further and deeper today than in earlier periods. Nevertheless, it is worth noting how central this element of risk is for Ibsen's characters from 1879 as well. For Helmer, the world could very well fall apart; it only takes a small misfortune or a moment of carelessness, and you and your entire family could be thrown into the abyss.

In addition to the fundamental emphasis on risk, on how the economic mechanisms of society penetrate family life, it is worth noting the specific form Helmer's doctrine takes here. The newly appointed bank manager is strongly opposed to debt and borrowing. And this somewhat striking doctrine is justified in flowery phrases about freedom and beauty. A home founded on loans contains an element of unfreedom, and thereby also something unbeautiful. Here, purely economic relations and calculations are justified in moral and ethical terms, typical of certain forms of ideology, namely that power interests are concealed from the individual by appearing as something else.

Yet while borrowed money is against Helmer's principled standards and practices, money itself is not. It remains at the center of attention in the following scenes as well. Nora is somewhat crestfallen over not convincing Helmer of the idea of a small loan, and "moves towards the stove" (Ibsen 2016a, 111):

> HELMER (*follows her*). [...] Hmm? Is my squirrel standing there sulking? (*Takes out his wallet.*) Nora; what do you think I have here?
> NORA (*turns around quickly*). Money! [...] (*counting*). Ten – twenty – thirty – forty. Oh thank you, thank you, Torvald [...] (Ibsen 2016a, 111)[9]

[9] HELMER (*følger efter*). [...] Hvad? Står ekornen der og surmeler? (*tar portemonæen op.*) Nora; hvad tror du jeg har her?
NORA (*vender sig raskt*). Penge! [...] (*tæller.*) Ti-tyve-tredive-firti. Å tak, tak, Torvald [...] (Ibsen 2008a 216–217).

To say that money is at the forefront is no exaggeration. As gracious a lord as ever, Torvald Helmer hands out some money to his wife and it seemingly has the desired effect. She immediately becomes overwhelmingly happy. This little interaction between them, where she withdraws slightly and is lured back with money, can be seen as their relationship in miniature. In this sense, it naturally has darker sides. These are further emphasized in the immediately following scene, where Helmer urges her to say what she wants for Christmas:

> NORA (*fiddling with his buttons; without looking at him*). If you want to give me something, you could of course – you could –
> HELMER. Well; out with it.
> NORA (*quickly*). You could give me money, Torvald. (Ibsen 2016a, 112)[10]

She somewhat shyly asks for money, while "fiddling with his buttons," which in a very literal sense suggests undressing and sexuality. Not only do financial matters intrude into the private sphere to the extent that they simply dominate the play's opening, but they also take on a form that more than suggests a prostitution motif. In other words, when the relationship between a man and a woman is as asymmetrical as it is here, it is difficult to avoid the fact that various acts (viewed from a certain perspective, at least) are carried out for money. The form that the relationship between man and woman takes under such conditions is such that he gives money and other material goods, while she gives something else. One of the things the narrative exposition of *A Doll's House* exposes is how gender issues are intimately (in more than one sense) connected with broader political-economic questions.

Another political motif at the center of these opening scenes is what one might call the public-private theoretical aspect, or that which concerns the relationship between private and public. For Ibsen, this denotes issues that are much deeper than just the increasing power of the press. Most central is how instrumental market relationships tend to invade the private sphere. In early bourgeois

[10] NORA (*famler ved hans knapper; uden at se på ham*). Hvis du vil give mig noget, så kunde du jo –; du kunde –
HELMER. Nå, nå; ud med det.
NORA (*hurtigt*). Du kunde give mig penge, Torvald.
(Ibsen 2008a, 218)

society, as well as today, the private sphere was understood as a free but secluded part of the life of a society and an individual. In public life, the logic of the market prevails – competition, means/ends thinking, instrumentality, economic value, calculation and so on – while private life, on the other hand, is dominated by entirely different values: here true humanity should be lived out, in relationships where people do not treat each other as means, but as ends in themselves. And as Helge Rønning, among others, has shown, a fundamental trait of Ibsen's drama is that this distinction is revealed as illusory or ideological: the fact is that this distinction is very fragile, in such a way that the economic sphere constantly threatens to colonize the private sphere of a cozy home.

This is also part of the background for the dramatic irony in Nora's response to Dr. Rank's question in the first act about whether she really knows "what society is:" "What do I care about boring society?" (Ibsen 2016a, 126). The Nora we meet at the beginning of the play is naive in the sense that she believes she can rise above society. She does not care about society, but she will learn throughout the play that society cares about her and her actions. Nora's ideology about the private will be challenged by the stronger societal mechanisms that will eventually invade her small and ever so vulnerable world.

Naturalness and Play

Nora's thoughts about the private sphere at the beginning of the play are an instance of what one might call the critique of bourgeois-romantic ideology in *A Doll's House*. The play largely consists of a series of such confrontations between romantic illusions or ideals and a much more unromantic and harsh reality. One of the things that happens in the course of the action is that the main characters, Nora and Helmer, must disabuse themselves of a few of the romantic illusions that dominated, and continue to dominate, bourgeois ideology or discourse; these include ideas about love, sacrifice, freedom, respect, happiness – and, not least, about what a man and a woman *are* – and what the difference between the two entails. One central romantic notion posits that there lies deep in each person's heart a core of natural, authentic humanity. And part of what the play shows is perhaps precisely that such a core does not exist – or at least that this idea can have highly repressive consequences.

Before we go further and examine the final confrontation between Nora and Helmer in the final scenes, we should also take a closer look at the other

couple in the play, namely Kristine Linde and Nils Krogstad. If it is the case that the Helmer couple is individually full of various ideological notions, it seems that the other two characters, Mrs. Linde and Krogstad, appear to be rather free of that sort of thing. In their final conversation together on stage, Mrs. Linde speaks about what "[l]ife and hard, bitter necessity have taught" her, and Krogstad replies that:

> KROGSTAD. And life has taught me not to believe in fine words.
> MRS. LINDE. Then life has taught you a very sensible thing. But actions, you must believe in those? (2016, 167)[11]

Their decision to join forces and try to build a relationship on this foundation implies that actions matter, unlike mere words; concrete actions count, not prejudices or opinions. And perhaps most importantly in our context here: change is possible. Thus, Mrs. Linde and Krogstad's decision to change the course of their lives is a kind of foreshadowing of Nora's actions at the end of the play.

But even though one can say that Kristine Linde and Nils Krogstad are free from most romantic illusions, it does not mean that they are pure cynics; they are not without ambitions for something other and more than what is given. On the contrary, the decision they make in this scene constitutes an ambitious and optimistic project to change their life and destiny. And this is an important aspect of the political dimension in the play. What they do and say towards the end of the play rests on what one could call a constructivist belief in the possibility of change, that what is man-made can also be changed by humans. In their world, there is no fate beyond what lies in social and individual limitations, and these are not static but flexible. The decision they agree upon at the end of the play also serves the dramatic function of practically and actively refuting Dr. Rank's words from the first act where he says that Krogstad is "a moral invalid [...] an individual [...] [r]otten right down to the roots of his character" (Ibsen 2016a, 126).[12]

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[11] FRU LINDE. Jeg har lært at handle fornuftigt. Livet og den hårde, bitre nødvendighed har lært mig det.

KROGSTAD. Og livet har lært mig, ikke at tro på talemåder.

FRU LINDE. Da har livet lært Dem en meget fornuftig ting. Men på handlinger må De dog tro? (Ibsen 2008a, 334–335)

[12] "et moralsk hospitalslem [...] et menneske som [...] er bedærvet i karakter-rødderne" (Ibsen 2008a, 245).

This opinion, shared by Helmer, that people are of a certain nature that cannot be changed, is one of the things criticized in the play. *A Doll's House* shows, through the case of Krogstad, that the notion that a person can be lost, that he is in his essence rooted to a certain nature, is both wrong and repressive. How things turn out for these two, and for Krogstad in particular, is of course not addressed in the play; it remains an open question, and that is ultimately the point.

Before we conclude this discussion about nature and essence, we must address the most obvious case, namely the question of the nature of women, and more specifically, Nora's essence or nature.

This question recurs throughout the play. I previously mentioned the way Helmer speaks to Nora – and claimed that it is not how one addresses one's equal. This is true, and the form of address is emphasized in the text in such a way that one *must* take notice and assign it significance. However, it is quite clear that it does not *only* have a negative meaning. It also points to a particular kind of ambiguity in the text regarding the relationship between the spouses. It is not only negative, but also indicates a form of playfulness and intimacy between them. What further contributes to this ambiguity is how Nora herself not only adapts to Helmer's way of speaking about her, but has also adopted the same manner of speaking of herself. And if one were to give a short answer to what role she plays, it is quite simply that of 'woman.' It is not just Helmer who calls her a squirrel and a skylark; she does so herself, and with pleasure. Even when her life is on the line – at least in the sense that she is considering suicide as a way out of her difficulties, at the end of the second act – she maintains these pet names:

> NORA (*stands for a moment as if to collect herself; then looks at her watch*). Five. Seven hours until midnight. Then twenty-four hours until the next midnight. Then the tarantella's over. Twenty-four plus seven? Thirty-one hours left to live.
> HELMER (*in the doorway to the right*). But where's my little song-lark?
> NORA (*going towards him with open arms*). Here is your song-lark! (Ibsen 2016a, 164)

Nora both plays along *with* and *up to* Helmer's wishes and perceptions of his wife. This is also part of what can be called the masquerade motif, which is central in several ways in the play. The fact that Nora plays roles and consis-

tently hides behind masks and various forms of staging is, of course, not a surprising observation. At times, this motif becomes so conspicuously clear that many interpretations, with good reason, refer to a play-within-the-play in *A Doll's House*.

Yet among those who have written about this dramatic technique in the play, there appears to be no agreement on a further interpretation of *A Doll's House*'s play-within-the-play. While Daniel Haakonsen sees it as a staging of the larger tragic fate and deeper idealistic drama in Ibsen, Unni Langås sees it as an advanced illustration of Judith Butler's postmodern theories of gender as performance and construction.

The most obvious effect of a scene on stage where a play is performed within the play – as in the tarantella scene – is metadramatic. Whatever other effects it may have, the play is underscored by this effect. But this is only the first, and usually least interesting, step in the process. The question of *what* role Nora plays is as important as the fact *that* she plays anything at all: she simply plays the role of woman.

When Nora most obviously and emphatically acts in the play it is as a woman, in various forms and fashions. Nora performs her femininity in an emphasized, pointed and almost theatrical manner. Whether she is playing the role of harmless "woman-child" or the sensual and sexy seductress, she conforms to specific (social) norms that relate to herself as a woman. It must therefore be said that in *A Doll's House*, the play within the play is a social expression. In the scenes in which Nora most clearly plays her roles, her society is most clearly expressed.

An additional example of this is how she consciously contributes to portraying herself weak and her husband as strong. This aligns with strong contemporary beliefs, ones that also belong to a solid tradition. The strength of these beliefs can be seen in their appearance in unexpected and somewhat peculiar places. When Edmund Burke argues against the idea that beauty is based on a form of perfection, he uses the example of gender differences. Women are, according to Burke, superior to men in terms of beauty, but without being superior in any real sense. To Burke, beauty always has something weak and imperfect about it. And when women know how to exploit this, it is not because they consciously pretend but because they act naturally:

> Women are very sensible of this; for which reason, they learn to lisp, to totter in their walk, to counterfeit weakness, and even sickness. In all

> this, they are guided by nature. Beauty in distress is much the most affecting beauty. (Burke 1990, 100)[13]

That it is woman's "nature" to pretend is an interesting, and not entirely uncommon, construction. Nora, as a character, quite clearly plays on ideas like this: that woman's "natural" tendency is to pretend or to be "artificial."[14] This is despite Nora's good reasons to hide being such feminine masks.
The necessity of maintaining certain forms of appearances within bourgeois life is also part of the reason Nora gives for not having said anything to Helmer. When asked why she has not yet "confided in your husband," Nora replies:

> NORA. No, for heaven's sake, how can you think that? When he's so strict on the issue of borrowing! And besides, just think how awkward and humiliating it would be for Torvald – with his manly self-esteem – to know he owed me something. It would upset the entire balance of our relationship; our beautiful, happy home would no longer be what it is. (Ibsen 2016a, 122)[15]

Not only does Nora stage herself in a specific manner, but she also contributes to staging the entire marriage in certain conventional ways. Nora contributes to the relationship by reinforcing Helmer's illusions about the power dynamics within the home. In doing so, she helps maintain the hegemony under which she herself "suffers."

In this sense, an important part of Nora's struggle in the text is that she must fight a battle against herself. She must combat norms that are deeply ingrained in her own mind. While this is clarified in various ways throughout the text, it is particularly evident at the end of the first act, when Helmer tells her what he believes Krogstad has done and the general principles by which

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[13] See, in addition, my book *Voldens blomster? Henrik Wergelands Blomsterstykke i estetikkhistorisk lys* (2003) for a more concrete discussion of Burke.

[14] For reference, see Per Stounbjerg's "Kvindens teatralske indtog i det moderne: Myter om kvinden som skuespillerinde hos Rousseau, Almquist, Strindberg, Zola m.fl," in *Litteratur og kjønn i Norden. Den XX. IASS-studiekonferanse 1994*, edited by Helga Kress (1996).

[15] NORA. Nej, for himlens skyld, hvor kan du tænke det? Han, som er så stræng i det stykke! Og desuden – Torvald med sin mandige selvfølelse, – hvor pinligt og ydmygende vilde det ikke være for ham at vide, at han skyldte mig noget. Det vilde ganske forrykke forholdet imellem os; vort skønne lykkelige hjem vilde ikke længer blive, hvad det nu er. (Ibsen 2008a, 238)

such matters should be judged. Helmer believes that Krogstad is morally "eroded" and "destitute," and therefore hopelessly lost (Ibsen 2016a, 139).

As Torvald Helmer explains, this is because Krogstad has had to "lie and dissemble and pretend to all and sundry," even those closest to him (139). Thus Krogstad "brings contagion and disease" into his home, destroying not only himself but his children, too (139). Helmer develops his train of thought into a more general theory during the conversation, suggesting that it is the women who must bear the main responsibility, even though this does not quite fit with the fact that it is Krogstad who is the starting point here. Helmer tells Nora that "[a]lmost all those who are corrupt from an early age have had mothers who were liars," and these words clearly affect her (Ibsen 2016a, 139).[16]

After reading Krogstad's letter, Helmer condemns Nora, and this condemnation repeats many of the things both he and Dr. Rank previously said about Krogstad's moral nature: Nora is fundamentally criminal, her nature is obvious to him and this essential trait is inherited, and thus beyond redemption. When he perceives her nature in this moment, he says, it is "your father's frivolous attitudes: no religion, no morals, no sense of duty" (Ibsen 2016a, 178).[17] Yet as soon as the second letter arrives and he believes he is saved, all is forgotten; it seems that it was nothing more than "words." To think so categorically, to speak of nature, essence, core, character roots and so on, is ideological – it is something one does to control others.

This point is further elaborated and emphasized in the final scenes. When Nora finally has her say about both her husband and their marriage, Helmer's main strategy, crucially, is precisely to appeal to feminine nature: "[y]ou are first and foremost a wife and mother" (Ibsen 2016a, 184).[18]

Considering how central and important the critique of such essentialist naturalism is in *A Doll's House*, the alternative ending Ibsen was pressured to write for a German production of the play is quite shocking. In this ending, Helmer physically forces Nora to see her sleeping children, something she is unable to bear as she collapses at the sight of her children and cannot leave.

[16] "nedbrudt"; "moralsk forkommen"; "lyve og hykle og forstille sig til alle sider"; "dunstkreds af løgn"; "Næsten alle tidligt forvorpne mennesker har havt løgnaktige mødre" (Ibsen 2008a, 274).

[17] "Alle din faders letsindige grundsætninger har du taget i arv. Ingen religion, ingen moral, ingen pligtfølelse" (Ibsen 2008a, 358–359).

[18] "Du er først og fremst hustru og moder" (Ibsen 2008a, 370).

This ending posits that there is a natural element in every woman that will assert itself in such a way that it becomes impossible for a mother to leave her children. Such an ending constitutes a complete negation of the play, and it is easy to see that Ibsen was dismayed at having given in on the matter, even though he did so to prevent even worse liberties from being taken with the text.

Ideological or Discursive Hegemony

In my view, this leads to the central point in the discussion about the political aspect of Henrik Ibsen's dramas: the critique or analysis of ideology. As I have attempted to show, the question of ideology arises on various levels even in a brief analysis of *A Doll's House* like the one I have outlined here. Ibsen's dramas relentlessly and meticulously analyze how ideology – or, to use different terms, discourse or hegemony – binds together the individual and society. And often, the analysis in the drama also clearly points to those who benefit from prevailing beliefs.

To further illustrate my point, it can be enlightening to once again focus on the women in the play. There are three women in this drama: Nora Helmer, Kristine Linde and the nursemaid Anne Marie. Kristine Linde had to marry a man she did not like; she sacrificed herself to help her mother and brothers. First she sold herself, and then she became a poor widow. She has had to work hard and has seen little happiness in her life. Anne Marie had a child out of wedlock with a man who was not willing to help her. She then had to send the child away, and soon after became a nursemaid, first for Nora and then for Nora's children. Both women, Kristine and Anne Marie, have had relatively bleak fates; they have been forced by circumstances, among other things, to live surrogate lives for others.

In my view, much of the radicalism and political relevance in *A Doll's House* lies in the fact that Ibsen chooses the happy and relatively wealthy Nora as the heroine of his drama. This is also where the difference from many naturalistic authors lies: Nora's problems cannot be reduced to the private or individual. They do not boil down to the fact that she has a particularly cruel, stupid or otherwise repulsive husband. On the contrary, one could say that Helmer, in many ways, is (or was) better than most. He is kind, intelligent, successful, and even sexually attractive to his wife, it seems.

Therefore, it is also an important point in the play that Nora is happy. The play opens with Nora's entrance, and she enters the stage "contentedly humming a tune" (Ibsen 2016a, 109). Additionally, it states that she "laugh[s] in quiet contentment" (Ibsen 2016a,110)[19] while she continually walks around and "hums" happily and contentedly. This, of course, has to do with the brighter prospects, but not only that. It is repeatedly emphasized at the beginning of the play – by Nora herself – that she is happy: "These last eight years have been a happy time," she tells Mrs. Linde, for example (Ibsen 2016a, 115). And a little later, she cannot hold back and exclaims that she finds it "lovely and miraculous to be alive and happy!" (Ibsen 2016a, 118).[20] We should take her at her word when she repeatedly asserts that she is happy and has good reasons to be.

This has both theoretical and analytical interest. *A Doll's House* namely rests on the possibility that one can *feel* happy without truly being so, that what may seem to be a happy life, may in fact be something else. This possibility is also one of the things that shocks Helmer:

> HELMER. [...] Haven't you been happy here?
> NORA. No, never. I thought so; but I have never been that.
> HELMER. Not –? Not happy?
> NORA. No; just cheerful. (Ibsen 2016a, 183)[21]

In other words, this means that Nora has *appeared* happy, even to herself. Therefore, when this apparent happiness turns out to be something else – mere cheerfulness, something more superficial – it also means that Nora's critique cannot be limited to just Helmer. The critique cannot only target Helmer; it must also be self-critique.[22]

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[19] "kommer fornøjet nynnende inn i stuen" [...] "stille fornøjet" [...] "nynner" [...] (Ibsen 2008a, 213, 214).

[20] "de sidste otte år har været en lykkelig tid" [...] "vidunderlig dejligt at leve og være lykkelig!" (Ibsen 2008a, 224, 230).

[21] HELMER. [...] Har du ikke været lykkelig her?
NORA. Nej, det har jeg aldrig været. Jeg trode det; men jeg har aldrig været det.
HELMER. Ikke – ikke lykkelig!
NORA. Nej; bare lystig.
(Ibsen 2008a, 367).

[22] Nora's critique targets herself as well in the very explicit sense that she realizes that it is not only Helmer who must change if they are ever to live together in the future. She herself must undergo

Nora's imaginary world is such that when catastrophe threatens and she realizes that there is a real chance Krogstad might destroy their lives, she expects something both alluring and frightening: "the miraculous thing." What she concretely expects is that her husband will act without regard to society and its norms and rules. In grand heroic-tragic style, she expects him to stand out as an individual. Instead, she witnesses Helmer's weakness and selfishness. Yet he cares about only one thing: his own position in society. No compromise is too great, no humiliation too deep to defend this position. This is also a kind of behavior that aligns with so-called common sense. It is not least in line with the economic demands that prevail in this society: all his chivalry, morality, and ethics evaporate as soon as a real threat appears.

What initially provokes Nora is purely private in nature, namely that her husband disappoints her. But this experience also concerns the relationship between the private or individual on one side and society on the other. This is, in other words, a political experience.

It is a political experience not only because Nora realizes that society's laws are not made for her but also because she has a very concrete experience that her own life is subject to certain discursive limitations. Her own interpretation of life turns out to be both false and impossible. In this sense, she sees the boundaries of the thinkable—which is the discourse or ideology itself. Her purely private disappointment snowballs, leading her to ultimately reassess the most fundamental aspects of her life, both as an individual and as a member of this specific society. Thus, her notions of security, happiness, freedom, sexuality, children, upbringing and autonomy, all prove to be different from what she had believed.

In other words, hegemony is systematic. The radicality of this play lies partly in the implication that everything is interconnected: not just this man, this norm, or this institution, but society as a whole is at stake in this play. Therefore, she can only move forward by stepping out, by seeking the boundaries within this society that she no longer wants to accept without having tested the matter for herself.

This is also why *A Doll's House* – politically – is Henrik Ibsen's most optimistic play. It ends with what Erik Østerud has called a utopian gesture: in this play, radical change is seen as – not certain – but possible. And that is, after all, no small feat in an Ibsen drama.

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fundamental change and growth. Nora realizes that the problem she identifies and wants to get to the bottom of also lies within herself, and in a very concrete, almost physical sense.

Ibsen and Politics: *Ghosts*

The opportunities for action for the five characters in Ghosts *seem far more limited than for Nora in* A Doll's House. *Helland emphasizes that* Ghosts *was perceived as an attack on one of society's foundational institutions, namely the family. This article presents a pedagogically arranged close reading of the prevailing ideology that underpins key scenes between carpenter Engstrand and Regine, Regine and Pastor Manders, and finally between Pastor Manders and Mrs. Alving. A main point for Helland is that the conversations between the characters reveal how both the individual and society are dominated by an ideological or discursive hegemony that makes change difficult, perhaps impossible. This article was originally published in Norwegian in the book* En internasjonal Ibsen *(2007,* An International Ibsen*). While a truncated version of this analysis was published in English in the proceedings volume* The Living Ibsen *under the title "Ideology and Hegemony in* Ghosts*" (2007), we felt it was important to make this more complete close reading available in English.*

Many of Ibsen's plays sparked both debate and resistance upon publication, but none more so than *Ghosts*. This is Ibsen's great scandalous success. There are political, moral, religious and aesthetic reasons why the resistance to this play was so strong. In this article, I will attempt to circle in on some of the play's political aspects. Thus, the political will be understood in a more fundamental sense than that which resides in topical "problems" or subjects. As I see it, the political in Ibsen revolves around a broad spectrum of issues, varying in both importance and form throughout his dramatic production. Three issues or questions emerge as particularly significant:

- The importance of economic relations
- The question of the natural
- The question of ideology, or discursive hegemony

All three issues are important to *Ghosts*, but I will primarily concentrate on

the last point,[1] the question of ideology, or, if one wishes to avoid the Marxist odor associated with this concept, what is commonly referred to today as discursive hegemony.

These three issues are also important in the preceding work, *A Doll's House.* Yet *Ghosts* differentiates itself from the preceding drama in several important ways. Perhaps most striking is how human agency and the ability to change one's fate seems to be much less possible in the world that is portrayed in *Ghosts*. Whereas Nora – and in a slightly different way, Nils Krogstad and Kristine Linde – possesses a fundamentally open range of possible action, in which even a radical break against an intolerable present state of being is possible, this type of transformative action appears far less likely within the subsequent drama.

Another difference can be seen in the subtitle of the plays. While *A Doll's House* is labeled as a "play" (*skuespill*), *Ghosts* carries the subtitle "family drama" (*familiedrama*). It seems here that Ibsen wanted to be more specific. Now, *A Doll's House* – and many of Ibsen's other plays – could also be called family dramas without much objection. The genre designation of this particular play must thus have a specific meaning, and it has indeed given rise to various interpretations of the text.[2] In *Ghosts*, then, one of society's fundamental institutions, the family itself, is at stake. This fact is one of the reasons why the play caused such a sensation in its time. *Ghosts* was perceived by many as fundamentally immoral, in the sense that it was perceived as an attack on society's morals, on a fundamental social institution: the bourgeois family. This does not, however, make the political criticism in the play more limited than in, for example, *A Doll's House*, as we shall see.

Exposition: The Engstrand Family

A play's exposition often aims to introduce the audience to its situation, outline important lines of conflict, and provide necessary background for the main storyline. This drama, however, begins with a secondary storyline, a subplot. The main plot of the play revolves around the Alving family, with Osvald and

[1] The political significance of economics in the author's work is discussed thoroughly by Bernard F. Dukore (1980).

[2] For a productive understanding of this aspect of the play, see Rottem 1996.

his mother Helene Alving at the center, and their old friend Pastor Manders as an important supporter and opponent. Yet, it is not these main characters who open the play, but rather the minor characters Carpenter Engstrand and his 'daughter' Regine. The first stage direction indicates that Engstrand "is standing at the back by the garden door," while "Regine, with an empty flower mister in her hand, is stopping him from advancing further" (Ibsen 2016b, 193).[3]

In other words, she physically prevents him from entering, or, more precisely, from getting closer to her. The relationship between this father and his daughter is thus introduced as one of confrontation, which is explained and elaborated upon during these opening scenes. But there is nonetheless little in the exposition that pertains to the main plot itself. We do learn that Osvald is resting, even though it is late in the day, just as we also learn that Regine has been raised "almost like" a child in the house, and we sense that she harbors certain intentions toward Osvald. Furthermore, there are hints about Manders and his relationship with Engstrand.

Even though this is not information that directly leads us into what constitutes the central plot or its backstory, there is every reason to argue that the initial scenes are not only necessary but also constitute a brilliant use of exposition. Firstly, the Engstrand family in several ways mirrors the Alving family; secondly, the fact that there are two (closely interwoven) family histories introduces a class perspective to the play. There is a clearly hierarchical relationship between the two families, where the socially subordinate family lives in a dependent relationship with the upper-class family. Yet, the most important aspect of the exposition, as I see it, lies in: 1) the way in which they speak, or rather the rhetoric or discourse that dominates here, and 2) the very crudeness of the contents of what lies under or behind what is said.

Engstrand's first line is a response to Regine's expressed dissatisfaction over the fact that he is so wet that water drips off him: "That's God's rain, that, my child" (2016b, 193).[4] Already in this first line, we see how he defends himself against criticism by speaking in religious terms. And when he hears that Osvald is still sleeping, even though it is late in the day, he tells a little story:

[3] "står oppe ved havedøren [...] Regine, med en tom blomstersprøjte i hånden, hindrer ham fra at komme nærmere" (Ibsen 2008b, 385).

[4] "Det er Vorherres regn, det, barnet mit" (Ibsen 2008b, 385).

> ENGSTRAND: I was out on a bender last night –
> REGINE: That I can believe.
> ENGSTRAND: Aye, for we are but frail, my child – [...] – and temptations are manifold in this world – but, by God, I was still at my work at half past five this morning. (Ibsen 2016b, 193–194)[5]

One should certainly not scoff at the ability to combine work with drinking, but what is interesting is how he justifies his alcoholism with a general, quasi-religious metaphysics surrounding humanity's sinful nature and the weakness of the flesh. Put more precisely, he describes his actions with rhetoric that draws elements from an authoritative, Christian metaphysics. For Engstrand is not particularly successful in his many attempts to give the impression of piety, while hiding behind a general rhetoric of temptations and universal human weakness. Not least because he curses and slanders at the same time, his veiled rhetoric appears hollow and without support, or, in other words, it appears ideological. Some of what is clarified by Engstrand's way of speaking is not only his falseness as an individual, but also a certain way of speaking is staged, in a clear, almost caricatured form.

Nearly all that is said here in the opening scenes is ideological in the sense that it – in an obvious and clumsy, vulgar manner – hides the truth. Almost everything Engstrand says is like this. But it concerns a jargon that he does not fully master, and the person to whom he speaks has, moreover, long since seen through him. Part of the effect is that the play begins with readers and spectators being made aware of this rhetoric, while preparing us for the possibility that this discourse can run deeper and be more extensive.

In regards to the content itself, this is striking enough. Engstrand claims to be Regine's father. Right from his first line, he calls her "my child," and when she almost with disgust dismisses his suggestion for her to come "home" with him, he replies:

> ENGSTRAND: What the hell's *this*? Going against your own father, are you girl?

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[5] ENGSTRAND: Jeg var ude på en rangel igårkveld –

REGINE: Det tror jeg gjerne.

ENGSTRAND: Ja, for vi mennesker er skrøbelige, barnet mit – [...] – og fristelserne er mangfoldige i denne verden, ser du –; men endda så stod jeg, ja Gu', ved mit arbejde klokken halv sex idag tidlig. (Ibsen 2008b, 386)

> REGINE (*mumbles without looking at him*): You've said often enough that I was nothing to do with you.
> ENGSTRAND: Pah. You wouldn't take *that* to heart surely –. (Ibsen 2016b, 195. Emphasis in the original)[6]

Both of them know that he as a father has said many times to her as child that she is not his. As their conversation continues, he gives a revealing explanation of how he could say such things. Firstly, it was just something he said when he had "had a drop," he says, repeating how "manifold" the "temptations of this world" are. Secondly, it was something he said when Regine's mother "decided to be difficult" and was "acting so prim and proper," and he even mimics the deceased mother, who supposedly said: "Let me go, Engstrand!" Leave me be. I've served three years with Chamberlain Alving's family at Rosenvold, I have![7]" (Ibsen 2016b, 195). That Regine is not his child was 'just' something he used to say when he was either drunk or when the child's mother refused his physical advances. These types of excuses would normally seem far from justifiable, but Regine does not seem to react to these remarks. Nevertheless, this provides a background that accounts for how she is able to conduct herself in such a businesslike manner in relation to Engstrand's main concern here, namely his proposal that she begin working in his "establishment [...] for ships' captains and officers and – and fine folk"[8] (Ibsen 2016b, 196). Regine appears to play an important role in his plans, as:

> there's got to be womenfolk round the house, that's plain as day. 'Cos we'll have a bit of fun in the evenings, of course, with singing and dancing and the like. You've got to remember, these are wayfaring mariners upon the oceans of the world. (*Closer*) Don't be daft now and stand in your own way, Regine. (Ibsen 2016b, 197)[9]

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[6] ENGSTRAND: Hvad fan' er *det*? Sætter du dig op imod din far, tøs?
REGINE (mumler, uden at se på ham): Du har tidtnok sagt, at jeg ikke kom dig ved.
ENGSTRAND: Pyt; hvad vil du bry' dig om *det* –.
(Ibsen 2008b, 389. Emphasis in the original)

[7] "var på en kant [...] fristelserne [...] slo sig vrang [og var] fin på det [...] Slip mig, Engstrand! Lad mig være! Jeg har tjent tre år hos kammerherre Alvings på Rosenvold, jeg!" (Ibsen 2008b, 389-390).

[8] "beværtning [...] for skibskaptenjer og styrmænder og – og fine folk" (Ibsen 2008b, 392).

[9] fruentimmer må der være i huset, det er grejt som dagen, det. For om kvellerne skal vi jo ha' det

Here we see the other side of Engstrand's language: the euphemizing style. It is easy enough to see why he needs "women" in this house, where "fun" is meant to be had. As soon as Engstrand realizes that Regine is persuaded neither by appeals to paternal authority nor religion, he says in a slightly veiled, but still rather direct manner that he wants her as a prostitute in his brothel. And he appeals to her common sense when he emphasizes that she should think of herself and not be "daft." The crudeness that underscores this is further elaborated when Regine asks whether her father could give her some money or at least "a scrap of dress fabric":

> ENGSTRAND: You just come into town with me, Regine, and you'll get dress fabric aplenty.
> REGINE: Pah, if I want, I can take that in hand myself.
> ENGSTRAND: Aye, but with a *father's* guiding hand it's better, Regine. (Ibsen 2016b, 197. Emphasis in the translation)[10]

Her father makes it clear that she must come to his establishment if she wants anything from him. Her response is that if she is to earn money for dresses in this way, she would rather "take that in hand" herself. In principle, it is not so much that she rejects prostitution as a possibility, but that she does not want Engstrand involved. Engstrand argues, however, that it would be much better with "a father's guiding hand" in the life of a prostitute.
The negotiation taking place here between "father" and "daughter" is about as grotesque as possible, and it becomes even more so when Engstrand predicts that Regine would not need to stay with him for long, as she could easily marry one of the establishment's guests. Even if she does not want to marry "that sort," as Regine calls them, this, too, serves potential advantages, as Engstrand knows from experience:

> ENGSTRAND: So leave off marrying them. It can still pay. (*In a more confidential tone*) That man – the Englishman – the one with the yacht

lidt morosomt med sang og dans og sligt noget. Du må sanse på, det er vejfarendes sjømænder på verdens hav. *(nærmere)* Vær nu ikke dum og stå dig selv ivejen, Regine. (Ibsen 2008b, 393)

[10] ENGSTRAND: Kom bare og vær med mig ind til byen, du, så kan du få kjoletøjer nok.

REGINE: Pyt, det kan jeg gøre på egen hånd, hvis jeg har lyst til det.

ENGSTRAND: Nej, ved en fars vejledendes hånd, det er bedre, Regine.(Ibsen 2008b, 394).

> – he paid three hundred speciedaler, he did – and she weren't not prettier than you. (Ibsen 2016b, 198)[11]

It is no great exaggeration to claim that the play opens by showing us an evil, distorted image of the family. Engstrand begins the negotiations by trying to invoke paternal authority, but here, only a few minutes later, he gladly admits that he is not her father. Indeed, he brings up the fate of her mother to argue his case to his daughter. In essence, he argues that 'it can still pay to give in to the upper-class men, even if it results in pregnancy: your mother received three hundred speciedaler.' This indomitable will to wriggle out of trouble and argue directly against earlier statements is an important aspect of Engstrand as a character. Most illusions fall away here, and the play reveals both great cynicism and considerable determination.

It is, however, also important that the exposition showcases a number of central discourses at work in the play – not only Engstrand's quasi-religious and euphemizing ways of speaking, but also Regine's more comical attempts to don the linguistic garb of the bourgeoisie. An important point, therefore, is how these discourses function as ideology in this society by concealing the truth. At the same time, they can be a weapon in the hands of those who know how to exploit another's fear of stepping beyond the boundaries of ideology. That this ideological element carries weight, even for these two rather disillusioned individuals, is part of the point of the almost burlesque turn the conversation takes in Engstrand's final line in this scene. When Manders is seen arriving, Regine demands that Engstrand leave:

> ENGSTRAND: All right, all right, I'm going. But you just talk to *him* what's coming. *He's* the man will tell you what a child owes her father. 'Cos I am your after all, see. I can prove that by the church register. (Ibsen 2016b, 198. Emphasis in the original)[12]

[11] ENGSTRAND: Så la' bli' å gifte dig med dem. Det kan lønne sig ligevel. *(fortroligere)* Han – Engelskmanden – han med lystkutteren – han gav tre hundrede speciedaler, han; – og hun var ikke vakkrere, hun, end du. (Ibsen 2008b, 395)

[12] ENGSTRAND: Ja ja, jeg skal så gøre. Men snak så med ham, som *der* kommer. *Han* er mand for at sige dig, hvad et barn skylder sin far. For jeg er nu din far ligevel, ser du. Det kan jeg bevise af kirkebogen. (Ibsen 2008b, 396. Emphasis in the original)

Regardless of the real relation to Regine that he has admitted in the conversation, he *is* still the father, as this can be "proven" by the church register. This brings the conversation full circle. At the same time, it provides a fine and pointed introduction to Manders, who is both 'man enough' to tell people their duties, and to insist on external concerns, such as what is written in the church register. He is, furthermore, the very man who entered this information into the church register.

Pastor Manders

Regine "looks at herself hastily in the mirror, fans herself with her handkerchief" and adjusts her appearance before pretending that nothing has happened – so that she can greet Manders "with a look of happy surprise" when he arrives (198–199). She hopes to present herself well and emphasize her physical attributes, which is something that also interests Manders himself. What transpires between them repeats much of what took place in previous scene between father and daughter, but with a partial role reversal. The way they speak particularly highlights this similarity. We find the same strangely suggestive or concealing discourse. I am not primarily referring to how Regine strives to speak in a refined manner, but rather to how Manders acts as an agent for Engstrand. Whether Engstrand has picked up phrases from Manders or Manders is quoting Engstrand is hard to determine, but there are striking similarities in their manner of speaking. Manders directly references Engstrand when he says:

> PASTOR MANDERS: He needs someone around him for whom he can feel affection and upon whose judgements he can rely. He admitted it himself so open-heartedly when he was last up to see me. (Ibsen 2016b, 200)[13]

Without knowing the realities behind Engstrand's wishes, Manders speaks on his behalf. And as Engstrand anticipated, he knows to refer to "a daughter's

[13] "Han trænger til at ha' nogen om sig, som han kan holde af, og hvis omdømme han kan lægge vægt på. Han erkendte det selv så trohjertigt, da han sidst var oppe hos mig" (Ibsen 2018b, 400).

duty" (Ibsen 2016b, 200). Regine, on the other hand, quite directly denies the validity of Engstrand's paternal claim:

> REGINE: But I'm not sure it's right for me at my age, to keep house for a single man.
> PASTOR MANDERS: What! But dear Miss Engstrand, this is your own father we are talking about here!
> REGINE: Yes, maybe, but still –. I mean, if it was a *respectable* house and with a really proper gentleman –. (Ibsen 2016b, 200-201. Emphasis in the original)[14]

Regine, in this moment, speaks quite directly to Manders about the man who is supposed to be her father, but the pastor is unable to take in what she says. Moreover, at the same time Regine sees her chance to advance her *own* agenda, which is to ingratiate herself with Manders. And she presses the matter with new turns of phrase and euphemisms in a way that frightens Manders to the extent that he interrupts her and demands that she fetch the lady of the house.

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Ideology and Hegemony

What takes up most of the time and energy of the rest of the first act is the conversation between Mrs. Alving and Manders. However, the exposition's display of this hidden rhetoric and the hint of the grotesque realities that hide behind such a discourse, cling to this conversation as well. For example, it is clear enough that Manders is not entirely honest with either Mrs. Alving or himself, when he explains why he wants to stay "down at the village store" (Ibsen 2016b, 202).[15] But in the discussion of the books written by freethinkers that Mrs. Alving has left lying out, ideological discourse itself becomes the subject of a theoretical discussion on stage.

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[14] REGINE: Men jeg ved ikke, om det går an for mig, i min alder, at styre huset for en enslig mandsperson.

PASTOR MANDERS: Hvad! Men kære jomfru Engstrand, det er jo Deres egen far, her er tale om!

REGINE: Ja, det kan så være, men alligevel –. Ja, hvis det var i et *godt* hus og hos en rigtig reel herre –

(Ibsen 2008b, 400–401. Emphasis in original).

[15] "nede hos landhandleren" (Ibsen 2008b, 403)

Manders seems shocked both to find "*these* books...*here*" (Ibsen 2016b, 202) *and* that it is Mrs. Alving herself who reads them, but above all that, that she thinks they that make her feel "safer":

> MRS. ALVING: Yes, because *that's* what's so strange, Pastor Manders – there's actually nothing new in these books at all; they only contain what most people think and believe. It's just that most people don't formulate it for themselves, or don't want to admit it.
> PASTOR MANDERS: Good Lord! Do you seriously believe most people –? [...] but not in this country, surely? Not amongst us? (Ibsen 2016b, 203. Emphasis in the original)[16]

When Mrs. Alving says that her experience of reading these books is that it makes her feel more secure, she means that she gets her own thoughts and opinions confirmed and supported. And she is optimistic enough to believe that this is the case with most people. The "new" ideas are in line with people's own thoughts, even though this is not fully recognized by the same people – yet. Manders gives the impression of being shocked by this possibility. But in spite of his strong opinions, he immediately has to admit that he has no first-hand knowledge of these books. He has never read them and sees no need to do so. He trusts the authorities, "one must rely on others...and quite right. Where would society be otherwise?" (Ibsen 2016b, 203)[17]

Manders is in other words, not only conservative, but overtly authoritarian, even anti-democratic. From this perspective, personal freedom or autonomy does not imply that the individual is to take an independent stand on the questions raised by Mrs. Alving's radical books. All the more surprising then, is Manders' admission in the following line "that there can be something rather attractive about such writings" (Ibsen 2016b, 203). This is a fascination or appeal that he wants to stay away from, perhaps because it is so strong? The deci-

[16] FRU ALVING: Ja for *det* er det underlige, pastor Manders, – der er egentlig sletikke noget nyt i disse bøger; der står ikke andet end det, som de fleste mennesker tænker og tror. Det er bare det, at de fleste mennesker ikke gør sig rede for det eller ikke vil være ved det.

PASTOR MANDERS: Nå du min Gud! Tror De for ramme alvor at de fleste mennesker –! [...] men dog ikke her i landet vel? Ikke her hos os? (Ibsen 2008b, 405)

[17] "man må forlade sig på andre [...] det er godt[...] gå med samfundene" (Ibsen 2008b, 406).

sive point for him, in any case, concerns the relationship between the private and the public sphere:

> MANDERS (*lowering his voice*): But one does not talk about it, Mrs. Alving. One certainly doesn't need to give an account to all and sundry of what one reads and what one thinks inside one's own four walls.
> MRS. ALVING: No, of course not; I quite agree. (Ibsen 2016b, 204)[18]

This is an important, almost fatal point in the play. Helene Alving agrees here with the doctrine that you may think and believe anything you want, but "one does not talk about it," if there is the slightest chance that it could offend anyone. And this is no minor concession. Here she agrees with what is after all Mander's principal *maxim*: in the private domain, "inside one's own four walls," one can read radical writings and even agree with what they have to say, but it must not get out into the public sphere. In a certain sense this is the root of the evil in *Ghosts*. For if nothing else this play is about the mechanisms that make the individual censor him- or herself, either as in Manders' case by fanatically sticking to the given and denying oneself new thoughts and perspectives, or as in Helene Alving's case by keeping new thoughts and opinions strictly private.

Where everything not already accepted by the majority is banned from the public sphere, societal change is hindered, and democracy remains nothing but an empty word. Mrs. Alving's agreement with Manders here clearly contradicts her earlier statement that there is nothing really offensive or radically new in the books she is reading. For if "most people" actually "think and believe" just about the same as the authors of her radical books, then there is no real reason to keep these opinions to oneself. But in the following conversation both the background to Manders' maxim and some of its further consequences are clarified. What really matters for Manders is after all not "most people" but what he calls "men with substantial influence," or "men in such independent and prominent positions that one can't very well avoid giving their opinions

[18] PASTOR MANDERS (*sænker stemmen*): Men man taler ikke om det, fru Alving. Man behøver dog virkelig ikke at gøre alle og enhver regnskab for, hva man læser og hvad man tænker indenfor sine fire vægge.
FRU ALVING: Nej, naturligvis; det mener jeg også. (Ibsen 2008b, 407)

a certain weight" (Ibsen 2016b, 205–206).[19] This clarifies Manders' position, and at the same time shows what it is that Mrs. Alving has agreed to, namely an authoritarian and anti-democratic view of society and politics.
Within the structure of the play, Mrs. Alving's acceptance of Manders' view is important with regard to at least three aspects of the play:

1) The personal or psychological: this fear of scandal or offence is an important force in the process that leads Helene into marriage, as it is a driving force in her staying married.
2) The material: this is the reason why the consequences of the catastrophe in the play are so great. The asylum is uninsured for this reason, and Manders is an easy victim of Engstrand's intrigues for the same reason.
3) This is part of the important political motif in the text; that both the individual and the greater society are dominated by an ideological or discursive hegemony that makes substantial change difficult, perhaps impossible.

This idea that society *and* its individual members are dominated by a discursive hegemony is central at the beginning of the second act as well. Mrs. Alving finishes the sad story of her marriage, Johanna the maid, and Engstrand. And the conclusion is – still – that "there was no alternative but to get the matter hushed up" (Ibsen 2016b, 223). Manders, of course, agrees that "that was all that could be done," but when he considers that he too has had a part in the case, in the sense that he was the one that married Engstrand to Johanna, he becomes agitated:

> MANDERS: But how deceitful of him! And towards *me*! I'd honestly never have believed that of Jakob Engstrand. Well, I'm going to have to deal with him most seriously; that he can rely on. – And the immorality of such a match! All for the sake of money –! How large was the amount the girl had at her disposal?
> MRS. ALVING: It was three hundred speciedaler.

[19] "virkelig meningsberettigede [...] mænd i såvidt uafhængige og indflydelsesrige stillinger, at man ikke godt kan undlade at tillægge deres meninger en viss vægt" (Ibsen 2008b, 410–411).

> MANDERS: Yes, just imagine – for a paltry three hundred speciedaler, to get himself married to a fallen woman!
> MRS. ALVING: So what would you say about me, getting married to a fallen man. (Ibsen 2016b, 223–224. Emphasis in the original)[20]

This conversation, like several others in the play, has the problem of double standards as its subject. And it is of course about gender; as in *A Doll's House*, a central point in this play is that men and women are treated differently. What is in principle the same thing, is seen by Manders – and the greater society he speaks for – as "vastly different" (Ibsen 2016b, 224). This difference is, in my view, the most important background to Ibsen's rather pessimistic analysis of the relationship between men and women. Most of the relationships in his dramas seem doomed. And the main reason for this is of a political nature: the plays seem to say that under conditions in which the relation between the sexes is so radically asymmetrical as it was in his world, the possibilities of a good relationship or marriage are slim. And not less important: even where a relationship is in fact good, there will always be a real danger that everything may change, for example, because it may in retrospect be given a different interpretation; it may, as seen in this play – and the proceeding one – be interpreted as a sale, a business transaction.

This scene, however, is not only about gender; it also focuses on social class. This is often neglected, but the class-issues are central to the play. Not only does it focus on the fact that that men and women are subject to different standards, but it also shows that there are radically different rules and opportunities for the different social classes in this society. This is quite explicit in Manders' reproaches to Engstrand, in the sense that what he, without reservation, recommends as the correct procedure for Mrs. Alving is condemned as "hypocrisy" or "insincerity" when it comes to Engstrand. And in this respect the differ-

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[20] PASTOR MANDERS: Men en sådan uoprigtighed af ham! Og det imod *mig*! Det havde jeg tilforladelig ikke troet om Jakob Engstrand. Nå, jeg skal rigtignok ta' ham alvorligt for mig; det kan han belave sig på. – Og så det usædelige i en sådan forbindelse! For penges skyld –! Hvor stort var det beløb, pigen havde at råde over?

FRU ALVING: Det var tre hundrede specier.

PASTOR MANDERS: Ja, tænke sig bare, – for lumpne tre hundrede specier at gå hen og la' sig ægtevie til en falden kvinde!

FRU ALVING: Hvad siger De da om mig, som gik hen og lod mig ægtevie til en falden mand?

(Ibsen 2008b, 445. Emphasis in original)

ence between Manders and Mrs. Alving is not as great as it might seem. It is, after all, worth noting how Helene Alving quite consistently refers to Regine as a person of somewhat lesser value. Regine is, for instance, a person for whom it is deemed quite acceptable by these two to marry off to someone. Mrs. Alving finds it revolting just to think about how her mother and aunts behaved towards her in this respect, but she is more than willing to do the same to Regine.

A corresponding and interesting parallel can be seen in connection with the actual ghost-scene in the play. In the first act, when Mrs. Alving tells Manders what she overheard her husband doing to Johanna, Manders' response is as follows:

> MANDERS: What an unseemly indiscretion on his part. But more than a foolish indiscretion it could not have been, Mrs. Alving. You must believe me. (Ibsen 2016b, 218)[21]

And in the opening scene of Act II, Mrs. Alving's conclusion about the repetition they have just witnessed is:

> MRS. ALVING: The whole thing's a passing fancy. (Ibsen 2016b, 223)[22]

With strikingly similar words they are both ready to excuse the upper-class male in cases like this. It is only a matter of "indiscretion" or "a passing fancy," which seems to mean that it is not very important, it is excusable. On the one hand this implies that it would have been *worse* had it *not* been a whim, but a case of serious intent towards these lower-class women. And on the other hand, it makes explicit that the same rules and standards do not apply to the lower-class women; they have to get out of the house, "and immediately," as Mrs. Alving says about Regine (Ibsen 2016b, 223). What this shows is that Helene Alving is, in spite of her otherwise enlightened and critical character, a representative and a product of her social class. But – and this is important – had this not been the case, it would further undermine one of this play's main political points.

But even though the text has more critical distance to Helene Alving than

[21] "Hvilken usømmelig letsindighed af ham! Å, men mere end en letsindighed har det ikke været, fru Alving. Tro mig på det" (Ibsen 2008b, 436).

[22] "Det hele er et løst indfald af Osvald; det kan De være viss på" (Ibsen 2008b, 443).

is often assumed in previous analyses, there is no doubt that she, or her reflexive, critical process of understanding is the driving force in the play. That is also what makes her self-criticism so important, for example when she calls herself a coward, because she did not dare to be honest. And at this point she has nothing in common with Manders; this represents ways of thinking that he would never even allow himself to imagine:

> MANDERS: And you call it cowardice to fulfil your obvious duty and obligation? Have you forgotten that a child should love and honour his mother and father?
> FRU ALVING: Let's not generalize about this. Let us ask, should Osvald love and honour Chamberlain Alving? (Ibsen 2016b, 225)[23]

What Mrs. Alving says here can be seen as a short introduction to what ideology-critique is, not in the abstract, but the concrete. Not duty, responsibility and abstract commandments, but the specific discussion of *this* man, *this* history, *this* situation. This way of reasoning, with relentless reference to specific power-relations, is both a formal procedure *and* the theme or content in many of Ibsen's plays. And this discussion of the relationship between truth and ideal, abstract and concrete and, of course, illusion and reality is continued in a conversation that, at times, verges on the absurd. Manders emphasizes Osvald's ideals, while Mrs. Alving answers by saying "Yes, but what about the truth, then?" and Manders automatically responds, "Yes, but what about ideals then?" And in a matter of seconds, we witness a curious turn in Manders' argument where he concludes by saying:

> MANDERS: You've established a beautiful illusion in your son's mind, Mrs. Alving – and you truly shouldn't undervalue that. (Ibsen 2016b, 225–226)[24]

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[23] PASTOR MANDERS: Og De kalder det fejghed at gøre Deres ligefremme pligt og skyldighed. Har De glemt, at et barn skal agte og elske sin fader og sin moder?

FRU ALVING: Lad os ikke ta' det så almindeligt. Lad os spørge: skal Osvald agte og elske kammerherre Alving?

(Ibsen 2008b, 448–449)

[24] FRU ALVING: Ja men sandheden da?

This, as you can see, is not far from what Dr. Relling says in *The Wild Duck*, although he of course puts it in more categorical terms. It is a lie, but it gives happiness and should be valued highly. This means that the question of truth and falsehood is inscribed in a further and more political context, which is made explicit in Mrs. Alving's great speech about the ghosts:

> FRU ALVING: [...] I almost believe we are ghosts, all of us, Pastor Manders. It's not just the things we've inherited from our fathers and mothers that return in us. It's all kinds of old dead opinions and all sorts of old dead doctrines and so on. They aren't alive in us; but they are lodged in there all the same, and we can never be rid of them. I only have to pick up a newspaper to read it, and it's as though I see ghosts creeping between the lines. There must be ghosts living throughout the entire land. They must lie as thick as sand, I'd say. And we are so wretchedly frightened of the light, all of us. (Ibsen 2016b, 227)[25]

The ghost metaphor permeates the play. In Ibsen's typical manner it is developed, discussed and interpreted throughout the action. It begins as a specific experience of repetition, that the younger generation repeats in a haunting way the fatal actions of their now dead parent-generation. And in this scene the metaphor is expanded into a full social theory. The whole of society is characterized by this ghostliness. Everyone, "all of us," are to some degree subjected to or dominated by opinions, beliefs and conceptual schemes, whether we like it or not. And this is an important point for any theory of ideology or discursive hegemony – in other words that society and the individual are deeply characterized by specific ways of thinking and speaking that we do not ourselves

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PASTOR MANDERS: Ja men idealerne da?

[...]

PASTOR MANDERS: De har grundfæstet en lykkelig illusion hos Deres søn, fru Alving, – og det bør De sandeligen ikke skatte ringe.

(Ibsen 2008b, 449-450)

[25] FRU ALVING: [...] jeg tror næsten, vi er gengangere allesammen, pastor Manders. Det er ikke bare det, vi har arvet fra far og mor, som går igen i os. Det er alleslags gamle afdøde meninger og alskens gammel afdød tro og sligt noget. Det er ikke levende i os; men det sidder i alligevel og vi kan ikke bli' det kvit. Bare jeg tar en avis og læser i, er det ligesom jeg så gengangere smyge imellem linjerne. Der må leve gengangere hele landet udover. Der må være så tykt af dem som sand, synes jeg. Og så er vi så gudsjammerlig lysrædde allesammen.

(Ibsen 2008b, 452)

master. In this sense we are all *in* ideology, and we do not have access to any free or neutral place outside, where objective truth can be seen and spoken.

This is, in my view, an important aspect of Ibsen's critique of idealism, of the thought that one can judge reality through ideals that are not contaminated by the same reality. Ideals are themselves part of social struggle, of power relations. That is also the reason why things are often so closely connected in Ibsen's texts, which is the main point for Mrs. Alving as she continues her story. She says that it is not the reading of books that has given her this new insight, but that it is something she can thank Manders himself for: when he showed her the door and sent her home to something that she experienced as revolting and an "abomination," she was forced to "examine" matters she had previously taken for granted (Ibsen 2016b, 227). She began to "unpick the knot," of Manders' and the world's teachings, and soon "the whole thing fell apart," she says, it turned out to be "machine sewn" (Ibsen 2016b, 228). In this sense the political critique in *Ghosts* is both strong and fundamental; in the end it encompasses the whole of society, precisely because things are connected. This is the case in both *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* – what starts off as a private disappointment gains momentum so that in the end society in its totality is at stake.

The difference, however, between these two dramas concerns the space for human agency, the possibility of change. In *A Doll's House* there is a clear possibility of change: the play ends with Nora breaking out of the given. In *Ghosts* these possibilities seem to be, if not gone, then at least on the wane. At the end of the play all the characters are doomed in one sense or other. The exception, if there is one, would be Mrs. Alving herself, because she is alive, and because she has worked her way towards new insight. But for this to be of significance she will have to break out of her own and Manders' conception of the borders between the private and public sphere.

In this play, however, there is also a sort of positive antithesis: the concept of the joy of life (*livsglæde*). It is more important in the play than is often acknowledged, and it is by no means purely whimsical and romantic. In conclusion, I will briefly touch upon this concept. In the conversation between Osvald and his mother at the end of the second act, he says that in Regine lies "salvation" because there is "the joy of life in her." This gives his mother pause, and she asks him to elaborate, to which Osvald replies:

> OSVALD: Yes, the joy of life, Mother – no one knows much about that here at home. I never feel it here. [...] That – and the joy of work. Well,

> they're one and the same thing really. But none of you know anything about that either. [...] people here are taught to believe that work is a curse and punishment for their sins, that life's something miserable, something we'd do best to get out of, sooner rather than later. (Ibsen 2016b, 244)[26]

The joy of life is thus explicitly presented as antithetical to duty and compulsion in society. Osvald points out how it is instilled through childrearing, such that it permeates society entirely. The concept of the joy of life precisely entails a break from the morality of duty and subservience.

But just as important, is how it also entails joy in work, however. Indeed, the two are one and the same. In this sense, the play takes on a utopian aspect, which is likely what makes the play so much more than a depressing naturalistic study. Yet this interpretation of this element in the play does not stop here. One should also take note of the first time the concept of the joy of life is introduced in the conversation between Osvald, Mrs. Alving, and Pastor Manders in Act I. In this scene, Osvald discusses his only memory of his father:

> OSVALD: I went up to into father's private room one evening, he was in such a bright, ebullient mood. [...] he took me and sat me on his knee and let me smoke his pipe. Puff, boy, he said – puff properly, boy! And I smoked as hard as I could, until I felt myself go quite pale and the sweat break out in huge drops on my forehead. Then he roared with laughter – [...] you came in and carried me off to the nursery. Then I was ill, and I saw you were crying. – Did Father often play pranks like that?
> MANDERS: As a young man, he was certainly full of the joys of life. (Ibsen 2016b, 210)[27]

[26] OSVALD: Ja, livsglæden, mor, – den kender I ikke stort til herhjemme. Jeg fornemmer den aldrig her. [...] Den – og så arbejdsglæden. Ja, det er nu igrunden den samme ting. Men den ved I hellerikke noget om. [...] her læres folk op til at tro, at arbejdet er en forbandelse og en syndestraf, og at livet er noget jammerligt noget, som vi er bedst tjent med at komme ud af jo før jo heller. (Ibsen 2008b, 488–489)

[27] OSVALD: jeg kom op på kammeret til far en aften, han var så glad og lystig. [...] han tog og satte mig på knæet og lod mig røge af piben. Røg, gut, sa' han, – røg dygtigt, gut! Og jeg røgte alt hvad jeg vandt, til jeg kendte jeg blev ganske bleg og sveden brød ud i store dråber på panden. Da lo han så hjertelig godt – [...] så kom du ind og bar mig ud i barnekammeret. Der fik jeg ondt og jeg så, at du græd. – Gjorde far ofte slige spilopper?

It is thus Manders who is the first to use "the joy of life" – and as an excuse for what comes quite close to what one could term child abuse. This has several important aspects. Perhaps the most important of these is how Manders introduces the concept of the joy of life into the discourse before it is used by Osvald. In this way, it becomes inscribed within a broader social context, as a concept or ideal that can be used in different manners and can be contested.[28] This weakens the utopian sentiment the term seems to acquire later in the play. The last time the term appears in the play is when Regine, just before she leaves the stage for the final time, asserts that:

> REGINE: [...] And *I* have the joy of life in me too, ma'am!
> MRS. ALVING: Yes, unfortunately; but just don't throw yourself away, Regine. (Ibsen 2016b, 254. Emphasis in original)[29]

This regretful "unfortunately" similarly shows that the joy of life, as a concept, can have varying meanings. It also signifies a danger and something negative. Thus, the concept is drawn into a broader political struggle. It is, like all political concepts, something contested that cannot be defined once and for all. This prevents the interpretation of the play that suggests it promotes a form of idealism by presenting a counter ideal. This ideal itself is show to be part of a discursive struggle, rather than elevated above the struggle for hegemony. It is ambiguous and requires both interpretation and contextualization – just like the play itself.

PASTOR MANDERS: I sin ungdom var han en særledes livsglad mand.

(Ibsen 2008b, 420–421)

[28] Eivind Tjønneland's article "Repetition, Recollection and Heredity in Ibsen's *Ghosts*" offers an important glimpse related to Ibsen's drama in the history of ideas and society. See: Tjønneland 2005.

[29] REGINE: [...] *jeg* har også livsglæde i mig, frue!

FRU ALVING: Ja, desværre; men kast dig bare ikke bort, Regine.

(Ibsen 2008b, 510. Emphasis in original)

Reviews

The Emperor of Interpretation

In this very early piece of scholarship, Helland engages with core issues related to interpretation and the validity of claims about literary texts. In his rather balanced and respectful review of Trond O. Larsen's 1990 monograph on Brand *and* Peer Gynt *(which was later developed into two monographs, in which the author claims respectively that Brand is Satan and Peer an Egyptian pharaoh), Helland warns us about the pitfalls and dangers of any act of interpretation – a warning that seems no less relevant in our age of fake news and conspiracy thinking.*

Peer Gynt og Brand: En ny fortolkning by Trond O. Larsen. 1990. Oslo: Gyldendal.

Late last fall, the Norwegian publisher, Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, published a new contribution to the Norwegian literary research field: Trond O. Larsen's *Peer Gynt og Brand – en ny fortolkning* (*Peer Gynt and Brand – A New Interpretation*). The title alone signals that this is an ambitious project. The audacity of the book is further emphasized in the preface, where Larsen states that he "chooses to bypass secondary literature [...] because, in my opinion, it lacks the unifying idea-pattern that ties them together" (1990, 8). (That little word "them" refers here to a summary not only within each individual work but also between the two dramatic poems.)

The expressed intention to claim a new and personal interpretation of these thoroughly interpreted works, so independent of tradition, will, in the following text, be respected. He wishes to "present the result of research" without seeking the usual concessions to an interpretative tradition, and therefore should not be met with objections based on this tradition. That the desire for freedom from tradition is naive, and that the "new" interpretation harkens back to ideas that might have seemed quite archaic or outdated even in the 1860s, is another matter.

The Theoretical Foundation

What is both new and surprising in Larsen's interpretations of *Peer Gynt* and *Brand* is related to the theoretical foundation – which, if not exactly new, is at least surprising – upon which his *Umwertung* (total evaluation) is founded. The interpretation arises (of course) from the problems understanding encounters, given the "seemingly" disparate nature of *Peer Gynt*, the fate of Brand (and Peer) and so on. The interpreter experiences problems like these as "directly bothersome," "bothersome because we lack the foundational ideas that place Brand's life in proper relief" (Larsen 1990, 7-8).

The driving force in Larsen's writing is, therefore, thirst for a unified meaning. The poetic work *must* constitute a fixed, identical whole. The question of whether "[I] am reading a whole or just a 'part'" is decisive (Larsen 1990, 14). This kind of anticipation of complete meaning constitutes yet another element in any attempt at interpretation, but even Gadamer would likely admit that one risks devolving into sheer mania. The need to achieve "the leap to the wholeness of the idea that the writer undoubtedly had in mind when he wrote the work," to address "directly the idea-world within the poem," to understand "the poem's unified idea-structure," and to assume "that there is a holistic idea-pattern underlying the work" is so strong that other considerations must seemingly be ignored (Larsen 1990, 16). The assertion that a completely fixed idea-structure must underlie *Peer Gynt* is, however, not substantiated. Instead, the interpreter resorts to exhortative preaching. Within the first 11-12 pages of the book, variants such as "bearing ideas," "idea-pattern," "idea-structure," "idea-foundation," "idea-world" and so forth, are repeated thirty-seven times in total, often in combination with adjectives like "holistic" or "unified" (ten times). A statement does not become truer simply by being repeated.

Larsen's interpretation appears to be driven by the need for a formulated encapsulation of the poetic work, thus reducing it to a singular message or content. The 'Great Work of Art' created by the 'Great Artist' cannot be "just fragments" or contain "unresolved mysteries" without this becoming "directly bothersome." Yet, the task of removing unsettling ruptures or excesses of meaning in the poetic work by assuming "that there is a holistic idea-pattern underlying the work" requires an additional assumption that

provides access to "a location outside and beyond" the text (1990, 16, 20). Larsen therefore "assume[s] that the poem consists of two layers, an open conflict surface and a closed idea-pattern" (21).

In his attempt to justify this last postulation, Larsen references a review of Andreas Munch's *Lord William Russell*, written by Ibsen in 1857.[1] In his review, Ibsen discusses some issues concerning symbolism in poetic art. He argues, among other things, that mediocre authors will seek to "elevate this symbolism of personality to the consciousness in their depicted characters [...] Instead of letting it wind its way through the work, hidden, like the silver ore in the mountain" (quoted in Larsen 1990, 19). In Larsen's interpretation, Ibsen, who was no mediocre writer, embedded such a hidden, symbolic "silver ore" in his work. Thus, interpreting Ibsen requires the skills of a miner: "Downwards must I burrow, pounding / till I hear the metals sounding" (Ibsen 1986, 27).[2] Unsurprisingly, Larsen "finds it appropriate to apply the poet's manifesto in *Illustreret Nyhedsblad* to Norway's national epic" (1990, 20) and argues that *Peer Gynt* consists of two things:

1. A surface: the obvious human conflicts, the skin of work, the open pit of the mine itself.
2. A base: the hidden idea-structure, the nervous system of the work, the ore of silver itself. (1990, 20)

This last "theoretical" assumption raises several issues. Firstly, it is well-known that Ibsen never wrote any kind of manifesto. He was, in fact, very unwilling to comment on his own poetic practice and would hardly appreciate seeing his oeuvre reduced to a rule-bound aesthetic program for symbolic poetry. Even if one were to accept the remarks in the newspaper review as a manifesto from Ibsen circa 1857, the "transferability" of such a manifesto to the Ibsen who writes *Peer Gynt* ten years later remains highly de-

[1] References to the poem "The Miner" (*Bergmanden*), though more or less hidden in Larsen's text, appear to serve a similar function in his argumentation.

[2] ("Nedad må jeg vejen bryde, / til jeg hører malmen lyde.") From the first stanza of the poem "The Miner," translated by John Northam. The poem's ending, however, indicates that a slightly pessimistic attitude towards the possibility of "going down for silver ore," in which: "Hammering and hammering / to the last day life shall bring. / Never beam of brightness dawning, / never sun-of-hope's full morning" (Ibsen 1986, 28). ("Hammerslag på hammerslag / indtil livets sidste dag. / Ingen morgenstråle skinner; / ingen håbets sol opprinder.") (Ibsen 2009d, 478).

batable. One can safely assume that the Ibsen who languished in Bergen during the winter of 1856-57[3] was a different man with different beliefs than the Ibsen who sits in Italy and writes "our national epic" in 1866, while being able to "breathe freely and think independently for the very first time" (Heiberg 1978, 122).

A more serious objection to this approach to *Peer Gynt* – and its rationale – is that the interpreter seems to completely conflate the concepts of allegory and symbol. To view the text as a literal "surface" that "conceals" an underlying ideological system is to engage in *allegoresis* in its most literal or naive sense. Even though *Peer Gynt* contains undisputedly allegorical elements, it is quite a reach to claim that the work constitutes the kind of simple allegory seen in the fable.[4] Nor would Ibsen's furious reaction to Clemens Petersen's allegorical reading of the work seem to support Larsen's view.[5]

It becomes no less peculiar when Larsen seeks to defend his *allegoresis* based on remarks Ibsen made regarding *the symbol*. It has been common to view allegory and symbol as contrary to each other, at least in Ibsen's time. It therefore seems strange that an alleged manifesto regarding symbolism can be used to support this *allegoresis*. This peculiar conflation may stem from the interpreter's failure to reflect on the rhetorical status that Ibsen's statements in *Illustreret Nyhedsblad* must themselves have. To assert that the symbolism in a work should "wind its way through the work, hidden, like the silver ore in the mountain" is itself symbolic language. Yet, in Larsen's

[3] Hans Heiberg describes Ibsen during his Bergen years as follows: "Like so many of his generation, [Ibsen], not only in the plays he wrote in Bergen, but also in article and lectures, wanted to investigate what made his generation Norwegian, not just a part of a Dano-Germanic-European common urban culture [...] He became slowly and increasingly perplexed with himself, both about what he wanted from his writing as well as what form it should take" (Heiberg 1978, 82, 90).

[4] Larsen seems to read *Peer Gynt* as an allegory of the following type: "moral, philosophical, religious [...] allegories referring to an additional set of ideas. If the allegorical reference is continuous throughout the narrative, the fiction "is" an allegory [...] Allegory may be simple or complex. In simple allegory the fiction is wholly subordinate to the abstract "moral," hence it often impresses the literary critic as naive" (*Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1979). For further discussion of the concept of allegory in relation to *Peer Gynt*, see Eivind Tjønneland's article "The Strange Passenger: An Aesthetic Problem?" (1989) ("Den fremmede passasjer – et estetisk problem?") in *Agora*, no. 2/3.

[5] Larsen cites Ibsen's argument against Petersen's interpretation of the work to support his *allegoresis*: "And is not Peer Gynt a personality, complete, individual? I know that it is." ("Og er nu ikke Peer Gynt en Personalighed, afsluttet, individuell? Jeg ved at den er det.") However, Ibsen's point is precisely that *Peer Gynt* is *not* meant to illustrate an ideological content or philosophical concept! It is the opposite: individual.

interpretation, this symbolic silver ore is rendered as allegory. It would have been more promising in terms of concrete textual analysis – and perhaps more plausible, too – to attempt to ground this interpretative theory within the text itself, rather than in a "manifesto" for romantic symbolism.

A more curious element that should be mentioned is that this almost Classicist or Rationalist view of the text's two layers is connected to a concept of genius that is close to Romanticism. About the creation of the work of art, Larsen says: "In the moment he takes up the pen and writes [...] he is no longer Henrik Johan Ibsen in Rome [...] Time, place and external circumstances disappear, and H.J. Ibsen, the man, is replaced by a creative, timeless writer who commits an idea-message to paper" (1990, 14). The writer as historical person is thus erased in the act of creative genius, and this is reminiscent of Romanticism's view of the Genius (a term Larsen frequently uses to refer to Ibsen). Larsen's genius is not, however, immediately or unconsciously creative; it is asserted "that the poet both consciously illustrates and conceals his ideas at the same time" (17). A rather unusual perception of genius. So, this Writer is a genius and *consciously* creates an allegory over an underlying system of ideas, which 120 years later will be uncovered by the (one can only presume) equally ingenious "scholar:" the Emperor of Interpretation?

In addition to these two interpretative-theoretical postulations, there are two more assumptions, related to content that underscore Larsen's interpretation of the two dramatic poems. The first is "that Peer's life journey is the poem's general and central theme, that Peer's journey follows a path of enlightenment, and that being whole and true in One's Self is the goal of this enlightenment" (17). This starting point may resemble many other common approaches to the work. With the second assumption, however, the interpretation takes a different direction: "I assume that the poem's underlying idea-tone is religious. By religious, I mean that the poem depicts Peer's pilgrimage towards enlightenment within the framework of a dynamic Master-Man-Fellow Man relationship" (Larsen 1990, 17).

With such assumptions as the basis for interpretation, one might suspect that the concrete interpretation evades discussion or criticism from the outset. When so much is taken for granted, both regarding the text's status and themes, the discussion is cut off before it can even begin: we find ourselves within a religious discourse.

Having asserted that Larsen positions his reading in a religious discourse, one can see how the arguments and reasoning in the book rest on

a faith-based acceptance rather than any logical consistency. If one does not accept the premises outlined above, the main bulk of Larsen's argumentation appears arbitrary. The book practically overflows with pseudo-conclusions. "Logical" words – such as "therefore," "hence," "consequently," "thus," "thereby" and so on – proliferate in the text without any necessary or plausible connection being demonstrated. His argumentation quite often simply breaks with the logic embedded in the language. Though we have seen several examples of this already, one clear case is found in the continuation of the explanation for the poem's division between surface and silver ore, where the next paragraph reads as follows:

> In line with this holistic view of duality, Peer becomes both the open, conflict-person, the individual Peer, on a journey through his own life, and the closed idea-person, the everyman Peer, on a journey through every human life. Thus, I have hereby confirmed the assumption of the poem's exoteric-esoteric layering, while, at the same time, justified my interpretative efforts. (Larsen 1990, 20)

"Thus," "thereby," "confirmed," "justified?" The fact that the truth of a statement is not proportional to its frequency is still relevant.

Conclusion

In light of the above, one will hopefully understand that we now aim to round off this review without delving into the content of Larsen's interpretation in detail. It should be briefly mentioned that the main concern of his interpretation is to read *Peer Gynt* in light of "two literary comparative texts [...] An old Syrian hymn, *Hymn of the Pearl* in the apocryphal Acts of Thomas [...] and the New Testament" (1990, 20), and to read *Brand* in light of his own *Peer Gynt* analysis and *the Old Testament*. Within his analysis, these "comparative texts" hold the status of "keys" that can open the "locks" that impede access to Larsen's "silver ore." Legitimizing the privileged status of these texts in relation to Ibsen's dramatic text is no *more* convincing than arguments previously discussed (the choice of *Hymn of the Pearl* as the most important of Larsen's intertexts appears – unfortunately – particularly arbitrary).

The Birth of Modernism: Henrik Ibsen

Helland's review of Toril Moi's influential monograph – which caused a lively debate in Norwegian as well as international scholarly arenas – points out both the merits and challenges of the book. It should be noted that there are slight differences between Moi's original English version of the book, and Agnete Øye's Norwegian translation, which appeared in the same year. Some passages discussed in this review are present only the Norwegian version. While Helland praises Moi's analysis highly and correctly predicts the seminal position her book would go on to garner in the field, he also points out how Moi's definitions of modernism and idealism are at times too abstract and misleading as philosophical categories. At the same time, Helland emphasizes how Moi's focus on Ibsen's break with idealism, in addition to her Cavellian theoretical orientation, allows her to deliver in-depth analyses of Ibsen's plays. This review, which was published in Edda *in 2007, demonstrates both Helland's solid grounding in philosophy and his lucid assessment of the directions that the field of Ibsen studies were to take in coming years. For those who wish to follow this debate further, we recommend Moi's response to Helland and other critics, which was published in* Edda *in 2008 under the title "Om noen reaksjoner på Ibsens modernisme: Svar til Helland, Larsen og Humpál" ("On some reactions to Ibsen's Modernism: Reply to Helland, Larsen, and Humpál").*

Ibsens modernisme by Toril Moi, translated by Agnete Øye. 2006. Oslo: Pax forlag.
Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theatre, Philosophy by Toril Moi. 2006. Durham: Duke University Press.

Great expectations have been tied to the publication of Toril Moi's new book, and *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* exceeds many of these. It is a big book – in both senses of the word. I believe the book will prove itself to be an important one for all who are interested in Henrik Ibsen. The basic understanding of Ibsen's career is not only laid out eruditely and descriptively, but

they also offer a broad overview of the approaches towards the works and their cultural contexts. *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, in both theoretical and empirical-analytical contexts, is quite an ambitious book, written in a refreshing and easy-to-read style. Toril Moi has written an education book that allows us to reflect and provokes resistance. Both aspects should be praised.

In the foreword to the Norwegian edition, Moi explains what her "main issue" is in the book: "how Ibsen became the first modernist in history of theater, and what this claim means" (Moi 2006a, 12).[1] The answer to "how Ibsen became modernist" is dealt with in Part I and II of the book, while the analysis of "the kind of modernism that was uniquely his" is dealt with in Part III (Moi 2006b, 1). Quantitatively, the discussion of this first question constitutes the main part of the book. This is the main subject for the first 315 pages, while the analysis of what Moi calls Ibsen's thoroughly modernist masterpieces – from *A Doll's House* to *The Lady of the Sea* – comprise the next 124 pages. Finally, twelve pages make up an epilogue on Ibsen's last five plays.

The actual division of the book is, of course, not so mechanical, and there is even a whole section in Part I dedicated to Ibsen's social dramas. Yet, considering the book's title, it is somewhat surprising that the analysis of what, according to Moi, constitutes Ibsen's modernism does not actually form the main part of the text. The reason for this is that the book has received a slightly unfortunate title in Norwegian. In English, the language in which it was written, it is titled *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*. In my opinion, it is a more fitting title because the subject of the book is precisely the birth of modernism (in the context of theater) and Henrik Ibsen's path towards this modernism. According to Moi, these are two sides of the same coin. In the presentation of this dual subject, visual art, theater and philosophy are important elements.

Now, claiming that Ibsen is the father of modern drama is nothing new. An early, and very good, source for this view is Peter Szondi, but it continues, though in slightly varying forms, in the work of such Ibsen scholars as Erik Østerud, Helge Rønning and Eivind Tjønneland, to name just a few. When Toril Moi, to a limited extent, discusses concepts like 'modernity' and 'the modern,' or even 'realism,' I perceive it primarily as an attempt at reassessing

[1] Translator's note: 2006a refers to re-translations of Agnete Øye's translation of Toril Moi's *Ibsens modernisme*. 2006b refers to Toril Moi's original English-language version of *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*.

Ibsen (within an Anglo-American context). For example, one concern in the book is to show that Ibsen not only stands in the modernist tradition, but he is no less advanced or exciting than figures like Proust, Joyce or Beckett. Many will probably think that Moi stretches the concept of modernism a bit too far, but of course 'modernism' is anything but a clearly defined term. The same applies to terms like 'modernity' or 'realism,' wherein the specific context is the decisive factor in the definition and application of these terms.

For Moi, the decisive characteristics of Ibsen's modernism are the use of realism and prose, various meta-theatrical elements, the critical distance from idealism, as well as several thematic elements such as the position of women, skepticism, the everyday, theatricality, love and marriage under modernity (e.g., Moi 2006a, 26; Moi 2006b, 9–10).[2]

Her concept of modernism helps Moi achieve two things: to detach Ibsen from traditional idealistic interpretation, and, at the same time, save Ibsen from what she sees as "the ideology of modernism." The latter term is taken from Frederic Jamson's book *A Singular Modernity* (2002), though Jameson mostly uses it in relation to "modernism as ideology" (Jameson 2002, 139). This term (and especially when Moi applies it) can illustrate both the strength and weakness of the book's theoretical approach. The strength of the book's theoretical basis is in its openness, while the weakness lies, in my opinion, in an almost overwhelming degree of abstraction. The ideology of modernism is thus characterized by "three basic doctrines," which these 'ideologues' seek to apply to all literature (not just late modernist literature): "The first and most important is the *autonomy of the aesthetic*. This is supported by two others: *de-personalization* and the *autonomization of language*" (Moi 2006b, 20. Emphasis in the original).[3] Many would likely agree that these traits have been dominant in literary studies and that they represent tendencies from which it is important to break away. However, when modernist ideology turns out to denote not just certain aspects of New Criticism or the more Blanchot-inspired version of deconstruction but virtually all thinking about literature – from New Criticism, through the Frankfurt School, to postcolonialism and New Historicism – it begins to approach meaninglessness. In my opinion, if one operates with a concept that completely erases the differences between, for example, T.S.

[2] I will discuss the more thematic components in Moi's determination of Ibsen's modernism below.

[3] "Den første og viktigste er *estetikkens autonomi*. Denne støttes opp av to andre: *depersonalisering* og *autonomisering av språket"* (Moi 2006a, 39-40. Emphasis in the original).

Eliot, Adorno and Paul de Man, then one has not said anything particularly precise.

What is more precise and relevant is Moi's assertion that there has been a tendency in the field of literature to "produce an opposition between realism and modernism understood both as formal aspects of texts and as names for distinct literary and artistic periods" (Moi 2006b, 23).[4] To conceive of such a dichotomy, Moi claims, "is fundamentally flawed" (Moi 2006b, 23). This is because, according to her, every text has an element of realism. A text that attempts to create an illusion of reality is thus merely appropriating one of the many rhetorical forms that realism can take. As she correctly points out, "realism" in literature existed both before and after the period commonly referred to realism. According to Moi, realism is not the reason Ibsen's dramas created an uproar. The antithesis to modernism – and what Ibsen actually breaks with – is, for Moi, not realism but *idealism*.

One of the strengths of this book is Moi's emphasis on idealism's significance as an intellectual horizon and antithesis for understanding Ibsen's drama. Idealism here denotes the philosophical conception of totality found in what is often referred to as "German Idealism." Moi highlights the problematic nature of the fact that today:

> We appear to have forgotten how important idealism was as a general way of understanding art and literature; how strong its hold on the hearts and minds of nineteenth-century writers, artists, critics, and audiences was; and what a long, slow, piecemeal task it was for a whole generation – the first generation of modernists – to work itself free from that hold. (Moi 2006b, 68)[5]

Although Moi likely dramatizes her "discovery" by exaggerating how we have "forgotten" idealism, this is nonetheless an important point. Moi builds on Naomi Schor's book on George Sand, and like Schor, she claims to demon-

[4] "skaper en motsetning mellom realisme og modernisme forstått både som formelle sider ved en tekst og som betegnelse på atskilte litterære og kunstneriske perioder" (2006a, 44–45).

[5] Vi har øyensynlig glemt hvor viktig idealismen var som en generell måte å forstå kunst og litteratur på; hvor sterkt grep den hadde om 1800-tallets forfattere, kunstnere, kritikere, og publikum både følelsesmessig det var for en hel generasjon – den første generasjonen modernister – å frigjøre seg fra dette grepet. (Moi 2006a, 107)

strate that "idealism was everywhere" in Ibsen's time (Moi 2006b, 70). But unlike Schor, Moi wants to go to the sources, which in this case means German Idealism, as she says: "I think Schor was wrong to leave German philosophy out of her book, for the omission weakens her understanding of what idealistic aesthetics was" (Moi 2006b, 70). Paradoxically, I argue, this also applies to Moi's own book. For, even though the chapter dealing with idealistic aesthetics spans over fifty pages, there is very little about German philosophy. Admittedly, she cites a passage from *Das Älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus* (*The Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism*), in addition to a presentation of Schiller's *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung* (*On Naive and Sentimental Poetry*), but, for the most part, Moi's explanation of German Idealism amounts to presenting it as a diluted form of Platonism, with an insistence on a close connection between the beautiful, the true, and the good – in art. And the emphasis on the superior value of art is the only difference from Plato, if we are to believe Moi.

The reason Moi portrays the aesthetics of idealism as a Platonic Schillerism is, of course, that she aims to establish a philosophical conception that clearly highlights the break made by Ibsen. However, this approach leads to some peculiar effects. It is outright misleading – considering her commitment to providing an account that incorporates "German philosophy" – that she repeatedly writes about "the idealistic trinity of truth, beauty, and goodness" (see, for example, Moi 2006b, 9, 87, 90). For a philosopher like Kant (and one must start not with Schiller but Kant), a fundamental point is that this "trinity" is broken apart. Indeed, what makes Kant a modern philosopher is precisely that, through his three critiques (of pure reason, practical reason and judgment), he demonstrates that the trinity Moi uses *cannot* be taken for granted. "The true," (in other words, the scientific) knowledge of how the world works, is given its place and boundaries – its claims of "validity" – in the first critique, just as ethical judgments about "the good" are determined in the second, and aesthetic judgments about "the beautiful" in the third. And as for aesthetics, Kant's fundamental point is that reflective judgment is autonomous. This specifically means that the judgment "This is beautiful" does not rest on what Kant calls interests, understood in the sensory, ethical, and cognitive senses. What characterizes aesthetic judgments (judgments of taste) is that they are not based on sensual desire, moral interest (in the good), or cognitive interest (in truth).

This may seem like splitting hairs, but it concerns one of Moi's central themes, namely periodization. She claims that "the story of modernism [...]

starts with Baudelaire and Flaubert. In other words, the development of the modern faith in the 'autonomy of the aesthetic' begins when aesthetics is severed from ethics" (Moi 2006b, 90).[6] In other words, the history of modernism begins with Kant, because it is with him that aesthetics and ethics "become two separate things." Or, in even more other words: modernism may seem to begin with what is its antithesis and diametrical opposite, namely the aesthetics of idealism, if we are to believe Moi. These are problems that Moi encounters because both modernism and idealism are thought of too abstractly. When the categories become as extensive as in these cases, they can hardly be prevented from merging into each other.

Some of these problems could be resolved by, for example, treating idealism as a somewhat loose and diluted doctrine, the contemporary doxa, or in other words: ideology. But it would have required empirical work to reconstruct this from contemporary sources, and this is not found in Moi's book. There is little doubt that idealism in this sense was a driving force in Ibsen's time, and it still has both Norwegian and international representation. Although Moi claims that she wants "to return to the source: German idealist aesthetics,"[7] it is primarily the vulgarized remnants of this aesthetics in the following generations that she deals with. And there may be reasons for this, as the aesthetics of idealism – when understood as a conservative, religiously oriented aesthetics of reconciliation – were almost hegemonic when Ibsen's literary career began.

Despite the weaknesses found in Moi's explanation of "idealism," this concept allows her to gain a productive grasp of Ibsen's entire oeuvre. She convincingly argues that "idealism" constituted both the main horizon and opponent for Ibsen as a dramatist. Only by breaking away from idealism was he able to create his own dramatic form, which Moi chooses to call "modernism." In the chapter tellingly titled "The Idealistic Straitjacket," she demonstrates how "Ibsen's early works are records of his struggle to fit into the straitjacket of idealist aesthetics, and this struggle came to an end in 1862, with the publication of 'Terje Vigen' and *Love's Comedy*" (Moi 2006b, 148).[8] By consistently

[6] "modernismens historie [...] begynner med Flaubert og Baudelaire. Med andre ord: Utviklingen av den moderne troen på 'kunstens autonomi' begynner når estetikk og etikk blir to forskjellige ting" (Moi 2006a, 137).

[7] "gå tilbake til kilden: tysk idealistisk estetikk" (Moi 2006a, 112).

[8] "Ibsens tidlige arbeider kan leses som dokumenter som viser hvordan han kjempet for å passe inn i den idealistiske estetikkens tvangstrøye, og at denne kampen tok slutt i 1862, da han utga 'Terje Vigen' og *Kjærlighedens Komedie*" (Moi 2006a, 215).

referring to "idealism," Moi succeeds both in her interesting and revealing readings of texts such as *St. John's Night*, "Terje Vigen" and *Emperor and Galilean*, while also integrating these texts into a meaningful narrative about the development of Ibsen's authorship. In my opinion, this alone elevates this book above the vast majority of Ibsen monographs.

Moi's analyses of these three texts, as well as her analysis of *Love's Comedy*, are highly interesting. It is a small feat in itself to breathe new life and relevance into a text like *St. John's Night*. It is also rare to see such a successful attempt to bring *Love's Comedy* into the discussion. The analysis of *Emperor and Galilean*, to which an entire chapter is devoted, is particularly successful. Moi's hypothesis for placing this peculiar play within the context of Ibsen's dramatic production is also worth noting. She takes Ibsen's repeated statements that *Emperor and Galilean* was his masterpiece quite seriously, and she provides numerous interesting reasons for he might have been right in claiming this. Most refreshing is Moi's insistence that this play is a *modern* drama that, among other things, "develop[s] a new understanding of theater and theatricality," while, at the same time, "it was intended to be a diagnosis of European modernity" (Moi 2006b, 190, 192).[9]

Another important aspect of the chapter on *Emperor and Galilean* lies in the book's new theoretical contribution to the field. While the book does open with a quote from *The Claim of Reason* and Stanley Cavell is thanked in the foreword, his thinking plays only a minor role in the early parts of the book. However, his role soon becomes quite prominent. Toril Moi is not the first scholar to draw on Stanley Cavell in her work on Ibsen's drama, but she is the first to give him a dominant place. With the help of Cavell, Moi succeeds in providing a focused analysis of Ibsen's persistent portrayal of modern skepticism. Perhaps most importantly, she emphasizes skepticism as an existential phenomenon and consistently focuses on its connection with theater and theatricality. In her analysis of *Emperor and Galilean*, Moi demonstrates how Julian not only theatricalizes others (and the world) but also theatricalizes himself. This focus allows her to gain substantial insight into the meta-aesthetic aspects of Ibsen's drama.

Here we also reach the broader theoretical ambitions of *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*. The introduction announces that "this book [is] an at-

[9] "å utvikle en ny forståelse av teater, teatralitet og teatralskhet [...] er ment som en diagnose av den europeiske moderniteten" (Moi 2006a, 268, 271).

tempt to develop an approach to literary research that builds on the philosophy of ordinary language of J.L. Austin, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Cavell." According to Moi, this represents a break from "a hegemonic tradition in literary studies, which builds upon Saussure's understanding of language" (Moi 2006a, 27).[10] In so far that it is true that the "tradition" of literary scholarship is *dominated* by a simplistic structuralist understanding of language, there may indeed be good reasons to desire a break and renewal. I must admit that I do not entirely recognize this description as the current situation in literary studies. Moreover, Moi does not convince me that Cavell and his philosophy of ordinary language are the way to go if one wishes to escape this purported (post-structuralist) linguistic prison. In other words, she is unconvincing if this is the *only way* out of the current situation. However, as I have stated, she nevertheless highlights many important aspects and argues well for literature's relevance in life and the world.

It is somewhat difficult to see how this represents a different "way of reading," if by this one means methodological or theoretical innovations. For the influence of Cavell is most evident in the thematic aspects of Moi's book. This is the background for how theatricality, skepticism and the everyday underlie her definition of Ibsen's *modernism*. As mentioned, Moi brings out some new aspects of Ibsen's drama by reading from a "Cavellian" perspective, but the idea that these are specifically modernist themes is mainly due to Cavell and Moi's understanding him.

Often, having an eye for one thing makes one blind to all else. This is especially true when the influence is as strong as it is in *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*. Moi tends to turn Ibsen into an "orthodox Cavellian," and the repetitive invocations of Cavell's authority often, in my view, serve to undermine it. Time and again, we hear that Cavell has helped the author understand something (Moi 2006a, 15), has uncovered something in an "astounding reading" (Moi 2006b, 10), has suggested something to the author (Moi 2006b 197, footnote 32), Cavell summarizes in his fundamental essay (Moi 2006b, 206), has helped the author see something "clearly" (Moi 2006b, 211), she is "persuaded" by Cavell's argument (Moi 2006b 212), Cavell has helped her

[10] "denne boka [er] et forsøk på å utvikle en litteraturførskning som bygger på dagligspråkfilosofien til J.L. Austin, Ludwig Wittgenstein og Cavell. Dette er altså en måte å lese på som bryter med den dominerende tradisjonen i dagens litteraturforskning, som bygger på språkforståelsen til Ferdinand de Saussure."

with a "formulation" (Moi 2006b, 213), and so on. And when we come to *The Wild Duck*, we not only learn that the "harrowing exploration of a father who cannot even begin to acknowledge his true relationship to his daughter reminds [Moi] of *King Lear*" but, in an elaborative footnote, we learn that "[s]ince it reminds [her] of *King Lear*, it also, inevitably, reminds [her] of Cavell's *The Avoidance of Love* (Moi 2006b, 248).

The most reductive result of Moi's somewhat extreme emphasis on Cavell is in my view the fact that the political and societal aspects of Ibsen's works become only vaguely visible. At times, Moi expresses herself as if she interprets Cavell's concept of "the ordinary" quite literally as everyday life, or the here and now of daily existence. And this leads to a somewhat narrow perspective on Ibsen as a "writer of the everyday." The focus often becomes a little too one-sided and directed towards the private and emotionally interpersonal. She expresses this several times in more principled terms:

> Ibsen recognizes that the greatest challenge for a human being is no longer to reach beauty and truth [...] but to be able to love. [...] Skepticism in general, and theatricality in particular, are the enemies of love. Modern human beings will have to struggle to overcome their skepticism, if they want to love each other. (Moi 2006b, 214–215)[11]

Of "The Four Greats," it was Jonas Lie who was called "the poet of the home," but based on Moi's analysis, one might at times wonder if this could also apply to her depiction of Ibsen. To be "able to love" is, of course, both important and difficult, but I believe the world presents challenges that are of greater importance and difficulty. And perhaps today's belief that the essence of life lies in "loving" is as good an example of "ideology" as anything else?

The main weakness of Moi's Cavellianism, in my opinion, is that it tends to reduce the problems in Ibsen's dramas to purely individual issues, which can then be fixed by individual solutions. This is not consistent, but often Moi seems to argue that a kind of philosophical therapy could solve the problem: "Nora and Helmer love each other as well as they can. They just cannot do

[11] "[Ibsen] erkjenner at den største utfordringen for et menneske ikke lenger er å nå det skjønne og det sanne [...] men å være i stand til å elske. [...] skeptisisme generelt og teatralskhet spesielt er kjærlighetens fiender. Om de skal klare å elske hverandre, må moderne mennesker kjempe for å overvinne sin skeptisisme" (2006a, 304).

any better. Had they known what they were doing when they performed their masquerades, they would have stopped doing it" (Moi 2006b, 234).[12] While there is some truth to this, I also believe that an important aspect of the play relates not just to "the depressing consequences of Nora's and Torvald's lack of insight" (Moi 2006b, 234, note 17), but structural phenomena and societal contexts that are far greater than any individual.

It is, however, almost unfair to demand *more* material and perspectives in such an exceptionally rich book as this. The over fifty pages-long chapter on "Ibsen's Visual World," for example, contains numerous new insights, ideas and bits of information that will likely play a role in academic discussions about Ibsen's oeuvre. Here, Moi analyzes "the European visual culture that formed the background to Ibsen's works," with an emphasis on "aesthetic theories; visual technologies; spectacle, performances; and the interaction between painting and theater in Ibsen's century" (Moi 2006b, 112).[13] Especially her discussion of the latter aspects contain new material, with overarching points about visual technologies and the relationship between painting and theater, as well as more detailed elements. To take just one specific example before I conclude: It is not new to point out possible parallels between *When We Dead Awaken* and Arnold Böcklin's paintings, but no one, as far as I know, has done this with the same detailed knowledge and convincing power as Moi.

The concrete analyses of Ibsen's "modernist masterpieces" likewise offer a number of original, thought-provoking and fruitful viewpoints (Moi 2006b, 9). These viewpoints are found in, for example, the emphasis on language's significance in *The Wild Duck*, a Wittgenstein-inspired reading of Nora's *tarantella* or her interpretation of *Rosmersholm* as "a pessimistic analysis" of both politics and marriage in the modern age in *Rosmersholm*, and as "Ibsen's darkest and most complex play" (Moi 2006b, 293).

Although there is much one can disagree with in Moi's work, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* is, despite this (and perhaps even because of this), an important book worth reading and discussing.

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[12] "Nora og Helmer elsker hverandre så godt de kan. De får det bare ikke til bedre. Dersom de hadde visst hva de gjorde da de utførte maskespillet sitt, ville de ha sluttet med det" (Moi 2006a, 330).

[13] "den europeiske visuelle kulturen som dannet bakgrunnen for Ibsens verk [...] estetiske teorier; visuell teknologi, visuell underholdning og forskjellige typer forestillinger; og det gjensidige forholdet mellom maleri og teater i Ibsens århundre" (Moi 2006a, 169–170).

Idealism as Problem and Necessity

This review of two Norwegian Ibsen productions demonstrates Helland's growing interest in incorporating methods and ideas taken from performance studies into his vision of Ibsen studies as a field. While trained as a literary scholar, Helland gradually developed an intercultural and interdisciplinary methodology that would reach its broadest audience with the English-language monograph Ibsen in Practice *(2015). In addition, this review points out the potentials and limitations of (post-)modern dramaturgy in relation to Ibsen's plays.*

Brand, translated to New Norwegian by Edvard Hoem. Directed by Kjetil Bang-Hansen. Set Design: John-Kristian Alsaker. Main stage at Det Norske Teatret in Oslo. Premiere 9 January 9 2015.

An Enemy of the People, adapted by Øyvind Berg. Directed by Victoria H. Meirik. Set Design: Susanne Müzner. Main stage at Den Nasjonale Scene in Bergen. Premiere 17 January 2015.

In many ways, the two Ibsen productions premiering in January 2015 are opposites. They demonstrate the range of contemporary Ibsen plays brought to life in the theater. Where one, *Brand*, stays close to the text and melds its existential religious undertone to its heartfelt and individual thesis, Den Norske Scene in Bergen attempts to bring *An Enemy of the People* into our contemporary age in a more direct sense by emphasizing both the political and social aspects of Ibsen's play. Despite their different approaches, both can result in good theater.

Both productions are deeply dependent on their unique and modern set designers. John-Kristian Alsaker's set design for *Brand* was inspired early on by Jan Groth's stage curtains. The recurring lines in the scenography sometimes created the impression that the curtain was made for the performance rather than for the theater. Groth's characteristic strokes create a contour across the surface of the curtain, lines that, through their striking yet abstract form, evoke

various associations: the beginnings of a crack when something is about to break, a Y-shaped valley, a wishbone, a bird in flight and surely much more. Groth's expression aims to evoke associations – and a similar intent likely underscores the set design, too. The aim is to open the text and let the play address more than "just religious fundamentalism or fanaticism," as Alsaker expresses it in the program. This is reminiscent of Ibsen's own belief that "it is, basically, irrelevant" that Brand is a priest, because "the demand 'all or nothing' applies to all things in life, love, art, and so on."[1] I found the scenography exceptionally successful due to its dialogical relationship with Groth's lines, and that abstract nature also opens the play up to interpretation. This underscores the harsh and inhospitable nature of the society into which Brand enters with his mission, while it also points at the protagonist's harsh and sturdy personality. The abstract nature of the set design also allows the spoken word to fill the space with meaning through the associations of the spectators. These are directed to the gloomy and obscure through the dark, cold surfaces with their steep, vertical lines. This makes us believe in both famine and storm, the perilous boat journey and the final avalanche. It is wonderfully done and ensured that I, at the very least, carried these visual impressions with me long after the performance was over.

An Individual Question

I do not, however, believe it was a completely successful production. The main reason, paradoxically, was that the words took up too much space. The word, in both senses (with or without a capital "W"), has been essential in the many successful productions that Svein Tindberg and Kjetil Bang-Hansen have done together in recent years, but in this production, I felt the result lacked intensity. If words are to be effective in the theater, they must be carried by an almost physical intensity. In the case of Brand, he must be able to take us by storm; whether he is portrayed in a positive or negative light, he must overwhelm his audience both on stage and in the theater. This did not happen in this version, yet not because of the actor Svein Tindberg's interpretation of the title role per se. Rather, the problem lies in how the production has been narrowed down

[1] Henrik Ibsen to Peter Hansen, 28 October 1870.

to become an individual and heartfelt issue about faith in God and its possible consequences for an individual's life. In Bang-Hansen's version, *Brand* is a play about a doubting fanatic. Brand's will is indeed strong; he demands sacrifice upon sacrifice based on the principle of "all or nothing," which he believes comes from God, but it is never enough. Even the greatest sacrifice is worthless if it is not willed and desired. One can understand that doubt is thematized, as well as Brand's yearning for an absolute, yet unattainable, confirmation of the divine. But, as an audience member, this concerns me little. I am rather indifferent to this Brand. While I might sympathize with his victims – those who fall into his clutches – even a very lively Agnes (played by Agnes Kittelsen) has not been given enough independent life in this production to move us. This is a pity – not least because a strong critique of a specific form of "spiritual" yet authoritarian masculinity should be made evident here.

The program contains an article by Ola E. Bø, where he mentions Eivind Tjønneland's characterization of the neo-religious turn in the 1990s as a "lemming march towards God." This was not intended as praise by Tjønneland and, to me, this expression points to a major weakness in this version of *Brand*. It may be a shortcoming on my part, but I think this play should be performed as something other than a story about a doubting bourgeois subject in the throes of religious longing. It often comes across as fragmented and, even though it has the potential to become particularly relevant, it does not achieve that relevance – despite many excellent performances on stage. Agnes Kittelsen has been mentioned; Britt Langlie portrays an almost uncanny "Mother," Mads Ousdal is brilliant as Ejnar, both in aesthetic and religious senses, and Paul-Ottar Haga is rock-solid as the doctor.

Media Society

The performances are strong in Den Nationale Scene's production of another play about an ambiguous idealist, *An Enemy of the People*. Stig Amdam, as Thomas Stockmann, is particularly memorable. We believe in both his good intentions and his intellect even as we see from the beginning that will and intellect can lead this man astray. Yet, fundamentally, the production highlights the opposition between truth and democracy on one side and economic power on the other. In other words, it is a political production that successfully makes the play relevant to our own times. The political aspects of this production op-

erate within the performance on multiple levels; I will briefly examine them. In any version of this play, the "town meeting" in the fourth act represents a crucial moment. In this production, the scene has been altered in several interesting ways. Firstly, the medium for the meeting has been changed – Stockmann has not called for a town meeting, but a press conference, held at one of Horster's hotels. Horster, in this version, has become a financier, hotel owner and "investor" – or "tax evader," as this production calls it. Thus, in this production, the people/citizens are not manipulated by Peter Stockmann, Billing and Hovstad, but, rather, by the press. Herein lies a political critique of the commercial and servile press in a "free" media society. The text, adapted by Øyvind Berg, mostly succeeds in giving the dialogue a contemporary feel. Stockmann's speech in the press conference, however, is not simply adapted; it is completely rewritten to address our current time and society. The production's success hinges on whether this speech engages the audience, and it certainly does; there is much that the theater's audience will recognize, as well as enough "sting" in it for many to feel personally targeted by Stockmann's attacks. This scene is further characterized by the partial breakdown of the border between stage and audience; the audience does not become fully integrated, but the actors address the spectators directly while they move around among them. The political element is significant, as we are pulled out of our passive position as art appreciators and are forced to engage with what is being said.

The Bath

In much of this, we can see how Victoria Meirik's direction relates to Thomas Ostermeier's famous 2012 production of the play. But it is a dialogical relationship, not an imitation. What they share, however, is the ambition to make the play contemporary and politically relevant. The scenography – we are placed in the lobby of Horster's new spa resort – must also be mentioned: white marble, glass doors at the back with a view of a garden, a gallery and a large shallow pool filled with water at the center of the stage. Stage and water are consistently imbued with a symbolic meaning. At first, the two women, Katrine and Petra, wade barefoot and enjoy the water. It becomes clear, however, that this water is far from healthy; all the characters eventually end up in this filth with their shoes on and fully clothed. This vividly illustrates how everyone is part of the problem and shares the same fate in more ways than

one. The question of who is watching and what can been in this postmodern theatrical society is symbolized by the set design's reflective and transparent surface.

Ibsen's play is deeply ambiguous, but often – and rightly so – choices are made on stage that clarify the text's ambiguity: portraying Stockmann as a hero (or clown) of truth, is one example. In Victoria Meirik's version, this ambiguity is played out towards the end, where Stockmann takes on a more dangerous form as he loses the support of those around him, even his family.

In the final scene, he appears to be engaging in an "Ibsenian" exercise, namely shifting the burden of his own failures onto his son, Eilif. The child, representing the future, is constantly on stage in this production. It bodes well neither for this boy nor the future he represents when his father, towards the end, decides to devote himself to raising his son so that he can "take over... and become a free man" who will one day "chase all the wolves to the sea." What this form of upbringing and planning for the future entails is illustrated on stage when Stockmann finally whispers his latest discovery into Eilif's ear, which the boy then "freely" repeats, somewhat puzzled: "the strongest one is the one who stands alone."

After Ibsen?

The final selection from Helland's diverse body of scholarly work is a review of four performances staged at the National Theater of Norway's Ibsen Festival in 2016, which he succinctly sums up as "Three Highlights and One Low Point." This review demonstrates Helland's facility with performance analysis, in which he seamlessly relates dramaturgical choices on stage with the interpretive complexities of the original texts. Moreover, he reflects on the implications of the festival's chosen theme, "After Ibsen," as well as broader questions relating to what is gained and lost in attempts to "modernize" Ibsen on stage.

In this review Helland discusses the following productions: Jan Bosse's *Borkman*, Runar Hodne's *Brand*, Simon Stone's *Peer Gynt*, Markus&Markus's *Ibsen: Peer Gynt*, Thorleifur Örn Arnarsson's *Vildanden* + *En folkefiende*, Peter Langdal's *Samfunnets støtter*, Dimitris Karantzas's *Når vi døde vågner*, Jens Vilela Neumann's *Water Games*, Tamás Ördög's *Child*.

The ambiguity of the subtitle of this year's Ibsen Festival – "After Ibsen" – can summarize many aspects of the festival. Within this historical relationship lies a challenge and a potential for meaning: how are these dramas relevant today? One can make theater "after Ibsen" by creating adaptations inspired by the texts, or by creating something entirely new, yet still related to Ibsen. But "after" can also mean that we have now regressed, that we no longer reach Ibsen's level and are truly lagging. All these meanings were brought to the fore during the opening performance of *Borkman*.

Borkman

Edvard Munch called *John Gabriel Borkman* "the most powerful snowy landscape in all of Nordic art." Yet, this production is sunny; Ella and Gunhild wear brightly colored, floral summer dresses, while bright summer curtains

adorn the walls. Fanny Wilton does arrive on stage with "snow" in her hair, but she too is dressed for summer, or in a scantily clad manner at least. The choice of actors reflects something similar: Ibsen's walking-dead twin sisters, Gunhild and Ella, are described as "older" ladies, with "quite grey" and "almost silver-white" hair, respectively (Ibsen 2014c, 157–158). Marika Enstad (Gunhild) and Laila Goody (Ella) are almost the exact opposite; in their forties, these women are heavily made up, rosy-cheeked, slightly plump and fiery, full of life. Erhardt, on the other hand, has not undergone this kind of rejuvenation, as John Emil Jørgensrud portrays a thickly bearded man in his thirties. One might be inclined to believe that this Gunhild must have been very young when she became a mother, but by the time Erhardt Borkman takes the stage all expectations of realism have been long since abandoned.

The most fundamental aspect in this production is a dissolution of the boundary between stage and spectator. As the play opens, we see a woman sitting among the audience begin to speak, or rather, she almost shouts to another woman sitting on the opposite side of the amphitheater set up on stage. This is Gunhild Borkman, who, with open hostility, asks her sister Ella Rentheim what she wants from them, and why she is visiting them after such a long time. The actors sit, stand, and walk among the audience. It becomes clear that part of the audience, sitting opposite us, are not actually spectators but a chorus used later in the production. Yet initially, the illusion is that they are audience members who are addressed, touched and have clothing thrown at, on, and over them.

In this sense, realism is not the goal. The acting style, too, is not realistic in any sense, but parodic and exaggerated. The overacting is most evident in passages with particularly weighty lines – Gunhild elongates the vowels when telling Ella about the "Eeeeiiiight looooonge yeeeeaaars" with Borkman upstairs, while Ella excessively stammers each time she says the name "Fffffanny Wwwwwwilton." When meeting the grown-up Erhardt, she exclaims, "Oh, how big you've become!" with a tone that parodies what silly adults might say to a twelve-year-old child. And indeed, these two women fight over Erhardt by pulling his beard. Later, Gunhild stands at the back of the audience, backlit and casting a shadow, while she, in a "super creepy," "ghost voice" shouts: "Never, in all eternity, shall Erhart be called that! [...] I alone shall be his mother!" (2014, 204). In the moment, this all appears to work well, thanks to these excellent actors, and the audience is entertained. It is a burlesque-style Ibsen, but it fails, in my opinion, when considered as theater.

Gags

Ibsen's place in world drama is inextricably linked to the roles he created for women, and this play features three strong characters – yet here they have been reduced to burlesque parodies. Paradoxically, the men have been given an even greater depth under Jan Bosse's stage direction. This is particularly the case for Jan Sælid (John Gabriel Borkman), who is more than simply a parody. He controls the room, particularly when interacting with Frida. To her, he is a kind of God, shouting stage directions like "Frida leaves" (whereupon she leaves the stage). He also addresses the audience, in what remains of the conversation between Borkman and Foldal, where the audience becomes (a silent) Foldal: "You are average people!" Yet, by this point, both as a character and in the production, Borkman has no more remaining malicious power. He can say anything, but it carries little weight as both the play and the character have been reduced to parody. Surprisingly, this scene seeks a pathos of existential suffering. But, at best, this is only a moment, or an intense sequence. Sælid is so good that it almost works in isolation, but within the overall context of the production, it is just one of many interludes.

The production includes numerous metadramatic elements. This is most evident at the beginning of the confrontation between Ella and Borkman, wherein Borkman holds a model of the stage with the audience and actors represented by Playmobil figures: "Here I will stand." As his anger grows, he throws away the figures sitting right in front of him – and the chorus begins to leave. He chases the "audience" in the model and in "reality," showing he still has power, not just in his imagination. If we were to ask what this means for the production, I think the only answer is that it is entertaining, a good time; these are gags, devices that breaks the illusion.

In the end, the audience is chased over to where the chorus sat initially, before the finale, performed with a forced psychological and existential pathos. But first, the chorus sings Jens Gunderssen's "Vuggevise" ("Noen kommer, noen går, noen dør i livets vår) ("Some come, some go, some die in life's spring"), which is presumably intended to create a more serious mood for the audience. For me, this came too late and the attempt to play the ending with some seriousness felt forced. The performance concludes with the chorus singing Irving Berlin's "Cheek to Cheek," while Erhart and Fanny literally dance across the stage. This perhaps unintentionally emphasizes that this is not even a serious attempt to explore the relationship between this text and our own reality – that stone is left unturned. The lines cannot carry seriousness or genuine meaning, they exist solely as objects of burlesque parody.

Simon Stone's Peer Gynt

Hamburg's Deutsches Schauspielhaus visited the festival with their version of *Peer Gynt*, directed (and written) by Simon Stone. The approach here was to reverse the gender roles. As Stone says in the program, he wanted to turn this "typically male play" into a play about women, where women could inhabit what he calls the myth of *Peer Gynt* and live out the *Peer Gynt* complex. According to Stone, it was important for him to "really make this a political act," but to achieve that, he had to create "his own" *Peer Gynt* by writing a new text, loosely based on this and several other of Ibsen's plays. This is unfortunate, as Stone's text is rather flat and lifeless compared to Ibsen's. Toward the end of the first act, Stone has Ibsen himself appear in one of the boxes and give a Reclam edition of *Peer Gynt* to the youngest of the three female versions of Peer (Gala Othero Winter), with the advice that she should read the text – a statement that becomes unintentionally ironic in this production.

The mythic Peer is portrayed through three female versions, each of whom represents a generation. The three are mothers and daughters who, even though the story is set in modern times, are entwined in a fatalistic cycle where a young mother leaves behind a baby girl and a father (a male "Solvejg"). The child then grows up to repeat her mother's actions. When Peer becomes a woman, it is as a predestined character. At the same time, a cliché about recent generations is repeated, where the self-centered and egoistic 1960s generation begets an ironically cynical 1980s generation, which in turn begets a generation that is beyond cynicism, drifting blindly from one moment's intensity to the next. Even more disheartening is how the transformation from a male to a female Peer is directly correlated with a decline in agency and subjective strength. Peer becomes a woman, but without subverting gender roles and ideology. Fundamentally, all three female versions of Peer are victims who suffer and appear passive. The male Solvejg is, of course, a fool; a demasculinized man portrayed as virile and capable, staying at home to raise a child! Yet even such a dolt of a man has strength and presence in relation to the female Peers: on stage, all the men dominate the women; they move freely, interrupt, hold the floor, and have physical presence and power. Towards the end of the performance, the eldest Peer (Angela Winkler) says that she has lived a meaningless life, that she has not really lived, "just reacted." Unfortunately, this is a rather accurate summary of the role of women within the world Stone has created. Obviously, this is also a political statement, albeit not the one for which we might have hoped.

Peer Gynt *As Dementia*

Markus&Markus is an award-winning theater collective that combines surrealistic theatrical expression with directed documentary. *Ibsen: Peer Gynt* is part three in their exploration of Ibsen plays combined with contemporary documentary reality. Here, Herbert, an elderly man with dementia, is the focus. At the opening of the performance, several maps are projected onto the background, zooming in on an area in Africa with place names like Peeropolis, Gyntiana, and Ghiza. In other words, we are in the fourth act of *Peer Gynt*, while simultaneously – via the video projection – we are in the company of Herbert, in the nursing home and on various expeditions with Markus&Markus.

I was skeptical about this project for several different reasons – political, ethical, artistic – but my skepticism quickly disappeared. It is not a performance that can be easily summarized, but they succeed in giving voice and expression to Herbert and his world. With great sensitivity, intelligence and humor, they convey his journey and show the world through his eyes. Ibsen's text becomes a sort of resonating space, where larger questions about human dignity, worth and individuality can be discussed and illustrated based on someone who may not (any longer) "be himself" – even though he naturally and repeatedly insists that he is, and always has been himself. I also felt they succeeded in bringing out ambiguities and a form of vulnerability in Peer, of which one is not often aware. The project is marked by a profound solidarity with those who do not fit into the accepted "reality," and thus it was an important part of the Ibsen Festival.

Prosaic Brand *at Malersalen*

Brand is a problematic and difficult play, not least in terms of set design. Under Runar Hodne's direction, this "problem" has been addressed by staging Armin Petras' version of the play: "after Ibsen." This version remains close to the original in terms of its content, but it is rendered in prose rather than verse and brought down to a more everyday level. The intention is likely to make it less about a distant God and more about mediocrity, selfishness and indifference in the here and now. For example, Brand's words during his first conversation with Ejnar and Agnes, about how the conventional everyday God in Christianity must be laid to rest in "wrapped in shroud," and that "our sick generation needs a doctor. / All you want to do is flirt, play, laugh. / Your faith comes

easy, but you will not ... / You want to unload the whole burden of anguish / On one who, we are told, paid the supreme penalty" (Ibsen 1972a, 88–89), have been transformed into a more contemporary version: "look at our country and you will see that every single person is only / half / somewhat faithful to their loved ones / somewhat funny at parties / somewhat moved when people suffer / all just slightly." There is no doubt that Petras' version is closer to our contemporary reality and therefore, in this sense, more relevant.

Nevertheless, I must admit that throughout the performance I really missed Ibsen's original *Brand*. Ibsen's language is so superior in its power and wildness that it makes this new version feel, at least initially, anemic. But, as the performance progresses, this feeling of being deprived of Brand's fanatical pathos diminishes. Henrik Rafaelsen delivers an already subdued text in such a low register and insistent manner that it gradually gets under the audience's skin. Never raising his voice, he continues, relentlessly and persistently, demanding one sacrifice after another, both from himself and those closest to him. This would hardly work without the contrast to Kjersti Botn Sandal's sensitive and vulnerable, yet still strong, Agnes. This new version of Ibsen still relies heavily on the "original" as a theatrical performance, in the sense that it is so condensed that it would be difficult to follow for anyone not familiar with Ibsen's *Brand*. Part of the effect is that Ibsen resonates throughout, as a kind of subtitle that adds depth and resonance to what we see on stage. It might have been even more relevant if the action had not been set in a sort of hillbilly setting loosely located in Southern Norway. Why the mediocrity that Brand attacks should be more prominent there than, for example, in Vinderen or Bærum is hard to understand. In my opinion, the performance fails by being directed at "others" rather than at the social strata that in fact dominates the audience.

The Wild Duck + An Enemy of the People

The basic idea behind *The Wild Duck + An Enemy of the People*, with the ridiculous subtitle "Enemy of the Duck," is to mesh these two plays into one. This is done both by intertwining the plots of both plays and the characters, so that Gregers becomes a combination of Gregers Werle and Thomas Stockmann, Peter Werle becomes a fusion of Håkon Werle and Peter Stockmann, while Old Ekdal becomes a mix of Ekdal, Relling and Morten Kiil. As a story, or at least in the manuscript, it works surprisingly well. But as theater, it does not. The production seems to have been developed by working on the scenes in

isolation, so they follow each other more like sketches in a revue than inseparable parts of any larger whole. This results in some nice and even strong scenes – now and then good ideas are presented in such a way that one might believe an interesting interpretation could be found. For example, Nader Khademi's undeniable comedic talent in the role of Hjalmar comes to the forefront in several ways that make one wish it could be more than just fleeting moments. And the scene where Kai Remlov's Old Ekdal has his big moment as a drag artist could be an opportunity to examine aspects of sexuality in the play, both as a tool of repression and oppression. But this does not happen, to any significant extent.

We find another fragmented reinterpretation in how Gina Ekdal, in this version, harbors hateful and aggressive feelings toward her daughter. She is constantly malicious to Hedvig, berating her, mocking her, repeatedly calling her a "cunt," throwing her glasses, hitting her and so on. Such an interpretation of Gina could work, but the problem with this production is the lack of any attempt to justify the interpretation scenically. Instead, it is presented as a statement devoid of any effort to place it in a broader context. The effect, then, is that the audience is to understand that Gina hates her child. It becomes downright absurd when, in the final scene in which Hedvig hangs herself on stage, the production attempts to evoke the audience's empathy for the grieving mother, Gina.

Overall, the aspects of gender-politics seem peculiar. This is best illustrated by the character Gina, whose first action when she enters the stage is to lift her skirt, a gesture that signals sexual availability. After the scene with the menu that Hjalmar brings back from dinner with the Werles, Hedvig is sent out to fetch beer, whereupon Gina unzips Hjalmar's trousers, reaches in and gives him a hand-job. "That was...necessary," says Hjalmar, but the question is whether this was necessary for the audience to witness. After Hjalmar learns the "truth" about Gina, we witness a rape scene. The result of all this is that Gina, in this performance, is not only an unsympathetic character but also a person with minimal agency and power. This aspect is further worsened by the omission of characters like Mrs. Sørby, Katrine or Petra. The result is that the women in this performance are so marginalized and reduced that, even though they are present on stage, they portray only evil mothers, objects of desire and/or victims.

Addressing truth is this production's explicit ambition and both the program and performance invite the audience to consider this as political theater. There is a political aspect to the focus on pollution, as well as the fact that it concerns an oil company rather than a spa. The idea is presumably to point out that our wealth comes at a price and thus to criticize the Norwegian ideo-

logy which claims our oil-based economy is magically "green." However, in this critique of Norwegian self-righteousness and selfishness, the main target of criticism, for some reason, is the trade union movement. In this version, Aslaksen has become a union boss, a pure opportunist, and the main exponent of Norwegian deceit and ego. He, Billing and Hovstad are dressed in grotesque costumes – enormous layers of folded fat, with a small head on top and visible genitals below. Aslaksen is lowered to the stage by the fly system, gnawing on a chicken leg, and he, Billing and Hovstad sing the working-class anthem "Seieren følger våre faner" ("Victory follows our banners"). As soon as Peter Stockmann scolds them a bit, however, they piss themselves. Thus, the middle class can sit in the theater and laugh at the trade union movement. But one cannot help but wonder what kind of political analysis underpins making the trade union movement the main target of criticism in these scenes from *An Enemy of the People*.

As suggested, metatheatrical elements are also at the forefront of this production. This is most explicit during the public meeting scene where Mads Ousdal eventually breaks out of the role of Gregers and acts as "himself." This long sequence, like the rest of the performance, jumps from one topic to another: what begins as a rather fresh critique of the theater audience moves to environmental issues, arms production, Norwegian double standards, sexual abuse of children and more, all while constantly circling around the question of the theater's function. He asserts that theater *used to be* important, but now it may not be, at least it doesn't seem that way – and this performance aims to explore the truth, intending for the theater to be truthful.

Questions of truth and politics are also questions of form; one can "mean" what one wants on stage, but it matters less if it is not worked through in a theatrical presentation. In a performance like this, where each scene is cluttered and unfocused, and where there is a very loose internal connection between different scenes and the larger narrative, the result is inevitably that there are very many truths – or, as expressed in the program, the play gets "a thousand different interpretations each night." This is likely meant positively by the costume designer Weisshappel, but it also points to a central problem. A production that creates at least as many truths as there are audience members can be called many things, but it *cannot* be called cohesive.

Like Stone and Bosse, Arnarsson has worked with outstanding actors, and they salvage much of the production. But even they cannot prevent the overall impression of these three productions from appearing mostly as an unconscious and uncritical reflection of contemporary traits: historical amnesia, fragmentation, momentary focus, paralysis, the backlash of gender politics and the pursuit of entertainment. There is nothing inherently wrong with this; one

is free to create affirmative art, but then one should also refrain from pretending to do otherwise.

Three Highlights and One Low Point

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that it was a diverse festival, where the actors' performances were particularly impressive. Even so, it must be acknowledged that the festival undeniably showed signs of being underfunded. One cannot escape the feeling that the chances of being invited increase drastically if one creates a production with few participants and simple scenography – one that is cheap to bring in. Perhaps that's why we didn't get to see Richard Eyre's *Ghosts* from Almeida or Toneelgroup Amsterdam's *Nora*. These are just two examples of intelligent, challenging, and current European productions that would have elevated the festival. It's also a pity that the budget didn't allow for more non-Western productions.

One highlight of the festival, however, was the opportunity to see Riksteatret's production of *Pillars of Society* from last year. It strikes a fine balance between comedy and seriousness and features solid acting performances, while the scenography contributes significantly to the expression. The same can be said about the Greek version of *When We Dead Awaken*, which did not try to modernize the play through antics and gimmicks but instead insisted on taking the play's theme of death-in-life seriously. The rigidity of life and the characters' fixation on their own myths were expressed through stylized ballet movements, where the human body approached the statue's expression.

Another highlight, on the opposite end of the scale, was *Water Games*, a Zimbabwean version of *An Enemy of the People*, where humor and playfulness went hand in hand with a political edge and subversive wit, even when aimed at the Oslo audience. These three performances alone are enough for me to happily remember the festival. These performances completely offset the embarrassing experience of the Hungarian guest performance *Child*, which was supposed to be an "updated" version of *A Doll's House.* This turned out to be an exceptionally clumsy version of the play, even reintroducing the alternative ending that Ibsen felt forced to write in his time. More pre-Ibsen than post-Ibsen, in other words.

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