



Author's comment on the translated excerpts

My ambition in writing this biography has been to create a new standard work on the life and work of Henrik Ibsen. This means that it provides ample information – and is consequently of ample proportions as well. The biography ought to satisfy academic requirements, and I have attempted to be innovative by interpreting life and work separately as well as together, from both a historical and literary-historical perspective. This means, quite simply, that I have sought to avoid a traditional, banal historical-biographical reading of the works and instead to say something about the man and the work, without falling into the reductionist trap.

In addition, I have wanted to write a gripping and readable narrative. To do so, I consciously make use of literary strategies – something I hope is also apparent from this selection. I make a point of varying stylistic levels and ways of writing. Certain passages are narrative and chronological, tracing Ibsen's life at both the macro and micro levels – here the reader will find everything to do with his family life, friendships and public appearances. In other passages I am more analytical and try to deal in-depth with important issues in Ibsen's life and work.

The first excerpt (The revolt of the human spirit, The nobility of the spirit, I must, I must) has been taken from early on in Volume II. Here, I undertake a basic analysis of Ibsen's perception of state, society and the individual, locating him politically and ideologically before relating this to his poetics and literary strategies.

In the other excerpt (The loft) we are well into the book. Here, I have selected the chapter where I present one of Ibsen's best-known plays: The Wild Duck. The chapter can serve as an example of how I present the individual dramas, their genesis, action, interpretation and reception. Naturally, not all the presentations of his play employ this template, but my aim has been to make it relatively simple to find the individual plays and, generally speaking, have chosen to present them in a way reminiscent of the chapter on The Wild Duck. The book is provided with a system of footnotes that satisfies academic requirements. These have been omitted in the translated excerpts.

The revolt of the human spirit

Before the end of August 1870, Ibsen receives a letter from Suzannah, who had now returned to Dresden together with Sigurd. Seeing the city again was depressing, she relates. While all of them were away, France had declared war on Prussia – a war that raged throughout the summer and autumn, with the final French resistance collapsing in February 1871, the month after The German Empire had been proclaimed at Versailles.

During the late summer and the autumn, Dresden filled up with wounded soldiers and French prisoners of war. The sympathies of the Ibsen family were on the side of France, something that would lead to problems as Saxony had recently joined The North German Confederation under Prussia's leadership. Suzannah was scandalised at the mockery and lampooning of the French people, at the victors' dishonourable deriding of their defeated enemy and the distrust of anyone who did not speak German. Suzannah and Marie hardly dared speak together in the street – and kept their sympathies to themselves.

But Sigurd did not.

'He is French heart and soul,' Suzannah writes – with a mixture of pride and despair – to Henrik in Copenhagen, 'and champions his cause every day at school, so, believe me, he is a true war hero.'

War martyr would have been a better word. Sigurd is said to have been mugged at school because he refused to declare himself a German. He could not expect any support from the teachers, who were just as patriotic as the German pupils. Henrik must have been beside himself with worry, but Suzannah was fortunately able to set his mind at rest a month later. At her request, the headmaster at the school had finally intervened and had Sigurd's tormentors punished. In his own letters to his father he does not mention his tribulations with one word. It was as if he had to be strong, unshakeable in his beliefs at any price. Could it be he thought that was what his father expected of him? For Henrik, too, was a man of strong convictions, but as a pragmatist he chose his battles with care. Henrik had a touch of Brand in his nature, but also a touch of Peer Gynt. His son, apparently, only inherited the former.

In a letter written a few weeks earlier, his mother gives a better impression of the complex temperament of the young man, with its particular blend of reason and emotions:

'In the evening, when he is tired, he sheds tears and wishes you were here, but yesterday, when he was sitting beside me in the wood, he first asked me if your writer's salary was for each year, and then if you were busy writing something.'

Before September was over, Henrik Ibsen had also returned to Dresden. 'There is no trace of any enthusiasm about the war,' he reports to Hegel. 'What the papers say in that respect is a total and utter fabrication. The country is suffering terribly.' The war dominated people's lives that autumn and the winter of 1871. The coal rationing was one thing; the effect of the war on people another. Many families had lost their sons on the field of battle, the hospitals were full of wounded German soldiers – and yet at the same time, captured French officers were moving freely about the city.

'As mentioned, it is grim living here.'

It is at this point that he probably once more lays aside the tragedy of Julian Emperor and tries instead to write an opera about Sigurd Jorsalfare.

But nothing will succeed for him. He blames it on the war – ‘this damned time of war is having a disturbing effect on me’ – but he had actually had trouble with his writing long before the war broke out.

Strictly speaking, the struggle he was having with himself had thrown him off course at least as much as the war. Life after Rome had been an eventful but rootless period. After lavish festivities in Stockholm and Egypt, scandal in Norway and exhaustion in war-torn Dresden – ‘my home from home’ – a revolt would have seemed to have built up inside Ibsen, a revolt that he only finds an outlet for in his increasingly intense relationship to Georg Brandes. At the end of June 1869, he writes a letter that triggers off a correspondence between them that lasts several years. The two of them develop a remarkable friendship, as strong as it is ambivalent, characterised by a mutual intense wish to fight the same fight, yet continually sabotaged by a recognition of how great the distance actually is between them. Typical is the extent to which both of them insist on reading their own ambitions into the work and life of the other – fruitful for themselves, but not always appropriate with regard to each other.

In March 1870, he writes to a Brandes, who is on the point of leaving on a major trip abroad. Brandes has complained about the resistance he has encountered in Denmark, and Ibsen gives the best advice he is capable of:

‘Friends are an expensive luxury; and when one has, as you do, an intimate personal relationship to one’s life-work, one cannot really insist on the right to keep one’s “friends”.’

Precisely in this mixture of well-meant advice and shameless projection of his own points of view lies an essential quality of their friendship, something that is apparent from Ibsen’s remark that ‘I do not insist on the sort of agreement that normally determines whether a relationship is to be preserved.’ Just as he had expected constructive criticism and honest opinions from Clemens Petersen, he hoped to achieve the same from Brandes. And Brandes expected precisely the same honesty from him – it is this attitude that explains much of the fluctuating temperature between them.

Around Christmas, Ibsen writes a new letter. Brandes has now been away for three quarters of a year and is lying in a Rome hospital with a serious attack of typhoid fever. And it is now that Ibsen airs the revolt that has been accumulating in him since returning home to a Germany at war, a war that has also had dramatic consequences for the holy city, Rome. With the cessation of Napoleon III’s guarantees for the Vatican State, Italian troops had taken over the whole city.

Ibsen mourns all that has been lost:

Rome was the only sanctuary in Europe, the only place that enjoyed true freedom – freedom from the tyranny of political freedom. I don’t think I wish to see it again after what has happened. All the delightful things, the spontaneity, the dirt, will now disappear; for every statesman that makes his appearance, an artist will be lost. And then that marvellous urge for freedom – that’s now a thing of the past; yes, I must say in any case that the only thing I love about freedom is the struggle to gain it; I’m not so keen about the possession.

Europe was in flames, the French had been crushed beneath Bismarck’s iron heel, and in eternal Rome the clocks had begun to tick once more. The

experience of change, decline, fall and transitoriness seems to have completely overmanned Ibsen and given him the feeling of living in an age of transition, an era where everything that had previously been stable was now in the process of being swept away:

The old, illusory France is in pieces, and now that the new, actual Prussia also is in pieces, we suddenly find ourselves in an age that is in its infancy. Oh, how ideas will now tumble around us. And not before time. Everything we have lived on until now has only been the crumbs from the table of the revolution of the previous century, and that diet has been chewed on and chewed on long enough.

This is how Ibsen dismisses the heritage of the major revolutions of 1789, 1830 and, in particular, that of 1848 – the revolution that coincided with his own intellectual awakening. In his opinion, their concepts need to be given a new content. Liberty, equality and fraternity no longer have the same meaning. This is what the politicians have failed to understand – ‘which is why I hate them’. What the world now needed was not more revolutions, not ‘external revolutions’ at any rate. No, what was needed was a ‘revolution of the human spirit’. And this was to be spearheaded by Brandes, as soon as he had shaken off his fever.

The revolt of the human spirit. This is his creed from now on – a creed that has already been gestating for some time. This is the consequence of *Brand*, *Peer Gynt* and the whole showdown with the national project. Was Brandes prepared to be part of *that* revolution?

The answer is yes. And no.

In literary history, Henrik Ibsen and Georg Brandes have stood like generals among ‘the men of the modern breakthrough’, shoulder to shoulder in their fight for the individual, freedom and progress. This presentation, however, is strictly speaking a distorted one, partly constructed by posterity after the breakthrough had gained ground and had come to determine the premises for writing history. Generally speaking, contacts between them were not as strong or as close as the impression often conveyed. The uneven though extremely fruitful exchange of ideas that began between them in summer 1869 comes to a sudden end after just a few years. Between 1876 and 1882, there was no correspondence between them at all. So during the years when Ibsen had his breakthrough with his contemporary dramas and was also making his mark in Germany, he had no contact with the leading figure of the modern breakthrough. Nor did Brandes write all that much about Ibsen’s authorship during those years. He did not write about *A Doll’s House* (1879) until a year had passed since its publication – and was rather negative when he did so – and in the years between 1877 and 1883, while Brandes was living in Berlin, he did not publish a single word about Ibsen in German.

It was not until the publication of *Ghosts* (1881) that he openly came out and declared himself solidly on Ibsen’s side, in something quite reminiscent of the comradeship in arms between the great writer and the great critic as tradition would have us believe.

That the level of contact between them was as modest as it was came not only from their differing so much as human beings: Ibsen a rough-hewn Norwegian, Brandes a highly-polished Dane – the former a satirist of the heart, the latter with a marked lack of humour. They also had a completely

different view of the world. Brandes, the academic, found the writer's disillusionment, negativism and preference for the dark and enigmatic difficult to stomach. He himself sought clarity and possessed a kind of optimism about progress that was alien to Ibsen. In *The Men of the Modern Breakthrough* (1883), Brandes compares progress to 'a fire-breathing locomotive'. Ibsen could never have written anything like that. On the other hand, they shared the idea of an intellectual aristocracy, although their elitism also differed. While Ibsen was a hermit and a fierce individualist, Brandes wanted to be a leading figure in the social struggle. He too admittedly refused to conform to the political Left, but he was not against the idea of political parties as such.

'I am not one of those who joins any party, for by myself I constitute a party and good people will have to join up with *me* or refrain from so doing.'

Brandes wanted to lead the way in social life and to reform its institutions. In addition, he involved himself in various ways in combating the social injustice that resulted from a class society, while Ibsen declared that he had no flair for solidarity. So Brandes was torn between the principles of solidarity and elitism – a problem Ibsen did not have.

While Brandes was like a chess player, Ibsen had declared that he wanted to up-end the board and scatter the pieces – this, perhaps, was the most important difference between them.

The distance between them was so great that Brandes can be suspected at times of having worked against Ibsen – passively, by omitting to mention his writing, and actively, by talking about him in such a way as could possibly seem to be compromising. Over time, the critic came closer to the writer's standpoint, but only after years of adversity, combined with a reading of Nietzsche. In the article he wrote about the German philosopher in 1889, 'Aristocratic radicalism', it is as if Ibsen's admonitions from the years around 1870 shine through the text, which is partially an interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy and partly the expression of a view of life that the weary leader of the modern breakthrough had then acquired.

In 1871, the chasm between them is still wide. Typically enough, they react very differently to the Vatican State being incorporated in Italy. Ibsen's tears that the only sanctuary for art was now lost only arouses Brandes' indignation. He writes to his parents:

'... I'd say that I snap my fingers at all the poetic tranquillity that once was here. In plain Danish it was sleep, thralldom, laziness and rotteness. Possibly the ruins looked a bit better in that light. But it is asking too much to let people languish just so that the ruins can look good.'

Brandes' letter to Ibsen has not survived, but he probably expressed something similar to this. Ibsen, at any rate, counters in his next letter:

'And now, in your last friendly (?) lines, you make me someone who hates freedom.'

Ibsen clarifies his views:

'I would never support making Liberty synonymous with political freedom. What you call Liberty, I call liberties; and what I call the fight for Freedom is nothing else but the constant, living acquisition of the idea of Freedom.'

He is in fact here touching on an inevitable disparity in the freedom rhetoric of the age. Both Ibsen and Brandes rallied round the banner of freedom and perceived the struggle for freedom as a progressive idea. At the

same time, the concept of freedom was a girder that shored up the established liberal society of which they were a part – and part of the common political rhetoric. Ibsen therefore has a strong need to distinguish between the trite freedom rhetoric he sees in politics and among the pillars of society and the permanent freedom revolution that he sees as *his* concern – which he refers to as the revolt of the human spirit. And this revolt was not dependent on political and social freedom, rather the opposite. In his opinion, Frenchmen ought to feel glad about the disaster that now had befallen them, because it could rouse them to a new awareness and to action. Brandes was not the only person to hear Ibsen's interpretations of the blessings of repression, preferably combined with undisguised praise of the elite. As soon as the conversation turned to politics and society, Ibsen was there with his pithy remarks.

'The minority are always right,' he could say on such occasions, or he would speak yearningly of 'the wonderful longing for freedom' the Russians must have under Tsarist dominion, and he was disdainful of everything that smacked of folksiness, popular organisation and party politics. Norway's misfortune was that the country had lost its nobility, for an aristocracy was needed to build a nation. Norway was a country of torsos without heads, of plutocrats and narrow-minded pedestrians. Not even the traditional aristocracy of the spirit had it managed to preserve in the official class.

With Brandes he does not mince his words:

'Dear friend, the liberalists are freedom's worst enemies. Under absolutism freedom of the spirit and of thought thrive best.'

For him, the greatest threat to freedom was 'the state' and the emptying of the concept's living content that allegedly took place here. Indeed, he even goes so far – to Brandes' consternation – that he not only denies the necessity of the state but also the duty of the individual to be a citizen.

'The state must go! And I must be part of that revolution.'

Precisely at this time of upheaval were the days of the state order numbered, he felt. And not only the state order but also religion, concepts of morality and forms of art. Everything was determined by history and the time for its fall had come. Brandes has hardly finished reading his friend's letter before he dashes off a letter to his parents – as was his wont when the world became difficult.

'His radicalism really surpasses everything conceivable. I feel dizzy when I read about all the things he wants to revolutionise.'

Every subtlety that might lie between the lines would seem to elude Brandes. He is simply shocked, which irritates Ibsen and makes him even more self-opinionated. The idea that Ibsen became Brandes' promised land as a critic – his 'America', as people have said – must therefore be tempered by the awareness that their aesthetic and moral views only partially overlapped each other. Ibsen probably *was* Brandes' America, but only with the reservation that Brandes, like Columbus, had originally been looking for India. Only gradually did both of them settle down as citizens in the same promised land as 'comrades in arms' in the modern breakthrough, but even then there were clear differences in their literary and ethical projects.

The nobility of the spirit

That Ibsen may well have made pithy remarks in his correspondence with the Danish critic is suggested in a later letter in which he complains with a nice touch of self-irony that the Paris Commune has stolen his 'non-state theory' and made it unusable. But how is he really to be understood – ironically or literally?

What actually underlies Ibsen's 'non-state theory', apart from the obvious intention of provoking Georg Brandes?

The state must go because it hinders the emancipation of the individual – that is the assertion. But a third concept almost cries out with its absence here, i.e. the nation. Formerly, before he had a showdown with the national-romantic view of life, the concept of the state for Ibsen had been closely connected to that of the nation, the former being legitimised by the latter. Based on an ethnological conception of the nation, he was still able to claim in 1865 that a 'State can be destroyed, but a nation cannot.' As long as 'our Fatherland' was strong enough, the nation would survive even though the state disintegrated, just as the Jewish people had demonstrated for centuries.

In 1871, he renounces the state without mentioning the nation with one word, and the absence of this little word reveals no less that a fundamental re-thinking of his view of the individual and society. Only on a couple of occasions does he include the concept of the nation again. In a conversation of autumn 1887, he explains in more detail to Henrik Jæger what has long since become his creed, that the state stands in the way of individual freedom, and he claims that neither language, historical inheritance, natural surroundings nor common intellectual development – in other words, everything that belongs to national characteristics – is so constituent for the individual as the individual's 'personal qualities, tendencies and outlook on life'. While the individual human being was formerly closely connected to the 'spirit of the people', and nationality was higher than the state, the individual has now been placed higher than nationality, and thereby the state as well.

To put it another way: Ibsen has never had anything all that positive to say about the power of the state, and once the nation has been written off as an entity of civilisation, he is left with little else than the individual. The recognition of this strikes him all the more since he has a front-row seat for many of the political and military changes that Europe undergoes in the 1860s and 1870s: Denmark's loss of Schleswig and Holstein to Prussia, the forming of a federation between the German-speaking states under Prussian leadership, Bismarck's war against Austria and France, and the establishing of a German empire, the Hapsburgs' loss of Venice to Italy and the completion of the unification of Italy with the inclusion of the Vatican State in 1870. For a later age that can recall two world wars, it is difficult to grasp the dimensions these events had for contemporary Europeans – especially the Franco-German war. Here, enthusiasm for the sovereignty of bourgeois civilisation abated – at least for a brief historic moment. And with the blood that seeped into the soil of the battlefields, many of the ideals that this civilisation had been built on – the heritage of the great revolutions – also began to pale.

For Ibsen, the conclusion was a natural one. There was no point in replacing one form of state by another one – 'that is why I believe the next great revolution will have to do with overthrowing the concept of the state itself.' In the following years, this realisation only became stronger in him. In

January 1883, Ingvald Undset, D.Phil., says the following about his conversations with Ibsen in Rome: 'Ibsen is no longer prepared to recognise nationality or anything more. He is a complete anarchist, wants to wipe the slate completely clean – put a bomb under the whole ark. Humanity must start to construct the world again from scratch – and do so beginning with the individual!'

A clean slate – so profoundly radical was the Ibsen idea of revolution; that was the task of his generation in the age of transition in which they found themselves – 'it will be the future's business to ensure what can come about; the great task of our age is to blow up that which now exists – to destroy!'

As a view of society, this is unclear and rather self-contradictory. The insistence that the state must go does not exactly harmonise with his praise of 'absolutism', the most authoritarian form of government. In practice, there is no doubt either that during the 1860s and 1870s Ibsen increasingly allies himself with the conservative forces in society, *for* those in power and *against* the opposition. This loyalty towards power is most clearly seen in his correspondence with royalty, where Ibsen cannot bow too low to the ground. But it is also visible in concrete issues to do with society. Even though he sympathises with the French, he does not let the country's revolutionary tradition off lightly, where, in his opinion, there was a sad lack of order and discipline. Indeed, Norway ought to be on its guard against its own revolutionaries: 'People who let Jaabæk and Bjørnson remain at large, qualify to be locked up themselves.' He says about the Norwegian conservative government that 'I support it with my pen and all my abilities'. Even on such an issue as Bjørnson's theatre strike he used the language of authority – the actors ought to be disciplined until they fell into line with those in charge.

How does all this all hang together? That the pithy remarks are emotionally motivated is no explanation, for they are based on reasonings, and a certain consistency can be detected, despite everything.

That he wanted the state abolished also harmonises badly with the demand he made for years that the state had obligations regarding the cultural life of the country, e.g. in the form of financial support for its theatres, writers' salaries as well as national and international conventions to ensure literary copyright. So these demands had formerly had a clearer ideological justification. In the speech he gave at P.A. Munch's sepulchral monument in Rome in summer 1865, he emphasises that the state has two responsibilities. One is to ensure 'The well-being of the state', i.e. the material welfare of the country. The other is to ensure 'The life of the nation', which meant helping the influence of literature, art and science to maintain the nation's right to existence. With the rejection of the concept of a nation it would seem that Ibsen's only positive expectation of the state is that it is to take care of its writers!

It is probably most correct to assess his thoughts about the state, the individual and society in the light of his mental and emotional constitution, his mission as a writer and his intellectual disposition. Hardly surprising, then, that the picture becomes blurred. But that is the very nature of the man. There is much to suggest that he lacked the necessary basic skills to understand and relate to complex social issues and practical-political mechanisms – something that has been underplayed in research since a lack of talent is seldom brought forward as a factor in the lives of great figures. No

matter how extreme his statements may appear to be, it is wrong to believe that he stood alone, without like-minded people. Indeed, it is perfectly possible to relate Ibsen's view of society to certain contemporary real-historical discussions and ideological positions.

With the emergence of modern, class-based industrial society there were many people who refused to accept democratisation, mass politics, political parties and bureaucratisation, which threatened to lay its grey veil of mediocrity over life. There were many who encouraged the demand for freedom and at the same time feared the tyranny of equality and who sought to contain the entry of plebeians into social life. The 1860s were the decade when the debate about democratisation, franchise and constitutional reforms had its major breakthrough in Europe. In conservative quarters, people feared the social rise of the lower classes and its influence on the political system. Reforms to the right to vote were introduced in Great Britain, Sweden and Denmark – with new constitutions in the two latter countries. All these reforms were characterised by conservative wishes to hold the lower classes in check. The tendency was to allow limited extensions to the right to vote, counteracted by a relatively stronger influence for the wealthy classes and a constitutional strengthening of a first chamber, dominated by the elite and closely connected to the executive.

Back in Norway, a similar proposal was advanced by Ibsen's old friends from the Hollender circle: Michael Birkeland, Ole Andreas Bachke and Jacob Løkke. Like Ibsen, they had all been shaped by the February revolution of 1848, but under the influence of the Thrane movement and the emergence of the Left opposition, all of them had gravitated to a basically conservative and anti-democratic attitude. Together with Assistant Secretary Aksel Segelke, the three of them wrote a number of articles during the 1860s in *Morgenbladet*, where they outlined guidelines that were along the lines of reforms in neighbouring countries. The problem was that no first chamber, or upper house, existed in the Norwegian parliament, partially due to the fact that the country did not have any real upper class apart from a thin stratum of higher officials and individual major commercial figures. So the logical way to proceed was to cultivate a Norwegian farming aristocracy via reforms to agricultural policy, and then bring about an alliance between this aristocracy and the remaining urban bourgeoisie. Only in this way could one create a social basis for a Norwegian first chamber along European lines.

The vision of the future was just as vague in these circles. As things turned out, the small farmers rallied round Jaabæk's opposition in the broad coalition of the Left. So frustration levels were high among conservatives in the Norway of the 1860s and 1870s; the despotism of the masses was brewing, without countermeasures being able to be agreed on.

This, in terms of practical politics, is also part of the backdrop for *The League of Youth*, even though Ibsen does not say a word about it.

In other words, Ibsen was not alone in wanting an elitist containment of the masses. Even so, he differed from his Hollender friends by cultivating a consistent distance to day-to-day politics. He was not much interested in franchise and constitutional reforms, nor did he dream of a farmer aristocracy – farmers are almost exclusively the subject of his disdain:

'I only wish revolution would come soon back home,' he said in an inspired moment in Rome, 'for then I would take the greatest of pleasure in mounting the barricade and shooting down Norwegian freeholders.'

By rising above every political group and every requirement regarding feasibility and complete consistency, Ibsen could allow himself to go much further than Birkeland, Bachke and Løkke. He came with one pithy remark after the other and excluded every bridge between thought and practical politics. And in doing so, he also undermined the Hollenders' project.

Ibsen, then, was no party man, and just as little did he belong to any clearly defined ideological school of thought. Even so, it might be fruitful to try and establish a term for, and to seek to determine the basic characteristics of, an Ibsenist ideology. A possible term is *aristocratic individualism* – a concept that captures his fundamental ambivalence as regards modernisation in a way that contains both the retrospective (aristocracy) and the progressive (individualism). Ibsen was a person who at one and the same time subscribed to and revolted against modern society. As a social child of the *petite bourgeoisie* and an ideological child of the 1848 revolution, he identified himself with the self-created, freedom-seeking individual, with ambition and changeability – it is no coincidence that the only social movement he took part in was Marcus Thrane's social-liberal revival. The limitations of a feudal society were foreign to him – he belonged in every way to the bourgeois-capitalist era.

At the same time, he was quick to react to many of the natural consequences of modernisation – and he was not alone in this. In the 19th century, especially in the latter half of the century, there were a number of writers, philosophers and social thinkers who warned against the dangers of the social imbalance of democratisation in the form of 'the tyranny of equality', 'rule by the mob' and 'majority rule'. There was no unified reaction. At the one end, there were sober analyses, such as Alexis de Tocqueville's discussion of the blessings and dangers of democracy in *Democracy in America* (1835). Tocqueville, who was himself of noble birth, saw the democratisation of Europe as being inevitable and desirable, but feared that a society of equality would lead to people giving up their freedom for security under an all-powerful state. At worst, he felt, democracy could give rise to a despotic regime: The sovereign state in democracy 'does not tyrannise – it presses, dampens, weakens, smothers, deadens – and in the end each nation is no more than a flock of timid and hard-working animals with the government as its shepherd.'

The worst enemy of democracy, in other words, was mediocrity – and also the longing for security.

Similar statements were made by John Stuart Mill and Kierkegaard ('The Crowd is Untruth'). Among those who did not accept the democratic trend, but who, more or less perseveringly, fought to ensure an intellectual aristocracy as a bulwark against the despotism of the masses was the writer Thomas Carlyle. In *On Heroes, Hero-worship and the Heroic in History* (1841) and other books he presented the heroic figures who, down through history, had held the torch of the spirit high. The revolutionary Italian freedom-fighter Giuseppe Mazzini also cultivated the minority and the exceptional individual, and developed a doctrine characterised by pan-romance nationalism, radical liberalism and heroic elitism. To what extent Friedrich Nietzsche belongs to this group of thinkers depends on how one interprets him. As he was actually read in Scandinavia at the end of the 19th century, he was at any rate cited in support of the belief in the exceptional human being and contempt for the masses.

However different all these various thinkers may have been, they were all driven by an emotional and intuitive force – some of them also by a metaphysical and irrationalistic tendency that placed them on the side of the more pragmatically oriented conservative containment policy that developed within the political system. They could more be compared with prophets who communicated a profound sense of ill-ease at the modernisation process that was sweeping inexorably forward. It was not until the 20th century that these tendencies assumed organised forms via the formation of political parties or radical groups that sought to shape the new mass society according to elitist principles. In individual countries, such as Germany and Italy, it became possible to smother democracy for a while; in other countries these groups were successively marginalised as democracy established itself. This was the case in Norway. Here the Freeminded Liberal Party established itself as the actual 'chief party' in the early 20th century, although it weakened during the 1920s, and its aristocratic message was carried out by activists in 'The Fatherland League'. After this came 'National Gathering', the Nazi party that took the aristocratic line in Norwegian politics to its perverted end in the Armageddon of the world war.

From being a call of the great man, the single individual who could rise up above the masses, aristocratic individualism turned in the 20th century into an organised aristocratic elitism within or alongside the party system. From there the path was short to an authoritarian elitism in which the romantic hero was replaced by a plebeian führer with sovereign contempt for the masses.

In this ideological landscape, Henrik Ibsen belonged within 19th century aristocratic individualism; he was one of the worried lone figures who warned against the negative aspects of democracy, basically shaped as he was before the establishment of parliamentary system of government. Compared to the aristocratic elitism of the 20th century he was more radical in his willingness to destroy what existed, but less radical in his alternative visions of society – to the extent that he had any. Ibsen was very much a creature of his own century – his ranting against the development of society was characterised by resignation, his relation to the process of modernisation deeply divided. He was revolution and reaction at one and the same time – almost a personification of what is referred to as 'the dilemma of freedom', the contrast between freedom as a vision and the inevitable consequences of freedom in real life.

Aristocratic individualism must, then, be seen as a strategy in order to harmonise the longing for the past and the belief in the future. The belief in the individual's opportunity for freedom and greatness is cultivated in a society threatened by the commonplace of democratisation and a society of equality. And this belief was linked to a concept of aristocracy that had been uprooted from its historical anchorage and re-interpreted as a 'spiritual' quality. The historical uncoupling is important – it was precisely the idea of the death of ideas and the collapse of history that underlay Ibsen's dream of the noble human being and Nietzsche's belief in the exceptional individual. If we take Ibsen's non-literary statements about politics and society seriously, it is difficult to ignore traces of irrationality, contempt for the masses, the cultivation of an elite and a certain affinity as regards violence and the exercising of power.

This is ultimately a skein of thought that runs like a fine idea-historical thread between Ibsen and the vitalism and leader-worship of the following century.

Had it not been for his writing.

One of the most remarkable things about Henrik Ibsen is the striking gap between life and teaching – i.e. life and writing. For him, drama was a psychological and aesthetical laboratory, and even though Ibsen's drama often focuses on ethical problems, it is hardly a medium for the preaching of moral or political ideas. In themselves, the theatre and the dramatic genre resist one-sided preaching. The dramatist is obliged to juxtapose different views of life without having any superior authority as narrator to rely on. If the audience is going to be convinced, this can only take place via the actions and lines of the characters on the stage. Theatre has to do with the interaction of opposites, where at best figures appear to be consistent, whole characters – no matter if they are heroes or villains. This calls on the dramatist to demonstrate a capacity for both empathising and maintaining a distance – which are two sides of the same coin. But even though drama by definition is many-voiced, there is no doubt that Ibsen drew more radical conclusions of this realisation than others did. In that sense, it can possibly be said that his anti-idealist drama, with its many voices and many possible interpretations, represents an approach to the very core of drama as a genre.

In much of his writing he explored the relationship between the individual and society in a way that was a constant dethronement of every position, even those most reminiscent of his own. A recurring motif is the heroic longing for greatness, or the ennobling of mankind. But unlike Mazzini he did not link heroism to the nation, and unlike Nietzsche to any history of civilisation. And he did not cultivate heroes in the manner of Carlyle; he tended in his plays to let them founder, not in tragic greatness but pitifully stripped of all their illusions. Ibsen did not preach heroism or power philosophy of any kind; rather, he undertook a dramatic examination of the human urge for freedom and self-transcendence, placing this urge up against other values, such as responsibility, love and everyday obligations. That is why Ibsen's closest political *alter ego*, Doctor Stockmann in *An Enemy of the People*, is portrayed with clearly ironical characteristics, and that is why it is so difficult to deduce any political implications from the plays.

It is perhaps correct to say that Ibsen the writer had a civilising and humanising effect on Ibsen the man by writing down his tendencies in his works, not in order to promote them but to discipline them.

If that is correct, it is incredibly apt when he calls writing passing judgment on oneself.

Henrik Ibsen was not a preacher but a writer, even though his works have been used as supporting evidence for everything from socialism and anarchism to fascism and Christianity. As a writer, he was interested in the constitution of the individual in the world. In that sense, he always wrote critical social dramas, but preferably in a universally valid form that pointed beyond every political, institutional and social category. Based on this realisation, it is tempting to interpret his conservative sympathies, his alliance with power, as a reluctance towards the political struggle as such. Ultimately, it was the opposition which brought politics into the foreground and which, once the battle had been won, then took the freedom phraseology along with it into positions of power and turned it into a society-bearing ideology. For a

person who had sworn allegiance to the idea of a permanent revolution of the human mind, the political struggle was a false trail, because the freedom of the individual was so often sacrificed and the concept of freedom consolidated – something that for Ibsen was synonymous with its becoming corrupted.

The noise from the struggles taking place in society also made it hard to write – and this is important. For Ibsen, aristocratic individualism is closely connected to the view of the role of poets and intellectuals.

‘What I wish for you above all is a real, full-blooded egoism,’ he writes, typically enough, to Georg Brandes. ‘You cannot be of greater benefit to your society than by mining the creative vein you have within you.’

That was what it was all about – one’s call, first and foremost.

‘I haven’t really ever had a strong feeling of solidarity; I have basically only taken it over as a traditional article of faith – and if one had the courage to leave it completely out of consideration, perhaps one would do away with the ballast that weights the personality down most.’

That which can appear to be a form of anarchism is, in other words, an aristocratic individualism linked to the role of writers and intellectuals in social life, as long as ‘the masses are without any understanding of that which is higher both at home and abroad.’ So under no circumstances is there any real anarchism – understood as a comprehensive and constructive ideology of society. Only in brief glimpses was Ibsen to express other models of society – and then only years later. Those who have attempted to make a constructive social thinker out of him have blandly overlooked the massive contempt he poured out for many years on the masses and the people, both in his life and his work.

So the relationship between the man and the writer can be summed up as following: While Ibsen *the man* expressed a resigned rage at social developments, Ibsen *the writer* revolutionises European drama with great energy, thematising highly radical ideas about the individual and society in his works. From a historical and biographical perspective, this is perhaps the most interesting of all the paradoxes that characterise Ibsen’s life and work.

Hardly surprising that Brandes allowed himself to be shocked. He wanted to reform social institutions, not deny them. In this struggle, he probably wanted to stand side by side with Ibsen, but there was much that jarred. Fairly early on he discovered that Ibsen was not all that well acquainted with the new ideas of the age – positivism, the natural sciences – as he had expected. In addition, he appeared to be socially indifferent and, at best, politically naive. At worst, a ‘die-hard conservative’. As such, he was of limited value as an ally for Brandes when in autumn 1871 he was preparing his first lecture in the series on the main currents of European literature, an event that involved his first major confrontation with the Danish public. In this struggle, he could do with all the alliances he could get.

The problem was that Ibsen did not want to take part in the social struggle. He did not want to stand on the battlefield, but preferred to fight from his writing desk.

Brandes genuinely admired Ibsen as a writer, but at the same time was repelled by his bitterness, doubted his sincerity and was shocked by his extremist tendencies. And Ibsen was just as frustrated with him. He admitted to a friend that his correspondence with Brandes was rather reserved from his side. He was irritated by the misunderstandings that arose because they did

not know each other, and because he felt that Brandes did not understand what he meant. In general, he was worried by the cautiousness and will to show consideration that Brandes displayed; the only thing that means anything for Ibsen is 'to will what one must'. Nothing indicates that Brandes understood these words – words that Ibsen had earlier learned from Clemens Petersen.

What they had in common, though, was important enough. Ibsen the hermit and Brandes the social reformer shared a belief in the exceptional individual and the duty of intellectuals to lead the way – a belief that Ibsen to all appearances strengthened in Brandes (and in that sense he was an important support for Brandes prior to his lectures in autumn 1871). The intellectual aristocratic tendency was never stronger in Ibsen than in the years around 1870, stimulated by the political and military unrest in Europe, fortified by the correspondence with Brandes and his own absorption in the piece of fluid European reality in which he had chosen to reside.

The foremost artistic outlet for these moods is to be found in the poem 'Balloon letter to a Swedish lady', which Ibsen wrote in Dresden in December 1870 while the Franco-German war was still in progress. The Swedish lady in question was Mrs Fredrika Limnell, who had received Ibsen at her country house by the Mälaren during his visit to Sweden the previous autumn. Based on his journey to Egypt he attempts here to give a diagnosis of his age by tracing lines back to the great period of ancient Egyptian civilisation. Unlike early Scandinavia and Greek Antiquity, ancient Egypt was a dead past – the columns and temples along the banks of the Nile were like bones and skeletons in the sand.

And why?

Well, the reason's pretty plain.
Where identity is lacking,
where the form does not contain
hatred, pleasure, joy and tension,
throbbing pulse and blood's bright stain, —
then the sum of high pretension
is mere skeleton-like clacking.

A civilisation that obliterated the individual and the personality, a society whose inhabitants had no other calling in life than 'Purely and simply to exist' was doomed to fall. Now this was in the process of happening again. What was else was expansionist, state-centred Prussia than a new Egypt, where people were more stones in the pyramid, pawns in the state system than they were personalities?

Prussia is to pay for this in the poem, but it is quite possible to read the rhyming letter as an acute diagnosis of modern states in general. But what was the alternative? First, Ibsen mumbles about old heroes, the Swedish warrior king Gustav Adolf II and the naval hero Peter Wessel before maintaining that the longing for 'beauty' was still alive. The longing for beauty and cultivation of heroes, the belief in the strong, exemplary leading figure that could bring greatness into social life is a core narrative in the aristocratic individualist. But Ibsen has no candidates, and the poem ends with a defence of the writer's resignation from social life to an artistic exile where art is cultivated for its own sake:

Shall we join the fun together?
Well, who knows, dear lady whether
doves will bring the card? We'll see.
Till then I wear gloves — kid-leather —
in my chamber's privacy;
till then I shall seek allayment
write fine poems down on vellum;
that will stir the good-folk's venom,
'heathen's' sure to be my payment;
mobs are my abomination,
I fear dregs, contamination,
I shall bide time's slow rotation
in my spotless wedding raiment.

That this fawning on the aristocracy has a certain connection to the writer's wish to appeal to the recipient of the poem, the upper-class Mrs Limnell is quite possible. But there is no reason to doubt his sincere contempt for the mob and the dregs of society. The aristocracy and the monarchy actually enabled him to find a space where he could cultivate his art for its own sake — with kid-leather gloves and on vellum. In this light, Ibsen's social ambitions do not only seem to represent a desire for status and financial security but just as much a seeking for an artistic space with optimum freedom.

Ultimately, this was the most important thing for him, and it was this that strongly influenced his view of the world around him.

The freedom to write.

I must, I must

Ibsen is just as emotional in his correspondence with Brandes as he is subdued in the long letter he writes to the Dane Peter Hansen on 28 October 1870. The message, however, is very much the same.

Peter Hansen was the journalist and critic Ibsen had got to know in Stockholm the previous autumn. The letter itself is one of the most often cited in the literature on Ibsen — and not without reason. It was written after Hansen had asked for a brief overview of his oeuvre, one that he had presumably intended to use for journalistic purposes. In other words, the letter, although private in terms of form, has the public as its addressee. Hansen, however, is not interested in an outer biography — he wants to have 'the inner narrative'. And this is precisely what he gets, nothing less than a concentrated literary autobiography over Ibsen's writing so far. It dates from autumn 1870 — after Ibsen has had his definitive breakthrough in Scandinavia. Ever since the publication of *Brand*, he has in various ways — and quite deliberately — cemented his position as a writer and carefully cultivated his public image.

As he does here.

He starts his inner biography by establishing the source of his own writing. 'Everything I have produced as a writer has had a mood and a life-situation as its origin; I have never written anything because I had found what people call "a good subject".'

With these words he defines the core of his nature as a writer. It is a question of 'necessity'. He does not write because he *wants to*, but because he *must*. It is as if a creative stream of necessity flows through Ibsen's life, its source deep within himself, where the individual works arise out of the meeting between this stream and the changing environments and events that surround him at any given time.

On the basis of this mode of thought, he then deals with the emergence of the individual plays. *Catalina*, a drama of rebellion, was written in a 'small narrow-minded bourgeois town where I was unable to find an outlet for everything that was fermenting inside me.' *Lady Inger of Oestraat* was set in motion by his falling in love with Rikke Holst; similarly, *The Vikings of Helgoland*, 'On the Mountain Heights' and *Love's Comedy* were all linked to a 'desire for freedom' arising from his love for Suzannah. And generally speaking, it is striking the importance he attaches to his wife's love and especially her unshakable faith in *Love's Comedy* when it came out. The loved, important 'other person' has the role of a midwife in his writing, at a time when everyone is turning against him. 'And so I was outlawed – everyone was against me' (in addition, his praise of Suzannah can also come from the desire to 'launder' the marriage of the embarrassing biographical interpretation that this play was exposed to when it appeared). Ostracism also led Ibsen into a new 'mood' that resulted in *The Pretenders*. After Prussia's attack on Denmark, the polarisation between the writer and society increased, giving rise to yet another new mood – a violent indignation that finds its release in *Brand* – the necessity being expressed in the organic metaphor that the play grew inside him 'like a foetus'.

Characteristically enough, he refers to his trip to Rome on a study grant as 'being forced into exile', thereby formulating his own 'myth of suffering' – the idea that he was obliged, so to speak, to flee the country because of persecution and opposition. Even so, more important is how he links his life-story to his writing via the rhetoric of necessity, to how adversity in life creates moods that in turn find their outlet in his works. A typical feature of this rhetoric is also the mystique of place and nature. Rome, with its 'ideal peace', gave birth to *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, both of them written as if intoxicated by wine. In the same way, there was something reminiscent of 'Knackwurst und Bier' in *The League of Youth*. Elsewhere, he links the realism of this play to 'the heavy German air', and he explains to Hansen that 'the soil has a great influence on the forms under which imagination creates.'

The thought is undeniably arresting – life in the eternal city naturally had to release the great dramas of ideas, while the realistic contemporary drama grew out of the pulsating, modern life of the metropolis in Germany. This connection is probably also quite real, but it is just as interesting to note that Ibsen, in the prose of his letters and speeches, promotes the idea of the hand as being the tool of the hidden core of the writer's nature, and the work as a reaction to the meeting between this core and the surroundings. In the same way, he links the striking thematic continuity found throughout his work with the same rhetoric of necessity, not least in the following request made in the preface to his collected works in 1898:

Only by taking in and appropriating my total production as a cohesive, continuous whole will one gain the intended, apposite expression of the individual parts. So my friendly request to my readers, quite simply, is not

to lay any play aside for the time being, not to skip anything, but to appropriate the works – to read them through and live them through – in the same order as I wrote them.

Right at the end of his life as a writer he manages to string together his works by matching the first words of the first one – ‘I must, I must’ (*Catalina*) – with the words that mark the fading out of the last one – ‘I am free, I am free’ (*When We Dead Awake*). There is much to indicate that the conscious organising to strengthen cohesiveness and consistency in his writing dates back to the early 1870s; the letter to Peter Hansen is an example – another one is the preface to the revised edition of *Catalina* in 1875. Here he emphasises how as early as his debut play he struck chords that were to reverberate through the coming works: ‘the contradiction between capacity and aspiration, between will and possibility – the tragedy and comedy of humanity and the individual at one and the same time.’

Thus did Henrik Ibsen laboriously construct the two pillars on which his literary work rested: his actual authorship and the mythology surrounding himself as a writer. On the basis of this, it is not surprising that he was reticent about his literary debt to other writers. To Hansen he once again explains away his knowledge of Kierkegaard, and similarly he avoids mentioning *The Feast at Solhaug* and *St. John's Eve*, the two plays that were most closely based on literary models. He willingly wrote about how the works came into being and his own working methods. But the origins of his works lay deep within himself, hidden behind a veil of mystique – or maybe even metaphysics. And here there was no room for anything as prosaic as literary impulses – the core of his writing remained concealed.

The idea that writing springs from the innermost regions of the writer gives no reason for suspecting Ibsen of being subject to a simply reductionist view of his own writing. On the contrary, he clearly distances himself from over-simplified deductions made from art to reality, from work to life. We have much evidence to support that he had a clear perception of the specific nature and independence of art. He was intensely aware of the fact that the published work lived its own life. On one occasion he wrote to Brandes that ‘The intention is not a matter for criticism’ and he admits that the author has to respect the critic’s independent interpretation. This did not prevent him from expressing his joy or displeasure at criticism, but his objections were quite often directed precisely at the reductionist reading of his works:

‘Why can’t the book be read as a poem?’ he typically exclaimed after the critics had carried on about the references to society in *Peer Gynt*.

In line with this, he expressed himself quite consistently regarding his own work, never passing himself off as one who wrote key dramas and seldom fuelling the belief that the hunt for models would enrich an understanding of the works. He preferred to let the works speak for themselves without any kind of guidance from the author. In his outburst against Clemens Petersen’s slaughtering of precisely *Peer Gynt*, in which he says that ‘My book *is* poetry – and if it isn’t, it will become so’ there is, however, a passage that complicates the relation between life and work. The quotation continues as follows:

The concept of poetry in our country, in Norway, must submit to the book. There is nothing stable in the world of concepts; the Scandinavians of our century are not Greeks [...] Summa summarum: I do not *want to be a*

dealer in ancient literature or a geographer, I do not *want* to develop my talents for Monradian philosophy; in short, I completely refuse to follow good advice.

These words of Ibsen have been read as if he almost professed a modernistic view of art, where the literary text is perceived as an *autonomous* entity that forms its own norms, independently of all considerations external to art. But there is no reason to pull the literary theories of later periods down over Ibsen's romantic head. For it is more as a continuation of the ideals of Romanticism, rather than those of modernism, that we are to understand his insistence on the exceptional position of the writer, his freedom to define himself what poetry is, no matter what expectations society may have of the nature and function of literature. What is *really* striking about the statement is how radically he follows this ideal, not least in his wish to reject the entire classical heritage as an authority for his own writing.

Even though he advocates respecting the distinctive nature of art *as* art, he was not, then, willing to cut the umbilical cord between the writer and the literary text; as a writer he was indissolubly linked to his creation. And even though his respect for the literary text prevented him from expressing an authoritative reading of his own works, there were other, more subtle, ways of confirming his ownership, as when he links the coming into being of the works with the pair of concepts 'experiencing' and 'living through'. This distinction is best-known from a speech he gave in autumn 1874, and it is not in his letter to Peter Hansen from 1870. But it is around this time that he first starts to use it. In May of that year, he writes to Magdalene Thoresen that in the process of writing he distinguishes between the 'experienced' and the 'lived through'. And in June, he emphasises the intrinsic value of art to Laura Kieler when he claims that *Brand* is 'completely an aesthetical work, and nothing else', then explaining that the drama is a result of 'something lived through', i.e. not 'experienced'.

Lived through, not experienced. Reality is converted into writing via a sublimation in the mind of the writer. He explains to his mother-in-law that 'poetic genesis' takes place when the writer is able to 'raise reality up to the inner, higher sphere of truth'. In other words, by living through it. It is in this way that Ibsen insists on a subtle link between the work, the writer and reality, retaining ownership of his work at the same time as he defends its independence as art.

If we combine Ibsen's aristocratic individualism, his view of the independence of art and the writer's ability to sublimate reality by living it through, a powerful view of the intrinsic nature of the writer emerges:

In a way, the writer stands outside society, carrying out his work in accordance with the norms he himself establishes by virtue of his genius. In terms of society, Ibsen sees himself as belonging to an intellectual elite – imaginative writers – which he believed had a unique ability to interpret reality and what was going on in the common people. It is easy to forget the collective aspect of Ibsen the individualist, for that which is 'lived through' is not simply something that takes place in the writer but also in his audience:

'But no writer lives through something in isolation. That which he lives through is at the same time lived through by his fellow-countrymen along with

him. For if this were not the case, how could a bridge of understanding be established between the producer and the receiver?’

This clarification is important and it underscores a significant modification in Ibsen’s conception of writing and the independence of the writer; independence is *relative* and it presupposes what is in itself evident – that the writer is and must ultimately be part of society. Ibsen does not give us many clues, but an obvious interpretation is that *for him the writer and the intellectual find themselves in an experimental and relatively independent field on the marginal zone of society*. It is in that sense that we must understand his self-presentation as a *poeta vates* after the breakthrough with *Brand*, where the writer comes in from the desert and enlightens people, just like the prophets of the Old Testament.

To pursue the metaphor for a moment – the desert surrounding Israelite society corresponds to the artistic and intellectual field of modern 19th century society, the marginal zone where new thoughts can take shape in optimum freedom. And he found this freedom for his own part by founding his occupation as a writer on the platform of an intellectual aristocracy, far removed from social institutions and the everyday struggle.

The loft

In *The Wild Duck* we meet the Ekdals, a small family that consists of the photographer Hjalmar Ekdal, his wife Gina and their only child, the fourteen-year-old Hedvig. With the exception of the first act, the entire play takes place in the studio, where the family live with Hjalmar’s old father, Lieutenant Ekdal. The small family has many burdens in life, and more accrue as old secrets come to light in the course of the action. Hjalmar is a hopeless dreamer with high thoughts of himself; his daughter Hedvig is in the process of losing her sight. Old Ekdal has never got over his great downfall in life, when he went to prison for embezzlement, something that was actually perpetrated by his former business partner, wholesaler Werle. During the play, it becomes clear that Gina had a relationship with the wholesaler when she was a maidservant at his house, and he is presumably Hedvig’s real father.

Hjalmar knows nothing of this as the action progresses, just as little as he is aware of the fact that the family is provided for by the same wholesaler. He goes round cultivating his inflated image of himself, dreaming of the great invention he one day will make. Like his father, he is living on an illusion of an authentic, free life – an illusion that is expressed symbolically by the wild duck the family keep as a pet in the loft inside the studio. With the exception of down-to-earth Gina, they regularly go up there to live out their dreams and to keep away unpalatable truths. And so they lead a happy life, until the wholesaler’s son and Hjalmar’s old friend Gregers one day return to the town with an unshakable determination to uncover all the lies and to lead the family to a life lived in truth and freedom. Gregers carries out his mission, only to discover that the truth does not set free at all; instead, it drives the whole family to desperation and causes Hedvig to point a pistol at her own breast.

All Gregers reaps is unhappiness with his ‘ideal demand’, while his diametric opposite, Doctor Relling, is proved right in his cynical maxim: ‘If

you take the life-lie away from an average person, you take away his happiness as well.'

In the letter that accompanied the last batch of the manuscript to Hegel, Ibsen wrote that the 'new play occupies in a way a place of its own in my dramatic production'. Hopefully, the critics will discover the innovative quality of the new play – 'in that case they will find quite a few things to disagree about, quite a few things to interpret. In addition, I believe that *The Wild Duck* can entice some of our young dramatists to explore new paths, and that I would consider it desirable.'

Two people who did not allow themselves to be enticed were Bjørnson – 'I find Ibsen's new book so utterly revolting!' – and Georg Brandes. As with the former play, Brandes wrote no review of this play either. His brother Edvard had gradually taken over that task. This was perhaps just as well. Georg was disappointed. He had hoped that after *Ghosts* Ibsen would serve the cause of the breakthrough movement. And now this? 'Ibsen made a sad impression on me, seemed a bit empty to me,' he resignedly writes to Kielland. 'Why deal exclusively with such completely insignificant beings!'

No, Hjalmar Ekdal was a miserable ally in the great Scandinavian cultural struggle.

Among the critics and the public in general, the excitement was no less than usual for a new publication by Ibsen. There were rumours in advance that the most biting social drama to date could be expected from him. When the cargo of books from Gyldendal arrived in Kristiania harbour at one o'clock in the morning, it took no more than an hour and a half for the books to be ready for sale in the bookshops. That same afternoon, the first reviews were in print in the evening papers.

One thing is certain: what people expected was not what they got.

One would have thought that the critics would gradually have ceased to let themselves be surprised by Ibsen, but that was not the case. It is striking that while *The Wild Duck*, more than a century after it was written, is now considered a highly suitable introduction to Ibsen for young people, the critics of the time were at a loss as to what the play in general was all about. Much of the confusion came from the fact that the play neither preached a traditional idealistic aesthetics nor made tangible social problems the subject of debate, as people had become accustomed to seeing in Ibsen's most recent plays. Instead, they were faced with a drama that hardly had any action or conflict and where no redemption or tragic insight resulted from Hedvig's death.

That Ibsen had added a 'fantastic-allegorical element' to realism was at least obvious. For some people this was felt to be something new, for others not: for Alexander Kielland 'these eternal symbols and allusions' made a 'tortuous, old-fashioned impression'. Similar thoughts were shared by the *Morgenbladet* reviewer of *Peer Gynt*; the unusual thing here was that the allegorical and symbolical were used in an otherwise realistic contemporary drama. According to Edvard Brandes, it was self-evident what the most important symbol of the play, the wild duck, was supposed to mean. Really? The *Morgenbladet* reviewer thought it was probably meant to symbolise one of the characters, but quickly gave up the attempt to find out which one. And he actually manages to write that Hedvig was well portrayed, if it had not been for 'that crazy story about the wild duck'.

For the *Aftenposten* reviewer – who together with Ditmar Meidell and the *Morgenbladet* reviewer represented the traditional, idealistic

interpretations of the play – Gregers Werle was the most disappointing character. Gregers, who should have been ‘the pure spirit, the noble element of the play’, proves to be just as confused and decayed as the rest of the characters in and around the Ekdals’ home. *Morgenbladet* shared in this frustration: ‘And this bloodless, pitiable figure, this delirious person, in whom it is impossible to find any interest, is the representative of the higher, the ideal in the play.’ It was bad enough that Hjalmar was an immature, naive idealist – most of the reviewers felt he had been brilliantly portrayed – what was worse was that Hjalmar’s mentor and model turned out to have been dyed in the same wool. The conservative reviewers concluded that Ibsen was once again preaching negativism and doubt, and that the only lesson one could learn from *The Wild Duck* was ‘to pick up one’s hat and leave, be the thirteenth person at table and take a pistol and shoot oneself.’

Ditmar Meidell’s conclusion could almost have been taken from Hjalmar Ekdal’s mouth: ‘Ah, the good times are past when a reviewer could end his critique with words like: No one will lay aside this book without having received a full, harmonious impression of the elevated, beautiful poetry that permeates the work.’

Johan Irgens Hansen, however, drew a completely different conclusion in *Dagbladet*. For him, it was precisely the revealing of the delusions of idealism that opened up for Ibsen’s positive message: ‘Brought to their knees by life’s demands, laid low in despair, we see his characters resorting time and time again to the only form of help they know – sympathy, love.’ While an idealist aesthete found the cheerless everydayness of the play repellent, it was precisely here that its greatness lay for Irgens Hansen – not least in the female characters. They represented the ‘forgiving, understanding, reconciling and appeasing element. They make life liveable, because they possess devotion and then this wonderful gift: to take the world as it is.’

The view of women says most about the positions of the idealist and the anti-idealists. While Gina, for the *Aftenposten* reviewer, was ‘the simple woman with the tainted past’, for Irgens Hansen she was a bearer of the qualities that made life liveable.

Characteristically enough, Irgens Hansen insists that Ibsen, far from having abandoned realism, had never been so realistic as he is here. Neither Ibsen nor Bjørnson had previously managed to escape completely from the heritage of Romanticism, he felt. Both of them had had a tendency to ‘stretch reality somewhat tightly over the last of ideas’. It was not until *The Wild Duck* that Ibsen had become a true realist, not simply on account of the outer realism, but because in his ‘mode of perception’ he had come closer to reality than ever before. ‘What Ibsen has not done before he has done in this book; he stands on the ground of humanity and pleads the case of humanity – even that of a very shabby humanity.’

Even so, it is wrong to believe that *The Wild Duck* was ‘misunderstood’ or ‘understood’ depending on whether one was an idealist or anti-idealist, conservative or radical. Once again, it is the Christian-conservative Swedish critic Carl David af Wirsén who most clearly breaks the pattern. With his ‘sceptical’ but intelligent reading of the play he often displays a keener awareness of subtleties than his radical colleagues. In both Erik Vullum (about *An Enemy of the People*) and Irgens Hansen (about *The Wild Duck*) Ibsen’s characters appear to be simpler, and the message of the plays more unambiguous than is the case in af Wirsén and a few other conservative

critics. His overall conclusion is, admittedly, not designed to surprise: 'Negations, ruins! Nothing positive, nothing that offers consolation!'

Nevertheless, he is gripped by the play and understands what it implies: 'Ibsen's irony has perhaps seldom been so universal and so biting at one and the same time as in *The Wild Duck*. "They are sinners, every one" – this is the theme, and one would have to be blind not to agree with the author when, in gloomy, dry variations, he repeats his "vanitas vanitatum vanitas".'

They are sinners, every one. That was Ibsen's judgment on humanity, and the believing critic could do no other than agree with him. But af Wirsén realises that the judgment has a quite specific address: 'His writing is increasingly becoming the funeral-bell of the 19th century – the sound is frightful and lacks any form of the atonement that lies in a tolling of the knell, but it has the entire desolate power of hopelessness and speaks only of bodies and decay and funeral palls.'

Carl David af Wirsén hears the bells tolling for his own age. He acknowledges Ibsen's view of humanity, praises his unique ability to express dramatically his critique of society. He is held by the symbolism of the play, shaken by the pessimism. Only he insists that hope exists in the world, a glimmer of light that makes the struggle worth while. Furthermore, he recommends that *The Wild Duck* be given a chance on the stage.

He was not alone in this. The critics were almost unanimous in thinking that this time Ibsen had delivered an unusually well-crafted play, even by his standards. By now theatres had begun to compete with each other to be the first to put on his new plays. Quick off the mark, the producer at Christiania Theater, Bjørn Bjørnson, got to work on *The Wild Duck* without delay, but at Den National Scene, Gunnar Heiberg was even quicker off the mark. And so Ibsen's new play was to have its first premiere in Bergen on 9 January 1885, two days before the theatre in the capital. Heiberg had set about the assignment with great enthusiasm, even though the play was considered beyond the capacity of the theatre – and criticism was overwhelmingly positive.

At The Danish Royal Theatre the play was accepted by a rapturous Erik Bøgh. The producer was William Bloch, and the premiere took place on 22 February. Bloch was the theatre's foremost producer and must take much of the credit for the break with declamatory theatre on the Danish main stage. His breakthrough came with *An Enemy of the People*, which he produced with great loyalty to Ibsen's stage directions and with the emphasis on the psychological portrayal of the characters. In his production of *The Wild Duck*, live hens and pigeons strutted about the stage in a naturalistic scenography. However, neither Bloch, the actors nor the audience were familiar with the symbolic language. Emil Poulsen played Ekdal in parodying and comical fashion, instead of balancing between the comic and the tragic. Ibsen had intended the play to be *both* tragic and comic, but this blending of farce, the comedy, melodrama and tragedy was most confusing for the audience, producers, actors, readers and critics alike.

Presumably, Heiberg in Bergen had a better grasp of the play, but unfortunately, Ibsen never got to see this production. On the other hand, he saw the Danish interpretation when he visited Copenhagen on his way from Norway to German in autumn 1885.

He was not pleased.

In Stockholm, it was increasingly Dramaten that performed his plays. Ludvig Josephson, to be sure, assumed the task of giving *Catalina* its first premiere at Nya Teatern in 1881, following up the *Peer Gynt* performance of 1876 with an impressive production of *Brand* on 24 March 1885, the first staging of the play in its entirety, which lasted six and a half hours. Ibsen was quite delighted with the reports he received of the production, but the fruitful cooperation between the author and producer was in fact over. Josephson lost his sense for 'the playing with enigmatic subjects and paradoxes' that characterises *The Wild Duck* and the later plays. Things were different with August Lindberg, for he was the man behind the production at Dramaten.

During rehearsals, he wrote to the author:

'With your latest play, Herr Doctor, we stand as if on a completely uncultivated field, where it is almost a question of advancing with hoe and spade. These people are completely new, and where will we get with our usual ways of doing things?'

This meant that Lindberg had seriously replaced Josephson as Sweden's Ibsen interpreter. Several years later, Josephson mildly poked fun at how Ibsen now seemed to find amusement in what readers speculated he could possibly have meant by his plays – if nothing else, this meant 'good bookshop speculation' for the writer.

Now, everything that came from the Norwegian dramatist's hand was considered 'a masterpiece', Josephson felt – 'let us see what people will say in seventy years' time.'

The more enigmatic and advanced Ibsen's dramas became, the more some of the critics suspected his motives. He speculated in scandals, enigmas and people's curiosity, it was said. Every success comes at a price. One does not write plays unpunished that people do not understand – not for seasoned theatre-goers, critics and writers, at any rate. When literature is incomprehensible, it must naturally be the writer there is something wrong with – seldom the critic.

What is there that is really new in *The Wild Duck*, and why was the play so difficult for the critics to place? The most striking feature is of course the symbolical and allegorical form. Ibsen had admittedly made use of such means previously, but not so eloquently and deliberately. In *The Wild Duck* he sticks to a few, recurring symbols – first and foremost the wild duck and the loft. This both relates *The Wild Duck* to – and distinguishes it from – *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, pointing forwards to a similar use of select, mainstay symbols in the late dramas, especially *The Masterbuilder* and *When We Dead Awaken*. On the surface, however, this play too is a realistic, contemporary family drama, with the stage presenting the well-known middle-class home, albeit a trifle shabbier than before.

There is no clear main character in the play, something that contributed to the confusion of the audience. The 'main character' in the play is in many ways the Ekdal family. In this, there is an interesting connection back to Ibsen's previous drama, *An Enemy of the People*. This play ends with Stockmann's famous utterance that the strongest man in the world is the man who stands most alone. But Stockmann does not stand alone – he has his family around him. In other words, the individual was so integrated in the family constellation in the 19th century that 'alone', without any further explanation, could comprise the nuclear family. In the relation between the

individual and society, the family in the 19th century was the mediating institution that both represented an expansion of the personal sphere and the smallest social cell. What could be more natural than Ibsen allowing himself to be fascinated by the family community? While he had dealt with the relation of individuals to external society in *The Pillars of Society* and *An Enemy of the People*, in the intervening dramas of *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* he had concentrated on the development of the individual inside the family. Here too, he was dealing with society, but more about society as it manifested itself *within* people and *between* people in the same family – supplemented by a sprinkling of family friends. This is also what he does in *The Wild Duck*.

The intriguing thing about precisely this play is that Ibsen interweaves here a number of motifs that point both backwards and forwards in his authorship. He does this too in his notes on the play, which date from 1882 or 1883. Here, in brief maxims, man's struggle for a freedom that cannot be realised is touched on ('emancipation is impossible'); there is also a great deal on the incompatibility of men and women, on the suppression of women by mass society, and on marriage, which on the one hand is to give people freedom, but which in reality 'has branded all as slaves'. Likewise, belief in the future, belief in science and in a socialistic utopia is punctured, with the Ibsenesque judgment that everything which now exists will perish. Here too it says this: 'Emancipation consists in obtaining for the individual the right to liberate himself, each according to his need.' Everything is relative: 'Conscience is not something that is stable.' The individual must form himself. Here too there are a number of thoughts about love of one's country, suppression by Christianity, the tyranny of the majority and the false struggle for freedom of the social-liberals – further on how a new aristocracy will rise up on the foundations of what exists. Many of these thoughts were later removed from *The Wild Duck*, but they are refound both in earlier plays and in the following, *Rosmersholm*.

Ibsen was in the processing of tying together his oeuvre, and many of the key lines cross each other in the preparations for *The Wild Duck* and in the play itself, even though they here find expression in an ingenious tapestry of symbols and allegories, hidden in the lines themselves and scenographic touches. The central contrast in the drama is between the idealistic demand for a whole, true life and a realistic acceptance of human insufficiency in life, including the characters' need to maintain themselves via life-lies. It is tempting to believe that Hedvig, her father and grandfather stand closest to the fate of the wild duck, the wounded animal that has latched onto the base of its own illusions. But if we do so, there is a risk of our taking over the perspective of the warped idealist Gregers Werle in the play. For is he not just as much a 'wild duck' as the others – believing that he sees everything so clearly, but unable to see through the fact that he is just as much driven by revenge against his father as by the ideal aim of liberating the Ekdal family? In recent research it is precisely the critique of the project of idealism that is emphasised, especially via the presentation of Gregers' over-symbolic and metaphorical language. He, above everyone else, insists on interpreting everything around him in symbolic phrases, greatly hampering others who are attempting to give language a real, tangible meaning; it is Gregers who convinces Hedvig that the wild duck is so important that it must be sacrificed.

Perhaps the strongest characters in the play are the ones who do not have any illusions to hide in – first and foremost the down-to-earth Gina –

while her cynical partner, Doctor Relling, has a more dubious outlook on life. While Gina has her work cut out trying to cope with her own immediate reality, Relling builds castles in the air for those he feels are unfit for life.

Despite the use of symbols, there is much in this play that links it to naturalism, not least the mood of downfall that is partly connected to social relations (e.g. the fall of Lieutenant Ekdal). The Darwinist references point in the same direction; it is hardly merely a coincidence that the animals that live in the loft – pigeons, hens, rabbits and a duck – are the same as those mentioned by Darwin in the chapter on the improvement of livestock in the *Origin of Species*, which Ibsen may have read in J.P Jacobsen's translation of 1872. Here, even 'the short-billed snipe' and 'the pouter pigeon' are mentioned, both of which are to be found in the loft. Darwin's point is to show what the transition from a wild to a domesticated state has meant for the development of the species. If Ibsen has made use of this scientific discussion, it is reasonable to wonder if he wanted to contrast free, natural and authentic life with civilised, unfree and tamed life. To take this idea further, Ekdal's wild duck then becomes a deeply ironic symbol of freedom, as it splashes around in the loft in a tub of water. The duck is no more free than the humans that wait on it, and expresses more than anything else the illusions people have about an authentic life they long since have lost contact with.

In this interpretation, the main contrast in the play is not between realism and idealism but between authenticity and unauthenticity. Admittedly, many people have been willing to see Hedvig's relation to the loft and the wild duck as an expression of a more authentic experience, for, unlike her father and grandfather, she abandons herself to the ideal world of the loft with the natural sincerity of a child; for her the loft is not a crippled version of reality but an expansion and enrichment of it. Others are less willing to idealise Hedvig in this way and believe that she too is a prisoner of illusions.

It is hardly surprising, then, that interpretations of the play have been many and divergent. The striking thing about the variations in interpretation is that the symbols in the play are in themselves not difficult to say something about – even those slowest on the uptake, such as the *Morgenbladet* reviewer, could understand that the duck was a symbol of one or more of the characters in the play. The problem must have been to relate the metaphors and symbolic elements to each other and the characters in such a way that the play was 'resolved'. Things are not made any easier by the fact that the symbols have a unique meaning for the various characters (i.e. Hedvig's loft is something else than Gregers'), and that some of them are aware of the symbols, whilst others are not. Certain researchers have taken the consequence of this and claimed that the play must be understood as an 'open' work, a view that is not far removed from Mathilde Schjøtt's review of 1884. As she saw it, Ibsen in this play had reflected 'the various aspects of everyday life, the human soul and imaginative writing; romanticism, realism, idealism and wretchedness – he uses all of these, lighting up his characters with the glare of irony and satire, whilst himself keeping to the shadows, so that the subject of debate must inevitably be where he is to be found.'

No matter how much he tries to hide himself, it is nevertheless possible to find the author between the lines of the play. At an external level, it is clear that Ibsen has gone back to his own childhood memories when shaping the location and the characters. That Hedvig and the loft are based on his sister and his memories of Venstøp is made likely, among other things, by the fact

that Harrison's *History of London* from 1775, which the Hedvig of the play is reading, actually existed in the loft at Venstøp (while the symbolic dimension of the wild duck are to be found in Welhaven's poem 'The Sea Bird', about the wounded wild duck that dives to the sea bed in order to die). The notes for the play reveal that one of Hjalmar's models was the photographer Edvard Larssen, who took the first preserved photograph of Ibsen in Kristiania in the early 1860s, but apart from that, tradition has it that Hjalmar's model was among a series of more or less irresolute figures with which Ibsen came into contact – just as was the case with Peer Gynt.

At a deeper level, too, some people have been tempted to see connections between the play and Ibsen's own life. Edvard Brandes thought that *The Wild Duck* was 'at one and the same time bitter and self-ironical' in the sense that Ibsen's showdown with idealism also carried a hidden sting for himself: 'He himself, Henrik Ibsen, is Gregers Werle, the man with the 'ideal demand'. But the question is when Ibsen had last presented an idealistic character that he did not at the same time cut off at the knees, and Brandes also arrives at the conclusion that it is more likely that Ibsen divided himself between Gregers and Relling, the idealist and the cynic, and via dialogue between the two of them mocked his age and himself. In this odd pair, there is a meeting between cynical doubt and the dream of wholeness and totality that was the Romantic inheritance that Ibsen undermined in his dramas, but that he never quite managed to free himself from.

He knew this himself. During a drinking spree in Munich he protested violently against his drinking companions' praise of idealism in his plays. He wanted merely to depict life as he saw it, but admitted after a pause that 'ultimately, you can look at things in such a way that in a way you are proved right; for there is a touch of Romanticism hidden in all my subjects, views and characters.'

This time, Ibsen had warned Hegel to be a bit more cautious with the first edition, having learned from the wrong assessment of *Ghosts*. The following play had been printed in 10,000 copies, but that was a comedy – or at least something that resembled one. He felt that 8,000 copies must be enough for *The Wild Duck*, although the publishers were obliged to print a further 2,000 copies only a month later.

Yet again, the Ibsen-Hegel book business went like a dream in Scandinavia. Things were more sluggish in Germany. It was not until 1887 that *The Wild Duck* was translated into German in two translations at different publishing firms, and not until the following year that the play was first performed on the German stage. In the first half of the 1880s, it looked as if Ibsen had lost his appeal on German audiences – *Ghosts* was still forbidden, and no one seemed interested in putting on *An Enemy of the People*. In fact, there had been no new Ibsen production since 1880. But in the latter half of the decade a new Ibsen wave swept over Germany, closely followed by a definitive breakthrough in Great Britain.

This pattern is typical of Ibsen: first, a crisis in Scandinavia, then a breakthrough in the rest of Europe, but then with plays that had been known and fully discussed in Scandinavia for a long time. In this light, the Scandinavian and the European Ibsen are two different phenomena. Half-way through the 1880s, Ibsen was still predominantly a Scandinavian writer – it was here he had his market and fought his battles.

In spring 1885, it was nevertheless not the conquest of Europe that preoccupied him most but rather the re-conquest of the provincial nation that happened to be his own.