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Henrik Ibsen's Political Poetics

In its first edition George Bernard Shaw's *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (London, 1891; 161 pp.) closes with a tacit appeal to anarchism as the necessary precondition to understanding and accepting Ibsenism:

One consequence of this is that those who are interested, fascinated, and refreshed by Ibsen's art misrepresent his meaning benevolently quite as often as those who are perplexed and disgusted misrepresent it maliciously; and it already looks as if Ibsen might attain undisputed supremacy as a modern playwright without necessarily converting a single critic to Ibsenism. Indeed it is not possible that his meaning should be fully recognized, much less assented to, until Society as we know it loses its self-complacency through the growth of the conviction foretold by Richard Wagner when he declared that ›Man will never be that which he can and should be until, by a conscious following of that inner natural necessity which is the only true necessity, he makes his life a mirror of nature, and frees himself from his thralldom to outer artificial counterfeits. Then will he first become a living man, who now is a mere wheel in the mechanism of this or that Religion, Nationality, or State.‹ [p. 161]

Shaw, whose ›Anarchism versus State Socialism‹ was reprinted from *The Anarchist* as ›Revolutionary Reprints No. 1‹ (London, 1889; 8 pp.), is indeed the only world famous critic to have seen Ibsen's meaning in the light of anarchism. Since 1889 GBS had been on the lookout for a better word; having avoided ›Anarchism‹ in 1891, he called it ›Communism‹ in the second and following editions of *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (London, 1913):

Ibsen here [1894] explicitly insists for the first time that ›we are members one of another‹, and that [...] the man who is standing alone for his own sake solely is literally an idiot. [p. 135]

Thus we see that in Ibsen's mind, as in the actual history of the nineteenth century, the way to Communism lies through the most resolute and uncompromising Individualism. [...] When a man is at last brought face to face with himself by a brave Individualism, he finds himself face to face, not with an individual, but with a species, and knows that to save himself, he must save the

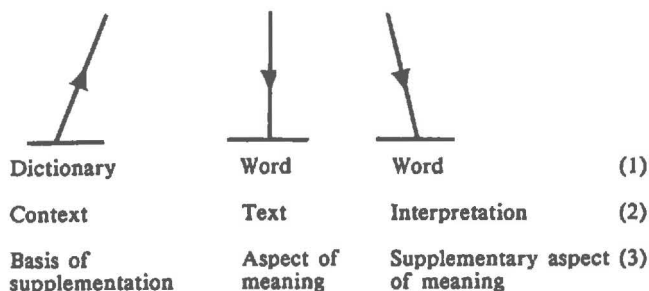
race. He can have no life except a share in the life of the community; and if that life is unhappy and squalid, nothing that he can do to paint and paper and upholster and shut off his little corner of it can really rescue him from it. [pp.136–37]

In substituting the word ›Anarchism‹ for Shaw's 1913 ›Communism‹ (a term that has practically lost the meaning he gave it) we should define ›Anarchy‹ with Immanuel Kant in his *Anthropologie* (1798) as ›Gesetz und Freiheit, ohne Gewalt‹: law and freedom – without suppression.

Shaw demonstratively read Henrik Ibsen's art in terms of his own political insights. In the years preceding publication of my *Henrik Ibsens realisme: illusion katastrofe anarki* (Vols. 1–2, Copenhagen, 1985) I tried to disregard all received opinion on the matter, working from the assumption that Ibsen himself was convinced that his total oeuvre constituted ›one uninterrupted, continuous totality‹ (Preface to his Collected Works, 1898, cf. Henrik Ibsen, *Samlede verker. Hundreårsutgave*, Vols. I–XXI, Oslo, 1928–1958 – in the following referred to as HIHU). Contrary to Shaw I have – for the reasons that I shall now discuss – left Ibsen's creative writing on one side and concentrated on the rest, looking for evidence of a conscious political poetics. In the Preface of 1898 just quoted, Henrik Ibsen talks of how the reader should read all the dramas chronologically, one after another, in order to ›receive the intended, appropriate impression from each part‹ of the whole (HIHU I, 8). Did he have one overriding intention?

Obviously, if you wish to know what Ibsen's twenty-five or so dramatic works have to say, you should read them. This, as a matter of fact, is Ibsen's request in the Preface of 1898. However, any result from such reading – say George Bernard Shaw's or yours or mine – will have to join the huge library of existing readings of Ibsen, side by side with all previous readings. And how do we then decide which reading is more in accordance with Ibsen's intention?

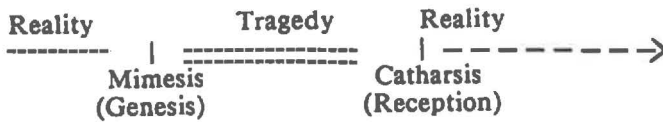
The structure of how we argue in favour of a specific interpretation is really quite simple, as a structure. You may think of the way we verify translations according to dictionaries:



On level 1 we accept the dictionary as valid, on level 2 we may be looking for a context with similar plausibility, and on level 3 the main features of the problem, its basic elements, have been given names epistemologically. What we claim in verifying a given interpretation is that a basis of supplementation exists, which according to experience contains aspects of meaning decisively relevant for text and interpretation as aspects of the meaning of the text. A basis of supplementation is an intersubjectively identical phenomenon, which may be more or less definitively structured and revisable – like a dictionary, a history of literature, or any other context that we use in verifying interpretations (e.g. among dogmatic Marxists *Das Kapital*, to a certain school of literary positivism laundry bills, etc.). For a fuller exposition of the problem of verification in literary interpretation see my *Verifikationsproblemet ved litteraturvidenskabelig meningsanalyse* (with Summary in English, Odense, 1971) and ›Hermeneutiske elementer‹ in Kittang & Aarseth (eds.): *Hermeneutikk og litteratur* (Bergen, Oslo, Tromsø, 1979, pp. 96-109).

Looking at the ›Ibsen problem‹ posed by his Preface of 1898, in this way, we may ask if it be conceivable that one could find or (re-)construct Ibsen's own principle(s) for a basis of supplementation with decisive relevance for Ibsen's interpretation of his total oeuvre? This question I have tried to answer affirmatively in the above mentioned two volumes (1985). I have sought Henrik Ibsen's poetics as a common denominator in all that he – outside of the dramas – has given as his views regarding the role of art, its function, duty, ways etc.; in short: the relation between art and reality according to Ibsen. In Aristotle's *Poetics* we have the classical description of the relationship between art and reality. Aristotle links tragedy (as the true realization of poetry) with reality through mimesis at the genetic end, and through catharsis

in the reception of tragedy. Reality flows into tragedy through mimesis, and through catharsis reality is modified by art:



Of course, this is not to say that art is not real or part of reality. Art is, however, according to Aristotle, specific, having a specific *telos*, or purpose, which in tragedy is attained through mimesis and catharsis, tragedy being to him the essence of dramatic art, its real and ultimate form.

Turning to Ibsen, we find that his view of the essence of poetry lies in his words ›poetisk Erkjendelse‹, i.e. poetic cognition. Henrik Ibsen seems to be the first one to use the formula ›poetisk Erkjendelse‹ in any Scandinavian language. At the two points of genesis and reception of tragedy in the above Aristotelian model you may substitute Ibsen's ›poetic cognition‹ for Aristotle's ›mimesis‹ and ›catharsis‹. This, in fact, seems to be the basic model in everything Henrik Ibsen has to say on the art of poetry or creative writing. While Aristotle sees tragedy as some sort of therapy (the curing of fear and compassion which threaten our self realization as rational human beings, according to the standard interpretation of Aristotle), Ibsen takes poetry to be a sort of cognition in its own way. Indeed, one of the principal reasons for Georg Brandes – leading the way for subsequent Ibsen criticism – to misunderstand the oeuvre of Ibsen seems to have been the way Brandes always held creative writing to be second to science and criticism. Brandes held poetry or creative writing to be essentially communication – and we have quite striking evidence how Brandes for this reason could not come to terms with Henrik Ibsen.

Henrik Ibsen's poetics are *political* because of his experience (which eventually became his theory) of art as cognition:



The achievement in poetic cognition is the insight into true structures in inner and outer human reality. Poetry thus sets you free. The poet liberates himself of the burden of the not comprehended; his poetry sets its recipient (the reader, spectator, user of the work of art) free in that way; the poet is his own first reader. Higher degrees of self-comprehension and comprehension of the world around us are attained. Poetic cognition is to each single participant (poet and/or consumer of poetry/creative writing) an *individual* act of cognition. This way of looking at art is characteristic for all the material examined in my study, i.e. for Ibsen's stand right from the beginning around 1850 up to the end about fifty years later. Here is an early sample, where Ibsen is discussing drama and deploring what he calls

[...] en ubeføiet Mistillid til Publikums poetiske Tilegnelsesevne, ret ligesom om det digteriske Syn for det Skjønne og Betydningsfulde ikke var fælles Eiendom for den Producerende og den Modtagende. Forholdt det sig anderledes, da lønnede det sandelig ikke Umagen at sætte to rimede Linier paa Papiret; thi sin egen skabende Trang kan Digteren ligefuldt tilfredsstille, og for Offentligheden skriver han dog ikke af Hensyn til Bifaldet, men for at klare Folkets gjærende Tanker; – den skabende, den formende Evne er hans alene, men Evnen til poetisk Erkjendelse og Nydelse af det allerede Formede tilhører det hele Folk.

[...] an unwarranted lack of confidence in the ability of the audience to apprehend poetically, as if the poetical view of the beautiful and the significant were not a common property of the creative as well as the receptive mind. Otherwise, it wouldn't be worth anybody's while to put two rhymed lines on paper; for the poet can always satisfy his own creative urge, and he doesn't write for the public in order to be applauded, but in order to clarify the fermenting thoughts of the people; – the creative, the form-giving ability belongs to him alone, but the capacity for poetic cognition and enjoyment belongs to the whole people. [HIHU XV, 163 – my translation]

The material examined encompasses everything extant written by Ibsen, except for his creative writing: his criticism of art and literature, his reviews, articles, addresses, speeches, interviews, and his letters. The material is comprehensive, but it is not overwhelming; neither is it without its difficulties.

Ibsen's public utterances present fewer difficulties, intended as they were for public consumption in situations which we can, to a certain extent, reconstruct. The letters are more difficult. We lack all the letters to which he is replying. Ibsen left no incoming mail, and almost none of his correspon-

dents have left copies of their own letters. We also have to imagine and make conjectures as to what Henrik Ibsen thought of the people to whom he wrote his letters. This is important, for it is generally agreed that he writes to many of his correspondents so to speak ›from within‹, appealing to their individual (in some cases quite idiosyncratic) views and ways. We notice great differences in vocabulary, tone, imagery, and other aspects – varying the implied persona – of Ibsen the letter writer, depending upon whether his (very) Christian sister Hedwig, or the (very) individualistic heroic Georg Brandes, or the liberal democratic political man Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson is being addressed. Nevertheless, you could *not* say that Ibsen differs so much from Ibsen that he at times contradicts himself. That does not happen. He is consistent, very much so, and he is hardly ever impulsive.

Returning to the model of Ibsen's basic view of the relations between art and reality, this material teaches us how his idea of poetic cognition entails certain distinct imperatives. The poet must be able not only to experience and/or imagine, he must ›gennemleve‹ (live through) his material. He must ›live through‹ his material in order to create the work of art. To ›live through‹ apparently to Ibsen means to bind his complete personality, intensively, in an engagement culminating in the ability to penetrate and to form the lived-through material, ›real‹ or ›just imagined‹, so that it will yield to the poetic cognition of the recipient. The poem must also bind the recipient in an aesthetic experience, i.e. an experience where one does not ask if this is ›art‹ or ›reality‹. The word, in Ibsen, is ›illusion‹ – but only when you are not in the aesthetic experience is the word ›illusion‹ relevant. – Under the spell of illusion you do not think of illusion.

Whether the recipient be the poet himself or another person, what he comprehends when he understands what really took place in the work of art (in the dramatic action), grasping the ultimate determinants in the experience, is identical or analogous to grasping determinants in reality. This, of course, is never suggested by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. It is, however, the purpose of Ibsen's dramatic art, right from the beginning. In this way, Ibsen's creative writing sets you free. Reality that one has understood one may react upon with a purpose. This goes for the inner as well as for the outer reality, our own feelings, our own life – and in relation to other people. Illusion, nevertheless, is a key factor in Ibsen's political poetics. Illusion, on the one hand, is what you want to get out of in real life. On the other, illusion in the

aesthetic experience binds you, so that afterwards you may really urgently want to understand why the action happened as it did (why did Nora have to go?). At the same time, the experience of dramatic illusion almost warrants that understanding the work of art will be relevant to understanding ourselves and our reality, the world we share.

Politically speaking, it may be important to Henrik Ibsen that we should understand our lives, our world. More important, however, than anything else to him in art is the fact that art mobilizes the capacity for interpreting and understanding in depth in those who take the aesthetic experience seriously. He speaks of our ›selvvirksomhed‹, our auto-activity. It is the promotion of this ›selvvirksomhed‹ which is the great gift which the practice of poetry means to the people:

Trangen til digterisk Selvvirksomhed er nemlig et Særkjende for hele den germanske Stamme.

The urge towards poetic autoactivity is namely a characteristic of all of the Germanic peoples [...] [HIHU XV, 131 – my translation.]

This urge is fully shared by poet and public alike – and it is an urge towards cognition. Ibsen writes:

Tingen er nemlig, at den Stiil, der kaldes Bjørnsons, ikke tilhører ham i anden Forstand end den, at han er den første Digter, som har betjent sig af den; men at den allerede iforveien har ligget som et slumrende Krav i Folket, [...] godt-gjøres noksom af den forløsende Følelse, hvormed Folket har modtaget hans Skildringer. [...] Anderledes skaber en Digter aldrig noget Nyt, og skal det heller ikke [...] Forholder dette sig rigtig, saa er det let forklarligt, hvorledes flere Forfattere i et og samme Tidspunkt kan komme til at ligne hverandre uden at nogen ligefrem Paavirkning har fundet Sted. Underligt skulde det jo være, om ikke Trangen og Tilbøieligheden til at vinde sig frem til Samtidens Opfatning skulde være ligesaa stærk hos de enkelte Forfattere som hos den læsende Masse, og naar denne Masse kan samle sig i fælles Glæde over en Digter, der har udsagt, hvad udsiges skulde, saa er det ganske rimeligt, at ogsaa Forfatterne samle sig om den fælles Tidsform, der maaske til Syvende og Sidst netop er det store Drivhjul, som tvinger dem til at digte.

The thing is namely, that the style we call Bjørnson's doesn't belong to him, only he is the first poet who made use of it. It was there beforehand, dormant as a request in the people [...] this is clearly demonstrated by the feeling of re-

lief with which his stories have been received. [...] A poet never creates the new in any other way, and he never should. [...] If this is correct, then you may easily explain how several authors, simultaneously, may resemble each other without any direct influence. It would certainly be strange should the urge and the desire to reach comprehension of your own times not be equally strong in the authors and among the multitudes reading. When they all join in common delight over a poet who has said that which had to be spoken out, then, how right it is, when the authors too join in the form of the day, that form which may in the end be that great driving force which compels them to compose. [HIHU XV, 326–327 – my translation.]

Ibsen's individualism remains ›individualism‹ with a difference: the freedom of the individual is dependant upon the community of all – and vice versa. The people must learn to think big, says Ibsen in an early letter to the king. This can only be taught by the people itself. This is the mission of art: in art we have the form, wherein each single man and woman defines himself, defines herself.

Autoactivity in poetic cognition is the core in Henrik Ibsen's political poetics, basic to his anarchism. It is striking that Ibsen denies that the poet should give the people its thoughts and feelings. The poet, provided he is great and true, gives the people works of art in which the autoactivity of each and all finds its own truth. Poetry is like a body of resonance for hitherto unheard vibrations in the people. The amplifier is not the music. Poetry is like an amplifier.

These ideas pervade the material under discussion. One cannot pinpoint the time when Ibsen adopts them, let alone a time when he lets them fall. But it can be shown that these ideas in Ibsen have what we may call a comparativist's plausibility. Comparative literature will seek sources, and in fact, once we see Ibsen's political poetics as a whole we can establish precedents. There is no such complete doctrine, but there are building materials within his reach during the early years around 1850, and certainly at his disposal before he leaves Norway for the twenty-seven years of virtual exile beginning April 5, 1864. The most important names, comparatively speaking, are: Ludvig Holberg (1684–1754), Charles Fourier (1772–1837), G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831), Henrik Wergeland (1808–1845), N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783–1872), P.–J. Proudhon (1809–1865); with Johan Ludvig Heiberg (1791–1860), Lorenz von Stein (1815–1890), Meir Aron Goldschmidt (1819–1887), and Frederik

Dreier (1827–1853) as the most likely suppliers of the foreign influences; with Paul Botten–Hansen (1824–1869) and A.O. Vinje (1818–1870) as his closest contacts in Kristiania – and the sight of revolutionaries like Marcus Thrane (1817–1890), Harro Harring (1798–1870), and Ole Bull (1810–1880) coming and going in Kristiania around 1850.

Anarchism is motivated by intense aversion to any and all forms of suppression, including the liberal democratic rule of the majority. ›The minority‹, says Ibsen in letters, ›is always and in all circumstances right!‹ Freedom is the supreme good, the basis of happiness. The freedom of all depends upon the freedom of each, and vice versa. The one and only supreme issue, Ibsen reiterates, is the education of the people. Not political institutions, social life is what matters. He explicitly disparages the State, the Church, the Military, the democratic parties, organizations of any other kind than the voluntary association of free individuals – asking for education above all. In his creative writing we find this specific form of communal individualistic anarchism enriched in specific ways. Short studies of *Love's Comedy* (1862) and *The League of Youth* (1869) in Vol. 1 of *Henrik Ibsens realisme* (1985) give a sexual and an economic dimension to our understanding of his position. I hope to be able to discuss all of his plays in a third volume to be published in 1989 (*Henrik Ibsens anarkisme: poetisk erkendelse 1850–1899*).

In the history of anarchism, 1864 is seen as the turning point with Bakunin and the 1st International (cf. Max Nettlau, *Geschichte der Anarchie*, Vols. 1–5, 1925–1984). Ibsen develops his own permanent anarchic vision well ahead of the public formations after 1864, and he never – as far as we know – joins any movement, let alone a party to any effect. It has become second nature with me to operate alone, he writes, on the occasion of the news of Bernard Shaw's first lecture on Ibsenism in 1890.

Historians see the almost universal tendencies towards anarchic ideas in the nineteenth century occasioned by almost universal tendencies towards centralizing business and administration, economy and politics. Anarchism is then the typical provincial reaction to centralization, the main problem being the problem of power, force, authority, suppression. Where political theory discusses how to handle, conquer, and keep social and political power, anarchism concentrates on the abolition of power. The minority is always and under all circumstances right, says Ibsen.

Anarchism may be divided into five or more main streams according to dominant ideas. Ibsen belongs among the early anarchists, in the vicinity of Proudhon, in his own way influenced by Charles Fourier. Norwegian literary scholarship has seen his affinity with later anarchists, Kropotkin (Henrik Jæger, 1888) and Bakunin (C. Collin, 1906). It may seem strange, then, that the question has never been systematically discussed in relation to Henrik Ibsen's poetics – his view of autoactivity in poetic cognition as a means of self-education for the individual and for the people. One reason for the neglect may be the fact that his poetics – as such – have never been discussed. Apparently, his occasionally overt anarchical utterances have been overshadowed by the individualism read into his dramas by critics ideologically preformed in dominant liberal or marxist climates – the way Shaw presumed his meaning would be misrepresented, benevolently or otherwise, never fully recognized until society would allow the emancipation from religion, nationality, and state – the agents of suppression.

Of course, state and society in Europe underwent appalling changes in the eyes of any anarchist during Ibsen's fifty years of work. And of course we cannot help seeing his drama changing drastically between 1850 and 1899. Putting it bluntly, the dreaded concentration of power accelerated all the time. Only for a very short time, around 1871 and the Commune in Paris, did a countermovement manifest itself. Ibsen at once interpreted the Commune as an anarchic event. Afterwards, he seems to have concentrated his immense intellectual and creative ability on trying to see and to make visible the misery of the ruling classes, by implication the misery of all. He alone, among known anarchists, chose the bourgeoisie as his primary audience. This, of course, had to do with his medium. If he intended to convert the bourgeoisie Ibsen lost his fight. Didn't he?

Henrik Ibsen's poetics will tend to entrap his audience in the aesthetic experience ever more remorselessly the more Ibsen realizes that his audience is ideologically blinded. He will make the realistic illusion perfect and build the catastrophe as a trap to catch our feelings so that we must exercise our prerogative of poetic cognition and realize who we are and to what extent action is alarmingly necessary in order to change the world we are supposed to will.

His final preface, from 1898, claims that all he has written belongs to one continuous totality. I think he is right, beginning with *Catilina* (1850),

whose protagonist he once called an anarchist. Also right is George Bernard Shaw in his concluding words, having analyzed all the available plays:

Here I must leave the matter, merely reminding those who may think that I have forgotten to reduce Ibsenism to a formula for them, that its quintessence is that there is no formula. [*The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, London, 1891, p. 134]

Trying to understand the way it all happens in Ibsen we are – whether we think of it or just do it – practising poetic cognition, which in itself is what he meant us to do, getting the experience of understanding on our own terms.

The centre of any drama by Ibsen, according to his idea of poetic cognition, will – analytically speaking – be found in three directions: in the meaning of the dramatic action as such, in your personal interest, and in our commonly shared reality. What happens, then, in the situation where you are under the spell of the optimal aesthetic illusion, is that these three areas melt into one, so that the catastrophe in the drama enables you afterwards to see clearly in all three directions: the text, your self, our world as seen by you. Only when we all share one world, being parts one of another, will there be one and only one interpretation.

Between May 1987 and March 1988 the ideas presented in this article were discussed in connection with university lectures at Gdansk, Göttingen, Odense, Århus, Norwich, Cambridge, London, Göteborg, Uppsala, Umeå, and Berlin referring to my two volumes on Ibsen. I owe the participants in those discussions my sincere thanks, and shall close on the same note as I did then: if you wish, you may regard everything that I have said today as a way of explaining why Henrik Ibsen in his time was called the Sphinx and caricatured as such, the inscrutable, the one poet who never interpreted his own works, never argued to show how right or wrong the critics were. According to his political poetics, interpreting his own work would have been to destroy the real meaning in all he had done.

[1988]