

saggi

## Ibsen and the Italian Risorgimento\*

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1. It cannot be doubted that the historical spark that was to stimulate and nourish Ibsen's creativity was the European revolutions of 1848-49, whose epicentre was France, but which in the widespread anti-Hapsburg movement also involved the Czech and Hungarian populations, as well as Italy, where in a protracted shock there were the insurrections in Lombardy-Veneto, the first ill-fated war for independence led from Carlo Alberto's Piedmont, as well as the Roman Republic. Ibsen himself, in the late Preface of February 1875 to *Catilina* – his first play, which not by chance was the fruit of those difficult times (1848-49) – recalls the “exciting and stormy times” and “the February Revolution [...], the revolutions in Hungary and elsewhere, the Prussian-Danish war over Schleswig and Holstein”, adding:

I wrote resounding poems of encouragement to the Magyars, urging them for the sake of humanity and freedom to fight on in their rightful war against the “tyrants”. I wrote a long series of sonnets to King Oscar [of Sweden and Norway] containing, as far as I remember, a plea that he set aside all petty considerations and without delay, at the head of his army, go to help his brothers on the frontiers of Schleswig (HIS 1, p. 129; ILS, pp. 8-9)<sup>1</sup>.

In fact, Ibsen's impassioned lyric *Til Ungarn!* – although its background is a Hungary which, now crushed by repression, is ready to become “a second Poland” – went beyond the Magyar revolution, singing the praises of the “new generations that took revenge on the throne, / like an autumn hurricane to bring down the pil-

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1. Quotations from Ibsen's works will be identified in the text with the following acronyms, ISV: H. Ibsen, *Samlede Verker (Hundreårsutgave)*, 21 vols., ed. by F. Bull, H. Koht, D.A. Seip, Gyldendal, Oslo 1928-58; HIS: *Henrik Ibsens Skrifter*, new critical edition ed. by V. Ystad, Aschehoug, Oslo 2005-10. The English translations are taken from H. Ibsen, *Letters and Speeches*, ed. by E. Sprinchorn, Hill & Wang, New York 1964 (ILS); *Ibsen's Poems*, ed. by J. Northam, Norwegian U.P., Oslo 1986 (IP).

lars of tyranny” (HIS 11, pp. 45-46) and therefore exalting the radical reasons for the European Risorgimento. The approximately contemporary lyric *Vaagner Skandinaver!* – addressed “to the Norwegian and Swedish brothers” – stressed in like manner the urgency of solidarity and unity among the Nordic peoples against “the German aggressor who is rising up to pillage / a part of Danish territory”: Schleswig-Holstein, “holy land for the Nordic race” (HIS 11, pp. 46 ff.).

In the Preface to *Catilina*, Ibsen is right, then, to speak of “a powerful and formative effect on [his] development” (HIS 1, p. 129; ILS, p. 9), in the light of the events of '48; an *effect* which, as might have been expected, did not only concern him, but was opening up new horizons to the conscience and culture of Norway, activating a process that was expanded and reinforced in the following decade. In fact, around 1859 – in particular in the current-affairs journalism of Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson – there emerges a convergence of the continental (above all the Italian) Risorgimenti, of the movement for the independence of Norway (a “partly colonial and partly postcolonial” nation)<sup>2</sup> and of the broader Scandinavianism (a politico-cultural movement which – again quoting Ibsen – at that time supported “the spirit of brotherhood of the North / which unites Norwegians, Danes and Swedes”) (HIS 11, p. 47)<sup>3</sup>.

At a close look, within this sensitivity of Ibsen and of Bjørnson, what was developing was something more profound than an immediate harmony, in effect, with “exciting and stormy times” of national reawakening and, by means of this *tumult*, certain themes came into focus that were to be peculiar too to this great Nordic playwrights of the turn of the century, so important for the renewal of the entire European scene. If we take an article by Bjørnson of July 1859, in “Bergensposten” – written just after the armistice at Villafranca – we see how the severe warning addressed to Napoleon III, who seemed to be failing to respect his commitment for the independence of Italy, also concerned “nations near and far”, but aimed, in the first place, by way of national liberation, at the realisation of a more universal liberation “from egoism, from miserable calculations, from restriction in small circuits of ideas, petty, petit-bourgeois, feeble”<sup>4</sup>. These words almost coincide with what Ibsen wrote in a letter of 3 December 1865 to Magdalene Thoresen:

2. “Politically, it was neither quite dependent nor quite independent”, explains Toril Moi, alluding to the various conditions of political *union* that had linked Norway, since 1380, to Denmark and, from 1814, after the Napoleonic wars, to Sweden, inevitably conditioning its linguistic and cultural identity (T. Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, Oxford U.P., Oxford 2006, pp. 39 ff.).

3. Thus Ibsen in the poem mentioned, *Vaagner Skandinaver!* Later, in touch with the German Risorgimento, Ibsen’s Scandinavianist ideal underwent a certain metamorphosis: “Like most Norwegian Scandinavians, I am a pan-Germanist. I look upon Scandinavianism only as a transitional phase leading to the confederation of the whole Germanic race” (HIS 13, p. 113, ILS, p. 136; see also a letter of 1872 to P.F. Siebold, in which – despite the parallel writing of the anti-German poem *Nordens signaler* – the greatness of Bismarck is recognised, as is the need for more balanced relations between Germany and Denmark; HIS 11, pp. 622 ff.; 13, p. 51; ILS, p. 116).

4. Cf. C. Collin, *Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson. Hans barndom og ungdom*, Aschehoug & Co, Kristiania 1907, II, pp. 370 ff.

Anyone from up there who has managed to retain a certain amount of human feeling becomes keenly conscious down here that there is something more worth having than a clever head, and that is a whole soul, I know of mothers away up in the Piedmont, in Genoa, Novara, Alessandria, who took their boys of fourteen from school to let them go with Garibaldi on his daring expedition to Palermo. Nor was it a case of saving their country then, but simply of realizing an idea. How many of the members of our Storting do you suppose will do the same when the Russians enter Finmark? With us any deed that asks more of us than getting through the day is 'impossible' (HIS 12, p. 194; ILS, p. 49).

The Italian Risorgimento seems to have been, for Bjørnson and Ibsen, above all an event charged with ideal power that went beyond the measure of normal political practice, but could as such be proposed as an example for a renewal of consciences in relation to the social and still more moral, action of peoples as of individuals, broadening the field of the possible to the impossible, the Utopian, and already prefiguring themes that are characteristic of these two writers. One need only think of Ibsen – on the point of writing *Et dukkehjem* – announcing the dissolution of patriarchal relations, which were keeping women and young people in subjugation, invoking – in almost the same words as had been inspired in Bjørnson – the necessary conflict with “the worldly wisdom of the old”, with “men with little ambitions and little thoughts, little scruples and little fears, those men who direct all their thoughts and actions towards achieving certain little advantages for their own little and subservient selves” (ISV 19; pp. 160-161)<sup>5</sup>.

We might subsequently have the impression that from time to time the enthusiasm for the Italian Risorgimento – in its concrete, less ideal aspects – was manifested by Ibsen in a somewhat attenuated form, to the point of expressing a certain irritation, just after finishing *Peer Gynt*, in October-November 1867, at having been indirectly involved in the unhappy invasion by Garibaldi of the papal lands (“To the devil with the whole war!”; cf. HIS 12, pp. 277-278; 324) and, indeed, the Italian repossession of Rome, stamped, in a letter to Georg Brandes on 20 December 1870, with a memorable epigram: “They have finally taken Rome away from us human beings and given it to the politicians” (HIS 12, p. 439; ILS, p. 106). Recently, however, in a splendid book on the Risorgimento, Lucio Villari has put this assertion in context, showing that Ibsen was fundamentally expressing a judgment that was shared, on a different level, both by broad sectors of public opinion and by Mazzini himself, and that in any case it was assimilated to the not illegitimate “dissent of politicians, entrepreneurs, personalities of northern and European culture on the prospect of a capital city, symbol of the most ancient history and of the greatest art, reduced to the role of backcloth of the political stage and inevitably that of huge bureaucratic and administrative machine”<sup>6</sup>.

5. Speech given to the Rome Scandinavian Circle on 27 February 1879, quoted in M. Meyer, *Ibsen. A Biography*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1974, pp. 469-470.

6. L. Villari, *Bella e perduta. L'Italia del Risorgimento*, Laterza, Bari-Roma 2009, pp. 325-326; 330.

2. As Fredrik Bætzmann was to point out, in his long historical essay on the Italian Risorgimento, the singular *semi-colonial* position of Norway as compared with Sweden and, culturally, Denmark (cf. note 2), the parallel influence mentioned of Scandinavianism, particularly among the student and intellectual elite, as well as the related tensions of the Nordic kingdoms with Russia and, especially, Austria and Prussia, precisely on the age-old question of Schleswig-Holstein (which, until 1866, was to run fatefully parallel to the genesis of Italian unity), drove the peoples of Northern Europe to sympathise with the struggle for liberation in our peninsula.

Thus, when in 1861 the delegate of the Kingdom of Italy arrived in Copenhagen, for the recognition of the newly-established nation, he was to be greeted by the most hearty good wishes and acclamations, with marked stress on the fact that Denmark had “enemies in common” with our youthful State, for it felt “threatened by the same power that for so many years had kept Italy under its yoke”. For the occasion, the following lines by Carl Ploug, the famous exponent of Scandinavianism, were sung:

Take this embassy with you to your homeland:  
where your banners wave,  
that too is the direction of the North<sup>7</sup>.

The complicated dispute for Schleswig-Holstein (a borderland with a mixed Germanic-Scandinavian population) – which had broken out precisely in March 1848 and concluded honourably for Denmark, after a war in which (thanks in part to a degree of support from Sweden and to the favourable attitude of the great powers), had succeeded in halt the German claims to the territories that were under its control – were a long way from resolution in 1861 (see also the lyric by Ibsen *I Havsnød*; HIS II, pp. 297 ff.) and moreover in the centre of the Prussian manoeuvring which had the more ambitious aim of gaining a primacy in the Germanic confederation. Between March and November 1863, it was the Danish crown that made the situation precipitate, when it partially incorporated Schleswig and prompted Bismarck, at the end of the year, to re-ignite the conflict, in alliance with Austria. Faced with an adversary with double the number of troops, abandoned by England and without the aid promised by the united kingdom of Sweden and Norway, the new war almost immediately proved disastrous for the Danes and led to their defeat, which involved the loss of a considerable part of the national territory.

Ibsen’s indignation at this betrayal of the Scandinavianistic ideal, as he travelled to Italy in 1864, was very great and can be felt in a poem with the unequivocal title, *En broder i nød!* (*A Brother in Peril!*). “Save your brother!”, Ibsen had sung in 1849:

7. F. Bætzmann, *Italiens frihedskamp. Fortællinger og skildringer*, H. Aschehoug & C., Kristiania 1911, p. 546.

“Hold out to your brother nation a friendly, fraternal hand” (HIS 11, pp. 48; 53); in December 1863, his lines rang out in infinitely more desperate tones:

My brother, where wast thou?  
I pledged the North with life and sword,  
one grave my country now;  
for sign thy ships sailed hitherward  
in vain I scanned the strait and fjord.  
My brother, were wast thou?

To the Norwegians who had remained “saved / within [their] hallowed plot”, unmindful of the promise of help in the moment of battle, there remained only to scatter about the world, concealing their national identity, dishonoured by their blameworthy indifference (HIS 11, pp. 514 ff.; IP, p. 58); a situation that exactly recalls what Peer Gynt does (for Ibsen, this was the typical incarnation of the Norway of the time) at the end of Act III of the eponymous drama.

This was the moment of “*det store vonbrotet*”<sup>8</sup>, clearly apparent in a poem, *Troens grund* (original title: *Fra Dybbøl-dagene*) written in the summer of 1864 (cf. HIS 11, pp. 516 ff.), as in the letters Ibsen sent from Italy. In these letters, Ibsen undisguisedly denounces the weakness and lack of cohesion of the Nordic in marked contrast to the *abnegation* shown by the Italians in their Risorgimento. We have seen this in the letter of 3 December 1865 to Magdalene Thoresen, where the writer had in fact clearly stated: “My journey down here was by no means a pleasure trip, I assure you. I was in Berlin when the triumphal entry took place. I saw the rabble spit into the mouths of the cannon from Dybbøl, and to me it seemed an omen that history will one day spit in the face of Sweden and Norway because of their behaviour then” (HIS 12, p. 195; ILS, p. 49). Ibsen was simply repeating obsessively what he had written to Bjørnson on 28 January of the same year:

But I cannot keep myself from dwelling with sadness on the situation at home, nor was I able to do so during my whole journey. If I had stayed longer in Berlin, where I saw the triumphal entrance in April, with the howling rabble tumbling about among the trophies from Dybbøl, riding on the gun carriages and spitting into the mouths of the cannon – the cannon that received no help and yet went on shooting until they burst – I think I should have gone out of my mind (HIS 12, pp. 175-176; ILS, pp. 39-40).

With his Danish publisher Frederik Hegel, in March 1866, Ibsen was to state with equal clarity: “Norway and Sweden have a terrible debt of blood to wash away, and I feel that it is my task in life to use the gifts God has given me to awaken my countrymen from their torpor and to force them to see where the great questions are leading us...” (HIS 12, pp. 209-210; ILS, pp. 54-55).

8. Cfr. H. Koht, *Henrik Ibsen. Eit Diktarliv*, Aschehoug, Oslo 1954, I, pp. 218 ff.

Finally, in 1870, in an autobiographical letter to Peter Hansen, from Dresden, Ibsen was able to sum up:

[...] the [Danish-Prussian] war began. I wrote a poem *En broder i nød!* [...]. It had no effect against the Norwegian Americanism that had driven me back at every point. That's when I went into exile!

About the time of my arrival in Copenhagen, the Danes were defeated at Dybbøl. In Berlin I saw Kaiser Wilhelm's triumphal entry with trophies and war booty. During those days *Brand* began to grow within me like an embryo. When I arrived in Italy, the work of unification there had already been completed by means of a spirit of self-sacrifice that knew no bounds, while in Norway! – (HIS 12, p. 428; ILS, pp. 101-102).

3. The comparison with the Italian Risorgimento is confirmed once again in Ibsen's poetic writings, which were an opportunity for an impassioned and sometimes bitter reflection on the fates of Scandinavia and of the West in general. One poem by Ibsen, written in the later 1860s, is known to us only by its title – in Italian – *Italia unita*, where he stresses the attraction of the *unitary synthesis* of a people – also preached by him in the play *Kongs-emnerne* of 1863 – in a cultural climate which was generally imbued with Hegelism.

Presumably *Italia unita* may in part be traceable to the lyric *Langt borte*, written in Munich in June 1875<sup>9</sup>, in which Ibsen sternly calls on the Nordic students, who were meeting in Uppsala, to consider the example of Italian (but also German) young people, if they are not to remain entrapped in a dangerous, paralysing lethargy (*døsen*), which, on the one hand, recalls the moral drowsiness which, in *Peer Gynt*, is symbolised by the Great Curve and on the other seems to be the implicit consequence of the facile semi-independence of the Norwegians, obtained in 1814, not with “a spirit of self-sacrifice that knew no bounds” of the people, but by means of an agreement among the great powers:

Such sweeping processions as those in the North  
have swept over Italy back and forth.

Youth's great, country-long demonstration  
shocked from its sleep those remnants of nation.

That was the century's cloud-misted dawning.  
Now Engelsborg's flying the flag this morning (HIS 11, pp. 599 ff.; IP, p. 124).

Another poem worthy of note, from 1872, is *Ved Tusendårs-festen den 18<sup>de</sup> Juli 1872*, dedicated to the anniversary of the reunification of the Kingdom of Norway by Harald Hårfagre in about 872. Here the far-off battle of Hafsford, near Stavanger, is interpreted by Ibsen in a key that relates to the Risorgimento: “Yes,

9. Cf. on this ISV 14, pp. 446; 525.

through the ages runs King Harald's vision / and Hafsfjord's fight is fought this every day" (HIS II, p. 612; IP, p. 134). In this vibrant poem, addressed to the Norwegian people, "that sunders in dissension sour – / and flocks to legends of shared aspiration" where what is to be feared above all is "paralysing-mind [*døs*] and vision-numbness" (HIS II, pp. 607; 610, IP, pp. 130; 133), we again find a contrast – emblematic too in Ibsen's dramatic works – between the spectres of a dark, restraining past and a dawn of recovery guided by men who fight for the light and who follow "King Harald's spirit for one kingdom-sway". "Hafsfjord's sun" for "a free, a mighty North of one accord" (HIS II, pp. 611 ff.; IP, pp. 134-135) is illuminating the world and the emancipation of the peoples. It is moreover

The sun that Solferino's heights made sear, –  
that sun that coloured Lissa's wine-blue sound, –  
that bronzed the blood-red spots on Porta Pia  
and chased the snake of Vatican to ground, –  
that slumbering sun Sadowa's ramparts relished...

Bringing together Solferino, Lissa and Porta Pia conveys that, for Ibsen, it is not the result of a battle that has the slightest importance, but rather the yearned-for ideal that it presupposes:

Mark where you stand, to-day's Norwegian brother.  
Take time's intent; for that must set your tone.  
[...]  
Observe time's law! It may not be denied.  
Cavour and Bismarck wrote it as *our* guide,  
and many a ghost he quelled, no spectre sparer  
that hero and that dreamer of Caprera (HIS II, pp. 611-612; IP, p. 134).

Helge Rønning has suggested a reworking of the historical figures evoked in these lines – Garibaldi, the dreamer-hero; Cavour, the experienced, practical political man – in a dialectic of idealism against realism which may be close to the ideological plan of a play like *Kejser og galilæer*, dedicated to the figure of Julian the Apostate, written in 1873 (though Ibsen already had it in mind in Italy in 1864)<sup>10</sup>. If this is the case, we may consider the influence of our Risorgimento, not only in the more explicit of Ibsen's poetry, but also in what is specific to some of his plays, in which, however – precisely because of the particular dialectic that characterises the theatre of this writer – there emerges a much more shadowy and problematic picture of the historical phenomenon than is offered by the lyrical writings.

4. Michael Meyer has already hypothesised that one possible model for the char-

<sup>10</sup> H. Rønning, *Den umulige friheten. Henrik Ibsen og moderniteten*, Gyldendal, Oslo 2007<sup>2</sup>, pp. 130-131.

acter of Brand may have been Garibaldi, since we know, by the bye, that Ibsen borrowed a biography of the Italian hero at the very time he was writing the eponymous play<sup>11</sup>. On these lines, Helge Rønning maintains that – again bearing in mind the typically Ibsenian clash between realism and idealism, tempted by the pervasiveness of the spirit of compromise – in his 1866 play, the author may in some way have translated the conflict between the realists Cavour and Victor Emanuel, prepared to compromise, and the idealists Garibaldi and (perhaps) Mazzini. In this perspective, this scholar believes that Brand may credibly incarnate “the appeal of Garibaldi to action and total adhesion to his calling”, as well as “criticism on the part of Mazzini of all forms of compromise in the field of *Realpolitik*”, vice versa transforming the Pastor and the Baliff almost into doubles of Cavour and Victor Emanuel.

That Ibsen had in mind these outlines and, in general, our Risorgimento may, in our opinion, find implicit confirmation from the fact that the already-mentioned poem *Italia unita* is probably of the same period, having been considered for possible inclusion in a collection of Ibsen’s poems of 1871, *Digte*<sup>12</sup>, together with other, equally unknown poems which however are in some way interconnected with the plays of the same period, such as *Skorpionen*, also known as *Jeg og min skorpion* and traceable to *Brand*, or *Munken på Epomeo*, which draws on Ibsen’s visit to Ischia in 1867, in the period when he was developing *Peer Gynt*.

Further, though more subtle, echoes of the Risorgimento are also indisputably present in this very “dramatic poem” of 1867: certainly in the scene in the madhouse in Cairo in Act IV, where a mad German doctor and his scoundrelly assistants (they too are German) keep imprisoned various exponents (disguised as Arabs) of the inert, suicidal Nordic megalomania, among whom is a certain Hussejn, who is the caricature of the Swedish Foreign Minister Ludvig Manderström, whose attitude in the Danish-Prussian crisis of 1863-64 had been very inconsistent and ambiguous: he first promised help to the Dens and then struck a more prudently neutral stance. In *Peer Gynt*, this ambiguous figure of a politician identifies himself, in his delirium, with a pen that is absolutely determined to be sharpened, so that in the end he kills himself by cutting his throat with a knife and leaves a remarkable auto-epitaph: “[...] he lived and died like a pen guided by others!” (HIS 5, p. 668). On this point, and in order to clarify the cryptic reference, it should be recalled that in the Danish newspaper “*Dagbladet*” on 15 December 1863, the question was posed, in very doubtful tones, whether the ephemeral Manderström was “a Nordic Cavour” or simply “an able pen or an authentic statesman”, representing the need of many Scandinavians to be guided, in the difficult moments of their history, by politicians of the stature of the Italian who, in North Europe, in life and in death, enjoyed authentic veneration<sup>13</sup>.

11. Meyer, *Ibsen*, cit., p. 263.

12. See the comment by Didrik Arup Seip in ISV 14, p. 36.

13. Cf. Bætzmann, *Italiens frihedskamp*, cit., pp. 529 ff., 544-545.



For Helge Rønning, in *Kejser og galilæer* there is to be found, in conclusion, a dialectic analogous to what we can trace in *Brand* because the events in Europe (and especially in Italy in 1860-70) might reveal to Ibsen parallelisms with the late Roman Empire: “Both periods are marked by the same historical contradictoriness”, which is very clear in the united Italy, where the synthesis between North and South, monarchy and broadrepublican sectors, economic progress and regress, religion and secularity soon proved arduous<sup>14</sup>. Looking at the evolution of the action of Julian, a Don Quixote-like figure in his effort to “bring about the new using the old”, and considering how his “dream of liberty is transmuted into a despotism that at the end of the play crushes” the emperor himself, one might glimpse the materialisation of the ambiguous idea of Garibaldi (with which, for example, Mazzini disagreed) that dictatorship might serve to affirm democracy: “a dilemma of liberalism in the Jacobin tradition”. Thus, the play, “like others by Ibsen that thematise an abstract idealism, may be read as a warning on the realisation of that Utopia that leads to oppression and ruin, and not to liberty”<sup>15</sup>.

It is interesting to note that Ibsen’s complex theatrical dialectic – which, the Preface to *Catilina* makes clear, is characterised by “the conflict between one’s aims and one’s abilities, between what man proposes and what is actually possible, constituting at once both the tragedy and comedy of mankind and of the individual” (HIS I, p. 132; ILS, p. 12) – also presents the stirring unitary phenomenon of the Risorgimento (though perceived as grandiose and positive and celebrated as such in the poems) as inescapably shadowy and problematic. Indeed, in exactly the same way, the global dimension embraced by the great Norwegian in his plays appears, in the modern sense, to be problematic and ambiguous. In Ibsen’s poems, the *spectres* of the past could be escaped if contemporary men and women really committed themselves to fighting them; in the plays, this desirable result, beyond all effort, nevertheless appears much more uncertain and open.

(traduzione di Ruth Anne Henderson)

14. Rønning, *Den umulige fribeten*, cit., pp. 139-140.

15. Ivi, pp. 141 ff.