

Ibsen's Cycle as Tragedy

by Brian Johnston

I. Inutility of Tragedy

Tragedy, in the modern theater, is a genre more honored in repute than in performance, and Ibsen, inasmuch as he is admired, is not admired generally as a tragedian. In college courses tragedy, in various guises, is taught respectfully; and having a "tragic vision" is always considered an impressive cachet for a dramatist to possess. But the creation of a full scale, multidimensional tragic argument about the modern world (of Aristotelian "magnitude") does not appeal to theater-goers, (still less to film-goers) nor to modern playwrights. It goes against the thrust of current actor training, too, which is to keep the actor reassuringly close to the same level of experience as audiences, to get audiences to find themselves on familiar ground with the actor and the world of the play and not to establish the undemocratic aesthetic distance that the scale of action and the expanding perspectives necessary to tragedy insist upon. Revivals of Greek tragedy, like those of Serban, Suzuki, Sellars or Mnouchkine¹, reveal the power of ancient tragedy to speak effectively through specially devised new theatrical conventions: but the exoticism of these productions keeps the details of our own contemporary world immune from tragic perspectives. The same goes for Elizabethan revivals: even in modern dress, the terms of these tragedies are not those of our modern world so that the experience of the tragic becomes part of an exotic excursion into foreign, and so safer, territory. As George Bernard Shaw remarked, "Shakespeare has put ourselves on the stage, but not our situations. . . . Ibsen supplies the want left by Shakespeare. He gives us not only ourselves, but ourselves in our situations."² Or, rather, our situations transfigured by tragic perspectives.

The arena of contemporary cultural conflict attracts adherents of many social agendas who believe drama is doing its best work when advancing one or another of these agendas. It clearly is extremely desirable that we should be conscious of, for example, the failure of our social systems and the injustices suffered by one or another group through the insensitivities of the culture at large. To what better task can serious drama address itself, it might be asked, than to make the public more conscious of these shortcomings and eager to do something about them? To counter with the argument that the purpose of a tragic art is to be adequately tragic - convincingly, devastatingly tragic - might seem a

¹ See Marianne McDonald, *Ancient Sun, Modern Light: Greek Drama on the Modern Stage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), for an account of the adaptations of Greek drama by Peter Sellars and Suzuki Tadashi. Mnouchkine's *Les Atrides* was first performed in Paris in 1990 and subsequently visited New York and Montreal.

² George Bernard Shaw, "The Technical Novelty in Ibsen's Plays," in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, 3d ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), 182.

cop out from the urgent demands of the culture. This is what proponents of Enlightenment "serious drama" (*dramas*) - Diderot, Beaumarchais, Mercer, Marmontel - believed; it is what George Bernard Shaw proclaimed in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* - a brilliant handbook for the practical application of Ibsen's plays.

Shaw's is still the prevalent view in interpreting the Ibsen who, we are asked to believe, gave up the huge mythopoetic, metaphysical, and tragic perspectives of his middle-period plays, *Brand*, *Peer Gynt*, *Emperor and Galilean*, to address instead "the problems of the present." His plays, from this view, are utilitarian: ferreting out shortcomings in the bourgeoisie to guide that troubled class towards leading freer, less problematic lives - which is as far from the hazards of the tragic vision as it is possible to go. Even comedy, in its strictest form, plays a more unsettling game than this, leaving as insolubly problematic the fate of its misfits: Socrates, Shylock, Malvolio, Alceste, Tartuffe.

In the poem, "To My Friend Who Talks of Revolutions" (1870) Ibsen described the Flood as the only revolution "that was not scamped half-heartedly" - except for the deplorable survival of Noah and his family! He calls for a replay of the botched event in which he would be around to set a torpedo under the Ark.³ This is the Ibsen who has been transmogrified by his interpreters from a grimly tragic skald to a basically benignant scold, reconstituted as the operator of a moralizing (and psychologizing) gladiatorial peepshow who casts variously defective specimens of humanity into his theatric arena to be doomed or reprieved according to our moral predilections. Viewing or reading Ibsen's twelve-play Cycle thus has come to resemble visits to Bedlam by the fashionable sane in eighteenth-century London: edifying excursions into the realm of the Deplorable or Unfortunate Other. The gatherings of modern Ibsenists all too often resembles a pharisaic festival for vaunting one's morally or politically correct credentials - what Oscar Wilde called simply washing one's clean linen in public.⁴

This also is a teachable Ibsen, easily assignable in anthologies of modern drama as "the father of modern realism," to be followed by his more or less similarly sober progeny. In the US this practically ensures that the only texts to appear in repertory and in college anthologies, with dreary regularity, are *A Doll House* and *Hedda Gabler*, on which the seal of at least partial political correctness has been stamped. In Europe, true, Ibsen is appreciated and performed more variedly and more adequately - though the twelve realist dramas beginning with *Pillars of Society* and ending with the "dramatic epilogue" *When We Dead Awaken*, still are not recognized as a great, interconnected tragic Cycle. There has been no

³ Cited in Michael Meyer, *Ibsen: A Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 329-30

⁴ The recent *Cambridge Companion to Ibsen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) reveals, in most of its critical essays, only too drearily how academic Ibsen interpretation actually has regressed from the early days when first-rate imaginations such as Henry James, Bernard Shaw, James Joyce, Thomas Mann, Rainer Maria Rilke, Hugo von Hoflinanstahl and their peers responded to his plays. On washing clean linen, see Algernon Moncrieff in Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, ed. Peter Raby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 1.244.

attempt to take up Ibsen's injunction, seconded by Shaw, to read or perform the plays in the order in which they were written, to discover what Ibsen insisted were the mutual connections between the plays. Ibsen, on such a scale, still proves difficult for the modern theater - or modern scholarship - to accommodate.

II. The Realist Cycle as an Archetype-filled Tragic Space

In *The Ibsen Cycle* I argued that the twelve plays constitute a single tripartite Cycle whose subject is modern humanity undergoing (in Hegelian terms) a great journey of spiritual recollection.⁵ On this audacious journey, the modern scenes, characters, and actions recall archetypal forces and presences from the cultural/historical past of the race - at least, of the Western tradition of that race. The whole sequence of such actions is dialectical, each play uncovering the fatal contradictions inhering in each stage of the journey and thus tragically self-destructing, so that there can be no going back in the evolutionary winding stairway of despair performed by the Cycle as a whole. And each play in itself is such a dialectical action: the Nora Helmer of act 2 of *A Doll House*, for example, can not return to the condition of consciousness of act 1; nor, after act 3 to the condition of act 2, and so on, through play after play in the Cycle, up to the "Epilogue." The "mini-Nora" at the opening of *A Doll House* will discover the "super-Nora" awaiting her at the close of act 3. And this is true not only of Nora but also, to a lesser though still notable extent, of the other accompanying characters in the play whose actions and speeches similarly evolve with the evolving dialectic. In the beginning of *Ghosts*, the confident joyful self-justifying Helene Alving is ineluctably journeying towards the distraught and horrified tragic figure of the final curtain in a play as dialectically relentless as *Oedipus Tyrannos*. Yet the devastating action also is a *tragically* transfiguring one, as archetypes from Greek drama and other spiritual streams (*åndelige strømninger*) crowd back onto the modern stage and provide a more adequate, even if a more desolating, *agon* of the human condition. In the Cycle, Ibsen created a space in which his imagination, crammed with cultural and historical content, could find room to explore fully.

This program of the Cycle resembles similarly audacious projects for the aesthetic redemption of our modern identity by such post-Romantic contemporaries of Ibsen as Richard Wagner and Friedrich Nietzsche - a program continued by modernists like T. S. Eliot and James Joyce. Joyce's lifelong admiration for Ibsen, I claimed, was due to a similarity of purpose in the two artists. The tragic *agon* that Ibsen invented for modern drama includes: (a) the dialectical subversion of modernity's claim to adequacy as human identity; (b) the archetypal recollection, beneath the images of modernity, of more adequate, though suppressed or evaded, forces and ghosts of the past - like a collective séance of modern consciousness. His archetypes are vehicles of the inherited and unresolved spiritual conflicts within the Western mind which have gone into

⁵ Brian Johnston, *The Ibsen Cycle: The Design of the Plays from Pillars of Society to When We Dead Awaken*, rev. ed. (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

the formation of our modern identity. Such archetypal presences within the plays, as in the work of Joyce and Eliot, gives them the spiritual dimensions necessary for a modern *tragic* argument, transcending the immediate problems of the present - as those problems usually are envisioned.

Tragedy, on this scale and in this sense, is not serviceable to any pragmatic agenda. It does not proclaim we would be better off if men were forced to be more accommodating, women more empowered, politicians made honest, or social injustices ended, admirable though these nostrums are. Tragedy has the more awkward intention of transporting our imaginations, if and when we dead awaken, into more liberating but also more desolate dimensions. The tragic experience is supremely inutile - which is why, in the utilitarian Enlightenment culture of the eighteenth century, the almost universally accepted Horatian formula - that the purpose of drama was "to please and instruct"-proved so fatal to the tragic genre. This nostrum gave us both moralizing and laughter-defying "weeping comedy" (*comédie larmoyante*), and such frigid exercises in tragic attitudinizing as Addison's *Cato*, the only British tragedy allowed by Voltaire to have achieved aesthetic adequacy.⁶

Utilitarian attitudes to art (Enlightenment, Liberal, Marxist) are anti-tragic, are, indeed, deeply discomfited by the premises of tragedy. For Enlightenment thinkers, who discerned the clear obligations artists had towards the improvement of society, tragedy signally failed to serve a useful social purpose, as Beaumarchais insisted:

the inevitable blows of fate do not offer the mind any moral lesson. When one can only shudder and be silent, is not the act of reflection the worst thing one might do? If a morality were extracted from this genre of play, it would be a dreadful one which might lead many souls toward crime, since its fatalistic vision would provide them with a justification; it would discourage many from following the ways of virtue, and all such efforts, according to this system, would be for naught. If there is no virtue without sacrifice, so too there is no sacrifice without hope of reward. Any belief in fatalism degrades man by depriving him of the freedom without which his actions reveal no sense of morality to him.⁷

Marxism inherited from the Enlightenment, along with much else, its insistence on the social utility of art and, along with it, Enlightenment's hostility to tragedy:

the Marxists do not like the tragic, hence not tragedy either, as long as it shows human failure as an eternal category - human existence. It is their firm belief that mankind has introduced the tragic into the world and that human effort can, therefore, remove it as well. So they see the tragic as a historical category of the *condition humaine* rather than an existential one. . . . Thus tragedy

⁶ Voltaire, *Appel a toutes les nations*, in *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, ed. Louis Moland (Paris: Gamier Freres, 1983), 24.201.

⁷ Beaumarchais (Pierre Augustan Caron), *Essai Sur Le Genre Dramatique Serieux*, trans. Thomas B. Markus, in *Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski*, ed. Bernard F. Dukore (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 300.

appears to be unresolved alienation. Tragedy makes man enter the "realm of necessity" consciously for the first time.⁸

Enlightened social and political causes are unquestionably worth fighting for: economic justice, feminism, hominism, gay rights, ecological sanity, the strictest gun laws, the abolition not only of capital punishment but of the barbarism of prisons and of all punitive law - together with many other attempts to improve and prolong our brief existence in the cosmos. It is good that playwrights effectively address these issues in the theater and bring home to us the urgency of reforms. Some of the best and most acclaimed plays of our time do just this. Many of his interpreters insist that concerns of this nature are the major purpose of Ibsen's art and that, in fact, this is where his real strength lies. They see him inheriting and continuing the unfinished agenda of the Enlightenment theater: of Lillo, Moore, and the *dramas* of Beaumarchais Diderot, Mercer and Lessing. This would not be a bad job for a playwright. But Ibsen, as a *tragic* dramatist, is not furthering this agenda which, from his *tragic* perspective, merely is re-arranging the deck chairs on the Ark before his torpedo hits. In his major work, which includes the Realist Cycle, he is performing the odder and less alluring task of rendering a tragic portrait of modern humanity, of getting his contemporaries to see themselves through a tragic perspective. Without such a perspective, our vision is not adequately, or authentically, human.

Getting us to take in the tragic perspective might be one way of snatching a shred of utility from the devastation of tragedy, but it is a fairly tough-minded concession. In *Ghosts*, tragedy is the privilege of only Oswald and Helene Alving, spiritual aristocrats who refuse the wary ethical myopia of Manders, Engstrand and Regina, and are transfigured but devastated in consequence. Tragedy is something one would never wish on one's friends, but which one demands for one's most admired dramatic characters. No one wants Antigone to give in to Creon and avert the calamity that comes down on her and upon so many others; nor do we side with Tiresias, Jocasta and the old shepherd, wanting Oedipus to stop his investigation even as we see, and reluctantly admire, the infernal machine that is being so superbly assembled against him. We go along with the obstinate suffering of these figures, and even with those of Euripides - who clearly seem more sinned against than sinning - because of the way such suffering opens up a clarifying, if bleak, perspective on the human condition.

Ghosts, a bigger play than *A Doll House*, is less often anthologized because, like *Rosmersholm* or *John Gabriel Borkman*, it is more difficult to misread as meliorist and therefore as intrinsically optimistic. The optimists, in fact, once declared the play redundant, from a utilitarian point of view, because of the discovery of penicillin - though a rescue operation now is being mounted for its new relevance to the AIDS crisis. The path Ibsen is taking us down in *Ghosts*, however, is a

⁸ Ernst Schumacher, "Again: The Marxists and Tragedy," *Theater Three* 8 (Spring 1990): 7. Marxism's aversion to tragedy may explain why Bertolt Brecht so stubbornly denied any tragic perspective to such plays as *Mother Courage and Her Children* or *The Life of Galileo*.

metaphysical, not a medical one. The grim game the tragedy is tremendously playing demonstrates that modern reality, under imaginative and rigorous analysis, reveals a tragic structure, an inescapable clash of irreconcilable imperatives. In *Ghosts*, I have suggested, the Cycle recollects and re-enacts our Hellenic heritage, whose supreme artwork was tragedy. The horror and execration with which the play was received shows how unprepared the nineteenth century was for the Greek tragic vision when stripped of classicizing costume and applied directly to the texture of the modern world. But that near-hysterical reaction to the play on its appearance in Europe - especially to the notorious performance at the Independent Theatre in London on Friday the 13th of March, 1891 - showed a better sense of what it actually was about than current respectful attitudes that see it as a worthy classic somewhat dated by medical progress. In *Ghosts*, more starkly perhaps than in the rest of the Cycle, Ibsen presents our humanity as an inchoate identity made up of an uncertainly recollected and conflicted past voyaging to a problematic future within a cosmos we still cannot comprehend; one by one the sustaining fictions we have constructed as faith, morality, truth, are stripped away. The sun that rises at the end of the play illuminates a total multiperspectival devastation.

III. The Conditions for the Game of Modern Tragedy

Ibsen's tragic vision is inseparable from an equally unsettling comic one, as *Ghosts*, for one, attests. Audiences often are surprised to discover how deliberately funny much of the play is, and many productions, convinced that an Ibsen play must be pervasively solemn, especially one with such a title, seem uncertain how to handle the comedy - especially as Ibsen's comedy springs from the same essentially anarchic vision as his tragedy. Tragedy and comedy, at their purest, are equally uncompromising and equally discomfiting; in fact, comedy often is the crueller genre. The story of *Oedipus Tyrannos*, of the young hero who leaves home, encounters and defeats a violent opponent, and then outwits a monster by answering a riddle - for which he is given the hand of the princess and made king - is really a comedic-fabulous archetype which would usually end with "and they lived happily ever after." The plot that *then* follows, the devastation of the triumphant hero, unfolded with supreme irony, is a cosmic joke from the divine perspective which Sophocles allows us to share disquietingly. Shaw observed of Hamlet, Othello and Macbeth: "The plays in which these characters appear could be turned into comedies without altering a hair of their beards."⁹ At the same time there clearly are tragic perspectives in comedies like *The Misanthrope* or *Peer Gynt*. It might be that, at their most authentic, both tragedy and comedy take in the other's perspective and survive it, as in *King Lear* and *John Gabriel Borkman*. In tragi-comedies like *The Wild Duck* and the work of Samuel Beckett the distinction between tragic and comic evaporates without lessening the bleakness of the result.

⁹ Shaw, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, 179.

Events that get a tragic rhythm going usually can be set right pragmatically in everyday life. A more adequate provision for superannuated monarchs might prevent the conflict of *King Lear*, and *Ghosts* might be only a condom away from happiness. But once the tragic rhythm takes over, usually by stubbornly disregarding everyday common sense, the audience finds itself submitting to this rhythm, and disregarding pragmatist objections - those, for instance, Thomas Rymer very sensibly made against the plot of *Othello*. We play the tragedians' game, forgiving sleights of hand if they work into the action another kind of logic, the thematic logic of tragedy, creating that conviction of the necessity of the events that Aristotle commended. The medical causes of Oswald Alving's collapse become totally subordinate to the metaphysical logic of devastation his situation sets in motion - its larger, metaphoric argument. We expect tragedy to validate, by the exploration it undertakes, such bleak music as, "best of all is not to have been born"; "Men must endure / Their going hence, even as their coming hither;/ Ripeness is all"; "I almost believe we are ghosts, all of us . . ."; "You're on earth; there's no cure for that!" These are painfully earned moments or stages in the progress of the tragic *agon*.

We recognize the rules of the game of tragedy and expect them to be obeyed. Any dramatic performance is a meeting ground where author, performers, and audience sort out what kind of game is being offered. If it is tragedy, we don't ask the play to provide the satisfactions of another genre - a drama of warm human sympathy, or engaged proselytizing or moralizing, for example. For though tragedy may contain these elements, it must override them. We recognize the attainment of the genre, whatever the style, when it (relatively rarely) occurs. If a tragedy's great effects come from language worked up to high levels of poetic and rhetorical force - as in the eloquent aria-like monologues and soliloquies of Elizabethan drama, or the *tirades* of French neoclassical tragedy - or from a thematic plotting in the linkage of themes and imagery, we are likely to forgive realistic implausibilities in the plots. Thomas Rymer, refusing to go along with the game Shakespeare was offering, condemned the plot of *Othello* as "a bloody farce" (Voltaire was even more dismissive of Shakespeare: "his monstrous farces that are called tragedies").¹⁰

For a realist tragedy in modern dress (the immensely difficult game Ibsen is playing) Elizabethan or neoclassical rhetoric would be out of place; and the art will shift instead to careful analytic plotting, a method of revealing immense implications beneath the frugal-seeming terms of a modern realism. In Ibsen's analytic method, the thematic and realistic plots are closely linked; and it is this rhetorical frugality that has led some to deny the plays a tragic status. To compare a rhetorical passage from Shakespeare with a "prosaic" passage from Ibsen and then to declare the latter lacking in tragic heft is to fail to see the new

¹⁰ Thomas Rymer, *A Short View of Tragedy*, cited in Dukore, 351; Voltaire, "Sur la tragedie," in *Lettres Philosophiques*, trans. William D. Howarth, in *French Theatre in the Neoclassical Era, 1550-1789: Theatre in Europe: A Documentary History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 592.

terms under which, alone, tragic pity and terror can be achieved in a modern drama. (Enlightenment bourgeois tragedies fail by preserving the rhetorical force of verse in a new overwrought prose.) The tragic rhythm has to reveal itself through an art of plausible factuality; through a theatric semiotics that indicates *modern* minds in conflict or under duress: through pauses, sudden accelerations or amplifications of everyday speech, half finished sentences, and a subtle pattern of submerged imagery and ambiguity. What we lose in amplitude of emotional rhetoric we gain in the precision and alarming closeness of the tragic analysis.

IV. The Comfortless Zone of Tragedy

Tragedy lures us into an arena where we have to give up the defenses we otherwise use to protect ourselves. It creates a thematic logic so imperative that (the opposite of our reaction in everyday life) we would be indignant if the catastrophe were somehow pragmatically averted. Tragedy, in this (Greek) sense, is tough for a culture to assent to. Samuel Johnson, along with his contemporaries, famously could not bear to let the conclusion of *King Lear* stand:

A play in which the wicked prosper, and the virtuous miscarry, may doubtless be good, because it is a just representation of the common events of human life: but since all reasonable beings naturally love justice, I cannot easily be persuaded, that the observation of justice makes a play worse; or, that if other excellencies are equal, the audience will not always rise better pleased from the final triumph of persecuted virtue. In the present case the publick has decided. Cordelia, from the time of Tate, has always retired with victory and felicity. And if my sensations could add any thing to the general suffrage, I might relate, that I was many years ago so shocked by Cordelia's death, that I know not whether I ever endured to read again the last scenes of the play till I undertook to revise them as an editor.¹¹

That last sentence pulls us up before we start to laugh at eighteenth-century squeamishness. Johnson obviously responded to the tragic situation more keenly than most of us, and took its moral implications very seriously. There was a point in which he could no longer go along with the rules of the game Shakespeare was offering. He could not enter a tragic space that asked him to set aside his deepest moral feelings. Unlike the Greek audiences, sincere Christians such as Johnson could not believe that the cosmos, created by a God expressly for the benefit - or at least the fair trial - of humanity, ultimately could not satisfy a human sense of justice. It is why they (along with Enlightenment rationalists like Voltaire) found it so hard to follow the Greek example of allowing tragedy to open onto an abyss where human rationality and divine or cosmic reality no longer coincided: where an Ajax could be cruelly toyed with and destroyed by Athena, an Oedipus made the object of a ghastly cosmic joke, or a Hippolytus, Pentheus or Phaedra hideously destroyed by unjustly indignant deities. (The formula of the "tragic flaw" seems a desperate misreading of Aristotle's *harmartia* to inject some

¹¹ Samuel Johnson, "Notes on Shakespeare's Plays: *King Lear*," in *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Sherbo, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, 8 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 704.

moral comfort into the bleak zone of Greek tragedy.) The gods of Greek tragedy are amorally powerful forces and, like the cosmic forces of modern scientific thinking, they ultimately elude the human categories by which we try to identify them. This is the vision so unsettlingly recovered in *Ghosts*, where the tragic nemesis lies waiting in the blood of its innocent victim, and an indifferent sun rises to illuminate the scene of human devastation.

The understandable tendency of modern audiences is to protest, like Johnson, against the tragic rhythm taking over events. It simply is not fair that Helene or Oswald Alving, the most admirable characters in *Ghosts*, should suffer so appallingly even as the play builds up the logic that requires them to. Tragedy requires us to override moral perspectives and to recognize the tragic structure ultimately underlying reality. Tragic impartiality goes against the way in which we react to events in the world. There is a natural tendency to pull tragedy down from its uncompromising stance, to rehabilitate it in our world where we sensibly resist it by all means possible: moral, medical, legal, social, financial.

Roland Barthes describes the French interpretation of Racine which seeks

to domesticate Racine, to strip him of his tragic elements, to identify him with ourselves, to locate ourselves with him in the noble salon of classic art, but en famille; it seeks to give the themes of the bourgeois theatre an eternal status, to transfer to the credit of the psychological theatre the greatness of the tragic theatre. . . [It is necessary] to renounce looking for ourselves in this theatre: what we find of ourselves there is not the best part, either of Racine or ourselves As with the ancient theatre, Racine's theatre concerns us much more, and much more valuably, by its strangeness than by its familiarity: its relation to us is its remoteness. If we want to keep Racine, we must keep him at a distance.¹²

The idea of Ibsen that emerges from much well-intentioned interpretation is of a troubled photographic recorder of nineteenth-century Norway and its social ills. The Norway he presents to us for deprecation, with some aesthetic license conceded to the constraints of the theatrical medium, is, we often are told, one that would have been recognized by any similarly shrewd and concerned observer of the scene (the enlightened commentator, perhaps?). The actual absurdity of this should be apparent to anyone who reflects on the plays and what they are depicting. Knock on any Norwegian door, the claim seems to say, and it will be opened by a haggard Karsten Bernick, a distraught Torvald Helmer, a devastated Helene Alving, a beleaguered Thomas Stockmann, a messianic Gregers Werle, a suicidal Rosmer and Rebekka, a near-schizophrenic Ellida Wangel, or a Hedda with her gun, and so on, all caught in mid-peripety-and-anagnorisis, perhaps-even without including a wandering cast of ghostly white horses, drowned sailors (called Johnston), uncannily summoned sirens, Rat Wives, and walking statues.

V. Ibsen's Invented Norway: a Metaphoric Stage Space

¹² Roland Barthes, *On Racine*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 149.

Ibsen's dramatic artistry is not the attempted accurate recreation of everyday reality onstage: everyday reality, on the contrary, is ruthlessly rifled by him only insofar as it helps his art to come into perfected being. Like all major artists, he reorganizes appearances - his experience of the world - into aesthetic significance. For someone concerned mainly with drawing faithfully the lineaments of his country's contemporary society, Ibsen went to extraordinary lengths to keep away from it, spending all but the last few years of his major creative life in self-imposed exile from Norway. It is obvious that in the Realist Cycle, as in *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, Ibsen did not *imitate* his Norway, he *invented* it - as an adequately metaphoric space for his tragic vision.

This metaphoric space extends into a metaphysical landscape from "the depths of the sea" which will claim certain characters, to earth-transcending heights "towards the mountains. Towards the stars. And the great silence" (the invocation in *Little Eyolf*) towards which other characters yearn. This vertical external landscape is echoed, or mirrored, as an internal landscape within characters, as in the Romantic art and literature that Ibsen inherited and adapted. The light and darkness, seasons, sunrises and sunsets, storms and avalanches, undertows, and planetary pulls of this landscape operate on cue with movements within the internal landscapes of the characters.

The human habitations within this landscape, like the houses of Greek drama, gather together a crux of conflicts containing fateful histories and memories; or they evolve, in the course of the dramatic action, into alien, constraining environments, peopled by watchful, constricting communities. The only characters allowed to enter that metaphoric space are those who earn their right to be there - by carrying a cargo of archetypal identity under their modern appearance; and this larger identity is released, imagistically, in multilayered speeches and actions that gradually build up and sustain the dramatic dialectic - of the "magnitude" necessary for tragic significance. Unlike real life characters, they perform only those actions and speak only those lines which advance the tragic argument that moves, in each act, to its prepared crisis of anagnorisis and peripeteia. That this is an accurate imitation of the rhythms and texture of everyday Norwegian life is as preposterous a notion as that the characters and actions of Greek tragedy are faithful representations of the everyday domestic and civic life of fifth century BCE Athens.

The difference between *Punch and Judy* and *Rosmer and Rebekka West* is not that one pair is artificial and the other "real life": the second pair is equally as much a construct of art, but conceived with a greater degree of aesthetic complexity. The protagonists are designed to bring out a more elaborate argument and aesthetic structure than a *Punch and Judy* show (itself capable of different levels of complexity) - a structure whose model ultimately is Greek tragedy. Jan Kott, for one, noted the resemblance between Ibsen's dramatis personae and those of the Greek tragedians:

Into the houses of Ibsen's imagination descend the ghosts of Oedipus, Electra, Orestes and Iphigenia... The summoning of Greek shadows reveals... parallels between Ibsen and Freud.¹³

There are more than Greek ghosts in the Hegelian recollection, or *temps retrouve*, undertaken by the Cycle, however, as Ibsen sets in tragic motion our entire human identity as it has revealed itself in the past as well as in the present. This is modern tragedy as a hugely recollective art where, in a resurgence of the repressed, archetypes of our human history and culture repopulate the stage. Such a recollective art, in fact, is the major achievement of Modernism.

The archetypal identity of an Ibsen character emerges from its interaction with other, similarly conceived identities in the ensemble of each play. Each character study, while interesting in itself, gains its full metaphoric stature only when juxtaposed with and put in action with others, marking out the lean logic of Ibsen's realism from the realism of others in the modern theater. Beyond individual identity, gender, and generation, characters onstage establish cultural, historical, ideological and archetypal dimensions. (See my schematic below.) Osvald Alvirig in *Ghosts* is the vehicle for a cluster of active metaphoric associations: sexuality, Parisian joy of life, artistic creativity, Greek paganism (his Orestean elements), Dionysian wine, Apollonian light, the sun (Julian's Helios in *Emperor and Galilean*) - bring him in conflict with Pastor Mander's equally multilayered hostility to all of these and to the intellectually inquiring and significantly named *Helene*.

Beyond the multilayered human and cultural conflict, dispersing the rain shrouding the metaphysical landscape, rises the sun, mentioned throughout, an emblem of so many levels of the conflict; at the same time the sun is the reminder of an indifferent, cosmic perspective on the tragic human scene. This powerful juxtaposition of metaphoric characters, action, and scene creates a form of symbolist shorthand allowing the confined space and time of the stage to contain, in each play and in the Cycle as a whole, the same vistas as the three middle-period plays, *Brand*, *Peer Gynt*, and *Emperor and Galilean*. The conflict widens and transcends the particulars of individual persons and place, an aspect of Ibsen's art commented on by the young James Joyce:

Ibsen's plays do not depend for their interest on the action, or on the incidents. Even the characters, faultlessly drawn though they be, are not the first thing in his plays. But the naked drama - either the perception of a great truth, or the opening up of a great question, or a great conflict which is almost independent of the conflicting actors, and has been and is of far-reaching importance - this is what primarily rivets our attention.¹⁴

The great conflicts of the plays require a selective dramatic method less minutely detailed and less casual than that of many realists not concerned to keep Ibsen's

¹³ Jan Kott, "Ibsen Read Anew," in *The Theatre of Essence and Other Essays* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1984), 58-9.

¹⁴ James Joyce, "Ibsen's New Drama," in *The Critical Writings of James Joyce*, ed. Ellsworth Mason and Richard Ellmann (New York: Viking Press, 1959), 63.

tragic and multiple perspectives in view. Not to see these perspectives is to compare Ibsen disadvantageously with writers not engaged with his artistic difficulties. A contrast of any passage in the Cycle with any passage from a realistic dramatist (for example, Harley Granville-Barker), will reveal the same differences as that between, say, Edouard Manet and the meticulously rendered realism of a conventional salon painter. Ibsen's thematic selectivity must impose distortions, economies, on the appearances and rhythms of everyday life much in the way Manet must do. Reality is rendered only as it serves the austere thematic requirements of the dialectic art. The *metaphoric* time of *Ghosts*, for example, requires that an action occurring between mid-day and sunrise the next day be encapsulated in less than three hours of almost uninterrupted *realistic* action. The change in the set from gloom to starkly brilliant light, like the lamp and champagne brought in for the joy-of-life dialogues, or the carefully calibrated collapse of Oswald precisely at sunrise and at the conclusion of the thematic/dramatic argument, is set to a metaphoric, not a realistic, clock - the same accelerating clock, in fact, that Greek tragedy kept time to. The metaphoric-tragic imperative driving the action of *Ghosts* is so compelling that few audiences notice the temporal sleight-of-hand that Ibsen is practicing on them.

VI. Creating the Dimensions of a Modern Tragic Drama

Not every play in the Cycle is tragic, any more than in a Greek tetralogy,¹⁵ but the Cycle as a whole creates a space in which tragic forces and a great tragic argument can come into being and from which elements of everyday life irrelevant to that argument are cleared away. The Cycle sets out to be (a) modern and (b) tragic - a combination more intractable than might be supposed. To be *tragic* Ibsen's cycle must be the imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and possessing magnitude: to be *modern*, it would need to set into tragic motion an adequate representation of our modern identity. After the mid-nineteenth century this identity was understood as having evolved over long biological and cultural time and to have accumulated the results, including the conflicts, of this history. An adequate, modern, tragic drama would have to encompass this. To take up a limited area of modern reality and then to offer an impassioned but partisan and partial account of it is the way the discourse of the world is conducted; but such partiality has to be discarded for tragedy, which requires more of a doomsday account, a Judgment Day upon the soul, as Ibsen said of his poetic vocation.¹⁶ Ibsen's is a doomsday on the psyche of our modern humanity itself, filled with all the dimensions of its cultural past, in which the dramatist is as involved as his creatures; for each one of us, Ibsen said, shares

¹⁵ It is my conviction that the twelve-play cycle consists of three tetralogies, with the fourth play as a comedy or satyr play, making the Cycle an intellectualized (i.e. modernist) festival of Dionysos.

¹⁶ "Writing means summoning oneself/ To court and playing the judge's part." Ibsen to Ludwig Passarge, Munich, 16 June 1880, *Ibsen: Letters and Speeches*, ed. Evert Sprinchorn (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 187.

the guilt of his/her people. There is no such thing as a guiltless class, race or gender - another currently unpopular idea.

Nineteenth-century middle class humanity was an ideal tragic subject: it was the class in power and a deeply guilty class. Its supremacy rested on a betrayal of the principles of the French Revolution and of almost every universal value earlier proclaimed when the bourgeoisie was seeking to end the oppressive hegemonies of the old order of monarchy, church, and aristocracy. In that Rousseauist dawn it may have been bliss to be alive: but by Ibsen's time that same middle class, empowered, had set up hideous industrial cities with their proletarian slums; had dispossessed and annihilated the native Americans; had supported the colonial seizures, massacres and exploitations in Africa, the middle east, and Asia, and had lost all sight of its living spiritual heritage through a cynical materialist exploitation of the world - all this was cloaked in a conveniently indulgent religiosity and celebrated, conventionally and opulently, in non-subversive, visionless art.

Even before it sought the séance or the psychoanalytic couch, this was a class deeply uneasy about itself, attacked from the right for its crass materialist values and tastes and from the left for its gross injustices. This however made it an extremely interesting class; its tortuous complexities were good fictional and dramatic material. The proletariat has not been able to rival it in interest, however much it might surpass it in virtue.¹⁷ This guilt-ridden class whose passing the Cycle seems to envisage, also carried, if only unconsciously, a huge cargo of archetypal memory, the reproachful ghosts that erupt continually to the surface of the psyche and extend the scale of the modern drama. As each individual, in Hegel's formulation is a "world soul" containing these immensities, tragedy no longer is the prerogative of a prince but a possible fate for anyone, regardless of social station. Ibsen's most imposing tragic protagonist, Brand, is a peasant's son. Another aspect of a modern tragedy, then, is that it is classless: a universal tragic action can be enacted as plausibly in a bourgeois drawing room as in the antechamber of a monarch.

To be tragic in this modern - or modernist - drama, the individual must be awakened into becoming a vehicle for the ghosts on which the modern world for the most part, has turned its back. Ibsen's plays, in fact, have as much the nature of séances as of psychoanalyses. The awakened individual becomes the medium through which the banished powers speak. This makes the Ibsen scene haunted ground where inadvertent actions can trigger off the archetypal drama. Ibsen's son Sigurd wrote of art that it "gives liberty of action to forces and possibilities to which life does not grant the chance of coming into their rights."¹⁸ Being vehicles of forces essential to our human wholeness (rather than to our

¹⁷ Brecht's proletarian or peasant figures are what William Empson would have called "versions of pastoral" devoid of potentially tragic (guilty) motivation, and so denied a fully adult identity.

¹⁸ Sigurd Ibsen, *Human Quintessence* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1911; Books for Libraries Press, 1972), 93.

happiness) they exist in a context beyond our usual moral categories. Ibsen's major characters, it must be admitted, behave extravagantly, alarmingly, often unpleasantly. It is in the nature of tragic individuals to be uningratiating; even, I have argued elsewhere, to be immature and irresponsible (a frequent charge of psychologizing critics):

An Antigone, well adjusted to her family history and to the new polity of Creon, happily marrying Haemon (and this, it seems, was the mythic story that lay to Sophocles' hand) was of no use to Sophocles' tragic purpose. An Antigone such as Sophocles reinvented her, obsessed with a corpse and the world of the dead, rating brothers higher than husbands, though abnormal and even pathological from the moralizing, psychoanalytic point of view, was perfect for Sophocles' purpose of demonstrating a heroic norm from which we, in our daily pusillanimity, have fallen. . . . The passionate Achilles, the hot-tempered Ajax, the stubborn Philoctetes, the extravagant Lear, and the malcontent Hamlet... all do much and say much that mature and responsible middle-class citizens would not and could not say and do - and are all the more impressive for it. . . . The concern that the cosmos should conform to our moral predilections is an attitude antithetical to tragedy.¹⁹

Much commentary on Ibsen's plays still seems less interested in the plays as carefully shaped and extended metaphors realized only in stage time and space than as real-life case histories. It is a better critical discipline to see the plays as realizing and extending the requirements, thematic and formal, inherent in the genre. They perform the difficult and delicate task of keeping all dimensions of the dialectical action in play while advancing the plausible modern story.

Thematically, the plays are dramatized concepts about the human condition, guiding the argument of each drama to a new level of awareness; *aesthetically*, they are beautifully controlled and shaped movements, as in contrapuntal music, moving, in each act in each play, to their powerfully prepared moments of peripeteia and anagnorisis, and attended by an imagery that gives them their poetic resonance; *imaginatively*, the characters in these plays, their fates and their worlds, take hold of our minds and emotions as they are gradually realized in formal terms. To ignore this considerable aesthetic achievement and engage in moralistic judgment or partisan partiality - as if the characters were presented, with their histories, in a police line-up or a psychoanalyst's casebook, and not in shaped dramatic structures-is to be operating altogether in the wrong area of interest.

VII. The Modern World a Defective Work of Art

The Theme of Alienation. Everyday modern life is not a natural truth the artist is obliged to imitate: it is always, already, itself a bad work of art, an artifice, a distortion of our humanity, created over time by our alienated, bungling consciousness and not in itself worth imitating. It becomes the artist's worthwhile subject only if its inadequacy is the starting point for exploring the extent of the error and loss entailed by human history. We receive a disfigured and corrupted inheritance as our human identity and we disfigure and corrupt it further. There is

¹⁹ Brian Johnston, *Text and Supertext in Ibsen's Drama* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 62-3.

a moment in *When We Dead Awaken* when the artist Arnold Rubek tells how his work, under the guise of contemporary human portraits, has smuggled into it the "dear domestic zoo. . . .All the animals which man has distorted (*forkvaklet*) into his own image. And which have distorted him in return."²⁰ Against this ongoing cultural corruption Rubek set up, in statue form, the image of a naked young woman "awakening to light and glory with nothing ugly or tainted to shed" - but he is speaking of this to the former model of that image, a woman whose subsequent history in the world, in her own manic account, has been one of self-annihilation, madness, and multiple murders. The gulf between the image and the irreparably damaged human model seems to encapsulate that between a potentially free humanity and its actual contemporary existence - the ground, I would claim, of Ibsen's tragic vision.

The world, its institutions and its history, is to a humanity seeking authenticity and freedom a hostile, alien space, as Schiller insisted in *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind*; the individual, the product of this alien space, is therefore self-alienated and must undergo a crisis that reveals both the repressing and inhibiting environment it takes for reality, and the falsity of the self that has, at the cost of its own truth, adapted to that so-called reality.

He comes to himself out of his sensuous slumber, recognizes himself as Man, looks around and finds himself-in the State. An unavoidable exigency had thrown him there before he could freely choose his station; need ordained it through mere natural laws before he could do so by the laws of reason.²¹

This confrontation, where a human identity seeks to realize its authenticity within an environment whose very values, loyalties and virtues are lethal impediments to self-determination, sets up the terms of an Hegelian tragic action of the greatest seriousness and magnitude, especially when carried out on the scale of a twelve-play cycle. The modern mind's fateful encounter with its ghosts, with its suppressed, evaded, or forgotten identity, is just the action and imagery to sustain a dialectic on such a scale. This would be the *Zeitgeist's* interrogation by the *Weltgeist*, of particular culture by universal history - and vice versa. As an account of the human condition, this was a somber corrective to the nineteenth century's optimistic faith in Progress, its confidence that modern reason, through legislation and technology, could liberate humanity. In a group of notes to *Ghosts* Ibsen contrasted "the luxuriant growth of our culture, in literature, art, etc. - and by way of contrast: the whole of mankind on the wrong track. . . . The fault lies in the fact that the whole of mankind is a failure. If a man demands to live and develop as a man should, then that is megalomania. . ." ²² These are not

²⁰ *Ibsen Volume I: Four Major Plays*, trans. Brian Johnston (Lyme: H. H. Smith and Kraus, 1995), 195.

²¹ Friedrich Schiller, *On The Aesthetic Education of Mankind In A Series of Letters*, trans. Reginald Snell (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954; New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1965), 28.

²² "Draft Manuscripts: Preliminary Notes," in *The Oxford Ibsen*, trans. and ed. James Walter MeFarlane (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 5.468.

considered and well-honed apothegms in the Nietzschean manner; but their perspectives are Nietzschean. In the same spirit the Greek tragedians, especially Sophocles, confronted their confident, rationalist democracy with the challenging ghosts of a distant, heroic, aristocratic, and decidedly non-democratic past. Oedipus, the supreme rationalist who yet unconsciously confirms the mantic prophecy of Tiresias, is the classic emblem of this confrontation. Roland Barthes wrote that the Greek theater

is always a triple spectacle: of a present (we are watching the transformation of a past into a future), of a freedom (what is to be done?), and of a meaning (the answer of gods and men). . . . Already mythology had been the imposition of a vast semantic system upon nature. The Greek theater seizes upon the mythological answer and makes use of it as a reservoir of new questions: for to interrogate mythology is to interrogate what had been in its time a fulfilled answer. Itself an interrogation, the Greek theater thus takes place between two other interrogations: one, religious, is mythology; the other, secular, is philosophy.²³

In Ibsen's Cycle the spectacle undertaken by the plot of each play takes place between the interrogation of a mythology constructed out of cultural history, and the interrogation of a modern, scientific/technological materialism. The opening play of the Cycle sets this out forcefully: Bernick's bid for supremacy in his society is to happen by means of the materialist-technological enterprise of the railway and attendant projects he wishes to bring about and control; but this is disrupted by the emergence from the past of the semi-mythological Lona (her name deriving from Apollonia, follower of Apollo) arriving with a Dionysian circus and music to inaugurate another enterprise altogether—the beginning of the modern spirit's tragic journey to spiritual authenticity which the rest of the Cycle will undertake.

The use of cultural history as "a reservoir of new questions" was begun by Friedrich Schiller, who lamented the modern dramatist's lack of mythological sources such as the Greek dramatists could employ: in his plays he set about converting history and its prominent individuals and events into a new mythological system, a mythology of service to the post-Romantic, post-Revolutionary spirit. Don Carlos, King Philip, Posa, the blind Grand Inquisitor, the Duke of Alba, Wallenstein, Mary Stuart, Elizabeth, Demetrius and so on, are made, with a liberal rendering of historical facts, into metaphysical agents of freedom and repression, light and darkness, truth-bringers and truth-deniers, whose victories and defeats (in *tragic* drama it is the positive forces who are defeated) help us understand the structure of our inherited spiritual reality. With *Don Carlos*, Schiller inaugurated the supertext of modern dialectical drama. In the dialectical tradition continued by Ibsen, Shaw, Brecht, Genet, these archetypal agents of progress or regression, light and darkness, take on innumerable modern guises.

²³ Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 68.

What was new about this Romantic/post-Romantic supertext or mythological system was that, unlike the Greek, it was from the start militantly subversive of the mainstream orthodoxy. It emerged at the point where the modern world divides between mainstream and minority cultures (and theaters). It is at this moment that the tragic hero (of minority literature and theater) emerges as the wanderer, outsider, outcast, rebel - even criminal - and where the old tragic concern with Integrity, (adherence to conventional heroic norms) now gives way to concern with Authenticity (rejecting conventional norms as inauthentic). The Byronic criminal-outcasts such as Cain or Manfred; Schiller's "interestingly guilty" Mary Stuart, Wallenstein, or Demetrius; Ibsen's Brand, Peer Gynt, Julian, Rebekka West, Hedda Gabler, Halvard Solness, or John Gabriel Borkman; Dostoevsky's, Raskolnikov, Stavrogin, Ivan Karamazov; Shaw's St. Joan; Kafka's alienated K; the Outsider and Caligula of Camus; Jean Genet's Blacks or the Said of *The Screens*, (and Genet himself) - to name only a few - are all examples of the variously subversive alienated consciousness of modern tragic literature.

The Romantics made Prometheus their hero and rehabilitated Milton's Satan. These and more realistically localized alienated characters become vehicles that better can express the nature and extent of our spiritual malaise than "the normal ego, that false self competently adjusted to our alienated social reality" described by R. D. Laing in *The Politics of Experience*.²⁴ This cultural divide, clearly perceived by Schiller, created the terms of all subsequent dialectical drama from Byron, through Ibsen, to Jean Genet.²⁵

VIII. Addressing the Scale of Modern Alienation Archetypal Recollection

Ibsen's tragic drama is one in which archetypal forces erupt into, transfigure, and devastate, modern (nineteenth-century) identity. This idea of his tragic subject was explored by Ibsen in his three great middle-period plays, *Brand*, *Peer Gynt*, and *Emperor and Galilean*. Since these plays were not written for theatrical performance he was free to extend to their limits the temporal and spatial metaphors of his argument. (I am not claiming all this was a conscious program: artists mostly discover such a pattern or program while at work on it.) These three plays, I would claim, shape Ibsen's dramatic cosmos; afterwards he would devise the means of staging it as a tragic, recollective drama of modern, urban, bourgeois humanity. The result was to be a portrait of humanity in nineteenth-century costume as compelling as any in the history of drama. The humdrum identities of modern urban life (ourselves and our situations) are enlarged and galvanized by archetypal forces that extend the dimensions of human identity

²⁴ R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), 144.

²⁵ The terms of this dialectic are clearly set out in the quarrel between Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and Tom Paine's *The Rights of Man*. Both writers draw on imagery of the theater, Burke on the old theater of Garrick and Siddons, Paine unconsciously creating a new imagery of the revolutionary theater. This dialectic and its images are taken up, after Schiller, by Shaw, Hauptmann, Gorky, Brecht, and culminate in Genet. Cf. Brian Johnston, "Revolution and the Romantic Theater," *Theater Three* 4 (Spring 1988): 5-20.

through individual, familial, communal, national, historical, cultural, natural, and supernatural circumstances of meaning (see my schematic below).

If, as Nietzsche claimed, it is only as aesthetic phenomena, as works of art, that we are finally justified, and if, as he further claimed, tragedy is the highest form of art, then Ibsen has offered a magnificent justification of nineteenth-century life. The portrait that emerges is of a humanity whose contemporary agitations and conflicts awaken and stir into life dormant and primordial layers of our identity; a "mine" containing "an infinite host of images of the past slumber[ing] . . . lying hidden in the dark depths of our inner being," as Hegel describes the Unconscious in *The Philosophy of Mind*.²⁶ When we recognize that the hero/ine of the Cycle is the human spirit itself made up of the wonderfully varied myriad of individual characters, major and minor, we will see there was no drawing in of artistic ambitions between the plays of the great middle period and the inauguration of the Cycle with *Pillars of Society*.

In *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* Ibsen had placed his alternate "galilean" and "emperor" identities within a metaphorically charged vertical landscape. This landscape changed with the changing terms of the protagonists' drama, serving as a responsive mirror that extended the hero's action into the cosmos. From the recidivist trolls in the depths of the sea in *Brand*, or the depths of the earth in *Peer Gynt*, to the lethal Ice Church and mountain peaks, the landscape of the two plays clearly is a symbolic as well as a natural terrain. This same vertical, symbolic-natural-metaphysical landscape would be explored in the Cycle, from sea-depths and mine-depths to mountain peaks and beyond.

The humanity inhabiting this landscape is extended in time as well as in space. In *Emperor and Galilean* these temporal perspectives are gathered around the collision within fourth-century Byzantium between a declining Hellenism and a triumphant, but corrupted, Christianity. Similar forces might have been summoned by other cultural situations. They would have taken on different ideological aspects but they would express the same recurring collision of worldly and other-worldly, life-affirming and life-denying, free and dogmatic forces, within humanity. Julian's failure to undo the Christian revolution or to impel the human spirit beyond this conflict into a new synthesis, is, I believe, an emblem rather than the cause of the spiritual *malaise* pervading the Cycle. Nevertheless, characters, situations, and imagery from the middle period plays, especially from *Emperor and Galilean*, reappear throughout the Cycle. Such an ironic, blasé production as *Hedda Gabler*, for example, re-enacts in miniature, within the drawing room of the Falk mansion, the whole huge spiritual conflict of Ibsen's world-historical drama.

Each play in the Cycle enacts a resurrection day. The ghosts are summoned for an exorcism as well as for a recovery of the repressed, in much the same way - if

²⁶ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of Mind*, trans. William Wallace and A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 205.

not with the same intention - as in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Ibsen's Faustian role *vis-a-vis* his society can be seen to resemble that of Ibsen's own Maximos, the magus of "the third empire" in *Emperor and Galilean*. The Cycle traverses a long night of the soul - in the last four plays literally, in the last act sequence, *evening, late evening, night, dawn before the sunrise*²⁷ - while ascending in higher stages, sequentially, to "the peak of Promise" of the last. Like Maximos, the cycle cannot deliver the liberation it envisages (Ibsen insisted his work represented a closure), only the sacrifice and suffering necessary to prepare for it. Without this sacrifice and suffering, however, the prospect of liberation could not be adequately - that is tragically - affirmed.

²⁷ Cf. Brian Johnston, *The Ibsen Cycle*, 160.

IX. A Schematic: Dimensions of Reality

Like Peer Gynt's onion, the dimensions of reality and conflict encompassed by an adequate tragic art can be set out in multiple layers, peeling "right to the centre."²⁸

Supernatural/metaphysical

Natural world

Historical/cultural forces

National identity

Social interactions: local time and place

Generational conflicts

Familial loyalties/conflicts

Male/female identities

Individual ego/libido

Unconscious realm

Not every tragedy will reveal all these dimensions - but the greatest generally do, trying to activate all layers in its single action. So integrated are all these layers that, like a spider's web (to change the metaphor), the shaking of any one strand causes the convulsion of the whole. Slice of life realism usually keeps to the "lower" levels of action; abstract allegory to the "upper." Of course, this is not a test to apply to plays, but rather only an aid to help detect the possible dimensions of the tragic art.

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²⁸ Ibsen, *Peer Gynt: A Dramatic Poem*, in *The Oxford Ibsen*, English version by Christopher Fry based on a literal translation by Johan Fillinger (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 3.396-97.