

Play It Again: Re-enacted Story as Tragic Plot by Brian Johnston

I. Re-enacted Story as Tragic Plot

The tragic dramatist, said Aristotle, is above all a maker of *plots*. The plot is "the soul of tragedy" and tragedy is the imitation of an ACTION. This is the nature of its manifestation in theatre space and time: everything else should be subordinated to the action unfolded in the theater as plot. "Plot", - the sequence and arrangement of the actions on-stage taking place before our eyes - "is the end for which tragedy exists...It is not for the sake of their characters that the agents engage in actions but, rather, for the sake of their actions that they take on the characters they have."¹

This might be the most frequently neglected axiom in drama interpretation which, particularly if the dramatic *style* is Realism, frequently subordinates action in dramatic art to the revelation of character. Tragic drama enacts an 'agon': an action carefully structured through the devices of the theatre to create a dramatic rhythm whose most effective climactic moments are the combination of reversal (*peripeteia*) and discovery/insight (*anagnorisis*). It is to these ends that the dramatist steers the forces of his or her plot. They are the central actions around which whole design of the play is structured. This is as artful and artificial a procedure as sonata form in music. Tragedy best arrives at this rhythm through conflict, and characters therefore will be created by the plot to take on the opposing sides of this conflict. This formula applies above all to Greek tragedy. In the Realist Cycle of 12 plays, from *PILLARS OF SOCIETY* to *WHEN WE DEAD AWAKEN*, Ibsen employs an analytic and retrospective plot structure, taken from Greek drama, rather than the 'narrative' plot structures of *BRAND*, *PEER GYNT*, and *EMPEROR AND GALILEAN*.

In Sophoklean drama antithetical forces or values engage in a collision that discovers the human capacity for heroism in the teeth of the revealed design of the gods. In Ibsen's Realist Cycle, it is the devastating yet transfiguring re-emergence, or re-enactment, of the evaded Past into the life of the Present. To illustrate the working of these perennial plots on human reality the dramatist will devise many exemplary characters and stories. A tragic dramatist's life's work, therefore, usually reveals one or two major *plot structures* only, repeated in play after play; but a great number and variety of stories which are chosen to

¹ Aristotle's *Poetics* Translated with an Introduction and Notes by James Hutton (New York W. W. Norton & Company 1982) p. 51

demonstrate the truth of the basic plot in widely different situations. The plot creates the catalyst through which an underlying tragic structure is revealed within the story.

II. Plot-Story Ratio of Sophokles' Oedipus Tyrannos

The classic example of how the plot reconfigures and tragically re-enacts the pre-existing story, is Sophokles' *Oedipus tyrannos*. The story or myth of Oedipus, in a number of versions, long preceded Sophokles' play and was well-known to his audience. The *story* was capable of many plot choices; the *plot* determining which elements of the story the dramatist will bring into significant being. Sophokles selects from the various versions those aspects serviceable to his perennial plot, while rendering the mythic material aesthetically significant through the artificial devices of the Greek theatre. It was his choice of plot, not the story, that established the tragic status of the play. I imagine Sophokles' contemporaries arrived at the theatre with a good idea of what the Sophoklean plot and themes would be, intrigued mostly as to how he would adapt his new subject - the story - to the theatrical demonstration - the plot - of those core themes.

The *story* was well known: Though Laius and Jocasta were warned by Apollo a son would prove fatal to Laius, Oedipus is born. To frustrate the prediction the royal parents give him to a slave to destroy by exposing him on Mount Cithaeron. Taking pity on the child, the slave hands him over to the care of a shepherd from Corinth, who gives the infant to the childless king and queen of Corinth, Polybius and Merope. They raise him as their son and heir. Years later, a drunkard at a feast accuses Oedipus of not being their son and, though assured by his 'parents' this is not true, he goes to Delphi to ask after his true identity. Apollo's oracle does not answer this question but makes the horrible prediction that Oedipus will kill Polybius and marry Merope - at least this is what Oedipus hears as the atrocity against his parents. He decides not to return to Corinth but to recreate himself abroad. He encounters a violent old man at a crossroads and, in anger, kills him and his retinue. After confronting the Sphinx menacing Thebes, he destroys her by answering her riddle and, entering Thebes, is rewarded with the hand of the Queen, Jocasta, becoming King, or tyrannos, of Thebes. Over the years he creates a family: two sons and two daughters. *In contrast to the narrative methods of e.g. Shakespeare and Brecht, none of this story is presented on-stage.* What we focus on as theatre audience is not the story, which occurred in extensive and arbitrary time and space outside the play, but what the *plot* will make of this story - how it will regather and shape its elements into a new, terrible significance, within the tightly confined time and space of the stage performance. The arbitrary and wide-ranging details of the story are summoned to the tribunal of the plot's logical structure. A violent, irrational past is revisited through Oedipus' newly alerted rational (*tragic*), consciousness: much as the Athenian audience re-encounters its primordial myths through the rational discipline of the newly evolved theatric performance.

Through the plot's agency, the story becomes, not a record of arbitrary and disconnected actions performed over extensive time in the past but a terrifyingly condensed, logical, and inexorable agon of unfolding tragic knowledge enacted *now* in the immediate present of the performance. Oedipus, through a swift sequence of confrontations, is led to discover his true identity while simultaneously learning he is the criminal he set out to unmask and punish. Oedipus' actions are not tragic until *he is brought to 'see' them as he re-enacts them*: The pre-existing events Oedipus comes to know are terrible; but they are *tragic only by being known*. Past events (i.e. the *story*) are tragically reconfigured as scenes in the mind's eye: the drunkard at the feast, the visit to the Oracle at Delphi, the encounter at the crossroads with the intemperate Old Man: all relived for the first time as a connected sequence from a horribly clarifying new perspective. Even more startling, the plot *re-enacts* the story's core past events: Tiresias' seemingly wild and senseless charge that Oedipus does not know his own identity repeats the drunkard's taunt in Corinth; the Delphic Oracle answers Oedipus once more, with a new riddle that will at last reveal his identity; Oedipus wrathfully confronts his uncle, Creon, seeking his death, as he had confronted his father; Oedipus, the Theban servant and the Corinthian shepherd regather, at the conclusion of Oedipus's search for identity, as they did long ago on Mount Cithaeron when Oedipus was an infant and his identity was about to be created. The play is a tragedy, not because of the actions Oedipus performed, but because, through mental re-enactment, he comes to know he performed them and for the first time sees their dreadful configuration. The *story* supplies the details of what he will come to know: the *plot* dramatizes the tragic agon of his knowing.

III. The Plot-Story Ratio in Ibsen

In Ibsen's plays the *stories* present a record of arbitrary, *open* actions exhibiting rich variety of detail. Reconfigured as tight retrospective *plots* the arbitrary events reveal the *closed* structures of necessity, design, even nemesis. This engagement of the plot upon the material of the story is the essence of his dramaturgy. The non-naturalistic devices of an Ibsen plot: - accelerated consequences, compression, ironic patterning, abrupt confrontations -, subject the story material to an insistent aesthetic structuring. The stories set out the modern malaise the plot structures interrogate. The major events staged by the plays are less external actions newly occurring, as in Shakespeare or Brecht, than earlier events tragically *recalled and re-enacted* in the mind within the condensed time of the performance. Jennette Lee, in 1907, discussing *The Lady from the Sea*, noted how, in Ibsen's plots, like those of the Greek dramatists and unlike Shakespeare's, characters are made to recollect actions from the past which take on the vivid visual presence of immediate experience:

"one source of interest is the gradual unfolding of the precedent plot. It is a series of pictures each picture suggesting some phase of early action in its setting. Compare this method with that of the Shakespearean play in which the early lines narrate what slight precedent action is given. In Ibsen's play we see the Lighthouse, the Betrothal, the Sea,

the Stranger killing the Captain, wandering over the face of the waters, entering foreign ports, in the cabin of the ship reading the Norwegian paper, that tells of the marriage of his betrothed. All these are not merely events narrated. They are scenes..."²

IV. The Plot a Liberating Re-enactment of the Story

As in *Oedipus tyrannos*, these past events or precedent plots, now take the form of mentally re-enacted agons on-stage. Recollected urgently by the **plot**, they become intense realities of the *present* only, transformed *now* in the light of newly awakened consciousness. Past events take on reality *only* as objects of *present* consciousness. As the past can be validated *only* in present consciousness, (there is no other way our past can manifest itself) it IS present consciousness only; is only what present consciousness makes of it. And this present consciousness transforms the old events into a new, present reality. As Ibsen's John Gabriel Borkman proclaims:

"But what has happened doesn't repeat itself either. The eye transforms the action. And so a newborn eye can transform an old action."³

And it is in this capacity for the newborn eye to transform the old action that the *plot*, in Sophokles and Ibsen, asserts a human freedom over the inevitability of the structure of the past. Oedipus cannot undo his past: but he can, and does, freely decide tragically to know and acknowledge it, against the advice of Tiresias and Jocasta. In *The Lady from the Sea* it is through a decision in the present plot - Wangel's release of Ellida from her 'contract' - that "everything's transformed" in the past that had tyrannized her. The recollection and recreation of the past was a fundamental action of Hegelian dialectics and was to be reformulated in the philosophy of Nietzsche.

It is the function of the plots to bring about a vivid resurrection and recreation of past events, which are then experienced as mental actions in the immediate present. This means that the essential actions in Ibsen's plays, the plots, take place as internal, mental events. In Jennette Lee's words:

One who is accustomed to think of plot and action as synonymous must dissociate the two terms in taking up the work of Ibsen. His plays have plot in abundance, but nothing happens in them, any more than in one of Mr. Henry James novels. The action takes place in the soul of a character or in the relation between characters. There are few incidents - unless one regards the adventures of the soul as such.⁴

The *stories* represent an area of the arbitrary, the accidental and external, the realm of *seemingly* free, spontaneous actions often exhibiting rich variety of detail. It is only when they are *reconfigured as plots* that the events of the stories reveal the 'closed' structures of inevitable conflict, necessity, design, nemesis.

² The Ibsen Secret, 95

³ Ibsen; Volume III: Four Plays translated by Brian Johnston, with Rick Davis, Lyme, N.H. Smith and Kraus 1998) p. 168

⁴ The Ibsen Secret 88-89

The plots are the tribunals before which the stories are brought to be comprehended and judged. This mastery of the past by better comprehending it is the only freedom we can exert over it.

V. The Artificial Structuring of the Plot

The 'artificiality' of the Ibsen plot: its non-naturalistic timing, compression, ironic patterning and co-incidences, are not unfortunate residues from the formulae of the well-made-play. Ibsen is not setting out to offer a facsimile of everyday life and then somehow failing to achieve the miniscule tics and nuances of current 'realism' in film and TV. Such realism has nothing more consequential to do than dwell endlessly on the unremittingly commonplace. The Ibsen plot is the operation upon reality of an aesthetically demanding structuring. Its artifices should not be denied to show that Ibsen can be as good as the latest practitioner of banal verisimilitude. Instead, these artifices should be searched out and played up, making clear the selective intellectual/imaginative discipline Ibsen's plots bring to his fictive material.

In much the same way, Realists in painting, like Manet and the Impressionists, (Ibsen's contemporaries), select only those elements of the modern scene that can be made to conform to the needs and problems of the composition on the canvas. Everyday reality is not the Truth the artists are trying to replicate: on the contrary, everyday reality is re-organized, often radically, into aesthetic truth and included only as it is serviceable to the demands imposed by the canvas. The Salon that refused Manet or the Impressionists, proudly exhibited the realistically cluttered canvases of the genre painters.

Just as the Impressionist agenda set up formal requirements to which reality had to conform, so the Ibsen plot is a similarly alienating perspective brought to bear upon the subject matter of the stories. Good *realistic* dramatists (e.g. Harvey Granville-Barker), like the meticulously accurate Genre painters, much more plausibly render the texture and rhythms of everyday life than the *Realist* Ibsen - as any comparison between a page or two of *Ghosts* and of e.g. *Waste*, or *The Voysey Inheritance* will reveal. The plot structure of *The Voysey Inheritance* is obscured by the ongoing story's fussy rhythm of plausibly inconsequential everyday discourse and an arbitrary-seeming abundance of anecdotal detail. The plot of *Ghosts*, in contrast, is an uncomfortable and alarmingly felt *presence* violently molding the realistic details. We need to see that this contrast is to the advantage of Ibsen's tragic play, just as the violently selective discipline of Manet is more admirable than the alluring abundance of 'anecdotal' details of an Alma-Tadema.

VI. Contrast between the Drama and the Novel

To dwell upon the *story* of e.g. *Rosmersholm*, piecing together and re-organizing its details as a narrative or biographical structure, is to decode the text as if it

were a novel or case-history and not a play. Any order or design that then is detected, will emerge, not from within the structure of the play but from outside it - from the structuring ideology of the interpreter. "If we resurrect Rebecca's past," writes Freud in his famous study of Rebecca West, "expanding and filling in the author's hints, we may feel sure that she cannot have been without some inkling of the intimate relation between her mother and Dr. West...."⁵. Freud, in this instance, is substituting his own performance of 'resurrecting' the past for the resurrection already performed by Ibsen's plot. He ingeniously unearths from the story the Oedipal pattern he himself already buried there. He employs a discipline external to the play to impose coherence on the scattered elements of the story instead of discovering coherence in the dramatic/theatrical discipline by which these elements of the past are reconfigured, piece by piece, by the structuring consciousness of the ongoing plot. The plot is the tribunal before which the elements of the story are brought to be seen and understood.

By ignoring the play's plot structure, piecing together the 'author's hints' from a hypothetical past outside the plot, we may come up with an endless realm of conjecture on all the characters in the play, including no doubt, the girlhood of Mrs. Helseth. The necessarily incomplete histories a playwright supplies his or her characters are not meant to lure us towards "filling in the author's hints" and away from attention to the unfolding action of the plot but to serve, *thematically*, the plot emerging before our eyes. There is only so much fictional detail a dramatist *can* supply. Simply launching a story into the world renders it vulnerable to infinite speculative daydreaming on the part of those indifferent to aesthetic values. There always will be those who will fuss over how many children had Lady Macbeth.

Reading the plays, we should imagine, not 'real life' events but an ideal *theatrical performance*. Contrary to what George Lukacs believed, Ibsen is not telling, in the form of drama, what better would fit a novel. In his study *The Historical Novel*, Lukacs takes the scene in *Rosmersholm*, Act III where Rebecca West describes to Rosmer and Kroll the nature of her step-by-step actions that led to Beate's suicide. Lukacs pays Ibsen the very back-handed compliment of establishing, through his "unflinching honesty" that a play such as *Rosmersholm* "*could not become a real drama*." The reason for this, he claims, is that "at the decisive moment" of Rebecca's confession "we see that the actual drama, namely Rebecca West's struggle, tragic collision and conversion, is, as far as subject-matter, structure, action and psychology are concerned, really a novel, the last chapter of which Ibsen has clothed in the outward form of drama."⁶. Lukacs reads Ibsen's plays in the way A.C. Bradley read Shakespeare's tragedies: as incomplete Victorian novels where the reader is asked to supply the details of psychology and past motive that Shakespeare had only implied. Instead of seeing the drama Ibsen has written, Lukacs laments the absence of the "actual

⁵ Sigmund Freud, "Some Character Types Met With In Psychoanalytic Work" in Henrik Ibsen, Penguin Critical Anthologies, (p. 397)

⁶ Georg Lukacs, *The Historical Novel*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983) (p. 125)

drama" he believes the retrospective method is substituting for. His objections could apply as cogently to *Oedipus tyrannos*.

The past, in Ibsen, is not a way of getting the offstage story told through the restricted form of modern realism. In *Rosmersholm*, Ibsen is interested less in the violent story from the past than in the subtler movement of Rebecca's evolving consciousness, now, as the plot brings her, for the first time, to interrogate that past through the alienating perspective of her newly evolved identity. The somewhat lurid, 'Gothic' story is the material which the austere dialectic of the 'classic' plot works upon. Reshaping the past story into a new dialectic of evolving consciousness is the real subject of the play. The past emerges as an estranging dimension of the protagonists' present identity. The plot negotiates the stages whereby tragic reconciliation with this alien past is reached: a process that requires the alerted attention of the audience through each move within the tautly held time of performance. Michael Goldman describes the strategy of Ibsen's retrospective plotting in similar terms:

The neat interlinking of incident and information from the past that Ibsen developed ... may too easily be misread as a kind of novelistic narration.... In performance, however, an Ibsen play strikes us not as a retrospective description of past events but as an unfolding succession of conflicts. Its dialogue constitutes a series of mini-crises that force bits and pieces of the past, with their attendant fears and desires, to be discovered, suffered, defined by the actor/character in the present. The emphasis is on the rendering of spontaneous choice in continually emergent situations.⁷

Certain facts from the story are recalled at certain moments by the plot, because only at these precise moments in the sequence do they gain their significance for the evolving dialectic. Goldman admonishes:

There is a tendency...to see the plot as an expedient, a way of delivering other, more important materials. From this point of view, the aim of the plot is to get out of the way with as little distortion of reality as possible. Any pressure the plot imposes is likely to seem a limitation on Ibsen's artistry.⁸

He praises Ibsen's method for the unique formal or histrionic pressure the plot places on the actors, the escalating artistic demands for responsiveness their exchanges call for: a "dramaturgy of fear" - of confrontations, engineered by the plots, that do not permit evasion. The plots are not a means by which the stories get told: they are the essence of the plays, the primary reason for their being. In the formal structure of the Greek tragic theatre, the plays followed a predetermined structure from Prologue through Choral Odes and Episodes to Epilogue. This, variously handled, was a kind of catalyst into which the old myths and their modern resonances were drawn for a powerful cultural encounter. The Ibsen plot, with its dialectical and archetypal structure and its variations

⁷ Michael Goldman, Ibsen, *The Dramaturgy of Fear*. (New York: Columbia University Press 1999) (p. 39)

⁸ Ibid. p. 61

throughout the 12-play Cycle into which the various stories are drawn, performs a similarly powerful catalytic function.

In their ultimate, painfully arrived at identities, Rosmer and Rebecca achieve the union that earlier eluded them. Rosmer's heritage of law, order, tradition and repression of the instincts is made to confront Rebecca's opposite past of anarchy in origins, personal history and motives involving the instinctual transgressions of incest, adultery, and murderous action. Ibsen described the dialectic as a collision between the 'acquisitive instinct' that "hurries from conquest to conquest: and "the moral consciousness" that "has its roots deep in traditions and in the past generally."⁹ Rosmer and Rebecca, ambushed by their pasts, give up an anticipated future of liberated action in the political world for the demands of an ancient, evaded, punitive justice. The *plot* renders this outcome of the story inevitable.

The lurid story is the material the austere plot sets to work upon, and this reworking of the story is the real subject of the play. This could be fulfilled only by dramatic form, not by such a form as the novel. The past story is resurrected by the present plot to reveal consciousness under immediate pressure - which the performative terms of the theatre make unique to the dramatic method. There is no past except that which is immediately given to present consciousness. The past confronts the protagonists as a dimension - often an alien and estranging dimension - only of their *present* identity. The plot of the play negotiates the stages by which tragic knowledge - anagnorisis - is reached: a process that needs to hold the alerted attention of the audience through each increasingly fateful move within the tautly stretched time of performance: compelling a heightened complexity of response by the audience to the shape the emerging material of the story is now taking on. The histories of the characters the plays elaborate create the archetypal and metaphoric 'material' for their *present* consciousness to work upon.

VII. The Plot as Aesthetic Structuring

The controlled terms of the plots, as in a séance, allow the archetypal elements, that are unrealized or lost sight of in the stories, to reveal themselves more adequately and powerfully, as in the *Oedipus tyrannos*. Certain facts are recalled, such as those of Rebecca West's confession, only at certain moments in the play, because it is only at these moments *in the performance* that, through the organizing dynamic of the plot, they gain their meaning and significance. The *story* brings into the drama dimensions of the modern world in all its free-ranging and unorganized multiplicity, "the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" in T. S. Eliot's dyspeptic formulation. A great variety of stories taken from the modern world might be chosen as serviceable to his dramatic plotting. These give the plays their contemporary characteristics and relevance and give to the Cycle as a whole a wealth of human detail. The details

⁹ Ibsen: *Letter & Speeches*, Ed.. Evert Sprinchorn, (New York, Hill and Wang 1964) p.249

of the modern story generate metaphors and archetypes which it will be the job of the plot fatefully to regather and re-organize into a tragic dialectic of anagnorisis and peripeteia. While the stories in Ibsen's Cycle consequentially reveal a wide variety of modern situations, the plots by contrast return again and again to the same dual action:

- (a) the dialectical erosion of modernity's status as the truth of our human identity.
- (b) the recovery of archetypes and forces more adequate to that identity.

One might see this abiding plot structure as all the time waiting to ambush the stories that approach its lair. This recalls how, in Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, the cultural past, in sequence, is recovered and replayed as dialectical philosophy. In Ibsen's Cycle, the plays' stories set out the modern malaise and its cultural sources that the plot structures will transfigure. *Rosmersholm* and *The Master Builder* provide contrasting examples of plots that are not only recollections, but also condensed re-enactments of the past revealed through the story. The plot seems to gather up once again the elements of the past story for a more fatefully conscious recreation of events earlier more arbitrarily and thoughtlessly performed. This re-enactment of the earlier events by the plot also is a form of redemption of the past, an assertion of freedom by the protagonists over the inexorably completed past. What had been suffered or lost in the material world of action now can be recovered, in its essence, as spirit. In Sophokles' play, Oedipus could not change the events that condemned him but he was free to discover and acknowledge their tragic truth and to pass judgment upon himself. The world that John Gabriel Borkman lost as compromised material wealth and power, is regained, as spiritual aspiration, in his last dying speech. In their finally purified identities, Rosmer and Rebecca achieve the marriage that eluded them in the world of compromised action; and in *The Master Builder*, under Hilde's ambiguous promptings, Solness recreates his earlier Lysanger ascent and rebellion but now in full consciousness of their subversive implications.

VIII. Arbitrary Story vs. Logical Plot.

The histories, both given and implied, behind the plot of *Rosmersholm*, range far too widely over time and space to be summarized.¹⁰ They establish the totally disparate pasts of Rosmer and Rebecca which the plot then organizes into a clear dialectic confrontation. Rosmer's long established heritage of law, order, tradition and repression of the instincts - 'Civilization' - is made to confront Rebecca's past of lawlessness in origins, personal history and motives, involving the instinctual anarchy of incest, adultery, and concealed violence to gain her ends. It is for this thematic confrontation - the plot - that all the characters of the play are created and assembled.

¹⁰ A much more detailed account of both *Rosmersholm* and *The Master Builder* can be found in *The Ibsen Cycle*.

The histories of the major and minor characters of *Rosmersholm* are selected not because they actually occurred in 'real life' but because they contribute to a pattern of metaphoric identities, events, perspectives, which the action of the plot will reconfigure into a richly condensed dialectic. The characters need not account for themselves outside this dramatic function. The plot gathers all the elements of the characters' life-histories and the wide world in which these were acted out, and condenses them into the judgment-day of the play's performed action. The protagonists, Rosmer and Rebecca, ambushed by their pasts, are led inexorably to give up an anticipated future liberation in the political world for the demands of an ancient, evaded, punitive justice. In Rebecca's words as she prepares to end her life, "I am bound by the Rosmer view of life. If I have transgressed, I must atone." It is the plot that has rendered this outcome of the story inevitable.

The events of the past are not just recollected and re-examined but simultaneously re-enacted, replayed by the newly evolved consciousness of the plot. That is, the plot's gradual evolution of a consciousness that will view the past events from a devastating new perspective is accompanied at the same time by a grimly ironic, undetected *replay* of the events. Marvin Carlson has drawn attention to the plot's extraordinary symmetries where both Rosmer and Rebecca fatally re-enact, in sequence, the past histories from which they futilely endeavor to break free. For example, in one such re-enactment: "The four specific actions taken by the dead wife are precisely repeated and in order, by Rebecca - indeed, they serve as one basis for the four-act arrangement of the play."¹¹

The four actions performed in the past by the dead wife are:

- (i) Beate revealed to Kroll that Rosmer is falling into apostasy. Rebecca urges Rosmer to do this in **Act One**.
- (ii) Beate wrote a letter to Mortensgaard to protect Rosmer. Rebecca repeats this action in **Act Two**;
- (iii) Beate hinted to Kroll at a relationship between Rosmer and Rebecca. Rebecca confesses this to Kroll in **Act Three**.
- (iv) Beate threw herself into the millstream as do Rebecca and Rosmer in **Act Four**.

The **plot** of the play restructures the elements of the story into a fatalistic, tragic agon of re-enactment whereby these elements now take on clearer dialectical and archetypal identity. The characters, as Carlson notes, are set out in terms of clear ideological opposition:

¹¹ Marvin Carlson: 'Patterns of Structure and Character in Ibsen's *Rosmersholm*' in *Modernism in Modern Drama: Ibsen, Strindberg, Pirandello, Beckett* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1998) p. 25

Conservative

Rosmer
Kroll
Mrs. Helseth
Beate

Radical

Rebecca
Mortensgaard
Ulrik Brendel
Dr. West

This opposition extends, metaphorically, into deeper and broader cultural, historical and archetypal dimensions. The individual stories of Rosmer, Rebecca, Kroll, Kroll's wife and children, Mortensgaard, Brendel, Mrs. Helseth, Beate, Dr. West, Rebecca's mother, Rosmer's father, etc., etc., can be extended and dispersed indefinitely and ultimately into formless infinity; but the *plot* of the play by its form and compression, prevents this dispersion imposing unity and coherence upon the subject matter. This becomes evident, also, in the *symbolic symmetry* of the plot's act by act progression:

ACT ONE: Evening:

Rosmer's Present.

Rosmer and Rebecca prepare to challenge society.

Ulrik Brendel appears, sharing this challenge Rosmer and Kroll break apart:

Rosmer and Rebecca are united.

First suggestion of the dead wife's accusation

Play opens with a reference to the millrace beyond the window.

ACT TWO: Morning:

Rosmer's Past.

Kroll counterattacks.

Brendel also attacked by his companions.

Mortensgaard enlisted on the side of Rosmer.

Rosmer now associated with pagan and sexual transgressors.

The dead wife's accusation now openly articulated - by Kroll and Mortensgaard.

Rosmer as himself seen as sexual transgressor.

Rosmer and Rebecca begin to separate.

ACT THREE: Morning:

Rebecca's Past.

Full scale attack upon Rosmer and Rebecca by Kroll and his associates.

Kroll confronts Rebecca with the truth of her 'origins': illegitimate, incestuous relation to her father.

She also is seen as 'seducer' of Kroll, Beate and Rosmer.

Rosmer and Rebecca now seem poles apart.

ACT FOUR: Evening:

Rebecca's Present. Rosmer and Rebecca give up their challenge to society, contemplating their defeat and separation.

Ulrik Brendel re-appears, sharing their defeat.

Rosmer and Rebecca now re-unite in a marriage and suicide.

Play closes with a reference to the millrace beyond the window.

A strictly realistic imitation of everyday modern life would not reveal such parallels and symmetries. The characters' histories are modern, complicated and could proliferate endlessly into the subjective conjectures so many commentators

love to indulge: the *plot* is archetypal, 'formal' and in its agonistic procedure draws the proliferating details into a coherent, objective and dialectical structure. The histories, inevitably, are inconclusive and incomplete. By containing only those details that will prove serviceable to the plot, they contain very evident lacunae of the kind described by L.C. Knights in 'How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth'. We know nothing of Rosmer's mother, nor precisely why Brendel was horsewhipped from Rosmersholm by Rosmer's father; little of how Mortensgaard's adulterous affair evolved or why Mrs. Helseth so detests Kroll's wife. The plots do not require more details from the story than Ibsen has provided. To search for more is to look outside the play and therefore to abandon interpretation.

The dialogue of *Rosmersholm's* concluding moments closes off one vista after another of previous consciousness as it narrows down to a search for a new precision of motive and moral condition:

ROSMER: Husband and wife must go together.

REBECCA: Just to the footbridge, John.

ROSMER: And onto it as well. As far as you go - I'll go that far with you. For now I dare to.

REBECCA: Are you sure beyond all doubt - this is the best way for you?

ROSMER: I know it's the only one.

REBECCA: What if you're deceiving yourself. If this is only a fantasy? One of those white horses of Rosmersholm.

ROSMER: It could well be. We can never escape them - we of this house.

REBECCA: Then stay, John!

ROSMER: The husband shall go with his wife as the wife with her husband.

REBECCA: Yes, but tell me first: Is it you who follow me? Or is it I who follow you?

ROSMER: We can never get to the bottom of that.

REBECCA: I want so much to know.

ROSMER: We follow each other, Rebecca. I, you and you, me.

REBECCA: I believe that could be true.

ROSMER: For now we two are one.

REBECCA: Yes. Now we're one! Let's go gladly!

The movement of the whole play began by opening up broad vistas of liberating action within the political world and now contracts to this impasse. The audience's attention focuses closely on each mental move by the protagonists. The wide world of opposing political factions, of a cultural war between extremists and their followers on both left and right, and of an envisaged new order transforming the world, has contracted to this couple's final anguished, mutual interrogation which is the quintessence of the play's whole wide-ranging dialectic. The pair of lover-reformers who wished to unite to transform the world is driven to isolation, each from the other, within his and her brooding, ever-more-narrowly circling obsessions. The darkness of the abyss within each is reflected in the darkness outside; the sparsely lit room and beyond, the night with its relentlessly awaiting millstream. These theatrical notations are as precise as in music and are meant to be appreciated as art, as aesthetic control. The pair's plunge into the millstream signals the closing off of the world they envisaged

entering and transforming. The plot has manipulated dialogue and scene to this imploding spiritual condition of the protagonists' chosen liberation from a past that, from the beginning, has been closing in on them inexorably.

IX. Plot and Story in *The Master Builder*

In *The Master Builder* the plot and its structure reconfigure the fragmentary material offered by the bewildering story in a way opposite to the movement of inexorable closure of *Rosmersholm*. The details of the story proliferate so diffusely they could beget a whole series of novels: the childhood's of Halvard and Aline; their marriage; his career; the breaking of Old Brovik and of other rivals Solness "hammered to the ground"; the birth and brief life of the twins; the fire; Aline's disastrous reaction and later death-in-life; the love of Ragnar and Kaja; her mysterious visit to Solness and later enthrallment; Solness's visit to Lysanger; his climbing the tower and meeting with Hilde Wangel; her home life; his growing alarm about the younger generation. Here, as with the story of *Rosmersholm*, is a field for endless speculation and daydreaming: but the plot of the play like a kaleidoscope, gathers these fragments into a meaningful pattern.

The main 'arc' of the play is from Solness's tortuous confinement and brooding obsession in the opening scenes to his self-affirmation at the close. The three acts of the plot visually signal a liberation from opening confinement and brooding obsession through a sequence, act by act, of progressively expanding light and space, a visual emancipation of the scene accompanied by an increasing emancipation of metaphoric vistas in the dialogue. In Act One, the scene is an artificially lit, windowless workroom; in Act Two it is a drawing room with large bay windows and flooding light; in Act III it is open air, a verandah, the scene bathed in the light of a sunset. And this visual expansion, like the contrasting movement of visual contraction in *Rosmersholm*, (and *Hedda Gabler*) is repeated in the dialogues and actions of the play. The awakening consciousness of Halvard Solness, under the prompting of Hilde Wangel, haltingly but gradually abandons its legacy of guilt and fear of retribution and joins in creating a version of the past which, though it may or may not be what "actually happened" is what "*ought to*" have happened because it recreates the past more adequately to the needs of the present.

To the pragmatist, there is something very wrong with a plot procedure that seems very cavalier with regard to the actual facts of the story: to the 'idealist', something momentarily right is taking place, as the past is being transformed through 'creative memory' into something more adequate to the needs of the spirit. Details such as Solness's (named after the sun) encountering Hilde Wangel at Lysanger ('lys' = light), being challenged to rise and fall at the autumnal equinox, the whole immensely elaborate metaphoric detail and patterning in the play involving increasing on-stage light and space, a verbal imagery of churches, houses, castles in the air, a fire in winter, dead twins, helpers and servers (both visible and invisible), the collision of youth and

maturity, harps in the air, a challenge to the Creator, and so on are now being 'worked' for metaphoric and archetypal, more than for factual value: That is, for their value as a network of interconnecting elements within the kaleidoscope of the plot, not as a proliferation of facts drawn from a hypothetical world beyond the plot.

These highly charged details selectively create the play's governing metaphors. A struggle takes place to establish the dominant language of the play and, by means of the plot, it is the metaphoric language of Solness and Hilde that wins out against the pragmatic language of, for example, Dr. Herdal or Ragnar Brovik. Remarkably, the play repeats the same action in each of its three acts: each act beginning with Solness's despairing self-recriminations in which the past seems to overwhelm and defeat him and each ending with his exultant affirmation of overcoming this past. As the same story is repeated it gathers more and more of both negative and positive 'content' from the past.

The effect of this remarkable sequence of repetition is that an incrementally increasing 'positive' past of Solness (the Lysanger ascent, challenge to the creator and alliance with the 'princess') is seen to struggle with an incrementally increasing negative past. This spiritual battle is metaphorically transposed into the image of Solness struggling with the Creator at the top of the tower accompanied, in Hilde's imagination, by the sound of harps. The effect on the audience is of experiencing the terms of the play's **story** escaping the limiting pragmatism of the Dr. Herdal version of events, for more liberating or more audacious terms of consciousness.

Hilde brings to Solness a startling story, which he is made creatively to recollect and then to link challengingly with his own selectively remembered past of guilty triumph and transgression against Aline. Whether Solness acted as Hilde recounts is deliberately kept ambiguous and he might have rejected this story for either a more common-sense or a more penitent version of events; but the plot of the play will show him accepting and developing the subversively audacious dimensions of her version of the story until it becomes a reality that he acknowledges as his own: his "new born eye transforms the old action" of the story. Until Hilde's arrival, it was the self-punitive and penitential version of his past that afflicted Solness: similar to the constrictive judgment and demand for atonement of *Rosmersholm*. Against this, Hilde will revive and activate the Faustian challenge of the Lysanger ascent. From one perspective, Solness destroys himself through a delusional acceding to Hilde's misreading of past events. From an alternative perspective, he liberates himself by letting the metaphoric or mythopoetic significance of the story take hold of him. The decisive moment of this ambiguous action is at the conclusion of Act Two:

HILDA: (*Look searchingly at him*) Is it true, or isn't it?

SOLNESS: That I get dizzy?

HILDA: That my master builder *dare* not - *can* not climb as high as he builds?

SOLNESS: Is that the way you see it?

HILDA: Yes.
 SOLNESS: I'm beginning to feel there's scarcely a corner in me that's safe from you.
 HILDA: (*Looks toward the bay window.*) Up there then. All the way up.
 SOLNESS: (*Coming closer*) In the topmost room in the tower - you could live there, Hilda. You could live like a princess.
 HILDA: (*Mysteriously, between earnest and jest*) Yes, that's what you promised.
 SOLNESS: Did I, in fact?
 HILDA: Really masterbuilder! You said I was to be a princess. And that I'd get a kingdom from you. And so you took me and - Well!
 SOLNESS: (*Seriously*) Are you quite sure this isn't some kind of dream - some fantasy - that's taken hold of you?
 HILDA (*Scornfully*) That perhaps you didn't do it?
 SOLNESS: I scarcely know myself - . (*More softly*) But one thing I know for certain - that I -
 HILDA: That you - Say it now!
 SOLNESS: That I *ought* to have done it.

The scene concludes with Solness's promise to hang the wreath over his new home: that is to establish, in the *present*, a triumphant *past* as a 'solid foundation' for *future* existence. In the modern bourgeois setting Hilda and Solness are validating a heroized, semi-mythic fable, of the Lysanger ascent, the towered castle with its princess, the singing in the air, the challenge to the Creator, the passionate embrace. Their ecstatic rewriting of the script of their mutually affirmed 'reality' will undergo further fabulous elaboration in the following Act. We cannot know if any of this recollected past actually happened and the skeptical critic (and the play has many) may demur at the mythopoetic extensions of the story Hilda and Solness perform. We witness Solness taking Hilda's story, accepting its 'fabulous' dimensions, and asserting its ideal truth - "I *ought* to have done it." Whether the events actually happened in the past, their validation is happening *now*... The final scene of the play, of Solness's ascent of the tower, his challenge to the Creator, watched by Hilde and the crowd of spectators, is not just a recollection, but a *re-enactment*, of the most subversive elements of the past action:

HILDA (mountains) At beginning of the play	Tower	SOLNESS At Lysanger and the end of the play
SOLNESS (below) (windowless workroom) At beginning of the play	Churchyard	HILDA (below) Among spectators At Lysanger and the end of the play

The play's *plot* - the immediate action on the stage - is refashioning the past history - Solness's story of long retribution and defeat and one forgotten action at Lysanger. Solness and Hilde confront the past and 'remold it nearer to the heart's desire', freeing it from the constrictions of the moral and imaginative norms that would oppose them. In the struggle for the play's dominant language, the plot's metaphoric and archetypal impulses strain against the tyranny of factual history; and this is true also of the play's final staged action: the tower ascent and the

struggle with the Creator that Hilde envisions. Wonder and terror are generated in the onlookers by the somewhat banal act of a middle-aged architect with vertigo climbing a scaffolding while Hilde and the skeptical and resentful Ragnar duel to establish the appropriate language for the event :

HILDA: (*With jubilant, quiet intensity*) At last! Now I see him great and free again!

RAGNAR: (*Almost speechless*) But all this -

HILDA: This is how I've seen him all these ten years. How strong he stands! Fearfully thrilling, after all. Look at him! Now he's hanging the wrath on the spire!

RAGNAR: All this I'm seeing here is completely impossible.

HILDA: Yes, it's the impossible, now that he's doing. (*With the inscrutable look in her eyes*). Can you see anyone else up there with him?

RAGNAR: There's no-one else.

HILDA: Yes, there's someone he's struggling with.

RAGNAR: You're mistaken.

HILDA: Can't you hear singing in the air, either?

RAGNAR: It must be the wind in the treetops.

HILDA: I hear a singing. A powerful singing. (*Crying out in joyful exultation*) Look, look! Now he's waving his hat. Waving down to us here. Oh, wave back up to him there. For now, now it is fulfilled! (*Snatches the white shawl from the doctor, waves it and cries out.*) Hurray, for master builder Solness!

DR. HERDAL: Stop! Stop! For God's sake!

In *The Master Builder* the attempt to find the adequate expression for what necessarily resists precise formulation opens up the dialogue of the final moments to such indefinite imagery as "castles in the air" a 'kingdom' and a battle with the Creator, a "great singing in the air" - dialogue that finds its visual stage counterpart in the sun-streaked sky, the ascending Solness, above, and, below, the gathered crowd of alarmed or rapt observers and the accompanying music. Against the triumph claimed by Hilda is counterpointed the negative voice of Ragnar and Herdal's alarmed warning as Hilda *repeats* the Lysanger action of waving the white object (this time Aline's shawl) that signaled the earlier act of worship and dangerous discipleship. Solness falls and is killed which would seem to validate Ragnar and Herdal's view of events: but Hilda's refusal to accept this as defeat - "But he went right to the top. And I heard harps in the air" and the visual symbolism of this scene, in striking contrast to the final darkness of *Rosmersholm*, insists that this is at the least a contested outcome. Retelling the *story*, it is possible to decide that Hilde is delusional and to see the play as a cautionary tale for middle aged men on encountering youthful sirens. However, to attend to the *plot* of the play, its evolution on the stage from the opening scene of tormented confinement to the final moments of exultant affirmation by both protagonists, (the expansive action attended by an emphatic on-stage visual and verbal imagery of increasing freedom), is to find such a cautionary reading drastically inadequate.

The plot has engaged with the past story, has gradually discarded its negative content, and has allowed its affirmative energies to emerge. The contrast with the plot movement of *Rosmersholm* could not be more emphatic. In both plays, however, the realm of the arbitrary, enacted by the stories, is replayed by the

liberating logic of the plots. In *Rosmersholm* the re-enactment culminates in an act of freely chosen judgment and expiation upon actions and motives at last more adequately comprehended: in *The Master Builder* a constricting and deadly version of the past is set aside and replaced by one that re-asserts the human spirit's Faustian ambition for transcendence. The plots of the plays impose coherence upon the scattered details of the past. In Nietzschean terms, History is always about the present - about what the present decides to make of the past for its projects for the future. This **redemption of the past** is the subversive lesson Zarathustra claimed to have given to humanity.

I taught them to work on the future and redeem with their creation all that has been. To redeem what is past in man and to recreate all "it was" until the will says "Thus I willed it! Thus I shall will it! - this I call redemption and this alone I taught them to call redemption."¹²

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Collected Works*, XI, 34