

On Ibsen and Strindberg

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The Reversed Telescope

By

Franco Perrelli

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PREFACE

This collection presents a partial balance of many years of study and offers a wide range of revised texts: proceedings, lectures, and essays, which were presented on different occasions and published in academic journals and books which are not always easy to find:

1. “Ibsen and the Italian Risorgimento.” *Il Castello di Elsinore*, no. 65 (2012): 47–55; “Henrik Ibsen og den italienske Risorgimento.” In *Lyset kommer fra Sør*, edited by Elettra Carbone and Giuliano D’Amico, 178–193. Oslo: Gyldendal, 2011 (lecture in Oslo, Nasjonalbiblioteket, 23rd November 2011);
2. [“Nora’s Tarantella”], “Some More Notes about Nora’s Tarantella.” In *Ibsen and the Arts: Painting—Sculpture—Architecture*, edited by Astrid Sæther, 119–131. Oslo: Centre for Ibsen Studies, 2002 (paper, Rome, International Ibsen Conference, “Ibsen and the Arts”, 24th–27th October 2001);
3. “Theatrical Roles, Feminism and Demonism in Ibsen’s Plays.” In *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai, Philologia*, 27–32. Cluj-Napoca: Universitatea a Babeş-Bolyai, vol. 3, 2006; “Ibsen. Roles teatrales, feminismo y demonios en los dramas ibsenianos.” In *Reencuentro con Henrik Ibsen: Reflexiones sobre su obra*, edited by José Ramón Alcántara Mejía and Elena de los Reyes Aguirre, 51–61. Ciudad de México: Universidad Iberoamericana, 2011 (lecture in Ciudad de México, UNAM, April 2006);
4. “Eleonora Duse’s Idealistic Ibsen.” *North-West Passage*, no. 4 (2007): 113–127 (paper, Nanjing, 4th International Ibsen Conference, 9th–14th November 2006);
5. “The Strange Case of Dr Ibsen and Mr Strindberg.” *North-West Passage*, no. 2 (2005): 147–156 (paper, Turin, International Conference, “Ibsen: the Dark Side”, 20th–25th October 2004);
6. “Strindberg in the Italian Nineteenth-Century Theatrical Canon” (unpublished paper, Kraków, 20th International Strindberg Conference, “Strindberg and the Western Canon”, Jagiellonian University, 1st–4th June 2017);
7. [“Strindberg and Greek Tragedy”], “A Note on Strindberg and Euripides.” *North-West Passage*, no. 1 (2004): 69–78;
8. “August Strindberg and Georg Fuchs.” *North-West Passage*, no. 6 (2009): 69–77 (paper, Turin, International Conference, “Strindberg: Drama and Theatre”, 6th–8th November 2008);
9. [“Ibsen in Anti-Ibsenian Theatre”], “Ibsen into the Anti-Ibsenian Theatre” (*abridged version of the paper*). In *The Living Ibsen. Proceedings – The 11th*

International Ibsen Conference (21st–27th August 2006), 463–8. Oslo: Centre for Ibsen Studies, 2007.

This book aims to shed new light on some curious and original aspects of the two great modern Scandinavian dramatists, Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg. Both writers are observed with a novel intercultural approach, through a sort of *reversed telescope*, which often extends beyond their usual Nordic context.

My gratitude goes to Prof. Roberto Alonge, founder and co-director of the scientific review “North-West Passage” but also companion of many cultural trips in the world. Thanks to Leonardo Mancini and Joanne Parsons for their advice in editing and to Hilary Siddons for the final linguistic revision. fp

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- HISV = Henrik Ibsen, *Samlede Verker. Hundreårsutgave*, 21 vols, edited by Francis Bull, Halvdan Koht, and Didrik A. Seip. Oslo: Gyldendal, 1928–58;
- HIS = Henrik Ibsen, *Skrifter*, 17 vols, edited by Vigdis Ystad *et al.* Oslo: Aschehoug, 2005–10;
- ASB = *August Strindbergs Brev*, 22 vols, edited by Torsten Eklund and Björn Meidal. Stockholm: Bonniers, 1948–96;
- ASSV = August Strindberg, *Samlade verk*, 72 vols, edited by Lars Dahlbäck *et al.* Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell-Norstedts, 1981–2013.

CHAPTER ONE

IBSEN AND THE ITALIAN *RISORGIMENTO*

There is no doubt that the European revolutions of 1848–49 acted as historical sparks that stimulated and nourished Ibsen’s creativity. The epicentre of these revolutions was in France, but the widespread anti-Hapsburg movement also involved the Czech and Hungarian populations, as well as the Italians, who experienced the protracted shock of the insurrections in Lombardy-Veneto: the first ill-fated war of independence led by King Carlo Alberto from Piedmont, and the Roman Republic. In the late Preface of February 1875 to *Catilina* (1850)—his first play, which not incidentally was the fruit of those difficult times (1848–49)—Ibsen recalls the “exciting and stormy times” and “the February Revolution [...], the revolutions in Hungary and elsewhere, the Prussian-Danish war over Schleswig and Holstein”, adding:

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

Ibsen’s impassioned lyric *To Hungary!* (*Til Ungarn!*) was written against the background of a Hungary crushed by repression and ready to become “a second Poland”. However, it went beyond the Magyar revolution to sing the praises of the “new generations that took revenge on the throne,/ like an autumn hurricane to bring down the pillars of tyranny” (HIS 11, 45–6) and, therefore, exalted the radical reasons for the European *Risorgimenti*. The approximately contemporary lyric *Awake, Scandinavians!* (*Vaagner Skandinaver!*) addressed “to the Norwegian and Swedish brothers” stressed the urgency of creating solidarity and unity among the Nordic

¹ Henrik Ibsen, *Letters and Speeches*, ed. Evert Sprinchorn (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 9.

peoples against “the German aggressor who is rising up to pillage/ a part of Danish territory”: Schleswig-Holstein, “holy land for the Nordic race” (HIS 11, 46 ff.).

In the Preface to *Catilina*, Ibsen is right, then, to speak of the events of 1848 as having “a powerful and formative effect on [his] development” (HIS 1, 129);² an *effect* which, as might have been expected, did not only concern him individually but was also opening up the consciousness and the culture of Norway to new horizons, thereby activating a process that expanded and gained strength in the following decade. Around 1859, in particular in the journalism of Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, we can see the beginnings of a convergence between the continental (mainly Italian) *Risorgimenti*, the movement for the independence of Norway (a “partly colonial partly postcolonial” nation), and a broader Scandinavianism,³ a political and cultural movement which at that time—again quoting Ibsen—supported “the spirit of brotherhood of the North/ which unites Norwegians, Danes and Swedes” (HIS 11, 47).⁴

Looking more closely at Ibsen and Bjørnson’s sensitivity, something more profound was developing than an immediate harmony with the “exciting and stormy times” of national reawakening. Through this *tumult*, certain themes came into focus that were to be peculiar to these great

² Ibsen, 8–9.

³ “Politically, it was neither quite dependent nor quite independent”, explains Toril Moi, alluding to the various conditions of political *union* that, since 1380, had linked Norway to Denmark and, from 1814, after the Napoleonic wars, to Sweden, conditioning its linguistic and cultural identity; cf. Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism. Art, Theatre, Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2006), 39 ff. Jon Nygaard, “The Wilder the Starting Point: Some Critical Remarks to Michael Meyer’s *Ibsen: A Biography*,” *Scandinavian Studies*, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 76, is of a different opinion: “In Norway’s relation to Denmark and Sweden, it is [...] first and foremost a question [...] of being a part of a common Scandinavian world expressed already from the late eighteenth century in the allegorical figures of the triplet sisters, Dana, Svea, and Nora, which in turn was the background for the pan-Scandinavian movement (Skandinavismen) from the late 1840s”.

⁴ See *Awake, Scandinavians!* Later, once they came into contact with the German *Risorgimento*, Ibsen’s Scandinavianist ideals underwent a certain metamorphosis: “Like most Norwegian Scandinavians, I am a pan-Germanist. I look upon Scandinavianism only as a transitional phase leading to the confederation of the whole Germanic race” (HIS 13, 113; Ibsen, *Letters and Speeches*, 136); see also a letter of 1872 to Peter Friedrich Siebold, in which—despite the parallel writing of the anti-German poem *The Change in Direction (Nordens signaler)*—the greatness of Bismarck is recognised, as is the need for more balanced relations between Germany and Denmark (HIS 11, 622 ff.; 13, 51; Ibsen, *Letters and Speeches*, 116).

Nordic playwrights of the turn of the century, who were so important for the renewal of the entire European stage.

If we take an article by Bjørnson in *Bergensposten* of July 1859—written just after the armistice of Villafranca—we see how the stern warning to Napoleon III, who seemed to be neglecting his commitment to the independence of Italy, also concerned “nations near and far”. However, through the theme of national liberation, the article firstly aimed at the realisation of a more universal liberation “from egoism, from miserable calculations, from restriction in small circuits of ideas, petty, petit-bourgeois, feeble”.⁵ These words almost coincide with those of Ibsen in a letter dated 3rd December 1865 to Magdalene Thoresen:

Anyone from up there who has managed to retain a certain amount of human feeling becomes keenly conscious down here that there is something more worth having than a clever head, and that is a whole soul, I know of mothers away up in the Piedmont, in Genoa, Novara, Alessandria, who took their boys of fourteen from school to let them go with Garibaldi on his daring expedition to Palermo. Nor was it a case of saving their country then, but simply of realizing an idea. How many of the members of our Storting do you suppose will do the same when the Russians enter Finmark? With us any deed that asks more of us than getting through the day is “impossible” (HIS 12, 194).⁶

For Bjørnson and Ibsen, the Italian *Risorgimento* seems to have been above all an event charged with an ideal power that went beyond the measure of normal political practice. As such, it could stand as an example for the renewal of consciousness in relation to the social, and still more moral, actions of peoples and individuals, broadening the field of the possible to the impossible and the Utopian, and already prefiguring themes that are characteristic of these two writers.

One need only think of Ibsen—on the point of writing *A Doll's House* (*Et dukkehjem*) announcing the dissolution of patriarchal relations, which were keeping women and young people in subjugation—invoking, in almost the same words as had been used by Bjørnson, the necessary conflict with “the worldly wisdom of the old”, with “men with little ambitions and little thoughts, little scruples and little fears” (HIS 16, 488).⁷

⁵ Christen Christian Collin, *Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson. Hans barndom og ungdom* (Kristiania: Aschehoug & Co., 1907), I:370 ff.

⁶ Ibsen, *Letters and Speeches*, 49.

⁷ Michael Meyer, *Ibsen. A Biography*, 3rd ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), 469–70.

One might subsequently have the impression that from time to time Ibsen's enthusiasm for the Italian *Risorgimento*—in its concrete, less ideal aspects—took a somewhat attenuated form, to the point that just after finishing *Peer Gynt*, in October–November 1867, he expressed a certain irritation at having been indirectly involved in Garibaldi's unhappy invasion of the papal lands (“To the devil with the whole war!”; cf. HIS 12, 277–8, 324) and, indeed, in a letter to Georg Brandes of 20th December 1870, he branded the Italian repossession of Rome with a memorable epigram: “They have finally taken Rome away from us human beings and given it to the politicians” (HIS 12, 439).⁸

In a splendid book on the *Risorgimento*, Lucio Villari has put this assertion into context, showing that fundamentally Ibsen was expressing a judgment that was shared both by broad sectors of public opinion and by Giuseppe Mazzini himself, albeit on a different level; in any case it reflected the not illegitimate “dissent of politicians, entrepreneurs, and personalities of Northern and European culture at the prospect of a capital city, symbol of the most ancient history and of the greatest art, reduced to the role of backcloth to the political stage and inevitably to that of huge bureaucratic and administrative machine”.⁹

As Fredrik Bætzmann was to point out in his lengthy historical essay on the Italian *Risorgimento*, the singular political position of Norway with respect to Sweden and, culturally, Denmark; the parallel influence of Scandinavianism (cf. note 3), particularly among the student elite and intellectual elite; and the related tensions between the Nordic kingdoms and Russia, Austria, and Prussia, in particular on the age-old question of Schleswig-Holstein (which, until 1866, was to run fatefully parallel to the genesis of Italian unity), drove the peoples of Northern Europe to sympathise with the struggle for liberation in Italy.¹⁰

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

⁸ Ibsen, *Letters and Speeches*, 106.

⁹ Lucio Villari, *Bella e perduta. L'Italia del Risorgimento* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2009), 325–6, 330.

¹⁰ Fredrik Bætzmann, *Italiens frihedskamp. Fortællinger og skildringer* (Kristiania: H. Aschehoug & Co., 1911), 546. Cf. in general Franco Perrelli, “Il Risorgimento italiano visto dalla Scandinavia,” *Il Castello di Elsinore*, no. 63 (2011): 45 ff.

Take this embassy with you to your homeland:
 where your banners wave,
 that too is the direction of the North.¹¹

The complicated dispute over Schleswig-Holstein (a borderland with a mixed Germanic and Scandinavian population) was a long way from resolution in 1861. The dispute had broken out in March 1848 and had ended honourably for Denmark after a war which—thanks in part to a degree of support from Sweden and to the favourable attitude of the great powers—had succeeded in halting the German claims to the territories that were under its control (see also the lyric by Ibsen *In Danger at Sea* [*Havsnød*]; HIS 11, 297 ff.). Moreover, it was at the centre of Prussian manoeuvring, which had the more ambitious aim of gaining primacy in the Germanic confederation. From March to November 1863, it was the Danish crown that made the situation precipitate, when it partially incorporated Schleswig and prompted Bismarck to re-ignite the conflict at the end of the year in alliance with Austria. Faced with an adversary with double the number of troops, abandoned by England, and without the aid promised by the united kingdom of Sweden and Norway, the new war almost immediately proved disastrous for the Danes and led to their defeat, involving the loss of a considerable part of their national territory.

Ibsen's indignation at this betrayal of the Scandinavianist ideal, as he travelled to Italy in 1864, was great, and it can be felt in a poem with the unequivocal title, *A Brother in Peril!* (*En broder i nød!*). "Save your brother!", Ibsen had sung in 1849: "Hold out to your brother nation a friendly, fraternal hand" (HIS 11, 48, 53). In December 1863, his lines rang out in infinitely more desperate tones:

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

Nothing remained for the Norwegians who had been "saved/ within [their] hallowed plot", unmindful of the promise of help in the moment of battle, but to scatter through the world, concealing their national identity, dishonoured by their blameworthy indifference (HIS 11, 514 ff.).¹² The situation recalls precisely what Peer Gynt does at the end of Act III of the

¹¹ Bætzmann, *Italiens frihedskamp*, 546.

¹² Henrik Ibsen, *Poems*, ed. John Northam (Oslo: Norwegian U.P., 1986), 58.

eponymous drama and, for Ibsen, this was the typical incarnation of the Norway of the time.

This was the moment of “the great disillusionment”,¹³ clearly apparent in the poem, *Grounds for Confidence* (*Troens grund*, original title: *In Time of Dybbøl* [*Fra Dybbøl-dagene*]), which was written in the summer of 1864 (cf. HIS 11, 516 ff.) and in the letters Ibsen sent from Italy. In these letters, Ibsen openly denounces the weakness and lack of cohesion of the Nordic peoples in marked contrast to the *abnegation* shown by the Italians in their *Risorgimento*. We have seen this in the letter of 3rd December 1865 to Magdalene Thoresen, where Ibsen had in fact clearly stated:

My journey down here was by no means a pleasure trip, I assure you. I was in Berlin when the triumphal entry took place. I saw the rabble spit into the mouths of the cannon from Dybbøl, and to me it seemed an omen that history will one day spit in the face of Sweden and Norway because of their behaviour then (HIS 12, 195).¹⁴

Ibsen was simply repeating obsessively what he had written to Bjørnson on 28th January of the same year:

But I cannot keep myself from dwelling with sadness on the situation at home, nor was I able to do so during my whole journey. If I had stayed longer in Berlin, where I saw the triumphal entrance in April, with the howling rabble tumbling about among the trophies from Dybbøl, riding on the gun carriages and spitting into the mouths of the cannon—the cannon that received no help and yet went on shooting until they burst—I think I should have gone out of my mind (HIS 12, 175–6).¹⁵

Ibsen was to state with equal clarity to his Danish publisher Frederik Hegel, in March 1866: “Norway and Sweden have a terrible debt of blood to wash away, and I feel that it is my task in life to use the gifts God has given me to awaken my countrymen from their torpor and to force them to see where the great questions are leading us...” (HIS 12, 209–10).¹⁶

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

¹³ Halvdan Koht, *Henrik Ibsen. Eit Diktarliv* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1954), I:218 ff.

¹⁴ Ibsen, *Letters and Speeches*, 49.

¹⁵ Ibsen, 39–40.

¹⁶ Ibsen, 54–5.

[...] the [Danish-Prussian] war began. I wrote a poem *En broder i nød!* [...] It had no effect against the Norwegian Americanism that had driven me back at every point. That's when I went into exile! About the time of my arrival in Copenhagen, the Danes were defeated at Dybbøl. In Berlin I saw Kaiser Wilhelm's triumphal entry with trophies and war booty. During those days *Brand* began to grow within me like an embryo. When I arrived in Italy, the work of unification there had already been completed by means of a spirit of self-sacrifice that knew no bounds, while in Norway! (HIS 12, 428).¹⁷

The comparison with the Italian *Risorgimento* is confirmed once again in Ibsen's poetic writings, where he had the opportunity to make an impassioned and sometimes bitter reflection on the fates of Scandinavia and of the West in general. One poem, written in the second half of the 1860s, is known to us only by its Italian title, *Italia unita*. It stresses the attraction of the *unitary synthesis* of a people, which Ibsen also preached in his 1863 play *The Pretenders* (*Kongs-Emnerne*), in a cultural climate which was generally imbued with Hegelianism.

Italia unita is presumably echoed in part in the lyric *Far Distant* (*Langt borte*) written in Munich in June 1875 (cf. HISV 14, 446, 525), in which Ibsen sternly calls on the Nordic students who were meeting in Uppsala to consider the example of the Italian (but also German) youth if they were not to remain trapped in a dangerous and paralysing lethargy (*døsen*). This lethargy recalls on one hand the moral drowsiness which, in *Peer Gynt*, is symbolised by the Great Curve, and on the other it seems to be the implicit consequence of the facile semi-independence of the Norwegians, gained in 1814 not with the people's "spirit of self-sacrifice that knew no bounds", but rather by means of an agreement between great powers:

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

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

That was the century's cloud-misted dawning.
Now Engelsborg's flying the flag this morning (HIS 11, 599 ff.).¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibsen, 101–2.

¹⁸ Ibsen, *Poems*, 124.

Another poem worthy of note, from 1872, is *At the Millennial Celebrations (Ved Tusendårs-festen den 18de Juli 1872)*, which was dedicated to the anniversary of the reunification of the Kingdom of Norway by Harald Hårfagre in circa 872. Here the far-off battle of Hafsford, near Stavanger, is interpreted by Ibsen in a key that relates to the *Risorgimento*: “Yes, through the ages runs King Harald’s vision/ and Hafsford’s fight is fought this every day” (HIS 11, 612).¹⁹ In this vibrant poem, addressed to the Norwegian people, “that sunders in dissension sour—/ and flocks to legends of shared aspiration” where what is to be feared above all is “paralysing-mind [*døs*] and vision-numbness” (HIS 11, 607, 610),²⁰ we again find a contrast—also emblematic in Ibsen’s dramatic works—between the spectres of a dark, restraining past and a dawn of recovery guided by men who fight for the light and who follow “King Harald’s spirit for one kingdom-sway”. “Hafsford’s sun” for “a free, a mighty North of one accord” (HIS 11, 611 ff.)²¹ is illuminating the world and the emancipation of the peoples. It is moreover

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

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

Mark where you stand, to-day’s Norwegian brother.
 Take time’s intent; for that must set your tone.
 [...]
 Observe time’s law! It may not be denied.
 Cavour and Bismarck wrote it as *our* guide,
 and many a ghost he quelled, no spectre sparer
 that hero and that dreamer of Caprera (HIS 11, 611–2).²²

Helge Rønning has suggested a reworking of the historical figures evoked in these lines—Garibaldi, the dreamer-hero and Cavour, the experienced, practical politician—in a dialectic of idealism versus realism.

¹⁹ Ibsen, 134.

²⁰ Ibsen, 130, 133.

²¹ Ibsen, 134–5.

²² Ibsen, 134.

This may be close to the ideological plan of a play like *Emperor and Galilean* (*Kejser og Galilæer*) dedicated to the figure of Julian the Apostate, which was written in 1873, although Ibsen had already conceived of it in Italy in 1864.²³ If this is the case, we may consider the influence of the Italian *Risorgimento* not only on Ibsen's more explicit poetry, but also on what is specific to some of his plays, where—precisely because of the particular dialectic that characterises his theatrical work—there emerges a much more shadowy and problematic picture of the historical phenomenon than is offered by the lyrical writings.

Michael Meyer has already hypothesised that one possible model for the character of Brand may have been Garibaldi, since we know that Ibsen borrowed a biography of the Italian hero at the very time he was writing the eponymous play.²⁴ Along these lines—bearing in mind the typically Ibsenian clash between realism and idealism which is tempted by the pervasiveness of the spirit of compromise—Helge Rønning maintains that Ibsen may in some way have translated the conflict between the realists Cavour and King Victor Emanuel II, who were prepared to compromise, and the idealists Garibaldi and (perhaps) Mazzini into his 1866 play. From this perspective, Rønning believes that Brand may credibly personify “the appeal of Garibaldi to action and total adhesion to his calling”, as well as “criticism on the part of Mazzini of all forms of compromise in the field of *Realpolitik*”, thereby transforming instead the characters of the Priest and Bailiff almost into doubles of Cavour and Victor Emanuel.

That Ibsen had these outlines as well as the *Risorgimento* in general in mind may, in our opinion, find an implicit confirmation in the fact that the poem *Italia unita* mentioned above is probably from the same period, due to the fact that it was considered for possible inclusion in an 1871 collection of Ibsen's poems, *Digte*.²⁵ Other poems also considered for inclusion are equally unknown, but are in some way interconnected with the plays of the same period: *The Scorpion* (*Skorpionen*), also known as *I and my Scorpion* (*Jeg og min skorpion*), echoes *Brand* (see note 13 of Chapter 2), and *The Hermit of Epomeo* (*Munken på Epomeo*) draws on Ibsen's visit to Ischia in 1867 in the period in which he was developing *Peer Gynt*.

Further, though more subtle, echoes of the *Risorgimento* are also indisputably present in this very “dramatic poem” of 1867: certainly in the scene of the madhouse in Cairo in Act IV, where a mad German doctor

²³ Helge Rønning, *Den umulige friheten. Henrik Ibsen og moderniteten*, 2nd ed. (Oslo: Gyldendal, 2007), 130–1.

²⁴ Meyer, *Ibsen*, 263.

²⁵ See the comment by Didrik Arup Seip in HISV 14, 36.

and his scoundrelous assistants (also German) keep various exponents of an inert, suicidal Nordic megalomania (disguised as Arabs) imprisoned. Among these is a certain Hussejn, a caricature of the Swedish Foreign Minister Ludvig Manderström, who had taken a very inconsistent and ambiguous attitude in the Danish-Prussian crisis of 1863–64, first promising to help Denmark and then striking a more prudently neutral stance. In *Peer Gynt*, this ambiguous figure of a politician identifies himself, in his delirium, with a pen that is absolutely determined to be sharpened; in the end he kills himself by cutting his throat with a knife, leaving a remarkable epitaph: “He lived and died like a pen guided by others!” (HIS 5, 668). On this point, and in order to clarify the cryptic reference, it should be remembered that on 15th December 1863 the Danish newspaper *Dagbladet* posed the question, in very doubtful tones, as to whether the ephemeral Manderström was “a Nordic Cavour” or simply “an able pen or an authentic statesman”, representing the need of many Scandinavians in these difficult moments to be guided by politicians of the stature of the Italian who, in Northern Europe, enjoyed authentic veneration, in life and in death.²⁶

To conclude, Helge Rønning sees in *Emperor and Galilean* a dialectic analogous to that contained in *Brand* as the events in Europe (and especially those in Italy in 1860–70) could have suggested to Ibsen a parallel with the late Roman Empire: “Both periods are marked by the same historical contradictoriness”. This is very clear in united Italy, where the synthesis between North and South, monarchy and broad republican sectors, economic progress and regress, religion and secularity soon proved arduous.²⁷ Looking at the evolution of Julian, a quixotic figure, in his effort to “bring about the new using the old”, and considering how his “dream of liberty is transmuted into a despotism which at the end of the play crushes” the emperor himself, one might just see the materialisation of Garibaldi’s ambiguous idea (which Mazzini, for example, disagreed with) that dictatorship can serve to affirm democracy: “a dilemma of liberalism in the Jacobin tradition”. Thus, the play, “like others by Ibsen that thematise an abstract idealism, may be read as a warning against the realisation of that Utopia that leads to oppression and ruin, and not to liberty”.²⁸

It is interesting to note that Ibsen’s complex theatrical dialectic—which the Preface to *Catiline* makes clear is characterised by “the conflict between one’s aims and one’s abilities, between what man proposes and

²⁶ Bætzmann, *Italiens frihedskamp*, 529 ff., 534–5.

²⁷ Rønning, *Den umulige friheten*, 139–40.

²⁸ Rønning, 141 ff.

what is actually possible, constituting at once both the tragedy and comedy of mankind and of the individual” (HIS 1, 132)²⁹—also presents the stirring unitary phenomenon of the *Risorgimento* (albeit perceived as grandiose and positive and celebrated as such in the poems) as inescapably shadowy and problematic. Indeed, in exactly the same way, the global, human dimension embraced by the great Norwegian in his plays appears, in a modern sense, to be problematic and ambiguous. In Ibsen’s poems, the *ghosts* of the past could be escaped if contemporary men and women truly committed themselves to fighting them; in the plays, this desirable result, however, appears much more uncertain and open.

²⁹ Ibsen, *Letters and Speeches*, 12.

CHAPTER TWO

ON NORA'S TARANTELLA

The curious staging of Walter Pagliaro's 1999–2000 production of *A Doll's House* provides us with a peculiar critical stimulus. Pagliaro imagines that, during her trip to the South of Italy to restore her husband's health, Nora came into contact with the so-called *tarantate*, or women bitten by a tarantula. Moreover, Pagliaro identifies three main phases of Southern Tarantism in Nora's theatrical development:

Fault, remorse, the rebuilding of her past. Nora committed one fault and she is filled with remorse for it; in order to be fully aware of her condition and recover, she must reassemble her past, with the help of a musical catharsis: this way is just like the therapy people often adopted in the South of Italy for the presumed *pizzicate*. Then the return of the past is, as Szondi writes, the moving cause of Ibsen's plays, as a drama of crisis; so it will be advisable to re-read this play as Nora's becoming aware, by a backwards route, to discover the reasons for a moral and family *bite*.¹

In Italy, thanks to the growth of anthropological research on the subject, we now have much reliable information on the phenomenon of tarantism. Knowledge of the phenomenon in Scandinavian culture has also been considered and we believe that, together with a number of Swedish physicians and scientists of the eighteenth century (Harald Vallerius, Emanuel Swedenborg, and Mårten Kähler),² from a merely poetical point of view, Henrik Ibsen can also be counted at least among the observers of tarantism.

This suggestion was made by Daniel Haakonsen in a 1948 essay³ and then again in his great Ibsen monograph of 1981,⁴ while general confirmation

¹ Walter Pagliaro, *Nora, fra sud e magia*, programme notes for *Una casa di bambola* by Henrik Ibsen, Associazione Culturale "Gianni Santuccio", 1999–2000, 5–6.

² Harald Vallerius, Emanuel Swedenborg, and Mårten Kähler, *La tarantola iperborea. Scrittori del Settecento svedese sul tarantismo*, ed. Gino Leonardo Di Mitri (Nardò: Besa, 1999).

³ Daniel Haakonsen, "Tarantella-Motivet i *Et Dukkehjem*," *Edda* (1948): 263 ff.

can be found in contemporary memoirs. In Paulsen, for instance, we read that Ibsen recommended a book on the tarantella by Jørgen Vilhelm Bergsøe.⁵ This could be the historical and well-informed essay *Observations on the Italian Tarantella*,⁶ a modern, rational book—unfortunately neglected by scholars—that distinguishes tarantism from the spider that gives its name to the symptoms of the strange sickness.

In his own memoirs, Bergsøe recalls Ibsen's presence during "*den ypperlige*", the magnificent "*Tarantella*" dance performed in Pompei in October 1867 by the daughters of the host of the Locanda Il Sole.⁷ Although some forms of Campanian tarantism characterised by theatrical attitudes allow those bitten by the tarantula to pick out a male or female partner for the dance, Ibsen probably observed a typical *tammorriata* arranged for foreign travellers during their Italian grand tour. However, this would not have been the explicit "*dance-illness*" (*Dans-sjukan*) that Kähler observed in Taranto,⁸ Apulia—"the land of Remorse [...], the elective area of Tarantism" (as the great anthropologist Ernesto De Martino called it)—⁹ which the Norwegian dramatist never visited.

Ibsen was, in any case, well-informed about Apulian tarantism thanks to Bergsøe's book. As for the specific Neapolitan *tarantella*—of which Ibsen had some direct experience—we have information from Alfonso of Aragon's time that it contained Arabian and Spanish influences and remained connected to ancient manifestations of tarantism. Although the tarantella grew into a kind of bourgeois "*figurata song*", in Cilento, south

⁴ Daniel Haakonsen, *Henrik Ibsen mennesket og kunstneren* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1981), 188 ff.

⁵ John Paulsen, *Samliv med Ibsen. Anden samling* (København-Kristiania: Gyldendal, 1913), 98.

⁶ Jørgen Vilhelm Bergsøe, *Iagttagelser om den italienske Tarantel: og Bidrag til Tarantismens Historie i Middelalderen og nyere Tid* (København: Thieles Bogtrykkeri, 1865).

⁷ Jørgen Vilhelm Bergsøe, *Henrik Ibsen paa Ischia og "Fra Piazza del popolo". Erindringer fra aarene 1863–69* (København-Kristiania: Gyldendal, 1907), 259 ff. See also Einar Østvedt, *Henrik Ibsen og la bella Italia* (Skien: Oluf Rasmussen, 1965), 103.

⁸ Mårten Kähler, "Anmärkningur vid Dans-sjukan eller den så kallade Tarantismus," *Kongl. Vetenskaps Akademiens Handlingar*, XIX, Stockholm, 1758: 29.

⁹ Ernesto De Martino, *La terra del rimorso. Contributo a una storia religiosa del Sud*, 2nd ed. (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 1994), 13.

of Salerno, some forms of tarantism were long connected to the therapeutic dance as a means of recovering from the bite of the tarantula.¹⁰

Ernesto De Martino considers tarantism to be a phenomenon that preserves signs of heathen orgiastic rites in a kind of opposition to Christianity, as it is based on a bite which is not necessarily only that of a spider and which then becomes a “mythical-ritual symbol”. Scorpions were also part of tarantism, and people talked indifferently of “*scorpionati*” and “*tarantati*” or “*attarantati*” (those bitten by a scorpion or a tarantula).¹¹ In addition to “the trolls/ In the depths of the mind and heart” (HIS 14, 47),¹² Ibsen was also comfortable with the evil sprites traditionally connected with demoniacal entities, and we can quote here the famous letter of 28th October 1870 to Peter Hansen, in which Ibsen confesses: “While I was writing *Brand* I had on my desk a glass with a scorpion in it. Now and then the little creature became ill. Then I would give it a piece of soft fruit. It would attack it furiously and empty its poison into it—after which it was well again”.¹³

However, as De Martino explains, “in order to kill the tarantula”, the bitten person must mime “the dance of the little spider, that is, the *tarantella*”:

They have to dance with the spider, indeed even be the spider that dances, irresistibly identifying with the spider; but, at the same time, there has to be an even more intense moment, in which their own choreutic rhythm is superimposed and imposed onto that of the spider [...]. People bitten by a tarantula execute the dance of the little tarantula (that is, the *tarantella*) as a victim possessed by the spider and as a hero who defeats the beast with the same dance.

Through this ritual we reach “an evocation, a configuration, a discharge, and the resolution of the psychic conflicts that ‘bite again’ in the darkness of the unconscious”.¹⁴

Speaking of *Peer Gynt*, Ibsen acknowledges that the “environment has a great influence upon the forms in which the imagination creates” (HIS 12, 429)¹⁵ and it is very likely that he encountered and was struck by the

¹⁰ Cf. Roberto De Simone, *Canti e tradizioni popolari in Campania* (Roma: Lato Side, 1979); Annabella Rossi, *E il mondo si fece giallo. Il tarantismo in Campania* (Vibo Valentia: Qualecultura/Jaca Book, 1991).

¹¹ See also Bergsøe, *Iagttagelser om den italienske Tarantel*, 127 ff.

¹² Ibsen, *Letters and Speeches*, 187.

¹³ Ibsen, 102.

¹⁴ De Martino, *La terra del rimorso*, 62–3.

¹⁵ Ibsen, *Letters and Speeches*, 102.

phenomenon of southern tarantism, not only during his first Italian sojourn (1864–68), but also in the period in which he was writing *A Doll's House*, between May and 20th August 1879 in Rome and Amalfi. However, we know that, in the second act of the first draft of *A Doll's House* (datable to 4th June–14th July 1879 and hence written partly in Rome and partly in Amalfi), there were no traces of the *tarantella* and the structure of the scene was different and weaker. Let us scrutinise it.

The dramatic action takes place in the same room “*comfortably and tastefully, but not expensively, furnished*” as the first act (in these drafts, without the Christmas tree) (HISV 8, 374), and Nora faces Helmer, who intends “to keep New Year’s Eve in peace and harmony”. Helmer wants to look in the letter-box and “see if there are any letters”. Nora, who is afraid of Krogstad’s letter, which would disclose her “forgery”, tries to stop him:

NORA. No, no, Thorvald—

HELMER. Why not?

NORA. No, no, I beg you not to—there are none there—

HELMER. Let me just see.

NORA (*plays a few chords at the piano*).

HELMER (*stops at the door*). Aha!

NORA. Do you know it?

HELMER. Will you really?

NORA. What shall I have for a reward?

HELMER. What do you want?

NORA. I’ll tell you afterwards?

HELMER. No, now.

NORA. No, afterwards. Do you promise me?

HELMER. Is it something you have asked me before?

NORA. No, ever. Now do you promise?

HELMER. Yes, I promise. (*To Rank*) Now listen to this. But we must have cigarettes with it; real Turkish ones.

(*He and Rank sit by the stove. Nora plays and sings Anitra’s song from Peer Gynt*).

MRS. LINDE (*enters from the hall*). Oh, but what is this?

NORA. Don’t interrupt.

HELMER. A picture of family life. What do you say to it?

RANK. Turkish, but pretty; is it not?

NORA. Sit down to the piano, Christine; go on playing. (*She drapes herself in shawls and dances*).

HELMER. How lovely she is, Rank. Look at the fine curve of the neck. What grace in her movements, and she is quite unconscious of it.

RANK. A wife is a good thing.

HELMER. A wife like her.

NORA. Are you pleased?

HELMER. Thanks!

NORA. Was it pretty?

HELMER. Thanks, thanks!

The scene is interrupted by the maid with the prosaic cue that "Dinner is ready" and it continues with Helmer, who insists on going and looking in the letter-box; he is stopped by Nora who reminds him of his promise to do everything she asks and forget all business till the new year, so as to earn "thirty-one hours to live" (HISV 8, 423 ff.).¹⁶ We are confronted with something that Laura Caretti has aptly called "an exotic stage-scenery, the *mise-en-scène* of seduction, tempting music":¹⁷ a scene in which Nora's forced sensuality and Helmer's aesthetic nature are emphasised. Helmer appears like a sultan and, as well as an explicit reference to the oriental scenes of *Peer Gynt*, even the cigarettes are "real Turkish ones".

In the definitive version, all that radically changes: Nora begins to play the first notes of the tarantella on the piano and stops Helmer; then she asks him to rehearse the dance for consul Stenborg's imminent party, in which she has to present herself wearing a Neapolitan popular dress; most of all, he must "correct her, lead her, the way he always does". Helmer sits down at the piano and Nora "*seizes the tambourine and a long multi-coloured shawl from [a] cardboard box*", and she "*wraps the shawl hastily around her, then takes a quick leap into the centre of the room and cries*": "Play for me! I want to dance!" Doctor Rank stands behind Helmer and watches, but the dance suddenly becomes increasingly violent; Helmer is embarrassed ("No, no, this won't do at all"), has difficulty in following her, and begs Rank to take his place at the piano: "then it'll be easier for me to show her".

Rank sits down at the piano and plays. Nora dances more and more wildly. Helmer has stationed himself by the stove and tries repeatedly to correct her, but she seems not to hear him. Her hair works loose and falls over her shoulders; she ignores it and continues to dance. Mrs Linde enters.

Mrs Linde stands tongue-tied with embarrassment and Nora, still dancing, calls to her: "Oh, Christine, we're having such fun!", or more literally, "Oh Christine, you are watching such oddities!". In this expression, "*such oddities*" (in Norwegian, "*løjer*", also eccentricities or jokes and fun), we can almost see the ancient proverbial definitions of

¹⁶ [Henrik Ibsen], *From Ibsen's Workshop*, ed. William Archer (New York: A Dacapo Paperback, 1978), 147 ff.

¹⁷ Laura Caretti, "La tarantella di Nora," in *La didascalia nella letteratura teatrale scandinava*, ed. Merete Kjølner Ritzu (Roma: Bulzoni, 1987), 44.

tarantism: “jocund misery” (Athanasius Kircher) or “little female Carnival” (Baglivi: “*Kvindernes lille Carneval*” in Bergsøe’s translation).¹⁸ However, Helmer remonstrates: “But, Nora, you’re dancing as if your life depended on it”; she answers, “It does”, and Helmer orders Rank to cease playing: “This is sheer lunacy. Stop it, I say!” and so “*suddenly*” Nora “*stops dancing*” (HIS 7, 323 ff.).¹⁹

The change in perspective is clear and the final version is much more effective: the inclusion of the exotic tarantella evokes not only the contrasting atmosphere of the South in the muffled, Nordic setting of the scene (it is Christmas time), but it also creates a turning point in the play. Haakonsen writes that the tarantella becomes “a symbol”, that is, an emblematic passage which acts as a catalyst for scenic development.²⁰ Margareta Wirmark notes that during this scene, “Nora is changed into a different woman” who “takes command of her own body and from now onwards will express personal feelings”. The tarantella, therefore, is something that “makes her visible to herself and others”, even making her *rebirth* possible, and we may even imagine an analogy with the Christmas nativity.²¹

It is possible that the scenic solution of the final version (completed in Amalfi on 20th September) was based on a spontaneous association of ideas which had developed from *Peer Gynt*. We must not forget that, in 1867, Ibsen witnessed “the magnificent tarantella” of Pompei, soon after finishing this play; in the draft of the last act we find, moreover, some satirical verses about “tumblers playing violin with toes and dancing tarantella on their knees” (HISV 6, 321).

However, if the tarantella allows Mediterranean “sheer lunacy” (“*den rene galskab*”) to burst into the core of the play, with the disconcerting effect of a dramatic weight that is greater than the conventional imaginary *tableau* of Anitra’s seduction, we must not believe that it was a new and alien component of the (partly Danish) culture of the Norwegian upper

¹⁸ See De Martino, *La terra del rimorso*, 49, 147, and Bergsøe, *Iagttagelser om den italienske Tarantel*, 90. About “Nora’s Carnival” see also Erik Østerud, *Theatrical and Narrative Space. Studies in Strindberg, Ibsen and J.P. Jacobsen* (Århus: Aarhus U.P., 1998), 49 ff.

¹⁹ Henrik Ibsen, *Plays: A Doll’s House. An Enemy of the People. Hedda Gabler*, ed. Michael Meyer, 2nd ed. (London: Eyre Methuen, 1982), 77 ff.

²⁰ Haakonsen, “Tarantella-Motivet i *Et Dukkehjem*”: 263.

²¹ Margareta Wirmark, *Noras systrar. Nordisk dramatik och teater 1879–1899* (Stockholm: Carlssons, 2000), 165, 171.

middle class to which the Helmers belong. It can be said that, in his writings, Ibsen is used to giving new life to scenic *remains*.²²

The great actress Johanne Luise Heiberg attests that, in the 1840s, Italian folk-dances (*kastagnetdans*) were in fashion in Copenhagen, "having been popularised by some Italian dancers".²³ The tarantella, moreover, had a very important role in Auber's *La Muette de Portici* or *Den Stumme i Portici* (from the libretto by Scribe and Delavigne), which was performed in Kristiania, in January 1851 during Ibsen's sojourn,²⁴ as well as in the great Danish ballet master August Bournonville's picturesque ballets, which were and still are very popular. *Feast in Albano* of 1839 and, in particular, the famous *Napoli or The Fisherman and his Bride* of 1842 (quoted by Bergsøe)²⁵ could also have been in Ibsen's mind when he was writing the second act of *A Doll's House*. Anyway, we know that a re-elaborate version of the music from *Napoli* was played at the Norwegian premiere of *A Doll's House* (Kristiania Theatre, 20th January 1880).²⁶

It was very easy for Edvard Brandes to object that Bournonville's Italy, "with its gay popular life, *saltarelli*, tarantellas, tambourines and castanets had very little in common with reality". On the contrary, Bournonville was aiming at the *Biedermeier* exaltation of "a kind of hyper-romantic land, in which beauty and poetry showed themselves without fail in every corner of the street";²⁷ however, Ibsen, in education and character, was not indifferent to wonderful and legendary events, even though his art aimed at a radical conversion of Romanticism.

In *Napoli*, the beautiful young Teresina takes to the sea with her fiancée Gennaro the fisherman, but a stormy wave snatches her out of the boat. The nereids Argentina and Coralla bring her to the Blue Grotto of Capri, where she rouses the Gulf Spirit's passion and is changed into a nereid; finally, thanks to the protection of the Madonna dell'Arco, she will

²² See also note 30 of Chapter 3.

²³ Johanne Luise Heiberg, *Et Liv genoplevet i Erindringen*, 6th ed. (København: Gyldendal, 1973), II:49.

²⁴ See HIS 1 (*Innledning og kommentarer*), 308–9.

²⁵ Bergsøe, *Iagttagelser om den italienske Tarantel*, 101.

²⁶ See August Bournonville, *Mit Teaterliv. Erindringer og Tidsbilleder* (København: Thaning & Appel, 1979), I:197, and HIS 7 (*Innledning og kommentarer*), 350–1. It should incidentally be noted that, in 1967, the director Erling Schroeder staged *A Doll's House* for Folketeatret in Copenhagen, and a tarantella in D major was used for Nora's dance: the same tarantella, as Bournonville personally pointed out, was the source of inspiration for *Napoli*; cf. Hans Bay-Petersen, *Erling Schroeder, sceneinstruktøren* (København: Rhodos, 1992), 268.

²⁷ Edvard Brandes, *Dansk Skuespilkunst. Portræstudier* (København: P.G. Philipsens Forlag, 1880), 251.

be found by the faithful Gennaro and be changed back into a human being, and their wedding celebrated at the Monte Vergine Sanctuary. *Napoli* begins with “a distant tambourine intoning a tarantella” and ends with the exultant explosion of an impetuous tarantella or, as we read in the libretto, “*under en bacchantisk Finale*”.²⁸

Erik Aschengreen has defined *Napoli* as “a ballet-version of the *Bildungroman* so loved in those days, in which the hero must gain the harmony and peace of mind that are typical of manhood”.²⁹ In *A Doll’s House*, Nora experiences an almost similar condition in a feminine way but, in her dramatic uncertainty between the anxiety of salvation and the demoniacal powers of destiny (that inward outburst in the tarantella scene), she maintains some of the characteristics of Teresina. It is not by chance that, during her Italian sojourn, Nora was probably bewitched by the sea, and she confesses to Mrs Linde her longing to see it again. In the drafts, too, Rank recalls her “great fondness of the sea”, “the great open sea”, and Nora answers enraptured: “Oh, yes, the sea, the sea! Isn’t the sea splendid?” (HISV 8, 411).³⁰ In the final version, Nora claims to have learned her tarantella in the isle of Capri and in the last act Helmer calls her “my beautiful little Capri signorina—my capricious little Capricienne” (HIS 7, 342).³¹

If there is an evident anticipation of *The Lady from the Sea* (*Fruen fra havet*, 1888) probably due to a common source of inspiration (the traditional *folkeviser Agnete and the Merman*), we should also remember—as Bergsøe writes—that maenads and women bitten by the tarantula felt a strong fascination for water and the sea;³² however, in the case of Nora, their restless wandering expressed in dance did not show the delightful Bacchic (as *Biedermeier*) exultation that coloured Bournonville’s world. It was, on the contrary, “a very unpleasant show”: as a true aesthete, Helmer stops Nora during the dramatic rehearsal. Here we may recall Henry Swinburne, who, in Salento, “in the country of the Tarantula” in the second half of the eighteenth century, paid to admire the dance of a woman bitten by tarantula, but had to stop her to avoid her complete

²⁸ August Bournonville, *Napoli eller Fiskeren og hans Brud* (København: Gyldendal, 1915), 5, 16.

²⁹ Erik Aschengreen, “Mit egentlige kald,” in *Perspektiv på Bournonville*, ed. Erik Aschengreen, Marianne Hallar, and Jørgen Heiner (København: Nyt Nordisk Forlag Arnold Busck, 1980), 219.

³⁰ [Ibsen], *From Ibsen’s Workshop*, 134.

³¹ Ibsen, *Plays*, 85.

³² Bergsøe, *Iagttagelser om den italienske Tarantel*, 95–6.