

## **Kierkegaard, Ibsen and the Aesthetics of Indirect Communication**

In his brilliant and influential *Die Theorie des modernen Dramas*, Peter Szondi famously claims that Ibsen's specific role in the crisis of modern drama is his thematization of the past. The past that Ibsen evokes, however, is not a particular event, but, as Szondi tells us in enigmatic terms, "the past as such," "die Vergangenheit selbst."<sup>1</sup> As Szondi further points out, such a project is inevitably caught in a contradiction, given that the medium of dramatic representation can by definition only show the present. As Szondi states, "the past as such,"

versagt sich der dramatischen Gegenwart. Denn vergegenwärtigt werden im Sinne dramatischer Aktualisierung kann nur ein Zeitliches, nicht die Zeit selbst. Über sie läßt sich im Drama nur berichten, während ihre direkte Darstellung einzig einer Kunstform möglich ist, die sie „in die Reihe ihrer konstitutiven Prinzipien aufnimmt“. Diese Kunstform ist (...) der Roman. (Ibid.)

[does not lend itself to the dramatic present. Only something temporal can be made present in the sense of dramatic actualization, not time itself. Time can only be reported about in the Drama; its direct presentation is possible solely in an art from that includes it "among its constitutive principles". This art form (...) is the novel. (Trans. Michael Hays)]

Ibsen's problem, according to this view, then, is that while he revolutionizes the *content* of modern drama by making the past its focus, he nevertheless continues to make use of the *form* of the French 19<sup>th</sup> century well-made-play. This tension results not least in a failure to provide sufficient motivation for the endings of his plays, *present* to us as

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter Szondi: *Theorie des modernen Dramas 1880-1950*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977, p. 28.

audience, through a past that cannot but remain *absent*. As such, Ibsen ultimately stands on the wrong side of modernism, as the swansong of “jener nachklassischen Epoche (...) die man die bürgerliche nennt” (147), rather than the birth of the modern. The latter role, for Szondi, corresponds instead to August Strindberg, who already with his 1887 *Fadren* translates the novelesque *content* of Ibsen’s drama into an altogether new dramatic *form* and thus initiates the path to the epic and subjective theatre of the twentieth century, finally able to overcome Ibsen’s contradictions.

Although Ibsen’s uneasy vacillation between the novelistic and dramatic forms is doubtlessly central to his work, I would nevertheless like to argue today that the assumption that this vacillation is in some sense a short-coming of Ibsen’s art, is based on a critical misunderstanding of the relevant aesthetic paradigm to be applied as a standard of judgment. More importantly still, this misunderstanding has ultimately also prevented a proper analysis of Ibsen’s poetics. Whereas contemporary concerns with the poetic dimension of aesthetics have limited themselves almost exclusively to the symbolic-allegoric divide, Ibsen draws on a different model altogether, which derives from Kierkegaard’s radical re-consideration of the Incarnation and his concomitant theory of Indirect Communication. Further, rather than simply providing us with a better framework for Ibsen’s work, this Kierkegaardian paradigm also offers a means of understanding what modernism *as* modernism might actually be, and thereby avoid merely reducing it to a continuation of either the Romantic or Realist traditions.

Though central to his entire project, Kierkegaard’s considerations on language and communication are never systematically developed, but rather scattered throughout his work. In an early, unpublished text written between 1842 and 1843, *Johannes*

*Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est*, Kierkegaard describes the meditations on language by the young man in the title in the following terms:

Det der derfor hæver Umiddelbarheden er Sproget, kunde Mennesket ikke tale, saa forblev det i det Umiddelbare. Dette mente han kunde udtrykkes saaledes, Umiddelbarheden er Realiteten, Sproget er idealiteten, idet jeg taler frembringer jeg Modsigelsen. Naar jeg saaledes vil udtrykke Sandsningen, er Modsigelsen der, thi det jeg siger er noget ganske Andet end det jeg vil sige. Realiteten kan jeg ikke udtrykke i Sproget, for at betegne den bruger jeg Idealiteten, hvilket er en Modsigelse, en Usandhed.<sup>2</sup>

[Therefore, it is language that cancels immediacy; if man could not talk he would remain in the immediate. This could be expressed, he thought, by saying that the immediate is reality, language is ideality, since by speaking I produce the contradiction. When I seek to express sense perception in this way, the contradiction is present, for what I say is something different from what I want to say. I cannot express reality in language, because I use ideality to characterize it, which is a contradiction, an untruth. (Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong)]

The conflict between language's ideality or universality, and experience's reality and particularity, which this passage points to, is a commonplace not only in our days, but also in Kierkegaard's. What distinguishes Kierkegaard's awareness of this split, however, is that he does not seek to resolve its tension, least of all by subsuming the particular under the universal in the style of a Hegelian *Aufhebung*. In fact, to Kierkegaard, the central problem of his age is that the distance between existence and ideality has been obscured both philosophically and socially. *Both* in the medium of rational thought *and* that of social institutions, the irreducible particularity and constant process of becoming

---

<sup>2</sup> Søren Kierkegaard: *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*. Fjerde Bind. Udgivne af P. A. Heiberg og V. Kuhr. København: Gyldendal, 1968.

that defines finite existence is replaced by static, universal concepts. As a result, contemporary society has become “fantastic” in the sense of taking for granted the *reality* of concepts and objective structures such as “humanity,” “duty,” “doubt” or “Christianity,” without accounting for the individual’s inevitably incommensurable relationship to these. While objective thought is justified within its own sphere – there is nothing wrong, for example, about mathematical or scientific reasoning – the contradiction arises when that sphere is imposed on subjective existence, assuming the latter to be comprehensible in terms of the former. Accordingly, to communicate *directly* means to abstract from the particularity of the communication situation – again, scientific discourse would be a paradigm – and thereby ignore one half of the dualism. To communicate *indirectly*, on the contrary, implies providing the conditions for the addressee’s productive assimilation of the ideality of a statement to a particular existence, which transcends it.

The negativity implied in this procedure is reminiscent of Romantic Irony, which similarly seeks to dismantle the supremacy of reason in order to release the imagination and emotions that are otherwise suppressed. Yet although Kierkegaard makes ample use of Romantic strategies in his own texts, it is clear that he in fact rejects the Romantic paradigm as equally untenable. To Kierkegaard, as his master’s dissertation on *The Concept of Irony* exemplifies, the absolute negativity of Romantic Irony ends up falling into the same mistakes as its Hegelian opponents. Like *it*, German Romanticism also abstracts from particularity in a transcendent flight of fancy similarly unconcerned with the concrete determinations and needs of individual existence. As such, it can have only a

theoretical, not actual significance. Linguistic relativism, that is, is as “fantastic” as linguistic positivism.

Instead of failing either to the side of immediacy or ideality, Johannes Climacus in the later *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* demands that proper subjectivity must consist in the simultaneity and equality of all human faculties.<sup>3</sup> This does not, however, imply a “symbolic” unity or sorts, but rather, a productive use of the irreducible tension central to what it means to be human. Accordingly, in the opening pages of *The Sickness Unto Death*, another of Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms defines the self in the following terms:

Mennesket er Aand. Men hvad er Aand? Aand er Selvet. Men hvad er Selvet? Selvet er et Forhold, der forholder sig til sig selv, eller er det i Forholdet, at Forholdet forholder sig til sig selv; Selvet er ikke Forholdet, men at Forholdet forholder sig til sig selv. Mennesket er en Synthese af Uendelighed og Endelighed, af det Timelige og det Evige, af Frihed og Nødvendighed, kort en Synthese. En Synthese er et Forhold mellem To. Saaledes betragtet er Mennesket endnu intet Selv. (XV, 73)

[Man is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self, or it is that in the relation which accounts for it that the relation relates itself to its own self; the self is not the relation but consists in the fact that the relation relates itself to its own self. Man is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short it is a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two factors. So regarded, man is not yet a self. (Trans. Walter Lowrie)]

What I would like to retain from this passage are two things: First, man is not a unity of any kind, but a relation. Moreover, the relation does not simply consist of the dualism of

---

<sup>3</sup> Søren Kierkegaard: *Samlede Værker*. Vol. X, pp. 48-49. Ed. A. B. Drachmann, J. L. Heiberg and H. O. Lange. København: Gyldendal, 1963. All subsequent references to Kierkegaard will be to this edition, indicated by volume number in Roman numerals, followed by the page in Arabic numerals.

the terms invoked, which to Kierkegaard constitute merely a “negative unity,” that is, the mere possibility of a self, but the relation between them, the self-consciousness of that relation, which is the positive third term. The way in which these terms are related, then, determines the kind of self at stake. This leads to the second point: that we are a self, is not a given, but a result, the effect of relating to the relation in a correct way.

Stated briefly, such a relation can only be found in what Kierkegaard terms the Religious sphere of existence. This does not, however, imply that a specific Religious content should be communicated when speaking religiously, as opposed to speaking speculatively or ironically. Rather, what matters is for the message to provide a specific kind of form that will make possible a specific kind of relation – and thereby mode of subjective assimilation. Indirect communication, in this way, does not merely seek the negative liberation of the particular, but the positive construction of the addressee’s subjectivity. More specifically, where the Hegelian or Romantic forms of communication relate to the transcendent as either a sublated and overcome immediacy, or an infinitely deferred goal, the Religious seeks to make it the very ground for the comprehension of the immanent.

Neither symbolic nor allegoric, the poetics of indirect communication in this sense comes closest to the structure of metaphor, in so far as it must provide the necessary conditions for a relation between two incommensurable terms, one of which remains absent in so far as it is beyond figuration from the perspective of the other. It is the reader, then, who performs the function of *tertium comparationis* by forcing a semantic transfer from one sphere to the other. Doing so is made possible by carving out

negatively, that is indirectly, a position beyond the overt horizons from which the proper relation to the relations in the text can be experienced.

Much of Kierkegaard's own textual strategies exemplify these issues concretely, but time constraints will not make it possible to analyze these here. Instead I will turn to Ibsen to show how Kierkegaard's theological considerations found aesthetic application. Doing so means first and foremost moving away from the usual consideration of the relationship between these two figures as a matter of correspondence in philosophical *content*, to one of similarity in *form*. To trace such in *A Doll's House*, which I will focus on for the remainder of my talk today, offers particular difficulties, however, as the radical nature of its form has been somewhat lost to us, due to the happy circumstance that few now would fault Nora for abandoning her home. Yet I think that if we are to properly understand the play, we must take seriously the critique levelled at Ibsen from the very start that Nora's change from complacent butterfly in the beginning of the play to New Woman at the end is unconvincing and insufficiently prepared for. The scandal of the famous last scene is due less, I think, to its concern with the "woman question," as is usually assumed, as to the difficulty of connecting its double movement: on the hand, Nora's negative realization that she has been living an illusion and, on the other, her positive decision to leave.

It is important to point out that the plot of *A Doll's House* does indeed, as is often claimed, depend on many of the mechanics of the well-made play. The central difference, however, as Bernard Shaw already pointed out in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, consists in the transformation of the traditional, final "unravelling" of events to their

“discussion.”<sup>4</sup> While *A Doll’s House*, like the well-made-play, makes use of the law as its dominant plot-determining code, the final discussion differs in so far as it does not serve to subsume all events to the logic of the law, but rather emphasizes the irreducible *conflict* between *opposed* forms of dramatic motivation; between Nora’s idealistic expectations of what will happen and the crude reality of legal and economic forces that govern Torvald’s world. This conflict, moreover, neatly maps onto that between values and facts, or life and truth, which Franco Moretti has persuasively argued as central to Elizabethan, Jacobean and, most recently, in his article “The Moment of Truth,” modern tragedy.<sup>5</sup> In these terms, what governs the sphere of values in the play is a logic of absolute altruism and self-sacrifice, while the realm of facts is governed by a law, which, as Krogstad reminds Nora, is wholly impersonal and objective, utterly unconcerned with motivations and the distinctions between people that they might bring.

It is, of course, the logic of the law rather than that of altruism that finally determines Torvald’s actions and thereby the outcome of the plot. But rather than simply being negated by facts, it nevertheless seems to be the sphere of values that gains the moral victory. It is, after all, as Nora herself points out, not her and her values but Torvald, who fails the test, by revealing himself not to be the man that she had thought, and Nora’s decision to leave in an important sense signals her rupture with and independence from the world of legal and economic concerns.

Yet, in this way, in a dialectical inversion that would have thrilled Kierkegaard, the realm of feminine values ends up forcing the sphere of the law that determines the plot to generate its opposite. By giving values rather facts the moral and interpretative

---

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Shaw, “The Quintessence of Ibsenism,” *Major Critical Essays*. London: Penguin, 1986, p. 160.

<sup>5</sup> See Franco Moretti: “The Great Eclipse” and “The Moment of Truth” in *Signs taken for Wonders. On the Sociology of Literary Forms*. Second, Revised Edition. New York and London: Verso Books, 1998.



priority the play, which seems to follow the law's logic of *necessity*, becomes subject to a wholly particular and thus *contingent* set of circumstances. If only Torvald would have been less of a prig, or if only women would be given their due, the conflict of Ibsen's play would disappear. As such, however, the play also loses any proper tragic dimension, since, as George Steiner claims about Ibsen in his influential *The Death of Tragedy*, the conflict is not absolute and can be overcome by social or temporal improvements.<sup>6</sup>

Yet that this is clearly not the case is visible not least in the fact that the sphere of altruistic values, like that of the law, cannot, ultimately, explain Nora's final departure either. Where Kristine tells Krogstad that "There is no joy in working for oneself," and begs him to "get me someone and something to work for,"<sup>7</sup> Nora ends the play on the Gospel of absolute individualism: the highest duty, is no longer that towards others, but that towards herself (359).

What is important in this context is that while Moretti's model provides fertile means for understanding the negative dimension of the play, its exploitation of the distance between facts and values, it cannot ultimately explain Nora's dramatic departure, which falls outside the logic of either of these spheres. In order to understand the motivation for Nora's action, and thereby its proper tragic dimension, it is instead necessary to take a closer look at the aspect of Ibsen's art that Szondi points to as his particular contribution to dramatic history: his representation of the past.

The well-made-play plot of *A Doll's House* is, as already mentioned, determined by the unfolding of the legal and economic consequences of Nora's original tragic flaw,

---

<sup>6</sup> George Steiner: *The Death of Tragedy*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996, p. 8; 291-292.

<sup>7</sup> Henrik Ibsen: *Et dukkehjem. Hundreårsutgave Henrik Ibsens samlede verker*. Vol. 8, p. 339. Ed. Francis Bull, Halvdan Koht and Didrik Arup Seip. Oslo: Gyldendal, 1933. All subsequent references to *A Doll's House* will be to this edition and volume. All translations into English are my own.

her forgery of her father's signature. As such it spans between the two only precise dates that we are told about in the play, the 29<sup>th</sup> of September eight years ago when Nora's father died and the three days from Christmas until Nora leaves, which constitute the dramatic present. Yet as the play unfolds this neat temporal frame is flooded as we begin to encounter a proliferation of past tragic flaws that continue to defer the point of origin of the events under which Nora is now suffering. Besides her own forgery there is Krogstad's, without which, as he assures us, he would never have entered the money lending business to begin with nor resorted to blackmailing Nora. Krogstad's own decline, however, is due to Kristine's abandonment of him for a wealthier man, which in turn seems due to her family's lack of paternal support. In addition, Nora's father was himself guilty of forgery, which is repeatedly invoked by Torvald as the origin of her moral deficiency. Yet Torvald himself also has a tragic flaw, as becomes clear when it emerges that it was he who was responsible for investigating Nora's father's crime, and that he let him off the hook in exchange for his daughter in marriage. Further still, Torvald's firing of Krogstad, which sets off the immediate catastrophe, is due not, as he confesses in the second act, to Krogstad's past crime or any professional incompetence on his part, but simply because he cannot stand the fact that Krogstad addresses him as "du" instead of "De," because the two were friends during their student years. The negative weight of the past is even further emphasized by means of the two minor characters of Doctor Rank and the Nurse. The former is dying of syphilis due his father's life of debauchery, while the latter is mother to Nora and her children only because she had to give up her own when her lover abandoned her.

If the past that Ibsen evokes, as Szondi claims, is the “past as such,” I take it that this is so because the present events that we witness can find their point of departure in any of the histories that precede it, rather than simply that of Nora’s forgery. And in so far as the past functions as the locus of meaning for the present, it becomes clear that a second, and competing, tragic paradigm is at work in this relation, which can be said to approximate that of allegory as Walter Benjamin defines it in his *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*. Like allegory there, the clearly defined unit of the well-made-play is here dislocated from the strict temporal and social environment that determines its causal and semiotic relations, and is redefined anew. “Any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else,”<sup>8</sup> Benjamin tells us, and likewise here, Nora’s fate can find its hidden causes in any of the past’s moments.

Yet if the relation to the past would at first seem to open up the signifier of the well-made-play to a plethora of signifieds, a dialectical inversion similar to that in the conflict between law and values takes place in that between present and past. By allowing any number of different points of origin, the difference between them also disappears, as the past does not offer a single action that might have led to an alternative happy outcome. The initial moment of freedom generates the inevitability and homogeneity of Benjamin’s “*facies hippocratica*” (145), the mask of death, underlying all allegorical play. And this lack of distinction between particulars, of course, as Krogstad reminds Nora, is of the nature of the law. Where the plot determined by the law, that is, gave way to contingency, the dimension determined by contingency gives way to the law. And what was kept absolutely distant by the plot of the well-made-play is by the inevitable

---

<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin: *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982, p. 152. My translation.

necessity of the past revealed as ultimately identical: the logic of the values of altruism, of being *for* another, coincides with and always generates the logic of deceit, of *being* another.

However, the logic of absolute necessity can provide tragedy no more than that of absolute freedom, since tragedy, as Schelling already pointed out, must consist in the dialectical relation of both. The play itself, of course, makes this more than clear, since if, as Krogstad puts it, “The Law does not ask for motives” (303), the ending forces us to do *precisely* that. The question that haunts the play, after all is *why* Nora leaves, what *her* motivations are, returning us once more, from the level of the abstract universality of the past to the concrete experience of this particular present. The relationship between the two tragic paradigms that I have traced, then, one immanent and one transcendent, is exactly what Kierkegaard in *The Sickness Unto Death* defined as a negative possibility, a relation between two terms in an antinomy. If neither term is permitted to gain the upper hand, however, neither are the two collapsed into a Hegelian *Aufhebung*, and this is so precisely because Ibsen holds on to two incommensurable modes of representation: that of drama and that of the novel. Rather than a failure, then, the vacillation between genres that Szondi points to is the necessary precondition for Nora to emerge as the positive third term in Kierkegaard’s notion of the self. Participating in both the present and the past, Nora’s inexplicable departure constitutes the negative space for the relation that relates itself to its own self, the *tertium comparationis* that makes possible an ontological transfer between spheres in the moment of decision. In Nora’s final action the sphere of contingency receives the tragic weight of the past’s necessity, but the past also becomes subject to the freedom of the present, and thereby makes change possible.

Nora's incomprehensible and offensive act in this way goes from being that which must be explained, to that explaining, by providing the interpretative position from which the proper relation of the relations in the text may be revealed. *Pace* Moretti, then, the moment of truth is not that in which the spheres of existence are torn apart, but that in which they are made to touch in all their incommensurability in the moment of infinite passion. It is only then, as Climacus reminds us in the *Postscript*, that the contradictions of existence can be overcome (IX, 164).

If Szondi is right, and I tend to agree with him, that drama following Ibsen abandons the simultaneity of contradictory modes of representation, then I would nevertheless argue that this is not the case for *all* subsequent literature. On the contrary, it seems to me, that Ibsen's greatest legacy is to be found in the novel, and that it can there account for much of the transformation that occurs between Flaubert and modernism. But that is another story.