

Henrik Ibsen

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Henrik Ibsen is beyond question the most important figure in modern thought. There are after all very few writers who have perfectly summarized great periods of the history of the race. Sophocles represents to us in dramatic form, perhaps better than any of his contemporaries, the real trend of ancient thought. Aristotle may be considered his only rival; and Sophocles is more important than Aristotle because he employs the method of art. The dark ages are dark to us, mainly, because they lacked so perfect an exponent. Dante is the only poet who is at all satisfactory. The spirit of the Renaissance is far more perfectly expressed in Shakespeare than in any other writer. After his time there is no one of planetary importance until we come to Balzac. But Balzac wrote in a period of transition; revolution and counter-revolution had already made earthquakes in Europe. But the world at large was not alive to the significance of what was happening. Nobody foresaw the extent of the dominion of science.

Ibsen was the first man to realize how tremendous an upheaval was involved in the discoveries of chemist and physicist. Revealed religion had already gone by the board so far as thinking men were concerned; and with it had gone the crude morality which is based upon it. People were feeling the need of confession while revolted at the idea of confessing to a priest, the need of redemption while appalled at the thought of a redeemer. Man was shaking himself free from the nightmare of ages, and he was in the curious condition which often happens to one in the morning. One is not sure whether one is awake or asleep. One does not fully realize where one is or who one is. This condition is often

one of great anguish. It never occurred to our grandfathers to discuss the problem of a woman who refused motherhood; of a man who doubted whether his duty was to himself or to his country.

Now Ibsen represented with the most sublime art, with the simplicity of Greek tragedy, all these earthquakes of the soul. There is hardly any phase of the great spiritual revolt which he does not portray. Even such questions as the value and propriety of truth fell under his analysis. He has often been represented as a propagandist. He may have been that in his capacity of citizen; in that of artist he was divinely impartial. His plays are not tracts.

It is doubtful whether one could argue any single proposition from one of his plays. He spares us the moral. One is often amused by people maintaining that "A Doll's House" is a plea for the emancipation of woman. It is obvious to the reader, and still more to the spectator, of the play that, however hard Nora banged the door, she was sure to be back in time for dinner. Ibsen himself made fun of his stupid admirers in "The Wild Duck." So far as he expressed his own opinion at all, it is in the earlier poems. For example, in "Brand," we find that the hero, while perfectly correct in asserting that "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law," fails through his not going on with the interpretation of that divinely given phrase, "Love is the law, love under will"; and in "Peer Gynt" he shows how the "will to love" of Solveig is the one magical spell necessary to the redemption of the hero. This is hardly a dogmatic statement. It is merely a dramatic presentation of the Law of the New Aeon.

Ibsen remains therefore the important figure of all recent times. It was very greatly the moral uncertainty produced by the spiritual revolution, the failure to adjust our systems of ethics to our material reconstruction, that made the war possible. This period of unrest is by no means at an end. The old Gods are a little more obvi-

ously dead. One hears everywhere the wailing of the babe Horus as he draws his first breaths, but, for many of us, the problems discussed by Ibsen still remain unsolved. They remain of supreme interest and importance. Even if we have read Ibsen thoroughly and carefully at the time of his greatest influence, twenty or thirty years ago, it is still incumbent upon us to read him again in the light of what has happened since.

The other day I took out "Brand" from my shelves and read it. I was astonished to discover how entirely my point of view had changed since I read him at college fifteen years ago. It was, one might say, an entirely new poem. Time had interpreted between Ibsen and the spirit. The absorbing and commanding interest remained undiminished; in a sense, its vigor had increased. The same applies to practically all the great plays of the Norwegian master; and it is really astonishing to observe on what heights he lived habitually, to what depths he invariably probed. Ibsen has certainly established his claim to be the supreme interpreter of the spirit of his age.

Today, more than at any other period, it seems urgent to study him with reverent care, for we are approaching a period of reconstruction and regeneration; and it is Ibsen above all others who can tell us what not to do. In the "Twilight of the Idols," many monsters appeared; and in this hour of the dawn of the new creation it is as it was (according to the Hebrew tradition) in the old creation, "Faces, half-formed, arose." Those faces perished because there was no substance in them; and today we are in danger of being obsessed by many ideas, sometimes beautiful but usually fantastic, that wish to impose themselves upon us for the true Gods of the Aeon.

We must be aware of these phantoms, and our best sentinel against them is that thorough skeptical examination of moral ideas which we owe to Henrik Ibsen.