

northwest passage

Yearly Review of the Centre
for Northern Performing Arts Studies

University of Turin

n. 4/2007

Ibsen and Modern China
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Dipartimento di Discipline Artistiche, Musicali e dello Spettacolo

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**John Gabriel Borkman and the Modern
Homo faber. A Reading of the Play as Seen
through Massimo Castri's Second Staging¹**

The first reading of *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896) may convey an impression of totally cold, gloomy, closed spaces, a version of the *danse macabre* where old people face one another, complaining about the past and trying to catch up with actions that took place long before and that they cannot possibly call back to life. These features undoubtedly form a system of leitmotifs in the play, Henrik Ibsen's second-last, but they do not fully account for its richness. The risk is that this dominant feature may overshadow – in a literal sense – other important ones.

During the nineteen-eighties the Italian director Massimo Castri was very interested in Ibsen's modern drama, even from a theoretical point of view². He staged his first *John Gabriel Borkman* in 1988 and proposed this play to the Italian public again in 2002/03, a production at the Teatro Stabile di Torino. This *Borkman* was similar to the first, but contained some differences, and was as a matter of fact an altogether new interpretation of the play³. I saw it at the

* University of Florence.

¹ This article develops a paper presented at the meeting *Studiare Ibsen. Convegno Nazionale di Studi Ibseniani*, held at Casamicciola, Ischia, 19-21 September 2006. I thank my colleague at the University of Florence, Edward Tosques, for revising my English text.

² M. Castri, *Ibsen postborghese*, Ubulibri, Milano 1984.

³ Both stagings have been analysed before. See M. Kjølner, *Senex et puer: John Gabriel Borkman according to Massimo Castri*, in *Proceedings: 7th International Ibsen Conference, Grimstad 1993*, Center for Ibsen Studies, Oslo 1994, pp. 382-9; R. Alonge, *Provisional Ending. (Back to Ibsen)*, in "North-West Passage", 1, 2004, pp. 129-46, who also compares the two productions. Visual and written materials on Castri's second *John Gabriel Borkman* are available at <http://www.informaticatorino.it/teatrodams>; the texts seem to have been written by Alonge, as the reading is similar to the one in Alonge, *Provisional Ending*, cit. Scholarly interest in Castri's work as theatre director is confirmed by "Il castello di Elsinore", 55, 2007, published by the Department of

theatre in May 2003. It made me return to the text for a more thorough reading, and this is also why I am particularly thankful to Castri's second staging of *John Gabriel Borkman*.

It must be observed that recent stagings of *John Gabriel Borkman*, in and outside of Italy, have run parallel to a more specific interest by critics and scholars towards this play, and generally towards the late works by the Norwegian playwright. This attention has been growing during the nineties and up to the present time, displaying a plurality of interpretations and critical approaches.

Already in 1956, however, Peter Szondi chose *John Gabriel Borkman* as an Ibsen sample-play in his seminal and controversial theory of modern drama. Szondi's reading still tells us something essential about Ibsen's dramatic method and his importance in the development of drama as genre; but the German scholar expresses a somehow fatal judgment about the artistic value of Ibsen's plays, as he basically denies the possibility of finding there, precisely because of their typical structure, any authentic dramatic life. This has also to do with the already mentioned fact that *John Gabriel Borkman* deals mainly with old people, who do not "act", according to Szondi, but rather recall past actions⁴.

I will start my analysis by focusing on three aspects where Castri shapes his second staging in a particular manner: laughter; the visionary quality of the fourth act; and the protagonist Borkman's features as a modern *homo faber*.

A comic and grotesque note recurs as part and parcel of the gloomy setting and the serious theme – a form of peculiar Nordic humour one often finds in both Ibsen and Strindberg. This kind of dark laughter in *John Gabriel Borkman* can be connected to the evident lack of communication among the characters, which has sometimes reminded scholars of Samuel Beckett⁵. Even Castri seems to introduce another couple resembling Vladimir and Estragon in the

Performing Art Studies at the University of Turin, dedicated to Castri's stagings of plays by Pirandello, Ibsen and Strindberg.

⁴ P. Szondi, *Theorie des modernen Dramas (1880-1950)*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1973 (1 ed. 1956); see in particular pp. 22-31 and 77.

⁵ Castri, *Ibsen postborghese*, cit., p. 51, writes of "[...] una sorta di beckettismo, d'immobilità totale dei personaggi [...]" (a sort of Beckettism, of total immobility of the characters). Cf. also F. Engelstad, *Lydende malm og klingende bjelle. John Gabriel Borkman – kapitalisme og kjærlighetssvik*, in *Kjærlighetens irrganger. Sinn og samfunn i Bjørnsons og Ibsens diktning*, Gyldendal, Oslo 1992, p. 195; Kjøller, *Senex et puer*, cit.; Alonge, *Ibsen. L'opera e la fortuna scenica*, Le Lettere, Firenze 1995, pp. 127-8; A. Kittang, *Ibsens heroisme. Frå Brand til Når vi døde vågner*, Gyldendal, Oslo 2002, pp. 24, 282, 291; B. Holm, *A Frozen Dream: John Gabriel Borkman 1896/2004*, in "North-West Passage", 2, 2005, p. 82; H. Rønning, *Den umulige friheten. Henrik Ibsen og moderniteten*, Gyldendal, Oslo 2007 (1 ed. 2006), pp. 385-6.

second act, when Borkman, a former banker and capitalist who once did an eight-year jail term for fraud, is chatting with his humble old friend Foldal, the only one left to visit him every now and then⁶. Owing to his own stubborn decision, Borkman has in fact been keeping himself imprisoned in his study for eight more years since the end of his first actual incarceration⁷. In Borkman's study these two losers fill the emptiness of their lives with words, supporting each other and waiting in vain for a general recognition to rehabilitate them and free them from their eternally monotonous routine.

Besides, the whole setting and all the living conditions are absurd and grotesque as such. Borkman lives isolated in his study on the first floor of the manor-house, while his wife lives on the ground floor. They do not talk to each other, do not see each other, but they are inseparable from each other in their mutual hatred. An equally disquieting lack of relationship concerns Borkman and his son Erhart.

Erhart, on the other hand, embodies a different, lighter kind of laughter, where comedy and even vaudeville interact with the fundamentally moral and existential issues at stake. This happens thanks to the hot blood of the younger characters, which creates a peculiar and humorous contrast with the gloomy mood of the old. This feature is emphasized in both of Castri's stagings⁸. Erhart is Borkman's and Gunhild's natural child, but he was adopted and brought up by Gunhild's twin sister Ella – Borkman's former girlfriend – after the scandal and the social disrepute following the fall of Erhart's father. In the plot centered on Erhart we see a young man in his early twenties, whose heart is contested by his three old relatives, who behave like vampires. While his mother Gunhild and her sister and rival Ella treat him as an object to be possessed, Erhart reaffirms several times that he only wishes to "live" with the wealthy and divorced lady Fanny Wilton, who is some years older, i.e. to enjoy immediate erotic bliss with her. All these ingredients are prone to eliciting easy laughter in the midst of such a serious plot, as in fact occurs in Castri's staging.

It has been observed how the director emphasized senility in this production, and consequently the gap between the old and the young, endowing Borkman, Gunhild and Ella with a walking-stick which becomes an extension of their body language⁹. Besides, the old relatives' *danse macabre* around their

⁶ This applies also to Castri's first staging in 1988. See Kjøller, *Senex et puer*, cit., p. 384.

⁷ G. De Martino, *Between Borkman's Lines*, in "North-West Passage", 1, 2004, pp. 45-6, proposes some symbolic meanings of the number eight.

⁸ Cf. Kjøller, *Senex et puer*, cit.; Alonge, *Provisional Ending*, cit.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 130-1. Alonge observes that "Vittorio Franceschi, the 2002 Borkman, has

youthful idol in the third act is followed, as a reply, by Erhart's and Fanny's provoking waltz. They repeat their dance while talking to the desperate Gunhild towards the end of the same act, just before leaving for the South and the "happiness" they think they will find there¹⁰.

Ibsen's mastery also finds expression in the way he includes the methods and clichés of traditional nineteenth century comedy and entertainment, which he knew well, in order to surpass them with something visually, emotionally and morally more committing – something which can even make him appear to us as a forerunner of Beckett. Castri's inventions help therefore to stress this dynamism. The old structures prefigure the new ones, in which we find the essence of Ibsen's modernity. This takes us back to Szondi, because even what we may call his "negative" opinion is actually a historical reflection about a critical turning-point in the way theatre had been conceived up to that time, and about a problem that would demand a solution in the twentieth century. The line Szondi draws goes rather from traditional theatre and through Ibsen's contradictions to the solutions introduced by Luigi Pirandello, Thornton Wilder and Arthur Miller¹¹; still, the question of Ibsen's heritage (and of Strindberg's) for the twentieth century is a main topic for Szondi, and therefore a form of very "positive" evaluation.

In the fourth and final act Ibsen removes the boundaries of the home walls and transfers the action outdoors, as Borkman and Ella go out of the manor-house where the first three acts have taken place. In the second part of this act the setting consists of a movable mountain landscape outside the main town, while the old couple, who have left the house, are walking uphill. It is winter, right after a snowstorm, with snow covering the ground and the slopes: a scenic design that Edvard Munch defined as the most majestic snowy landscape in Northern art¹². This part of the play, set beyond the bourgeois parlour, has

absolutely no 'aura' and that he is "[...] like a resident in an old people's home". This image differs in fact from Ibsen's stage directions, where Borkman is described as elderly but still distinguished. Jan Malmsjö's appearance and interpretation in the production of *John Gabriel Borkman* by the Stockholm *Dramaten*, which I was able to see in Oslo on 1 September 2006, corresponds more exactly to Ibsen's description, which on the other hand does not prevent even this Borkman from being comical.

¹⁰ Cf. Alonge, *Provisional Ending*, cit., pp. 139-44.

¹¹ Cf. Szondi, *Theorie des modernen Dramas*, cit., pp. 77, 127-35, 139-61. It is interesting to read, in this respect, Miller's own reflections: A. Miller, *Ibsen and the Drama of Today*, in J. McFarlane (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994, pp. 227-32.

¹² Quoted from D. A. Seip, *Innledning*, in H. Ibsen, *Samlede verker. Hundreårsutgave*, XIII, *John Gabriel Borkman. Når vi døde vågner*, Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, Oslo 1936, p. 27: "Det er alt dette som har fått Edv. Munch til å si om 'John Gabriel Borkman' at

visionary and symbolic qualities that Castrì exploits with the help of a bare, stylized and almost abstract stage and through a use of lights and colours with fairy-tale effects. The existential subject matter of the tension between captivity and longing for liberation interacts in all of Ibsen's modern plays with the dialectics of stage signs, between closed and open spaces¹³. In *John Gabriel Borkman* this system of signs produces one of the most interesting challenges to the directors of today. In this case Castrì proposes an uninterrupted shift between the third and the fourth act, that is between the closed and open spaces¹⁴. Towards the end of the third act the snow begins to fall inside too, while the front wings representing the entrance hall of the house, with the door on the background, slowly rise up and give way to a structure of bare winter trees and branches¹⁵. Later in the act, while Borkman and Ella are walking, their uphill direction is conveyed by a simultaneous raising of the trees (as if the woods were thinning out), until just a single bare tree is left on stage, with a chest, to which I shall return. Even the bare tree on the empty stage, described by Ibsen as a dead pine in a wood clearing in his naturalistic stage directions, can be considered as an echo of the setting of *Waiting for Godot*¹⁶.

Castrì's strategy confirms on the whole what has been pointed out about the most recent productions of *John Gabriel Borkman* in different countries: the play has been performed as an absurdist drama and/or one that exploits the

det er det 'mektigste snelandskap i nordisk kunst' (Harry Fett: Østen i tusj s. 73)". It is well-known how sensitive an interpreter of Ibsen's universe Munch was as a painter.

¹³ A thorough study of this aspect is A. Aarseth, *Ibsens samtidsskuespill. En studie i glassskapets dramaturgi*, Universitetsforlaget, Oslo 1999; on *John Gabriel Borkman* in particular pp. 309-33. About the problem of man in a cage see also J. McFarlane, *Ibsen & Meaning. Studies, Essays & Prefaces 1953-87*, Norvik Press, Norwich 1989, pp. 59-61. The special quality of the fourth act of *John Gabriel Borkman* is described in J. Northam, *John Gabriel Borkman and the Swansong*, in "Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen", 8, 1994, pp. 131-40; F. Paul, *Metaphysical Landscapes in Ibsen's Late Plays*, in "Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen", 9, 1997, pp. 17-33; and in F. Paul, "As if he were a King" – *The Rise and Fall of Ibsen's John Gabriel Borkman*, in P. Bjørby et al. (eds.), *Ibsen on the Cusp of the 21st Century. Critical Perspectives. A Festschrift in Honor of Asbjørn Aarseth*, Alvheim & Eide, Laksevåg 2005, pp. 125-39.

¹⁴ This solution was already adopted by Castrì in his previous production. Cf. Kjølner, *Senex et puer*, cit., p. 388, and Alonge, *Provisional Ending*, cit., pp. 135, 144-5. An uninterrupted shift between the third and fourth act – which by the way are half the length of the first and second ones – is also carried out, with a different solution, in the above-mentioned production by the Swedish *Dramaten* (see note 9).

¹⁵ In both of Castrì's stagings the third act does not take place, as in Ibsen's text, in Gunhild's parlour on the ground floor, but in the entrance hall of the manor-house, so as to allow the described shift to the fourth act. Cf. Kjølner, *Senex et puer*, cit., p. 388, and Alonge, *Provisional Ending*, cit., p. 144.

¹⁶ Alonge, *Ibsen. L'opera e la fortuna scenica*, cit., p. 128; Alonge, *Provisional Ending*, cit., p. 135.

post-naturalistic, almost cinematographic qualities in the fourth mobile act¹⁷. Castri's staging can therefore be considered as part of a general trend of re-shaping this late nineteenth century play in the light of the present. With the vividness of his fourth act, Castri offers an example of the modern possibilities of Ibsen's drama, in spite of its tighter bonds with nineteenth-century conventions, especially if compared to Strindberg's later plays. In his revolutionary station-plays and dream-plays, such as *To Damascus* (1898-1901) and *A Dream Play* (1901), Strindberg uses the scene rather as a psychic space, freeing it on purpose from realistic or naturalistic criteria of verisimilitude. It is as if the fourth act of *John Gabriel Borkman*, still realistic, moves towards a similar dream-like quality¹⁸.

Borkman's autobiographical narrative reaches its peak in the closing act, but it has in fact recurred since the character first appeared on stage at the beginning of the second act. Borkman has seen and keeps seeing himself, in spite of his actual failure, as a special, modern *homo faber*, the organizer of a global industrial and communications development of which he was to be the sole creator and demiurge¹⁹. It has been observed by Merete Kjøller and Roberto Alonge how Castri's attitude to Ibsen on stage has changed from an earlier more experimental approach in which the text could be deconstructed and reconstructed, to a greater respect for the integrity of its utterance, where the work of interpretation rather concerns acting, setting and direction strategies²⁰. At the end of the play another invention by the director occurs, after those already mentioned of the old people's walking-sticks, the dance of the old and the young, and the uninterrupted, snowy shift between the third and the fourth act. Borkman's eternal dream of his nation's and the world's industrial transformation, and his vision of a marvelous destiny of ceaseless progress

¹⁷ See Paul, "As if he were a King", cit., pp. 131-4; Holm, *A Frozen Dream*, cit.

¹⁸ Szondi's pages on Strindberg are illuminating in this respect: where Ibsen preserves the traditional stage form but fills it with modern subjectivity and memory, Strindberg also starts to change the form towards the "subjective" drama of the twentieth century. See Szondi, *Theorie des modernen Dramas*, cit., pp. 40-57. For a comparison between *John Gabriel Borkman* and Strindberg's *A Dream Play* see also Aarseth, *Ibsens samtidsskuespill*, cit., pp. 328-31. Franco Perrelli defines the scenery in the fourth act of *John Gabriel Borkman* as "an immense dream-like perspective": F. Perrelli, *Henrik Ibsen. Un profilo*, Edizioni di Pagina, Bari 2006, p. 159 ("[...] un'immensa prospettiva di sogno [...]").

¹⁹ Daniel Haakonsen observes that Borkman's ore-mining and work motifs run like a basso continuo through the entire play: D. Haakonsen, *Ibsen. Mennesket og kunstneren*, Aschehoug, Oslo 2003 (1 ed. 1981), p. 194.

²⁰ Kjøller, *Senex et puer*, cit., pp. 382-3; Alonge, *Ibsen. L'opera e la fortuna scenica*, cit., pp. 124-8.

for himself and mankind, take the form of a chest which the protagonist comes to at the end of his uphill walk, at the town's lookout point, which will soon become the place of his own death. It is a toy chest, and while Borkman expresses, according to the text, his yearning to set free the beloved ore of the mountains to make it circulate and work for mankind, he plays like a child, taking a top, a trumpet and a toy train out of the chest²¹. The possession and manipulation of money – which caused Borkman's fraud and his even greater crime towards Ella, the woman he loved – turns out to be a form of authentic childlike passion, pure, absolute and totally absorbed in the moment: Borkman wanted and wants to provide money for industrial production, transformations and great communications, fantasizing about a dynamic, on-line world, which exists in order to create wealth²². Borkman is singing, with total commitment and as “the last prophet of a century which gave birth to capitalism”²³, the actual changes Norway and Europe underwent in the course of the nineteenth century.

It is therefore understandable that the play has been interpreted, both in stage productions and critical studies, by connecting the protagonist's personal fate with the wider socio-historical context of the radical changes leading Norway towards modernity during the second half of the nineteenth century, and, at an even higher level, with the symbolic dimension of the Faustian man in Western civilization²⁴. Borkman the bourgeois capitalist is placed before the

²¹ Cf. Alonge, *Provisional Ending*, cit., pp. 135-6. Alonge also mentions a ball among the toys, which I do not recall.

²² At the end of the 1988 version Borkman dies sitting in the chest, the contents of which are more open to interpretation. Cf. Kjølner, *Senex et puer*, cit., p. 388: “Under this tree there are two chairs and, a little bit off, a chest: a trunk for toys or a strong-box for hidden treasure. It is precisely here inside this chest that Borkman lies down at the end to die”. Alonge, *Ibsen. L'opera e la fortuna scenica*, cit., p. 128, reads it as a strong-box for money.

²³ G. De Martino, *John Gabriel Borkman's Scriptural Echoes*, in F. Perrelli, R. Tessari (eds.), *Ibsenian Lessons. A Festschrift for Roberto Alonge*, DAMS – Università degli Studi, Torino 2002, p. 90.

²⁴ Several studies have analysed this aspect. Some contributions from international literature are H. Rønning, *Ibsen and the Ambivalence of Modernity*, in *Proceedings: 7th International Ibsen Conference*, cit., pp. 48-63; P. Madsen, *Nature's Revenge. The Dialectics of Mastering in Late Ibsen*, in *Proceedings: 7th International Ibsen Conference*, cit., pp. 64-81; Paul, “As if he were a King”, cit. Vigdis Ystad denies on the other hand that *John Gabriel Borkman* has anything to do with history; the play is ultimately, in her view, a “timeless tragedy”: V. Ystad, *John Gabriel Borkman. Historisk analyse eller tidløs tragedie?*, in “Edda”, 1997, 1, pp. 54-64. Two recent books on Ibsen – T. Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism. Art, Theater, Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006; Rønning, *Den umulige friheten*, cit. – have explored in different ways the historicity of Ibsen's work. For Rønning, in particular, Ibsen's complete works are to be understood within the context of modernity as a social and historical

existential consequences of his game and the transformations he has set off, even if just in his fantasy.

Modern development – not as the industrial transformation of our world, but as a change in artistic expression between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century – is, as mentioned before, the main concern of Szondi's theory, according to which Ibsen is modern (perhaps unfortunately modern), in the sense that he draws theatre closer to the epic element, i.e. to the dominating genre of the bourgeois age, the novel. Ibsen represents therefore a crisis and a turning point. *John Gabriel Borkman* in particular is so exemplary for Szondi, since the scholar analyses the basic convention in the construction of a play by Ibsen as the relationship between the uttered word, which recalls the past, and the present (lack of) action:

Ibsens Problem ist die Darstellung der innerlich gelebten vergangenen Zeit in einer Dichtungsform, die die Innerlichkeit nur in deren Objektivation, die Zeit nur in deren je gegenwärtigem Moment kennt. Er löst es, indem er Situationen erfindet, in denen die Menschen über ihre eigene erinnerte Vergangenheit zu Gericht sitzen und sie auf diese Weise in die Offenheit der Gegenwart rücken²⁵.

Ibsen's problem is to represent the past as an interior experience, in a literary form that allows interiority only as objectified, and time only in the present moments that follow one upon the other. He solves it by inventing situations, in which people sit as judges of their own remembered past and, in this way, take it to the open light of the present²⁶.

The interpersonal dialogue, which in the classical canon of drama as postulated by Szondi should contain the seeds of immanent action, refers in Ibsen rather to an action that has already taken place, and that has been developing in the past up to the present moment of the stage action. In this sense, according to Szondi, Ibsen makes drama too “epic”²⁷, causing a break and a state of imbalance in the historical life of the genre. The present interpersonal dialogue

point of reference; *John Gabriel Borkman* is relevant to his discourse: *ibid.*, pp. 15-6, 18-9, 380-93.

²⁵ Szondi, *Theorie des modernen Dramas*, cit., p. 77.

²⁶ My translation.

²⁷ Remarks on Szondi's idea of the “epic” in Aarseth, *Ibsens samtidsskuespill*, cit., pp. 313-6. About the question of writing drama in the age of the novel cf. Rønning, *Den umulige friheten*, cit. pp. 64-90.

in Ibsen is so cluttered with the past that it transforms the present action on stage, in Szondi's opinion, into a mere pretext. In *John Gabriel Borkman*, Szondi observes,

[...] ist die Vergangenheit [...] nicht Funktion der Gegenwart, vielmehr diese nur Anlaß zur Heraufbeschwörung der Vergangenheit. [...] nichts Vergangenes also, sondern die Vergangenheit selbst: die immer wieder erwähnten "langen Jahre" und das ganze verpfuschte, verfehlte Leben²⁸.

[...] the past [...] does not operate in the present, but the present simply provides an opportunity to evoke the past. [...] not past events then, but the past as such: the continuously mentioned "past years" and their "entire spoiled, failed lives".

The characters seem to conduct a dialogue but have actually sunk into themselves, reverted to their own past and withdrawn into their subjectivity. The form of dramatic dialogue interacts with a subject matter that is instead epic and diegetic, fundamentally suited for the novel, or – one might almost infer from reading Szondi – for on-stage soliloquy²⁹. Although Szondi explains, and is even able to show, that he does not want to evaluate normatively, but rather to describe historically and dialectically, his conclusions concerning *John Gabriel Borkman* and Ibsen are quite harsh: the old characters Borkman, Gunhild and Ella are "buried souls", and this judgement is actually extended to Ibsen's whole universe:

Nur in sich vergraben, von der "Lebenslüge" zehrend, konnten Ibsens Menschen leben. Daß er nicht ihr Romancier wurde, sie nicht in ihrem Leben beließ, sondern zur offenen Aussprache zwang, tötete sie. So wird in Zeiten, die dem Drama feindlich gesinnt sind, der Dramatiker zum Mörder seiner eigenen Geschöpfe³⁰.

Ibsen's characters could only live buried in themselves, deriving nourishment from the "life-lie". The fact that he did not write about them as a novelist, that he did not leave them in their lives, but forced them to open utterance, killed them. Therefore, in times of hostility against drama, the dramatist becomes a murderer of his own creatures.

²⁸ Szondi, *Theorie des modernen Dramas*, cit., p. 28.

²⁹ Hence Ibsen's "Beckettism" according to Castri, *Ibsen postborghese*, cit., p. 51.

³⁰ Szondi, *Theorie des modernen Dramas*, cit., p. 31.

It is not completely true, however, that everything has already happened in *John Gabriel Borkman*, whether as concerns the external action, the characters' inner, psychological and emotional processes, or their existential awareness. All the buried problems of the past take new form in the present, a dark winter evening with no ellipses between the acts. And the increasing tension in the dialogues between the two sisters, as between them and Borkman, Borkman and Foldal and the old and the young is – as always in Ibsen – skillfully built up through the interaction between the revelations about the past and the present moment of reckoning. Ibsen's particular use of the retrospective technique implies that the narration of flashbacks is extended throughout the play, and not traditionally limited to the "exposition" in the first act. This method, far from making present action an occasional pretext, creates within it a crescendo of uneasiness³¹: how do the characters *act now* from the new light shed upon the past? Ibsen's repertoire of theatrical conventions confers an almost absolute importance on moral choice. And ethics are fundamentally concerned with human action.

In this respect we may observe the peculiar mixture of *rigor mortis* and burning, devastating passions in the behaviour of the old characters on stage³². First in the present dialogue with Borkman, once again encountered after so many years, Ella learns the real reason why the man left her. And first at the end of the play, in facing his own death, Borkman reveals the primary motivation of the whole dramatic action, telling Ella about the precise moment he went down into the bank vault to gain illegal possession of other people's bonds, so as to provide money for his dream of development. Standing again together at the lookout point over the town and the fjord, Ella and Borkman help each other to recall:

³¹ Cf. Haakonsen, *Ibsen*, cit., pp. 128-30. Miller, *Ibsen and the Drama of Today*, cit., pp. 229-30, writes: "[...] I still believe that a play without a past is a mere shadow of a play".

³² Cf. R. Young, *Time's Disinherited Children. Childhood, Regression and Sacrifice in the Plays of Henrik Ibsen*, Norvik Press, Norwich 1989, pp. 181-2; Engelstad, *Lydende malm og klingende bjelle*, cit., p. 188. To Joan Templeton the old people in the play seem portraits of the "frozen soul": J. Templeton, *Down among the Dead Women: John Gabriel Borkman*, in *Ibsen's Women*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, pp. 291-301. Frode Helland underlines the *rigor mortis* too: F. Helland, *Melankoliens spill. En studie i Henrik Ibsens siste dramaer*, Universitetsforlaget, Oslo 2000, pp. 293-355. Bent Holm offers an interesting mythical-symbolical reading of the realistic plot, according to which every main character, except for Mrs. Wilton, is dead. With Ella's entry the characters change from their decades-long rigidity to movement, in a kind of *Dance macabre*, a dance of the dead. See Holm, *A Frozen Dream*, cit., p. 87.

BORKMAN (*peger udad*). Sér du, hvor landet ligger frit og åbent for os – vidt ud over?

ELLA RENTHEIM. Der på bænken sad vi ofte før, – og så endnu langt, langt videre ud over.

BORKMAN. Det var et drømmeland, vi så ud over dengang.

ELLA RENTHEIM (*nikker tungt*). Vort livs drømmeland var det, ja. Og nu er det land snédækt. – Og det gamle træ er dødt.

BORKMAN (*uden at høre på hende*). Kan du skimte røgen af de store dampskibene ude på fjorden?

ELLA RENTHEIM. Nej.

BORKMAN. Jeg kan. – De kommer og de går. De bringer forbundsliv hele jorden rundt. De skaber lys og varme over sjælene i mange tusend hjem. Det var *det*, jeg drømte om at skabe.

ELLA RENTHEIM (*stille*). Og så blev det ved drømmen.

BORKMAN. Det blev ved drømmen, ja. (*lytter*) Og hør der nede ved elven, du! Fabrikerne går! *Mine* fabriker! Alle de, som *jeg* vilde skabt! Hør bare hvor de går. De har natarbejde. Nat og dag arbejder de altså. Hør, hør! Hjulene hvirvler og valserne lyner – rundt, rundt! Kan du ikke høre det, Ella?

ELLA RENTHEIM. Nej.

BORKMAN. *Jeg* kan høre det.

ELLA RENTHEIM (*ængstelig*). Jeg tror, du ta'r fejl, John.

BORKMAN (*mere og mere opildnet*). Å men alt dette her – det er bare ligesom udenværkerne omkring riget, det, må du vide!

ELLA RENTHEIM. Riget, siger du? Hvilket rige –?

BORKMAN. *Mit* rige vel! Det rige, jeg var lige ved at tage i besiddelse den gang jeg – den gang jeg døde.

ELLA RENTHEIM (*stille, rystet*). Å John, John!

BORKMAN. Og nu ligger det der – forsvarsløst, herreløst – udsat for røveres overfald og plyndring. – Ella! Ser du fjeldrækkerne *der* – langt borte? Den ene bagenfor den anden? De højnes sig. De tårner sig. *Det* er mit dybe, endeløse, uudtømmelige rige!

ELLA RENTHEIM. Å, men der står et så isnende pust fra det rige, John!

BORKMAN. Det pust virker som livsluft på mig. Det pust kommer til mig som en hilsen fra underdanige ånder. Jeg fornemmer dem, de bundne millioner; jeg føler malmårerene, som strækker sine bugtede, grenede, lokkende arme ud efter mig. Jeg så dem for mig som levendegjorte skygger – den nat, da jeg stod i bankkælderen med lygten i hånden. I vilde frigøres dengang. Og jeg prøvde på det. Men jeg mægted det ikke. Skatten sank i dybet igen. (*med framrakte hænder*) Men jeg vil hviske det til jer her i nattenstilheden. Jeg elsker eder, der I ligger skindøde i dybet og i mørket! jeg elsker eder, I

livkrævende værdier – med alt eders lysende følge af magt og ære. Jeg elsker, elsker, elsker eder!³³

BORKMAN (*pointing out*). You see how the land lies before us, free and open – all the way out.

ELLA. We often used to sit on that bench – and look even farther still.

BORKMAN. It was a dreamland we were seeing then.

ELLA. The dreamland of our lives, yes. And now it's a land of snow. And the old tree is dead.

BORKMAN (*not hearing her*). Can you see the smoke from the great steamers out on the fjord?

ELLA. No.

BORKMAN. I can. They come and they go. They make this whole round earth into one community. They spread light and warmth into human hearts in countless thousands of homes. *That's* the thing I dreamed of doing.

ELLA (*softly*). And it stayed a dream.

BORKMAN. It stayed a dream, yes. (*Listening*). Hear that? Down by the river, the factories whirring! *My* factories! All the ones *I* would have built! Can you hear how they're going? It's the night shift. Night and day they're working. Listen, listen! The wheels are spinning, and the gears are gleaming – around and around! Don't you hear them, Ella?

ELLA. No.

BORKMAN. *I* hear them.

ELLA (*fearfully*). I think you're mistaken, John.

BORKMAN (*more and more exhilarated*). Oh, but all this – it's only a kind of outworks enclosing the kingdom, you know!

ELLA. The kingdom? What kingdom?

BORKMAN. My kingdom, of course! The kingdom I was on the verge of possessing when I – when I died.

ELLA (*quietly shaken*). Oh, John, John!

BORKMAN. And now it lies there – defenseless, leaderless – exposed to the rape and plunder of thieves – Ella! Do you see those mountain ranges *there* – far off. One after another. They leap skyward. They tower in space. That's my deep, my endless, inexhaustible kingdom!

ELLA. Yes, but John, the wind blows ice-cold from that kingdom!

³³ Ibsen, *Samlede verker*, XIII, cit., pp. 123-4. I have changed the gaps between letters, used by Ibsen to stress a word, with italics (“det var d e t” with “det var *det*”).

BORKMAN. That wind works on me like the breath of life. It comes to me like a greeting from captive spirits. I can sense them, the buried millions. I feel the veins of metal, reaching their curving, branching, beckoning arms out to me. I saw them before me like living shadows – the night I stood in the bank vault with a lantern in my hand. You wanted your freedom them – and I tried to set you free. But I lacked the strength for it. Your treasures sank back in the depths. (*His hands outstretched*) But I'll whisper to you here in the silence of the night. I love you, lying there unconscious in the depths and the darkness! I love you, your riches straining to be born – with all your shining aura of power and glory! I love you, love you, love you!³⁴

Words about the past become present action and moral choice. Which “kingdom” do we actually long for in the moment of reckoning? Borkman’s turning from the actual interlocutor standing before him, Ella, to the imagined “buried millions” (towards whom he stretches out his hands), *is* action expressed in words, although it also confirms the kind of soliloquy, of inner dialogue with one’s own past, which Szondi emphasizes. At this moment Borkman’s Faustian longing ironically coincides with his social crime. His personal mythology of the Lord of the Ore, who has descended into the bowels of the earth to grasp his promised treasure and set it free³⁵, corresponds to the base concrete image of a thief in the bank vault. Bent Holm has given a good description of this moment as a “frozen dream”:

This imagery constitutes the frozen dream, which appears at the same time grandiose and grotesque, because of the incoherent references. Characteristically enough, there are no sharp borderlines between the bank’s basement, the mountain’s depth, and Borkman’s

³⁴ Ibsen, *Four Major Plays*, II, R. Fjelde (trans.), Signet Classic, New York 1970, pp. 404-5.

³⁵ Madsen connects Borkman’s deed with early twentieth-century financial theories, according to which idle capital kept in banks should circulate in order to increase business and wealth: Madsen, *Nature’s Revenge*, cit., pp. 69-72. Kittang refers to Madsen and links this context to the symbolic motif of the dance of the dead in the play: Kittang, *Ibsen’s heroisme*, cit., pp. 302-3; and so does Helland, *Melankoliens spill*, cit., pp. 338-40. But where Kittang’s reading is “heroic”, Helland’s is “melancholic”: “Malmens sang er de samme ‘toner’ som dødsdansens musikk. [...] Til grunn for Borkmans hele livsprosjekt ligger altså dødsdansens skremmende forveksling av liv og død”, *ibid.*, p. 339. Cf. also Rønning, *Den umulige friheten*, cit., pp. 383-4. A strong, well-formulated attack against Borkman’s personal mythology as *lie* is in McFarlane, *Ibsen & Meaning*, cit., pp. 327-30.

mental interior, the exterior and realistic, and the interior and symbolic world³⁶.

Reconsidering Szondi critically, we can then conclude that it is the very agedness of three of the characters in *John Gabriel Borkman* (four with Foldal) which gives the play its powerful emotional and dramaturgic life. On the one hand the “buried” old people make a last attempt to come back to life and gather their fragments in order to find some meaning³⁷. Each of them nourishes a future vision, which is of course an illusion, but which they fight for until the end. On the other hand, the choices, omissions and turning points of their lives are, because of their age, summed up in the utmost existential value of their minds and words³⁸.

Who “is” then John Gabriel Borkman? As always in Ibsen, the richness, subtlety and ambiguity of the text make different, even opposite answers possible. And this is also true for the other characters of the play³⁹. Evidently, Ibsen works deliberately on the vast semantic spectrum of his characters. In doing so, he relies on the intrinsic absence, in drama, of a diegetic space of mediation and comment between the author and the audience: the narrator’s voice⁴⁰. In this

³⁶ Holm, *A Frozen Dream*, cit., p. 84. An excellent analysis of this aspect is J. Dines Johansen, *Mimetic and Diegetic Space in Ibsen’s Late Plays*, in A. Saether (ed.), *Ibsen and the Arts. Painting – Sculpture – Architecture. Ibsen Conference in Rome 2001, 24-27 October*, Centre for Ibsen Studies, University of Oslo, 2002, pp. 133-49. Cf. also Young, *Time’s Disinherited Children*, cit., pp. 193-4; D. Johansen, *The Closing of an Epoch: Punishment and Euthanasia. Death in John Gabriel Borkman*, in P. Bjørby, A. Aarseth (eds.), *Proceedings: 9th International Ibsen Conference, Bergen 5-10 June 2000*, Alvheim & Eide, Øvre Ervik 2001, pp. 377-85; Paul, “*As if he were a King*”, cit., pp. 127-8.

³⁷ Gianna De Martino relates the recurrent use of the biblical word *oprejsing* – from the verb *oprejse* (to redeem, redress, repair) – in *John Gabriel Borkman* to the characters’ attempt to restore order and meaning from chaos and loss: De Martino, *John Gabriel Borkman’s Scriptural Echoes*, cit., pp. 85-95. See also De Martino, *Between “Borkman”’s Lines*, cit., pp. 46-7; A. Jakobsen, “*To Waste One’s Life*”: *Biblical Language in Ibsen’s Dramas of Contemporary Life*, in “*Ibsen Studies*”, 1, 2004, pp. 30-9; and Holm, *A Frozen Dream*, cit., pp. 83-4.

³⁸ Cf. Alonge, *Provisional Ending*, cit., p. 131.

³⁹ To mention only some interesting examples, Sandra Saari’s and Joan Templeton’s readings of the female characters Gunhild Borkman, Ella Rentheim and Fanny Wilton are rather different, at times opposite. The same applies to Frode Helland’s and Atle Kittang’s reading of Erhart’s pursuit of love. Cf. S. Saari, *The Female Positions in John Gabriel Borkman*, in “*Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen*”, 8, 1994, pp. 159-84; Templeton, *Down among the Dead Women*, cit.; Helland, *Melankoliens spill*, cit., pp. 325-31; Kittang, *Ibsens heroisme*, cit., pp. 299, 308.

⁴⁰ Cf. C. Segre, *Teatro e romanzo*, Einaudi, Torino 1984, pp. VII-XI, 3-14. Ibsen was conscious of the independent voice and will of his characters, which could “astonish” him; cf. Haakonsen, *Henrik Ibsen*, cit., pp. 101-2.

sense Ibsen's plays are far indeed from the narrative and epic genres, and they thoroughly exploit the specific resources and limits of drama.

Atle Kittang proposes the idea of a dramatic "laboratory" to account for the contradictions and complexities of Ibsen's plays. Ibsen has social, political, moral and philosophical ideas, but he is a playwright and not a journalist, politician, moralist or philosopher. His characters are shaped in the force-field and tensions that specifically belong to drama⁴¹. And this set of dramatic conventions imitates real life, as no human being can be grasped in one simple formula; even in this sense, Ibsen's evident longing for truth and authenticity takes a step towards a more problematic and fragmented twentieth century.

Is John Gabriel Borkman a dreamer, a fake, an abuser? Is he only a champion of deceit and self-deceit? Or is he in a way, and despite his failure, a hero, a prophet and a champion of work, a dimension in which he has been seeking a kind of sublime fulfilment? The prevailing reading in the critical tradition and – as far as I have seen – in the interpretation on stage tends to stress the negative implications of his character⁴². Borkman seems trapped in a self-deceit that is of course different from Hjalmar Ekdal's in *The Wild Duck* but equivalent to it, in the sense that he prefers to dismiss, through a myth about his own person, some uncomfortable truths about the evil he has caused himself and others, as well as about his failure.

However, there exists also a different reading which emphasizes the power and fascination of the vision of modern progress in Borkman⁴³. According to

⁴¹ See Kittang, *Prolog om Ibsens heroisme*, in *Ibsens heroisme*, cit., pp. 11-27. Also McFarlane, *Ibsen & Meaning*, cit., pp. 45-66, warns against the idea of Ibsen as Ibsenism, a coherent system of thought, and he insists on "[...] the complex unity of his art. He is irreducible" (*ibid.*, p. 66).

⁴² One could start from G. Brandes, *Henrik Ibsen (1898)*, in *Samlede Skrifter*, III, Gyldendal, Kjøbenhavn 1900, pp. 341-6. Cf. also D. A. Seip, *Innledning*, in Ibsen, *Samlede verker*, XIII, cit., pp. 9-36; McFarlane, *Ibsen & Meaning*, cit., in particular pp. 300-38; Young, *Time's Disinherited Children*, cit., pp. 180-94; Engelstad, *Lydende malm og klingende bjelle*, cit.; Engelstad, *The Defeat of Failure and the Failure of Success. Gender Roles and Images of the Male in Henrik Ibsen's Last Four Plays*, in *Proceedings: 7th International Ibsen Conference*, cit., pp. 390-405; O. I. Holtan, *The Troll's Eye and Rubek's Art: Ibsen and the Modern Sensibility*, in *Proceedings: 7th International Ibsen Conference*, cit., pp. 130-40; Templeton, *Down among the Dead Women*, cit.; Paul, *Metaphysical Landscapes in Ibsen's Late Plays*; cit.; D. Johansen, *Mimetic and Diegetic Space in Ibsen's Late Plays*; cit.; Paul, "As if he were a King", cit.; Rønning, *Den umulige friheten*, cit., pp. 380-93. There are differences; some contributions account for the complexity of the character, while others, such as Young's and Templeton's, are more drastic.

⁴³ Cf. C. Leland, *Anagnorisis in John Gabriel Borkman*, in "Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen", 4, 1978, pp. 138-53; R. Alonge, *Epopea borghese nel teatro di Ibsen*, Guida, Napoli 1983, pp. 151-73; Alonge, *Protestant Severity versus Mediterranean Dissi-*

Kittang, Borkman is *also* a typical Ibsen hero, whose prototype is to be found in Brand. He is suited for action and he wants power. But his will to power, in the style of a Nietzschean *Übermensch*, does not limit itself to egotism, but rather transcends the self and is intended as a gift to mankind. Borkman states repeatedly that the power he wished and still wishes to obtain – even at the cost of betraying Ella's love – is needed to transform the world and bring about progress, wealth and happiness for the multitude⁴⁴.

Dag Solstad, one of Norway's most outstanding novelists, also explains who Ibsen's contemporary national audience were, namely bourgeois champions of work, both dreamers and pragmatic individuals, entrepreneurs and inventors, creators of the great industrial and technological progress which took place within just a few short decades. These people were the prime audience of Ibsen's books and plays, and even the socio-historical point of reference on which Ibsen could mould his own vision of the individual who is devoted to work⁴⁵.

Besides, the "genetic" link between the late *John Gabriel Borkman* and the early poem *The Miner* makes Ibsen's autobiographical projection in Borkman more likely⁴⁶. *The Miner* is an allegory of the complicated and ambiguous mission of the artist and intellectual: the miner longs for the depths, where he hopes to find a vein of gold, that is, the ultimate answer about the meaning of life. He is convinced that truth and light can only come from below and within, but he is also aware that by pursuing his mission he is definitively losing touch with real life, real light and the rest of mankind. Borkman likes to remind us that he is a miner's son, and that his father used to take him down into the bowels of the earth to set the ore free⁴⁷.

pation, cit.; Northam, *John Gabriel Borkman and the Swansong*, cit.; Madsen, *Nature's Revenge*, cit.; Kittang *Ibsens heroisme*, cit.; Alonge, *Provisional Ending*, cit. The notion of "heroism" is more often complex in these contributions, whereas Alonge thinks unequivocally that Ibsen praised the heroism and ruthlessness of Borkman the male bourgeois capitalist, and became his poet. I do not share this opinion.

⁴⁴ Kittang, *Ibsens heroisme*, cit., pp. 11-27, 278-317, 361-73.

⁴⁵ D. Solstad, *En forfatters bruk av Ibsen i sine romaner*, in *Artikler 1993-2004*, Oktober, Oslo 2004, pp. 43-58.

⁴⁶ This poem exists in three slightly different versions, *Bjergmanden* from 1850, written when Ibsen was twenty-two, *Bergmanden* from 1863 and *Bergmanden* from 1871, when it was finally included in the collection *Digte*: see Ibsen, *Samlede verker*, XIV, *Dikt*, Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, Oslo 1937, pp. 101-3, 297-8, 332-3. Didrik Arup Seip quotes lines from a letter by the composer Edvard Grieg, who already in 1896 saw Borkman as a new version of Ibsen's old miner: Seip, *Innledning*, in Ibsen, *Samlede verker*, XIII, cit., pp. 30-1.

⁴⁷ Possible folkloristic and legendary sources (the sunken treasure, the singing ore, accessible only for a short time after midnight, its connection with the dance of the dead), and an interesting comparison with E. T. A. Hoffmann's tale *Die Bergwerke von Falun* (1818), are put forward in E. M. Fleck, *John Gabriel Borkman and the Min-*

Digging riches and light from the depths of the earth is therefore a powerful and meaningful image, to both Borkman the capitalist and Ibsen the writer and intellectual. Besides, the image is able to connect Ibsen the romantic with Ibsen the modernist. Several interpreters have thus seen in *John Gabriel Borkman* an autobiographical allegory by the aged Ibsen about his own life which had been devoted to the work of art; even the contiguity of subject matter and chronology with *When We Dead Awaken*, his last play, dealing with a sculptor, supports this view⁴⁸. Castri's staging too suggests this autobiographical projection, as when Borkman (the actor Vittorio Franceschi) walks through the woods in the fourth act, wearing a coat and a hat that make his silhouette look like the well-known images of Ibsen as an old man.

However, saying that the character of Borkman is close to his creator, and even partially autobiographical, is not the same as saying that Borkman is a hero. Ibsen could direct his stern and critical glance not only towards society at large but also towards himself; as a matter of fact he compared living to a struggle with one's inner chaotic powers and writing to a Doomsday of the self.

Borkman, both as an individual destiny (with a certain degree of autobiography), and as the possible figure of the modern bourgeoisie and of the "progress" of the western world (again with a certain autobiographical slant), shows the "bewildering complexity" of Ibsen's poetic universe, as stressed by Claudio Magris in his essay on Ibsen's diagnosis of the crisis of the bourgeois world⁴⁹. Ibsen's radical progressive views are not just a boring outdated aspect of his literary works, a layer of nineteenth-century dust, uninteresting for today's readers. But his radical progressive ideas do run up against complications and approach a lucid pessimism. The hope that Ibsen once expressed to Brandes, his hope that they might be able to provoke a revolution in the human spirit⁵⁰, gets entangled in dramatic situations of paralysis from which human beings often cannot find a way out, a liberation. Yet, a longing for authentic passions and a full life is the underlying nerve of Ibsen's otherwise very controlled,

er of Falun, in "Scandinavian Studies", 51, 1979, pp. 442-59. Cf. also De Martino, *Between "Borkman"'s Lines*, pp. 59-63, who reminds that the relevant leitmotif of Borkman as a miner's son was added later, for the final version of the play.

⁴⁸ Cf. Haakonsen, *Ibsen*, cit., pp. 188-211; Helland, *Melankoliens spill*, cit.; B. Hemmer, *Ibsen. Kunstnerens vei*, Vigmostad Bjørke, Bergen 2003, pp. 510-1, 514-7.

⁴⁹ C. Magris, *Il tardo Ibsen e la megalomania della vita*, in *L'anello di Clarisse. Grande stile e nichilismo nella letteratura moderna*, Einaudi, Torino 1984, pp. 86-119.

⁵⁰ Letter from Ibsen to Brandes, dated Dresden, 20 December 1870: "Hvad det gjælder er menneskeåndens revolter, og der skal De være en af dem, som går i spidsen". M. Borup (ed.), *Georg og Edv. Brandes. Brevveksling med nordiske Forfattere og Videnskabsmænd*, IV, 1, Gyldendal, København 1939, p. 204.

plain and naturalistic form of utterance. I think that even Borkman is an expression of this dilemma⁵¹.

Castri writes about *John Gabriel Borkman*:

Mi sembra tutto sommato un grande *De profundis* sulla borghesia ottocentesca: muore con Borkman la borghesia che credeva in una missione da compiere per l'umanità⁵².

On the whole it seems to me a great *De profundis* on nineteenth century bourgeoisie: with Borkman dies the bourgeoisie who believed in a mission to accomplish for mankind⁵³.

Magris too observes that Ibsen's progressive attitude stems from a Norwegian bourgeoisie whose capitalistic development has not yet destroyed, as elsewhere in Europe, the autonomy of the individual, i.e. its own fundamental principle⁵⁴. Without a clear image of the bourgeoisie and its heroism, then, it would have been impossible for Ibsen to represent the profound crisis that leads to a sense of failure about its epic deeds.

We must not forget, by the way, the acute sardonic muse that appears everywhere in Ibsen's texts, and his bitter gaze turned towards the illusion of material progress. Particularly in *Brand*, the ethical and religious impulse of the protagonist is compared to foolish and conceited characters who celebrate the marvelous development of Norway, as if *that* were the real progress of mankind. Moreover, one of Brand's apocalyptic visions, before being swept away by the avalanche from the mountain top, deals with the black smoke from the British industrial revolution, soon destined to choke the whole world. Let us finally not forget the harsh satire against capitalism and imperialism in the wake of the protagonist's progress in the fourth act of *Peer Gynt*, where the adult Peer has become a versatile self-made man with clear Faustian ambi-

⁵¹ One of the consequences of Toril Moi's attempt to reconsider Ibsen's place in literary history – according to which realism and naturalism, by overcoming idealism, were in fact the birth of modernism – is the definition of our author's complex position between "critique and utopia", between scepticism and disillusion (the realistic urge to burst fake idealism) and, still, dream and yearning (the urge to keep an authentic romantic spark alive). See Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, cit., in particular pp. 13-4, 89, 319-20.

⁵² Castri, *Ibsen postborghese*, cit., p. 30. Like Magris, Castri connects his reading of Ibsen to the sense of crisis and loss of meaning within the late nineteenth-century bourgeoisie. That is also why he has chosen to perform late, less "straightforward" plays such as *Rosmersholm*, *Hedda Gabler*, *Little Eyolf* and *John Gabriel Borkman*.

⁵³ My translation.

⁵⁴ Magris, *Il tardo Ibsen e la megalomania della vita*, cit., p. 88.

tions⁵⁵. Even if we concede that Borkman's vision of universal progress is sincere, and not an excuse to ignore his crime towards society and the woman he loved, his evoking the image of general welfare and happiness is more reminiscent of Adam Smith's optimistic liberalism or Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism than of the pessimism and criticism of modernity in Nietzsche, to whom Kit-tang refers in his reading of Ibsen's heroism.

Borkman and his visions of progress therefore appear *also* grotesque and melancholic. One may wonder, for example, whether he has ever been an entrepreneur. Though he has been a miner's son and later a banker, probably a very powerful one, he never seems to have become an entrepreneur but has rather just dreamt it. Recent "postmodern" interpretations tend to stress the vagueness and inconsistency of Borkman's persona, in spite of his imposing it, with the totality of his project, on those around him. In more general terms, this inconsistency of his refers to a whole universe devoid of meaning, direction and future destination⁵⁶.

However, even if we believe Borkman and rely on his skills as *homo faber*, Ibsen asks the same fundamental moral and existential question complicating the linear progress of the solitary hero to his goal which he poses in *Brand*. The pursuit of truth does imply individual choice and liberation of the self; a conflict is however generated between the self-fulfilment the characters long for and the ties that bind them to one another, and that can also provide them self-realization and meaning, for instance through love and marriage⁵⁷. The exercise of

⁵⁵ Cf. M. Ciaravolo, *Prison and Madhouse: Ibsen's Critical Images of Modernity as Developed in Brand and Peer Gynt*, in Perrelli, Tessari (eds.), *Ibsenian Lessons*, cit., pp. 53-73.

⁵⁶ Cf. E. Tjønneland, *Ibsen og moderniteten*, Spartacus Forlag, Oslo 1993, pp. 13-5; K. Aslaksen, "Mændene er så ubestandige, fru Borkman. Og kvinderne ligervis." *Problemer omkring genre, teatralitet og identitet i Ibsens John Gabriel Borkman*, in "Agora. Journal for metafysisk spekulasjon", 11, 1993, 2-3, pp. 112-29; Holtan, *The Troll's Eye and Rubek's Art*, cit.; Engelstad, *The Defeat of Failure and the Failure of Success*, cit.; Madsen, *Nature's Revenge*, cit., stresses the sense of emptiness and nothingness in the play, yet believing in a certain heroism of Borkman and the modern project. See also Helland, *Melankoliens spill*, cit.; Dines Johansen, *The Closing of an Epoch*, cit.; De Martino, *John Gabriel Borkman's Scriptural Echoes*, cit.; Holm, *A Frozen Dream*, cit.; Rønning, *Den umulige friheten*, cit., pp. 360-3, 380-93.

⁵⁷ Cf. Haakonsen, *Henrik Ibsen*, cit., pp. 110, 125, 154; Young, *Time's Disinherited Children*, cit. (perhaps with exceeding moralism); Aslaksen, "Mændene er så ubestandige..." , cit., points out the existence of the Self in the meeting with the Other; p. 123. See also Engelstad, *The Defeat of Failure and the Failure of Success*, cit., pp. 400-2. The Ibsenian conflict between self-fulfilment and love of the Other is stressed in Hemmer, *Ibsen. Kunstnerens vei*, cit., pp. 37-41, 54-87, on *Borkman* pp. 493-521. Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, cit., refers to ordinary human relationships,

power always implies the risk of abusing others – especially women⁵⁸ – even if this occurs during a heroic process of self-liberation, self-emancipation or even self-transcendence. In this sense it is true that Brand is Borkman's prototype.

It must be said that balanced sensitive interpretations of Ibsen's literary universe have always grasped the richness and ambivalence of *John Gabriel Borkman*, even at a very early stage, and even in Italy. As far back as 1914 the young author Scipio Slataper, from Trieste, stressed both the heroic dimension of Borkman as modern bourgeois entrepreneur and his fundamental betrayal of love⁵⁹. In 1984 another writer from Trieste, Claudio Magris, put forward a comprehensive reading of "great style and nihilism" in modern literature, including Ibsen. This combination is also to be found in *John Gabriel Borkman*, where a radical sense of loss and nothingness is expressed through Ibsen's clear form and composition. If Borkman's life represents loss of meaning, it also expresses, according to Magris, a "megalomaniacal" nostalgia, a desperate longing for meaning, a spark without which life really would be meaningless⁶⁰.

Borkman's fascination with modernity, and even his megalomania, are in any case represented not just critically by Ibsen. This kind of attraction-repulsion ambivalence towards modernity recurs often in late nineteenth-century avant-garde Scandinavian artists. One might compare Ibsen's attitude with what Strindberg or the Norwegian author Sigbjørn Obstfelder write about the city, progress and modern technology⁶¹. Marshall Berman helps us, in his study on the great interpreters of the experience of modernity in the nineteenth century, to understand their deep ambivalence. Berman describes the peculiar voice of these authors as:

love and marriage as those possible spaces, for Ibsen, where we can be free and true, but also where we can fail completely – what she calls the good and the bad everyday.
⁵⁸ Castri, *Ibsen postborghese*, cit., p. 30, speaks of the bourgeoisie as "[...] un universo maschile, il cui nemico primario è sempre e soltanto la donna" (a male universe, in which the primary enemy is always and only woman).

⁵⁹ S. Slataper, *Ibsen*, Sansoni, Firenze 1944, pp. 150-5, 321-7. This book, a masterpiece of prose and criticism, was originally Slataper's dissertation thesis. Born in 1888, Slataper died on the front during World War I, in 1915. Although he gained access to Ibsen through German, it is no exaggeration to say that his *Ibsen* formed the basis of modern Scandinavian studies in Italy.

⁶⁰ Magris, *Il tardo Ibsen e la megalomania della vita*, in *L'anello di Clarisse*, cit., pp. 86-119.

⁶¹ Ciaravolo, *Lo sguardo di Obstfelder sulla grande città*, in "Studi Nordici", 6, 1999, pp. 71-105; Ciaravolo, *Parigi "capitale del XIX secolo" nella visione strindberghiana*, in G. Chiesa Isnardi, P. Marelli (a cura di), *Nord ed Europa. Identità scandinava e rapporti culturali con il continente nel corso dei secoli*, Tilgher, Genova 2004, pp. 361-88.

[...] ironic and contradictory, polyphonic and dialectical, denouncing modern life in the name of values that modernity itself has created, hoping – often against hope – the modernities of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow will heal the wounds that wreck the modern men and women of today. All the great modernists of the nineteenth century – spirits as diverse as Marx and Kierkegaard, Whitman and Ibsen, Baudelaire, Melville, Carlyle, Stirner, Rimbaud, Strindberg, Dostoevsky, and many more – speak in these rhythms and in this range⁶².

Gianna De Martino helps to emphasize another important aspect, when she analyses the prophetic overtones and the echos from the Holy Scriptures in Borkman's language. His aura, his coherence in spite of everything, his firm belief and (at least apparent) lack of doubt make him heroic in a way. At the same time his prophetic vision finds its goal in progress, something completely profane⁶³. If progress becomes the new divinity of the nineteenth century, Borkman is its prophet.

At the end of his staging of *John Gabriel Borkman*, Castri summarizes these contradictory dimensions of the character through the powerful unconventional image of an old man who has turned once again into a child playing with his toys. Alonge gives a careful description of this moment of the show:

Slowly Franceschi takes out of the trunk a spinning top, then a toy trumpet, then a ball, and finally a toy train. He goes down on all fours to set the train in motion. He bends over the trunk and opens it as he remembers the crucial night when he went down into the bank vaults with his lantern. The great banker's magic moment coincides with going down the mine with his father, and also with the playing of the eternal child who opens the chest full of his toys⁶⁴.

This absorbing devotion prevents Borkman from achieving an adult relationship to the world. There is something touching and at the same time grotesque in his feverish excitement. This man, who has not communicated with the outside world for sixteen years of isolation, now wants to become the demiurge of universal communication.

⁶² M. Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air. The Experience of Modernity*, Penguin, New York 1988 (1 ed. 1982), p. 23. Rønning, *Ibsen and the Ambivalence of Modernity*, cit., is also inspired by Berman and quotes this same passage at p. 50.

⁶³ De Martino, *John Gabriel Borkman's Scriptural Echoes*, cit.

⁶⁴ Alonge, *Provisional Ending*, cit., p. 136.

In this way Castri produces “the tragicomedy of an impossible redemption”⁶⁵. Borkman the *homo faber* becomes the symbolic expression of the powerful vision that moves modern capitalism and, therefore, of the critical standpoint of an equally modern humanist⁶⁶. Borkman is finally “free” in the fourth act, outdoors and in the cold winter air. Here he expresses his technological, industrial and financial vision with an optimism that becomes sinister, because in the meantime we can clearly see that it is shot through by self-destructive impulses and will soon lead the protagonist to death. Ibsen’s scepticism thus grasps the critical point where making and producing reveal an existential void, the escape from oneself, the shortcut of deceit and a great egotism. Prison can then be represented as a closed space, but it is in the open spaces – as in the fourth, African act of *Peer Gynt* – that freedom can more clearly turn out to be an illusion, while the prison of one’s solipsism⁶⁷ reveals itself.

In my opinion, the reading of the fourth act, and consequently of the whole play, as proposed by Castri, connects the existential and the socio-historical spheres. And it is right to connect them, since the most profound questions about the meaning of our lives cannot leave our historical experience, i.e. the experience of modernity, out of consideration. This was true for Ibsen’s time and it is still true for ours.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 135. The expression is borrowed from the critic Ugo Ronfani. It must be observed that Alonge, who carefully records and praises Castri’s staging, does not agree with the director’s interpretation: “under Castri’s direction the grandiloquent meaning of Borkman’s lines is lost and degraded, his words fall apart like the faint mutterings of a madman – or an elderly child playing with his train or spinning his top” (p. 137); “for Ibsen the protagonist is a giant, a superman, the convinced and convincing interpreter of the capitalist ideology” (p. 140).

⁶⁶ In her excellent reading, Kjølner sees Castri’s emphasis on Borkman the old man and the child as in contrast with the idea of his being a *homo faber*. In my opinion Borkman’s acting as both an old man and a child interacts in a peculiar way with his words and visions, typical of a *homo faber*. Cf. Kjølner, *Senex et puer*, cit.

⁶⁷ Seip, *Innledning*, in H. Ibsen, *Samlede verker*, XIII, cit., p. 21: “Hans maktsyke er så jefyldt, at han blir litteraturens beste eksempel på en ‘solipsist’”.