HENRIK IBSEN AND HIS SELF-EXILE IN GERMANY

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ABSTRACT. Henrik Ibsen, the playwright who had a decisive contribution to the development of Norwegian literature, chose the exile at the time when his plays were not well received in his native country. He found his freedom, difficult to achieve in Norway, on German soil, in Dresden and Munich. There he came into contact with the authentic culture and his plays won a resounding success. This facilitated the way towards the recognition of his artistic value in Scandinavia as well. However, fame did not bring him the happiness he had hoped for, because the fjords and the sea continued to attract him, although he did not feel Norway as his homeland even after 27 years of exile.

Key Words: Norwegian literature, German theatre, 19th century drama, exile

Introduction

Henrik Ibsen is nowadays a symbol of Norwegian literature. However, neither Norway’s social and political development nor its linguistic evolution supported his flourishing personality: «Né dans un pays qui n’accéderait à l’indépendance qu’un an avant sa mort, se servant d’une langue qui n’était pas établie, il édifia une oeuvre qui, en dépit de ces handicaps et en quelques années, devint l’une des plus retentissantes au monde.» (De Decker 9) The driving force of his writing seemed to be the exile, which Ibsen himself chose as a sine qua non condition for the fulfilment of his own destiny. The fact that his plays were received with hostility in his native country led to 27 years spent far away from Norway, in Italy (1864-1868 and 1878-1885) and Germany (roughly speaking 1868-1878 and 1885-1891), a period which brought him literary fame. Throughout this article we use the generic name of Germany, although this country was properly formed only in 1871.

The exile meant for Ibsen the great opportunity of his life, the one of reaching a climax; it meant the reception of his work to his expectations and his recognition by the Norwegian audience. The League of Youth (1869), Emperor and Galilean (1873), Pillars of Society (1877), Rosmersholm (1886), The Lady from the Sea (1888), Hedda Gabler (1890) were the plays written during his self-imposed exile in Germany. When Ibsen left Germany in 1891 the press speculated either that he was abandoning his disciples as they were claiming consideration for themselves, or that the debate on naturalism had offended him.

All Ibsen’s important plays except for Peer Gynt had been staged in the German-speaking world by 1901 and everything he had written had already been translated. Moreover, in 1898 S. Fischer Publishing House in Berlin published Henrik Ibsens sämmtliche Werke in deutscher Sprache, revised and introduced by Georg Brandes, Julius Elias, and Paul Schlenther.

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Premises of Ibsen’s self-imposed exile

Among the premises which made Ibsen leave his native country, the Nordic spirit occupies an important place, the spirit that predisposes to go far away so as to reach one’s goals. Another aspect is Ibsen’s preference for loneliness, for a voluntary solitude in the Norwegian society. A third premise is represented by his character combining a meticulous, scrupulous side with a shy, common-sense one, a character typical rather of the Germans.

Although German political and cultural influences had always been more or less objected to in Norway, one of the moments of his youth which influenced him in choosing Germany as an adoptive country was his study visit of 1852 to theatres from Copenhagen, Berlin, Dresden, and Hamburg at the time when he was employed at the Norwegian Theatre in Bergen. On this occasion, Ibsen came into contact with the German literary historian and writer Hermann Hettner and Das moderne Drama, which would constantly influence his activity as a playwright. Hettner’s idea that historical dramas had to be based on psychological conflicts perfectly fitted Ibsen’s approach. Under the influence of the German theoretician Ibsen wrote Lady Inger of Oestraat (1854), considered the most remarkable play of his youth.

Ibsen decided to leave Norway because of the political and social humiliations and dissatisfactions. According to Jacques De Decker, the self-imposed exile was a necessary evil for him to reconsider his country critically, without any direct influence: «Manifestement, Ibsen avait eu besoin de cet éloignement de sa terre natale pour mieux la réinvestir, la saisir par la mémoire et la fantaisie et, surtout, la considérer d’un oeil critique.» (De Decker 84) He had got involved in several polemics and conflicts. One of these polemics was between Ibsen and Richard Petersen together with other Danish supporters who refused to stage the play The Vikings at Helgeland. This polemic strengthened his belief that he was not the right man in the right place since Norway refused the opening to the modern world. Another conflict was between Ibsen, appointed artistic director at the Møllergate Theatre in Christiania (now Oslo), and the members of its council, who accused him of lack of interest for the institution.

Ibsen did not cease to love his native land but he did not love its people. More than once did those around him notice his longing for Norway. However, Ibsen was a proud-spirited man and he refused to live by the side of those who did not appreciate him and did not want to keep up with the modern times.

Facets of Ibsen’s self-exile

Taking the decision to leave Italy in 1868, Ibsen felt compelled to avoid Norway because of its leaders’ lack of any patriotic enthusiasm. The Conservatives and the Liberals pettily disputed their power and thus a national culture could not take shape. It was natural that under these circumstances the writers had to seek inspiration elsewhere.

The exile meant on the one hand the possibility of living in true freedom, getting rid of the constraints of the society in which he was born, constraints related to traditionalism and symbols. Ibsen was not a Liberal, but sided with freedom of expression and freedom of thought above everything: “For mig er friheden den højeste og første livsbetingelse.”2 (Ibsen XVII: 449) or “Det heder jo at Norge er et frit og selvstændigt rige; men jeg sætter ikke stor pris på denne

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2 “To me freedom is the highest and first condition of life.” Henrik Ibsen, letter to Georg Brandes, 3 January 1882. The translations from the Dano-Norwegian language are my own.
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The playwright accepted the exile also for the sake of success. A former bohemian, in conflict with his fellow countrymen, not once refused by them with a view to the support of his work, he changed significantly. Ibsen became aware that the exile could bring him the appreciation of others, including the Scandinavians, who noticed his transformation: «On s’attendait à voir en l’auteur de Brand un vieil ascète austère et sérieux, et on découvrit un homme encore jeune, élégant dans sa veste de velours, distingué, aimable et plein de vie.» (Dietrichson apud De Decker 102-103)

Although not a German, Ibsen was Germanic by his structure: “German is his great and single-minded love of truth and the courage to confess to it [...] Ibsen means for Germany ‘a moment of self-reflection’: the affinity between Ibsen and the German drama is seen as their common concern with using literature as a means of social criticism.” (George 61) Moreover, also in Norway he came into contact with aspects of German culture: Bergen, the town in which Ibsen spent several years of his youth, «plus qu’aucune autre ville scandinave, conserve dans sa race des vertiges de la ligue hanséatique» (Vincent 48). The first dramatic models that he studied and staged were the works of German romantics. Although his background is Norwegian, «sa psychologie est valable pour toute la race germanique» (Vincent 49). Ibsen remained a portraitist of his native country, with mountains, fjords, and small towns, but felt attracted to the German people, to the bourgeois society of the German towns, to powerful politicians, and to genuine artistic richness. In this respect, he saw the exile as the materialization of his attraction to authentic culture, which allowed the individual to develop according to one’s own will. This was impossible in his native country: «la vie en Norvège, telle que je la vois en ce moment, a quelque chose d’indisciblement médiocre, elle mine l’être en assommant la volonté» (De Decker 94).

Besides its positive side, the exile also meant deprivation to Ibsen, especially in its first period. The first years spent among foreigners were marked by poverty, sacrifices, loneliness, even separation from his family. Ibsen often felt the lack of financial reward, but perhaps this was precisely the reason for which he kept writing and pursuing his art. In the first months spent in Dresden the Ibsens were quite poor. His family lived isolated and in simplicity. “Fra 1881 til 1890 utgav han Gengangere, En folkefiende, Vildanden, Rosmersholm, Fruen fra Havet og Hedda Gabler, men i alle disse årene tjente han bare 130 000 kr. til sammen – betydelig mindre enn hva langt ringere skuespillforfattere i de større land som

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1 “They say that Norway is a free and independent realm; but I do not appreciate this freedom and independence as long as the individuals are neither free nor independent.” Henrik Ibsen, letter to Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, 12 July 1879.

2 “Norway is a free land inhabited by unfree people.” Henrik Ibsen, letter to Olaf Skavlan, 24 January 1882.
Scribe, W. S. Gilbert og Pinero, tjente pr. år.” (Meyer 477) Moreover, the nostalgia of the paradise lost with its fjords, sea and nature was always present. During his exile, Ibsen went back to Norway only twice: in 1874 and 1885. In his latter visit, he confessed to the workers gathered in Trondheim: “Det er efter 11 Aars Fraværelse, at jeg for en 8 Dages Tid siden kom hjem igjen til Norge./ I disse 8 Dage i Hjemmet har jeg følt mere Livsglæde end i alle de 11 Aar udenlands.” (Ibsen XV: 407) It was a reassessment of the notions of home and abroad, the relationship between the two and the joy of living. Homesickness is specific to any individual as the physical geography of one’s native place is impregnated into his/her mind.

**German cities relevant to Ibsen’s exile**

Ibsen’s presence in Germany included three important cities: Dresden (1868-1875), Munich (roughly speaking 1875-1878 and 1885-1891) and Berlin, with an important role in promoting his plays.

“The Florence on the Elbe’, as Dresden is called, was well-known by the Norwegian artists. It was a place of modern life, where the railway, the bus or the steam ship were at hand and which had become one of the cheapest in the country. In spite of these advantages, he felt lonely: “Kjender De ingen Danske, som agter at oppholde sig i Dresden ivinter? Jeg længes meget efter Skandinaver; muligens findes her allere nogle [...] Dresden er et meget behageligt og et meget billigt Levested.” (Ibsen XVI: 220)

When Ibsen moved here in 1868, the plays *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* which had been written in Italy and had given their author an identity as a playwright, had already appeared in Scandinavia, but had not been translated for the German audience. The German readers became acquainted with Ibsen through his critics, represented especially by Georg Brandes and Leo Berg. Brandes, an influential critic, well-respected within German literary circles, depicted Ibsen’s personality as being “aggressive and polemical, an enemy of all groupings, be they state, family or marriage” (George 60), marked by a mixture of pessimism and optimism. In his opinion Ibsen was “grundgermanisch” (George 60).

The German readers first came into contact with Ibsen’s poems, some of them translated in 1868, then with *Brand* in 1869. As the German language was accessible to him, Ibsen would supervise the translations. He wrote his works in his native language, and knew that he depended on the quality of these translations for promotion and just understanding: «Il écrivait dans cette forme singulière de danois mâtiné d’expressions et d’accents typiquement norvégiens que peu de professionnels de l’art dramatique non scandinaves possèdent assez pour pouvoir le fréquenter intimement.» (De Decker 10-11) Ibsen was claiming a new *Weltanschauung*, a profound revolution regarding practical or social relationships of mankind.

5 “From 1881 to 1890 he published *Ghosts, An Enemy of the People, The Wild Duck, Rosmersholm, The Lady from the Sea* and *Hedda Gabler*, but in all these years he earned only a total income of 130,000 kr – considerably less than playwrights of far inferior importance in larger countries such as Scribe, W. S. Gilbert and Pinero earned per year.”

6 “It is after an absence of 11 years that I came back to Norway 8 days ago./ In these 8 days at home I have experienced more joy of living than in all the 11 years abroad.” Henrik Ibsen, speech delivered in Trondheim, 14 June 1885.

7 “Don’t you know any Danes to want to settle down in Dresden in winter? I miss Scandinavians very much; possibly there are already some here [...] Dresden is a very pleasant and a very cheap place to live.” Henrik Ibsen, letter to Frederik Hegel, 31 October 1868.
He was the author who always asked questions, allowing his readers and audience to find answers. During the Dresden exile, Ibsen became the most read Norwegian writer in Northern Europe. His dream of being known and praised, of coming back liberated to his country, began to take shape.

In 1874 the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen’s prestigious theatre company started on a tour with a modern staging and modern performances of plays by Shakespeare, Schiller, Bjørnson or Ibsen. The troupe was famous for the great resources used, the mastery of realistic scenery and lights, the psychology of the embodied characters. The same year, Ibsen decided to visit Christiania, where he was warmly welcomed: “Jeg er her bleven modtagen med overordentlig velvilje af alle mennesker. Enhver tidligere misstemning er nu forbi.” (Ibsen XVII: 139)

Love’s Comedy and The League of Youth were staged in his honour.

In 1875, Ibsen changed the town of adoption, preferring Munich to Dresden. The capital of Bavaria was characterized by a much more animated cultural environment in which the literary group The Crocodile occupied a privileged place. Unlike in Dresden, in Munich there were many Norwegian artists, including Eilif Petersen, Erik Werenskiold, Gerhard Munthe, Christian Skredsvig.

His stay in Munich is associated with Ibsen's revolt against the poetic style of his previous works and the courage to render real life in his creations. It is the time of Pillars of Society. Ibsen began to present the deficiencies of contemporary society, covering four areas of concern: the religious conflict, the conflict between generations, the social conflict and the one related to sex. By making reference to these serious problems of humanity, Ibsen challenged the public, and hoped to find solutions. Ibsen’s work at this time proved German strength of character and magnitude. Unlike in the 1870s, Ibsen was now seriously taken into consideration by both the German and the Scandinavian audience. Germans were so excited about the realism pushed to its extreme that an Ibsenian school was born. The Norwegian became the mentor of many writers including Gerhart Hauptmann, Hermann Sudermann, Hermann Bahr, Wolfgang Kirchbach, Arno Holz or Johannes Schlaf.

Ibsen first received an impulse from the above mentioned Meiningen Theater, which introduced him to Berlin with The Pretenders. Then his first contemporary drama, Pillars of Society (1877) meant the starting point of his fame as a playwright. The success was reached especially through Otto Brahm, an influential critic in the late 1880s in Berlin, involved in furthering the Naturalist movement, director of Freie Bühne, and later Deutsches Theater and Lessingtheater. He became Ibsen’s supporter after seeing a performance of Pillars of Society, a play which in 1878 had been played on 5 different stages in Berlin within 2 weeks. If this play opened his way to Germany, A Doll’s House and Ghosts later consecrated him in the European vanguard. “Mit besøg i Berlin, og alt, hvad dermed står i forbindelse, betragter jeg som en sand og stor lyrke for mig. Det har virket vidunderlig forfriskende og foryngende på mit sind og vil også ganske sikkert afsætte sine mærker i min fremtidige digtning.” (Ibsen XVIII: 127) wrote Ibsen after a performance of Ghosts at Residenztheater in Berlin.

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8 “I have been received here with extraordinary kindness by everyone. Any previous dissatisfaction is now gone.” Henrik Ibsen, letter to Frederik Hegel, 16 September 1874.

9 “My visit to Berlin and everything connected to it I consider as a true and great fortune for me. It has had a wonderfully refreshing and rejuvenating effect on my mind, and will also quite certainly leave traces on my future writings.” Henrik Ibsen, letter to Julius Hoffory, 4 February 1887.
The pessimistic idealism of the Scandinavian writer represented the right message at the right time. Idealism derives from the desire for freedom, honesty, happiness and confidence in the possibility of reaching them in a German environment. Pessimism comes from the subtle bonds of the playwright with the Norwegian space: “All his dramas bear the impress of a Norwegian Aufklärungstendenz. The psychological element, in which his talent is rooted, lends to his characters, - because he is far more the thinker than the poet, that characteristic which makes them so incomprehensible to the naïve observer [...] The pessimistic elements in the poet have their origin only to a small degree in the perception of universal misery; it is the misery of Norway that aggravates and pains him. The name of his illness is not Existence, but Norway.” (Eller 62-63)

The exile, the distance in space and time, allowed the Norwegian playwright to become a mature personality. Ibsen remained a restless and ambivalent soul, longing for freedom but also for Norway. “I Norge vilde det være mig rent umuligt at slå mig ned for alvor. Intet steds vilde jeg føle mig mere hjemløs end deroppe. For et nogenlunde åndsudviklet menneske strækker ikke nutildags det gamle fædrelandsbegreb til.” (Ibsen XVIII: 182) When coming back from the exile, the Norwegian society was not fully prepared to receive him. The Scandinavians opened the theatre gates for Ibsen’s masterpieces as soon as they had enjoyed the European success, but the political life in Norway had not yet reached the degree of nobility Ibsen had hoped for. When coming back from the exile Ibsen still did not feel at home and continued his quest for identity through art. He remained a solitary man until the end of his life. Unable to live any longer far away from the sea, but unwilling to live with the Norwegians, Ibsen came up with a compromise solution, which he confessed to Brandes: “Kan De gætte hvad jeg går og drømmer om og planlægger og udmaler mig som så dejligt? Det er: at slå mig ned ved Øresund, mellem København og Helsingør, på et frit åbent sted, hvor jeg kan sé alle havsejlerne komme langvejs fra og gå langvejs. Det kan jeg ikke her. [...] Å, kære Brandes, man lever ikke virkningsløst 27 år ude i de store fri og frigørende kulturforhold. Her inde eller, rettere sagt, her oppe ved fjordene har jeg jo mit fødeland. Men - men - men: hvor finder jeg mit hjemland? Havet er det, som drager mig mest.” (Ibsen XVIII: 397). It seems that even in 1897 when already being in his native country, he would rather go back to Germany or Italy: “I München har jeg boet længe nok til at kunne lade mig naturalisere i Bayern, hvor jeg er sikker på at blive godt modtaget. I Italien ligeså. Og jeg må sige at Norge er et vanskeligt land at have til fædreland.” (Ibsen XVIII: 398)

10 “In Norway it would be simply impossible for me to settle down seriously. In no other place would I feel more homeless than up there. For a somewhat spiritually developed human being nowadays the concept of native country does not do.” Henrik Ibsen, letter to Georg Brandes, 30 October 1888.

11 “Can you guess what I hope and dream about and plan and picture to myself so delightfully? That is: to settle down by Øresund, between Copenhagen and Elsinore, on a free, open place, where I can see all sea racers coming from afar and going a long way. I cannot do that here. [...] Oh, dear Brandes, one does not live unaffectedly for 27 years in the great, free, and liberating cultural conditions. In here or better said up here, near the fjords is my native land. But – but – but: where do I find my homeland? The sea is what attracts me most.” Henrik Ibsen, letter to Georg Brandes, 3 June 1897.

12 “I have lived long enough in Munich to let me naturalise in Bavaria, where I am sure to be well received. Likewise in Italy. And I must say that Norway is a difficult country to have as fatherland.” Henrik Ibsen, letter to Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, 15 June 1897.
Effects of Ibsen’s exile

The exile that Ibsen imposed on himself, considering that it would save him and his family, worked both synchronically and diachronically. The first to mention are the changes determined by the cultural, economic and political environment on the Norwegian writer’s personality. But the effects of Ibsen’s presence in Germany on the German culture and audience appeared as well. His exile was also beneficial for the Norwegian culture. Diachronically speaking, the effects may be felt up to nowadays, since we are among the beneficiaries of his artistic creation.

The literary and intellectual climate of the 1870’s - 1880’s in Germany was under the auspices of naturalism and of individualism as a fundamental driving force. The class struggle and the feminist movement in the German social area influenced Ibsen’s attitude in front of the audience. The increasing voice of the minority drew his attention because “minoriteten har altid ret. Selvfølgelig tænker jeg ikke på den minoritet af stagnationsmænd, som er agterudsejlet af det store mellemparti, der hos os kaldes de liberale; men jeg mener den minoritet, som går foran der, hvor flertallet endnu ikke er nået hen.”13 (Ibsen XVII: 448)

The individualistic Germans loved visions, they dreamed of a new Reich, and Ibsen managed to positively ‘manipulate’ them, using the trends of his time to anticipate the events that were to come. Thus, the Norwegian playwright depicted the conflict between the individual’s duty to oneself and the individuals’ role in society.

From an immigrant in search of freedom, Ibsen became a liberator of the Germans in a short period of time. The Germans gradually began to feel attracted to his personality as his great art represented the expression of the conscience of the age. “It was in Ibsen more than in anyone else that youthful Germany discovered the truth and the art of its time, and the method of their attainment [...] Like Brand he led the way up the mountain height, revealing new scenes, other views of life, of morals and art.” (Eller 100)

When Ibsen appeared on the German artistic scene, the bourgeoisie had not become aware of the conflicts it had to cope with. It needed a researcher to discover and describe its problems, but also a visionary and a prophet capable to guide it. All these qualities were to be found in Ibsen who fully understood what Eugene Wolff stated in Die Moderne, zur Revolution und Reform der Literatur, namely “all creative literature ought to clarify poetically the spirit of contemporary life [...] The subject matter of our literature must be modern; it must consider the growing interest in social questions.” (Eller 55-56)

Although the native language he wrote in was not widely used, the force of his genius could break the language barrier and take German literature to the level of self-realization. He saw the fellow-man as a superman and the stage as a moral institution. And fortunately for him the theatres staged his plays even simultaneously and spread his message. In this way he became “an integral and significant part of the modern German drama [...] He assisted youthful Germany, by liberating it, to express itself.” (Eller 130)

13 “the minority is always right. Of course, I do not think of that minority of men in stagnation, who are left behind in the big center party, who among us are called liberals; but I mean that minority going ahead, where the majority has not yet reached.” Henrik Ibsen, letter to Georg Brandes, 3 January 1882.
Conclusions

Henrik Ibsen, the father of modern drama, underwent a spectacular evolution, due, in part, to his courage to step into the unknown, preferring the exile abroad to feeling exiled in his own country. Germany had a beneficial role for him as it ensured his way to success. Even if it was often accompanied by nostalgia, the exile contributed to the transformation of the little known Norwegian playwright into an undeniable personality of world literature. The fact that he was the right man in the right place at the right time led to a revolution within the European theatre and a revolution of the society’s way of thinking.

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