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CONCEPTUAL CORRESPONDENCES BETWEEN HENRIK IBSEN'S *ROSMERSHOLM* AND FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE'S *THUS SPOKE ZARATHUSTRA*

Crina LEON[1]

Abstract: *In this paper we analyze the correspondence of some concepts characteristic of Nietzsche's philosophy from* Thus Spoke Zarathustra *in Ibsen's play* Rosmersholm*. Although they worked in different cultural spheres (literature and philosophy) and had little to say about each other, Henrik Ibsen and Friedrich Nietzsche produced the most radical criticism to the traditionalism of the age through their virulent works. We assume that beyond the obvious interferences between the two works, there also existed an influence of Nietzsche's philosophy on Ibsen's play.*

Keywords: *Henrik Ibsen, Friedrich Nietzsche, eternal return, will to power, Superman.*

1. Introduction

Apparently, Henrik Ibsen and Friedrich Nietzsche did not know each other very well. Nietzsche's comments on Ibsen's writings do not prove thorough knowledge of his work. On the other hand, Nietzsche's name appears in *The Complete Works of Henrik Ibsen* only once during an interview taken by Hans Tostrup on November 26, 1900 after the philosopher's death and published in *Verdens Gang*.

Consequently, it would seem that in the absence of objective "evidences", there could be only possible interferences between Ibsen's dramatic work and Nietzsche's philosophy, also because of "Ibsen's steadfast refusal to acknowldege any external influences" (Kaufman 171).

It is possible that both thinkers should have had a common source, namely the spirit of the age, with no mutual influences, but Nietzsche's view certainly had an impact on Ibsen by providing "at least an enormous moral support." (Törnqvist 136). Even if interference does not justify the influence, it may grow into an influence, and in some cases it is difficult to separate them. The most productive period of Nietzsche's writing, 1872-1888, and Ibsen's self-exile in Germany (1868-1878, 1879-1880, 1885-1891) overlap. The German intellectuals were acquainted with *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) and *Untimely Meditations* (1876). That is why Ibsen, who had settled in Munich in 1875, may have discussed about Nietzsche's concepts within the literary circle *Krokodil*, which he started attending

[1] Faculty of Letters, "Al. I. Cuza" University of Iaşi.

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in 1876, and we consider there is a significant correlation between Nietzsche's work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885) and the characters' thinking and motivation in Ibsen's play *Rosmersholm* (1886).

Nietzsche's philosophy in general is based on several concepts. Out of these, three concepts are primarily developed in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, namely: the Superman, the will to power, and the eternal return. Similarities with Nietzsche's philosophy are obvious in *Rosmersholm* with a view to the subject matter and Ibsen's way of conceiving his characters.

2. Apollonian-Dionysian. The Superman

Nietzsche's Apollonian-Dionysian pair of concepts takes the form of the relationship between the Christian man and the Superman. The Apollonian man considers the individual responsible of rising above his earthly, petty goals, and integrating himself into an ideal world. He opposes pride, courage, freedom of spirit, joy of life, and worships a transcendent being. The Dionysian man cultivates the instinct for growth, accumulation of forces, and longs for eternity. If the Apollonian man is a slave of morality and nihilism, the Dionysian man (including his ideal, the Superman) is characterized by the will to power, he loves life, and declares God's death.

Zarathustra is the one who wants to share his teachings to the people and condemns mercy, virtue, prudence, and happiness. He suggests that salvation could be achieved through will and the eternal return. The Superman's will to create ensures the eternal return on behalf of eternal joy. Zarathustra refers to a new morality in which the previously considered evil (lust for power, selfishness, freedom of spirit) becomes good.

When the Ibsenian character Rebekka steps into the world of Rosmersholm, she is like a noble master from the Nietzschean philosophy, endowed with will, carrying her guilt unconsciously, led by altruistic ideals. She believes that she has a noble mission, that of setting Rosmer free, rendering him the joy of life, the power to act without restraint. But the pursuit of this project brings her under the spell of Rosmersholm. This experience destroys her will and deprives her of the power to act. "Rebekka's final stage might be summed up in Nietzschean terminology as: will to power in her yields to bad conscience, and, wanting to atone, she puts herself at the disposition of the ascetic priest and his sick will" (Van Laan 279). The main male character, Rosmer, undergoes as well an evolution from the Apollonian to the Dionysian man. The former pastor begins to fight for the liberation of others' spirits. He begins with his own spirit under Rebekka's influence, and wants to decide by himself what to do with his life.

In the end of the drama, the two commit suicide and reinforce their faith in each another. The two choose death so as to be reborn on a higher step on the way to the Superman. The alternation Dionysian-Apollonian, with all its implications, including the eternal return, causes accumulation. However, the past suggested by Rosmersholm is an obstacle to the characters' complete success.

The one who is in favour of the eternal return in the name of the creative will as an eternal joy is the Superman. He is the only one able to overcome himself, as he is endowed with the need for dominance and selfishness. A tolerant, generous, modest or compassionate man can never do that.

After God's death, it is the Superman's mission to render dignity to the human existence, as he is the creator *par excellence*. But the Superman appears only

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as a consequence of the transmutation of values, which occurs after the selective eternal return. The superior man sees joy in the present moment, not despair, like the ordinary man. The superior man is in love with destiny, for he knows it is himself who creates it. The Latin words *amor fati* used by Nietzsche suggest precisely this love for destiny. Far from meaning acceptance of fate, the words *amor fati* mean becoming, the belief that the chaos in which we live is a necessity for our evolution. Any event that we experience, even the most unpleasant, is an opportunity for us to overcome ourselves, to become stronger. Nietzsche considers suffering as a *sine qua non* condition for our evolution.

In *Rosmersholm,* Rebekka and Rosmer are offered the chance to overcome themselves, with a view to reaching in the future the stage of the superior man. They have the courage, in the end of the play, to face death, and choose the moment of the suicide *now, at this very moment*. This is an achievement representing qualitative accumulation towards the Superman.

Rebekka is a powerful and evil spirit, in Nietzschean terms, so she is very likely to overcome herself, something which she desires and for which she uses her entire will. Under Rebekka's influence Rosmer begins to change as well, and in the beginning he gives up Christian morality. However, as we have mentioned, the white horse, the symbol of Rosmersholm, keeps appearing as an obstacle in Rebekka's way.

The fact that Rosmer decides to die proves his transformation, the strengthening of his will to power. By suicide and by freely choosing their own destiny, Rebekka and Rosmer prove that they experience suffering as a chance for their evolution and that they understand the meaning of Nietzschean *amor fati*.

3. (Im)morality

Nietzsche attacked the essence of old morality and Christian religion, radically and irreversibly ennobling the sin, encouraging man to break the old tables with Christian moral values and replace them with new ones, including new values. In his turn, Ibsen, the reformer, attacked moral abuses such as: the women's abuse in the family, the community's abuse by the moral tradition of Rosmersholm, by the press, political institutions, etc.

Morality plays a decisive role within Nietzsche's philosophy, and this theme is related to the proclamation of God's death. Zarathustra descends among people to speak against moralists and Christians, against the ascetic and the "world beyond", against the institutions: the press, army, justice, state. He preaches self-improvement of the human spirit through a triple transformation - camel, lion and child. In the first stage the spirit is like a camel demeaning itself. Later, it is eager to be free and turns into a lion, endowed with will and power. Although it becomes free, defeats the dragon and says no to all moral values, the human spirit still cannot create new values. Finally, turning into a child, the only one able to create, the spirit acts only according to its own will. Zarathustra identifies himself with the lion, announcing the appearance of the child.

Rebekka is an emancipated woman with radical beliefs according to which love may also exist outside marriage and value may also be met outside the church. She feels compelled, just like Zarathustra, to educate the Apollonian Rosmer in the Dionysian sense of cultivating his joy of life. But the Christian tradition, the excessive moral force of Rosmersholm reduces Rebekka's strength. However, Rosmer realizes his true purpose in life, that of bringing joy to his fellow citizens instead of the earlier moral oppression. By

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playing the role of Nietzsche's camel, Rosmer wants to become a lion, while the previous lion, Rebekka, loses aggression by lending a part of her will to the one she educates.

Rosmer reaches the apostasy and thus he rises above the masses based on the Christian flock-laws. The two characters' selves reach self-improvement as they decide to commit suicide in order to regain confidence in each other. Before dying they prepare themselves to be judges in God's absence. Rosmer and Rebekka know how to set themselves free for death and through death and prove that they have learnt Zarathustra's lesson: they know how to die in time to be reborn and thus by means of accumulation, to build the Superman. Rebekka's paganism and Rosmer's Christian idealism mutually shape themselves and finally form a single entity.

One of the true moral and eternal values is love. It survives the death of God. Rebekka demonstrates by her death that her love for Rosmer is real. Another value of the new-born morality is freedom. Man is free to choose his deeds. The superior man is free to choose his own death, and thus manages to defeat death, which no longer produces fear, as in the case of ordinary people.

The concept of "criminals from a sense of guilt", as defined by Sigmund Freud (Freud 174), is present in both works analyzed. The preexistence of the feeling of guilt and the use of the criminal act appear both in the words of Zarathustra in the fragment entitled *On the pale criminal*, and in Rebekka's evolution throughout the drama.

Bad conscience acts even before committing a sin and often determines a new crime. "The pale criminals", as Nietzsche calls them, are those sinners who, as they become aware of the mistakes they have made, cannot bear the burden of guilt, confess it and set themselves free by death.

"The pale criminal" in the drama is Rebekka. Unconsciously marked by the Oedipus complex (Rebekka is guilty of incest, by becoming Dr. West's mistress after her mother's death, without knowing that he was her father), she enters the Rosmer family as an immoral young woman and wants to separate Beate from her husband. She poisons her soul gradually, so that Beate begins to despise herself and eventually commits suicide in order to ensure her husband's happiness. Rebekka confesses that she has acted under the influence of two wills, one which commands, the other which prohibits action. The bad conscience, coming from the subconscious, from a sinful past, says "yes", while the robust conscience replies "no". Finally, the feeling of guilt has turned her into a criminal. Rebekka intensely, but unconsciously, lives the feeling of remorse, symbolized by the white horses. In the opinion of Theoharis C. Theoharis in the paper *Ibsen's Drama: Right Action and Tragic Joy*, the white horses frighten her but not out of remorse over Beate. "The white horses in her case are shame and guilt over her origin, over the corruption of her nature" (Theoharis 114). The white horses are at the same time a symbol of death, of her own death.

4. Eternal return

The concept of eternal return was not created by the German philosopher, but it belonged to the Greco-Roman Stoic school. Time is cyclical, what is happening now has happened before and will happen again in the future (an anti-Christian conception, as the Christian conception on time is linear, from the moment of creation to the Apocalypse). Nietzsche adopted the concept and considered that cyclicity was based on the will to power.

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The will to power assumes its past and looks to the future, focusing on the present. Zarathustra stresses the importance only of the present for each of us in more of his speeches, including *On the Vision and the Riddle*. The present moment alone may belong to us, and we can shape it according to our own will. It gathers two eternities, the past and the future, and receives the value of eternity. Live the present moment, as if you wanted it to repeat itself again and again!

In *Rosmersholm* the eternal return of the same, which may become tiresome by re-living the same things and which in the subconscious, may induce fear of this fatality, offers at the same time the possibility of taking the responsibility for one's mistakes by blaming oneself. This is the case of Rebekka, the unscrupulous young woman, who has led an immoral life with Dr. West and who, by entering the Rosmer family has the ambition to become the mistress of the house, regardless of the consequences of her desire. To achieve this goal, Rebekka follows the criminal plan that leads to Beate's suicide. When her dream is about to come true and Rosmer wants to marry her, Rebekka has a revelation and refuses. Something from her past prevents the marriage, namely the relationship she has had with Dr. West. Out of revenge, Beate's brother, Kroll, humiliates her by telling her that she is the doctor's illegitimate child. At this point, Rebekka becomes aware of the incest and feels guilty.

The guilt from the past (the incest) determines Rebekka's confession regarding the recent guilt (her essential contribution to Beate's death). This is how the eternal return works. The feeling of guilt is felt before knowing the truth about the incest (her first crime committed) and it causes Rebekka's criminal actions towards her mistress. When realizing the initial fault, Rebekka becomes "the pale criminal", admits her later guilt and chooses death by will to power so as to get purified. Her life before coming to Rosmersholm has been lived under the domination of the Oedipus complex, which she reiterates in the Rosmer family. Thus she recreates a situation similar to that of her youth, driven by an inner force which she cannot oppose. The love for Rosmer and the hostility towards Beate are in Freud's opinion (Freud 173) an effect of the Oedipus complex, a forced imitation of the relationship with her mother and with Dr. West. The dream of the servant or governess, who imagines herself the mistress of the house is in fact an unconscious return of a life experience. The triangle Rebekka-her mother-Dr. West becomes the triangle Rebekka-Beate-Rosmer.

Rebekka and Rosmer choose death as a joining point between the lived life and the possible return, between the past and the future. Suicide is the present moment, a moment so important for Nietzsche, the ending of the past and the beginning of the future. Death abolishes all conflicts and goes back to an early state, enabling the return. Before committing suicide, the two symbolically marry.

The eternal return is also suggested in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and in *Rosmersholm* by the supernatural, symbolical element. Nietzsche preferred the eagle and the snake around its neck, Zarathustra's animals, as symbols of the eternal return, while Ibsen suggested cyclicity of time through the white horses of Rosmersholm. This symbol which often appears in the text had been chosen at an earlier stage as the title of the play. This shows Ibsen's interest for the idea of the eternal return.

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5. Will to power and God's disappearance

Will to power is essential for creating new values, and is thus indispensable for the reassessment of the old morality and its replacement with a new one. All the actions of self-improvement imply will to power. The Nietzschean will to power is a "finite" force, but its repetition is thought of as eternal return. This power sets the spirit free. It is to be found in everything that moves. It is the very essence of human existence, the source of all human unrest.

Ibsen's characters are also puppets of the will to power, be it Rebekka, Rosmer, Beate, Kroll, Brendel or Mortensgård. Simple or influential people, Christians or atheists, moral or immoral, gentle or cruel, they all want to create something by destroying something else, they all want to self-improve. Thus, the will to power is subject to the pragmatic logic of action.

Rebekka makes use of the will to power both in the name of Good, of salvation, of happiness, and to annihilate everything that opposes her upstart condition. After getting acquainted with the new family life, she begins to live the dream Freud mentions of any servant seeing herself instead of the mistress of the house.

As we have seen, she also wants to emancipate Rosmer. Transforming him into an atheist is not difficult to achieve, because the pastor does not agree with the spirit of his age with all its constraints, and loves very much people the people, being able to make any sacrifice to "ennoble" them. Two aspects are not foreseen by her: that the spirit of the place, and her love for Rosmer could be an obstacle for her will to power.

Her will gives way because of self-blame and Rebekka decides to leave at first the man she loves and then her entire life by suicide. She is looking for a pure conscience. When she decides to commit suicide it is in order to save Rosmer. Her will to power decides her death, thus creating the opportunity of returning.

"Until Rebekka's suicide threat the will to power has been subordinated to pragmatic ethical logic in the action. From that point forward the will's Nietzschean goal of powerful expansion through explicitly antimoral self-transcendence will come progressively into play opposing apocalyptic liberating joy to praxis" (Theoharis 107).

In the case of Rosmer, the will to power acts in his relationship with humanity and with reference to Rebekka. He wants to give up everything the past has offered to him, good or bad, to give up the morality imposed by Rosmersholm, to create his own values, such as freedom, joy, confidence, and love. Rosmer makes important steps on his way towards emancipation, he accumulates, overcomes himself from many points of view, but when individual freedom begins to take shape, the remembrance of Beate overshadows his happiness.

Rosmer's will is not strong enough to overcome the pain. It needs outside support. And this could be that of Rebekka. She is the one who comes with the solution, namely new relationships with the outside world. Rebekka realizes that Rosmer's will is not strong enough to create, in Nietzschean terms, and suggests various refuges to overcome the pain of Beate's death. That is why he asks Rebekka to be his wife. Rebekka's refusal and the finding out of the truth about her criminal deed are blows for Rosmer's weakened will.

His will of action has been based on trust and this has disappeared. The only way to regain the faith and thus to strengthen his will is in Rebekka's hands: she could prove to him that her feelings are real, by following Beate's way. Thus, he will be able to face for the first time the fear

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regarding the bridge from where Beate has fallen, and he will be able to join Rebekka in death by own will. Consequently, in the end of the drama, the will to power is the one that decides death also for Rosmer, and creates, as in Rebekka's case, the opportunity of returning.

Although belonging to the group of moralists, Beate proves to have a strong will, being able (and not only under the influence of the distress caused by Rebekka) to sacrifice herself for the beloved man. Her death is chosen for a noble cause and this means accumulation, but accumulation in the name of the Good of Christian morality, which according to Nietzsche, does not get her any closer to the superior man.

Ulrich Brendel, Rosmer's moral and spiritual mentor, attached to Rosmersholm, also tests his will to power, trying to change his life by adapting to his time. However, the end is a failure. His will neither destroys nor creates anything. Brendel fails to overcome himself. His will is not a will to power in Nietzschean terms.

Therefore, the will to power characterizes Zarathustra, but also his correspondent, Rebekka, it is less present in the case of Rosmer (more at a declarative level and in need of external support), not at all active in Brendel's case, who fails to set himself free and show his value, not transforming himself throughout the play. The will to power is characteristic of the transformed being (Zarathustra, Rebekka).

In Nietzsche's universe, God has disappeared and the human beings may act according to their own will without any limit. Nietzsche's advice is to pursue one's highest ideals and act in complete freedom. Ibsen's characters want to do the same: Rosmer gives up Christian morality and fights for emancipation and rendering others' dignity, while Rebekka has never been acquainted with moral values. However, she has set important ideals for which she has fought giving free way to her imagination, which sometimes turned malefic.

According to Nietzsche, breaking the old tables with the Christian moral values and building a new hierarchy of values, setting immorality instead of morality, lead to God's death. In Ibsen's drama, giving up the Christian moral values of Rosmersholm, moreover, blaming them for some characters' failure (Rebekka) determines the fact that at the time of suicide, the two main characters consider themselves their own judges in God's absence.

The modern man wants to become a god himself, that is why he commits the crime against God. The divine values disappear, and man imposes human values. In Ibsen's drama Rosmer and Rebekka turn suicide, death, in a moment of fulfillment with a view to the return. If in God's presence, He is the most intense expression of human overcoming, the highest expression of will to power, when God disappears, his place is taken by the man who, a master of his own will, also becomes responsible for his own overcoming by himself.

6. Conclusions

In the two analyzed works *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *Rosmersholm,* Friedrich Nietzsche and Henrik Ibsen focus on the contradiction between desire and reality, between will and possibility.

Rebekka's history from Ibsen's play is very similar to the history of Zarathustra. Rebekka is the one who evolves from the Apollonian woman to the Dionysian one, acts through will to power, experiences the eternal return, prefers the immoral side, and accepts God's absence, thus proving features associated with Nietzsche's Superman. Nietzsche and Ibsen are theorist and practitioner of the same philosophy,

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and they both promote "the same form for idealism and belief in the individual value" (Beyer 31).

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