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Henrik Ibsen

Frontispiece to The Open Court.

in conflict with *what ought to be*. Socialism is nothing but the practical question, whether the real is also the rational, whether *what is* is *what ought to be*. Still socialism is the beginning, not the end of this question. Socialism knows this question only for the masses, only for their industrial life, their material requirements. But the *mass* is that which is—is it also that which ought to be, is *it* rational? Is it rational that there is *mass* in humanity? Is this mass that which ought to be?

Thus one question leads to another. Individualism is born of socialism—the query whether the things of life are rational, not only for the mass, but for the individuals of whom the mass consists.

Thus, the problem of life is *spiritualized*, and takes possession of society and law and art and science and family and education. Ultimately it turns to man himself and puts the question to him: Is thine own being rational? Art thou thyself what thou oughtest to be?

This problematic aspect of modern life, no one has so sharply seen as Ibsen. What Lessing said of *truth*, Ibsen said of *freedom*. Not its possession, but the eternal struggle for it, is the worthwhile thing. Ibsen stands on the same platform with the great modern preachers of *free personality*, with Max Stirner and Nietzsche, with Tolstoi and Kierkegaard; but he surpasses them all. He struggles with every problem which he discovers or creates, until all his struggling, creative life seems as a death from which a resurrection may be expected.

In addition, the poet must fight his way through the religious problem,—religion apprehended, not as a psychic experience, not as a question of science and world-view, but as a thing of worth or worthlessness for human personality. From this side Ibsen often touches upon the religious problem in his social dramas. The religious problem is central in two of his creations: in “Brand,” and in “Emperor and Galilean.”

In “Brand,” it is rather the ethical side of the problem that is treated: in “Emperor and Galilean,” the mystical side is treated. Brand’s religion is totally a religion of the will. His God is youthful force, youthful strength, and summons strong and world-moving words in the souls of men. The God believed in by the people. The church, however, is a weak and senile God; and, impotent himself, makes terms with the weakness and feebleness of men. He himself loves half-measures, imperfections, closes his eyes when men are cowardly and weak. His task is to make life easier for men, to decrease life’s burden for them. Therefore, *on this very account*, men

serve and love him *only half-heartedly*. A little earnestness and a little levity; today, a little of this, and tomorrow, a little of that; one eye turned to heaven, the other squinting at the earth.

Then comes Brand with his solution, his cry: "*All or nothing!*" The decision and resoluteness of the old Christians live anew in this northern preacher—those old Christians whose God demanded that they should be one thing or the other—cold or hot—else he would spew them out of his mouth. Brand hates any consideration which would divert the will from its path and goal. His radicalism reminds one of the radicalism of the Gospel—a man who puts his hand to the plow may not look back—the love for Christ suffers no competition from love to father and mother and wife and child; and yet, the goal of the will for Brand is different from what it was for the first Christians. Those Christians lived for the community, the Church, which filled their whole soul, their whole life; their Lord, their Christ, lived in it. They made sacrifices for the whole of which they were a part. Not the will to the whole, however, but the *will to personality*, was the goal of Brand's life. This was the voice of his God, which he perceived in his own soul, and to which he subscribed with his whole being.

No motive exists for Brand, except the effectuation of his own inner power, his inner freedom and truth. Only *that* is good, which a man does of himself, which he does voluntarily. Everything is bad, to which he is determined by external stimulation and enticement—or in which he follows the old familiar conventions, the inherited customs and usages. "One thing only I demand as my own, a place to be entirely myself in." "That thou canst not will be forgiven thee, but nevermore that thou wilt not!" That is the problem in Brand—the divine right, the divine duty of self-assertion, self-affirmation, the all-redeeming power of personality, cancelling all youth's guilt.

Thus Brand begins the great conflict with the forces which confront him along the way to his self. The will to personality is under the ban of heredity. There are the ties of blood which claim authority over the will, and summon the will to a life and death struggle. The mother is the son's first tempter, to make him unfaithful to the voice of his duty, to lure him from his chosen and sacrificial calling as a preacher to a poor and remote congregation—lure him away into a brilliant and indulgent life for which she has saved and increased tainted money for her son.

The son, however, sacrifices the mother to his uncompromising-

ness. He sacrifices her also when she supplicates the priest in her son, that he will administer the holy sacrament to her on her death bed. He *can* not, his heart rebels against it; he knows no other law for his mother than for all other people, and the mother has not fulfilled the conditions which alone could have brought her consolation in the hour of death—*all or nothing*; she has not cut loose from the god Mammon that she has served all her life.

Still the conflict proceeds, becomes more grievous. In the venture on which he stakes his life, in order to bring final comfort to a dying unhappiness, darkened by folly, the preacher wins a wife who feels herself an affinity to such strength of will; he finds a church that looks up to him, because it discovers a man in him—a man who can become to them, the weak ones, a teacher and leader through his own strong life. The woman forsakes a love which has sprung only from a fleeting, philandering frivolity; and now lives for the man who has taught her to find her self. Then comes what should be the supreme happiness to a household—a second soul, like their own, to be led along the path of life by parental love and faithfulness. And, indeed, there in that child, a new happiness does bloom for both of them. The young life is a blessing to both. Yet this happiness becomes a new conflict, a new war. The child grows ill; only a speedy departure from the country, whose cold, damp climate menaces the tender human bud, can give hope of convalescence and life to the child.

The *will to a self-chosen duty* triumphed over father's and mother's love. The child dies. The parents cannot leave the congregation to which they had dedicated their lives. Only the memory of the dead child remains; its playthings; its little garments in which it had laughed and wept, and made its parents so happy at the last Christmas festival.

Still even this memory is something foreign; it comes from without into the soul; it is a burden on the freedom of personality. It is a cult of death, not of life; and when the gipsy-woman comes to beg the child's clothes for her living babe, all that is left of the child is surrendered, though the deed cuts to the quick, in order that the soul of the mother may be untrammelled in her celestial flight for freedom. This offering costs a bitter, bloody battle of the heart, but it is made fully and freely. Thus the mother dies—the sacrifice sacrifices her—dies a happy, blissful, victorious death of loyalty. She has seen God in such triumphant freedom—and who sees God dies.

Mother, child, wife gone: the congregation still remains; the real final end of the preacher's life. Out of that congregation Brand proposes to make men in his own image and after his own likeness—pure, free, solidified, self-dependent personalities, serving only the God in their own breasts, but serving him with the whole heart. In that congregation he proposes to crush the evil demons of servility, and the real foes of humanity—levity and dullness and folly.

Added to this, the church edifice, old and musty and decayed—once adequate for father and grandfather—now is much too small. There must be a new church—wide halls, full of air and light, room for all to serve life and love. Brand considers it to be the task of his life to build this new church. Then new difficulties loom up. Influential men of the congregation will have nothing to do with such an innovation. They love the old quiet contentment. They find the parson too strict, too hard. They stand for humaneness, for compromise. They are on the side of the God who is himself so human that he keeps one eye closed—the God who loves all kinds of compromise, the God who requires nothing whole, great, resolute, decisive, of men. The entire social, phlegmatic inertia of the place combines against the man of deed and of power.

Yet Brand brings them all to time. The church is built; all opponents bow in presence of the success. Authorities bear witness to the energy of the pastor who has erected so stately a monument to ecclesiastical glory. Then comes the dedication of the church. The provost comes to dignify the occasion, to bestow reward of merit in the shape of orders and titles. Then it dawns upon the pastor that this new church, too, will be only a new fetter for the spirit. He flings the key of the church door into the sea, and summons his people to follow him into the altitudes, where there is no temple more made of hands, because the earth is God's temple, because all men are priests, and all bonds that bind are scorned.

This victory also is won. The people leave the provost and his retinue and follow their pastor, their emancipator, to the sacrificial altar—up to the desolate, bleak, icy region, where the folk saga speaks of a glacier church. But this victory is only an apparent victory—a defeat. The congregation grows weary and mutinous on the way. Finally, they demand of the pastor to tell them where the end of this journey will come, what the reward for such effort will be. Then Brand speaks the decisive word: No end—life a battle all the way through, a battle against dividedness and imperfection and weakness of the will, a battle against all idols which hold men down

in golden, shining slave-chains.

And the reward of victory? Inner freedom, inner joy, unity of the will, aspiration of faith, freedom of soul. "Deception, delusion!" cry the people. Back they go to the provost and all the men of the golden mean and the comfortable, complacent life—down they go to the lowlands. They leave the pastor and freedom; and the pastor is told in a vision that his superhuman aim can be only yearning and hope. Yet his faith fails not. His faith leads him through ridicule and scorn to God, in vision of whom Brand dies, burying his last doubt underneath the engulfing avalanche. He endures to the end, though all else fails.

Ibsen's "Brand" is the tragedy of the man who stands for all or nothing,—the man who proposes to be something whole and complete in the midst of a world which loves compromises and half-way measures and lives on what is foreign to it. Brand and his wife go the steep, hard way. Yet it is the way that brings liberation and the blessedness of the vision of God, if also of death.

It is easy to see that the poet chose the model of this pastor from his northern home, where the harsh climate and rude soil ripened religious characters like Kierkegaard and Pastor Lammer—men who came to have a seasoned courage and defiance, men who represented with iron consistency the divine right of their uncompromising thoroughness, of their peculiarity, as against the whole stagnant piety of official churchdom.

Nietzsche attacked the same problem, but, as you know, not with a pastor or theologian as model—but a mythical figure, the alien Zarathustra, the superman. Did Nietzsche think that no such men of will, of personality, were to be found among the theologians nourished in theological schools? Did he think that theological training was indeed *training*, i. e., taming of the will, developing of the memory at the expense of strength of will? Did he think that Pastor Brand spoke a language which could find no echo in the schools—that the northern atmosphere from the glacier was too cold and clear for modern school-rooms and scholastics? Best give learned and semi-learned lectures, diverting their hearers from what moves the present time—best not lay hold of the will, mold personality, launch out against all the powers which keep men from coming to themselves. State Christianity—*mass* Christianity—needs theologians, but not personalities, not whole resolute characters which will let nothing stand in the way of their aims.

Such was Nietzsche's attitude. According to him, State Chris-

tianity had adjusted religion to the instincts of the herd, the mass, the multitude; and the mass would rather that others should think and act for them than to act and think for themselves. It was a State church that had created a convenient church-calendar Christianity, in which the faith of Sunday had nothing to do with the facts of the rest of the week. That was Nietzsche's attitude to the same problem. We have not time here to tone down his extravagances and expose the residuum of justice and truth in his strictures upon the religion of his fatherland. Certainly, when a man is divided by his piety, divided between heaven and earth, his very religion hinders him from belonging entirely to life, entirely to himself, entirely to his God.

It is the merit of Ibsen to have apprehended religion from a new side, the side of *the will*, religion thus making man ever lonelier, leading man ever farther away from the great human herd, until he is all alone with himself and his God. It is quite possible, however, that this, too, is only *way*, not *goal*; a prophecy of the future, not tangible reality. Indeed, were it otherwise, Brand would be no liberator, no guide, but only a new *law*, a new inertness and accommodation. In the spirit of the poet, Brand is to be yearning and hope. Up there is the ice church, the eternal temple, not made by men's hands, ever above us; all leave us who walked with us in the lowlands of life; we mount up the way to it as Jesus went to Jerusalem and the cross; we must seek entirely alone, ultimately to find in this way our overthrow, our entrance into God.

Who goes this way knows the anxiety which overtakes one in solitude. Yet he alone also knows the power and blessedness of faith. He is disburdened of every heritage which he has brought out of the deep—heritage where there is curse for every blessing—released from the guilt which accompanies him *incognito* through life. All doubt behind him, all uncertainty of heart—faithful to himself, *faithful to his own error* even, preferably to one alien hidden truth—wholly faithful, without making allowances, without higgling and haggling, faithful unto death; this is the crown of life, which the strange pastor of the rugged northland—poet and seer—at last earned and received. This is the religion of the will.

Then after Ibsen, in "Brand," had sketched the ideal which his patriotic soul coveted for his northern countrymen—the ideal of personality, strong-willed, dying for conviction—he gave in "Peer Gynt" the obverse side of the picture, the exhibition of a weakling, living for comfort, guided by his selfish wish—a man in whom the

poet saw an embodiment of the motley mass of the people. "Brand" and "Peer Gynt"—how different! Both are national creations, born of that glowing patriotic love (which can hate, also), and of the bitter ridicule of all the powers ruining the folk soul.

Yet, for the genuine poet, each of his works has a liberating effect; it relieves a tension by which the soul is held; it broadens the vision for new and greater sides of life. To be sure, there is a universal human side in all national life, rightly understood. A living folk type transcends national boundaries and appeals to other peoples: our cause is your cause, it says. The human is international. The deeper it is apprehended, the more does it strip off the local part; it seeks for an expression embracing all the peoples, and creates in temporal and local images the mirror of the whole present life as exhibited in the great conflicts of the times, affecting all struggling spirits. Thus Ibsen broke through national limits, too. It was precisely his life in foreign parts, in Rome, in Germany, after he had overcome the melancholy and the irritation of removal from home, that paved the way to those problems which are imbedded in the eternal nature of man.

Therefore he now apprehended the religious problem, also, from another side—where there is neither Jew nor Greek. He apprehended it at a point where, to him, the history of Christianity became an expression of ideas in which he discerned the impelling power of the religious culture of humanity. Ibsen received in Rome new impressions of the power of history. The Eternal City preached a past to him, under whose spell all peoples of the new day lived, by whose force the present cultural life was everywhere pervaded. Ibsen delved into the past, studied it in one of its most important pivotal points, with the hot endeavor of a year's involuntary idleness.

For a time, however, the material at his disposal was too much for his digestive and constructive powers; therefore he went to Germany and experienced its political rebirth. The great spectacle of a people awakening from a long, death-like sleep, finding itself again, and stepping upon the stage of history a second time with rejuvenated energy, brought Ibsen to himself, too, supplied him with a living commentary on what he had been reading in the old writings of the Roman libraries. The poet came to know German thinkers, especially Hegel, the philosopher of history—Hegel who contemplated all human happening in its innermost connections, in the eternal necessity of self-unfolding Reason.

Thus originated the great work, "Emperor and Galilean," an his-

torical play, we are wont to call it; in fact, a present-age play, a play of human faith and yearning, of human seeking and wandering. The center of the double tragedy is held by Julian—dubbed by Church historians, *the Apostate*—Roman Emperor. Already Christianity had three hundred and fifty years of history behind it. What some choose to call the proletariat, assembled around Messiah, had demonstrated their spiritual and moral superiority over a decaying and hostile world. The deep feeling of weakness which trembled in the heart of the upper classes, the intimation of monstrous moral decline, of a condition of life which human nature could not long endure—all this had made once hostile spirits receptive for the messianic expectation of the poor and the disinherited. The philosophy of the time had developed more and more that supramundane character, that hankering for the mysterious and the mystical which had drawn the whole educated world nearer and nearer to the fundamental thoughts of Christianity. Thus, under cover of the sharp opposition between Roman and Christian society, breaking out into bloody persecutions, the catastrophe was prepared for, which lifted up the cross to imperial symbol under Constantine, and made the God of the Christians the God of the State.

And in this way the Christian's Kingdom of the Future, so long hoped for and expected, appeared—different, indeed, from the dreams of Christians; and Ibsen begins with depicting Christianity emerging in triumph over Roman culture. The faith of the Galilean has exchanged peasant garb for robes of the court and it is now known by its costly raiment and courtly manners. The confessors of Christ have built a high wall against everything that can remind them of the glory and splendor of pagan times, and that can convince spirits of the greatness and significance of this pagan culture. Greek philosophers are persecuted and banished. Visitors to their lecture rooms are earnestly and persuasively warned. Youth is forbidden to partake of their poisonous food. And those are the worst zealots against Greek culture, who have themselves drunk from that fountain. They feel their own weakness as compared with the gigantic forces of life which once helped them to create a great spiritual culture. Therefore, they blaspheme the gods which they formerly worshipped; they flee the Academies in which once the thirst for truth gathered seekers together; they hate the beauty whose pictures once charmed them. Every means seems justified to them, every intrigue and violence, that will sever and save Christian believers from contact with the bearers of the ancient culture.

In essence, the new world remains the old world, only under a new, a Christian, name. It becomes worse than the old, for it has a glittering, pious galvanism and gloss which *hide vices*, while all rottenness and dissolution were open as the day in the old world.

Julian seeks a pure woman and he thinks that he has found her in the person of Helena, a pious kinswoman of the Emperor, and a Christian fanatic. Yet this saint of the new faith is a monster of ambition and lust. Perfidy, adultery, murderous assault upon the Emperor's brother—this is what fills her pious Christian soul. And the Emperor, head of the Galileans, hypocritical, suspicious, hesitates at nothing. It is a sorry cloak which conceals, superficially enough, this pious court society with its processions and its church-building.

This is the atmosphere in which Julian lives and from which he has sprung. In this atmosphere no healthy plants grow. An inner contradiction preys upon his young soul. He has imbibed so much of the faith of the Christians that he finds his dearest friends among them—honored teachers and friends of his youth whom he loves. He would like indeed to support the preaching of poverty and self-abnegation, to dedicate his service to Christ, to overcome his foes with the weapons of that spirit which issued from Christ. Yet, deep in his soul, throbs a hot yearning for life—life that the Christians condemn, the life of beauty and of freedom, the kingdom of this world and its glory.

And when he seeks rest of soul in faith, doubt arises as to where this faith—where Christianity at all—is to be sought. Christians themselves rave against each other: they anathematize each other over the question of the Son of God, creation out of nothing, over the Trinity and its nature. They preach turning away from the world and yet are lustful of the stolen sweets of the world. And when these doubts overmaster him, books are given him as answer, as of old in the Greek schools, when he asked—what is truth? He betook himself to the books, only to find that they could not satisfy a hungry soul. And the cry for life grew mightier in him; it became a cry for a new revelation, for an experience of something new, for something not written down in any book!

Then he comes to a magician and exorcist who promises the seeker to induct him into the most hidden mysteries of life, and to give him new revelation, answer to all the enigmatic questions of his soul. Offending Christian friends, disregarding their admonitions, he follows the magician, who leads him through supra-terrestrial regions. In visionary rapture, Julian experiences the two-fold predic-

tion of a coming, a third, Kingdom, which he will found through the way of freedom which is also the way of necessity, and which the guilty ones of humanity, Cain and Judas Iscariot, united with the tree of knowledge and the Cross of Golgotha. Julian applies the prediction to himself. He feels himself called to dissolve the Kingdom of the Christ; for the God-Man had no freedom in his Kingdom and no necessity. He proclaimed his eternal "Thou shalt" to man—his commands remain *outside* of man. Julian remembers his Christian virtue, which has been a constant offense in the presence of an alien will, in the presence of the Emperor, in the presence of the Christ. The human has become something disallowed, since the Seer of Galilee seized the helm of the world! With him, to live is to die. Our normal innermost soul rebels against this—*and yet we ought to will precisely against our own will!*

Julian becomes Emperor, contrary to all probabilities which seem to obstruct his way to the throne. And now Destiny, the world-will, expresses itself apparently in the sense of that visionary prediction, and the Byzantine Ruler proceeds to found a Kingdom of Freedom. He proclaims—he proclaims the free play of the forces in his kingdom; the old gods whom the Christ has dethroned are reinstated. Everyone shall live according to his faith, serve God as he pleases. And since the freedom which the Emperor accords the least of his subjects he reserves for himself also, he decides for the old gods and announces his faith to the people.

Now the imperial nimbus begins to work; what the emperor believes, others will believe also. His example is effective for all who hope for corroboration and advantage from the throne. Hosts of apostates come and flatter the Emperor. Fallen away from their Christ-God, they make the Emperor their God. But the Emperor-God is only a man, subject to the influences of his environment which uses the spectacular worship of the Emperor as a means of enmeshing him in its net. The memory of the time when the ruler was also Pontifex Maximus awakens. Julian feels himself to be priest, then supreme philosopher also. He works on a book to refute the folly of the Galilean at a single stroke. The multitude increases to whom word of Emperor is word of God: harsher becomes the contrast to "render unto God the things that are God's."

The reign beginning with the declared freedom of faith, is now ending with the repression of the Christ faith. The Christ faith is persecuted; but the persecution purifies the Christ faith. The apostates are the half-way, vacillating Christians, seekers of the Galilean

for their own advantage. To the remnant, their faith is everything—faith in the strength of which *one man* is strong enough to withstand an Emperor. The spirit of the old heroes and martyrs is in the remnant. Then it begins to dawn upon the Emperor that the Galilean who is crucified is not dead, and a new, greater doubt comes over the Emperor; “There is no comparison between me and the Galilean,” he says. “Who will possess the Kingdom, Emperor *or* Galilean?” The old necromancer gives the final meaning: Both have their day, both will yield to another their kingdom; they will go down but not pass away. As the child passes into the youth, the youth into the man, thus the first kingdom and the second will grow into the third; *the kingdom of free humanity, of wisdom and beauty*, will be united with the kingdom of necessity, which preaches suffering and death—when, no seer can tell! Given this vision of the future, Julian hesitates; he wants to be third himself. With this self-deception, he goes down in conflict with the Persian Empire; and the solution of the riddle is announced over his corpse: *will is must will*.

Thus, the tragedy of Emperor Julian is Ibsen’s confession of faith, a prophetic glance into the history of the development of humanity. Church and State, these two rival, warring powers, determining the cultural history of Christian peoples by their rivalry and warfare, are here seen in their inner connection; one cannot be without the other; one creates and conditions the other. Rome and Byzantium—these are the gates of that history whose tide still bears us on today.

In Rome, God is all, Emperor nothing; in Byzantium, Emperor is all, God is nothing. This opposition is Scylla and Charybdis for Christian peoples. Free from Rome! this was the watchword of the Reformation, and this cry seemed to signify liberation from an oppressive necessity, this return of a kingdom of humanity and of freedom. Yet, when the people became free from Rome, they took the road that leads to Byzantium, where they hoped to have found freedom, but only fell into a new dependence. It is significant that Ibsen lets the tragedy of Rome play itself out in the background, and delineates the tragedy of Byzantium with all the poetic power of his constructive imagination.

Many weaklings have fallen victim to this cult of Byzantium. They have changed their disposition and their religion, as they have changed their clothes; and the living Gods they have preached to the world were yet only idols, which were outlived. It was reactionariness, an effort to check growth, to call a halt to the development

which they had undertaken.

Ibsen, however, wants to transcend this dualism: this is the problem to which he dedicates the drama. He himself is, of course, the mystical seer, who gives the Emperor a look into the hidden deep of life, and finally sees how the Emperor, who does not understand his times or himself, fulfills his destiny through his lack of understanding. Precisely this apostasy from what offers the soul its stay in Christianity, produces self-examination among those who cannot and will not take the road to Byzantium. They purify themselves and their faith from the dross which has made it a hissing and a by-word to all serious, forward-looking spirits. Once again, there are *great individuals*, where formerly there were only members of a herd. They find in themselves a strength which makes them leaders of others into the light.

Thus what speaks here to us in a great world-historical spectacle is also the history of each man's own soul. The division which consumes the heart of Christian peoples is repeated in the life of individuals, and demands its solution from each one—State and Church, Emperor and God: this is the contradiction *in* man, between free, sovereign man and the eternal necessity which rules over him. Will man declare for the Emperor, will he himself *be* Emperor, self-ruler in the Kingdom of Spirit and of Will—only to be dashed against the limitation of eternal necessity which holds him? Then he hears the cry, "Render to God the things that are God's." Will he subscribe to the other kingdom, the kingdom of divine necessity? Then the ruler-man mounts up in him, the man who imperiously demands his right, his freedom.

Now the mystic releases himself from this division. He has intimation of a third kingdom, in which the law of freedom and the law of necessity, of life and of death, are become inwardly one,—in which the will has become conscious of its eternity. In this third kingdom, the Christ has ceased to be an external mandatory power, an historical authority: he is entirely inward, entirely man in man. And the ruler-man does not look back to idols to which he once sacrificed; he looks forward—he has himself become messianic, and gives all his freedom, all the wealth of his life and his spirit, a living sacrifice to man, that men, too, may become ruler-men, messianic men. To build this third kingdom, this is the task of all free spirits: it is a secret, hidden kingdom, a kingdom in man, in which Emperor and Galilean look beyond themselves into the great, glad future which shall fulfill all necessity with freedom.