

## IBSEN'S "LIFE-FORMS"

BY R. PETSCH

THE deep misunderstanding to which Ibsen was exposed by his contemporaries, and from which his work suffers even today, did not arise from the difficulty of the problems treated, nor from his new and peculiar technique; though criticism was directed mainly against these points. In reality something else aroused opposition: Ibsen had outrun his contemporaries to such an extent, and his ways were of such a singular kind, that very few could follow him into the mysterious depths from which sprang his "presentation of characters and destinies of men." If every genuine work of art down to its smallest details claims to be an expression of an artistically grasped experience, and further, if this experience in subject, extent, kind and intensity is anchored in the whole personality of its creator, then the beholder must enter completely into his personality in order to view through his eyes that portion of the world and human life which he has seen and projected. No research into sources however carefully carried out; no establishment of biographical and actual facts (the perception of which *in itself* is not yet an experience); no analysis of composition and style; no evaluation according to sacred aesthetic standards or moral and religious ideal concepts brought from without are of any avail here.

"Down into the depths you must descend  
If the essence you would comprehend."

Equally of no avail are descriptions or causal explanations in the mechanistic sense, and the burdensome transference of its methods to things of the spirit. What alone matters is the technique of "understanding" such as was first applied in the days of German idealism, perhaps rather intuitively, by Wilhelm von Humboldt, and which has lately been developed to perfection by Wilhelm Dilthey

and by his eminent, and logically far more astute, successor—Eduard Spranger. It is above all to Spranger that we owe the most important categories for the comprehension of spiritual differences which do not allow themselves to be grasped by investigation from without. No collection of biological facts and psycho-physical forms of action and reaction, however complete, lead us to the core of another's personality. What alone avails is intuitive comprehension of the ultimate impulsive forces in their fundamental tendency and inborn power, and in their interconnectedness and strength relationships. The only thing that helps is penetration into the depths of the microcosm which reflects the whole world, but always with a particular accentuation of values that is significant of the individual. Into these depths we can penetrate by way of an artistic intuition alone; yet we need not fear that, therefore, we shall necessarily fall into an arbitrary and purely fantastic interpretation of another's life according to our own. The investigator, as well as the investigated, is a microcosm and contains all human possibilities, only with a different accentuation of value. Therefore what will first be accessible to him in another's personality, and what will arrest him in it, will be that which corresponds to his own value-pattern. The more profound, liberal, astute, educated and practised the observer is, the more will he get into touch with the observed personality and comprehend it according to his own life-laws, not as a fixed rigid quantity, but as an entelechy ever revealing itself in the stream of life and growth as a functional unity striving after an inherent aim. It is true that we cannot in a rational and scientific way grasp this unity in its manifold strivings and currents, in acts and experiences; much less can we determine its development beforehand. Nevertheless we can penetrate far into the "total structure" of the personality if we call to our aid the structure of reality accessible to all. For what presents itself to our eyes is only the reflection, the "objectivation," of spiritual strivings which sometimes are represented by an incalculable group of human beings, all akin to each other in their fundamental tendency and all severally striving to realize certain values, though by infinitely diverse ways and in immeasurably varied conditions. These values may be classified with comparative accuracy. To each of these classes of values corresponds a particular section of reality in which it realizes itself. Naturally, we may only define such sections sharply for the purposes of preliminary investigation: they are "object-strata" to each of which corresponds a particular domain in each human individual

and ego-circle. Every man has part in *all* these circles, and so has relations with all object-strata; but in everyone some ego-circle predominates strongly according to the special values which he in himself accentuates in all experiences. Thus the individual fits into a "life-form" corresponding to his fundamental trend, and within this he tries to realize the direction of his value. This is Eduard Spranger's doctrine of *Lebensformen*,<sup>1</sup> developed in a scientific work of extraordinary depth, admirable breadth, and of rare charm of presentation. He distinguishes three *individual* "fundamental types of individuality": the theoretical, the economic, and the aesthetic man. In addition he distinguishes two *collective* forms: the social man, and the man of power; and, finally, a form comprising all these: the *total* form of existence, the religious man. There can be no question of an ethical "life-form" which could be co-ordinated with the others, as there would be no object-strata corresponding to it. Ethical life is merely a special kind of behavior towards values generally, and changes in so much as we gauge values according to their significance and application as related to the structure of the valuing personality; an ethical man in a positive sense is he who in a conflict between values always gives preference to the higher or highest value. All valuing in this sense strives towards a final condition in which the conflict of values is overcome and in which the valuing ego merges into the absolute personality, i. e., the religious life-form, the idea of which Friedrich Brunstad has lately developed with commendable clearness and comprehensiveness in a thoughtful book.<sup>2</sup> With the help of this theory it is easier for us to do justice to the leading men of history and especially of spiritual history; also to such complicated, and at first sight difficult, characters as Rousseau, Nietzsche, Tolstoy and Henrik Ibsen. Only, one must not forget that none of these personalities represent absolutely any one "life-form," quite apart from the fact that in each living microcosm all other possibilities are at least potentially present. For instance, in every thinker there also lives something of an artist though a stunted one, and also something of an economist; very often, too, the proper life-form is hidden by one superimposed through an enforced vocation leading in another direction. Often, too, we perceive a tension between different tendencies, one of which corresponds to the core of the personality but which tries to

<sup>1</sup> Eduard Spranger: *Lebensformen. Geisteswissenschaftliche Psychologie und Ethik der Persönlichkeit*. 3 Aufl. Halle A. S. M. Niemeyer, 1922.

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Brunstad: *Die Idee der Religion. Principien der Religionsphilosophie*. Halle a. S. Niemeyer, 1922.

“express” itself in another life-form. Thus there are countless complications. In this consists the extraordinary charm and fertility of Spranger’s method, which demonstrates only the fundamental traits, possibilities of development, and complications of life-forms but could not, and did not attempt to, penetrate into the ultimate abyss of individual personality. Spranger’s procedure is that of a strictly methodical science, whereas ultimately the individual is “inexpressible” for the rational observer (*Individuum est ineffabile*) and its comprehension is the task of an artistic “community of perception.” From this point of view a host of questions concerning Ibsen and his art are answerable. Is he really a poet? Did he see living people, achieve an intimate relation with them, and form them into living characters? Or are they merely pawns in a game of chess, mere embodiments of concepts? Are they just dramas, as has been asserted, little ethical tracts in the form of dialogues, or abortions of a pessimistic mood? Ibsen has explicitly on all occasions and not only in connection with *Rosmersholm*, laid emphasis on this view: “Above all this is a poem of men and women and human fate.” As poet and creative artist he behaves, or at least tries to in a purely aesthetic way. But this is not to say that the fundamental tendency of his character leads him in this direction. On the contrary, already on the 12th of September, 1865, he had written to Bjornson,<sup>3</sup> saying that “he had now expelled the aesthetic from himself, just as formerly it had power over him as an isolated thing claiming to have a value in itself.” With disgust he turned from a Copenhagen aesthete who saw in Christ only the “most interesting phenomenon of the world’s history,” and who enjoyed him “as the glutton enjoys the sight of an oyster.” Thus Ibsen lacks the passion” of a born aesthete, and from the outset we may assume that his artistic activities, to which no doubt he brought rare gifts, were only a secondary form of expression for his personality, a kind of auxiliary and substitute form for a mode of work which perhaps would have corresponded better to his most innermost being, but which through unfavorable circumstances was denied to him. But what other life-form must we consider? Hasty judges might maintain the theoretical. But Ibsen has not the passionless, unprejudiced, balancing nature of a thinker who is indifferent to response and acceptance. For that, the fighter is too strong in him, his thoughts too contradictory, too much dominated by emotional accents and too fantastic. Certainly Ibsen had a lively interest in philosophy

cal subjects—amongst others for Hegel's conception of history:<sup>4</sup> but of a purely intellectual penetration and comprehension of life there is no question in his case. Quite unquestionable is his *ethical* behavior; but this corresponds, as was shown, with no particular life-form, though it can lead us to the right track. Ibsen has his whole heart in ethical valuation and in composing poetry. And just as he does not write poetry in order to create anything lasting, in the possession of which to enjoy himself, still less does he do so in order to conform to any particular aesthetic type. He writes in order to taste the joy of creating. He lives with his characters till they make him "nervous" when he takes leave of them, only to have soon again a feeling of emptiness which drives him to "new frenzies."<sup>5</sup> No more will he have anything to do with traditional and formulated teachings, either religious or moral; nay, every truth becomes suspect in his eyes the moment it can be formulated. Thus he soon confronts every character he created, and to which he had just been saying "yes," with the annihilating smile of the sceptic, and pushes on just when the masses he has been castigating and shaking up, think they have reached his "standpoint" and become his equal.<sup>6</sup> Onward, over the bodies of the dead, this full-blooded egoist points the way,<sup>7</sup> not over the corpses of people but of conquered idols and ideals to ever new values, ever new changes and developments, victories and liberations. Ibsen, in common with every born moralist, has the pathos of valuing, re-valuing and continuous striving after higher values. The grouping of his characters, as well as the inner dialectic of his dramas and the totality of their sequence, rests just on this. But what is, for him, the highest and last value? On January 3rd, 1882, Ibsen wrote to Brandes: ". . . for me *freedom* is the highest and first condition of life." But this freedom is not to be taken in the sense of any political party, nor in that of Socialism. Any democratic levelling is hateful to him. Full of sure sympathy for worker and for woman, both of whom are fighting for their freedom, and who, once liberated, seem to offer the highest security for a better future, he yet does not want to hear of any real endeavors towards emancipation. On February

<sup>3</sup> Letter to Bjornson, Kristensen, 13 Feb., 1887.

<sup>4</sup> In his letter to G. Brandes of April 30th, 1873, he criticizes "The writers who write about philosophy without knowing anything about Hegel or German science."

<sup>5</sup> Compare the letters to Th. Caspari of June 27th, 1884, with those from Hegel of September 2, 1884, and to M. Prozor of November 20th, 1890.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. his letter to G. Brandes of June 12th, 1883.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. his letter to G. Brandes of September 24th, 1871.

17th, 1871, he wrote to G. Brandes: "What they call freedom, I call liberties, and what I call the fight for freedom is nothing less than the steady living acquisition of the freedom-idea. He who possesses freedom in any other way than as something to be striven for, possesses freedom dead and without spirit; for the concept of freedom has the quality of expanding while it is being acquired; and if anyone stands still during the fight and says, "Now I have it," he shows that he has lost it. It is just this dead fixed freedom standard which is characteristic of *Hate* societies, and that is what I meant when I said it was no good." The fight will remain as long as there are human beings conscious of their dignity. "Conflict is good, fresh, and healthy,"<sup>8</sup> said Ibsen once, and in this he approaches Lessing closely. It is a struggle for an ultimate good, one which consumes and renews itself continuously, one which ever moves on and tempts you from a distance, and yet remains the same fundamentally; something which is not put into man from without, but which is given with human nature itself. The freedom of the individual which Ibsen strives for is only an ever stronger development according to itself, the working out of its own soul-structure as it expresses itself in the deepest needs of personality. That means that every one of us has nothing better and nothing else to do than "to realize oneself in spirit and in truth."<sup>9</sup> "To realize oneself in one's conduct of life, that is in my opinion the highest that man can attain. This task we all have, but most of us bungle it."<sup>10</sup> Clearly this is the fundamental reason of Ibsen's flight into the country, of his voluntary solitude; it was to save his soul from perdition through considerations for friends and strangers. In "friends" he saw but a costly luxury demanding sacrifice at the expense of our personality.<sup>11</sup> At first sight this ethic might appear purely formalistic; in truth it is just as "material" as that of Max Scheler which also is based on the principle of personalism.<sup>12</sup> To perceive one's own inner structure and to work out one's inherent tendencies and aims is itself a content of life worth the sweat of the noble—compared to which all the special aims towards which particular tendencies of the soul reach out, crossing and supporting each other, are of mere

<sup>8</sup> Letter to Brandes, April 4th, 1872.

<sup>9</sup> Letter to Th. Caspari, June 27th, 1884.

<sup>10</sup> Letter to Bj. Bjornson, August, 1882.

<sup>11</sup> Letter to G. Brandes, March 6th, 1870.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. M. Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Werthethik, neuer Versuch der Grundlegung eines ethischen Personalismus*, 2. Anfl. Halle A. S. Niemeyer, 1921. One of the most eminent philosophical works produced in recent years.

secondary importance, as being (so to speak) mere means to the highest aim. To remain master of oneself in spite of the pressure which the various tendencies exercise, to order one's whole life according to one's own laws, to bring to realization the particular strata and combination of various value-tendencies significant of the ego, to hold the reins continuously, and to rule with superior force and foresight—it is in this that the born master-nature reveals itself. It is the "political" man in the purest and noblest sense of the word—which does not mean that he need be a professional politician. On the contrary, he may turn with disgust from the political life of today. Amongst the life-forms which Spranger presents to us, none corresponds better to Ibsen's innermost nature than that of the master man; this form can quite well coexist with his strong educating love for human beings as bearers of high values, and for brothers chosen as kings like himself.

It has been rightly said that in every tragic hero and heroine of Ibsen there lies hidden a fallen king, an overturned queen, in fact a "bungled" master-nature that has allowed itself to be led from its path. From *its* path! Not from a "right" path, a path right for everyone. In *Emperor and Galilean* Ibsen places Cain's fratricide and Judas' betrayal as actions of bitter necessity: they acted as they *had to* and their actions were necessary in the composition of the whole. Had they acted differently, they would have "sinned" towards themselves and towards their destined tasks. If a curse lay on their deed, they had to take it upon them; for to that end the curse lay in the path of their life. That is what is meant by "taking one's fate into one's hands." In this the highest moral courage is required: not presumptuous courage which wants to set itself above all restraints, and which desires to "live itself out" in the sense of *Peer Gynt* ("live for yourself"); nor the cowardice of him who bows to every alien law; nor the half courage of those who "doubt their own doubts," who go along their own way for a little while and then break down, who sway between sham freedom and intensified slavery. It requires the full manly courage which dares to fail; which treads its path with a "robust conscience" when a thousand external and internal things say "no"; when happiness in a "human" sense, public reputation, and "peace" break down over it; and when the actor must appear to himself and others as a criminal offender towards sacred traditions. That is the colossal courage of Brand with his "Live thyself"; of whose tragic one-sidedness, of whose monstrous misunderstanding of the religion of mercy, of whose

capacity for resistance towards life, the poet was as much convinced as any of his readers and spectators.

The ultimate ideal cannot be put into dry words, nor can it be caught by a philosophical formula: it remains experience and fantasy and can only be represented by ever new fantasies; ever new, because every representation, with the colors and forms of reality, labors under the necessary limitations of all given individual and empirical conditions, and these of necessity lack something of that unconditioned and universal character which the "ideal" demands. Hence the inner dialectic of the great "process of objectivation" which is represented by Ibsen's dramas in their entirety. The gift of perceiving his own experience as something detached from his soul, and of letting others see it thus, was brought to him in his cradle; it is the gift of the poet. But in no one figure does the experience emerge quite clearly and in the complete fullness of its radiations; so, from drama to drama it is re-examined and contemplated from different aspects, and thus ever more sharply, ever more deeply, perceived. At least, that is the ideal direction in which Ibsen's poetical art moves. The changes, the gradual development and refinement of his craftsmanship serve too this purpose. Thus, in Ibsen, art is only a means to an end, never an end in itself; but, the end in itself was not one which had necessarily to point away from the aesthetic path. Ibsen does not want to propound a material doctrine or represent such in model pictures; but he wants to show man in conflict, in apostasy, in collapse, and in purification—and this is the object of his aesthetic perception. Logical dialectic above all stands in the service of that grand "irony" with which Ibsen aims again at a *plus ultra* after every achieved presentation; and which he reaches not through intellectual, but through artistic creative means. His intellect, too, stands absolutely at the service of his artistic work.

Ibsen's acquired and considered knowledge also enters into the service of the ultimate human ideal as perceived by him. His poetical expression of this ideal was never shaped perfectly because it never corresponded completely to his personal structure which was set on conflict and development and never could give itself to a goal once it had been attained. He, too, pursued here the path which his nature indicated to him with individual courage and with the utmost tenacity. But Ibsen would not have been the artist he was if he had not felt impelled for once to envisage human society as a whole, from the point of view of the personal ideal as worked out

by every individual. Also he would not have had in his make-up so much of the religious life-form as every man undoubtedly has, and as the poet of *Brand* most certainly had, if in moments of the greatest excess of energy he was not to feel *forced* to contemplate the individual from the point of view of the whole—that is, in the light of that totality the experiencing of which, according to Spranger, forms the basis for the religious behavior of man and provides the means for its fruition. It is clear that he could not stop at a mere addition of the immeasurable wealth of inherent and lived laws of the self. There was bound to be a still higher value in which they all met, and in which all life-forms would find their unification. Now in Ibsen's time Spranger's classification of all possibilities was unknown. The secular conceptions of history and of people were still too strongly tinged by mediaeval dualism and by German idealism from Schiller to Hegel, to allow a reconciliation between "both" possible forms of humanity. "Between happiness of the senses and peace of soul, man only has anxious choice," complained Schiller; and, in the main, unity is reserved for divinity. Only in exalted moments of blissful perception does man achieve aesthetically that unity to which his nature points. The lasting condition of the "beautiful soul" is an ideal unattainable on earth. As long as we are in the flesh there will remain two fundamental tendencies: sensuality which enjoys, and morality which renounces. Schiller recognized (though he was not the first) that the one life-form was represented in Greek civilization, the other in Christianity. His regrets for the vanished "Gods of Greece" ceased early; and he maintained, also against Humboldt, that Hellenic "beauty" was purchased by a great lack of spirituality and conscious morality. These were the historic-philosophical constructions such as were current in Germany after Lessing: and it was his *Education of Mankind* which predicted a "third Gospel" and in so doing renewed again the dreams of mediaeval thinkers. In a much more pronounced way Hegel applied to historical events the principle of the synthesis of thesis and antithesis. All this was not unknown to Ibsen and must have been in his mind, particularly during his stay in Germany when preparations for his Julian dramas were in progress. Here he had firm ground under his feet, and he believed that he had at last succeeded in obtaining that "positive world conception" which his critics often missed in him.<sup>13</sup> For him the ideal of future mankind weaves itself out of "both life-forms" which have to be reconciled. For this

<sup>13</sup> Letter to Hegel, June 12th, 1871.

observer, the infinite wealth of individual possibilities reduces itself to two types. As representative of one Brand may stand; and for the other—well, that most severe of ascetics, Brand himself, says with shining eyes: "Silen is a splendid figure, the drunkard." Between enjoyment and renunciation; between overflowing Dionysiac devotion to the good things of the world and blissful physical reproductive power on the one hand, and bitter self-mastery and discipline of the will on the other, life moves. There here emerges, besides the psychological, a historical and ethical separation in the sense of German idealism. Heinrich Heine's thoughts about the union of Hellenism and Nazarethism have met, in Ibsen, with Lessing's, Schiller's, and Hegel's ideas: and thus arose his great separation between the first realm which culminated in Greek civilization but was founded on the tree of Knowledge in paradise, and the second realm which sprang from the Cross. The whole, true, genuine man, as the present can produce him, the man to whom Ibsen is able to say "yes," can belong to the one realm as well as to the other: for both realms still exist among us. But he is, in all his power, one-sided and therefore only half man. Completion is not achieved by swaying between the two goals as millions show, drunkards as well as philistines: these are merely attempts of mankind gone wrong. To reach the highest synthesis, the true equilibrium, a third realm must arise: the realm of deep mystery that shall be founded both on the tree of Knowledge and on the Cross because it loves and hates them both, and because it has its living source both in the garden of Eden and on Golgotha."<sup>14</sup> Up to now the redeemed who could guide mankind from youth to the maturity of man, has not come. But Ibsen is determined to hope for him. There are two possibilities: one, that in every individual both sense and spirit may attain perfect balance. So the principle of individual being, which continuously develops personality according to its own laws (through quite a special blending of the elements, and with special main and subsidiary accentuations) would be broken through. Ibsen was rather thinking of the other possibility: of the ideal human society where both great types, each manifesting itself in infinite ways, would unite for fruitful work. In this, and only in this, sense was he ready to acknowledge a "union," when it pursued real cultural problems:<sup>15</sup> otherwise he hated every society and all party combina-

<sup>14</sup> *Emperor and Galilean*, I. Part III act. Cf. also R. Inger's H. Ibsen, messenger of the third realm. Vaigtlander, 1920.

<sup>15</sup> Speech at the meeting of the Swedish Authors' Society at Stockholm, April 11th, 1898.

tions. How such a united working would take effect in practice, Ibsen never described, nor wished to describe. Every imaginative flight however daring would have been held down by the empirically possible. In reality the doctrine of the third realm was less the *central* thought of Ibsen than a sedative for a longing which stirs up the soul so profoundly and which reaches towards the infinite. It signifies, further, that the eternally separated lines of both the great life-forms (with their monstrous one-sidednesses) will meet sometime in infinite space. Thus every one-sided life-form (be it never so powerful!) ever strives towards its completion by the other life-form—though it cannot in reality reach it without injuring itself. To the ceaselessly striving personal life-principle of Ibsen there answers from the last unsatisfied depths of his soul, a harmonious conceptual aim; but it is far enough distant not to be able to assuage the conflict of his real life. Ibsen's true life-form—that of the master-man seeking to train himself and others to life according to their individual laws, and even helped towards this goal by art—is in no way affected.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Translated by A. Makowen.