

BLIND IDEALISM IN IBSEN'S *BRAND*

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It has been 112 years since the last play was written by Henrik Ibsen, and he still lives on through his works as a modern dramatist. His plays cannot be set aside; even in our time, they demand to be studied more than ever before. Ibsen has been studied and performed all around the world, especially in Asia, where he speaks to the political and social needs of that part of the world. The combination of current political circumstances, social inequalities, and human rights has given his plays there a special urgency. However, even though Ibsen has seen a particular resurgence in Eastern world, the terrible events of 22 July 2011 in Oslo and Utøya also bear certain traces of Ibsen in his country of birth as well. A false hero, trumpeting himself as a true philosopher in a land in need of rescue, but who brings only chaos and destruction.

Regardless of geography, Ibsen's texts continue to ask contemporary man about the meaning of freedom, and his plays continue to remain relevant to many of today's global socio-political issues. The plays warn us about moral zealots such as Gregers or Brand, who, after all, are not entirely alien to us. A blind idealist, like Gregers, according to Dr. Relling, has a "moralistic fever"; he is not crazy any more: "He's no crazier than most people. But he's got a disease in his system all the same. [...] Oh yes, it's a national disease, but it only breaks out now and then" (Ibsen: *The Wild Duck*, 1978: 451-452).

The political techniques of ruling over the masses are seen in Ibsen's plays. His hypothetical society has a triangular form, at the apex of which stands a person knowing himself as a "true philosopher". His mission is leading the masses up from the base. In *Brand*, which deals with religion, the protagonist Brand works to spread his unique theology among the people in order to unite them around a common thought.

When it comes to the ambiguity of Ibsen's characters, Brand is a good example. On the surface, he is a very inflexible religious zealot, but Ibsen ironically portrays him as a hero, even though the play is based on him being an anti-hero. The remarkable subject in *Brand*, like most other plays by Ibsen, is the concept of illness in children. In *Brand*, the sick one is Alf, Brand and Agnes's infant son, who eventually succumbs to his illness. Alf is an innocent child with no will to determine his own life; he is a lamb in his father's hands, ultimately victimized for his father's blind idealistic mission. The notion of "child" also carries the notion of "generation", and here Alf could be considered the symbol of the next generation of Brand.

Alf's disease occurs due to the cold weather at the bottom of the fjord. According to the doctor, this weather is what is fatal for Alf, and he sternly warns Brand to abandon the severe environment. Brand refuses, because he believes that Alf and any other person or thing are only hindrances to be sacrificed in the furtherance of his sacred object.

Brand comes down from the top of the mountain to the deep valley by the fjord like the one sent by God to carry out his sacred missions. Along the way, he expects

having to sacrifice people and things in order to accomplish God's command, from which not even his own son escapes. Alf has his own individual rights, which no one could violate. It is his right to stay alive, but his father sacrifices him for the mission. Through this play, various people and things are sacrificed, but Alf is the only one who does not have the free will to choose. His father, who fosters (the illusion of) sublime society, sacrifices the son for his own purposes. When Agnes worries about Alf's illness and impending death, she says, "We've one thing God daren't ask us give!" (Ibsen 2007:50). Brand replies contemplatively, "I've sacrificed my all, I have renounced my old life's call" (Ibsen 2007: 50).

Religion is one of the main strategies by which the authorities attain their power, an idea I find echoed in Ibsen. Brand identifies himself not only with the prophets, but also with God or at least some transcendental being. George Bernard Shaw asserts the same:

Brand acts as if he were the perfect Adam in a world where, by resolute rejection of all compromise with imperfection, it was immediately possible to change the rainbow "bridge between flesh and spirit" into as enduring structure as the tower of Babel was intended to be, thereby restoring man to the condition in which he walked with God in the garden [...] (Shaw 1979: 137).

In Brand's reply to the doctor who suggests leaving the place for little Alf's sake, he compares the matter to God and his Son. When the doctor exhorts, "Be humane!", he seems unfamiliar with the word:

Brand (*looks up*)

Humane! That word, yes — weak, perverse, the password of the universe! With that each weakling hides the fact he's neither nerve nor will to act; with that each worm conceals how he won't stake his **all** on victory; and so each coward's fickle vow is, in its name, soon broken now; — you puny spirits will persist till all mankind's one humanist! **Was God humane to Jesus Christ? Had your God been in charge then,** He would have declared for clemency beneath the Cross, — made sacrifice heaven's diplomatic-note device! (my emphasis) (Ibsen 2007: 57).

Then he adds, "The earth may quake, but I shall stay!" (Ibsen 2007: 58). To me, these statements put him in an equivocal existence. At first, he draws a parallel between himself and God, and places himself among the celestial. On the other hand, with this strict pronouncement, regardless of the consequence, he demonstrates his inhumanity in killing his innocent child, which makes him closer to the devil.

By applying this play to the situation in the Middle East and Arab world, the disasters of blind idealism are illuminated remarkably. The ardent religious beliefs of those like Brand are barriers to progress. In this respect, Sayyid Qutb, a Middle Eastern theorist of the "just society", is a proper example. Two things deserve mention when thinking about Qutb. The first is the spread of the "elite-government" theory in different

forms from the West to the rest of the world since the death of Socrates. The “elite-government” in the societies based on Qutb’s theory is named “Supreme Ayatollah-government”. Suprem-Ayatollah is at the highest rank of clerics who is taken for granted as the wisest one knowing the source of light. Qutb, whose birth coincided with Ibsen’s death, emphasizes man’s ignorance on the one hand and the presence of divine wisdom (*Qur’an*) on the other hand. Qutb’s divine wisdom is metaphorically a string that brings totality if human beings grasp it. To him, this is the only way of finding release from ignorance (*jahiliat*). According to him, “when the relationship of the belief is established, whether there be any relationship of blood or not, the Believers become like brothers [...] and man’s spirit soar[s] to higher horizons, freed from the bondage of flesh and blood and the pride of soil and country (Qutb 1978: 225, 232). The second fact emphasized the importance of Henrik Ibsen’s *Brand* in the current situation of the Middle-East and Arab world. It remains relevant today because of its intense examination of the notion of ordering the “just society”. This is not the “Spring” of such nations. The innocent children of such societies, like Alf in *Brand*, are condemned to live in a cold and loveless place, in the name of “All or nothing.” On the other hand, *Brand* is an example of those who, ironically speaking, bring the gift of the divine society.

Therefore, his name (which means *fire* in Ibsen’s Danish-Norwegian) might imply the purity of fire or the light of salvation to idealist readers. Moreover, he sacrifices others in the name of martyrdom in order to achieve his own targets. According to him, those who are not on the right side of him are on the wrong side of God, the idea which rests also on Muslim Brotherhood foundation. Sayyid Qutb’s believes,

If we look at the sources and the foundations of modern ways of living, it becomes clear that the whole world is steeped in *Jahiliyyah* [ignorance of divine guidance], and all the marvelous material comforts and high-level inventions do not diminish the ignorance. This *Jahiliyyah* is based on rebellion against God’s sovereignty on earth. It transfers to man one of the greatest attributes of God, namely sovereignty, and makes some men lords over others [...]. The result of this rebellion against the authority of God is the oppression of His creature. [...]. Only in the Islamic way of life do all men become free from the servitude of some men to others. (Qutb 1978:14-15)

To him, it is the responsibility of the Muslim brotherhood (the callers to Islam) to release human beings from the chains of ignorance:

This universal declaration of the freedom of man on the earth from every authority except that of God, and the declaration that sovereignty is God’s alone and that he is the Lord of the universe, is not merely a theoretical, philosophical and passive proclamation. It is a positive, practical and dynamic message [...]. This cannot be

¹ The word means ‘sign of God’

attained unless both “preaching” and “the movement” are used. This is so because appropriate means are needed to meet any and every practical situation. (Qutb 1978: 105)

This is an interesting juxtaposition with Brand. Metaphorically, he brands the “villains”, such as his mother, on the forehead, whereas he has himself the brand of villainous activities which to him signifies divine worship. His name, ultimately, represents him as destructive rather than constructive. Brand is an example of those who inject their harsh opinions into the public as the supposed leaders of a celestial society. Ibsen shows how the result of these functions is degeneration instead of regeneration.

Alf is a symbol of Brand’s next generation who is condemned to death by extremism and by the fanaticism of their forebears. It is clear that Brand aims to establish a celestial society, and to achieve his goal, he has this principle of “all or nothing,” sacrificing all he has in this path. The son’s illness and death are not justifiable on the grounds of divine will, but he is nevertheless killed because of his father’s beliefs.

Brand’s message is one of idealism, his mission the institution of a divine society, and he sacrifices not only himself, but also his family as a symbol of this society, to achieve his goal. As a result, he loses not only his wife and his mother, but also Alf, who represents a whole generation. In my view, therefore, this is not a play in which Ibsen loudly proclaims the “all or nothing” principle, but it is his admonition for the blind idealists not to sacrifice “all *for* nothing”. To Brand, fanaticism is idealism, an idea which Ibsen rejects. The theme of *The Wild Duck* is more or less the same. Gregers Werle is an extreme idealist who wants to infuse his ideals into the lives of Hjalmar and others, as Rotenberg notes: “Gregers might stand in place of inspired political and/or religious leaders; Hjalmar stands more in the place of the struggling masses” (Rotenberg 1996: 151).

George Bernard Shaw sees Brand and Peer Gynt (to whom I would add Gregers) as running along the same continuum: “Their castles in the air are more beautiful than castles of bricks and mortar; but one cannot live in them; and they seduce men into pretending that every hovel is such a castle, just as Peer Gynt pretended that the Trolld king’s den was a palace” (Shaw 1979: 137). To George Bernard Shaw, Ibsen’s plays “illustrate his thesis that the real slavery of today is slavery to ideals of goodness” (Bernard Shaw 1979: 194). In the preface to the third edition of *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1922), George Bernard Shaw highlights Ibsen’s anti-idealism, asserting that if the lessons of his plays had been better absorbed, the First World War, the war of ideals, could have been avoided:

Since the last edition of this book was printed, war, pestilence and famine have wrecked civilization and killed a number of people of whom the first batch is calculated as not less than fifteen millions. Had the gospel of Ibsen been understood and heeded, these fifteen millions might have been alive now; for the war was a war of ideals. Liberal ideals, Feudal ideals, National ideals, Dynastic ideals, Republican ideals, Church ideals, State ideals, and Class ideals, [...]. Men

with empty phrases in their mouths and foolish fables in their heads have seen each other, not as fellow-creatures, but as dragons and devils, and have slaughtered each other accordingly [...] even the iron-mouthed Ibsen, were he still alive, would perhaps spare us, disillusioned wretches as we are, the well-deserved "I told you so." (Shaw 1979: 97-98)

If the public were actually informed of the messages in Ibsen's plays, it would avoid falling into another trap of dictatorship. If I am putting words into Ibsen's mouth, it is because my studies of his plays lead me to assume what Ibsen would say about new dictatorships appearing from a revolution's installment of a new leader as its champion and hero. Therefore, the possibility of an ideal state is extremely fragile. Throughout history, tyrannical regimes have been established upon mottos of freedom and democracy. To Ibsen, the just society is the society in which the people live freely without being influenced by seemingly heroic leaders or institutions:

What Ibsen insists on is that there is no golden rule; that conduct must justify itself by its effect upon life and not by its conformity to any rule or ideal. And since life consists in the fulfillment of the will, which is constantly growing, and cannot be fulfilled today under the conditions which secured its fulfillment yesterday, he claims afresh the old Protestant right of private judgment in questions of conduct as against all institutions, the so-called Protestant Churches themselves included. (Shaw 1979: 201)

Ibsen was aware of society's dream promoters and knew that making dreams is a political strategy for those in power to reign over the masses. When these dreams are shattered by a newcomer with the promise of light of truth, tragedy ensues. The masses rise up automatically to run toward the promised light. The new power seekers who promise the ideal society based on light of truth, like Gregers, cause chaos in equal measure as enlightenment.

The new power seekers are not like the former dream makers who seek to rule the masses; their political ploy is to make a new illusion, that of friend and foe. Therefore, instead of the former dreams, the masses confront the new imaginary foes. This society is disorganized enough to prove the need for an organizer. Therefore, "The Second Coming" arrives to save the frightened masses from the dark domain with the promise of light.

The frightened masses rush toward the saviour promising enlightenment and the beautiful city. The society is dreadful enough to keep the inhabitants from pondering their environment or realizing the political ploys of those seeking power. Ibsen shows serious doubt about the newcomer's honesty: who can really guarantee that the newcomer is telling the truth? He is perhaps only the bearer of a new way of fooling the masses and the rest are "the wounded ducks." Is Jesus "the thirteenth at the table" who comes to heal "these wounded ducks?" Or is it the devil? Even though he meant the latter, he wants, through his suspicious stance, to provoke thought on the current

political situation.

Finally, as the stench of war continues to drift from corner to corner of the world, by way of warning, I would like to conclude this study with another quotation by George Bernard Shaw. My target, of course, is the current idealist power seekers:

Not that there is any sign of the lesson being taken to heart. Our reactions from Militarist idealism into Pacifist idealism will not put an end to war: they are only a practical form of the *reculer pour mieux sauter*². [...].The shallowness of the ideals of men ignorant of history is their destruction. (Shaw1979: 98)

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Biographical note

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Summary

It has been 112 years since the last play was written by Henrik Ibsen, and he still lives on through his works as a modern dramatist. His plays cannot be set aside; even in our time, they demand to be studied more than ever before. Ibsen has been studied and performed all around the world, especially in Asia, where he speaks to the political and social needs of that part of the world. The combination of current political circumstances, social inequalities, and human rights has given his plays a special urgency in Asia. However, even though Ibsen has seen a particular resurgence in Asia

² *Reculer pour mieux sauter*: to step back in order to have a better take-off.

and the Middle East, the terrible events of 22 July 2011 in Oslo and Utøya bear certain traces of Ibsen in his country of birth as well. A false hero, trumpeting himself as a true philosopher in a land in need of rescue, brings only chaos and destruction.

Ibsen is considered, from one side, as an idealist whose heroes are divine for rescuing the society from their life-lie. On the other side, he is as a deflator of heroism and a derider of blind idealism. To the former, in his hypothetical society, there is a triangular form at the apex of which a leader stands to lead the masses up from the base.

The question is raised here: how do Ibsen's plays enlighten the debate on the contemporary socio-political issues? By applying historical approach along with contextual methodology, this study answers the above question. The significance of conducting this study on Ibsen's plays is to know the response of his plays to the current political matters.

Keywords

Ibsen, Heroism, Idealism, Democracy, Socio-Political System, *The Wild Duck*, *Brand*.