

THE POLYIMAGE POETICS IN IBSEN'S LATE PLAYS

Wang Yuli

Nowadays, Ibsen's late plays carry weight in international Ibsen studies, and "the implicit poetic intention" seen in these plays is increasingly engaging the interest of academics (Wang Ning, 2004, 8). What are the original poetic thoughts implied in Ibsen's late plays? I believe the most unique and attractive of them lies in the following: there remains to be discovered, one or more holistic imagery realms, in addition to the holistic imagery realm perceived by most audiences in each of Ibsen's late plays. In other words, if Ibsen's play writing was compared to the activity of construction, each of his finished late plays would be like two or more buildings, rather than a single one. These buildings, one after another, create a peculiar landscape, and these consecutive images shape the imagery realm in depth. Both the landscape and imagery realm are always beyond one's understanding. Furthermore, the poetic thoughts hidden in Ibsen's late plays can be condensed into one term "polyimage poetics". After reading his speeches and letters, I feel that Ibsen might have semi-consciously created these aesthetic polyimages, which will be discussed from three aspects based on his late plays, speeches and letters.

I. Polyimage Drama: New Path Blazed by *the Wild Duck*

The Wild Duck, the first of Ibsen's late plays, was a crucial turning point in his dramatic career. On September 2nd, 1884, Ibsen wrote to his publisher Frederik Hegel, "In some ways this new play occupies a position by itself among my dramatic works, its plan and method differing in several respects from my former ones. I shall say no more on this subject at present. I hope that my critics will discover the points alluded to. At any rate, they will find several things to squabble about and several things to interpret. I also think that *The Wild Duck* may perhaps entice some of our young dramatists into new paths, which I think is desirable" (Ibsen, *Letters and Speeches*, 237). Just as Ibsen said, the play has aroused endless debate, and there is no agreement among scholars concerning what new paths were blazed by *The Wild Duck*.

I believe that Professor Knut Brynhildsvoll has an insightful view on this issue. He says, "*The Wild Duck* onwards is full of reflections about the essence of art and the role of the artist. This meta-textual level becomes more and more intrusive in the later dramas in which the art discourse is usually perceived as the poet's coming to terms with his own role as an artist."¹ But, how are these "reflections about the essence of art and the role of the artist" presented in a realistic and domestic story between a timber trade family and a photography business family? Professor Knut pursued his inquiries no further and so I believe that it is necessary to explore the artistic conceptions and artistic techniques of Ibsen in order to answer this question.

The artistic conception and creative techniques in *The Wild Duck* are truly different from that of its predecessors. The artistic techniques, such as coincidence, irony and elaboration, are employed to conceive a historical legend within Ibsen's early dramas, and discussion, contrast and retrospect are utilized in order to expose social problems in his middle dramas. By contrast *The Wild Duck*, as the first of his

late plays, opens up a new artistic path. The “new” indicates that Ibsen had no intention of telling a complicated story and proposing a social problem when starting to write; on the contrary, he was to write a play within a play by working with both directions of multiplicity, that is, expressing the inner anxiety and self-doubts of artists in the guise of realistic stories regarding the living predicament of ordinary people. To achieve this, he endowed the main characters, scenes, actions and plots with multiple symbolic significances, as well as transformations, which make plays with multiple imagery realms vary in the impression they give whenever angles are switched.

If *The Wild Duck* is interpreted literally, it is a story about the entanglement, conflict and tragic reconciliation among the timber trade manufacturers of Werle, Gregers Werle, and photography business boss Hialmar Ekadal. These characters' actions can be separated into several groups. First, there are some, who are like the short-sighted wild duck; greedy, cunning and advancing at the cost of others' lives who cannot escape the punishment of going blind. Next, we have others who are wounded wild ducks, diving to the bottom and never coming to the surface again. They are cowardly, self-deceitful and living in their illusion. Finally, with willful tempers and firm ideals, we have the ones that inquire of the truth and expose others' illusions, and as a result a family is ruined. These characters, along with the wounded wild duck, that dark garret, compose a secular and gloomy world without future. Some wild-duck-like characters, with the central image of the “wild duck”, form an imagery group. In this sense, the significance of the imagery group is that “The life-lie is the illusion which every person must cling to in order to attain a modicum of self-assurance. If you take away the life-lie from the average man, straight away you take away his happiness” (Clurman, 1977, 136). Or, as George Bernard Shaw said, “Ibsen set about the exposure of those of the choicer spirits, beginning with the incorrigible idealists who had idealized his very self” (Shaw, 1932, 75). However, if we shift perspectives and penetrate this play, we could see some “points alluded to” in those characters and in different layers of the play.

Gregers is a very special character in *The Wild Duck*. Ibsen once said, “Gregers is the most difficult character in the play, as far as acting is concerned” (Ibsen, *Letters and Speeches*, 242). His specialty and complexity reside in his “alienation” as Werle's son; he criticizes and intrudes on Hialmar's family life as a poetic stranger, whose metaphoric words fail to be understood. Ronald Grey once pointed out that “Gregers' words are ridiculous in that his manner of speaking is symbolic and his usage of words gives prominence to the symbols” (Ronald, 2001, 271). However, I believe this is technique of estrangement that Ibsen uses in order to make readers or audiences rethink the character and comprehend the implied image.

In my opinion, Gregers is more of a sort of artist than a madman with ridiculous words. He talks like a poet, with Hamlet's acute insight and Brand's stubbornness. He holds firmly to the truth and leads others to pursue their lofty ideals. Being a sober man who can see life clearly, he intends to bring the “sunshine of truth” to Hialmar's family and will help them start a new life on a new foundation. Meanwhile, he ruined a happy family when he revealed the truth that Gina once conceived Werle's child and then Werle transferred Gina to Hialmar. When facing truth involuntarily, humans are hard to believe. Lu Xun, an insightful and incisive

Chinese novelist, once said, “Suppose in an impregnable iron room without windows, many people, who are sleeping soundly, will smother to death. They will die in their sleep without fears and miseries towards their coming death. When your warning awakens several clear-headed persons and pushes these unlucky ones to suffer the distress on their deathbed, do you think you did good to them?” (Lu Xun, 2005, 441)? Lu Xun’s questioning over the role of the novelist and artist is in line with the meditation and self-doubt that Ibsen expressed in *The Wild Duck*. There exists in the world such artists who can take in all with their observant eyes. They can see decay from prosperity, rot from fresh, abyss from heaven and a thunderstorm from silence. However, it is hard to say whether this is beneficial to social life, and in what aspect it is positive when speaking out those cruel “facts” or “truths”.

Gregers belongs to the artists who swear to seek truth and “dares to face the miserable life”, while Doctor Relling is one of the artists who create life-illusion by using “hide and deceive” purposely. Relling is also an acute observer, and is aware that “most people are sick”. However, his prescription for saving patients is to conceal their real situation instead of searching for the primary cause of disease; his treatment is to cultivate “life-illusion or life-lie” rather than “claim of the ideal”. Despising Gregers, Relling regards him as a “quacksalver” who is hopelessly defeated after repeated treatments. On the contrary, Relling considers himself to be “magic doctor” with an “infallible” method. Praising himself to be “magic doctor”, he saves patients effectively out of humiliation and desperation and helps them live a happy life by plastering “genius” or “inventor”. This sort of doctor like Relling, could be possibly associated with “literati” criticized by Lu Xun, “By utilizing hide and deceive, they make a curious exile, which is regarded as the correct path to go in their mind.” (Lu Xun, 2005, 254) But, “the art full of hide and deceive” causes people to be “falling everyday”, like wild ducks diving into the poisonous marsh. For a long-term solution, Relling-like artists are short-sighted and they are also, with regard to their nature, the wild duck in the water-trough.

The Domino effect of Gregers and Relling’s transformation pushes Hialmar and Hedvig into new identities. As a photographer, Hialmar narrates to himself that “when I resolved to devote myself to photography, it wasn’t simply with the idea of taking likenesses of all sorts of commonplace people.” He believes that “an invention depends largely on inspiration and intuition”. Moreover, he said solemnly “I felt even then that the day when I held the patent in my hand— that day—would bring my—release”. Aren’t these words the sleep-talking of artists? Hialmar has no capability of invention except to “retouch photos” of his real life. Retouching photos and beautifying reality are the business of third-rate artists. Hialmar and Relling have something in common with nature, that is, both of them have a wild duck in them. Besides, they achieve nothing and live a life woven with “lies” and “illusions”. However, Hedvig, the wild-duck-mother who is the daughter of Werle, is similar to Gregers, but with more passion and self-sacrifice. Both of them share a tacit mutual understanding and cooperate through a tacit agreement, which accomplishes her mission of being a “Jesus-like artist”². She was born sympathetic to humans and animals, especially to those weakly being hurt, and she devotes her heart-felt love. She takes good care of the wounded wild duck and shows consideration for her parents in affliction. When they are sick, she will pray for them. To assure Hialmar

of true love, she sacrifices her dearest worldly treasure; her own life. The young artist achieves her own dignity and destiny with her “sorrow” and “dream”. However, can the sacrifice of Hedvig “set free what is noble in Hialmar”? Relling believes that the death of Hedvig does not mean anything beyond Hialmar’s short grief and self-pity. In an essay titled *Christ and Pig*, Xia Laidi argues that Jesus Christ was born to persuade the common people and redeem them from sin at the expense of his own sacrifice. Consequently, “he has no idea about how many times he had been crucified on the cross, and then resurged, and then sacrificed.”³ Even so, the world does not become much better.

With regard to this, what can artists do? Should they expose the truth of life, or make a plausible lie in order to beautify reality? To exercise love and goodness, shining on others with a glimmer in their souls, or fulfil other missions? Ibsen does not offer an immediate answer. At any rate *The Wild Duck* is not so simple, as George Bernard Shaw said, after exploring it in detail. In the play, Ibsen questioned the “claim of the ideal” imposed upon people by those idealists and disagreed with Relling’s cultivating dreamer. These are the superficial significances of the play. When we penetrate into some of the queer conducts of the characters, we find out that there are hidden images within artist groups and that it is “a play in play”, embracing “image beyond image”. The implied image under the surface concerns the essence of art and artists *per se* and other series of complicated problems. We can perceive from this that Ibsen reflected profoundly upon his early idealism of “awakening others and elevating others”, while also to some extent querying the essence of art and the role of artists. The problems relating to art proposed by Ibsen in the play are problems which could not be avoided by any serious composer or artist.

Based on the above explanation, the new path blazed by *The Wild Duck* was an artistic path of “polyimage drama” constructed with estrangement, metaphor, multiple and complicated symbols, and other techniques. The basic features of “polyimage drama” are the transformation and multiplicity of the main characters, that is, scenes of “implied images” under the surface image, for which a new dramatic imagery realm is constructed. In this kind of polyimage drama, there exists a “meta-drama” concerning art and artist by itself, in which soul-examining and art-examining of dramatists are contained⁴. Meta-drama belongs to meta-art. “Meta-art” is the art of including reflection upon art and the artist, on its own terms within the play, and thoughts regarding the essence of art, function of art, identity of artist. With the experiment in *The Wild Duck*, Ibsen further developed the exploration in his later creation.

II. The Polyimage Realm in Ibsen’s Late Plays

After *The Wild Duck*, most of Ibsen’s late plays are endowed with “polyimages”. *Rosmersholm* seemingly depicts the struggle between conservatives and radicals in a beach town in western Norway, while in actuality it could be regarded as a primary answer to the artistic problems proposed in *The Wild Duck*, which shows the development of the inner soul and the arduous exploration of artists. There is a similar ‘Gregers’ protagonist, Clergeman Rosmer, who “wanted to pass from house to house like a guest who brought emancipation with him — to win over men’s

thoughts and wills in a wider and wider circle”, but later he found himself guilty, and turned to self-judgment 5. *The Lady from the Sea* seemingly carries forward this train of thought and discusses about family and women’s problems, while in fact, the play could be seen as the hetero-dissection and mirror image of the artist 6. *The Master Builder* is on the surface “a play about daily life in which the creator must live and submit to a generational gap conflict and unhappy marriage” (Hemmer, 2007, 406), but in actuality it is an expressionist play showing the obscure and secret soul of artist 7. It is safe to say that the “self-examination of soul” and “self-examination of art”, like double helix through these works, making them assume “polyimage” and attribute of “meta-art” as well. In the following, I will use *John Gabriel Borkman* (hereafter, shortened to *Borkman*) as a typical example to analyse the polyimage realm in Ibsen’s late plays.

The deep imagery in *Borkman* is difficult to figure out. At first reading, the play is about “a swindler who is also an idiosyncratic man defends, deceives and whitewashes himself” (Northam, 2001, 271). From the realist aesthetic perspective, surely *Borkman* tells a story about Borkman, a transient celebrity as a managing director of a bank in the late period of the 19 century, who was thrown into jail and put himself on trial. After reading the play, these images, such as “old and gloomy Rentheim house”, “a sick wolf pacing his cage up there in the gallery” and “twilight with driving snow”, impresses the reader so much that they are immersed in chilly and forlorn air. These images, connecting with the image “gaol of soul” hidden in the play, touch our souls with profound humanity and philosophical significance, which words cannot express. This is the surface image world of *Borkman*.

After a closer reading between the lines and of the central image deep within the dramatic situation, *Borkman* is found to be a divine workmanship like a multi-storey building. In contrast to a story about a banker and swindler, *Borkman* expresses the soul of some artists in nature and the fantastic world of a dramatist. This fantastic world is an imagery realm including metaphors, symbols and puns, which also concern the essence, mechanism and limitation of artistic creation.

The protagonist Borkman is a key to unlock the depths of this imagery world. He says in Act Two, “I am a miner’s son. And my father used to sometimes to take me with him into the mines. The metal sings down there.” The line easily reminds the reader of *The Miner*, a poem written in 1851 by Ibsen—“On it goes then, blow on blow/ Till he drops from toiling so, / There’s no gleam of radiant morning, / No bright clarity, no dawning!” (Ibsen, *Selected Works* Vol.8, 7) Here “Miner” symbolizes “artist” and excavating a mine means “writing”. In some sense, the process of writing is the process of excavating the dark kingdom of the human soul. The light of ideals in the mind of the artist breaks through the darkest and most secret quarter of the human soul 8. Their objects of exploration are like the ore buried deep in the earth, and as Borkman said, “She is hard, I tell you. Hard as the metal I once dreamed of hewing out of the rock.” That the “treasures” of darkness are dug out into the daylight is the process of an artist’s self-exploration and self-reflection, and that process emancipates people’s spirits and serves mankind. Paul Johnson once described the nature of Ibsen’s career, “The searchlight of his hatred moved systematically over all aspects of human societies, pausing from time to time, almost lovingly, on some idea or institution which evoked his particular loathing.” (Johnson,

98) Zweiget had a more vivid description, “They (artists) dig millions of rocks, just like Michelangelo with anger and fury. In the darkest mine of life, they bump in a frenzy of excitement against the glimmering rocks they once touched in their dream.” (Zweig, 2004, 136) Shakespeare is a model among the artists of the sort, whose works are so good as to be praised highly by scholars all over the world. In the poem written in 1855, Ibsen said, “Without bless of night, I'll lose my wit. If I could achieve something, due to the gift of night” (Ibsen, *Selected Works* Vol.8, 15). However, the souls of “miners” might be impacted gradually by the career of excavating into the heart of darkness for years.

As a laborious artist with creative talents, Borkman seems to have “great ability”. He believes that “I could have created millions! All the mines I should have controlled! New veins innumerable! And the waterfalls! And the quarries! And the trade routes, and the steamship lines all the wide world over!” As the head of the “world of poetry”, Borkman thinks himself to be an exceptional man. He often becomes intoxicated with his own great plan, even to the manic extent, “I had power in my hands! And then I felt the irresistible vocation within me! The prisoned millions lay all over the country, deep in the bowels of the earth, calling aloud to me! They shrieked to me to free them! But no one else heard their cry — I alone had ears for it.” These words proclaim the strong desire for creation and eagerness to excavate and express. On this Bjørn Hemmer comments, “The desirable impulse for creation—that is the impulse of possessing those not yet to hand, which are dreamt and yearned by every people with talents. The talents of sort are in line with gifts of poets and artists since they create unprecedented works” (Hemmer, 2007, 512). What dwells in the gifts are the very soul of artist, which is a weary mixture of “ice and fire”.

The more Borkman vehemently determines to achieve his great projects, the more coldly he treats his families and lovers. To attain enough money to sustain and develop his career, he deserts his dearest girlfriend Ella, and marries wealthy Gunhild. When Ella asks him why, he argues with eloquence that “the great aims I had in life helped me to bear even that. I wanted to have at my command all the sources of power in this country. All the wealth that lay hidden in the soil, and the rocks, and the forests, and the sea — I wanted to gather it all into my hands to make myself master of it all, and so to promote the well-being of many, many thousands”. The eloquence seems to be “lofty and tragic”, which precisely implies the thinking of artists. In letter of March 8, 1882, Ibsen wrote to Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, “In order to work with full force and undivided attention in the cause of spiritual emancipation, one must have a certain degree of economic independence.” (Ibsen, *Letters and Speeches*, 205) which can be paraphrased to be “To serve for the well-being of millions, artists, first of all, must have a substantial amount of money”. This is also the logic of Borkman.

Being the managing director of the bank, Borkman thinks he is nearer to his aims, and he boldly appropriates others' accounts and securities worth several million—which might be the metaphor of artists; they who will absorb others' energy and destroy others' happiness in order to achieve their career. Then comes the fall. As Ibsen said, “I see everything in my mind. In the battle of my mind, I fail at the verge of victory”. Borkman suffers failure at the nearest aim—he is taken

captive. In contrast with Solness, who climbs up the summit and falls down to death, Borkman is given 16 years to judge repeatedly his own motives and experiences — also the soul and fate of an artist. He is his own judge. This undoubtedly is a profound and suspenseful trial without precedent.

What on earth is the difficult problem that Borkman tackles? The crux of it includes two aspects: Is it illegal for ambitious creators to fulfil their great ideals at the cost of others' rights? What is the significance of artists' laborious excavation in the dark kingdom of human soul? Borkman thinks "those buried treasures in the darkness" are dug out to "brighten and warm the souls of millions", which is of the highest and ultimate value in his career. Everything done for this goal is reasonable. But, is it really reasonable? Borkman asks himself this question time and time again, and Ibsen also questioned and reflected on it repeatedly.

After self-judging for many years, Borkman believes that it is best to excavate the treasures buried in the darkness. Before dying, facing the rolling mountain chains he said "I will whisper it to you here in the stillness of the night: I love you, as you lie there spellbound in the deeps and the darkness! I love you, unborn treasures, yearning for the light!" Just like Paul Johnson said, artists show special preference to those "buried treasures in darkness". Those numerous veins of ores and boundless kingdoms are the objects to be exploited by the artists. Those "buried treasures in darkness" will be discovered as unique as human souls, or symbols indicating and broadening the soul map of self-reflection.

Ibsen, who knew the complexity of it very well, could not neglect another aspect of the problem. The voice of Ella—another side of Ibsen's soul of art—echoes in his heart. Ella spoke severely to Borkman, "You deserted the woman you loved! Me, me, me! What you held dearest in the world you were ready to barter away for gain. That is the double murder you have committed! The murder of your own soul and of mine!" The accusation was surely one with which Ibsen identified from the innermost part of the heart, but it was difficult to face. On the surface, Ella condemns Borkman's climbing up to the top of power and money at the cost of sacrificing love; but while in the depths, Ibsen as an artist cannot but feel: To achieve the glory of art, artists desert their lovers and excavate into the dark kingdom. This will harm his own soul and the soul of his lover as well. On September 23, 1884, Ibsen wrote to Karoline Bjørnson, "I'm afraid that I've busied myself for such a long time now with the drama, in which the author must to a certain degree drown and kill his own personality, or at least hide it, that I have probably lost much of what I value highest in a letter writer" (Ibsen, *Letters and Speeches*, 239). This could be taken as confession that the artist felt his soul was hurt. Writing to Jonas Collin, on July 31, 1895, Ibsen said, "There is, of course, a certain satisfaction in becoming so famous in one country after another. But it gives me no sense of happiness. What is it all worth—really? Well--!?" (Ibsen, *Letters and Speeches*, 320). This letter disclosed Ibsen's state of misery. True happiness must be based on the happiness given to others; it is impossible to enjoy happiness if you could not offer happiness to others (or hurt the soul of a lover). In this sense, Ibsen might deeply understand the term "double murder" proposed by Ella.

At the end of the play, Ibsen made Ella pronounce the final verdict to Borkman, "John Gabriel Borkman — you will never touch the price you demanded

for the murder. You will never enter in triumph into your cold, dark kingdom!". Then, Borkman feels a hand of ice that clutches at his heart, and falls dead on the ground with a shriek. Errol Durbach criticizes the ending, "Avoiding glib extremes of hope and despair, Ibsen ends this coldest of plays with gestures of minimal compassion" (Durbach, 1982, 68). Contrarily, Harold Clurman believes, "Whether induced by the pursuit of holiness, artistic perfection or intellectual eminence, the coldness of the heart kills. In this assertion and confession Ibsen pronounces his deepest conviction" (Clurman, 1977, 189). The former of the two criticisms concerns the surface meaning of the play; the latter almost touches the depth of the imagery world. However, "Ibsen's deepest conviction" is the shadow of "double murder" permeating in his heart, instead of his examining "coldness of the heart". Therefore, in the deep imagery realm of *Borkman*, there the serious sense of sin and the sense of confession pervades all, which reflect the brilliance and the depth of the play. In short, in the deep and secret world, there exists a dark world illuminated by the ray of heaven, and an imagery realm properly constructed from the art.

III. Polyimage Poetics and Opening-up of Modern New Artistic Realm

From the analysis above, the imagery realm of Ibsen's late dramas is double or even multiple, and the imagery realm implied mostly concerns art *per se*, and the artist and their creation, which constitute Ibsen's polyimage realm. With further exploration, we can understand the poetic wisdom and craftsmanship of Ibsen's polyimage drama, and the artistic ideas behind the polyimage drama. Thus, the implication of "polyimage poetics" could be extracted and summarized.

First, the polyimage drama in Ibsen's later period is constructed with the situation full of tension, personalised with implied identity, symbolic scenes, dialogues with puns, complex structure and other techniques such as estrangement and metaphor. The attribute of "polyimage" and "meta-art" are also on account of the unique dramatic way of thinking and ideas of art specialized by Ibsen.

Second, Ibsen's conception of art is related to polyimage drama. Ibsen once said, "My plays aim at making the reader or the spectator feel that during the reading or performance he is actually experiencing a piece of real life" (Ibsen, *Letters and Speeches*, 211). Even in his senior years, he still held to "The effect of the play depends a great deal on making the spectator feel as if he were actually sitting, listening and looking at events happening in real life" (Ibsen, *Letters and Speeches*, 222). It is with this conception that Ibsen attached importance in imposing "realism" on audiences, and not on playing "tricks" of deliberated suspense and uncertainty just for fun. This gives Ibsen's late dramas the colour of realism, but Ibsen did not dwell here. He was born to see the deeper implied images below the surface. If a little girl stands in front of him, he would believe "in an enigmatical princess who hides behind the serene features"; if the girl wears pearls, he would believe "There is something deeper, something hidden in her love of pears" (Ibsen, *Letters and Speeches*, 286). His thinking preference helps him transplant one personage into another, creating these double or multiple images. He did set every prop and every scene carefully and endowed them with implied meaning, which construct different imagery realm along with other images. Moreover, Ibsen knew that "Every reader remoulds the work beautifully and neatly, each according to his own personality. Not

only those who write but also those who read are poets. They are collaborators” (Ibsen, *Letters and Speeches*, 337). Therefore, Ibsen tended to give some uncertainty to personage and plot, or leave a blank in some places, aiming to construct a boundless imaginary space and a re-writing space. All in all, the dramatic way of thinking and wisdom of art in Ibsen’s late dramas are responsible for the deep imagery of his works, which is like “a vein of silver throughout the whole works” (Ibsen, *Selected Works* Vol.8, 190) as well as the dramatic use of language.

Third, Ibsen’s idea that “Writing is to self-judge” was exercised in his late dramas, which can further explain why Ibsen’s late plays have the attribute of polyimage and “meta-art”. On June 16, 1880, Ibsen wrote to Ludwig Passarge, “In every new poem or play I have aimed at my own spiritual emancipation and purification—for no man can escape the responsibilities and the guilts of the society to which he belongs. Hence I once wrote the following lines by way of a dedication in a copy of one of my books: Living is a war with the trolls in the depths of the mind and heart; writing means summoning oneself to court and playing the judge’s part” (Ibsen, *Letters and Speeches*, 187). Such an idea is quite different from the imitation theory of drama known since ancient Greece, and also different from expressionist drama theory pervading Northern Europe at that time. With the impact of the artistic idea, Ibsen turned his self-examination of soul in the early phase into the “double examinations” in the later period, that is, examining not only his own soul, but also art itself. It is the “double examinations” that contribute to “profundity of soul” in Ibsen’s late dramas, and makes a deep inquiry into the mystery of artistic creation, essence and function of art, identity and role of artist, and other problems deep inside the realm of “meta-art”. Undoubtedly, this is an important innovation in European drama history due to its broadening the artistic realm of expression and reflection.

In European drama history, dramatists tend to take gods, heroes, social life, characters, humanity and fate, cosmic order, ethics and religion problems as their objects. However, few dramatists regard the soul of the artist, creative activities and value of art as their objects to be depicted, inquired and reflected upon. Shakespeare did a small study of the problem in *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*, which are considered to include thinking upon art. Ibsen however, made a further inquiry and his reflection and expression are above that of Shakespeare in profundity. Moreover, in his artistic reflection, Ibsen did not discuss “what is art” directly, but concealed the problem into a well-constructed imagery realm. The imagery realm, growing and changing, constantly transforms itself into another rich and deep imagery realm with the development of the story. It is safe to say that this is a new artistic realm with modernity due to its extension of the ancient and modern western art realm 9.

In *Art Realm*, a work of aesthetics by Zong Baihua, we read that “Art realm is not a perfect reproduction on a single layer, but a realm with many layers. It falls into three layers: imitation of outlook of reality, manifestation of life rhythm and revelation of ultimate spirit” (Zong Baihua, 1999, 144). Because the ultimate spirit is mainly “Zen realm” for Zong Baihua, his art realm with three layers is still the classical art realm. However, Ibsen returned to art *per se*, and to the inner soul of art, indicating an art realm where art mirrors itself, which also presents strong modernity. Ibsen’s art realm is original and unique in the history of art on the account of its

divergence from classical and modern art realm.¹⁰

The polyimage poetics in Ibsen's late dramas has its own unique connotation of modernity and is an illumination for modern artistic creation, in contrast with the polyphony in Dostoevsky's novels. Theoretically, "polyimage" is more artistic than "polyphony", or has more ontological significance in artistic aesthetics. "Polyphony" deals with dialogues with varied contents, and contents are not the essence of art; while "polyimage" involves form as well as the imagery realm detached from superficial secular life, which is the essence of art. If "implicit imagery is the existence of art essence" (Zou Yuanjiang), imagery in Ibsen's late dramas is indeed implicit. Actually, "polyimage" with much artistic charm is more attractive than the "polyphony" in his early dramas. Further, polyimage poetics in Ibsen's late dramas is imbued with modernity because it includes the dimension of art per se, and realizes self-examination of art in art autonomy. Moreover, polyimage poetics impose great impact on many artists of the 20th century, such as, Chekhov, Pirandello, Joyce, O'Neill, Samuel Beckett and others, who perhaps don't have the concept of polyimage poetics, but carry on the pedigree of polyimage and offered much works characterized with polyimage and attribute of "meta-art"¹¹. In the current Chinese literati field, some writers as Can Xue¹², still make an effort to create the work of art full of polyimage and "meta-art". Hence, it is safe to say that the polyimage poetics in Ibsen's late plays have impacted modern artistic creation, and are instructive to current artist creation.

Notes

1. Brynhildsvoll, Knut. *The Roots of Modernity: Aspects of Henrik Ibsen's Dramatic Work*. The speech was delivered by Prof. Knut in Central Academy of Drama, Beijing in 2007 and I attended the lecture.
2. "Jesus-like artist" is the artist who agrees with Jesus Christ in life faith and exercises great love in his real life and artistic creation, even awakening others at the expense of his own suffering and sacrifice. The artist of the sort is similar to those that Norwegian poet Henrik Wergeland depicts, "They are not able to extricate themselves out of the abyss of misery, whatever by means of justice or crime. They stretch their arms to snatch the goal, fascinating but instantaneous." See *Ibsen-Kunstnerens Vei* written by Bjørn Hemmer, p.402.
3. "Jesus Christ and Pig" is quoted from the essay "The 'Indigenous' Jesus Christ" written by Zhu Yuhong. *Lu Xun Research Monthly* 11(Beijing 2007), 31-39
4. There are similarities and differences between "self-examination of soul" and "self-examination of art". The former puts emphasis on examining the artist's own soul and excavating the depth of humanity in order to understand human beings well; while, the latter lays stress on examining the identity of artist, artistic activities, work of art, and rethinking the essence of art, function of art, so as to promote the understanding towards art.
5. See Yuli, Wang. "Rosmersholm: Galloping White Horses and Mid-night Sun—Also on the Exploration of the Essence and Potential of the Dramatic Art". in: *Hundred Schools in Art* 102 (Nanjing 2008), 162-168.
6. ——. "The Lady from the Sea: Hetero-dissection and Mirror Image of the Artist". in *Forum of Arts* 66 (Fuzhou 2011), 22-27. Hetero-dissection means an

- approach in which the artist examines himself in the opposite sex.
7. ——. “*The Master Builder: Self-examination of Artist and Inquiry of God*”. In: *Aesthetics and Art Studies* 2(Wuhan 2010), 345-359.
 8. Ibsen once said, “Glimpses from my spirit’s depths break through the dead of night, flash like a stroke of lightning.” See Harold Clurman, *Ibsen*. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1977, 27.
 9. “Art realm”, also “artistic realm”, includes “artistic mood”. Professor Ye Lang proclaims that “Artistic mood is a kind of type with metaphorical taste in imagery.... There is artistic mood in the Western work of art.” See Ye’s “On Artistic Mood”, in *Literature and Art Studies*, 1(1998). This is the premise of discussing imagery and artistic mood in Ibsen’s late drama.
 10. “Polyimage” in Ibsen’s late plays, is different from “image beyond image” in ancient Chinese opera and painting, though both of them have something in common. The main divergence are: “polyimage” has attribute of “meta-art” due to “polyimage” involves certain cosmic idea, and art itself and the secret of artistic creation; Contrarily, no attribute of “meta-art” is in “image beyond image” of ancient Chinese opera and painting. Besides, “polyimage” in Ibsen’s late plays is similar to “double and multiple images” in the paintings of Salvador Dali, Spanish artist, but Dali’s result from “paranoiac-critical activity”, tending to “apply the erotic metaphor to the external world”, even “indulging in facial visual trickery”, which is far less profound in art realm than Ibsen’s. See Finkelstein Haim, *Salvador Dalí: Double and Multiple Images*, American Imago, winter 1983, No.4, P.311.12.
 11. I will devote another essay to discuss the problem. However, I will mention just one point here. The following dramatic works are influenced by the Ibsen’s polyimage poetics and his late plays: Chekhov’s *The Seagull* and *Uncle Vanya*, Luigi Pirandello’s *Henry IV* and *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and *A Portrait of the Artist as Young Man*, Eugene O’Neill’s *A Touch of the Poet* and *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* and others.
 12. Can Xue (1953—), a Chinese female writer, has published numerous novels and some books of commentary on Shakespeare, Dante, Goethe, Italo Calvino, and Bruno Schulz. She claims that all of her works are from the experiments in which she takes herself as the subject. She is regarded as one of the most experimental writers in the world by some literary scholars and readers. Susan Sontag once said, “If China has one possibility of a Nobel laureate, it is Can Xue.”

Works Cited

1. Bernard Shaw, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*. London: Constable and Company Limited 1932.
2. Bjørn Hemmer, *Ibsen-Kunstnerens Vei*. Trans. Shi Qin’e, Beijing: The Commercial Press 2007.
3. Errol Durbach, *Ibsen the Romantic*. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd. 1982.
4. Harold Clurman, *Ibsen*. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd. 1977.
5. Henrik Ibsen, *Letters and Speeches*, edited by Evert Sprinchorn, Clinton: The

- Colonial Press Inc. 1964.
6. ——. *The Selected Works of Henrik Ibsen.vol.8*. Trans. Pan Jiaxun *et al.* Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House 1995.
 7. Paul Johnson, *Intellectuals*. Weidenfeld: Harper Collins 1988.
 8. Ronald Grey, "Reinterpretation of *The Wild Duck*". in: *Ibsen and Modernity: the West and China*. Ed.Wang Ning. Tianjin: Baihua Literature and Art Publishing House 2001.
 9. Stefan Zweig, *Architect of the World*. Trans. Gao Zhongfu *et al.* Beijing: Beijing Yanshan Press 2004.
 10. Wang Ning, *Ibsen and China: Constructing Aesthetics*. Ed. Tianjin: Tianjin People's Press 2004.
 11. Zong Baihua, *Art Realm*. Beijing: Peking University Press 1999.
 12. Zou Yuanjiang, "The Limitation of Drama Ontological commitment". In: *Drama* 110 (Beijing 2003), 20-26.

Biographical note

Wang Yuli, Ph.D., is associate professor at Art Department of Wuhan University (Wuhan 430072, China). His major academic interests are Ibsen's plays, modern drama and Art Aesthetics. Email: sealight9999@126.com

Abstract

The unique poetics of polyimage implied in Ibsen's late plays can be excavated with aesthetic reading. The term polyimage is coined to describe Ibsen's original design in aesthetic form and ingenious realm in aesthetic reaction in his late plays; that is, beyond an imagery realm, another imagery realm exists, which construct a deep vision of significance. In each of the excellent late plays, what Ibsen creates is one or more veiled holistic imagery realms in addition to an ordinary entire imagery realm perceived by most audiences. The "layers of imagery realm" result from Ibsen's "double self-examinations", including self-examination of soul and of art. It is these "double self-examinations" that make polyimage possible in his late plays and generates the attribute of "meta-art" in these works. Compared with polyphony in Dostoevsky's novels, the polyimage in Ibsen's late plays contains a unique modernity, which is of great significance to modern artistic creation.

Keywords

Ibsen; polyimage poetics; double self-examinations; meta-art