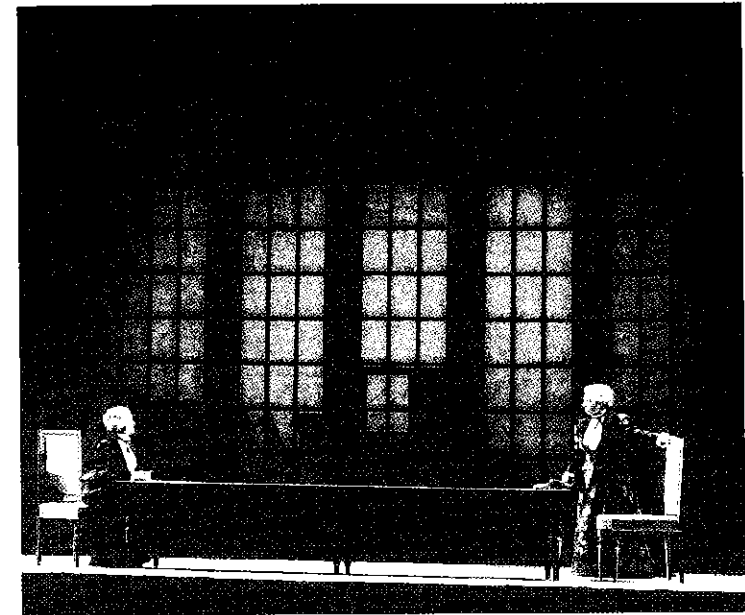


Centre for Northern Performing Arts Studies
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Ibsenian Lessons

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Università degli Studi
di Torino

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Centro Studi per lo Spettacolo Nordico
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Ibsenian Lessons

A Festschrift for Roberto Alonge

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Front Page Illustration:
H. Ibsen, *John Gabriel Borkman* directed by Massimo Castri
Teatro Stabile di Torino, 2002
(photo by M. Norberth)

Yet, here, the new technique is not a metaphor: it is a *symbol*. It does not hint at a common «naturalistic» reproduction of reality, but at the desire to display the *negative* of the existent. What hides «in the mother's womb», that is, the alterity which, even though sunk into the innermost part of the man who has produced it, denies the individual in itself. Like a secret dream, this *other* image returns the negative of an experience, the negative of a society: it can be developed and expressed in positive indications, but in the meantime it will have to establish the foundation of the new process of artistic penetration into reality.

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Massimo Ciarravolo

Prison and Madhouse: Ibsen's Critical Images of Modernity as Developed in *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*

Brand (1866) and *Peer Gynt* (1867) have been read as the starting point of a modern dramatic work which makes its author a «diagnostician to an entire civilization»¹. In terms of technique, however, they were written before Ibsen decided to become a «photographer» of his contemporaries (letter to Bjørnson, 9th December 1867), caught inside the bourgeois parlour. Lou Andreas-Salomé, in one of the most sensitive books written on Ibsen's modern characters, discusses whether and how it is possible for them to pursue freedom, self-realization and authenticity in a home environment which rather resembles a cage. The recurring image she chooses as a kind of leitmotif is the Ekdal loft (*Bodenkammer*) in *The Wild Duck*.

In spite of their being set in wide, natural spaces, also *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* convey images of imprisonment. The aim of this essay is to analyse and try to interpret some passages in Act IV of *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, connected with such images. What do they add to the discussion of the purpose and direction of modern life, which is an evident polemic trait in both dramatic poems? And what can they mean with respect to both title characters' existential quest, that is to say, to the text of each play as a whole? Can we use these images of imprisonment, deviation and madness to find another, if minor link between *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*? Can we read them for example in contrast, in a relationship of question/answer, as *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* – as *wholes* – have often been read²?

¹ See R. Fjelde, *Introduction*, in AA. VV., *Ibsen. A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by R. Fjelde, Englewood Cliffs (N.J.), 1965, pp. 1-10. The quoted expression refers in particular to *Emperor and Galilean*.

² E. Bentley, *Henrik Ibsen: A Personal Statement*, in *Ibsen. A Collection cit.*, p. 17: «To write both *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* is not just twice the job of writing

The way *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* reflect the experience of modernity is shown at a first level by the structural relation between dramatic action and time. Ibsen often uses his typical retrospective technique here, though not as comprehensively as in his later bourgeois plays. Action covers five and a half years in *Brand*, and takes place in contemporary Norway from beginning to end, whereas *Peer Gynt* is a long life's story, starting at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the title character is twenty, and reaching contemporaneity by Act V. In a sense retrospection in *Brand* reaches back to the beginning of Christianity, to the example of Jesus himself, whom the priest Brand wants to imitate. And from the very start we are told by the Peasant that Brand's Christian faith is outdated and does not fit «nowadays». Just as we learn to see the priest's heroic stature, an ironic and ambivalent light is shed upon him. It is therefore not so irrelevant that the character is a priest – as Ibsen maintained in a letter to Georg Brandes (26th June 1869) – since Brand, like Søren Kierkegaard some decades earlier, embodies the loneliness of religious faith in a modern world that no longer seems to need God's point of view to be interpreted³. As far as *Peer Gynt* is concerned, the long gap of some decades between Acts III and IV contains both the character's «maturity» from youth to adult life, and the breakthrough of modern civilization, with a shift from community life in the Norwegian countryside to the big business of world trade. Peer's progress has, therefore, both individual and social implications. His «onion identity» revealed in Act V, with many layers and no centre, serves of course also as a typical Ibsenian retrospection, but it is mainly the most emblematic rendering of the condition of a bewildered modern mankind.

The scenes that I would like to highlight are set in satirical contexts. In general we can say that the satirical scenes in *Brand* and

one of the two; it is to force the reader to read the plays as thesis and antithesis in an artist's effort at synthesis».

³ About «the meaning of God's death» in Ibsen's plays see E. Durbach, *Ibsen the Romantic. Analogues of Paradise in the Later Plays*, London-Basingstoke, 1982, which contains some penetrating analyses of *Brand*: pp. 9-13, 17-18, 81-87. An opposite, idealistic interpretation is given by Bjørn Hemmer, *Brand, Kongs-emnerne, Peer Gynt. En studie i Ibsens romantiske diktning*, Oslo-Bergen-Tromsø, 1972. According to Hemmer, Brand is a thoroughly positive hero of faith without any ambiguities.

Peer Gynt are structurally parallel, as they allow a widening of the scope of the plays, from the two characters' individual quest to a more detailed depiction of the modern times they live in. By doing so, these scenes connect and interweave the existential and the social, man and his world. An older and more traditional critical approach tended to neglect the satirical elements, or even judge them negatively, as if Ibsen's social concern were additional to the core of the text, and ultimately inessential. We can even say that two main authorities, Ibsen himself and Georg Brandes, have justified such an approach. Ibsen wrote to his publisher Hegel that *Peer Gynt* should be read as «poetry», and that the satirical parts in it were rather isolated⁴. Furthermore, the dramatist suggested in a letter to Edvard Grieg that the first stage production of *Peer Gynt* (1876) should skip the whole of Act IV⁵, where satirical elements abound. Finally, Brandes maintained in his first essay on Ibsen that the long dialogues between Brand and the Mayor (in Acts IV and V), and all Act IV in *Peer Gynt* were out of place⁶. In their excellent survey of the stage reception of *Peer Gynt*, however, Fredrick J. Marker and Lise-Lone Marker show how the more disquieting dimensions of the text, with all its irony, satire, cruelty and even socio-political elements, were gradually exploited in the productions of more recent decades, from the Fifties onwards⁷. And even literary critics have eventually moved to a more proper understanding of the Ibsenian satire in *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*. We have indeed to assume that both dramatic poems, in spite of their multiple layers

⁴ Letter of 2nd February 1868, not included in the letter volumes of HU, quoted from H. Ibsen, *Vita dalle lettere*, edited by F. Perrelli, Milano, 1995, p. 51.

⁵ HU, XVII, pp. 124-125. Letter from Dresden, 23rd January 1874. Francis Bull, editor of *Peer Gynt* for the HU, points out that the director Josephson did not agree to excluding all Act IV and proposed more selective cuts, which Ibsen accepted. See HU, VI:1, p. 50.

⁶ G. Brandes, *Henrik Ibsen (1898)*, in *Samlede skrifter*, III, Kjøbenhavn, 1900, p. 259 and pp. 270-271. This text gathers three different «impressions» – three essays written at different stages, in 1867, 1882 and 1898, dealing with Ibsen's development as much as with the critic's. The quoted passages belong to his *First Impression*.

⁷ F. J. Marker-L.-L. Marker, «In the hall of the Mountain King: *Peer Gynt*», in *Ibsen's Lively Art. A Performance Study of the Mayor Plays*, Cambridge 1989, pp. 9-45.

and complex meanings, were the result of consistent projects by their author, and, as Asbjørn Aarseth underlines in his study on *Peer Gynt*, we must face the task of interpretation coping with the problem of how to relate the parts (all parts) and the whole to one another⁸.

Talking to Brand in Act IV, the Mayor (*Fogden*) proposes a plan for a new public building, which should include both punishing and democratic functions under the same roof: an apparently bizarre combination of poorhouse, jail and madhouse on the one hand, and election room, feast and meeting hall on the other. In fact this project will never come true, since Brand intends to erect a new church instead, and the Mayor has to resign himself to the will of the parish priest, now a stronger man than he.

Before analysing the chosen passage, it is worthwhile recollecting what we know about the Mayor by this time. He is the progressive opportunist, the one who has an administrative role within the young democratic institutions of Norway, and uses it instrumentally, only to consolidate his personal power and prestige. Ibsen treats him with biting irony, and as a dramatist he cannot but express his comment through the Mayor's actions and his both superficial and sly speech. At the beginning of Act II the Mayor appears for the first time, engaged in an aid action, delivering food to the poor hit by famine, and, at the same time, uttering cheerful and cynical comments on the others' desperate situation. What is interesting here from an ethical point of view, is that Brand's heroic and merciless Christian faith, with its tone of permanent judgement, appears in this same situation at least as inhuman as the futile Mayor's words: Brand, in fact, refuses to help, because in his opinion people should welcome famine as an instrument through which God makes himself felt on earth⁹. Briefly afterwards, however,

⁸ A. Aarseth, *Dyret i Mennesket. Et bidrag til tolkning av Henrik Ibsens Peer Gynt*, Bergen-Oslo-Tromsø, 1975. See in particular pp. 3-30, and, for the aspect of satire as «part of a whole», pp. 108; 125; 219 and p. 245 (note 231).

⁹ See H. Kringelbotn Sødal, *Henrik Ibsens Brand – illustrasjon på en teleologisk suspensjon av det etiske?*, in «Edda», 1999:1, pp. 63-70, who argues convincingly that Brand's position and dilemma can certainly be related to Kierkegaard's ideas, but rather to *Frygt og Bæven* – with its «teleological suspension of the ethical» – than to *Enten-Eller*, as most critics have traditionally maintained. On this aspect see also E. Durbach, «Ibsen the Romantic» cit., pp. 81-87.

a poor woman calls for help to rescue her husband on the other side of the fjord (it is by the way another tragedy caused by famine and despair); and now Brand is the one ready to sacrifice himself, whereas the Mayor avoids a risky involvement by asserting that the man in danger «does not belong to his district». The first long and important confrontation between Brand and the Mayor takes place in the central part of Act III. The Mayor's suggestion is that Brand, now grown rich after inheriting from his mother, should leave the parish. As a matter of fact, the Mayor would like to rid himself of his uncomfortable rival, who wants to awaken the faith and critical conscience of the individuals. The Mayor's opposite strategy is to reassure and spread consensus, for example through the self-complacent rhetoric about the past greatness of medieval Norway and the magnificence of contemporary material progress. While Brand imagines bridges between life and faith, action and idea, the Mayor can only approve of new bridges over the fjords. The distortion and instrumental use of democratic principles are well expressed by the Mayor's final remark in the dispute with Brand: if the *best* men are with Brand, well, he himself has in any case got the *most*.

The Mayor reappears in Act IV, when Brand has even won «the most» through his charisma. Now the Mayor seeks an alliance – in order, of course, to be re-elected¹⁰. And as a veritable social architect of Modern Democratic Norway, he goes to Brand to propose a new building against poverty and crime. The enthusiasm with which he describes his «progressive» architectural vision reveals the author's satirical intentions:

Afhjælper skal et dybtfølt Savn,
idet jeg til Distriktets Gavn

¹⁰ «[...] det lakker stærkt mod Thingvalgstiden; / thi maa till noget stort jeg ty / og bringe Foretag paa Bane, / saa jeg blir Kurvens første Hane / og hindrer Valget af en ny» (HU, V, p. 276). This passage implies a problem of interpretation and translation, because *Fogden* declares that he wants to be re-elected, where *foged* was not an elective office in nineteenth-century Norway. *Foged* corresponds rather to «bailiff» in English, and from a logical point of view it is likely that *Fogden* was the local bailiff and, as well as this, a deputy at the national parliament, the *Storting*. His being voted might have caused the misunderstanding in the English translation «Mayor». I will nonetheless continue to use this name, which is traditionally used in the English sources.

faar byggt et Armodsdømmens Pesthus;
 ja, Pesthus siger jeg, fordi
 det skal for Brødens Smitte fri.
 Og denne Bygning, har jeg tænkt,
 forbindes nemt med et Arresthus,
 saa Virkning blir med Aarsag stængt
 bag samme Bom og samme Laas,
 med Vægg kun mellem Baas og Baas.
 Og da jeg engang er paa Gled,
 saa er min Agt at bygge med
 en Fløj indunder samme Tag,
 som bruges kan till Valg og Lag,
 till Alvorshandling som till Fester,
 med Talerstol og Rum till Gjæster, –
 kort sagt, et pent politisk Festhus¹¹.

The Mayor adds that a madhouse (*Daarekiste*) was actually strongly needed too, but that he gave up the idea, since such a project – he argues with his rhetoric on progress – would have become too big and expensive in times of rapid growth and development. Read in ironical terms, the conveyed sense in the Mayor's words (obviously beyond his intentions) is that our material progress needs great, indeed enormous madhouses for the generations to come. Brand suggests sardonically that in case someone goes too mad, the big meeting hall should be used to the purpose. The self-satisfied Mayor misses Brand's point and agrees enthusiastically, with a future vision that reaches its peak:

Ja, Rummet staar som oftest ledigt!
 Det Indfald, Brand, var ganske snedigt!
 Vil Byggeplanen blot ej briste,
 saa har vi gratis Daarekiste,
 har samlet under fælles Tag,
 beskyttet af det samme Flag,
 de væsentligste Elementer,
 hvorfra vor Byggd sin Farve henter; –
 vi har vor hele Armodsdøm
 samt Slyngeflokkens Syndeflom
 og Daarerne, som før gik om

¹¹ HU, V, pp. 277-278.

foruden Røgt og uden Tugt, –
 og saa har vi vor Friheds Frugt
 med Valgkamp og med Talers Flugt;
 vi har vor Raadssal, hvor vi drøfter,
 hvad gjøres kan till Byggdens Tarv, –
 vor Festsal, hvor vi giver Løfter
 om Skjøttel af vor Fortids Arv.
 Hvis altsaa blot ej Sagen faldt,
 saa faar jo Klippesønnen alt,
 hvad han med Billighed kan kræve,
 for rett sit eget Liv at leve¹².

In Ibsen's satire we can read different implications, which do not necessarily contradict one another. The fact that the meeting hall is empty most of the time can be read as a reminder that democratic institutions need participation to stay alive; if such a participation fails, democracy becomes a void formality and can be used instrumentally, as power, just by unscrupulous people like the narrator himself, the Mayor. This would possibly indicate on Ibsen's part a positive judgement on at least the potentiality of freedom and democracy. The fact that the empty meeting hall can host insanity without making too great a difference could also imply, however, a more negative opinion. Democracy *as such* is sheer folly. This kind of negative attitude towards political freedom, democracy and liberalism tends indeed to prevail in Ibsen's fundamental correspondence with Georg Brandes, particularly in the letters written between December 1870 and April 1872¹³. Ibsen's pregnant attempt to clarify his point of view on the difference between «real» *freedom* and political *freedom*s, in his letter to the Danish critic dated 17th February 1871, seems to offer the Mayor's vision in *Brand* a significant interpretative context:

Jeg går aldrig ind på at gøre friheden ensbetydende med politisk frihed.
 Hvad De kalder frihed, kalder jeg friheder; og hvad jeg kalder kampen for

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 278-279.

¹³ All of Ibsen's letters to Georg Brandes (1866-1902) are grouped in Georg og Edv. Brandes, *Brevveksling med nordiske Forfattere og Videnskabsmænd*, IV:1, København, 1939, pp. 189-249, whereas they are scattered in the letter volumes (XVI, XVII and XVIII) of Ibsen's HU.

friheden er jo ikke andet end den stadige, levende tilegnelse af frihedens idé. Den, der besidder friheden anderledes end som det efterstræbte, han besidder den dødt og åndløst, thi frihedsbegrebet har jo dog det ved sig at det stadigt udvides under tilegnelsen, og hvis derfor nogen under kampen bliver stående og siger: nu har jeg den, – så viser han derved at han netop har tabt den. Men netop denne døde siden inde med et visst givet frihedsstandpunkt er noget karakteristisk for *stats*samfundene; og det er dette jeg har sagt ikke er af det gode.

Ja, visstnok kan det være et gode at besidde valgfrihed, beskatningsfrihed, o.s.v.; men for hvem er det et gode? For borgeren, ikke for individet. Men det er aldeles ingen fornødvendighed for individet at være borger. Tvertimod. Staten er individets forbandelse¹⁴.

This central passage illustrates how the question of a definition of modern freedom and democracy was an absolutely central and vital ground of confrontation and disagreement between Ibsen and Brandes. In Ibsen's letters to Brandes, and in the answers to Ibsen which Brandes provides through his still fundamental Ibsen-essays¹⁵, we find a debate between two of nineteenth-century Europe's leading intellectuals on the topic – a topic which is more than ever unsolved and open. From a truly liberal point of view Brandes cannot approve of Ibsen's distrustfulness towards political action and democratic institutions. He finds Ibsen's standpoint conservative, even if rooted in radicalism.

Going back to the highlighted passage of *Brand*, one might also wonder how Ibsen could conceive such an «absurd» vision of a series of repressive institutions combined with the administrative and democratic ones. As a matter of fact this vision was based on common experience and was not too far from reality. A type of public building combining the offices and the representative rooms of a town hall with the cells of a police station is not uncommon in Scandinavian architectural history¹⁶. What matters, though, is that Ibsen is capable of using and even deforming reality to create a

¹⁴ In Georg og Edv. Brandes, *Brevveksling* cit., p. 205, and in HU, XVI, p. 349.

¹⁵ G. Brandes, *Henrik Ibsen* cit., pp. 237-354 (see note 7). The core of Brandes' confrontation with Ibsen's ideas on freedom and democracy, the individual and politics is in his *Second Impression* from 1882, *ibid.*, pp. 285-295.

¹⁶ As a realistic framework of reference see H. Ibsen, «[*Barndomsminner*] 17.1.81», in HU, XV, pp. 365-371. It is an autobiographical sketch where Ibsen, while describing his birthplace Skien, lingers on a building which includes *rådstue*, *arrestrum* and, surprisingly for the narrator, even *dårekiste*.

more powerful symbol. No matter how satirical and diverting the whole description might seem, it conveys strong and central modern images. And it shows how aware Ibsen was of processes affecting not only Norway, but the whole of western civilization. The first part of the Mayor's vision, for example, can remind us of the British workhouse, unforgettably depicted by Charles Dickens in the opening chapters of *Oliver Twist* (1838). Here Dickens attacks Victorian mentality and nineteenth-century utilitarianism, according to which poverty fosters crime, is ultimately a sin, and must be punished as such. Applying a more recent perspective on modernity, we can observe that the same institutions imaged by the Mayor – poorhouse, jail and madhouse – have been brilliantly analysed by the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault in his books *Madness and Civilization* and *Discipline and Punish*, which, published in 1961 and 1975, contributed to start a merciless and widely influential «postmodern» criticism of the «great narratives» of our western culture, such as rationality, enlightenment, humanity, progress and democracy¹⁷. And what is most strikingly «Foucaultian» in Ibsen's satire, is the metaphoric/metonymic meaning of the building. The combination under the same roof of both democratic functions, typical of what we term «the open society», and institutions of imprisonment represents here the contradictions, not to say the falsity, of our modern and «progressive» social construction, the democratic state. Democracy is meant to free individuals, but it rather institutionalizes, criminalizes, controls and at the same time conceals whatever does not conform and deviates by being *too* individual and peculiar. Hence Ibsen's sharp criticism in *Brand* and elsewhere.

In the equally long and satirical passages of Act V Ibsen's critical stance is confirmed and reinforced. The Mayor speaks of «human times», but people are for him nothing more than a mob to be ruled, pragmatically and cynically. He is more inhuman than Brand, the merciless hero of faith who can at times show real interest and pity towards the wretched. As well as this, life in a modern state

¹⁷ M. Foucault, *Folie et déraison: histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, Paris 1961; M. Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison*, Paris, 1975. I have used the Italian editions: *Storia della follia nell'età classica*, Milano, 1998, and *Sorvegliare e punire. Nascita della prigione*, Torino, 1993.

requires, according to the Dean (*Prosten*), conformism, levelling and lack of individualism. The Dean states explicitly that his aim is to have to do with disciplined masses which are easy to control, rather than with thinking citizens. And Brand's fault is, in his eyes, that he stirs individuality too much. Brand's spirit contains too many deviating things: his sublime faith, but also his feelings. When he plays the organ in the new church, full of despair after his wife Agnes's death, the Schoolmaster (*Skolemesteren*) and the Sexton (*Klokkeren*) listen to him and are moved. Trapped in their social roles and in their own self-control, however, they do not dare to show their *feelings*, something which Ibsen describes with great sense of humour.

What I also want to focus through my analysis, is that the satirical scene between Brand and the Mayor in Act IV is not superfluous with respect to the general plot, before and after it, and to the meaning of the dramatic poem as a whole. Many threads connect it with the main motifs of the text. We can wonder, for example, what kind of echo is produced in Brand when the Mayor informs him, in the continuation of the same scene in Act IV, that at the moment he is engaged in catching and imprisoning some blockheads and rascals railing in the area; and that these people – all belonging to a family of gypsies – stem in a certain sense from Brand's mother. We know since Act II that Brand's materialistic mother gave up the love of her youth to marry a rich man and gain possession of his properties; and we know that Brand's controversial relationship to his mother – his deep shame because of her raw materialism – is a personal, psychological key to acquire insight into his uncompromising (and blind) idealism, not very unlike Gregers Werle's shame caused by his father's actions in *The Wild Duck*. Ibsen is a master of the retrospective technique also in *Brand*: both Brand and Gregers Werle feel that they have inherited a sin, and they want to make amends for it. Now the Mayor's insinuations complete the story: the young love dismissed long ago by Brand's mother was a learned poor boy, and after being rejected he became half mad, married a gypsy girl and gave birth to the gang of rascals the Mayor is now pursuing. That is why the Mayor states that Brand's mother (i.e. her refusal) is the «origin» of that family. Furthermore, the intervention of a desperate and savage woman belonging to this group of people will soon lead to Agnes' death in the last part of Act IV. Finally, the youngest of this pack of irregulars

is the mad, fifteen-year-old Gerd, connected throughout the play to the Ice Church, the mountain peaks, the hawk: to dimensions beyond human limits that both frighten and draw Brand, and that will determine his end (and our difficult interpretation of it)¹⁸.

We see how Ibsen is capable of creating a network of interrelated images and motifs, where there is in fact no hierarchy between the «serious» and the «satirical» scenes. The scornful attitude of the Mayor towards the poor, the wretched and the lunatics, well expressed in his vision of the new «progressive» building, is eventually put into practice when he chases and imprisons them. The Mayor's «modern» materialism, utilitarianism and conventional refusal of whatever is different and deviating does not differ much from the behaviour of Brand's mother, even if this is connected to a «pre-modern» society. Opposed to these dominating, raw and materialistic values, we find the destiny of the former learned boy and of his children: poverty, exclusion, crime and madness. Where is Brand's place between these two opposite spheres? We see that he can sympathize with the miserable in general and with Gerd in particular, or at least feel pity for them. Brand pours scorn on many people, but not on them. Probably this is also because his absolute idealism and his individualism imply a deviation from the norm and a loneliness that are not unlike those of the wretched and the lunatics. Brand puts himself outside and «beyond the line». If folly is not «positive», it is at least a standpoint from which an absurd normality can be critically interpreted. This is by the way what Ibsen often means by «being mad» in the letters of these years¹⁹. By

¹⁸ Harald Beyer points out the close relationship between Gerd and Brand, which he sees in both characters' opposition against the hawk, interpreted as «the spirit of compromise» (*akkordens ånd*). See H. Beyer, *Kan en ut ifra steder i Peer Gynt kaste lys over dunkle punkter i Brand?*, in «Edda», 1941, p. 343. On the connection between Gerd and Brand see also J. Northam, *Dramatic and non-dramatic poetry*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*, edited by J. McFarlane, Cambridge, 1994, (pp. 28-57) pp. 35-36.

¹⁹ To B. Bjørnson on 16th September 1864: «Michel Angelo, Bernini og hans Skole forstaar jeg bedre; de Karle havde Mod til at gjøre en Galskab engang imellem». To M. Thoresen on the 3rd December 1865: «Hvorofte hører vi ikke i Norge Godtfolk tale med en saa inderlig Selvtilfredshed om den norske Besindighed, hvormed igrunnen ikke betegens andet end hin lunkne Middeltemperatur i Blodet, der gjør det umuligt for de skikkelige Sjæle at begaa en Daarskab i stor Stil». To B. Bjørnson on 4th March 1866: «Naar jeg læser

stepping beyond the borderline, however, Brand also abandons a rational and ethical understanding of a – in spite of its absurdity – possible life in this world. By doing so, he causes his son Alf's death, his wife Agnes' and finally his own²⁰.

Bitter and gloomy visions of this world accompany Brand while he is climbing to the icy tops and departing from life. Most critics have highlighted here Ibsen's scorn on contemporary Norway and on an age of dwarfs, when patriotism and Scandinavism are merely rhetorical. Ibsen's disillusionment after the war between Denmark and Prussia in 1864, when Norway and Sweden did not help their «brother in need», is of course known to be an important source of inspiration for the whole project of *Brand*, since the unfulfilled epic version²¹. Ibsen's concern with modern times goes in any case beyond Scandinavia in the dramatic poem *Brand*. Norway and Scandinavia are for him part of a western civilized world in which he sees more risks than hopes. Otherwise it would be inexplicable why one of Brand's final visions deals with pollution, environmental devastation and a greedy materialism which, starting from the English industrial revolution, threatens to spread worldwide. A prophetic prediction indeed.

Ibsen's concern with the worldwide process of modernity is even more evident in *Peer Gynt*, since the title character leaves agrarian Norway and becomes a successful self-made man through world trade during the first two or three decades of the nineteenth century. The fundamental question about personal authenticity, which makes *Peer Gynt* one of the masterpieces of world literature, is also interwoven with the problem of the deep ambiguities of modernity – which makes individual emancipation possible, but whose rushing forward can become aimless and imply an alienating loss of memory,

Beretningerne deroppe fra, naar jeg ser paa al denne respektable og agtværdige Trangbrystighed og Jordvendthed, da sker det med den samme Følelse, som den, hvormed den Afsindige stirrer ind i et eneste koncentreret, haabløst mørkt Punkt» (HU, XVI, p. 102; 118 and p. 126).

²⁰ See the acute observations in F. W. Kaufmann, *Ibsen's Conception of Truth*, and I. Deer, *Ibsen's Brand: Paradox and the Symbolic Hero*, both essays in *Ibsen. A Collection* cit., pp. 18-28 and pp. 52-62.

²¹ H. Ibsen, *Brand. Utkast i episk form*, in HU, V, pp. 363-422. For a comparison between the epic fragment and the dramatic poem see H. Koht, *Innledning*, *ibid.*, pp. 159-174, J. Northam, in *The Cambridge Companion* cit., and H. Skaar, *Brand som epos og drama*, in «Edda», 1997:1, pp. 65-74.

roots and identity²². Also Peer Gynt, so successful in the big world, has left something essential behind, and he, though very old, must go back in Act V to understand what it is. This «something essential» is not so much rural Norway as, of course, Solvejg and a possible home to be shared with her. Yet even the parallel, retrospective story of «the boy who cut off his finger» – of his sacrifice as a humble peasant and father, and of his children who have now forgotten him and become wealthy in the United States – has something important to tell us about both Peer Gynt and modernity.

The madhouse returns in Act IV of *Peer Gynt* – a «real» madhouse this time, not an imagined one²³. The asylum scene in Cairo, with which the act ends, has drawn far more critical attention than the previously focused scene in *Brand*. It is disquieting and enigmatic, both cruel and grotesque in its episodes. It is also, in any case, a culminating passage, and several critics have agreed to underline its importance, even if they have understandably disagreed on how to read it. At first glance Act IV of *Peer Gynt* may seem too satirical and loose, consisting of different and unconnected parts, difficult to grasp as a unity. Yet, the «wild» fantasy deployed throughout the act, describing middle-aged Peer's progress in the world, seems to find in the madhouse a coherent summary and terminus.

The main events which take place after Peer has left Norway, and which mark his progress from youth to adult life, are narrated retrospectively in the first part of Act IV by a very self-conceited Peer. There is a long gap between the end of Act III, when Peer leaves Norway at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and Act IV, when Peer is presented as a handsome middle-aged man. A

²² See M. Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air. The Experience of Modernity*, New York, 1988 (first published in 1982). An interesting attempt to read Ibsen through Berman's idea of modernity is E. Østerud, *Myth and Modernity: Henrik Ibsen's Double-drama*, in «Scandinavica», 1994:2, pp. 161-182. The article deals with Ibsen's bourgeois drama and it focuses on the problematic need for emancipation.

²³ In *Folie et deraison*, part I, chapter IV, Foucault gives a short and interesting account of the Oriental madhouses and their humanitarian tradition since the Middle Ages. The Cairo madhouse has existed since the thirteenth century and practiced a peculiar «cure of the spirit» with dance, music, plays and tales. Quoted from M. Foucault, *Storia della follia* cit., pp. 121-122. An open question is of course what Ibsen knew about this tradition. His journey to Egypt took place first in 1869.

contemporary historical event, the war of independence of Greece against Turkey (1821-1830), serves as a reference to determine the approximate time of Act IV. At the beginning of the act Peer Gynt is having dinner with four international adulators on the coast of Morocco. Peer's yacht, with Norwegian and American flags, is anchored offshore. Now a very wealthy man, Peer reveals the secret of his success: he has been «himself», in the sense that he has thoroughly minded his own business and never bound himself to anyone or got married. He is a veritable conqueror of the West: he has worked hard, adapting himself flexibly to all circumstances and making a fortune. Profit has been the only law and logic followed by him. Shipowner in Charleston, slave-trader, seller of Buddhist images to China and, at the same time, organizer of the Christian «evangelization» of China – Peer finally declares himself a philanthropist, decides to abandon slavery and becomes a landowner in the southern States, a good master for all his black subjects²⁴. Now his next project is to make profit out of the war between Greece and Turkey. His international «friends» approve of it, rhetorically praising the Greek struggle for freedom; but Peer disappoints them, as he is going to lend money to the Turks, the oppressors. Ibsen's satire is biting and funny throughout the whole passage, and – as in the case of the vision of environmental destruction in *Brand* – he preforms many of our present experiences in the globalized world, last but not least the instrumental use of democratic causes in the profitable business of war (or is this use of just causes an «eternal» truth about human history?).

An interesting and debated question is whether Peer has changed from the daydreamer and rascal he was as a young man in the Norwegian valleys and mountains: whether he has or has not «become another» from the one he was in the first three acts. In a way he has not changed: he did and does fascinate; he was and is a liar; he did and does want to become emperor; he did and does commit crimes which he was and is unable to regret. My impression is, however, that he has gone through a metamorphosis, in the sense that he has

²⁴ Francis Bull mentions an American novel on *Peer Gynt*, based on an American film, based in its turn on the play. In the novel the retrospective events in the States are amplified and interpreted without satire. See F. Bull, *Inledning*, in HU, VI.1, pp. 11-12.

become an opportunistic mask of himself. As a young betrayer, escapist and liar he still had a tormented and «damned» humanity, which he has lost by Act IV – or at least concealed very well behind a thick shell of self-celebration, respectability and hypocrisy²⁵. Misanthropy and desperation are the only possible outcomes of this split attitude, and they will in fact characterize Peer in Act V, when he comes back to Norway as a very old man²⁶.

Among the different stages and transformations Peer goes through in the crazy Act IV across northern Africa, from Morocco to Egypt, I would like to remind the reader briefly of two, before analysing a passage of the asylum scene in Cairo. Alone in the desert, Peer has to compete and fight against the monkeys to be able to keep possession of a branch of a tree, where he has slept for the night²⁷. It is an image of Peer's extraordinary adaptability, but also a nightmarish symbol of mankind sunk to the level of a beastly, Darwinian survival of the fittest. In the next episode, Peer fills his incredible mental desert with a vision of a great transformation: to water the Sahara and make it blossom; to found there his own flourishing state of Gyntiana and his own capital town Peeropolis. It could represent a new version of Goethe's modern *homo faber* Faust, if this vision were a serious project, and not merely a momentary egotistic impulse, soon abandoned for something else²⁸.

²⁵ A similar view is expressed by F. Bull, *ibid.*, pp. 39-40, whereas A. Aarseth, *Dyret i Mennesket* cit., does not see the need to «postulate a fundamental change» in Peer between Act III and Act IV (pp. 56-57), and underlines the connection between young Peer's dream of becoming emperor and the ironically deformed fulfilment of this dream in Act IV (pp. 72-73). Nor does E. A. Wyller, *Peer Gynt-skikkelsens dramatiske enbet*, in «Edda», 1953, pp. 93-110 (quoted in A. Aarseth, *Dyret i Mennesket* cit., pp. 163-164) see a «double» Peer Gynt, charming as a young man and conceited as an adult.

²⁶ I do not therefore fully agree with Georg Groddeck's sensitive psychoanalytic reading of *Peer Gynt*, in *Ibsen. A Collection* cit., pp. 63-79. Focusing the importance of Peer's daydreaming as the expression of an unexpressed unconscious life, Groddeck tends to underestimate the ambiguities of Peer's weak «reality-principle».

²⁷ See A. Aarseth, *Dyret i Mennesket* cit., p. 49.

²⁸ F. W. Kaufmann writes: «Peer Gynt may be considered a nineteenth-century caricature of Faust who deludes himself into the belief that his superficial and aimless activities will contribute to his self-realization, the fool of a morality play in a modernized version». In F. W. Kaufmann, *Ibsen's Conception of Truth*, in *Ibsen. A Collection* cit., p. 26.

By the time he has been half-deceitfully taken to the lunatic asylum by its director, the strange German doctor Begriffenfeldt, Peer Gynt has become the apotheosis of the totally free individual, as it were, whom no one can ever imprison, dominate or even define. As Knut Brynhildsvoll has observed, Peer flees fixed identities, and he is always ready to adopt new roles according to the needs of the moment²⁹. If Ibsen could express something which I have anachronistically called a «Foucaultian» standpoint through the image of the poorhouse-jail-madhouse in *Brand*, well, Peer Gynt may then be seen as the alternative answer to it: as the undisciplined individual who breaks free, managing to keep out of the cage which society inevitably is; an individual so totally free that he even manages to embody and handle the social mechanisms of discipline and punishment (for example slavery) «ironically». Within this kind of interpretative framework, Begriffenfeldt and his madhouse cannot be but further attempts to reduce Peer to discipline and destroy his peculiar, sticking individuality. This interpretation has been recently proposed by Eli Martinsen in an interesting, but in my opinion naïve attempt to apply a Foucaultian reading to *Peer Gynt*³⁰.

When Peer realizes that he has been locked in a madhouse, he becomes more and more terrified. Its director, or rather former director, Doctor Begriffenfeldt makes it clear from the start that this asylum represents a world turned upside down. The apparently most floating and adaptable individuality, Peer Gynt, is afraid of Begriffenfeldt's *deraison*, and afraid of losing himself. It is to be noted that Peer encounters this *deraison* at the end of his journey into nothingness in Act IV³¹, just while he, as a fake historian (his latest identity), is engaged in keeping reality at a safe distance. Begriffenfeldt declares however that «absolute reason died last

²⁹ See K. Brynhildsvoll, *Über Rolle und Identität und ihr gegenseitiges Verhältnis in Peer Gynt*, in «Edda», 1978:2, pp. 95-105.

³⁰ E. Martinsen, *Disiplin og undertrykkelse – en lesning av Peer Gynt i lys av Michel Foucaults bok*, in *Overvåking og straff. Det moderne fengsels historie, Hovedfagsoppgave i nordisk litteratur*, Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet i Trondheim, 1999.

³¹ See K. Brynhildsvoll, *Über Rolle* cit., p. 98: «Vom Standpunkt des imperativen Anspruchs der Seinsverwirklichung bedeutet diese Fremdvertretung des eigenen Ichs die Nicht-Existenz. [...] Er [Peer] ist in der Tat niemand, weil er alle ist».

night at 11 o'clock», or – as he corrects himself afterwards – that «he» (reason) «lost his mind» (*Han er gaaet fra sig selv*)³². Begriffenfeldt's conclusion is:

Nu er det klart, og det la'er sig ikke dølge, –
Denne Fra-sig-Gaaen vil have till Følge
En hel Omvæltning till Lands og Vands.
De Personligheder, som før kaldtes gale,
blev nemlig iaftes Kl. 11 normale,
konforme med Fornuften i dens nye Fase.
Og ser man endvidere paa Sagen rett,
er det klart at fra nyssnævnte Klokkeslett
begyndte de saakaldt kloge at rase³³.

I think that this turning upside down can be read in the «positive» terms of madness which Ibsen expressed in the previously quoted letters (see note 19): a radically critical standpoint from which an absurd rationality is judged. This will be indeed a shaking experience for the self-conceited, opportunistic and calculating Peer. Upside down and inside out: the wardens are locked in cells and the lunatics are set free; the ordinary, normal world is folly, and madness is normality. In terms of realistic likelihood I imagine Begriffenfeldt as a kind of borderline character, an intelligent and bizarre doctor who has lived long enough with the lunatics to be a bit of a lunatic himself, and to be able to tell Peer Gynt uncomfortable truths by savagely pulling his legs and mistreating him. On the one hand only «the fool» (this is his traditional role towards the king or emperor) can from his borderline position unmask falsity; on the other hand, from the Doctor in *Brand* to Relling in *The Wild Duck*, doctors in Ibsen's plays often fulfil this function: to tell the main character a fundamental and uncomfortable truth, often caught in a formula, such as Begriffenfeldt's «*selvets Kejser*», emperor of the self. Either Begriffenfeldt is aware of his criticism or he is totally raving; this doctor appears to me in any case to be a vehicle for Ibsen's satire against Peer, rather than the object of it, as has been proposed by Lidén and Aarseth³⁴.

³² HU, VI:1, p. 177.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 177-178.

³⁴ See A. Lidén, *Peer Gynt i Egypten*, in «Edda», 1940, pp. 237-265. First,

With respect to Peer's modern success, which characterizes Act IV as a whole, Begriffenfeldt's madhouse represents the terminus of an ethically absurd direction. And the doctor's words defend an ethical rationality against Peer's instrumental, self-centred rationality based on calculation and personal advantage. Dealing with Act IV of *Peer Gynt*, John Northam writes of a «demonstration of the consequences of self-obsessed living, not just in Peer but in the world at large», and observes that «the final scene in the Cairo madhouse represents a universal bankruptcy, though its bitter ironies are focused on Peer»³⁵. Embodied by Peer, western «freedom» has become egotistic folly, frantic self-promotion: a point of no return. Begriffenfeldt's «crazy» accusation against Peer shows how Peer's apparently boundless freedom is an even bigger cage, a mad, «autistic» solipsism, a failure to see a relation of responsibility between the self and the world where also the others live³⁶. Not unlike the aesthetical man Johannes in Kierkegaard's *Forførelers Dagbog*, Peer is continually changing in order not to change anything about himself. In spite of his innumerable roles and floating identities, he has a strong, indeed irreducible ego, which is not free, but rather like a cage. Begriffenfeldt is finally telling Peer that no one can ever be *self-made*, because the self can only develop in relation to otherness. The lunatics have found their emperor:

PEER GYNT. Ja, det er just Knuden.
Jeg er mig selv i et og i alt;
men her, saa vidt jeg forstod, det gjaldt
at være sig selv, saa at sige, foruden.

Lidén calls Begriffenfeldt a parodic caricature of Hegel and Hegelian terminology, and even sees him as a spirit similar to that of von Eberkopf (the German adulator of Peer Gynt at the beginning of Act IV); then he establishes an interesting connection between Hegel's and Begriffenfeldt's ideas on madness, which illustrate the problem of man's loss of humanity and spirituality. Lidén concludes that Hegel's idea of man becomes fundamental for Ibsen. In the end Lidén cannot solve his own contradiction: why then is Begriffenfeldt parodic? A. Aarseth, *Dyret i Mennesket* cit., pp. 180-183, develops Lidén's analysis of this Egyptian scene and also sees Begriffenfeldt as the object of authorial irony.

³⁵ J. Northam, in *The Cambridge Companion* cit., p. 41.

³⁶ Similar conclusions are drawn in D. G. Myhren, *Hverken eller og Enten eller. Et bidrag til belysning av personlighetsproblematikken i Henrik Ibsens Peer Gynt*, in «Edda», 1979:2, pp. 73-98.

BEGRIFFENFELDT.

Foruden? Nej, der taer De mærkelig fejl!
Her er man sig selv aldeles forbandet;
sig selv og ikke det ringeste andet; –
man gaar, som sig selv, for fulde Sejl.
Hver lukker sig inde i selvets Tønde,
i selvets Gjæring han dukker tillunds, –
han stænger hermetisk med selvets Spunds
og tættner Træet i selvets Brønde.
Ingen har Graad for de andres Veer;
ingen har Sans for de andres Ideer.
Os selv, det er vi i Tanken og Tonen,
os selv til Springbrættets yderste Rand, –
og følgelig, skal der en Kejser paa Tronen,
er det klart at De er den rette Mand³⁷.

Aarseth, who gives an ethical reading of the same passage³⁸, underlines the structuring dichotomy in Peer Gynt between his dreams and his inevitable, often brutal clash with reality, which takes him down to earth³⁹. Yet even the imaginative restlessness of a western *homo faber* like Peer Gynt can produce a brutal reality – for the others. Slavery, imperialism, war, profit, exploitation and instrumental use of otherness: we rich western people could all ask ourselves today, as the Strange Passenger once asked Peer Gynt: where is the seat of these dreams of ours? What have we ever dreamt of? A minor, postcolonial reading of *Peer Gynt* is textually possible, and certainly ethically necessary.

By making *Peer Gynt* a dramatic translation of Foucault's ideas in *Discipline and Punish*, Eli Martinsen decides, in contrast not to consider Ibsen's Kierkegaardian heritage: the fundamental ethical problem of personal choice and personal responsibility⁴⁰. If the whole world is a cage, and freedom and subjectivity do not exist, then no one can choose anything authentic and personal, but only be the victim – or rather: the product – of an invisible yet totally controlling and disciplining power. Foucault refuses an ethical position, in spite of the moral tension which he continually reveals

³⁷ HU, VI:1, pp. 178-179.

³⁸ A. Aarseth, *Dyret i Mennesket* cit., pp. 178-180; 191.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁴⁰ E. Martinsen, *Disiplin og undertrykkelse* cit., pp. 45, 49.

in his lucid analysis of the «total institutions». In this respect I think that Peer Gynt is responsible for his cage, and could even free himself from it, which would imply his renouncing «total freedom». And whether he returns in time at the end of Act V or not, this is a mystery that each reader has to solve alone. Martinsen's Peer Gynt becomes in contrast a victim of circumstances, a man who is not left in peace, not allowed to be as boundlessly free as he would like to be. Even if freedom is not possible according to Foucault, at the end of her thesis⁴¹ Martinsen tries to give Peer a last chance by resorting to Marshall Berman, who has put forward a problematic, yet open and possible vision of modernity in *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*. Martinsen should have then considered Berman's fundamental criticism of Foucault's approach:

Just about the only writer of the past decade who has had anything substantial to say about modernity is Michel Foucault. And what he has to say is an endless, excruciating series of variations on the Weberian themes of the iron cage and the human nullities whose souls are shaped to fit the bars. Foucault is obsessed with prisons, hospitals, asylums, with what Erving Goffman has called 'total institutions'. Unlike Goffman, however, Foucault denies the possibility of any sort of freedom, either outside these institutions or within their interstices. Foucault's totalities swallow up every facet of modern life. He develops these themes with obsessive relentlessness and, indeed, with sadistic flourishes, clamping his ideas down on his readers like iron bars, twisting each dialectic into our flesh like a new turn of the screw [...].

After being subjected to this for a while, we realize that there is no freedom in Foucault's world, because his language forms a seamless web, a cage far more airtight than anything Weber ever dreamed of, into which no life can break⁴².

As well as this, Berman mentions Søren Kierkegaard several times in his book, even if (unfortunately) none of its chapters really deals with the Danish philosopher. In the preface to the first edition Berman writes:

We might even say that to be fully modern is to be anti-modern: from Marx's and Dostoevsky's time to our own, it has been impossible to grasp

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁴² M. Berman, *All that is Solid*, p. 34.

and embrace the modern world's potentialities without loathing and fighting against some of its most palpable realities. No wonder then that, as the great modernist and anti-modernist Kierkegaard said, the deepest modern seriousness must express itself through irony⁴³.

Ibsen shared this consciousness and this ambivalence with Kierkegaard. In *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* we encounter Ibsen the «anti-modernist», the writer who perceives the inner and outer cages of modern life, and pessimistically distrusts modern fantasies of progress⁴⁴. Ibsen «the modernist» is on the other hand never satisfied with our imprisonment, and in every line he has written he encourages us to pursue emancipation, authenticity and self-realization, in spite of the possible failures. The problem of «life in a cage» and of our attempts at liberation is developed in Ibsen's later bourgeois plays, as Lou Andreas-Salomé shows with great intelligence in her book. Ibsen's female characters, writes Andreas-Salomé, convey the sense of the objective cage in which modern humanity lives, but also an inexhaustible longing for freedom and subjectivity. She finds an «interstice» in an original idea of *home*, where it is possible to reconcile our wild and our tame nature, our individuality and our dependence on others, without denying any of them. As a matter of fact both *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, the religious and the aesthetical man, dismiss in different ways the ethical possibility of home and shared life.

Ibsen poses an ethical problem of balance between a necessary liberation from norms that suffocate individual life and the need for norms that enable individuals to live as social beings, preventing them from suffocating one another. As I have tried to show, this problem is both social and individual; the definition of *Brand*'s and *Peer Gynt*'s «true selves» cannot leave the rest of mankind out of consideration.

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⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁴⁴ Brandes summarizes: «Han [Ibsen] havde et skærpet Blik for den Egoisme og den Usandhed, som Fantasilivet kan rumme, for den Stymperagtighed, som den politiske Friheds- og Fremskridts-Frase kan dække over, og efterhaanden blev en storartet, aandelig eller sædelig *Mistænksomhed* hans Muse». In G. Brandes, *Henrik Ibsen (1898)* cit., p. 277.