Ghosts

Henrik Ibsen

Introduction

The winter of 1879-80 Ibsen spent in Munich, and the greater part of the summer of 1880 at Berchtesgaden. November 1880 saw him back in Rome, and he passed the summer of 1881 at Sorrento. There, fourteen years earlier, he had written the last acts of *Peer Gynt*; there he now wrote, or at any rate completed, *Gengangere*. It was published in December 1881, after he had returned to Rome. On December 22 he wrote to Ludwig Passarge, one of his German translators, "My new play has now appeared, and has occasioned a terrible uproar in the Scandinavian press; every day I receive letters and newspaper articles decrying or praising it.... I consider it utterly impossible that any German theatre will accept the play at present. I hardly believe that they will dare to play it in the Scandinavian countries for some time to come." How rightly he judged we shall see anon.

In the newspapers there was far more obloquy than praise. Two men, however, stood by him from the first: Björnson, from whom he had been practically estranged ever since *The League of Youth*, and Georg Brandes. The latter published an article in which he declared (I quote from memory) that the play might or might not be Ibsen's greatest work, but that it was certainly his noblest deed. It was, doubtless, in acknowledgment of this article that Ibsen wrote to Brandes on January 3, 1882: "Yesterday I had the great pleasure of receiving your brilliantly clear and so warmly appreciative review of *Ghosts*.... All who read your article must, it seems to me, have their eyes opened to what I meant by my new book—assuming, that is, that they have any *wish* to see. For I cannot get rid of the impression that a very large number of the false interpretations which have appeared in the newspapers are the work of people who know better. In Norway, however, I am willing to believe that the stultification has in most cases been unintentional; and the reason is not far to seek. In that country a great many of the critics are theologians, more or less disguised; and these gentlemen are, as a rule, quite unable to write rationally about creative literature. That enfeeblement of judgment which, at least in the case of the average man, is an inevitable consequence of

prolonged occupation with theological studies, betrays itself more especially in the judging of human character, human actions, and human motives. Practical business judgment, on the other hand, does not suffer so much from studies of this order. Therefore the reverend gentlemen are very often excellent members of local boards; but they are unquestionably our worst critics." This passage is interesting as showing clearly the point of view from which Ibsen conceived the character of Manders. In the next paragraph of the same letter he discusses the attitude of "the so-called Liberal press"; but as the paragraph contains the germ of *An Enemy of the People*, it may most fittingly be quoted in the introduction to that play.

Three days later (January 6) Ibsen wrote to Schandorph, the Danish novelist: "I was quite prepared for the hubbub. If certain of our Scandinavian reviewers have no talent for anything else, they have an unquestionable talent for thoroughly misunderstanding and misinterpreting those authors whose books they undertake to judge.... They endeavour to make me responsible for the opinions which certain of the personages of my drama express. And yet there is not in the whole book a single opinion, a single utterance, which can be laid to the account of the author. I took good care to avoid this. The very method, the order of technique which imposes its form upon the play, forbids the author to appear in the speeches of his characters. My object was to make the reader feel that he was going through a piece of real experience; and nothing could more effectually prevent such an impression than the intrusion of the author's private opinions into the dialogue. Do they imagine at home that I am so inexpert in the theory of drama as not to know this? Of course I know it, and act accordingly. In no other play that I have written is the author so external to the action, so entirely absent from it, as in this last one."

"They say," he continued, "that the book preaches Nihilism. Not at all. It is not concerned to preach anything whatsoever. It merely points to the ferment of Nihilism going on under the surface, at home as elsewhere. A Pastor Manders will always goad one or other Mrs. Alving to revolt. And just because she is a woman, she will, when once she has begun, go to the utmost extremes."

Towards the end of January Ibsen wrote from Rome to Olaf Skavlan: "These last weeks have brought me a wealth of

experiences, lessons, and discoveries. I, of course, foresaw that my new play would call forth a howl from the camp of the stagnationists; and for this I care no more than for the barking of a pack of chained dogs. But the pusillanimity which I have observed among the so-called Liberals has given me cause for reflection. The very day after my play was published the *Dagblad* rushed out a hurriedly-written article, evidently designed to purge itself of all suspicion of complicity in my work. This was entirely unnecessary. I myself am responsible for what I write, I and no one else. I cannot possibly embarrass any party, for to no party do I belong. I stand like a solitary franc-tireur at the outposts, and fight for my own hand. The only man in Norway who has stood up freely, frankly, and courageously for me is Björnson. It is just like him. He has in truth a great, kingly soul, and I shall never forget his action in this matter."

One more quotation completes the history of these stirring January days, as written by Ibsen himself. It occurs in a letter to a Danish journalist, Otto Borchsenius. "It may well be," the poet writes, "that the play is in several respects rather daring. But it seemed to me that the time had come for moving some boundary-posts. And this was an undertaking for which a man of the older generation, like myself, was better fitted than the many younger authors who might desire to do something of the kind. I was prepared for a storm; but such storms one must not shrink from encountering. That would be cowardice."

It happened that, just in these days, the present writer had frequent opportunities of conversing with Ibsen, and of hearing from his own lips almost all the views expressed in the above extracts. He was especially emphatic, I remember, in protesting against the notion that the opinions expressed by Mrs. Alving or Oswald were to be attributed to himself. He insisted, on the contrary, that Mrs. Alving's views were merely typical of the moral chaos inevitably produced by re-action from the narrow conventionalism represented by Manders.

With one consent, the leading theatres of the three Scandinavian capitals declined to have anything to do with the play. It was more than eighteen months old before it found its way to the stage at all. In August 1883 it was acted for the first time at Helsingborg, Sweden, by a travelling company under the direction of an eminent Swedish actor, August Lindberg, who himself played

Oswald. He took it on tour round the principal cities of Scandinavia, playing it, among the rest, at a minor theatre in Christiania. It happened that the boards of the Christiania Theatre were at the same time occupied by a French farce; and public demonstrations of protest were made against the managerial policy which gave *Tête de Linotte* the preference over *Gengangere*. Gradually the prejudice against the play broke down. Already in the autumn of 1883 it was produced at the Royal (Dramatiska) Theatre in Stockholm. When the new National Theatre was opened in Christiania in 1899, *Gengangere* found an early place in its repertory; and even the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen has since opened its doors to the tragedy.

Not until April 1886 was *Gespenster* acted in Germany, and then only at a private performance, at the Stadttheater, Augsburg, the poet himself being present. In the following winter it was acted at the famous Court Theatre at Meiningen, again in the presence of the poet. The first (private) performance in Berlin took place on January 9, 1887, at the Residenz Theater; and when the Freie Bühne, founded on the model of the Paris Theatre Libre, began its operations two years later (September 29, 1889), *Gespenster* was the first play that it produced. The Freie Bühne gave the initial impulse to the whole modern movement which has given Germany a new dramatic literature; and the leaders of the movement, whether authors or critics, were one and all ardent disciples of Ibsen, who regarded *Gespenster* as his typical masterpiece. In Germany, then, the play certainly did, in Ibsen's own words, "move some boundary-posts." The Prussian censorship presently withdrew its veto, and on November 27, 1894, the two leading literary theatres of Berlin, the Deutsches Theater and the Lessing Theater, gave simultaneous performances of the tragedy. Everywhere in Germany and Austria it is now freely performed; but it is naturally one of the least popular of Ibsen's plays.

It was with *Les Revenants* that Ibsen made his first appearance on the French stage. The play was produced by the Théâtre Libre (at the Théâtre des Menus-Plaisirs) on May 29, 1890. Here, again, it became the watchword of the new school of authors and critics, and aroused a good deal of opposition among the old school. But the most hostile French criticisms were moderation itself compared with the torrents of abuse which were poured upon *Ghosts* by

the journalists of London when, on March 13, 1891, the Independent Theatre, under the direction of Mr. J. T. Grein, gave a private performance of the play at the Royalty Theatre, Soho. I have elsewhere [Note: See "The Mausoleum of Ibsen," *Fortnightly Review*, August 1893. See also Mr. Bernard Shaw's *Quintessence of Ibsenism*, p. 89, and my introduction to Ghosts in the single-volume edition.] placed upon record some of the amazing feats of vituperation achieved of the critics, and will not here recall them. It is sufficient to say that if the play had been a tenth part as nauseous as the epithets hurled at it and its author, the Censor's veto would have been amply justified. That veto is still (1906) in force. England enjoys the proud distinction of being the one country in the world where *Ghosts* may not be publicly acted. In the United States, the first performance of the play in English took place at the Berkeley Lyceum, New York City, on January 5, 1894. The production was described by Mr. W. D. Howells as "a great theatrical event—the very greatest I have ever known." Other leading men of letters were equally impressed by it. Five years later, a second production took place at the Carnegie Lyceum; and an adventurous manager has even taken the play on tour in the United States. The Italian version of the tragedy, *Gli Spettri*, has ever since 1892 taken a prominent place in the repertory of the great actors Zaccone and Novelli, who have acted it, not only throughout Italy, but in Austria, Germany, Russia, Spain, and South America.

In an interview, published immediately after Ibsen's death, Björnstjerne Björnson, questioned as to what he held to be his brother-poet's greatest work, replied, without a moment's hesitation, *Gengangere*. This dictum can scarcely, I think, be accepted without some qualification. Even confining our attention to the modern plays, and leaving out of comparison *The Pretenders*, *Brand*, and *Peer Gynt*, we can scarcely call *Ghosts* Ibsen's richest or most human play, and certainly not his profoundest or most poetical. If some omnipotent Censorship decreed the annihilation of all his works save one, few people, I imagine, would vote that that one should be *Ghosts*. Even if half a dozen works were to be saved from the wreck, I doubt whether I, for my part, would include *Ghosts* in the list. It is, in my judgment, a little bare, hard, austere. It is the first work in which Ibsen applies his new technical method—evolved, as I have suggested, during the

composition of *A Doll's House*—and he applies it with something of fanaticism. He is under the sway of a prosaic ideal—confessed in the phrase, "My object was to make the reader feel that he was going through a piece of real experience"—and he is putting some constraint upon the poet within him. The action moves a little stiffly, and all in one rhythm. It lacks variety and suppleness. Moreover, the play affords some slight excuse for the criticism which persists in regarding Ibsen as a preacher rather than as a creator—an author who cares more for ideas and doctrines than for human beings. Though Mrs. Alving, Engstrand and Regina are rounded and breathing characters, it cannot be denied that Manders strikes one as a clerical type rather than an individual, while even Oswald might not quite unfairly be described as simply and solely his father's son, an object-lesson in heredity. We cannot be said to know him, individually and intimately, as we know Helmer or Stockmann, Hialmar Ekdal or Gregors Werle. Then, again, there are one or two curious flaws in the play. The question whether Oswald's "case" is one which actually presents itself in the medical books seems to me of very trifling moment. It is typically true, even if it be not true in detail. The suddenness of the catastrophe may possibly be exaggerated, its premonitions and even its essential nature may be misdescribed. On the other hand, I conceive it probable that the poet had documents to found upon, which may be unknown to his critics. I have never taken any pains to satisfy myself upon the point, which seems to me quite immaterial. There is not the slightest doubt that the life-history of a Captain Alving may, and often does, entail upon posterity consequences quite as tragic as those which ensue in Oswald's case, and far more wide-spreading. That being so, the artistic justification of the poet's presentment of the case is certainly not dependent on its absolute scientific accuracy. The flaws above alluded to are of another nature. One of them is the prominence given to the fact that the Asylum is uninsured. No doubt there is some symbolical purport in the circumstance; but I cannot think that it is either sufficiently clear or sufficiently important to justify the emphasis thrown upon it at the end of the second act. Another dubious point is Oswald's argument in the first act as to the expensiveness of marriage as compared with free union. Since the parties to free union, as he describes it, accept all the responsibilities of marriage, and only pretermit the ceremony, the difference

of expense, one would suppose, must be neither more nor less than the actual marriage fee. I have never seen this remark of Oswald's adequately explained, either as a matter of economic fact, or as a trait of character. Another blemish, of somewhat greater moment, is the inconceivable facility with which, in the third act, Manders suffers himself to be victimised by Engstrand. All these little things, taken together, detract, as it seems to me, from the artistic completeness of the play, and impair its claim to rank as the poet's masterpiece. Even in prose drama, his greatest and most consummate achievements were yet to come.

Must we, then, wholly dissent from Björnson's judgment? I think not. In a historical, if not in an aesthetic, sense, *Ghosts* may well rank as Ibsen's greatest work. It was the play which first gave the full measure of his technical and spiritual originality and daring. It has done far more than any other of his plays to "move boundary-posts." It has advanced the frontiers of dramatic art and implanted new ideals, both technical and intellectual, in the minds of a whole generation of playwrights. It ranks with *Hernani* and *La Dame aux Camélias* among the epoch-making plays of the nineteenth century, while in point of essential originality it towers above them. We cannot, I think, get nearer to the truth than Georg Brandes did in the above-quoted phrase from his first notice of the play, describing it as not, perhaps, the poet's greatest work, but certainly his noblest deed. In another essay, Brandes has pointed to it, with equal justice, as marking Ibsen's final breach with his early—one might almost say his hereditary romanticism. He here becomes, at last, "the most modern of the moderns." "This, I am convinced," says the Danish critic, "is his imperishable glory, and will give lasting life to his works."