FOLIA SCANDINAVICA
VOL. 9 POZNAN 2006

IBSEN'S UNFAVOURABLE OPINIONS ON POLAND: IGNORANCE OR CONTEMPT?

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ABSTRACT. It was only three times that Henrik Ibsen voiced his opinions on Poland: her national character, history, culture and political future; twice in his letters to, respectively, Bjørstjerne Bjørnson of 28 January 1865 and Georg Brandes of 30 September 1888, and once in his poem Abraham Lincolns mord (The Murder of Abraham Lincoln), almost totally unknown in Poland. The opinions were brief and vague, besides, they were private, passed in personal letters. The mention in the poem was connected with bitter remarks regarding contemporary politics and hypocrisy of the mighty political rulers of the world and false public opinion.

Ibsen's remarks were, in fact, part of his meditations on Norway, Scandinavia, Europe and only in this context were aimed at saying a few words about Poland, a country he never showed any interest in. They were interesting only in connection with his political and historical thinking. His opinions on Poland were far from being favourable but it would be difficult to consider them as malicious or hostile.

Ibsen showed little interest in Poland even in the years 1863 and 1864 when the so called "Polish question" was largely discussed all over Europe in connection with the Polish January Insurrection of 1863. According to my knowledge, Ibsen mentioned Poland only three times in his writings: twice in his letters and once in his poem Abraham Lincolns mord (Abraham Lincoln's Murder, 1865). Up to my knowledge, Professor Olga Dobijanka-Witczakowa was the first to shortly comment on Ibsen's remarks on Poland in his letters. She did it in her introduction to a two-volume edition of Ibsen's plays published in 1984 in a footnote, without entering into details (Dobijanka-Witczakowa, 1984: CIII-CIV). Since that time I have been tempted to find more infor-

mation or simply to try to guess why Ibsen, who was a voracious reader of newspapers, who was from time to time a political writer deeply interested in current events and politics at home and abroad, who wrote politically inspired poems and plays showed no interest in Poland or delivered negative opinions on Polish society and culture. Needless to add that Ibsen's opinions were those of a genius, not just negative statements by somebody unimportant.

Poland was mentioned for the first time in Ibsen's letter to Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson of 28 January 1865, the famous letter written in Rome, very often quoted because it contains Ibsen's recollections of his Berlin experience when he saw German crowds on the streets of the capital of Prussia expressing their triumph after Dybbol's battle and jubilating over the victory over Denmark. Besides, in the same letter one finds Ibsen's reflections on the "Tragic Muse", ancient Greek tragedy and on the very essence of his creative efforts in the domain of drama. Remarks on Poland are strictly connected with reflections on Norway; they are, in fact, interwoven. Ibsen was generally very bitter about Norway and Sweden for their totally passive attitude in the face of the war of Prussia against Denmark; in his eyes it was a betrayal. He wrote to Bjørnson about his sad thoughts concerning home affairs and topical political problems. His melancholy political meditation turned to the very question of survival of Norway as the nation. "Often it appears to me unthinkable that we could go under. A state community [statssamfund – political community] can be destroyed but not a nation. Poland is actually not a nation, it is a state community; aristocracy has their interests, the middle class theirs, and peasants again theirs, they are all independent of each other or even struggle with each other. Poland has rather neither literature nor art and science which fulfill a particular mission important for the development of the world. When Poland becomes Russian, then Polish population will ceased to exist; but as far as ourselves are concerned, if we will be deprived of our apparent and formal freedom, if our lands will be taken, if our state community will be disorganized, so we still be in existence as nations. Jews were once a state community and a nation; Jewish state was annihilated but the nation, however, continues to live as such. I believe that still the best in us will yet live, provided that our national spirit preserve its power of flight sufficient to thrive even in misfortune; but this is still a great and decisive question. The question which only brought faith and trust [...]" (Brev fra Henrik Ibsen, 1904, I: 105f.).

The second mention of Poland does not, in fact, bring new information. In his letter to Georg Brandes from Munich of 30 October 1888, Ibsen expressed his thankfulness for sending his book Indtryk fra Polen (Impressions from Poland, 1888). He has only one thing to add: with Poland "a wholly black continent ["sort fastland"] opens to Western consciousness. Heartfelt thanks for this new enrichment!" (Brev fra Henrik Ibsen, 1904, II: 181). Ibsen only seems to repeat here his former negative opinions on Polish culture using a new, slightly ambiguous expression. It was doubtful whether he had read Brandes' book when he expressed his thanks to him; he may have quickly looked through it so as not to be totally unprepared for thanking the author. My opinion is that Ibsen used

the expression "black continent" to emphasize alien, non-Western, which means also non-European character of Polish culture and Poland. The letter to Brandes is once again an important one. Ibsen was as bitter as ever about Norway. He continued to have in his mind difficult questions concerning nationality, and, first of all, his own relation to his country and to his national identity. He wrote further in the same letter: "It would be totally impossible for me to settle for good in Norway. There is nowhere were I would feel more homeless than up there. The old conception of a fatherland no longer suffices for anyone intellectually mature. We can no longer rest content with the political community in which we live. I believe that national consciousness is ready to die out and that we will be relieved of tribal consciousness. At any rate in my case I passed through that evolution. I begun with feeling myself a Norwegian, develop myself to become a Scandinavian and I now end in the general Germanic" (Brev fra Henrik Ibsen, 1904, II: 182, tr. in: Meyer, 1992: 621; "political community" – "statssamfund"). Seen from this perspective, Poland also may seem a tribal country, totally unprepared to accept standards of modern consciousness, being really a "black continent" situated in the Eastern part of Europe.

The poem by Ibsen I mentioned was written shortly after Abraham Lincoln had been shot down by John Wilkes Booth at Ford's Theatre in Washington on 14 April 1865. As Michael Meyer justly remarks, "Characteristically, he [Ibsen] directed his indignation not, like the rest of the world, at Booth, but what he regarded as the hypocrisy of human reaction. Why such anger now? he asks. Was this worse that Prussian action at Dybbøl, the Russian rape of Poland, England's bombardment of Copenhagen in 1801 and 1807? These broken promises and betrayals have «manured the soil of history»; could anyone expect a sweeter harvest? But, the poem ends, I shall not cry woe over every poisoned blossom that opens on time's tree. Let the worm gnaw; there can be no rebirth till the scull is clean. Let the mockery of our system be exposed. Nemesis will be sooner sit in judgment on our hypocrisy" (Meyer, 1992: 254; the text of the poem, see: Ibsen, 1993, II: 483f.).

As we see, Poland now is presented among the European victims worth to be pitied of political hypocrisy and indifference of politicians and governments. In Ibsen's thoughts, compassion and sympathy for Poland are combined with low evaluation of the country's culture and society. A question arises what Ibsen might have known about Poland when both letters and the poem were written.

The whole year 1863, the year in which his play The Pretenders was written, was spent by Ibsen in Christiania with a short interval in June when he made a trip to Bergen. In winter news concerning the Polish uprising reached Norway, and were received with great emotion and wide popular support. In the small town of Christiania at that time things were happening around Ibsen and he could hardly stay away from them. It was not for the first time that the "Polish question" was in the mind of Norwegians. Already the November Insurrection of 1830 had captured popular imagination and among the most deeply

engaged people was Henrik Wergeland, both as a poet and a journalist. A small group of Polish refugees arrived in Christiania and some of them decided to stay in Norway for years. Interesting materials concerning Poland were gathered and published in the book Norge og den polske frihetskamp (1937), prefaced by Professor Francis Bull and introduced by Rebekka Hammering Bang. The idea of publishing this remarkable book was an initiative taken by the Polish ambassador (delegate) to Norway Władysław Neuman (1893–1945) an outstanding diplomat, now largely forgotten. The book clearly shows that interest in Poland's fate was strictly connected with reflection on the fate of Norway; this characteristic feature is also to be observed in Ibsen's remarks on Poland in his letters: he combined statements about Poland and thoughts about Norway. Already a pamphlet by Christian Magnus Falsen, published in June 1814, entitled Hvad har Norge at haabe, hvad har det at frygte af en Forbindelse med Sverrig, og under hvilken Betingelse kan denne Forening ene vaere ønskelig?(What is Norway to expect, what is she to be afraid of from her connection with Sweden, and under which condition can this union solely be desirable?), was an example of thinking about Norway's political future in connection with the fate of Poland and other countries fighting for their independence. Falsen was an outstanding spokesman of the independents party and his essay was published a month after the proclamation of the Norwegian 17th of May 1814 Constitution. In his pamphlet he expressed common fears that the cruel fate of Ireland, Hungary and Poland might await Norway. These fears were pretty alive in 1863 and particularly in 1864 when Prussia finally defeated Denmark. In 1864 seventy-four-year-old Carsten Hauch, Danish writer and poet, wrote lines in which one reads: "The play played with Poland,/Is now played with ourselves" (Norge og den polske frihetskamp, 1937: VIII).

The sympathy and compassion for Poland was openly manifested. For example a meeting of support in Christiania on 7 April 1863, according to a report published in "Morgenbladet" of 9 April, was attended by a crowd of three to four thousand people, an impressive crowd for a town of about forty thousand inhabitants! Other signs of support and different manifestations and celebrations were numerous.

According to Rebekke Hammering Bang, in the time of the January Insurrection Norwegian newspapers published materials reflecting not only pro-Polish but also pro-Russian points of view, the latter, in her opinion, shared by nobody. But why not by Ibsen, at least to a certain extent? With original Norwegian contributions scarce, plenty of foreign articles were reprinted, among them information and commentaries of "The Times", the newspaper which was seldom favourable to the Polish cause. Numerous poems were also published expressing moods and emotions of the time. Bang adds, however, that nothing in Norwegian literature of the period equals "a beautiful poem by Carl Snoilsky" (Norge og den polske frihetskamp, 1937: XXXIX). She obviously had in mind his poem På Polens grav. In 1864 the tide of interest in Poland begun to weaken, Norwegians were more and more focused on Denmark.

Among Norwegian journalists one person deserves special mention, that of Jonas Lie, an outstanding writer and a friend of Ibsen from the beginning of his early years in Christiania. According to Arne Garborg, author of a book on him, Jonas Lie was a brilliant journalist, a praiseworthy successor of Wergeland, also deeply interested in the fate of Poland. Freedom of Poland and Norway was for him almost equally important. Jonas Lie's journalism was very different from that of Wergeland, it was distanced and rational. His articles contained opinions which he pronounced after thorough examination of the subject he was interested in, taking into consideration all possible points of view. The years 1863 and 1864 were for Lie a period of deep political disappointment. He quickly came to the conclusion that both Poland and Denmark were condemned to suffer an ultimate defeat.

Jonas Lie published an article on Poland entitled Polen – Langiewicz in "Illustreret Nyhedsblad" of 12 April 1863. The article is worth of attentive reading. In its fragments connected with the subject of our interest, he first asks a question concerning the role of a leader of a nation at the time of uprising or war for independence. Such men like Nehemias for the Jews or Garibaldi for the Italians, writes Lie, become real dictators of their countries. These chosen personalities take care of their nations; they become their hearts, which beat and cease to beat for the sake of their fellow-citizens. Lie next asks if Poles fighting for their freedom have such a leader or dictator; his answer is historically just: they have two of them at the same time, Langiewicz and Mierosławski. Both leaders are supported by their parties and proclaim that each of them is a unique "infallible national prophet" ("ufeilbar Folkeprophet"). Quarrels of the parties in Poland diverted the attention of Europe from the fight of Poland for independence. Lie notices in these events a new appearance and return of "the same angel of destruction, which had hovered with spread wings over Poland through the whole history of that country. This is the spirit of discord and dissension which is so particular for Polish national character that made comparison with «a Polish diet» [«den polske Riksdag»] a proverb." These peculiar features of Polish national character were the main cause of Poland's calamities. As we see from these remarks, Lie's opinions are far from being unreasonable and they resemble long and never ending discussions on Polish history led even now, especially on this part of our history which may be called "history of decline and final catastrophe of Poland" (Norge og den polske frihetskamp, 1937: 227f.).

It is highly possible that Ibsen read Lie's article or similar statements in another articles he found in Norwegian newspapers of the period. We must agree that opinions presented in such articles were true and just. In the case of Jonas Lie it was absolutely clear that all his thoughts and his deep sympathy were with Poland. Can we really condemn Ibsen for his controversial opinions, at least these which refer to Polish history, if we take into consideration the broader

context in which they appear? Details may be, of course, subject to long discussions. Surely, Russification was never a very serious threat to Polish society as a whole when seen from contemporary perspective, but a historical approach to the problem teaches us about periods in which the question was quite serious. Ibsen's approach was that of a stranger who showed no deeper interest in the history of Poland and saw no reasons why he should display any. Besides, the years 1863 and 1864 were very busy and difficult for Ibsen for many reasons. The year 1863 was that of "The Pretenders, [which is] the first of the great epic quartet that was to embrace Brand, Peer Gynt, and Emperor and Galilean" (Meyer, 1992: 621). The play appeared in print towards the end of October and working on it Ibsen asked himself questions concerning nation and the very meaning of the term, which he applied both to medieval but also contemporary Norway.

I relate the course of political events of the time after Michael Meyer: "On 15 November 1863 King Frederik VII of Denmark had died without male issue, and been succeeded by collateral member of the family, Christian IX. The old and grisly problem of the Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein now reared its head. They disputed Christian's claim to be their ruler, since they had always accepted the Salic Law and denied claims through females. The German states, who had long resented the Danish suzerainty over the Duchies, maintained that the rightful ruler of them was now the Duke of Augustenburg, and Bismarck, supported by Austria, championed the German cause. In December the armies of the German League attacked Holstein; in mid-January the Prussians issued an ultimatum to Denmark; and on 1 February the Prussian forces invaded Schleswig. It was the first testing of Bismarck's new army [...].

The young king of Sweden and Norway, Carl XV, and his foreign minister, Count Manderström, had continuously and openly professed support for Denmark in this matter of the Duchies, and Manderström had made several pronouncements, notably one in July, which left no doubt in most Scandinavian minds, including Ibsen's that, if Danish independence were threatened, Sweden and Norway would come to her aid. A few days after Manderström's July statement, Carl XV offered Denmark a military alliance. But, not for the last time in Swedish history, strong forces within the government advocated a policy of isolationism, and the king found his hands bound. The Norwegian students held a big meeting on 12 December, at which they sent a declaration to the Swedish students asserting that all Scandinavians must now regard the Danish cause as their own, and a week later a gathering of three thousand citizens in Christiania sent the king a message of support for any military action he might take in support of the Danish cause. But the Storthing would go no further than to make a promise of financial aid to Denmark, and that conditional on one of the great western powers joining the alliance. Palmerston had declared in the House of Commons that autumn that any nation which challenged the rights of Denmark «would find in the result that it would not be Denmark alone with which they

would have to contend», but for any effective intervention the cooperation of France was essential, and Palmerston could not face the prospect of a French conquest of Prussia. When the crisis came, Denmark found herself alone.

Ibsen's feelings towards his countrymen, already strained, became considerably aggravated by this, as he thought, chicanery. He had had hard thing to say about Denmark in the cultural field in recent years, but this example of aggression against a small neighbour by a bullying power angered him as much as the similar situation had done in 1848 when the Swedes and Norwegians had uttered professions of sympathy but had sent almost no help. On 13 December, the day after the student meeting in Christiania, Ibsen published in «Illustreret Nyhedsblad» a furious indictment of his fellow-countrymen. He called the poem simply To Norway.

> Those generous words that seemed to gush
> From bold hearts swelling high
> Were but a flood of empty gush,
> And now their stream is dry!
> The tree, that buds of promise bore
> Beneath the banquet's light
> Stands stripped and smitten to its core,
> A graveyard cross upon the shore
> That's ravaged in a night.
>
> 'Twas but a lie in festal song,
> A kiss that Judas gave,
> When Norway's song sang loud and long
> Beside the Danish wave (Edmund Gosse's translation, Meyer, 1992: 223ff.).

In such a way the cause of Denmark devoured in Scandinavia the cause of Poland. The next year Ibsen left for Italy and a new period opened in his life and work; on 5 April 1864 he left Christiania for Copenhagen. He was still in the Danish capital when the Prussians stormed Dybbøl on 18 April and the brave Danish resistance was ended. On 20 April he sailed to Lübeck and continued on to Berlin. "There, on 4 May, he saw the Danish cannon captured at Dybbøl led in triumph through the streets while Germans lining the route spat at it. «It was for me», he wrote a year later to Magdalene Thoresen, «a sign that, some day, history would spit in the eyes of Sweden and Norway for their part in this affair», and the idea for a new play, unlike anything that he had hitherto written, grew in him «like a foetus»" (Meyer, 1992: 227). In Rome Ibsen continued to think about the Danish war and its impact on politics in Norway. In a letter to Bjørnson of 16 September he commented on the political and social situation in Norway as follows: "Political events at home grieved me sadly, and have much clouded my happiness. So it was all lies and dreams. These recent happenings will have a considerable effect on me. We must now draw a line through our ancient history; the Norwegians of today clearly have no more

connection with their past than the Greek pirates have with the race that sailed to Troy and fought beside the gods... (Brev fra Henrik Ibsen, 1904, II: 103f.; tr. in: Meyer, 1992: 243)".

When we take into consideration all bitter statements of Ibsen on political affairs at home and abroad, his opinions on Poland are no more strikingly unfair or unfavourable, just the contrary, they concord with his angry opinions on Norway, Scandinavia, Europe, and the rest of the world. Besides, some aspects of Polish history, discussed both in Poland and abroad found a more or less proper reflection in Ibsen's remarks on Polish society. His remarks should not be received as painful to the Polish readers of Ibsen. Of course, his extremely low evaluation of our culture and history is surely too unfavourable to be accepted by somebody seeing things from a more or less "objective" point of view. But my initial statement that Ibsen showed no interest in Poland proved to be true. Ibsen has in common with many writers among the greatest a rather dark and pessimistic view of mankind and its history; his deep insight into human nature taught him a bitter lesson. Poland, however misty was her image in his mind, was no exception from the rule. He put our country into a category of victims of a general hypocrisy and cynicism of kings and presidents, politicians, ministers and governments, but it did not mean that he felt obliged to accept any aspect of Polish history and culture that he valued lowly only because we were victims of history. He never used a preferential treatment to anything, be it his own country Norway or Poland. In a sense, he accepted the image of Poland as "Pologne martyre", according to a common 19th-century stereotype applied to Poland, but he did not succumb to sentimentality. He seemed, however, to accept a stereotype concerning our part of Europe as a worse, not only younger part of the continent. The fragment of his letter to Georg Brandes in which he thanked him for his book Impressions from Poland saying that it was a "new enrichment" may be interpreted as slightly ironic. Could he really think that a book on a "black continent" that he showed no interest in might be considered as any kind of enrichment?

It is high time we answered the question I asked in the subtitle of my paper. Are Ibsen's opinions on Poland a result of ignorance or contempt? Ignorance was surely present in his remarks on Poland, but ignorance in a peculiar sense of the word; I think that it was a kind of non-knowledge, a refusal to acquiring knowledge on a subject one is not interested in. Ibsen never presented himself as an expert on Polish affairs and his opinions were expressed in his private letters. He, after all, showed sympathy and solidarity with Poland mentioning our country in his poem Abraham Lincoln's Murder. Doing so he fulfilled moral obligations of a liberal European writer or intellectual in the 19th century who should support the cause of the oppressed. The question seems to be more complicated in the case of contempt. The word I used was perhaps too strong but Ibsen surely considered Eastern part of Europe to be a dark and alien part of the continent. My answer is then simple: neither ignorance nor contempt, but a little bit of both.

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