

Longing for the Infinite

- *From idealism to modernity – Ibsen's aesthetic conditions*

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The book *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* from 2006 was written by literary scholar Toril Moi who has a particular interest in the intersection of literature, philosophy, and aesthetics.¹ I understand her reading of Henrik Ibsen, his life and his dramatic texts as something close to a collaborative investigation of the relationship between literature and the world. Throughout the book she draws an arc of aesthetic development through Ibsen's texts while using this as an allegory for the birth of modernism. We are presented with a critique of the notion that the precursor of modernism is realism. While reevaluating Ibsen's place in history she argues that we have overlooked the role of the aesthetic in the idealist holy trinity of beauty, goodness, and truth, and that aesthetic idealism is the relevant precursor to modernism.

I would like to stay with the way Moi situates agency and our capacity to create purpose within a historicized understanding of language. I try to support this by reading Ibsen alongside her book. Both many of his dramas and Moi's text rest on a presupposed notion that the aesthetic ideology, found with idealism as well as with modernism, permeates the potential of language. I believe what Moi does is to use Ibsen to exemplify an historical, existential engagement with language and meaning, through aesthetics. That she is searching for our ability to constitute meaning.

¹ Toril Moi's profile at the Duke University webpage, <<https://fds.duke.edu/db/aas/Literature/faculty/toril>> (08/08 2023).

Ibsen's aesthetic conditions

A lot happened within aesthetic ideology in Europe and Norway during Henrik Ibsen's lifetime. He lived between 1828 and 1906 and spent 26 of those years living and working abroad. He is considered an international writer everywhere but in Norway.² Throughout his life Ibsen kept in touch with both public debate and the political situation at home. In Scandinavia the debate about the function and purpose of art was both explicit and notably politicised. Professor in Nordic literature, Asbjørn Aarseth, writes about the relationship between the poet and the political sphere at the turn of the last century. He refers to historian Johan Ernst Sars who uses the term *poetokrati*, which describes how politicians during the end of the 19th century had to endure influential, moralist judgements of poets in a way which interfered with their work.³ We see that the Romantic idea of the artist-genius remained in Norway throughout the 19th century and Aarseth picks up this thread from Sars who compares the position of the 19th Century poet to a prophet who holds direct spiritual and social influence. With Aarseth this influence is specifically framed as political. The poet was attributed a power that could sometimes seem a real threat to the high-strung moral demands of this society.⁴ When Ibsen first moved to Kristiania, our current Oslo, in 1850 the art being produced at the time was dominated by a blend of nationalism, idealism, and religion. The notion of the aesthetic was hard to separate from either the growing national identity of the time or the religiously informed morality. To be moral was to be authentically pious, sincere, and naive.⁵ These qualities were also associated with the project of romantic nationalism and to fail to uphold them became by extension the same as opposing the natural Norwegian self-expression.⁶

² Asbjørn Aarseth, *Ibsens samtidsskuespill: en studie i glasskapets dramaturgi* (Oslo 1999) p.13.

³ Johan Ernst Sars, *Samlede værker Bd 2 Udsigt over den norske historie* (Kristiania, 1912), cited from Aarseth (1999) p.12.

⁴ Aarseth (1999) p.12.

⁵ Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theatre, Philosophy* (Oxford 2006) p.147.

⁶ Moi (2006) p.166.

In his biography from 2021, *Ibsen's Kingdom: The Man and his Works*, professor of drama Evert Sprinchorn writes at length about Ibsen's contemporary, Norwegian author Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, who was his rival as playwright and poet. Both, but especially Bjørnson, were engaged in the Romantic nationalist project. Up until the dissolution of the union between Norway and Sweden in 1905, just a year before Ibsen's death, Bjørnson campaigned loudly for a Norwegian republic. Just before the turn of the century he also publicly renounced Christianity. When Ibsen's attitude towards contemporary culture became more critical through the years it placed them ideologically closer. Sprinchorn writes about Ibsen in the eye of the public: "The political right and the traditionally religious admired him in the 1870s as an upholder of ideals, a supporter of the monarchy, and then denounced him in the 1880s as an anarchist, a Darwinist, and an immoralist".⁷ Where Bjørnson was directly political, Ibsen was more interested in the cultural implications of politics. In 1898, for his own 70th birthday, Ibsen was invited to the Norwegian Association for Women's Rights. This is where he gave a famous speech where he thanked the association for the celebration but declared that he was not sure that he even knew what the women's issue, "kvinnesaken", was. He did have sympathy for the struggle for women's rights but rejected attempts to paint his works as instrumentally political.⁸ He identified himself as more of a poet than a social philosopher despite common perception.⁹ Sprinchorn places Bjørnson alongside the critic and scholar Georg Brandes as two important contemporary points of reference. Brandes was ideologically close to Ibsen and there is preserved correspondence between the two, much concerning the state of modern literature. He was a political radical who looked for a philosophy beyond theology and was suspected of being an atheist.¹⁰ Brandes tentatively named 'the modern breakthrough' in Scandinavian literature and advocated for a literature that addresses and investigates societal issues. Ibsen shared Brandes' belief in a realist

⁷ Evert Sprinchorn, *Ibsen's Kingdom: The Man and his Works* (Yale University Press 2021) p.17

⁸ Aarseth (1999) p.13.

⁹ Aarseth (1999) p.14.

¹⁰ Sprinchorn (2021) p.111.

literature grounded in experience. We should today understand this belief as opposing the conventions that painted the striving for literary realism as base, immoral, and, in its essence, not art.

Moi insists on the presence of German idealist philosophy within public discourse as central for the understanding of Ibsen's milieu. She also explains her choice to make more use of Schiller than of Hegel.

I do not wish to deny that Ibsen, like so many other Scandinavians at the time, was influenced by Hegel's aesthetics [...] The characteristic conflation of truth and beauty is, if anything, stronger in Hegel's aesthetic than in Schiller's, and nineteenth-century Scandinavian critics often spoke in recognizably Hegelian terms.¹¹ But Hegel's lectures on aesthetics do not convey that burning, radical desire for freedom that still appealed powerfully to Ibsen and Brandes in 1871. (In his breakthrough lectures, Brandes invokes Schiller, but not Hegel.)¹²

With Schiller the purpose of art is always to guide us towards the utopian ideal: A state where we will be fully free while experiencing perfect belonging. The main faultline here is that when we, like Schiller, hold our own and the world's perfectibility as reachable it affects our metaphysical understanding of language. With our communication seen as perfectible, our miscommunication becomes an emotionally charged failure rather than an inescapable human condition. Ibsen felt this and we can see his attempts to move away from idealist aesthetics, but to consciously do so was not an easy thing. His political conscience was being checked by his literary ambition and the need to be respectable in the eye of the public.¹³

Moi writes about Ibsen's depiction of idealism in *Kejser og Galilæer* from 1873 wherein the Roman emperor Julian aims to build community and experience unity with his

¹¹ Moi (2006) p.74.

¹² Moi (2006) p.74.

¹³ Sprinchorn (2021) p.187.

people. Julian holds religious ideals that are impossible to live up to and which do not acknowledge his genuine human experience. His desire to live according to a preconceived, idealised version of himself creates distance between him and his people. He becomes involuntarily theatrical in a way that marks the beginning of the “inner exile” that is his undoing, theatricality here being the social mode which Moi associates with the adherence to unlivable ideals. In Ibsen’s time their naive and spontaneous ideals seemed, ironically, to be pushed away by the strong demand for it.

In his plays Ibsen continually returns to the distance between a person’s ambition and their actual ability. If we look at this distance as a motif it fits well within the aesthetic frames pushed by Naturalism, the literary realist movement of which Ibsen is one of the most famous names. The writing that came with the programmatic movement was highly influenced by a positivist perspective propelled by the rapid advancement of science, as well as the growing recognition of psychology. Many of Ibsen’s characters are defined by their social and economic conditions as much as by their psychology or personality. This can be read as merely an expression of the positivist influence on the arts, but it also resulted in a deterministic, and sometimes fatalistic, view of life.¹⁴ Reading Ibsen it seems as though he was worrying about how the (necessary) negation of Idealism might lead to scepticism instead. In Schiller's article *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry* from 1795 he divided humankind in two categories: “realists, who judge only by experience. And idealists, who judge only by reason”.¹⁵ The naturalist movement valued experience and truth preferably based on measurable evidence.¹⁶ But there are things that are not easily measured. In Ibsen’s work an example of this is the issue of understanding. When you think you have it, you can later find out that you were mistaken. When communicating, one person can experience understanding while the other one disagrees. Whether with the idealistic struggle for moral and aesthetic

¹⁴ Sprinchorn (2021) p.379.

¹⁵ Friedrich Schiller, “On Naive and Sentimental Poetry”, in Walter Hinderer and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (eds), *Essays* (New York 1993), cited from Moi (2006) p.85.

¹⁶ Moi (2006) p.194.

perfectibility or with the overly positivistic struggle for the measurability and predictableness of all things, this problem of expressing the inner mind becomes an unwelcome reminder of our own, and perhaps the world's, finite nature. In her book, Moi invokes philosopher Stanley Cavell's definition of *scepticism*. The term is here interpreted as an existential experience as well as an intellectual issue. The conclusion that we could be absolutely, metaphysically unknowable to each other starts with the discovery of our finitude. That we are separate from each other, alone. Moi argues that there is a sceptic experience typically associated with modernism which often manifests itself through a loss of faith in language.¹⁷ This appears as a recurring motif already in Ibsen, to whom it seemed a real risk that the overly sceptic position towards language would make us lose faith in our capacity to reach each other in a more pragmatic sense. In several of his later dramas the exploration of love and language is connected to what Moi calls the everyday or the ordinary.¹⁸ The realm of the everyday is the place where we negotiate our metaphysical agency. For Ibsen this is a place of potential.¹⁹ These depictions are to be understood as both particular and general. His characters' existentially charged struggles are often placed in their own living rooms where the ordinary or the realm of the everyday is definitely not always depicted as good, often not even optimistic. For Ibsen, as well as for Moi, the everyday is where we have to take on the building of human relationships. Where we create meaning.

Ideology of Modernism

Literary realism is often, reductively, framed as a unified, demarcated period of aesthetic naivety which functions as modernism's necessary steppingstone. If we, like Moi, use Erich Auerbach's definition of realism that simply frames it as "representation of reality", it follows that we are going to need a new conceptualization of the birth of

¹⁷ Moi (2006) p.212.

¹⁸ "The everyday", or "the ordinary" as a concept is surely helped by the word "hverdagen" in Norwegian, which is the native tongue for both Moi and Ibsen, but it also alludes to ordinary language philosophy. Moi expands on the philosophical foundation for this in the book *Revolution of the Ordinary* (Chicago 2017).

¹⁹ Moi (2006) p.89.

modernist aesthetics.²⁰ Here, Moi frames aesthetic idealism as the actual steppingstone for modernism. She makes a point of how idealism is often lazily thought to have died with Romanticism, while it actually lived as a powerful aesthetic norm all throughout the 19th century and stayed in weaker incarnations well into the 20th century.²¹

In her historicization of idealism, Moi leans on *A Singular Modernity* from 2002, by Fredric Jameson and what he there calls the “ideology of modernism”.²² The main principle, or doctrine, of the ideology of modernism is the autonomy of the aesthetic. Moi divides her interpretation of this concept in two. Firstly, the autonomy of the aesthetic can, even when formulated as a doctrine, be an attempt to let art be understood and experienced for itself and not as an edifying tool for cultural pressures. Secondly, the implication that follows is that art itself, and not the representation of reality, must be art’s subject-matter. In Moi’s description, Jameson defines modernist aesthetics and “culture” as opposing enemies.²³ In literature “culture” was thought to appear as realism or representationalism. What is left of art without culture can be exemplified by formalism, where the medium itself and the self-reflexive exploration of techniques and effects are the very purpose of art. The understanding of modernist aesthetics as ideological points us towards a missionary approach that still affects the historical understanding of modernism today.²⁴ To illustrate this, Moi moves into the 1920s and 1930s to describe how the high modernists, while incarnating a romantic desire for the absolute, treated art as the secular equivalent to religion. Art becomes what saves us, the answer to an existential problem.²⁵ Moi continues with how in the post-war era this absolute faith morphed into its opposite. Language became understood as increasingly unreliable and modernist literature became obsessed with the unsayable, the unrepresentable. This ideal, which denies art the claim of an external

²⁰ Moi (2006) p.31.

²¹ Moi (2006) p.68.

²² Moi (2006) p.19.

²³ Moi (2006) p.20.

²⁴ Moi (2006) p.2.

²⁵ Moi (2006) p.2.

purpose, would later be confronted by the many schools of thought that insist on the cultural situatedness of human expression.²⁶ Through ongoing canon revisions we are exposed to more women, more postcolonial writers, more working-class and racially marginalised writers. The point that Moi makes here is that even though this is the case, we silently still fall back on the formalist tools that were sprung from within the modernist paradigm:

[...] when culturalists read, they often simply translate formalist concepts into politicized categories. Culturalist critics of film, theater and literature are still obsessed with high modernist and postmodernist themes such as reflexivity, negativity, absence, the instability of boundaries, and the breakdown of language. The difference is that theoretical constructs such as the unsayable are relabeled as femininity, the abject, the marginal or the subversive; and textual self-deconstruction is read as a sign of revolutionary undoing of established norms. *When it comes to aesthetic strategies, formalism and culturalism are not as different as they seem. In fact, they are barely different at all.*²⁷

Moi uses this discussion looking to explain and reframe Ibsen's place in history, but she manages to also pinpoint the fact that the ideology of modernism, here represented by its formalist aesthetics, has not been overcome.²⁸ This is noteworthy if we wish to properly historicize the value and purpose of art, especially if we wish to give art the possibility of purpose beyond pure aesthetics.

Historically situated readings

Arne Garborg was one of Ibsen's contemporary critics who, like Ibsen, found himself in the doorway between idealism and naturalism. Garborg received Ibsen's drama *Kejser og Galilæer* in 1873 with reluctant approval. He believed its form and realism conveyed

²⁶ Moi exemplifies this with Marxism, feminism, new historicism and cultural, postcolonial and queer studies. Moi (2006) p.21.

²⁷ Moi (2006) p.22 [my. Italic].

²⁸ Moi (2006) p.22.

a sort of beauty in itself, but that Ibsen's writing was not uplifting enough. Garborg was dissatisfied with Ibsen's scepticism:

What one ultimately is left with as the final result of his poetry, is the discovery— which by the way is not new—that 'everything is vanity'; disappointments and emptiness, emptiness and disappointments,— this is the inner despair we encounter everywhere.²⁹

Nevertheless Garborg praised the drama as an aesthetic masterpiece and appreciated its historical and aesthetic truths. Moi underlines how in Garborg's reading this notion of a literary truth that travels outside of idealist selection is not negated by Ibsen's scepticism. For a more conservative idealist, this would be unacceptable.³⁰

Earlier in the book, Moi presents an overview of readings emerging from within the ideology of modernism. She argues that from this point of departure, Ibsen can only be read two ways: either one must frame his dramas as outdated representationalism or ascribe an engagement with the autonomy of art to his works. The former reading is the more common but in 1998 Frode Helland did a modernist reading of Ibsen's last four plays as his thesis. Since then, the tide has changed within Norway and the scholarship on Ibsen has been more extensive.³¹ Helland reads Ibsen through Adorno and Moi sketches out some other modernist takes that followed. These readings focused mainly on the last four dramas, claiming that Ibsen was occupied with the unsayable, with art as negativity, as not-life.³² The older Ibsen did become decidedly pessimistic and his interest in the unsayable was being read by modernists as a transcendental movement towards a place beyond language. This clashes with Moi's reading. She believes that Ibsen's pessimism is an expressed interest in what hinders (and then, implicitly, what constitutes) a life worth living. Moi's reading is closer to my

²⁹Arne Garborg, *Keiser og Galilæer*: *En kritisk studie* (Christiania 1873), cited from Moi (2006) p.199 [Moi's translation].

³⁰ Moi (2006) p.199.

³¹ Moi (2006) p.33.

³² Moi (2006) p.33.

own and what I believe to be Ibsen's intentions. I also believe the discussion, which stems from this kind of reading, on our ability to create meaning to be interesting in itself.

Idealist aesthetic constructions

There is a parallel between the norms within Norwegian everyday life in Ibsen's time and the constricting, reductive conventions regarding aesthetics. This parallel is tangible in Ibsen's choice of motifs as well as in his engagement with aesthetic literary and dramatic conventions. We see this in *Et Dukkehjem* from 1879, which is one of Ibsen's most famous dramas as well as a centrepiece for the movement of Naturalism. The play is still staged throughout the world and is arguably Ibsen's first fully modern drama. We follow the couple Nora and Torvald Helmer who have built and held their everyday life together as an aesthetic construction characterised by their bourgeois expectations. On top of gender roles and economical expectations, the characters are defined by their strained attempt at embodying the ideal, which is illustrated by a theatrical social mode. Their everyday life takes the shape of a performance where their two small children work almost as props.³³ Throughout the play we see Nora carefully construct their idyllic life, while a self-awareness that undermines the naively ideal is gradually revealed to the audience.

When the drama begins, Nora has been paying off a loan behind her husband's back. We learn that she secretly took out the loan in Torvald's name and that she did so to afford a vacation that would save her husband's health. Torvald wants his wife to be small and helpless and Nora gladly shapes herself as such while her secret capability and agency are made a spectacle for only herself and the audience.³⁴ The intrigue unfolds with the involuntary unveiling of truths resulting in Nora being robbed of her own self-sacrifice and the illusion of Torvald's noble character. They are both pushed

³³ Henrik Ibsen, *Et dukkehjem* (Oslo 2018).

³⁴ Ibsen (2018).

out of the aesthetic construction they built around themselves but in the very last scene, Nora wants to stay in her new-found space of honesty. She tells her husband that she wishes to finally speak seriously with him. This is met with frustration and confusion:

Du ængster mig, Nora. Og jeg forstår dig ikke. // Nej, det är det just. Du forstår mig ikke. Og jeg har heller aldrig forstået dig – før i aften.³⁵

For the audience, her self-awareness is to be understood as dangerous.

Nora's attempt at an idealist mode of authenticity is upheld by gendered tropes and recognizable bourgeois imagery. She reaches for the ideal of everyday bliss in a way the audience recognises as theatrical while Torvald never sees it as anything other than naive, idyllic expression. In the last act, Nora takes off her masquerade costume, both literally and figuratively, shedding their shared bourgeois fantasy. When her husband is unable to acknowledge their new reality, revealing the truth of his character, Nora's temperament shifts, and she finally acts out her self-awareness. When she sheds her adopted, idyllic mannerisms, it is a shift that Torvald views as excessive and overwrought and she is dismissed as unstable.³⁶ Ironically for the audience, it is precisely here that she, together with the text, becomes undeniably modern.³⁷

Modes of authenticity

Nora and Torvald's theatrical staging of what Moi calls "various idealist scenarios of female sacrifice and male rescue" are in the final act turned on their head with a claim of a new form of authenticity.³⁸ Nora tells her husband and the audience that her old life was keeping her entertained (*lystigt*) but she was never truly happy (*lykkelig*).³⁹ Nora's

³⁵ Ibsen (2018) p.153.

³⁶ "excessive and overwrought" is referring to "*overdrevent og overspændt*", Ibsen (2018) p.155. [my translation]

³⁷ Ibsen (2018) p.155.

³⁸ Moi (2006) p. 226.

³⁹ Ibsen (2018) p.155.

theatricality was her tool of agency. Still, she accuses Torvald and her father of wishing this inauthentic version of her into being: “Jeg har levet af at göre kunster for dig, Torvald. Men du vilde jo ha’e det så. Du og pappa har gjort stor synd emod mig. I er skyld i, at der ikke er blevet noget af mig.”⁴⁰ She claims that Torvald and her father have made her into an actor. In other words, they have pushed theatricality upon her, by which it follows that an insurmountable distance was created between them. It makes her lonely. *Et Dukkehjem* is a slow revelation of the unfulfilled potential of a marriage. The last scene ends with Nora asserting her individuality outside of being a mother and a wife. She is grabbing the unfulfilled potential of her everyday life and stepping out the door. We do not know what happens next and this sort of open ending was unconventional. Nora’s modern mode of authenticity does not itself make her less lonely but it does remove her from a life that is dependent on her abject subjectivity. That her unfulfilled potential is no longer bound up with her marriage was subversive and dangerous to the contemporary audience. Nora is written to be likeable but imperfect. What we are presented with is an undermining of the idea of the ideal woman. In short, she is written to be human, even while a woman.

Faith in human language

Nora’s coming into her authenticity is dependent on some level of scepticism. During the 20 years that followed *Et Dukkehjem* Ibsen would publish ten more dramas. Several of the characters in his later works turn to scepticism in a way that makes the characters unable to engage with their own experience. Their capacity to know each other, to act out their love, is constricted within their use of language. Discussing the suicide by the young character Hedvig in *Vildanden* from 1884 Moi writes that “language use is at once the practice and the ground of all human meaning”.⁴¹ She suggests that without language that makes sense, we become unable to navigate our relationships or even our reality. The young character Hedvig has a father theatrically occupied with his own self-

⁴⁰ Ibsen (2018) p.155.

⁴¹ Moi (2006) p.261.

image. To the audience, he seems, in part, like a sharpened caricature of Nora's idealist husband written five years earlier. In Moi's reading, the father's performative personality is what obscures Hedwig's pain to him. In the end, Hedwig's death is framed as a consequence of her father's failure to perceive her pain.⁴² The ability to doubt the world appears in the same drama as an absent privilege. We see this in the instance of Hedwig's mother Gina. The character has no access to any scepticism at all and becomes helpless in the face of her husband's delusions. Left without scepticism, without the fear that we will not understand, or will not be understood, it is hard to find our own agency and our current reality becomes unchangeable nature.

Ibsen was balancing between idealist ideas of an absolute reachability between people and its opposite, where we instead lack fundamental faith in human language. This relationship to idealism is of interest when looking at his engagement with what it means (and does not mean) to lead a good life. Moi highlights the way this relationship is obscured by the notion of idealism produced within modernist ideology. People do need some level of scepticism to be able to acknowledge any difference between what we seek and our actual grasp. But Ibsen was also wary of leaning too far into scepticism and instead lose our ability to trust the, not so uncommon, experience of feeling understood or our capacity to feel like we understand and, by extension, our ability to create connection and meaning. Through reading Ibsen we find that we are knowable to each other, but only under the condition that we have faith in that we are.

⁴² Moi (2006) p.263.