Periphery and Tragedy: Ibsen and the Emergence of a Literary Form

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Abstract This paper challenges the claim that there can be no such thing as a modern tragedy by offering a new interpretation of the structure of Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman*. On the one hand, the events of this play are governed by the actions of characters that cannot help but act in accordance with a subjective determination, autonomous of all external considerations. On the other, these characters time and again reveal themselves as bound by external laws that exceed their control. The opposition between these two principles goes through a number of dialectic turns, which makes the play's tragic conflict center on the impossibility of determining which of these principles ultimately governs the construction of its meaning. Significantly, this dialectic mirrors what Kierkegaard twenty years earlier predicted would constitute the structure of modern tragedy, where the conflict no longer rests on the fact that a necessary order opposes the hero, but on the question if such an order even exists. I conclude the paper by arguing that the emergence of such a new conception of tragedy in Scandinavia during the nineteenth century is a product of its specific position at the cultural and economic periphery of the world-system. It is the movement of literary forms across different cultural context, then, that makes possible the birth of a new literary form.

Key words *John Gabriel Borkman* modern tragedy Kierkegaard modernity

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This article is part of a new book project that I am just beginning, and in which I trace the evolution of modern tragedy through different socio-historical positions in the modern world-system during the nineteenth century. On the one hand, I thus agree with the claim, originating in the late eighteenth century and made prominent in our days by George Steiner, that modernity does not allow for tragedy, understood in its classical sense. On the other hand, I show that new kinds of drama emerge during the nineteenth century, which retains fundamental aspects of the structure of tragedy while adopting it to the conditions of modernity. If there is no tragedy in a classical sense, then tragedy nevertheless survives through a historically conditioned process of morphological transformation.

In this article I want to focus on the kind of tragedy that I claim it emerges in Scandinavia during this period, at the periphery of the world-system. In its essence,

this tragic paradigm consists of a dialectical relation between two equally constitutive but opposed representational principles, neither of which can claim priority, and which therefore leave the fictional world of the text without stable semiotic determination. One principle concerns contingency and subjectivity. The other is about necessity and objectivity. I want to illustrate the dialectical relationship of these prinziples first by offering a partial reading of the form of Ibsen's John Gabriel Borkman by briefly contextualizing this reading in the larger historical argument of the project.

Dialectic

At its most immediate level, the dramatic world of *John Gabriel Borkman* is determined by the principles of subjective desire. The suffocating environment of the play derives from the stubborn decision of Borkman and his wife to avoid each other's presence for years on end; an exercise of willpower so absolute as to be almost impossible to believe. This present condition itself is, of course, a product of Borkman's own ruthless will-to-power, for the sake of which all other considerations were suspended: his love for Ella; the well-being of his investors; the future of his wife and child. As Borkman explains, his actions and their consequences were dictated only by the fact of his own character: "People don't understand that I had to because I was myself—John Gabriel Borkman—and no one else" (Ibsen 380/336).[1]

For Borkman, significantly, adherence to the demands of subjectivity leads to deceit: the misrepresentation of the actual value of his stock, which is a deliberate manipulation of the semiotic structure governing relations between individuals. The external, objective realm thus shows itself to be vulnerable to the subject's desires and manipulations, and Borkman is not the only one to take advantage of this situation. Gunhild, too, we are told, was responsible for making the family appear wealthier than it was; an activity notably also couched in the language of signification: "Yes, the word was always that we had to 'represent' " (Ibsen 331; translation modified/297). This exploitation of the gap between sign and referent extends even to Ella, who attempted to usurp Gunhild's place as Erhart's mother. Identical to Borkman, moreover, Ella's misrepresentation of her role derives from her subordination of reality to an irrepressible subjectivity. As she tells John Gabriel, her relation to Erhart was dictated not by compassion but by her inability to restrain the desire for motherhood: "But I couldn't reconcile myself to that loss. And that's why I took Erhart in" (Ibsen 372/330).

The laws of economy, society and nature: meaning lies not within existing rules of signification, but in the dark realm of subjectivity, which is free to use them as it wills. The central question of the play accordingly becomes that of an action's motivation: why did Ella accept Erhart, as Gunhild asks her in act one; why did Borkman abandon Ella, as she challenges him in act two; why did lawyer Hinkel betray his friend, as Foldal wonders, and so on. The power to determine the world belongs to subjectivity and freedom, on which objective relations show themselves to be dependent for their proper interpretation.

By virtue of their very difference, however, the realm of subjectivity also remains unable to fully control the world confronting it. That is, if the vulnerability of

the external, objective realm is the source of individual power—which makes it possible to manipulate the world according to our wills—its very contingency is also the source for dramatic conflict, since it remains inherently ungovernable. Borkman's eventual fall is due to a contingent set of circumstances: to the fact that Ella chose not to respond to Hinkel's advances; that Hinkel wrongly thought she did so on Borkman's instructions; that Borkman in turn had confided in his friend. As so often in Ibsen, the situation provides for conflict, but not, as George Steiner points out, for tragedy, since the contradiction is in principle remediable and not absolute (Steiner 291 – 92). In fact, far from tragic, the collision almost becomes farcical instead: the discrepancy between the uncompromising nature of the striving subjectivity and the contingency of its downfall makes the former look absurd: Borkman still posing as Napoleon so many years on.

This inherent vulnerability of the characters of the play opens a new perspective that negates the first. Contrary to what might at first appear, the present is determined not through subjectivity but its denial. The world with which the play opens is a negative space defined by the absence of the very attributes that encapsulate the essence of each character's desire. In a modern version of the Dantean law of contrapasso, every character is punished by the very law he or she attempted to manipulate: Borkman broke the law of economics and is deprived of money and power; Gunhild broke the law of social representation and is deprived of social standing; Ella broken the law of nature, and is deprived of life. Far from contingent and open to manipulation, the sphere of external objectivity acquires a metaphysical structure that operates by absolute necessity. The specific, contingent reason for Borkman's catastrophe—Hinkel's betrayal—becomes irrelevant in this larger context, where it is not how a subject's plans are frustrated that matters, but that they ineluctably must be. The particular articulation of this law is secondary to its universal principle. He who lives by the sword dies by the sword. Subjectivity, in this context, is no longer primary or absolute, but rather accidental and secondary: nothing you can do, no matter how many precautions you take, can save you from the certainty and strict necessity of the law of retribution that rules in the objective world.

Pace George Steiner, *John Gabriel Borkman* thus takes the shape of contradiction after all: the realm of contingent, subjective desires, or freedom, clashes with the nezessary metaphysical order, or fate. But the determination of the present as defined by the principle of objectivity itself runs into problems, and is negated no differently than its predecessor. From a further perspective, this universal law is not an end in and of itself, but simply the premise that the action of the play negates. Its dramatic world, after all, is conditioned not by the absolute stasis of a negative present (nothing ever changes in Dante's *Inferno*), but by the characters' persistent belief that the laws that punished them will be suspended: Borkman awaits "the hour of restitution," when his fellow bankers will "come up to me here in this room!" (Ibsen 357/318); Gunhild places her faith in Erhart to provide "Restitution for my name and honor and fortune! For the whole of my desolated life" (Ibsen 331/298); Ella seeks to adopt her sister's son so as to break the necessity of death itself. The iron rules of power, society and nature are challenged in direct contradiction of Foldal's claim that

restitutions of this kind are impossible: "The law," as he points out, "doesn't make such allowances" (Ibsen 363/323). Instead the central characters all live on the belief articulated by John Gabriel himself: "There are no precedents for exceptional men" (Ibsen 375/333).

If the present is the punishment for a tragic error committed in the past, then the future derives its force from its ability to cancel that necessity by the sheer power of subjective hope. It is not only Ella who cannot bear the thought that the law she's punished by should be unmovable and therefore simply must pursue its refutation. Borkman too makes it clear that faith in restitution is an existential necessity for him. Similarly, without hope for Erhart's "mission," Gunhild would "despair" (Ibsen 340/305), making her subjective need take absolute priority and become the standard for all others.

The perspective on the play that sees action as posited by the characters' subjectively necessary orientation to the future is nevertheless also negated. At a further level, this forward thrust is contradicted by the imposition of an absolute present that makes all escape impossible. As Mark Sandberg has recently reminded us in an illuminating article, *John Gabriel Borkman* makes use of a remarkable continuity of time in the changes between its acts. The transition between act one and two occurs by means of a "sound bridge," as the Dance macabre that Frida begins to play toward the end of the first reaches its conclusion at the beginning of the next. At the close of act two Gunhild rushes out of Borkman's room only to reappear at the beginning of act three entering her own downstairs. Act three ends with Ella stopping Gunhild's rushing after Erhart, with which act four in turn begins as we view the immediate completion of this action from a position outside the Borkman home.

What is striking about this mode of representation, however, is less the fact that it reduces the disruption of time within the play by establishing a fluid continuum than that it increases it outside it. The time that elapses between acts one and two is suggested to correspond to the time that passes within them, as the changing of the scene while the curtain is down can take as long as it takes for the Dance macabre to reach its end. With the transition between act two and three, however, this correspondence of the temporality of characters and audience becomes notably more difficult, since the time required to descend from the upper to the lower storey of the house presumably is less than that required for the changing of the scenes on stage. By the time we reach the change between acts three and four the conflict between the characters' world and ours has become unmistakable, to the extent that the fictional time that elapses between the acts is by far less than what it takes to change the scenes in the reality the audience inhabits.

The temporality of the play is thus not merely continuous, but in fact decreasing when measured against the standard of our own. The effect of this disruption is a radical increase of the sense of stasis in the play by making time telling notably longer than time told. The characters that seem so like us are on the other imprisoned in a temporality several times too small.

The desire to escape the law of retribution through a future that exceeds it is in this way ironically negated by the characters' confinement to a present which has be-

come absolute: there is no "beyond" beyond it; no alternative time is represented, nor any possibility of breaking its gradually decreasing scope. Caught in an ontological order over which the characters can exercise no control, the category of necessity returns to the pole of objectivity, which once more provides the ultimate conditions for the construction of the world in which they move.

I have traced here the dialectic of subjectivity and objectivity as it evolves through four distinct stages within the older generation comprised of John Gabriel, Gunhild and Ella. This process is not final: any stage can claim authority with equal justification and be overturned as well as any other. In fact, the dialectic repeats itself, and is expanded, at the still further level of the relation between the older generation as a whole and the younger group made up of Erhart, Fanny Wilton and Frida. The structure of the play at large vacillates between the Manichean universe of the older generation, in which all relations are posed in terms of absolute distinctions, and the more modern world of Erhart and his friends, where all is compromise and no decision final. The former thus operates according to the rules of drama, in which divisions and conflicts must be immediately drawn so as to resolve themselves within the span of a few hours, while the latter resembles the logic of the novel, in which each event needs time to develop in all its permutations. The universe of the younger generation lays claim to the future, to which the novel truly does belong and in which drama becomes an increasingly marginal artistic form, but the play's own enactment of the outcome of that struggle is left ambiguous.

In this remainder of this article I want to leave aside this further elaboration of the dialectic of the play and instead show how the impossibility of ultimately determining which principle has priority and posits the conditions of the plot and world we witness, is Ibsen's crucial contribution to the regeneration of the tragic form.

History

At the conclusion of his monumental *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel distinguishes between modern and ancient tragedy. In its essence, the difference lies in the conflict at work, which in ancient tragedy is constituted by the opposition between two equally necessary and justified substantive principles. The characters in ancient tragedy, that is, do not embody particular subjectivities but rather contradictory moral commands ("sittliche Mächte" [Hegel 555]), both of which carry legitimacy: the law of the state which Creon follows, against the law of the family by which Antigone abides (Hegel 544). Underlying this opposition is the common identity of both moral principles in the Idea, which is revealed through the mutual and necessary destruction of the heroes, who cannot exist without their opposite (Hegel 549). In modern tragedy, on the other hand, interest is placed with the particular and contingent subjectivity of the characters, which provide the motivation for the action and its conflicts (Hegel 556). In this latter mode, the final reconciliation that is central to Hegel's appreciation for the genre is problematic at best. Without an underlying identity between the subjective hero and the "existing power" that opposes him, the ending can consist only in the unilateral destruction of the former by the latter, and the hero's acceptance of this fact (Hegel 565 – 66).

To Hegel, of course, this characteristic of modern tragedy constitutes its weakness with respect to its ancient paradigm, but others following him (Goethe, Theodor Vischer, Friedrich Hebbel) instead redefine the genre so as to provide its contemporary incarnation with a more noble place. From this view, the aim of tragedy is not the reconciliation of two equally necessary but opposed positions, but rather the asymmetrical relation between the principle of contingency and that of necessity, which leads to the ruthless destruction of the former. As Hegel had rightly seen, however, in this modern structure the element of inevitability central to tragedy disappears. By making the manifestation of necessity dependent on the destruction of a particular subjectivity, necessity is grounded on a principle that denies it: particularity could always have been different and no specific set of circumstances can accordingly create an absolute collusion since its alternative is automatically implied. Indeed, the horror of the situation here lies not in the necessity of the relation between opposing principles, a universal law and a specific subjectivity, but in the extraordinary bad luck that they should have come together in the first place when other trajectories can be envisioned. Had Klara in Hebbel's *Maria Magdalena*—according to Ibsen the greatest modern play—only not slept with Leonhard, or the noble secretary whom she really loves not left town, the catastrophe would have been avoided. Having espoused the capitalist principle of infinite possibility it can no longer be contained and the very attempts to destroy it ironically reintroduce contingency as the category organizing the relation between the formal structures within the work as a whole. As such these plays arguably constitute artistic failures, since they contradict their own explicit purpose; indeed, arguably they even contradict the criteria of their very genre, since, as Goethe already knew, the permutation of narrative alternatives is the lifeblood of the novel, but remains inassimilable to the drama, which is bound, ontologically, to aunique, and inherently limited, time and space (Goethe 280 – 81).

These difficulties that arise from the attempts to incorporate the modern principle of subjectivity to the structure of tragedy are resolved at the core of European culture in a number of different ways. What I would like to briefly suggest here is that Søren Kierkegaard provides a solution to this same dilemma that both offers an answer to the structure operative in John Gabriel Borkman and indicates how it might be a specifically Scandinavian phenomenon. In an essay from 1843 that has still not been appreciated for its radicality, Kierkegaard re-imagines the entire framework for modern tragedy and rewrites Hegel's analysis of Antigone for a modern world. Retaining the form of dialectical necessity defined by Hegel as proper to pre-modern drama but taking as its content the principles of contingency and necessity established by his heirs, Kierkegaard argues that tragic conflict in the modern world is characterized not by the fact that a necessary order opposes our contingent individuality, but rather by the impossibility of deciding if such a necessary order still exists, and what determination the events we witness therefore carry. By making contingency and necessity equally applicable principles for the construction of the same dramatic plot, the vacillation between them posits nothing external to itself and denies any determination to which alternatives might be imagined. If in Hegel's tragedy the conflict is absolute and positive because both constitutive principles must be operative in the situation, in tragedy

as conceived by Kierkegaard the conflict is absolute but negative because neither can ultimately claim priority. Not an ultimate identity of equals, but a simultaneity of asymmetric opposites.

The impossibility of determining whether it is the principle of subjectivity or objectivity that governs the construction of John Gabriel Borkman partakes of this conception of tragedy. Pity and sorrow are here not effects of the certainty of the destruction of the hero, but of the irreducibility of doubt. As Borkman tells Foldal when discussing the latter's own attempt at the genre, and with a clear allusion to Aristotle's definition, it is with doubt that the great fall: "Har du selv tvivl, da står du på faldenden fødder" ["If you yourself have doubt, you stand on falling feet"] (Ibsen 364; translation modified/323).

Kierkegaard, Ibsen, and then Strindberg: all operate with this structure, which applies the dialectical necessity of a pre-modern form to organize the contingency of modern experience. Scandinavia's position at the periphery of the world-system during the nineteenth century—squarely placed between distinct historical forces—provides the genre's temporal and geographical boundaries: a few decades, and then it vanishes again.

【Note】

1. All references to *John Gabriel Borkman* are given first to the English translation, followed by the page number in the Norwegian original.

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