The Norwegian master Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906) is and will remain the most important modern playwright—which is not to say there are no flaws in his work. Of all artists, playwrights are the most beholden to the moralism of their time; they must love and hate what their audiences love and hate. Few people go to the theater to learn. They are there to have their prejudices confirmed, in the company of strangers who share those prejudices, and who show it by laughing, sighing, tearing up, and applauding at the appointed times. Modern theater habitually serves its patrons a stew of liberal platitudes. Dramatic spectacle is what the more or less cultivated secular public enjoys instead of church on Sundays. This audience does not wish to be startled awake or intellectually challenged. It does wish to have its compassion massaged and its indignation roused. These are the privileged sentiments of democratic times, and they are stimulated by the wan resignation of Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya* and *Three Sisters*, the philosophizing schoolboy monkeyshines of Shaw’s *Man and Superman*, the grimacing brutality of Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children*, the plangent heartbreak of Tennessee Williams’s *The Glass Menagerie*, and the icy sorrow of David Mamet’s *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross*—to speak of some of the most esteemed works by some of the most popular modern playwrights.

Ibsen is both of this company and apart from it. He explored what was left of the modern soul and studied the modern self that was replacing it. He was the great innovator of middle-class domestic tragedy, endowing ordinary lives with the moral significance previously reserved for
princes and legendary heroes. His works were reviled by some as immoral, and hailed by others as prophetic. Ibsen’s daring created the taste by which he is now appreciated. He was the arch-poet of emancipatory liberalism.

The godless nineteenth century invited those who were strong (or presumptuous) enough to determine life’s meaning for themselves. Ibsen extolled the freedom of each man and woman to defy religious commandment or social convention and live in accordance with his or her own nature. Freedom was the ultimate value—though in his eyes, most people would prove unworthy of the gift. He registered subtle degrees of worthiness and unworthiness. He mourned the unlived life, in which the possibility of genuine love was sacrificed to mingy prudence or self-aggrandizement or religious misgiving or even artistic vocation. And he refused to profess any formula for happiness, whether in personal ethos or in political arrangement; it was up to every individual to fail or succeed by his own lights. Even the Swedish-Norwegian monarchy was liberal enough for his purposes, allowing a sufficient margin of freedom for persons of sufficient boldness to flourish in their chosen direction.

Though Ibsen subscribed to the modern artistic slogan *épater le bourgeois*, to bedazzle or to flummox the stolid citizenry was as far as he was willing to go. He wanted to give the workaday householder a chance at a more vivid life, not do away with middling comfort and security. As the Norwegian scholar Ivo de Figueiredo writes in his impressive new biography, *Henrik Ibsen: The Man and the Mask*, “It was never Ibsen’s purpose to wage war against bourgeois society, neither in life nor in literature. In time he certainly became a rebel, but he was and remained a bourgeois rebel. . . . Why abandon the dream of the good life?”

Yet Ibsen’s vision inclined toward the tragic. He subjected all the good things he praised—freedom, self-fulfillment, love, nobility, happiness—to the acid test, which revealed every flaw and sometimes dissolved every shred of the ideal. Impediments to happy endings abounded. Ibsen knew how difficult it could be to escape one’s past, even when the failing was not one’s own. The sins of the fathers were indeed visited upon the children, and pain was transmitted in the blood, sometimes literally, down the generations. He also understood that certain goods, most desirable in themselves, may be incompatible with one another—that self-realization in
one’s chosen work may preclude love, or nobility foreclose happiness. He proved, in the lives he imagined, the tragic nature of the liberal order as Isaiah Berlin would later describe it, in which there is no fixed hierarchy of virtues, and ideas evidently of equal worth, such as freedom, nobility, and equality, might not agreeably coexist.

Ibsen felt the need to choose, and he chose nobility. “Democracy’s vital duty is self-ennoblement,” he asserted. When in 1885 the Workers’ Association of Trondheim celebrated his presence in their city with a procession, Beethoven’s choral music, and ringing testimonials, Ibsen reciprocated the warm feeling with a speech. A new nobility or aristocracy must arise and irradiate faltering democracy with its life-enhancing excellence. The critic and translator Michael Meyer quotes at length from these remarks in Ibsen: A Biography:

An element of aristocracy must enter into our political life, our government, our members of parliament and our press. I am of course not thinking of aristocracy of wealth, of learning, or even of ability or talent. I am thinking of aristocracy of character, of mind and of will. That alone can make us free. And this aristocracy, which I hope may be granted to our people, will come to us from two sources, the only two sections of society which have not yet been corrupted by party pressure. It will come to us from our women and from our working men.

Ibsen was not calling for feminist uprising or proletarian revolution. He was “certainly not a supporter of the Left as a party,” as de Figueiredo says. Party types would only interfere with the germination of individual virtue. Men and women of unwavering independence were needed. Ibsen’s pronouncement was sufficiently energetic to be inspiring, yet so vague as to be practically useless. Ibsen imagined the modern self, but not modern society.

The belief that democracy’s highest purpose was not universal equality but the nurturing of select noble souls has had a number of artistic devotees, from Verdi to Frank Lloyd Wright to Saul Bellow; but it flared most brightly in the hopeful days of democracy’s birth, and especially among German-speaking artists and thinkers. Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship, Schiller’s plays and poems and essays, Mozart’s greatest operas, Beethoven’s Fidelio: All these
deprecated the artificial and pernicious nobility of birth and honored the natural nobility of ordinary men and women, which expressed itself in their decency, courage, and strength of will. As democracy ripened, however, the taste for nobility did not enjoy widespread approbation, and Ibsen’s advocacy of the extraordinary ordinary man and woman made his egalitarian good faith suspect. His boldness on this score, his willingness to remove himself from the crowd, showed him a man of rare stature, a singular figure among theater folk.

In the eponymous hero of his first successful play, Brand (1866)—a verse drama in rhymed octosyllabics, never intended for the stage, though it would become a mainstay of Norwegian theater—Ibsen created a character, he said, who reminded him of himself on his best days. That’s a frightening thought. For Brand is the hardest of hard men, a priest who serves with unswerving fidelity the ferocious God made in his own image, and who likens the trial of his devotion to that imposed upon Abraham. “All or Nothing” is his byword, and he despises everyone who cannot live up to the demands of his consuming faith. He refuses to attend his mother on her deathbed because she is unwilling to give all her worldly goods to the church. When the doctor tells him that unless he takes his wife and child someplace warm the boy will not survive the winter, Brand insists that his duty to his congregation must keep him in the freezing mountains. When his son dies, he coldly instructs his sorrowing wife to give the boy’s clothing, which she treasures, to a gypsy beggar, who needs it more than she does. When his wife dies, he is whipsawed between rejoicing at the unfolding of God’s plan for him and despair at the loss of all his earthly loves—and his despair proves his failure to secure his soul’s triumph by his many sacrifices. Brand had believed in his own invincible will, and he willed the loss of all his earthly goods so that he might possess salvation. He embodies faith and hope without charity. Because he lacks the virtue the doctor held up to him, humaneness, the would-be saint turns out to be no more than a mad zealot.

Yet he is manifestly a force—and this quality, not sanctity, interests Ibsen. The Swedish playwright August Strindberg would hear in Brand’s fulminations “the voice of a Savonarola.” As the avalanche that will kill Brand thunders down the mountainside, he demands to know from the source what his life has meant: “Answer me, God, in the moment of death! / If not by Will, how can Man be redeemed?” A voice answers through the uproar: “He is the God of
Love.” Brand has lived the wrong life, for love is just what he lacked. He fails because the only imperative he acknowledges is his own will. The truth comes too late to save him. Brand is what Goethe calls ein Natur. An all-but-irresistible impetus drives him; it seems he cannot do other than he does. Yet all the while, the possibility of changing his life lay before him. Realizing his nature and living his soul’s truth are two different things. His titanic energy and heroic will serve the imperial self, yet leave the soul barren.

Peer Gynt (1867), another verse drama written to be read and not staged, is better known in the English-speaking world for Edvard Grieg’s incidental music than for Ibsen’s script. But the play is a work of genius. The hero is a fabulist who aspires to live up to his own lies, a rascal at best, a scoundrel at worst, and the guiding principle of his life is to be himself, as he declares over and over. The imperial self has a history both noble and degraded, from Goethe’s Bildung or self-development to Nietzsche’s “Become what thou art,” and on down to the vogue for self-actualization that has issued in soft drink commercials exhorting customers to “Be you.” Peer’s wild career runs to the ignoble end of the scale, but he is not without élan. To live a life as bold and marvelous as his inveterate liar’s imagination is his aim, and he is a paragon of energy and determination, however misdirected these virtues may be.

Peer falls in with trolls, mythical underground creatures that represent the darkness in human nature. The Troll King instructs Peer in troll morality: “Men tell each other: ‘Man, be thyself!’ / But in here, among us trolls, we say: / ‘Man, be thyself—and to Hell with the rest of the world!’” Peer’s nature proves basically troll-like. An adventurer without scruples, he makes his fortune as a slave trader and plantation owner in the American South. To be emperor of the whole world is his stated wish, and he schemes at getting gold enough to purchase the position.

In a Cairo madhouse taken over by the inmates, who welcome Peer as the Prophet of Self, he is told that it is lunatics who best embody his credo:

Here we are ourselves with a vengeance;
Ourselves and nothing whatever but ourselves.

https://www.firstthings.com/article/2019/12/ibsens-soulcraft
We go full steam through life under the pressure of self. Each one shuts himself up in the cask of self, Sinks to the bottom by self-fermentation, Seals himself in with the bung of self, And seasons in the well of self. No one here weeps for the woes of others. No one here listens to anyone else's ideas.

When finally he tires of his wanderings, Peer journeys home to Norway, where he hopes to live out a peaceful old age. But on the heath he meets a Button Molder who informs him that he is a nobody—a mediocrity, neither good enough for heaven nor bad enough for hell—and so the Button Molder will melt down Peer's soul in his casting ladle and consign the residue to the junkyard. Peer cannot bear to be thus annihilated; he would rather suffer as himself in hell. After rushing around trying to prove that he is not a nonentity, he comes to the cabin of Solveig, the only woman whom he had ever loved and who never stopped loving him. “Tell me, then!” he begs her. “Where was my self, my whole self, my true self? / The self that bore God's stamp upon its brow?” She answers, “In my faith, in my hope, and in my love.” The evocation of the Christian virtues is patent. Peer collapses in Solveig's arms and she lulls him to sleep. He roved the world in search of a fate magnificent enough to satisfy his extravagant vision of himself, and found that the life he should have been living was with the woman he had left behind. Without admitting it, perhaps even to himself, Peer recognizes that the self with God's stamp is in fact his soul, which faith, hope, and love just might save in spite of him. Ibsen leaves unsettled the question of whether the Button Molder will find Peer Gynt's soul deserving of eternal preservation. But one has reason to hope.

Ibsen spoke of Emperor and Galilean (1873), a historical tragedy in prose, as his masterpiece. Certainly it is his most ambitious work, and rehearses the familiar themes of freedom, will, necessity, salvation, and the joy of life. The play is twice as long as anything else Ibsen wrote, and it has never been staged in England or the United States. The action takes place in Constantinople and various outposts of the Roman Empire between A.D. 351 and 363, and it
encompasses the imperial reigns of Constantius, Gallus, and Julian the Apostate. The state of Julian’s soul is Ibsen’s main concern as the young man struggles to choose between the Christianity of his upbringing and the paganism of his temperament: Will the sensuous and intellectual life he craves cost him salvation?

When my heart longed for the lost world of Greece, the Christian gospel held me back, saying: “One thing only is needed.” When I felt the sweet lust of the flesh, the Prince of Chastity scared me with His: “Let the body suffer that the soul may live!” Every human instinct became sinful from the day when that seer from Galilee began to rule the world. He turned life into death, love and hatred into sin. But did he transform flesh and blood? Has not man remained what he always was, earthbound?

When Julian ascends to the imperial purple, he decrees religious freedom for all so that he himself can embrace paganism. Yet the new emperor cannot rest content with his freedom and vast dominion, for Christ governs men’s souls as the earthly overlord cannot: “What did Alexander of Macedon, what did Julius Caesar win? Greeks and Romans speak of their deeds with cold admiration—while the other, the Galilean, the carpenter’s son, reigns as the King of Love in warm and trusting human hearts.” Influenced by the mystic Maximus, Julian comes to envision himself as the Messiah of the third kingdom, in which the joy of the flesh and the purity of the spirit will be reconciled: “Emperor-God. God-Emperor. Emperor in the kingdom of the spirit, and God in the kingdom of the flesh.” One thinks of Nietzsche’s chimerical ideal, Caesar with the soul of Christ. But the third kingdom is not to be. In battle against the Persians, Julian is brought down by the Christian renegade Agathon, who believes his weapon is the spear of Longinus, the Roman centurion who pierced the side of the crucified Christ.

Ibsen’s Julian exemplifies the nineteenth-century intellectual for whom the divinity of Christ is an impossibility, yet who regrets his loss of faith and hopes for a new secular dispensation to make good the deficit. The pagans get most of the applause lines, but Ibsen gives Christianity its due, even if one suspects his heart is not in it. Julian comes to hate the Galilean as a rival potentate, but he recognizes the allure of Christianity. Julian’s encomia to pagan sweetness and
light are undercut by the savagery of the political world he inhabits. The peaceable Christian virtues and the promise of heaven give believers’ lives a sweetness that the pagan alternative lacks. Ibsen seems not altogether confident in the new secular dispensation.

*A Doll’s House* (1879) may be the most frequently performed work in the repertoire of serious modern drama. Nora Helmer and her husband Torvald appear to be living the bourgeois dream. They take Christian belief for granted as the basis of orderliness and respectability, and invoke it only when catastrophe is imminent. When Nora resolves to leave her husband and children in order to start her life anew, she declares that she has no idea “what religion means.” She has long accepted church teaching without giving it any real thought. But no more: “I want to find out whether what Pastor Hansen said was right—or anyway, whether it is right for me.”

What is “right for me” is Ibsen’s watchword. The radicalism of *A Doll’s House* in its day rested on its presentation of Christian cultural authority as an enemy of the self. The truth of doctrine is a matter to be decided by the autonomous self. No authority is to be taken on faith. Freedom and self-realization are the indispensable virtues. There can be no truly human life without them:

HELMER: First and foremost you are a wife and mother.

NORA: I don’t believe that any longer. I believe that I am first and foremost a human being, like you—or anyway, that I must try to become one.

The play has acquired the status of a founding document for the feminist social justice movement, though Ibsen disclaimed any such intent. In a speech in 1898 to the Norwegian Association for Women’s Rights, he averred: “I have never written any play to further a social purpose. I have been more of a poet and less of a social philosopher than most people seem inclined to believe.” Yet the moralized chiaroscuro in which the characters are drawn and the tendentious cascade of the action serve a social purpose more convincingly than they do the integrity of a work of art. This most esteemed play of Ibsen’s is his most distinguished failure.
In *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, George Bernard Shaw, Ibsen’s most perceptive critic, articulates the master theme of Ibsen’s middle period. The domestic tragedies that made Ibsen’s reputation show the suffering caused—in some cases, the irreparable evil done—by decent people to themselves and their loved ones in the name of some spurious ideal. What appears unimpeachable proves insupportable, unendurable, an enemy of the self. The crumbling of Nora’s unreasoning hope that Torvald will show himself miraculously magnanimous when threatened by scandal propels her out the door. She has put so much stock in her idealized view of marriage that when it collapses there is no place for temperate reconsideration and reconciliation; the whole affair goes up in flames, and all she can do is bolt from the wreckage.

In *Ghosts* (1881), Mrs. Alving sacrifices herself, first to preserve the marriage her husband has defiled, then, once he has died, to enshrine his sterling reputation in order to keep her son from learning the truth. When Oswald Alving, who has lived away from home since he was seven years old, returns to her as a young man, it transpires that he has already learned truth enough. Diagnosed with congenital syphilis, he carries packets of morphine for eventualities, and implores his mother to administer the fatal dose should he become incapacitated. The pathos and horror of the final scene are unequalled in modern theater.

In *An Enemy of the People* (1882), Ibsen knocks the stuffing out of the democratic principle that virtue lies in majority rule. The noble and decent Dr. Stockmann, a public health official in a spa town, defies commercial and political pressure and insists that the lucrative mineral baths, contaminated by industrial waste, be closed down. Whereas Shaw was susceptible to sometimes foolhardy political enthusiasms, Ibsen promotes individual liberty and integrity. His quintessence is ruthless iconoclasm. In *The Wild Duck* (1884), life-giving lies are subjected to fatal scrutiny in the light of high ideals. A self-styled moral colossus, Gregers Werle, eager to atone for his wealthy father’s injustice toward a sometime business partner, intrudes upon the down-at-heel Ekdal family. The Ekdals have been content in their romantic illusions, but Gregers shatters their happiness for the sake of a higher ideal: familial relations founded on absolute honesty. This noble intention not only proves lethal—an innocent young girl is moved to kill herself—but is revealed to be shot through with delusion. Little is left standing when Ibsen is finished.
As in *The Wild Duck*, Shaw writes, so in *Rosmersholm* (1886) Ibsen “insist[s] on the power of ideals to kill.” Rebecca West’s love for the minister-turned-freethinker John Rosmer is instinct with noble aspiration. She longs to help him achieve his rather woolly ambition to ennoble humankind. But both she and Rosmer are plagued by guilt over the suicide of his wife, Beata, who drowned herself in the millrace in order to free Rosmer to marry Rebecca and realize his world-altering project. It turns out that Rosmer can fulfill himself only in innocence, and that is gone for good. The only proof of his nobility and Rebecca’s that Rosmer can now accept is the ultimate renunciation. Rosmer and Rebecca pronounce themselves man and wife and follow Beata into the millrace. In a world in which all ideals kill, there is nothing left but death.

Three of Ibsen’s last plays, *The Master Builder* (1892), *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896), and *When We Dead Awaken* (1899), compose what one might call his purgatorial phase. Ibsen is finished with ordinary middle-class people who speak everyday prose. Now his characters are figures of mastery and fascination, drawn in swift, telling strokes, as though Ibsen had no patience for anything but the human essentials. Their speech bears a lifetime’s condensed significance; they sound like souls raptly explaining the motives that determined their eternal fates. They obsessively revisit the lives they did not live and cling to the hope that all might be put right by one last surge of vital force. The master builder Halvard Solness reckons the cost of his professional success to be his wife’s emotional devastation: “Everything that I have created, beautiful, secure and friendly—yes, and magnificent too!—I must sit here and expiate. Pay for it. Not with money. But with human happiness.” The financial wizard and convicted embezzler Borkman insists he could not have acted differently than he did, as he pursued a fantastic scheme of wealth creation, for his own glory and the general benefit, to which ambition he sacrificed the woman he claimed to love: “People don’t understand that I had to because I was myself—because I was John Gabriel Borkman—and no one else!” The renowned sculptor Arnold Rubek attempts to atone for his failure to return the love of his former model, consumed as he was with his art: “Then let us two dead people live life to the full for one short hour before we go down again into our graves!” Again and again the imperious self, wanting what it wants, virtually unhinged by the intensity of its desire, loses the chance for love and happiness, then grasps for it too late.
In the essay “Ibsen’s New Drama,” the young James Joyce rhapsodized about his hero as the influential intellect of the age: “It may be questioned whether any man has held so firm an empire over the thinking world in modern times. Not Rousseau; not Emerson; not Carlyle; not any of those giants of whom almost all have passed out of human ken.” Ibsen delivered Joyce from soulcraft and opened up new possibilities of self-realization. A Norwegian magazine piece that appeared after the publication of Rosmersholm presented a stark choice for those who value their souls: “Christ or Ibsen.” It is the choice between obeying the commands of the soul and following the caprices of the self. Modern man delights in self-creation. The modern self is the product of unencumbered human will and can be whatever it chooses. The self is importunate, with endless desires, the soul peremptory, with the one thing needful. The self opens out; the soul closes upon.

Ibsen retains his potency today, as Christ’s dwindles. He professes absolute freedom amid the boundless proliferation of choice. As he depicts the damaging effects of traditional soulcraft, he reassures—for Christ makes demands that liberated selves are loath to accept. Ibsen’s turn of mind has become the default position of the liberal intelligence. People who have never seen or read his plays think and feel as he taught his audience to do. Yet the choice remains a live one. To follow nature has been the philosophers’ ideal, from Plato to John Stuart Mill to Nietzsche. But in the modern era, “nature” has been individualistic. We are, paradoxically, to follow ourselves: The self serves only the ideal of the self. Christianity proposes something quite different.

To honor the soul’s imperative requires overcoming one’s nature and living under the aspect of eternity, in the light of the miracle of the Word made flesh. The skepticism that probes every established truth for weakness stands against the belief that the truth was revealed once and for all when God himself came down to live and die and live again among men. To recognize no authority but our own mind and will, or to submit to an unearthly power and its appointed earthly representatives: That is the choice before us. The stakes are high when we go to see an Ibsen play.
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