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What is the Word:
Late Beckett Throbbing Between Drama and Poetry

Edited by Rosy Colombo

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Late Beckett Throbbing Between Drama and Poetry

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Francesco Marroni, *Henrik Ibsen e la spettralizzazione del reale*[1]

Abstract

Francesco Marroni's last volume, *Henrik Ibsen e la spettralizzazione del reale*, engages with a sustained analysis of Ibsen's play *Ghosts*, though also offering a very broad assessment of the playwright's oeuvre, the genesis of many of his works, and his reception in Europe, especially in the UK. The present article provides an overall commentary on Marroni's volume and discusses its originality and role within Ibsen studies in Italy and abroad.

Keywords: Francesco Marroni; Henrik Ibsen; *Ghosts*; George Bernard Shaw

In his latest volume, the outcome of many years of study and intellectual sedimentation, Francesco Marroni presents a comprehensive reading of Ibsen's oeuvre while mainly concentrating on *Ghosts* (1881) – possibly the most controversial among the playwright's works. *Ghosts* is described as "a dynamite act, an anarchic as much as immoral work, a true gesture of subversion against both institutions and readers" (66),[2] and on account of all this can be considered as a real masterpiece in theatrical history. To a close analysis of the play Marroni devotes the dense central chapter of his book. Before that, the first chapter provides an exemplary critical-biographical introduction through which Marroni demonstrates how Ibsen's principal dramatic texts are haunted by the phantoms of his personal past. The argument is astutely pursued and substantiated in the third and last chapter, which focuses on a crucial event happening when the playwright was just eighteen, i.e., the birth of his illegitimate son Hans Jacob, with whom Ibsen always refused to establish any relationship, even denying him a final reconciliation forty years later. Arousing unfounded fears and suspicions on his own illegitimacy, Hans Jacob's birth exacerbated Ibsen's phobias and paranoias, so much so that various obsessive themes in his corpus may be more or less directly traced back to it. Precisely such ghosts of the

[1] Chieti: Solfanelli, 2025. ISBN 978-88-3305-613-5, pp. 122.

[2] Unless stated otherwise, all translations from Italian are mine.

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imagination are taken by Marroni as a hermeneutic key to explore Ibsen's tendency to spectralise reality – a process which is somehow reminiscent of the poetics of Vernon Lee, a transcultural author mainly writing in English and, not too surprisingly, an admirer of Ibsen's work. The possible Ibsen-Lee connection may offer yet another explanation for Ibsen's considerable success in the Anglophone fin de siècle, which is a point Marroni often highlights in the volume. Reflecting on the ghostly presences that always haunt the human mind and that she views as essential to produce art and literature, Lee describes them as

> things of the imagination, born there, bred there, sprung from the strange confused heaps, half-rubbish, half treasure, which lie in our fancy, heaps of half-faded recollections, of fragmentary vivid impressions, litter of multi-coloured tatters, and faded herbs and flowers, whence arises that odour (we all know it), musty and damp, but penetratingly sweet and intoxicatingly heady, which hangs in the air when the ghost has swept through the unopened door, and the flickering flames of candle and fire start up once more after waning. (1890, ix-x)

Although the passage draws on typical imagery from her Aesthetic-Decadent milieu (flowers, scents, impressions, synaesthesia), Lee – like Ibsen – recognises the importance of certain spectral presences in artistic genesis. In the introductory note to *Hauntings. Fantastic Stories* (1890), she explains that these ghosts have nothing to do with the supernatural, nor with mediumistic powers. "They exist" – she maintains – "only in our minds, in the minds of those dead folk; they have never stumbled and fumbled about […] among the arm-chairs and rep sofas of reality" (ix). It follows that these ghosts are, on the contrary, subjective constructions upon which the creative faculty depends. Furthermore, they derive almost always from our personal past, or sometimes from the collective past – from history – as she again argues,

> That is the thing — the Past, the more or less remote Past, of which the prose is clean obliterated by distance — that is the place to get our ghosts from. Indeed we live ourselves, we educated folk of modern times, on the borderland of the Past, in houses looking down on its troubadours' orchards and Greek folks' pillared courtyards; and a legion of ghosts, very vague and changeful, are perpetually to and fro, fetching and carrying for us between it and the Present. (x-xi)

Marroni adopts a very similar point of view in his interpretation of Ibsen's work. By doing so, he also brings to the fore his own outstanding role as a critic and academic, which was itself the outcome of the reworking of past experiences, obsessions, and reconsiderations. With great intellectual honesty, in the volume's Preface Marroni reveals the nature of the ghosts haunting

his imagination and intellectual experience, in a sort of *mise en abîme*, or also a game of mirrors, between Ibsen and himself. Marroni's relationship with Ibsen's work and the reasons that led him to return to it after his years as a student, when that work was revealed to him in a kind of epiphanic moment, are essential to understand the processes of personal and artistic spectralisation underlying *Henrik Ibsen e la spettralizzazione del reale*.

Shifting the focus to the main topic of the volume – i.e., the ghosts of the mind that inhabit all of Ibsen's texts – the first chapter explores the playwright's impoverished childhood and youth after his father's disastrous bankruptcy, whose effects were dramatic and long-lasting. Barely a teenager, Henrik had no other choice but to leave school and become an apothecary's apprentice away from home. He consequently became his own master and ended up educating himself through voracious readings of Latin classics (Sallust and Cicero), of novels (Scott and Dickens in particular), and of his intellectual model Voltaire – all texts and authors that unfortunately would not enable him to gain admission to the University of Christiania (present-day Oslo). The event resulted in a more acute sense of defeat, while also increasing the suspicion towards the academically-educated figures that often surfaces in several of his works. Nevertheless, his unwavering confidence in his own talent and literary ambition – which became even stronger after he finally gave up the dream of becoming a painter – led him to the composition of his first plays in his early twenties: the verse tragedies *Catiline* (1849) and *The Burial Mound* (1850). Despite the rejections and criticism encountered by these early dramas, both Ibsen's marginal position in Norwegian theatre and his outsider status within the Lutheran society of his country – once again generated by the aforementioned personal ghosts – unexpectedly proved to be ideal vantage points to lay bare the contradictions and hypocrisies of both worlds. These themes, and other motifs related to them, were later transposed into drama.

However, in antithesis to the hostility of the national establishment, Marroni observes how Ibsen always showed a rare ability to forge fruitful intellectual relationships and collaborations, especially in the Scandinavian circles abroad he frequented during the long periods spent in Italy and Germany. Despite such consent, it was in England in particular that Ibsen found his most receptive audience among such avant-garde intellectuals as William Archer, Edmund Gosse, and George Bernard Shaw. The volume draws attention to various episodes in Ibsen's life (his irregular education, the family's financial collapse and the consequent need for him to learn a trade, his steadfast faith in his abilities, etc.) that indicate analogies with the struggles and personality of Shaw, a playwright greatly indebted to Ibsen and to whom Marroni has devoted substantial scholarly attention in recent years. In 2022 Marroni's research led to the edition of a prestigious collective

volume, *George Bernard Shaw. Teatro* (published by Bompiani), which features Shaw's major plays in new Italian translations and with new critical introductions; in the following year, then, Marroni edited a special issue of the important academic journal *RSV. Rivista di studi vittoriani* devoted to the Irish dramatist. Both publications emphasise Shaw's deep debt towards Ibsen and explain how, conversely, much of Ibsen's success in the Anglophone world – as already noted – depended on Shaw (suffice here to mention the groundbreaking essay *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, 1891). Despite the opposition and suspicion encountered in Scandinavian countries, Ibsen was thus acclaimed in London for his anti-bourgeois and controversial themes. This was mainly due to a very thriving theatrical scene, that included not only Shaw but also Gosse – the author of reviews, translations, and the monograph *Henrik Ibsen* (1908) – and Archer, himself a dramatist, theatre critic, and translator. It was indeed in Archer's English version that *Ghosts* premiered in 1891 at London's Independent Theatre, a private institution founded to circumvent censorship by the Lord Chamberlain, who had banned the play from public theatres. Shaw's early comedies would also be staged under the aegis of the Independent Theatre Society.

Another point of contact between Ibsen and Shaw lies in their common interest in ancient Roman history. In Ibsen, this inspired the above-mentioned drama *Catiline*, based on the reading of Sallust and Cicero though most probably composed in ignorance of the rich literary tradition stemming from the story of the conspirator;[3] in Shaw, on the other hand, the Roman past proved inspirational for the historical play *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1899). Surprisingly enough, whereas Shaw openly acknowledged precise intertextual presences in his work through his debt towards Shakespeare (to both *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Julius Caesar*), Ibsen confessed to have never read Shakespeare's Roman plays before writing *Catiline*. In addition, he even declared to have known the Bard's corpus only superficially at the time. Nevertheless, thematic points of contact suggest potential intellectual dialogues between Ibsen and Shaw even in the absence of direct influence, pointing to shared artistic paths and aesthetic visions.

Marroni devotes a sustained analysis to Ibsen's self-imposed exile in Germany and Italy, which began in 1864 and lasted for twenty-seven years. After that, when he had finally achieved international fame, the author returned to Christiania. Exile was for him a radical choice, necessarily shared by his wife Suzannah and son Sigurd (who would be the Prime Minister of Norway from 1903 to 1905), through which – as Marroni argues – Ibsen

[3] The most famous plays based on the Catiline and published before Ibsen were Ben Jonson's *Catiline his Conspiracy* (1613), Jolyot de Crébillon's *Catilina* (1748), Voltaire's *Rome Sauvée* (1750), and Dumas *père*'s *Catilina* (1848).

wanted to offer an image of himself as an unappreciated and misunderstood artist, unjustly ostracised in his homeland. Only by radically detaching from his country, then, was Ibsen able to devote himself body and soul to reading the signs of his time, interpreting historical and social change, and bringing to the surface what few writers of his age could clearly grasp and shape into art. His determination to live life as an *exul immeritus* also suggests Ibsen's desire to position himself as "an *oppositional* Norwegian" (15) – that is to say, a Norwegian whose poetics and work kept on questioning the culture and society he was born into, as well as an artist who made of this questioning his life's mission. Such a kind of self-fashioning seems to anticipate the motives and dynamics underlying Joyce's departure from Ireland together with Nora Barnacle four decades later. For both authors, exile was construed as indispensable to the full expression of literary talent: a perspective illustrated by Shaw – himself a voluntary exile from Ireland – when he in hindsight described the artists of his generation who had chosen to abandon their mother-country,

> Every Irishman who felt that his business in life was on the higher planes of the cultural professions felt that he must have a metropolitan domicile and an international culture: that is, he felt that his first business was to get out of Ireland. (1930, xxxiv)

Given these statements, it may be helpful to rediscuss the analogies and overlaps, primarily thematic, between Ibsen and Shaw, especially considering how much they seem to have influenced Marroni's decision to dedicate a monograph to the first after having been so intensely engaged with the second. What primarily connects the two playwrights is their critique of the bourgeois value system and its hypocrisies, and it is particularly Shaw's first drama, *Widowers' Houses* (1892), set in a contemporary middle-class milieu, that bears clear signs of Ibsen's influence. The play centres on a critique of the housing system at the basis of Victorian urban landscapes and, by doing so, reveals how all characters, even those more oppositional to the establishment, are ultimately stuck on the same unjust socioeconomic dynamics to which they conform out of convenience. Similarly, *Ghosts* concentrates on the construction of a place designed for communal welfare, but in fact meant to perpetuate the economic and social hegemony of a small plutocratic elite over the many. The projected facility is an orphanage in memory of Captain Alving, a respected member of the town whose probity is, however, only superficial. In the final act of *Ghosts*, a fire burns down the whole building.

From an intratextual perspective, *Ghosts* is presented by Marroni as thematically homogeneous to *A Doll's House* (1879), although the two plays end in opposite ways: while Nora slams the door behind her and abandons the family, determined to pursue self-assertion, Mrs Alving, a devoted wife

and mother, accepts the role society imposes on her gender, thus conforming her life to a false narrative of marital devotion, in what Marroni describes as a "distortion of reality" (8). Her awakening comes too late, when the syphilis – a patent metaphor for both mental and moral issues – transmitted to their son through her husband becomes terminal, hence undermining the bourgeois family at its roots. Here we encounter one of the many literary variations of the biblical motif of the sins of the fathers being visited upon the children, which is likewise developed by Shaw in *Mrs Warren's Profession*, as well as by Wilde in *A Woman of No Importance*, the most serious of his comedies of society (both dramas were written in 1893). In their Ibsenian problem plays, however, both Wilde and Shaw reject biblical determinism by setting the younger generation free from the prejudice and bigotry of the past. Despite the finale, Ibsen once again emerges as a source of inspiration for two of the most famous Irish playwrights ever, while his fraught relationship with Scandinavian culture echoes the ambivalent and complex, yet enduring, ties that Shaw and Wilde, but also Joyce, developed with their homeland. In all of them, one perceives both an awareness of the provincialism of their native culture and, on the other hand, a recognition of its universality.

Frequently urging the reader to set Ibsen's corpus against transnational and transcultural dialogues, and offering consistently convincing and compelling exegetic insights, Marroni situates his book within the wider tradition of major Italian criticism on Ibsen, from Scipio Slataper to Antonio Gramsci, from Alberto Savinio to Franco Perrelli, to Claudio Magris and Franco Moretti. Yet, although he fully acknowledges the importance of all of them, on the other hand this never challenges the originality of his own approach in *Henrik Ibsen e la spettralizzazione del reale*. Marroni's study offers new and astute interpretive keys to assess previous criticism and theoretical discourses on Ibsen, both within and beyond Italy. This is so evident that the book can be easily placed among the foremost contemporary international scholarship on the playwright, whose starting point can be identified in Raymond Williams's seminal *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (1968). Marroni himself refers to Williams's essay as not only an essential reference for his own research, but also as the first work to have redirected Ibsen's reception inside and outside British culture after Shaw's aforementioned *Quintessence of Ibsenism*. If, therefore, at the beginning of *Henrik Ibsen e la spettralizzazione del reale* Marroni declares that the book represents the first result of his rigorous and passionate research on Ibsen – thus hopefully promising a productive continuation of the critical journey here begun – it would be highly desirable that he also provide an English translation of the present work. This would ensure a broader and more effective dissemination of his vision, which undoubtedly finds its rightful place in today's global reception of Ibsen.

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