

SHAW AND IBSEN

— Problems of Ideal and Idealist —

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George Bernard Shaw held a lecture series on Ibsen for the Fabian Society in 1890 and the series was published in book form in the following year, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*. The book has until today been acknowledged as one of the most challenging and controversial interpretations of the works of Ibsen. Shaw tried to analyze Ibsen's dramas mainly through the two key words, ideal and idealist from beginning to the end. He re-evaluated the two terms, or in his own words, brought about a transvaluation⁽¹⁾ of the terms after Ibsen. In this paper I would like to follow Shaw's enunciation on these terms and analyze the content and how they changed or didn't change in the course of the years through the year of the lecture, the year when the obituary was written and the year when a small article was written, i. e. 1938.

Let me first examine Shaw's definition of the terms from *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*. According to Shaw man cannot face inexorable and threatening facts. Therefore a man masks them and avoids facing the grim faces of them. Now man comes to think that all the masks are real and to act on that assumption. He accepts such action as standard moral conduct and forces this on others. Thus masks become his ideals and this policy upon masks becomes idealism.

This is very far from the traditional definition of the terms. Traditionally ideals have been accepted as object or condition a man should pursue to be realized in this world or in his life time. It is the object which is desirable and respectable if not obtainable and attainable during his lifetime. Needless to say the notion of the ideal can be traced back to Plato and it has constituted a vast range of historical mountains in Western European intellectual life both individually and socially. The ideal is an

object which usually one cannot see for this very moment as an existing one. It belongs to the future, unseen and beyond this world. Therefore it is always taken for granted that there remains some inevitable gap between the existing condition or reality and the desirable condition or ideal. The ideal thus possesses inevitably as its attributes the unfulfilled yearning and expectation. In some cases they turn out to be mere fantasy, illusions and blindness, and idealist as fantast, daydreamer and illusionist just as Aeschylus was made fun of by his Athenian citizens because of his absentmindedness.

As Keith M. May points out, Shaw was a moralist before he was a man of letters⁽²⁾ and he had been doubtful and suspicious of existing conditions of ideals in general. He also realized the unconscious cheating of human reasoning which easily takes the ideas uttered for the reality realized. Man is in many cases not brave enough to acknowledge ideals as ideals and reality as reality. This is often caused by man's lack of tenacious reasoning power which Shaw very highly valued but above all by the lack of the ethical courage to recognize and accept the reality as it is. This is probably one of man's greatest tragedies and a source of agony or joy for him. However, this in positive cases could turn out to be a source of energy for constituting new ideas and thus to interpret the world and man in a new perspective, thus a birth of a new ideal.

The point of departure for Shaw is the fact that people come to be confined in a small world where illusions come to occupy the ruling position with the masks of ideals. This is the very world that Max Weber appropriately called *Zaubergarten* (magic garden) in his sociology of religion.

Then how did he inquire into the characters or motives in Ibsen's dramas utilizing these terms?

Brand was described as an idealist of heroic earnestness, *Peer Gynt* as a man who pursues the ideal of unconditional self-realization, Julian in *Emperor and Galilean* as the reincarnation of Peer Gynt with some modifications. *A Doll's House* handles the theme of the happy family life as the idealist's dream, *Enemy of the People* that of middle-class domestic and social ideals versus commercial political ideals. Gregers Werle in *The*

Wild Duck is characterized as an idealist of the advanced type and an idealist mischief-maker. *Rosmersholm* is observed from the viewpoint of the danger of forming ideals for other people. In *Lady from the Sea* Shaw discerned the origin of ideals in dissatisfaction with the real.

When Shaw published *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* in 1891, Ibsen had not yet written his later four plays. In the 1913 edition of the book Shaw resumed his quest for the ideal and idealism in Ibsen's dramas. *Bygmester Solness* was a dreamer. In *Little Eyolf* "the worst, because the commonest and the most intimate cases of idealism"⁽³⁾ is sought after in family life. However, reference to the terms was discontinued after this drama. In *John Gabriel Borkmann* and *When We Dead Awaken* the word "ideal" appears only once, in the former "idealization of gold" and the latter "the sculptor's ideal is a virgin" respectively. And about the last drama *When We Dead Awaken* Shaw said that "Morality and reformation give place to immortality and resurrection."⁽⁴⁾ Here is found some change of attitude toward ideal or morality. In this point Wisenthal's characterization of this process as "the need to face the facts has given way to the need to change them"⁽⁵⁾ seems to meet the point. This, however, does not mean that Shaw ignored the problem. On the contrary he concluded the lecture on Ibsen's last play saying, "The end, too let us hope, of the idols, domestic, moral, religious and political in whose name we have been twaddled into misery and confusion and hypocrisy unspeakable. For Ibsen's dead hand still keeps the grip he laid on their masks when he first tore them off . . ."⁽⁶⁾

Now I have purposely omitted mentioning *Ghosts* and *Hedda Gabler*, for I would like to examine them a little bit in detail. *Ghosts* seems to have been the very drama which incited Shaw to think over the problematics of ideal and idealist. Here he profusely uttered the word ideal and it genuinely proves to be affective and valid for the analysis of the drama. Shaw's proposition on the two terms developed and evolved exclusively around the question of marriage and sexual ethics in the 19th century European society and *Ghosts* centers in on this problem.

Mrs. Alving's life, fully dedicated to the ideal family life under strong advice by Pastor Manders and consequently dedicated to the debauched

husband, might be able to be called venerable and sublime from a certain point of view. As Schopenhauer said in *The World as Will and Ideas*, a life filled with agony and the figure of man who endures it evoke an emotion of awe among us. There is emitted something noble and awesome which moves us. Her dedication to the ideal might have generated some satisfaction in her mind because she was in a way conscious that she had been faithful toward the ideal, namely duty. Very strict formalism seems to produce some kind of satisfaction in the mind of a performer because of his systematic consistency of behaviour. Her tragedy however was deep and it came over her two times. Her only hope, her son, was to be victimized by his father's debauchery. Is the family ideal, faithfulness toward one's husband, worth sacrificing one's life for twice? Ideals are for the better, loftier and more meaningful life not for the desolate, gloomy and chilly state of mind.

It was the irony of Ibsen to juxtapose the ideal family life and venereal disease, the noble and the base. However, these two do not absolutely exclude each other as is well known. Ibsen's explicit treatment toward uncritical reverence of ideals which came to lead to a shameful disease was very poignant and sensationally affected the ruling Victorian morals of the time. This iconoclasm by Ibsen by way of challenge to the ideal family life appealed to Shaw indomitably.

Then how about *Hedda Gabler*? Shaw said "Hedda Gabler has not ethical ideals but only romantic ones. She falls into the abyss between ideals which are not imposing on and realities which are not discovered . . . She is void of any other standard of conduct than conformity to the conventional ideals."⁽⁷⁾ That Hedda has no ethical ideals is apprehended by Shaw as one of the main reasons why Hedda spent her life so aimlessly. And that she only followed the conventional ideals means that she followed conventional way of living in certain crucial moments of her life. So here the word ideal has neither a positive nor a negative value. It only signifies the neutral colorless mode of life.

Further Shaw said what Hedda wanted was the courage to do wrong and he called "this monstrous but very common setting-up of wrong-doing as an ideal" as "unlooked-for reaction of idealism."⁽⁸⁾

One cannot help suspecting here that the terms "ideal" and "idealism" are used with a different implication from that in *Ghosts*. In the second and third quotations ideals and idealism are not principles which would hamper man's vivacious development of life but that highly respectable objective man should follow through his life. Therefore it is desirable that wrong-doing would not be set up as an ideal and man usually does not look for wrong-doing as reaction of idealism. Evidently the two terms are given here a positive and desirable import, namely they are used in terms of traditional, classical or conventional connotations.

The similar thing could be pointed out in the word "idealism" when Shaw said that "Hedda is free from idealism which is imposing on." This is the idealism which one like Hedda despises and rejects sharply as mediocre banality. In this context Keith M. May's saying that "Hedda rightly realized that the niceness of the nice people such as Tessman, Miss Tessman and Thea is a piece with their illusions"⁽⁹⁾ somehow meets the point. For May's term "illusions" is interchangeable with "idealism". As May continues, Hedda knew that "reality escapes them since it can't be contained by social decency". However, what are their illusions? Don't they discover in another man's character and accomplishment something worthy of dedicating their life to? And isn't this a spark which ignites respectable idealism? It would be undeniable that the idealism here holds of something noble, which Hedda flatly rejected and wouldn't recognize. Thus the circle of idealism closes at the starting point.

While *Ghosts* turned out to be an indispensable source of contemplation for Shaw to revalue the terms, *Hedda Gabler* presented much more complicated elements and factors in an idealism which rejects the plain approach by a single definition. Shaw naturally recognized this and said "We unfortunately use this word ideal indifferently to denote both the institution which the ideal masks and the mask itself, thereby producing desperate confusion of thought."⁽¹⁰⁾ Like everything in man's life the ideal consists of two facets, a noble and beautiful facet and a ghastly and repellent one.

Shaw neither tried to propose a very elaborate theory on philosophical or ethical terms nor did he propose a meticulous exposition on Ibsen's

dramas. His main objective was not a logical consistency in every minute point of his exposition but a logical turnover of traditional values through his interpretation of Ibsen's dramas. Weber designated the process of breaking down of that Zaubergarten Entzauberung der Welt (liberation of the world from the magic) and this was what Shaw intended to bring about through his new definition of the two terms even in a small scale. In other words his intention was to cause uneasiness and confusion in man's mind which has adjusted itself comfortably with the eyes closed to conventionality. In this context his proposition would be all the more appealing for its rough yet powerful scheme.

In 1906 Ibsen died and a week after his death Shaw's obituary was published in *Clarion*. Shaw stressed and praised here again Ibsen as an iconoclast saying that Ibsen showed contempt for "squalid idolatry which modern respectability called idealism."⁽¹¹⁾ Shaw's insistence on ideal and idealism was never extinguished. Nearly two thirds of the obituary was occupied by the refutation of Ibsen's alleged influence over both him and the British drama world of the time. So his main purpose in the obituary seems to lie in cautioning against imminating cannonization of Ibsen than commonplace eulogy for Ibsen.

In spite of this shift of accentuation Shaw concluded his obituary, "Ibsen's dramas are for cultivated modern people and they lay souls bare and were illumination of life for us."⁽¹²⁾

In 1938 at the age of 82 Shaw contributed a small article for a Norwegian newspaper published in New York saying "I have not a word of my *Quintessence of Ibsenism* written in my early thirties, to withdraw or delete now that I am in my early eighties."⁽¹³⁾ Shaw's interpretation of Ibsen through reevaluation of the terms had remained unchanged for some fifty years and in this context he had been loyal to Ibsen or his own interpretation from his encounter with Ibsen up to his death.

Then there would be the question: if Shaw was loyal to Ibsen in such a long time in spite of some small vicissitudes as Wisenthal examined in detail, could one call this reevaluation of the terms by Shaw as one example of Ibsen's influence? In other words, did Shaw change and reorient the definition of terms because of his encounter with Ibsen?

Shaw's posture and utterances had been suspicious and ironical toward conventional ideas and morals long before his encounter with Ibsen. His involvement with Ibsen's works fortified and intensified his doubts over them and eventually it came to help him consolidate his own evaluation of the phenomena and empty jargon.

All the conventions that man has held for hundreds of years as desirable or natural objectives were assembled and integrated by Shaw under the designation of fantasies, illusions and ultimately as ideals. In *Ghosts* there are exchanged the following conversations between Pastor Manders and Mrs. Alving.

MANDERS Is there no voice in your mother's heart that forbids you to destroy your son's ideals?

MRS. ALVING But what about the truth?

MANDERS But what about the ideals?

MRS ALVING Oh! Ideals! Ideals! If only I weren't such a coward!⁽¹⁴⁾

Shaw seemed to pay attention to the use of the word here, to develop his own thinking and to express this in his lecture. Could one call this process influence?

Theory and practice of influence have been discussed and analyzed by many literary critics. Claudio Guillén in his *The Aesthetics of Influence* says that influence would be defined "as a recognizable and significant part of the genesis of a literary work of art . . . influences are forces that introduce themselves into the process of creation, so to speak, from the outside . . . élans and incitations which carry the genetic *movement* further, and allow the artist to pursue this elaboration of expressive forms."⁽¹⁵⁾

It is one thing to establish a theory of influence and another to put it into practice or apply it for the analysis of an existing work. But anyway here is no doubt a very interesting concept of influence as genetic incitation. The term could be applied not only to literature but also to other genres of art and spiritual activities.

In the case of Shaw's proposition, it is certain that he received impetus and suggestions from Ibsen's works. He said in *Quintessence*, "I

shall make a digression on the subject of ideals and idealists, as treated by Ibsen . . . and then at last I shall be in a position to describe Ibsen's plays without risk of misunderstanding."⁽¹⁶⁾

There are even cases in which an author himself acknowledges "influences" from others saying, for example, the words of gratitude to certain people, it does not necessarily mean that this certain author has gotten "influence" from this or that specific person. However, in this case one can admit intimate literary relation between Shaw and Ibsen from Shaw's own words as well.

Then how about his terminology? His exposition on the terms would not be called an entirely new breakthrough in its way of thinking. Many have pointed out the same phenomena in different ways and perspectives more thoroughly. As said above Shaw payed attention to the dialogues in *Ghosts* and theoreticized them in his own words as he himself admitted. This could hardly be called literary influence. He enlarged and explained Ibsen's messages according to his understanding, just as Marxists do to the writings by Marx. It would be more appropriate to denote this a form of reception and rearrangement of Ibsen's dramas by George Bernard Shaw.

Notes

1. Wisenthal, J. L., *Shaw and Ibsen, Bernard Shaw's The Quintessence of Ibsenism and Related Writings*, University of Toronto Press, 1979, p. 255.
2. May, Keith M., *Ibsen and Shaw*, The Macmillan Press, 1985, p. 80.
3. Wisenthal, J. L., op. cit. p. 177.
4. *ibid.* p. 173
5. *ibid.* p. 37.
6. *ibid.* p. 193.
7. *ibid.* p. 168.
8. *ibid.* p. 171.
9. May, Keith M., op. cit. p. 83
10. Wisenthal, J. L., op. cit. p. 121
11. *ibid.* p. 241.
12. *ibid.* p. 245.

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13. *ibid.* p. 257.
 14. translation by William Archer, London, 1890.
 15. Guillén, Claudio, *Literature as System*, Princeton University Press, 1971, p. 30—31.
 16. Wisenthal, J. L., *op. cit.* p. 117.

All the quotations from *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* are from the 1913 edition.

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