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Francesco Marroni, *Henrik Ibsen e la spettralizzazione del reale*, Chieti, Solfanelli, 2025, pp. 122, ISBN 9788833056135

In this intellectually stimulating monograph, where elements of textual and literary analysis come coupled with historical and (meta)biographical insights, Francesco Marroni takes us on a reading journey that is both enjoyable and compelling. Interspersed with graphic moments through which the author zooms in on relevant episodes and phases of Henrik Ibsen's life, this work presents itself as a hybrid and nuanced experiment. Written in an elegant and captivating style, *Henrik Ibsen e la spettralizzazione del reale* (*Henrik Ibsen and the Spectralisation of the Real*)[1] seems to smooth out technicalities in favour of a narrative strategy that, while never going to the detriment of factual evidence, succeeds in establishing an intimate dialogue with the reader.

What is more, this vivid storytelling mode functions as an antidote to the saturnine subcurrent of the spectralisation motif, to be conceived in the psycho-sociological terms of a haunting reality, or past, that the distraught mind takes pains to repress until ghostly traces of it are bound to resurface, whether along the glaring lines of an anxiety-ridden 'uncanny', or as mesmerising, less palpable forces that still exert a disquieting, even paralysing power. The latter seems to be the case when it comes to Marroni's portrayal of the eminent Norwegian playwright, whose life parable is reconstructed via an engaging, well-pondered combination of dramatic *tranche-de-vie* focusings and a panoply of flashbacks and contextual details.

In addition to this, when immersing oneself in the book, one gets the impression of entering a Woolfian 'semi-transparent envelope' where a stream of perceptions is carefully sifted out as if through an entrancingly suffused lens. While proceeding to disentangle meaning from the 'cotton wool' of mundane existence, such a hermeneutic filter can be seen as permeating Marroni's tale with, so to speak, a glow of cold light. Besides tying in with the ideas of spotlighting and denouement in a metadramatic sense, this glow generates a vaguely eerie atmosphere from start to finish. Needless to say, the theatrical effect and lurking mood are in full consonance with the notion of 'spectralisation', i.e. the psychological process of systematically reducing situated (traumatic, worrisome) experience to the bare bones of a (harmless?) simulacrum, in a weird state of suspension between corporality and absence, past and present, material attachments and emotional distance. In Marroni's study, to put it concisely, spectralisation turns into an all-encompassing interpretative category. A stylistic feature and a topic in the same breath, it works as an exegetic tool at various levels,

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[1] Unless otherwise specified, all the English translations of titles, sentences and single words from the book are mine.

from Ibsen's attitudes, reactions and defence mechanisms to his personal, socio-political and professional relations, to finally reverberate through his artistic modes of representation and critique. This is notably true for his play *Ghosts* (1881, first staged in 1882 in the United States), whose original title was *Gengangere*, a powerful hint at 'those who return', entities resisting utter obliteration.

In the "Prefazione" ("Preface", pp. 5-10), Marroni seals his communicative pact with the reader by declaring that he has dealt with Ibsen's life chronicle "con lo spirito di un narratore che decide di raccontare le vicissitudini di uno scrittore" ("with the spirit of a narrator who decides to recount the vicissitudes of a writer", p. 8), often doing so by means of the rhetorical device of a "focalizzazione ravvicinata del personaggio, raffigurato quasi in presa diretta" ("a direct focus on the character, depicted as though in real-time reporting", *ibidem*). Enthralled by Ibsen's theatre since he was a university student, he recently rediscovered it under British eyes, as it were, when assessing George Bernard Shaw's *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891) for a landmark critical edition of a selection of Shaw's prefaces and plays, translated into Italian and published by Bompiani in 2022. Marroni joins the chorus of critics who have hailed Ibsen as a founding father of modern realistic drama in the contentious *fin-de-siècle* transition to the twentieth century, and seems to be particularly fascinated by the fact that the Norwegian artist undertook that in a self-restrained, secretive way that would nonetheless ignite the fire of an all-out attack on social hypocrisy and misconduct, masks and conformism. Indeed, in spite of his introverted and shy temperament, Ibsen proved capable of shocking middle-class people out of their complacency, tearing away the veil of their 'fictional constructions' with surgical precision and pointing the finger at their foul secrets (from corruption and sexist prejudice to marital infidelity, venereal disease and incest). Thinking of *Ghosts*, what is provokingly exhibited on stage is in fact an assembly of de-humanised simulacra, a parade of mostly *spectralised* figures in the grip of their flaws and fears.

These elements are expanded from various angles in the three following sections of the book. Chapter 1, "Invenzione di un inizio inimitabile" ("The Invention of a Unique Beginning", pp. 11-51), provides snapshots of Ibsen's life by teasingly starting *in medias res* and with reference to precise chronotopical coordinates: 25 June 1867, Casamicciola municipality, island of Ischia. We are thus ushered into one of the geographical backdrops of the playwright's self-imposed exile away from his censorious nation of origin. As a matter of fact, Italy revealed itself as a supporting host country for Ibsen, who lived in Rome, Ischia, and Sorrento (1864-1868, 1878-1885), besides long stays in Germany (1868-1878, 1885-1891). Although his financial conditions continued to be poor, during his earliest 1860s Italian sojourns he seemed to be recovering energy and his talent for writing (and painting). In particular, the landscape of the southern part of the peninsula, with its breathtaking sea views and quiet pace of life, gave him some salutary respite.

Marroni intends to capture one of those fleeting happier moments, coinciding with the eve of Suzannah's birthday (Suzannah Daae Thoresen, Ibsen's wife), as if this close-up might synecdochically preannounce the hard-won success that lay ahead. In that period, the author was actually concentrating on the composition of his ambitious play in verse *Peer Gynt*. Meanwhile, however, the spectre of poverty and hostility was to take up

residence with the expatriate family and refuse to let go. Being physically miles away from Norway, in the dear company of his wife and his son Sigurd, would not readily set Ibsen on the road to unconcerned obliviousness. Symptoms of estrangement and mechanisms of para-neurotic defence did come into play as well, from a tendency to procrastinate and find a sublimating escape route by dint of eidetic imagination (e.g., by half-jokingly drawing banknotes as promissory notes and virtual presents on family birthdays and anniversaries), to a longing for solitude and the compulsive habit of keeping track of every expense, so as not to go over a meager budget. Marroni deftly interweaves these strands and sets up the scene for a consistently arranged sequence of analepses that reach back to Ibsen's childhood, with the first traumatic occurrence linked to his father Knud's financial ruin in 1834, the boy's consequent moving to Grimstad in 1843-1844 as an apprentice to a pharmacist, and his affair with house servant Else Sophie Jensdatter Birkedalen, who gave birth to an illegitimate son in 1846. By degrees, several turning points in Ibsen's life are touched upon, including references to the conception, planning and performances of his dramatic works, with the beginning of his voluntary exile in Rome in 1864 emerging as a pivot and prelude to personal redemption. Importantly, Ibsen's artistic vision is never totally severed from the political views of a republican who had become sceptical of religious and bourgeois orthodoxy, looking toward the constitution of a democratic society free from the shackles of tyranny and narrow-mindedness.

Chapter 2, "'Feccia e scorie' dell'umanità: prima e dopo *Spettri*" ("'Dregs and Sediment' of Human Nature: Before and After *Ghosts*", pp. 53-105), takes a cue from a passage of Ibsen's 1874 speech to a delegation of students welcoming him in Christiania (Oslo's former name). The now successful playwright reflected on his poetics and inspiration sources, associating them with both a noble domain that "has stood higher than my daily self" and "that which to introspective contemplation appears as the dregs and sediment of one's own nature. The work of writing has in this case been to me like a bath which I have felt to leave cleaner, healthier, and freer" (pp. 57-58).[2] Again, Marroni formally actualises the spectralisation motif by delving into *Ghosts* from a tangential perspective. That controversial play is somehow cast as an explosive charge being detonated in the wake of *A Doll's House* (1879) – with Nora Helmer's notorious slamming of the door behind her (and in the face of old drama's scripts) – and at the apex of Ibsen's lifetime struggle against philistine pretence, double-dealing, and dishonesty. This fight could not help coping with the dregs and sediment of human finitude and corruptibility, if in the hope of paving the way for catharsis. Hence Marroni's emphasis on Ibsen's uneasiness and inner turmoil when going back to Christiania in 1874, where, in the full glare of the cultural milieu's interest, he did not refrain from penetrating the carapace of the *status quo* in Norway's capital, with its conventional morality, received views, and socio-political immobilism. The playwright perfectly realised that he was considered – and feared – as an iconoclastic freethinker against whom the establishment ought to be on guard.

The commentary on *Ghosts* hinges on this historical framework, when Ibsen was staying again in Southern Italy, namely in Sorrento, where he wrote the *pièce* in 1881.

[2] Marroni quotes these passages directly in English from H. IBSEN, "Speech to the Norwegian Students", in ID., *Speeches and New Letters*, Engl. trans. A. KIDAL, with an Introduction of L.M. HOLLANDER, Boston, Richard G. Badger/The Holland Press, 1910.

Marroni does not fail to address a series of fundamental aspects related to this play, such as Ibsen's doubts concerning William Archer's translation of 'Gengangere' as 'Ghosts', instead of the more semantically appropriate 'Revenants', and how the work's unvarnished anatomy of social taboos, degeneration and institutional figures' malady was to fuel alarm and moral outrage in conservative circles, so much so that the text's first edition did not sell, while, in England, the Lord Chamberlain's Office would not license public performances of *Ghosts* before 1914.

What however remains most impressed in our minds from Marroni's investigation is the picture of a prison-like bourgeois interior and its resilient 'queen', woefully caught up in her "scrupolosa costruzione della macchina finzionale" ("scrupulous construction of the fictional machine", p. 83). If doomed to failure, Helene Alving's agon *vis-à-vis* the heinous consequences of her late husband's debased nature, the meanness of Pastor Manders, and the need to sweep it all under the rug with the illusion of protecting her (dying) son Oswald, could be said to fit within a paradigm of tragic heroism. Indeed, Mrs Alving's collusion with the erection of a white sepulchre does not seem to completely invalidate her efforts and unyielding will. Her hieratic, stoic bearing is of a higher standard, akin to that of ancient Greek tragedies (especially Sophocles and Aeschylus, p. 102). Consonant with this quality, her commitment to enacting a process of spectralisation of reality carries with it a superior philosophical and existential import that goes beyond the constraints of duty imposed by a petty community. In Marroni's formulation, the play's memorable closing scene, with syphilitic Oswald invoking death at the break of dawn and her dumbstruck, horrified mother resisting his plead for a lethal dose of morphine, consecrates "la valenza tragica di una donna che ha scelto la strada sbagliata" ("the tragic connotation of a woman who has chosen the wrong path", p. 105). A victim of unspeakable treacheries, intense suffering and stifling societal expectations, Mrs Alving's final standing in a fit of terror is more reminiscent of a carved icon than a mere shadow of herself.

The "Conclusione, ovvero, gli ultimi spettri" ("Conclusion, or, the Last Ghosts", pp. 107-118) marks the final stage of the book's 'hauntological journey' in Ibsenian territory. Being placed under the magnifying glass is now another moment in the playwright's life: 5 June 1892, which corresponds to no birthday's eve, but to a circumstance of death, i.e. the passing away of Else Sophie, the woman at Grimstad who bore him a son out of wedlock. Marroni imaginatively fills in the blank regarding the indefinitely postponed encounter between the artist and his ostracised son: Hans Jacob Henriksen, to whom he had given financial support from a distance until the boy reached the age of 14. Tradition holds that Henrik did reluctantly meet Hans Jacob several years later, in Norway. We are thus turned into spectators of a speculative reconstruction of such a visit by an awkward spectre from the past: a revenant son who, originally banished for very different reasons than those inducing Mrs Alving to separate from beloved Oswald, happens to be received with coldness and be scornfully paid off with five crowns by his famous parent. And yet, as Marroni contends, if forced to step away from the door of his father's house, the curtly rejected guest would in all likelihood refuse to leave the spectral household that had been inhabiting Ibsen's mind for decades, apparently allowing no truce.