

Når vi døde vågner

H.Ibsen

September 18-19, 2015

It must have been in 1977 when I purchased the three volumes of Ibsen's dramas in a bookstore in Norway. Three soft covered editions of which I only partook of the last containing his mature plays, the once who made him famous all over the continent and forms the basis of his reputation. Before that I had bought the collection of his mature plays in a Penguin Classics edition of four black volumes with covers appropriately enough lifted from Munch. Some of the plays I no doubt read, but basically I felt that Ibsen I should read in the original, it would be stupid otherwise.

In the first few months of 1978 I read all the plays in the third and last volume (Nutidsdramer 1877-99) except the very last *Når vi døde vågner*, whose title may have 'scared' me a little, or I just had enough. It would take me almost forty years before I got around to sample the last of his plays.

Although Ibsen started out as a poet, and his first attempts at drama were in verse, it is as a realist dramatist he is known. He may have written more verse than prose as far as sheer bulk is concerned, but he did decide that verse was impossible for the contemporary stage. But *Når vi døde vågner* is hardly a realist play, it probably was never intended for the stage at all, as indicated by the dramatic stage instructions, involving not only running brooks, but mountain cliffs and fog (but of course such things are trivial to get around in an actual staging). The dialogue is smooth and enjoyable enough yet the lasting impression is one of stylization, making the whole set-up somewhat stilted. The play has been likened to the late symbolic ones of Strindberg, but of course written before their time.

The plot, if we can speak of that, can easily be summarized. We have the professor and his young wife returning back to their home shores. He is not a professor of learning but of art, sculpture to be more exact. He is really an artist. A very successful one who has earned his laurels abroad and become wealthy and famous, able to acquire property and to have big houses built for himself. And to acquire a young wife, a wife he has promised to take to the top of a mountain and show all the delights of the world to, something he has renegaded on. At the resort by the sea, where they spend an idle existence, another woman turns up under a foreign name. The professor knows her right away. She was his young model, while he was still struggling. The sculpture on which his fame rests was modeled on her. It was their child, as she calls it. She feels used, she gave him not only his youth but her soul, her young innocent vibrant soul, and he had in the end betrayed her, he had ignored her (not even carnally taken advantage of her, one surmises) and thought of their time together as a mere episode, however delightful, yet but an episode. She had merely served his purposes and been cast away when no longer useful. There are also indications that she is mentally unhinged. There is a mention of a sequence of husbands and veiled hints of murders by a knife.

Meanwhile his young wife has become fascinated by a landowner who has turned up

at the resort and professes to like to hunt prey, be it wolves, bears or women, as long as they are full of life and blood. He persuades her to leave the sea and head for the mountains, which gives the occasion for a change of scene. We then find the professor and his young wife estranged. She has become endeared to the landowner and joins him on hunting expeditions, but does not provoke any jealousy on the part of her husband, who is too preoccupied with the claims of his old muse. She too had been promised to be taken onto the top of a mountain and be shown all the delights of the world. The professor is rather bored with his young wife and the idle life he has led with her. He wants to return if not to his youth per se as much as to the creative powers he enjoyed at the time. But how to do it? How to find the way back? How to unlock the small chest in which those powers reside inside him? Who has the key? Not his wife, who like all proper wives address him with his last name, but his old model, who still calls him by his first. She seems, for all her bitterness and hatred of him, not adverse to the idea. She is after all a bit mentally unhinged.

They escape together up to the mountains, halfway meeting the professors wife, who halfheartedly tried to resist the advances of the landowner, who has jettisoned the idea of shooting bears his mind set on another kind of bloodful and lusty prey. They exchange greetings, the landowner escaping the threatening weather together with his newfound prey down the treacherous path, advising in parting the professor and his model to seek shelter in a nearby hut. But they prefer to climb towards the top, she meanwhile unsheathing a knife, heading one way or another to their certain destruction, disappearing in the fog.

What to make of it? Ibsen fashioning a sort of self-portrait of the artist who went abroad became wealthy and famous and finally returned to his native shores feeling a great disappointment?

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