

Introduction

In this book I first explain how Ibsen became a modernist (Parts I and II), and then I analyze the kind of modernism that was uniquely his (Part III). To show that Ibsen actually was a modernist, it has been necessary to expose a theoretical rigidity, uncover a case of historical amnesia, and develop a historically and culturally grounded understanding of Ibsen's aesthetic development.¹

A theoretical rigidity: The ideology of modernism

I began to write this book because I was struck by the discrepancy between Ibsen's unquestioned status as a classic of the stage and the relative absence of interest in his work among academic critics. Equally striking were the incessant references to Baudelaire, Flaubert, and Manet as the great founders of modernism. Why, I wondered, was Ibsen's name not included? Why would intellectuals and critics ritually refer to modernism in relation to poetry, narrative prose, and painting, but not theater? Was it because of Ibsen? Or because of something to do with theater as an art form? Whatever the reasons, I soon noticed that in Anglophone academic circles the bare mention of Ibsen's name tended to elicit responses marked by boredom, disdain, or condescension. I cannot count the number of times otherwise well-read people have told me that they have never read and never bothered to see any plays by Ibsen, or that they haven't read any since they were students. They do not seem to mind telling me this. In the Anglophone world it is still shameful for a literary critic to reveal that he or she knows nothing about Baudelaire and Flaubert. Why, then, are so many critics convinced that ignorance of Ibsen is just fine?

Although one or two of Ibsen's plays remain required reading in introductory courses on modern theater, they are there mostly as obligatory historical markers, hurdles to be got over as soon as possible, so as to get to the really exciting stuff, whether that is taken to begin with Chekhov, Artaud, and Brecht, or Beckett. This attitude reveals Ibsen's ambiguous status: on the one hand, he represents the unquestioned beginning of modernism in the theater; on the other, there is a widespread feeling that however important he

was for the development of modernism, Ibsen himself was not a modernist. Ibsen thus comes to occupy a strangely liminal position as an artist at once essential and irrelevant to the theory and history of modernism. This book begins by exposing the theoretical and aesthetic positions that produce this picture of Ibsen's place in history.

In Chapter 1, I show that the widespread neglect of Ibsen's achievement is caused by the specific set of aesthetic beliefs that rose to dominance in the Western world after 1945. Drawing on Fredric Jameson's work in *A Singular Modernity*, I name these aesthetic assumptions the *ideology of modernism*. The ideology of modernism produces a characteristic theoretical and literary rigidity, most clearly evident in the belief that there is a fundamental opposition between realism and modernism, in which realism figures formally as modernism's abjected other, and historically as modernism's necessary precursor. The effect is to categorize realism as at once formally naïve and historically passé, and in any case as incompatible with modernism, which, in contrast, shines forth as formally self-reflexive and sophisticated, and as historically still relevant. The same theoretical rigidity explains why the ideology of modernism has a great deal of difficulty dealing with theater as an art form.

Chapter 1, then, provides a theoretical analysis of the ideology of modernism, and shows that its fundamental aesthetic categories inevitably construct a picture of Ibsen as a boring old realist, incapable of self-conscious metatheatrical reflection. This picture is simply wrong: if this book shows anything at all, it is that Ibsen's theater offers an unmatched series of superbly sustained metatheatrical reflections. But although he was highly formally self-conscious, Ibsen's modernism was not a formalism. When I go on to establish the key features of Ibsen's modernism in Chapter 6, it becomes clear that his concern with the question of theater, what it can do and what it can be, is only one aspect of his path-breaking theatrical modernism.

A historical amnesia: The forgetting of idealism

The theoretical analysis in Chapter 1 aims to unsettle the belief that there is a fundamental opposition between realism and modernism. Formally, this is easy to do: if realism is taken to mean the "representation of reality", then James Joyce is surely not less realistic than Honoré de Balzac. The historical version of this belief is the idea that realism precedes modernism. To displace this belief, it is necessary to propose an alternative account of the birth of

modernism, which is what I set out to do in Chapter 3. Here I show that we (literary critics, literary historians) have suffered from an amazing case of historical amnesia: we have forgotten all about the importance of aesthetic idealism throughout the nineteenth century. To be more specific, literary historians know, of course, that romanticism was idealist and that modernism was not. What we have forgotten is that idealism did not simply die with romanticism, but that it remained a powerful aesthetic norm for most of the nineteenth century, and that weak, degraded forms of idealism lasted until well into the twentieth century. By showing that idealism was a key factor in just about all the aesthetic conflicts that raged in Europe throughout the century, and particularly in the bitter struggles that mark the period after 1870, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* makes a fundamentally new contribution to the understanding of nineteenth-century literary history.

Most of the numerous nineteenth-century struggles over realism had nothing at all to do with modernism, and everything to do with idealism. On this point, my work draws on the pioneering analysis of Naomi Schor in *George Sand and Idealism*, where she shows that in France in the 1830s idealism and realism, as embodied in the novels by George Sand and Balzac, were taken to be two aesthetic paths leading towards the same idealist goal. Much later in the century, idealist critics would still praise some kinds of realism (for example, Dostoevsky's and Tolstoy's) and pile invectives upon others (for example, Ibsen's and Zola's). Realism, then, is not *one*; to cast something called "realism" as modernism's negative other simply will not do.

Chapter 3 charts the rise and fall of aesthetic idealism, from its exuberant, revolutionary romantic origins, exemplified in Schiller's aesthetics, to its inglorious decline into a conservative moralism, embodied in the decisions of the Nobel Committee of the Swedish Academy in the period before World War I. The chapter has two key arguments: that the works of Henrik Ibsen provide a near-perfect genealogy of the emergence of modernism from the demise of idealism; and that by reintroducing the concept of idealism, we can see that what we usually call modernism is the result of a historical development that only really gathers pace after 1914. To project this relatively narrow notion of modernism back to the last decades of the nineteenth century is both anachronistic and unhelpful.

In this book, I do not set out to provide one, new definition of modernism. Rather, I show that modernism, like realism, is not *one*. In Chapter 3, in particular, I claim that in the period from around 1870 to around 1914 the various kinds of early modernism can be defined only negatively: what they have in common is not what they *are*, but what they are *against*. Since late

idealism was a complex and incoherent phenomenon, challenges to it also take many and quite dissimilar forms. (Just think of the differences between Émile Zola and Stéphane Mallarmé, or between Oscar Wilde and Henrik Ibsen, for that matter.) In Chapter 3, then, I show that the end of idealism is the birth of modernism. This is not intended as a definition of modernism, but a foundation for further work on early modernism. My contribution to such a task is to account for the important features of *Ibsen's* modernism. That some of these features will turn out to be quite different from the features privileged by the ideology of modernism is not surprising. (That some of them will turn out to be quite similar to those preferred by the ideology of modernism is not surprising either.)

In this book “idealism” is used as a synonym for “idealist aesthetics” or “aesthetic idealism”, understood as the belief that the task of art (poetry, writing, literature, music) is to uplift us, to point the way to the Ideal. Idealists thought that beauty, truth, and goodness were *one*. Artistic beauty thus simply could not be immoral; to call a work ugly—in nineteenth-century Norwegian, the word is often *uskjønt* (“unbeautiful”)—was to question its ethics as well as its aesthetics. Idealism thus seamlessly merged aesthetics and ethics, and usually religion too, since most (but not all) idealists also believed that God was the highest incarnation of the trinity of beauty, goodness, and truth. Although it could coexist with certain kinds of realism, idealism required writers and artists to idealize women and sexuality. If these things could not be idealized, they had to be demonized. The result was a long line of literary women who sacrifice their life for love, opposed to an equally long line of demonic temptress-figures: the madonna/whore opposition is everywhere in idealist works. Ibsen's greatest modernist achievement is surely his unique capacity not simply to destroy idealist notions of femininity, but to avoid falling into the opposite trap of demonizing women and sex (this is what happens to Zola's women, and to most women in modernism, too).

By reintroducing the concept of idealism, we can make sense of the long period in literary and aesthetic history that stretches from the end of romanticism as a living artistic movement to the rise of modernism. Much of what is currently lumped together under the general heading of “Victorianism”, for example, could be analyzed historically and theoretically as the many-faceted effects of the specifically British appropriation of idealist aesthetics. The concept of idealism is perhaps even more illuminating when it comes to grasping the aesthetically confusing period from 1870 to 1914, which I see as a moment marked by a great number of different, highly self-conscious aesthetic attempts to *negate idealism*. In this respect this period can be

understood as what Thomas Kuhn would call a period of *crisis*, a transitional period in which one paradigm has broken down and another has not yet become dominant. Kuhn writes that new theories usually emerge “only after a pronounced failure in the normal problem-solving activity”.² The aesthetic failure of idealism, its incapacity to deal with modern life and modern problems, became increasingly obvious as the century wore on. For Ibsen, who lived in Germany at the time, the Franco–Prussian War of 1870–1 and the rise and fall of the Paris Commune in the spring of 1871 were events that confirmed the bankruptcy of idealism, occasioning in him an urgent need to forge something new out of the destruction of the old. (For Flaubert and Baudelaire, who lived in a more advanced society, 1848 performed a similar task.) The result was aesthetic crisis and, ultimately, the birth of a new paradigm: modernism.

In Chapter 6, I show that Ibsen’s great work of crisis, the work that most profoundly registers the impact of the events of 1870–1 as well as his movement out of idealism, is *Emperor and Galilean*, the remarkable double play written in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Paris Commune. In my analysis of this play, it emerges that for Ibsen, the negation of idealism leads to skepticism. While Ibsen considers skepticism as perhaps the most important existential and philosophical problem of modern life, he also represents it as death-dealing and destructive, and tries to find non-idealist ways to overcome it. (I shall return to this.)

I speak of the death of idealism. But did it really die? The argument of this book is that some time before World War I, idealism ceased to be artistically respectable even among established arbiters of taste (or, in terms inspired by Pierre Bourdieu: around this time idealism had lost the capacity to bestow cultural and artistic capital on serious artists). This is not to say that the literary establishment turned anti-idealist overnight. Many of the Nobel Prizes in the period from 1914 to 1945 went to latter-day idealists. Various kinds of aesthetic idealism flourished in the twentieth century: religious idealism, socialist realism, certain kinds of fascist aesthetics, and a great deal of popular literature and film. My point in Chapter 3 is simply that every single one of these belated incarnations of idealism was profoundly alien to the ideology of modernism. Thus, the ideology of modernism itself became the greatest promoter of the historical amnesia that has erased the long survival of idealism from literary history. The true aesthetic antithesis of modernism is not realism, but idealism. In all other ways, however, the history of the twentieth-century legacy of aesthetic idealism remains to be written.

A culturally grounded engagement with aesthetics: Biography and painting

In this book I have tried to find a way to understand Ibsen's works that engages with questions of form, style, tone, and aesthetic traditions without neglecting their cultural and historical significance. Works of art are not produced in a cultural vacuum. The fact that some of them transcend their own circumstances and still speak to us does not turn them into eternal expressions of essential humanity: their historicity is part of their continuing appeal to us.

Part I of this book is called "Ibsen's Place in History". In this part, the theoretical opening chapter is followed by three large, cultural, and historical chapters. Chapter 1, the most theoretical chapter of the book, explains how he is currently placed, and analyzes the theoretical positions that have led to the relative downgrading of Ibsen. Chapter 2, the most biographical chapter of the book, begins the analysis of Ibsen and his works by discussing his personal place in culture and history. Chapter 3, the chapter on idealism, makes the case for a new understanding of Ibsen's place in literary history; and Chapter 4 investigates Ibsen's interaction with the visual and theatrical traditions in which he found himself placed. Read as a whole, Part I is an effort to place Ibsen in the European context where he belongs.

In Chapter 2 I ask what it was about Ibsen's trajectory and career that enabled him to revolutionize European theater. This biographical chapter introduces the reader to Ibsen's highly unusual, and highly marginal, cultural position as a white, male, heterosexual writer from a peripheral and underdeveloped, more or less postcolonial European nation, who chose to live in exile in Italy and Germany for twenty-seven years. The focus of the chapter is on Ibsen's cultural resources, which I bring out by comparing Ibsen to his friends, the radical Danish critic Georg Brandes and the German idealist Paul Heyse, a figure whose power to reveal important aspects of Ibsen's character and work has never before been explored. Since Heyse was an influential idealist, this comparison also helps to prepare the ground for the full-scale investigation of Ibsen and idealism that follows in Chapter 3.

Anyone interested in Ibsen quickly learns that he originally wanted to become a painter, and that he always prided himself on his knowledge and understanding of visual arts. Critics have often referred to Ibsen's visual imagination, yet very little work has actually been done to establish what kind of visual imagination Ibsen is likely to have had. Nor has anyone

elucidated the connection between painting, spectacles, and theater in the aesthetic traditions that Ibsen first made his own, and then went on to transform. These are the tasks I have taken on in Chapter 4. “Ibsen’s Visual World” begins with Ibsen’s experiences as a member of the jury for painting and sculpture at the 1873 Universal Exhibition in Vienna, and continues by comparing Ibsen’s taste in the 1870s to that of another early modernist, Henry James. I then briefly discuss the aesthetic theories (of Diderot and Lessing) and the visual technologies and spectacles (panoramas, dioramas, attitudes, *tableaux vivants*, among others) that produced the European visual culture to which Ibsen belonged.

Inspired by *Realizations*, Martin Meisel’s impressive study of painting, theater, and narrative in nineteenth-century Europe, Chapter 4 shows how close the relationship between painting and theater was in Ibsen’s time, and how many traces of the European tradition in painting one can find in his works. This chapter establishes a number of possible connections between scenes and images in Ibsen’s plays and painters from Anne-Louis Girodet to Arnold Böcklin, and, equally importantly, demonstrates that Ibsen’s modern breakthrough both illuminates and is illuminated by contemporary painting. Particularly important for this part of the argument is a stunning 1887 canvas by the Scottish painter William Quiller Orchardson entitled *The First Cloud*. The painting has significant modernist features, and strongly parallels some of Ibsen’s concerns at the time; yet Orchardson himself appears to have understood it in idealist terms. Orchardson’s painting thus helps me to show that in the late nineteenth century, even art that considered itself traditional was beginning to outstrip the available aesthetic discourses. The chapter ends by considering Ibsen’s use of visual elements in his satirical treatment of Gregers Werle’s idealism in *The Wild Duck*. Ibsen has only to a very limited extent been connected to the broad visual traditions of the nineteenth century, and “Ibsen’s Visual World” thus provides new perspectives on his plays.

Becoming modern

Part II is called “Ibsen’s Modern Breakthrough”, and deals with Ibsen’s transition from idealism to modernism. Drawing on the broad historical and aesthetic findings of Part I, I show that right from the start, Ibsen never felt truly at home within the idealist aesthetic tradition, which in Norway in the 1850s was deeply nationalistic and dominated by the visual arts. Although this cultural milieu appears to have been inimical to Ibsen’s specific talents, as

long as he lived in Norway, he participated fully in its concerns, even writing a poem specially for a *tableau vivant* based on a national romantic painting.

Mid-nineteenth-century Norwegian culture was also deeply hostile to theater. I bring this out by looking at Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's 1868 novella *The Fisher Maiden* (*Fiskerjenten*), in which Bjørnson (who in 1903 received the Nobel Prize that many thought Ibsen ought to have had) sets out to reconcile religion, nationalism, and theater. A masterpiece of idealist aesthetics, *The Fisher Maiden* reveals the depth of the divide between Bjørnson's sunny idealism and Ibsen's far more fraught struggles with the aesthetic tradition that dominated Norway in his early years.

This chapter traces Ibsen's constant discomfort with the demands of idealist aesthetics, in his early plays *St John's Night*, *Lady Inger*, *The Feast at Solhoug*, and *Love's Comedy*, as well as in the poems "In the Picture Gallery" and "On the Heights". In particular, I draw attention to Ibsen's constant meta-theatrical, or rather meta-aesthetic self-consciousness which, in the eyes of idealists, completely ruined the effect of many of his most promising works, but which today emerges as evidence of his immense artistic hunger for something new. Ibsen created only one undisputed idealist masterpiece: namely, the epic and highly pictorial poem "Terje Vigen" written in 1861–2. In the play published at the same time, *Love's Comedy*, Ibsen finally managed to turn idealism into his subject matter. In so doing, he took a decisive step on the path towards modernism, not least because *Love's Comedy* creates a thoroughly modern and thoroughly fascinating woman in the character of Svanhild.

To write a book on Ibsen, one has to quote him. Throughout this book I mostly use my own translations, which I have made as literal as possible. English-language readers and directors have sometimes found Ibsen's prose plays excruciatingly pedestrian. Like Arthur Miller, they feel that "Ibsen's language, lyrical as it may sound in Scandinavia, does not sing in translation".³ I can understand this reaction, for translations of Ibsen often do make him sound flat-footed and boring. But this is not always the translator's fault. My own struggles with Ibsen's texts have taught me to respect the difficulties of the Ibsen translator. I have therefore included, as an appendix, a brief discussion of why it is so difficult to translate Ibsen's subtle and dramatic Norwegian into equally subtle and dramatic English.

Chapter 6 focuses on *Emperor and Galilean*, the vast double play about the life and death of Julian the Apostate, the fourth-century Roman emperor killed on the plains of Mesopotamia by a fanatical Christian hell-bent on martyrdom. For me—as for Ibsen himself—this is the pivotal play in Ibsen's production, the play in which he writes his way out of idealism and into

modernism. In the same way, Chapter 6 is the pivotal chapter of this book, for this is the chapter in which I first set out the key features of Ibsen's modernism. Although most critics have failed to see why Ibsen always insisted that *Emperor and Galilean* was his *hovedverk* (principal work), I think he was right to do so, for this is the play in which the idealist trinity of truth, beauty, and goodness finally falls apart for Ibsen, and in which a quite modern skepticism carries the day.⁴ (Although *Emperor and Galilean* is a fascinating play, it remains one of Ibsen's least read and least performed plays. I therefore include a synopsis as an appendix.)

Emperor and Galilean is a document of the historical moment in which Ibsen came to consciousness of the absolute bankruptcy of idealism, a consciousness which was already pushing its way to the surface in *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, without reaching the maturity it does in *Emperor and Galilean*. In spite of its radical challenges to idealist aesthetics, however, *Emperor and Galilean* cannot escape idealism's demand for absolute idealization or absolute demonization of women: the play's contrast between the evil and lascivious Helena and the holy and pure Macrina would, unfortunately, shock no idealist. In this play, Ibsen nevertheless engages with the most burning intellectual and existential questions of his time, and above all with questions of faith and skepticism, of the meaning of life in a universe without God. But *Emperor and Galilean* also contains Ibsen's most advanced metatheatrical and meta-aesthetic reflections. This is why I consider this play absolutely central to Ibsen's transition to modernism, in a way that *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* are not.

I bring out the meta-aesthetic and metatheatrical dimensions of *Emperor and Galilean* by comparing the last act of Part I of Ibsen's play to Act 4 of Victor Hugo's breakthrough romantic drama *Hernani*, which Ibsen undoubtedly knew, and by showing that Ibsen's friend in Munich, the painter Eilif Peterssen, does something quite similar in his masterpiece *Christian II signs the Death Warrant of Torben Oxe*. I then go on to show that Part II of *Emperor and Galilean* is a veritable theater laboratory, packed with metatheatrical and meta-aesthetic scenes.

The key features of Ibsen's modernism, then, emerge from my reading of *Emperor and Galilean*. But *Emperor and Galilean* does not complete Ibsen's transition to modernism. At the end of Chapter 6, therefore, I turn briefly to *Pillars of Society*, to show that it provides the remaining features that, when combined, produced the sequence of modernist masterpieces that begins with *A Doll's House* and ends with *The Lady from the Sea*.

- there is a turn to realism and prose
- idealism is ironized or shown to be destructive

- skepticism is a central theme
- the everyday is represented as a possible alternative to skepticism
- theater as an art form is embraced and acknowledged
- antitheatricalism is rejected
- theatricality is criticized
- self-theatricalization in everyday life is a central theme
- love is shown to be destroyed by theatricality and skepticism
- the situation of women is seen as the key social question of modernity
- marriage is a central theme, often used as a figure for the everyday

This skeletal list does not convey the richness of Ibsen's vision of the conditions of modern art and modern life. The number of references to theater and theatricality nevertheless testifies to the depth of Ibsen's meta-aesthetic concerns. The list also conveys the characteristic themes of Ibsen's modernism: the situation of women; the relationship between idealism and skepticism; and the use of marriage as a figure for the ordinary and the everyday; and, not least, the fate of love in an age of skepticism. These, then, are the concerns that come to the fore in the third and last part of this book.

The language I use in this list—skepticism, the everyday, theater, and theatricality—says something about my own intellectual allegiances. My understanding of Ibsen is inspired by the profound and original work of Stanley Cavell, above all by his magnum opus *The Claim of Reason*. My analyses of theater and theatricality are particularly inspired by certain sections of "The Avoidance of Love", Cavell's astounding reading of *King Lear*, and by Michael Fried's epochal study of Diderot's aesthetics in *Absorption and Theatricality*, a book which itself has close affinities with Cavell's essay on *King Lear*. In this respect, much of this book stands as an attempt to develop something one might call an "ordinary language criticism": namely, a way of reading that looks to Cavell and the late Wittgenstein for its understanding of language, rather than to the tradition after Saussure.⁵

Ibsen's modernism: Theater, skepticism, love

By proposing that Ibsen's modernism can be understood as a set of features, I do not mean to say that every single one must be present in every work for the work to count as modernist; nor do all the features need to bear the same weight in every play. In *The Wild Duck*, for example, the situation of women is not the major concern (although it is a concern); and in *Rosmersholm*, the protagonists never manage to find their way back to the everyday. On the

other hand, Ibsen's concern with idealism and skepticism, and with theater and theatricality, surfaces in some way in every play I discuss.

In Part III of this book, I read four plays in some detail to bring out the richness and complexity of Ibsen's modernism, to draw attention to his profound understanding of his medium, of the situation of women, and of the difficulty of human relationships in modernity. These plays are *A Doll's House*, *The Wild Duck*, *Rosmersholm*, and *The Lady from the Sea*. In the brief epilogue, I turn to *Hedda Gabler* and *When We Dead Awaken*, principally to trace the fate of idealism in Ibsen's later work, and to show that if *Hedda Gabler* inaugurates a new phase in Ibsen's writing, it is because this play exhibits a significant change in Ibsen's relation to the everyday.

I would have liked to write at length about every single one of Ibsen's contemporary plays, but that would have produced a book at least twice the size of this one. First of all, I decided to discuss Ibsen's plays and other works in chronological order, beginning, in Chapter 5, with some of the early works, and ending in the "Epilogue" with some comments on *When We Dead Awaken*. Even more than most writers, Ibsen had a strong sense of the development and the evolution of his thought. To mark his seventieth birthday in 1898, his collected works were published in Dano-Norwegian for the first time. Ibsen was unusually enthusiastic about the project. Younger readers, he wrote in his preface to the edition, knew his more recent plays far better than the older ones:

This has caused a break in the reader's awareness of the internal connections among the works, and to this break I attribute no small part of the strange, incomplete and misleading interpretations and constructions to which my more recent works have been subjected from many quarters.

Only if one apprehends and understands the totality of my production as one, coherent and continuous whole will one get the intended and appropriate impression of the individual parts.

In short, therefore, my friendly request to my readers is not to put any play aside for a while, not to skip anything just for now, but to take in the works—reading them and experiencing them (*gennemleve dem*)—in the same sequence as I created them.

(15: 381–2)

My choice of plays for detailed, chapter-long commentary has in part been decided by the historical logic of my argument: given the pivotal role it occupies in Ibsen's development towards modernism, *Emperor and Galilean* imposed itself. Having chosen to place *Emperor and Galilean* at the center of my argument, I needed to show how he got there. In Chapter 5, I therefore

turn to Ibsen's early works, ending with a discussion of *Love's Comedy*, the most "proto-modernist" of the plays written before *Brand*. Since I consider *A Doll's House* to be Ibsen's first fully modernist play, *A Doll's House* was the obvious starting point for Part III. And since *The Lady from the Sea* answers some of the questions raised in *A Doll's House*, that play seemed to me to be the end of a cycle.

Between *A Doll's House* and *The Lady from the Sea* Ibsen wrote *Ghosts*, *An Enemy of the People*, *The Wild Duck*, and *Rosmersholm*. In Chapter 3, I show that *Ghosts* provoked perhaps the final intense flare-up of idealism in Europe. That is one reason why I did not return to it in Part III. The main reason, however, is that in Part III I want to foreground Ibsen's investigations of love. Both *Ghosts* and *An Enemy of the People* contain almost all of the features of Ibsen's modernism that interest me in this book. In particular, they are profoundly meta-aesthetic: *Ghosts* in its explicit thematization of idealism and its fascinating use of the final, theatrical tableau; *An Enemy of the People* in the great metatheatrical Act 4 featuring Dr Stockmann's speech. They are not, however, primarily concerned with love, which is why I decided to leave them out of Part III. Although *Ghosts* is about a miserable marriage, that marriage is never represented onstage. One of the central questions in *Ghosts*: "Was Helene Alving right to leave her depraved husband after barely a year of marriage?" In my view, that question receives a far more subtle treatment in *The Lady from the Sea* than it does in *Ghosts*.

In Chapter 7, I begin to analyze Ibsen's investigations of love by looking at the subtle intermingling of Ibsen's critique of idealism (embodied in the character of Torvald Helmer) and his unmatched understanding of women's situation in marriage and society. I also relate Ibsen's critique of idealism to the reception of the play in Norway and Denmark. My argument in this chapter is both that *A Doll's House* can be read as a rebuff of Hegel's conservative understanding of women's role in marriage and the family, and that in the famous tarantella scene, Ibsen shows us just why theater is the only antidote to theatricality. Reading the tarantella scene in the light of Wittgenstein's famous remark that "The human body is the best picture of the human soul", I show that this scene is revolutionary in its understanding of different ways of looking at a performing woman's body. Above all, however, I read *A Doll's House* as a play that asks what it will take for two modern individuals to build a relationship based on freedom, equality, and love. That question is one Ibsen returns to in many plays, but most intensely in *The Lady from the Sea*.

In Chapter 8, I turn to *The Wild Duck*. As the subtitle indicates, my main concern in this chapter is love and language. No other play by Ibsen gives

such a moving account of love denied and rejected. The relationship between Hedvig and her father reminds me of *King Lear*: perhaps *The Wild Duck* is *King Lear* as it would have to be written after 1871. The main argument of the chapter is that Hjalmar Ekdal's theatricality and Gregers Werle's skepticism lead them to use language in ways that erode Hedvig's sense of the meaning of words. In so doing, they ultimately cause her death. I also show that *The Wild Duck* is deeply preoccupied with theater, idealism, skepticism, and the everyday, and wonder why Gina is represented as powerless to defend her daughter against the erosive skepticism of Gregers Werle.

Rosmersholm, the subject of Chapter 9, is Ibsen's darkest play of the period before 1890. Here there is hardly a trace of the redemptive powers of the everyday. All attempts to lead a meaningful public and personal life fail. Ibsen's astounding investigation of Rebecca's and Rosmer's relationship shows that this couple is doomed: mired in skepticism, they can only celebrate an ironic negation of marriage: their destiny is death. *Rosmersholm* is also, on my reading, a thoroughly self-conscious exploration of theater and theatricality. To me, the end of this play is Ibsen's most complex, and most bitter, analysis of idealism, and not, as some critics have claimed, an unbridled celebration of romantic heroism.

The Lady from the Sea rehearses almost all the themes found in *Rosmersholm*, but comes to a very different conclusion. In my view, Ibsen's account of Ellida's and Dr Wangel's conversations is a stunning attempt to ask what it takes to make a modern marriage—understood as a relationship between two equally free human beings—work. In this way, the play sets out to provide an answer to the question on which *A Doll's House* ends: namely, what it takes for a relationship to become a marriage. In order to follow Ibsen's analysis of this question, however, we also need to notice that the play can be read as Ibsen's rebuff to romantic tales of female sacrifice: namely, Richard Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* and Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid". This much underestimated play also intertwines the story of Ellida's achievement of freedom with a fascinating investigation of art, theater, and music, in which the main question is how painting, sculpture, and theater can express what some critics have called the "inner mind". Ultimately, I show, *The Lady from the Sea* is a stunning analysis of the perversion as well as the assertion of freedom and choice.

As I read Ibsen's modernist plays, they tell us that the death of idealism gave free reins to modern skepticism, and that skepticism makes us doubt the power of words. To Ibsen, love is bound up with faith in human language and expression, with our attempts to reveal ourselves to others, our wish to be known and understood by them, and with our wish to know and understand

them. To doubt language, as Johannes Rosmer ends up doing, is to exile oneself from human community and from love. In Ibsen's theater the only alternative to love is an unbearable solitude that either destroys us or drives us to madness and melodramatic excess in a desperate attempt to make our existence heard and to have it acknowledged by others.

Ibsen's contemporary plays are concerned with the difficult task of finding a way to honor the dreams of freedom and creativity of revolutionary romanticism while at the same time negating idealist aesthetics. At his most optimistic, Ibsen thinks that our best chance of expressive freedom and of love comes in ordinary human relationships. At his most pessimistic, he shows that precisely those relationships can easily become the source of desperate meaninglessness. At all times, however, Ibsen sees that both the longing for the (romantic) absolute and the disappointed, skeptical recoil from that longing are existentially destructive. *Rosmersholm* in particular is a masterly investigation of the way in which the romantic yearning for full and free expression is thwarted by the equally romantic belief in perfect (wordless) communion between souls. The play implacably demonstrates that idealist notions of love, beauty, and sexuality will destroy human relationships, imprison us in skeptical isolation, and, in the end, make us fit only for death.

In this book, Ibsen's theater ultimately emerges as an exploration of the conditions of love in a world where the most genuine expressions of human feelings increasingly come across as theatrical. How can we love each other in a world where we no longer trust the power of language to convey our meanings, where the search for absolute truth and absolute faith just leads to absolute despair? This is the mature Ibsen's most fundamental question, the one to which his major plays keep returning. It is a question that resonates even more powerfully today than in Ibsen's time. This is why Ibsen's investigations of women, men, and marriage are crucial to our understanding of modernity, and why they still matter intensely.