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TRANSLATING IBSEN FOR THE ENGLISH STAGE

On 21 March 1872 Henrik Ibsen wrote a letter to thank Fredrik Gjertsen for his translation of Horace's *Ars poetica* and to praise his ability to make a Scandinavian language "reproduce the content and form of the ideas of classical antiquity". "To translate well", he wrote,

is a difficult matter. It is a question not only of translating the meaning but also, to a certain extent, of re-creating [*omdigte*] the style and the images and ultimately of adapting the whole form of expression to the structure and demands of the language into which one is translating.¹

At the time, Ibsen had not yet begun see his own works translated in a big way, but as a reader he had clearly developed a keen sense of the problems of translation, including those connected with what he liked to call the "*sprogtone*" of different languages.² By the time he was writing his last plays, they appeared in translation — not only into English but also into German, French and Russian — almost immediately upon their first publication. And in our own days far more people see and read his plays in translation than in Norwegian; far

¹*Samlede verker. Hundreårsutgave*, ed. Francis Bull, Halvdan Koht and Didrik Arup Seip (Oslo, 1928-57), XVII.25. Subsequent references to this edition (*HU*) will be included parenthetically in the text. Here as elsewhere, unless otherwise indicated, translations from the Norwegian are mine.

²See his later use of this term in , e.g., his comments on N.M. Petersen's saga translations, in the preface to the second edition of *The Feast at Solhaug* (1883) (*HU* XV.377); and his discussion of translations of Goethe's *Faust*: he praises Peter Hansen's but thinks that Viktor Rydberg's fails to preserve "the Gothic *sprogtone* of the original" (*HU* XVIII.156-7). - It is worth remembering that, while Ibsen always wrote his creative work in Norwegian, for 27 years he was forced into forms of translation as soon as he left his own doorstep.

more are responding — whether as audiences, readers, or even scholars — not to the original texts but to products of the "difficult matter" of translating Ibsen.

The title of my paper is in no way meant to suggest that I have overcome the difficulties in "translat[ing] well". The implications of the gerund are not prescriptive ("this is how to do it"), merely descriptive. The paper springs from the experience of translating a handful of Ibsen plays for particular English stage productions: *John Gabriel Borkman* (1975-6) and *Brand* (1978) for the National Theatre; *Pillars of the Community* (1977) for the Royal Shakespeare Company; *The Wild Duck* (1990), *The Master Builder* (1995-6) and — in progress — *Love's Comedy* for the Peter Hall Company.³ In each case, except for *Brand* (of which more later), I worked with the director — Sir Peter Hall or John Barton — and attended as many rehearsals as possible (not only to keep an eye and an ear on the text but also, as it turned out, to engage in continuous informal Ibsen seminars with the cast). What I have to say in general terms is a product of particular oxymoronic experiences — painful joy, or agonised excitement — of seeing and hearing the Norwegian word made English flesh. My aim is simply to draw on those to highlight some particular difficulties in translating Ibsen for the English stage.

The *vade mecum* for anyone thinking about translating for the stage, and what it involves, must be Egil Törnqvist's excellent article on translations of Strindberg's *Ghost Sonata*⁴ in which, with characteristic clarity, he lays bare the problems of reconciling the three often troublesomely contradictory aims of dramatic translation: faithfulness to the original text, speakability for the actors, and intelligibility for the audience. Those three aims will provide the framework for my exploration.

Faithfulness, in the case of Henrik Ibsen (or the naturalised Henry Gibson), used not to be high on the agenda: Archer, we all know, took the bow for the author at the première of *Quicksands*, a version of

³Dates in brackets are those of performance.

⁴"Att översätta Strindberg: *Spöksöndaten* på engelska", *Svensk litteraturtidskrift*, nr 2 (1976), pp. 4-31.

Pillars of the Community, in 1880. My own involvement with translation in the first place sprang from being asked by the National Theatre to comment on what was then (in the 1970s) regarded as the standard acting translation of *John Gabriel Borkman* and discovering, in the translator's "Note on the Translation", that he had found the play's language "tiresomely repetitive" and had decided to "trim" and "thin out" the dialogue.⁵ So much for the unique "*sprogtone*" of that play about obsessive, and therefore repetitive, people.

Faithfulness, it was often thought, is for scholars; freedom to re-write for directors and actors. But in the last thirty or so years, the gap between these two positions has closed, or at least narrowed, for several reasons. One is the new — post-1950s — drama in English: the dialogue of Pinter and Beckett and many others has made theatre practitioners and audiences more alert to the importance of verbal nuances, of patterns and tones and undertones in the language, and of course of pauses and silences, too. We have been taught to listen, as never before, to the spoken and the unspoken language of playwrights. For Ibsen, this has meant a new climate of interest in his prose, which used to be dismissed as simply prosaic.⁶ Generally, it has meant the growth of something we might call a translator's theatre, with directors steadily asking for new translations of old classics.

I have been fortunate to work with brilliant professional directors genuinely committed to faithfulness, though obviously not at the expense of speakability and intelligibility. Both John Barton and Peter Hall, like so many of their younger contemporaries among British directors — and here is the second reason for the impulse towards faithfulness — have a solid academic background: Cambridge-trained in the importance of textual detail. Peter Hall was the first to stage *Waiting for Godot* in England (1955), and his illustrious career heading the Royal Shakespeare Company, the National Theatre, and lately his

⁵Michael Meyer, trans., *John Gabriel Borkman* (London, 1960), p. 92.

⁶Cf. John Millington Synge's famous reference to "Ibsen and Zola dealing with the reality of life in joyless and pallid words" (Preface to *The Playboy of the Western World* [1907], cited from *The Plays and Poems of J.M. Synge*, ed. T.R. Henn [London, 1963], p. 174).

own company, has if anything only strengthened his trust in, and humility before, the word of the author. The base text in our Ibsen collaborations has therefore always been a "literal": not a linguistically literal translation — which one soon learns is an impossibility, as each language is a closed system and one is forever coming up against passages where there simply is no literal equivalent in English for what is going on in Ibsen's Norwegian text⁷ — but one intended to convey to the director, within the text and in footnotes, as much as possible not only of the paraphraseable sense but also of the stylistic qualities of the original (which are of course crucial to an understanding of tone and meaning): the undertones and allusions, the grammar and syntax, the sounds and speech rhythms. The text has then travelled back and forth between Peter and me, he revising for speakability and I revising his revisions in the interest of the original's qualities, until we have arrived at a compromise satisfying both parties — a text which is then fine-tuned through minor adjustments in rehearsal. But only minor ones as, once the acting text is agreed on, Sir Peter becomes a benevolent tyrant, insisting on observance of textual minutiae, down to the dashes of uncompleted sentences and the commas and semicolons which signal the grammar of interrelationships between Ibsen's characters.⁸ Such faithfulness meant that even Dame Peggy Ashcroft,

⁷An obvious, and for the translator agonising, example is that of the ubiquitous modal adverbs—"jo", "vel", "nok", etc.--so crucial to establishing the tone of a passage and the attitude of a speaker. Another is the level of intimacy established by the choice of personal pronouns: "du" or "De". Yet another is the tendency of Norwegian--like all Germanic languages--towards compounds, a problem exacerbated by Ibsen's tendency to find his thematic keywords in compounds: "livsglede", "lysrød", "livsløgn", "hjerterkuld", etc.

⁸On punctuation, the translator clearly has to exercise caution in the choice of Norwegian text, since Ibsen's proof-reader at Gyldendal's modified the author's punctuation to some extent. In the first edition of *Ghosts*, for example, the proof-reader added some 45 commas and one dash which were not in the manuscript Ibsen submitted (See *HU* IX.173). *Hundreårsutgaven* claims to restore Ibsen's punctuation.

playing Ella Rentheim in *John Gabriel Borkman*, could be driven to tears before she got the punctuation right.

In my work with John Barton I found a different kind of faithfulness. As a scholar and a well-known (re)writer (responsible, for example, for hundreds of pseudo-Shakespearean lines in the Royal Shakespeare Company's *Wars of the Roses*), he had already compared and collated all existing translations and also studied the *Oxford Ibsen's* translations of the drafts of *Pillars of the Community*. What he wanted from me was a clear, unfussy version which incorporated some lines from the drafts — thus, *inter alia*, heightening the ironic effect of Bernick's speeches of only partial confession.⁹ Suppressing my own editorial principles, I complied. Ibsen may have turned in his grave, but then Ian McKellen in the part of Karsten Bernick used the lines to make the ending of the play as ambivalent, the famous coming to rest on "the spirit of truth" as shot through with doubts, as may well have made Ibsen turn with pleasure.

This takes us to the third reason for the narrowing of the gap between scholarly faithfulness and theatrical freedom. As translation theory has arrived as an academic subject, "faithfulness" has become the subject of sophisticated questioning; and in the Introduction to the collection of essays on *Rethinking Translation* which he edited, Lawrence Venuti can write:

A translation emerges as an active reconstitution of the foreign text, mediated by the irreducible linguistic, discursive and ideological differences in the target-language culture.¹⁰

In poststructural conceptions of textuality, an "original" text is itself a translation — a deferred, or incomplete, process of finding a signifier for a signified. Theorists like Derrida and Paul de Man, starting from Walter Benjamin's ideas of translation, have exploded the binary

⁹From the "fifth draft" we added, for example, the line in which Bernick uses biblical authority to spike the guns of those who would condemn him: "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone" (cf. *HU* VIII.239).

¹⁰*Rethinking Translation*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (London, 1992), p. 10.

opposition between "original" and "translation". To Derrida, "[t]he translation will truly be a moment in the growth of the original, which will complete itself in enlarging itself".¹¹

Now, I do not for a moment wish to suggest that directors wanting a free version rather than a faithful translation are consciously thinking of themselves as serving the original by an act of "enlarging" deconstruction. But, willy-nilly, we are living in a postmodern culture which favours and legitimises "re-writing", whether in the theatre and cinema (such as Ian McKellen's *Richard III* on stage and screen, or Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet* film) or in the academic world where, for example, the study of the "afterlife" of Shakespeare's plays, in more or less re-written versions, is flourishing. In practical terms — and in the rehearsal room one has to be very practical — this culture makes it more difficult to insist on faithfulness over speakability (which in fact often only means what sounds right to a contemporary ear). But, also in practical terms, my experience, confirmed by the directors I have worked with on Ibsen and also on Strindberg, suggests that the greater the actor or actress, the less he or she questions the translation: they simply *make* it speakable and so arrive at an Ibsen language — which is not necessarily the same as good standard English. With Ibsen's prose plays, this means that the director has to find, or to train, a cast who not only are prepared to trust the text but also can convey the unspoken as well as the spoken, or the result will be thin and two-dimensional. When working on *The Wild Duck* we were fortunate to have as Hjalmar Ekdal Alex Jennings, who has since played both Peer Gynt and Hamlet with the Royal Shakespeare Company and who, during much of the rehearsal period, was nightly acting in a Restoration comedy at the National Theatre. All that range was mobilised in his Hjalmar, with the effect that the audience was never quite sure when this character was "acting" and when sincere, when posturing and when genuinely suffering. Towards the end of *The Wild Duck*, in his last duologue with Gregers Werle, Hjalmar has

¹¹Jacques Derrida, "Des tours de Babel", quoted in Venuti, p. 7. See also Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator", in Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations* (New York, 1969), pp. 69-82.

a speech about his feelings for Hedvig which turns on the word "inexpressible" ("usigelig"), used four times:

My love for that child has been inexpressible. My happiness each time I came back to my simple home and she rushed to meet me with her sweet injured little eyes was inexpressible. Oh --- I've been a gullible fool. My fondness for her was inexpressible --- and I dreamed - I let myself imagine that her fondness for me was just as inexpressible.¹²

The *Oxford Ibsen* makes this passage into more acceptable English by varying the adjective, but Alex Jennings took the four "inexpressible"s without protest and made the repetitions at one and the same time a sign of Hjalmar's poverty of mind and his strength of inarticulate feeling. The audience saw through him and loved him at the same time.

Ibsen clearly knew what extra-verbal demands the language of his later plays makes on an actor. In a conversation in December 1894 he told how he had discussed with Hans Schröder, the director of the Christiania Theater, the casting of the part of Allmers in *Little Eyolf*. He had insisted on Halvorsen rather than Fahlstrøm, whom many had thought right for the role:

I don't doubt Mr Fahlstrøm's ability to interpret the words; but there are places in Allmers's part where a lyrical temperament breaks through, - where that which lies behind the words can be understood only through the tone of the voice [*Stemmens Klang*]. (HUXIX.204)

It will be clear by now that I think the third aim of a dramatic translation, intelligibility for an audience, also very much depends on the actor's or actress's trust in the text and skill in conveying both what it says and what it does not say, but can be made to express. The texts

¹²Inga-Stina Ewbank and Peter Hall, trans., *The Wild Duck and John Gabriel Borkman: Two Plays by Henrik Ibsen* (Bath, 1990), p. 100.

of Ibsen's last four plays are notoriously enigmatic, the dialogue often appears half-articulate, presenting us only with the tip of an iceberg of thoughts and feelings. It is tempting to make it easier for an audience by explaining, laying bare a bit more of the iceberg — even while knowing that to do so is a betrayal of Ibsen's art. In working on the base text of *The Master Builder* I found myself filling the pages with notes explaining to Peter that, "untranslatably", Ibsen was making his speaker refer to something very important in the simplest and vaguest kind of phrase: "dette her med froken Fosli" (Dr Herdal), or "dette med oss to" (Solness to Hilde), or "Slik som De har det" (Hilde to Solness). Such phrases are linguistically untranslatable because the English language system does not admit these unattached pronouns; and the moment you attach nouns, such as "this business" or "this relationship", you have both narrowed the signified by explanation and made the phrase sound like translatoresque. Not only that, but in Ibsen's text this language mode is deeply functional: throughout the play characters will use a "det" or a "dette" or a "slik" as a sign of something he or she cannot, or will not, understand or bear.¹³ It is a matter not so much of inarticulateness as of deferral of meaning. To the audience these pronouns become, as it were, dotted lines on which the author invites us to inscribe our own translation: that which we are painfully and wonderingly working out about the characters and their relationships. They are central to the hard work of interpretation which, rather than immediate intelligibility, Ibsen offers his audience. Aline Solness, in a duologue with her husband in Act 2 — a dialogue of mutual incomprehension — presents an extreme case: "Men det forfærdelige, som branden drog efter sig — ! *Det* er det! Det, det, det!" (*HU* XII.71). As with King Lear's five times repeated "never" (*King*

¹³ *The Master Builder* even opens on such a line: Knut Brovik's "Nej, nu holder jeg det snart ikke lenger ud!". And, where for Brovik "det" signifies the unbearable, for Solness and Hilde in their last duologue "slik" signifies an exaltation beyond understanding:

SOLNESS (*ser på hende med sænket hode*). Hvorledes er De ble't slik, som De er, Hilde?

HILDE. Hvorledes har De fåt mig til at bli' slik, som jeg er? (*HU* XII.119)

Lear, V.3.284), Mrs Solness's five agonised "det"s have the effect of turning the most ordinary word into some arcane language, signifying an unspeakable horror. Rightly or wrongly, we thought it necessary to assist the audience here by giving the actress this translation of the lines: "...but the terrible things that followed in the wake of the fire ... Terrible ... Terrible ... Just terrible!"¹⁴ Gemma Jones, who took the part, realised in Aline Solness a remarkable death-in-life existence, and so should perhaps have been trusted with more literal lines at this point. It was greatly to her credit that no one ever suggested that, in speaking the lines just quoted, she sounded like Hamlet's father's Ghost — a danger to which the translation admittedly exposed her. Perhaps we were wrong.

Ibsen's prose texts tempt the translator to expand and explain, because he creates his own language — his unique "*sprogtone*" — by packing with suggestion an apparently flat and colourless style. There is of course also the opposite tendency in his prose dialogue: to make characters leap from the plain to the visionary, from literal statement to metaphor — the fjordscapes and trolls, the white horses and vine-leaves and castles in the air. Here the temptation for the translator is the opposite: to cut and contract, since *on the page* the metaphors tend to stick out like sore thumbs. (Of course sometimes, as with the false rhetoric of the pillars in Bernick's community or the dangerous myth-making of Gregers Werle, they are meant to.) What I learned from Peter Hall and his actors was the obvious, but often forgotten, truth that Ibsen's texts were prepared for the reader but written to be spoken; and that the problem disappears if they are spoken boldly, without would-be naturalistic hesitation (signalling "this is being dragged out of my subconscious") on the one hand, or heavy, Maeterlinckian underlining of symbolic meanings, on the other. Spoken thus, the words often prove to be masks for the characters — ways of hiding both from themselves and from others — as much as

¹⁴As yet unpublished script. - I wonder if James Walter Mc Farlane also had *King Lear* in mind when he rendered this speech as : 'But the terrible things that followed the fire ...! *That's* something I can never ... never ... never ...' (*The Oxford Ibsen*, VII [London, 1966], p. 395).

self-revelations or emotional indulgence. Spoken thus, Borkman's dreams about his limitless enterprises, or Solness's visions of the "helpers and servers" who have turned him into a master builder, have an extraordinary effect. The audience is enabled both to empathise and to stay critically detached, to see these figures at one and the same time — in a tension, as with the two halves of a paradox — as heroes and charlatans. Or perhaps the real paradox is that in the end it is the actor who shows the translator that faithfulness, speakability and intelligibility *can* be one and the same thing.

But of course there is no such thing as a monolithic "Ibsen". There are linguistic and stylistic qualities common to all or many of the plays, but each play also has its own characteristic language and so presents its own peculiar problems to the translator. To take just one example, *The Wild Duck* differentiates more than any of the other plays between individual characters' language in terms of class and breeding, with Gina and her malapropisms at one end of the scale and the unctuous, bottom-pinching chamberlains of the first-Act party at the other.¹⁵ At the same time the play as a whole conducts a thematic discussion of language, its use and abuse: of the truth-seeking metaphors of Gregers Werle which prove so fatal; of Hjalmar picking up Gregers' language and mouthing it without any real understanding; of Gina cutting right through to human reality in the simplest language: "Look at the child, Ekdal! Look at the child!" And of Relling finally deconstructing not only the rhetoric of Hjalmar's grief over Hedvig but also Gregers' self-construction as "the thirteenth at table". In our work on *The Wild Duck*, that devastating closing line — "Å fan tro det" —

¹⁵Ibsen made this point emphatically in a letter of 6 March 1891, refusing Victor Barrucand permission to publish or perform his French translation of *The Wild Duck*. The play, he wrote, "presents quite special difficulties in that one must be very closely familiar with the Norwegian language in order to be able to understand how thoroughly each separate character in the play has his or her own individual and idiosyncratic mode of expression, by which one can also recognise his or her level of education. When, for example, Gina speaks, one must at once be able to tell that she has never learned any grammar, and that she comes from the lower classes." (HU XVIII.288)

caused the actor, Terence Rigby, more agony than all the rest of his lines put together. "What *does* it mean?" he kept asking. Like Gosse and Archer and McFarlane before us,¹⁶ we had rendered it as "The devil it is", thus crucially making the play close on an expression of radical scepticism. This has clearly been too dark a note for some translators. R. Farquharson Sharp, in the old Everyman edition (1910), translated the line as a kind of neutral agreement: "So I should imagine"; and Michael Meyer chose the evasiveness of silence: he omits the last line and ends the play on a stage direction, "RELLING *laughs and spits*."¹⁷

What to do with Gina's malapropisms was an acute problem, involving both source- and target-language; and we found it helpful to collaborate with the actress (Nichola McAuliffe) over what came natural to her, even as we tried to bear in mind the relation of her expressions to the language pattern of the play as a whole. Thus, to take a single example, Gina voices her resentment at the status the wild duck has achieved in the Ekdal family: "Den velsignede vildanden, ja. Den gjøres der da krusifikser nok for". In my note to Peter in the base text, I had pointed to the creativity in Gina's language use here: by some process of free association the "velsignede" ("blessed"), obviously not in itself meant to have a religious sense, leads on to "krusifikser" (literally "crucifixes"), Gina's embroidery on the Norwegian phrase "gjøre krus", meaning "to flatter", or "to make up to"). Other translators had been satisfied with recording Gina's irritation in reasonably normal prose, for example:

That blessed wild duck! What a lot of fuss you make over her!
(Gosse/Archer)

That there blessed wild duck! The fuss there is over it!
(Ellis-Fermor)

¹⁶See *Henrik Ibsen: Seven Famous Plays*, ed. W.Archer (London, 1950), p. 278, and *The Oxford Ibsen*, VI (London, 1960), p. 242.

¹⁷Michael Meyer, trans. *The Wild Duck* (London, 1962), p. 123.

That blessed wild duck! All the carrying-on there is about that bird.
(McFarlane)

Unwilling to lose the connection, however inadvertent as spoken, between Gina's "krusifikser" and the wild duck symbol in the play as a whole, we finally agreed that Gina would say:

That blessed wild duck! The way you go on about her, you'd think
she was Jesus Christ himself!

I have quoted this, not as claiming to have found *the* correct translation, but as an example of some of the thinking that goes into a text translated for the stage.

So far I have referred only to Ibsen's prose plays. The verse plays, naturally, present their own problems. Basic decisions have to be taken about metre, rhyme, etc., and an overall matrix has to be found for the language. Ibsen's point about transposing the "*sprogtone*" becomes a particular challenge for the translator. I will illustrate this with reference to my experience of supplying Geoffrey Hill, the distinguished poet, with a "literal" translation from which he would create his own version of *Brand*, to be performed at the National Theatre.¹⁸ Geoffrey knew no Norwegian and initially had reservations about undertaking the task at all. He had misgivings about Ibsen's language as he knew it through earlier translations (which he claimed sounded "like Carlyle"), and above all about finding an English equivalent of the rhyming four-beat metre — trochaic and iambic — in which *Brand* is written. A specimen passage of "literal" had only confirmed his suspicion that the play could sound like 6,000 lines of

¹⁸In what follows I cannot avoid going over some of the same ground as in my Introduction to *Henrik Ibsen, Brand: A Version for the Stage by Geoffrey Hill* (Minneapolis, 1981). This text of this "version" restores cuts which had been made for performance. The first published text, *Brand: A version for the English Stage by Geoffrey Hill* (London, 1978), is a record of what was spoken on the stage of the National Theatre. A third (full-text) edition was recently published as a Penguin Classic (London, 1996).

Hiawatha. In retrospect he claims that what made him change his mind, to the point of seeing exciting possibilities in the project, was "a remark attributed by William Archer to Ibsen: 'I wanted a metre in which I could career where I would, as on horseback'".¹⁹ Geoffrey found that he could transpose Ibsen's metre into a largely three-beat English verse, though "frequently varied with two-beat and four-beat verse".²⁰ Once he had made this discovery, Geoffrey began — like Ibsen when he had found the form for *Brand* — to work remarkably fast. We were both busy academics, somewhat bemused to find that *Brand* demanded, even in this way, all or nothing. What I sent Geoffrey, piece by piece, was a text of mainly quite unspeakable English that attempted to communicate to him, as accurately as possible, what appears in the Norwegian text. It followed Ibsen's verse phrase by phrase and line by line, and on every page there were footnotes to explain what could not be rendered by direct translation: connotations and associations of words and images, effects of rhythm, rhyme and sound, etc. These notes, it seemed, were often more useful than the "literal" text itself.

A comparison of a passage in Geoffrey Hill's "version" with its source and the "literal", and with two translations, will help to indicate what was — and was not — achieved. Because of the length of the extracts, they are separately presented at the end of my paper.

The passage is a set-piece: Brand's account of his childhood memory of seeing his mother rifle his father's dead body and his bed for any money hidden. As my footnote told Geoffrey, the passage is markedly different, in diction, syntax and rhythm, from the usual speech mode of Brand.²¹ My footnote had also told Geoffrey of the irony of Brand introducing and structuring this memory as an 'eventyr', with its two meanings of 'adventure' and 'fairytale'. Brand is telling his mother a story only too hideously true. There is an interplay between the detachment of a self-conscious narrative technique — as in the

¹⁹Geoffrey Hill, Preface to Penguin edition of *Brand*, p. viii.

²⁰*Op. cit.*, p. vii.

²¹See Åse Hiorth Lervik, *Ibsens verskunst i Brand* (Oslo, 1969), esp. p. 77, for an analysis of the metre of the passage.

repetition of the line "hun tellet, hvasket: mere, mere!" — and an intense immediacy of experience; and the two impulses frequently meet, as in the six consecutive lines beginning with 'hun'.

Michael Meyer's was a translation commissioned for stage performance in 1959.²² It captures some of the staccato quality and immediacy of the original, but is overall low on faithfulness: Ibsen's 33 lines of iambic tetrameter become 21 lines veering between prose and free verse. The "eventyr" structure is gone, and so are many of the actions and images which make for intensity, such as the scar, the sniffing, and the swooping falcon. The result is a fairly undemanding intelligibility for the audience: they would understand what happened but would not have to think about the "scar" on Brand's soul or about the "fearful triumph" of the Mother, nor about the way Brand presents his story. The lines are eminently speakable, as good, clear English prose. In contrast, the *Oxford Ibsen* translation²³ is a reading version, high on faithfulness. It has exactly the same number of lines as the original but one-third more words, needed to explain and expand what in Ibsen is implicit and condensed. Thus, for example, "hun været efter gjemsleers spor" becomes "She seemed to root out hidden treasure / Like a hog, by smell" — a striking phrase as such, but an expansion of Brand's suggestive economy. Ibsen's rhyming tetrameters have become prose lines with a pentameter feel to them. But, in terms of contents, everything in the original is there, leaving the reader with a very full understanding of what happened, and how. Only the "eventyr" structure is missing.

Compared to these two translations, Geoffrey Hill's version is very free. The lines are shortened to trimeter, and there is a pulse beating through them, recognisable (in the context of the text as a whole) as Brand's "family theme" and transposed into words as "the scar / of an early fear". Half-rhymes and internal rhymes punctuate Brand's delivery. Geoffrey Hill is re-creating the emotional complexes in, and

²²Michael Meyer, trans., *Brand* (London, 1960); references are to paperback edition (London, 1973).

²³*Brand*, translated by James Kirkup in collaboration with James Walter McFarlane, in *The Oxford Ibsen*. III (London, 1972).

the impulses behind, the story Brand tells, and in doing so he both omits details of the original and adds his own. The feelings of fear in the boy are invoked in images that are not in Ibsen's text: the narrator, across the years, looks back on his boyhood self, "like a little owl", but soon identifies himself with the boy's wondering "why his hands were claw-like / and yet so paper-thin". He turns to the present tense, as Ibsen doesn't, to achieve immediacy, as Ibsen does; and, as in Ibsen, there is in the speech as a whole a strange tension between the detached irony of a cautionary tale, on the one hand, and the pain of remembered suffering, on the other. When, finally, he expands Ibsen's image of the Mother as a bird of prey —

Her shadow swoops; it looks
like a swooping hawk's
She tears open a purse
as a hawk rips a mouse —

then he is both true to the spirit of the speech and the play — where, after all, a hawk is going to swoop at the end — and writing remarkable English verse.

But, as it turned out, this verse did not work very well for the actors, who were trying to speak it as if it were realistic prose. By the time the text went into production, the project had changed its nature. Peter Hall had become too immersed in National Theatre politics to find the time to direct the play, and Christopher Morahan, who did direct it, did not seek to collaborate with the author of the text. Neither Geoffrey nor myself attended rehearsals. When the production was mounted on the National Theatre's largest stage, in the Olivier Theatre, a Wagnerian set of ice-floes and peaks swamped the verbal language with visual effects. Audience reception was cool, and the critics were fairly unanimous in their unease with the play. The impression that it was alien and unable to speak to British culture dominated the reviews. The review in *The Times* was captioned "Up the Icy Path: Ibsen Unconquered". In the end this version has come to be seen mainly as part of Geoffrey Hill's corpus of verse, rather than taking a prominent place among Ibsen translations. And yet it would seem to fit, far more

than the more faithful or more easily speakable translations, those ideas of Ibsen himself on translation with which I began this paper: the need to re-create and transpose ("*omdigte*") "the style and the images" of the original, and to adapt "the whole form of expression to the structure and demands ("*struktur og behov*") of the language into which one is translating".²⁴ The problem may well rest in how we understand "the structure and demands" of the target language. An Ibsen translation into English is still expected to sound as if Ibsen had written in a standard English idiom, when in fact the Norwegian of his dramatic texts is more inventive than standard. To put the problem into different words, we have not yet heeded Walter Benjamin's point that "it is not the highest praise of a translation ... to say that it reads as if it had originally been written in that language".²⁵

Translating Ibsen is in many ways an activity best defined in the words of August Wilhelm Schlegel, the great Shakespeare translator, who saw himself engaged in "a thankless task in which one is continuously tormented by the sense of ineluctable imperfections".²⁶ Translating Ibsen for the stage, as will be obvious from this paper, adds a further layer of torment to one's sense of "ineluctable imperfections". Beyond the near-impossibility of reconciling the demands of faithfulness, speakability and intelligibility, there remains the fear that staging a text which is "an active reconstitution"²⁷ of the original is an infringement of Ibsen's particularly strong sense of proprietorship. Unlike Shakespeare, whose plays belonged to his company and whose texts were revised, as needed, by himself and others, Ibsen regarded each of his plays as his "spiritual property" ("*åndelig eiendom*"), part of the "continuous whole" of his corpus.²⁸ Against such fear, however, we

²⁴See note 1, above.

²⁵*Illuminations*, p. 79. (See note 11, above.)

²⁶Letter to Goethe, 15 March 1811 (my translation). Quoted in German ("ein undankbares Handwerk, wobey man immerfort durch das Gefühl unvermeidlicher Unvollkommenheiten gequält wird") in Margaret A. Atkinson, *August Wilhelm Schlegel as a Translator of Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1958), p. 4.

²⁷See note 10, above.

²⁸Preface to the 1883 edition of *The Feast at Solhaug*, and note "To my Readers" in

must set the clear evidence that Ibsen, from early on, wanted his works to be accessible to English culture. At much the same time as he wrote the letter with which I began this paper, he also wrote to Edmund Gosse who had reviewed his *Digte* (1871) in *The Spectator* for 16 March 1872:

The English people is very close to us Scandinavians in spirit and in ways of thinking and feeling, and precisely because of this I have found it painful to think that the language should be putting a barrier between my writing and all this great, kindred world.²⁹

Thanks initially to Gosse and Archer, Ibsen saw those "barriers" come down; and by the time the young James Joyce reviewed *When We Dead Awaken* on its first appearance, it seemed natural to use the very fact of translation as a measure of Ibsen's power:

The play is already in process of translation into almost a dozen different languages — a fact which speaks volumes for the power of its author.³⁰

So, if a translation is in one sense a loss, in another sense it is an enlargement of Ibsen's ownership, for, as summed up in the paradoxical line from *Brand* which Ibsen copied onto the photograph of himself that forms the frontispiece to the *Standardutgave* of his *Collected Works* (*Samlede Digterverker*), "Evigt ejes kun det tabte".

the 1898 edition of his *Collected Works*. I discuss this point in "'Spiritual Property': Intertextuality and Influence in Ibsen's Texts", *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen*, IX (1997), pp. 35-50.

²⁹Cited in Elias Bredsdorff, *Sir Edmund Gosse's Correspondence with Scandinavian Writers* (Copenhagen, 1960), p. 26.

³⁰Cited from *Ibsen: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Michael Egan (London, 1972), p. 386.

APPENDIX: A passage in *Brand*, and some versions of it

Henrik Ibsen (1866):

Ifra et barndomseventyr,
som aldri av mitt minne flyr,
som skjemmer sjelen lik et ar
ifra et helet hareskar.
Det var en høstkveld. Død var far,
og du lå syk. Jeg snek meg inn
hvor han lå blek i vokslysskinn.
Jeg sto og stirret fra en krok,
og så han holdt en salmebok;
meg undret mest den dype dvale,
og hvi hans hånledd var så smale;
jeg kjente lukt av kuldslått lin; -
da hørte jeg på gangen trin; -
inn kom en kvinne, så meg ei, -
hun gikk til sengen rakt sin vei.
Hun ga seg til å gramse, rode;
først flyttet hun den dødes hode,
så trakk hun frem en bunt, så flere, -
hun tellet, hvisket: mere, mere!
Så grov hun ut av sengens puter
en pakke, bundet til med knuter;
hun rev, hun hugg med ilske hender,
hun bet den opp med sine tenner.
Hun grov på ny. Hun hittet flere.
Hun tellet, hvisket: mere, mere!
Hun gred, hun ba, hun jamret, svor;
hun været efter gjemslers spor, -
og fant hun, - fluks med jublens angst
hun skjøt, som falken, på sin fangst.
Til slutt var hver en lønnkrok tørt;
hun gikk av stuen som en dømt;
hun svøpte funnet i en pjalt
og stønnet stilt: så *det* var *alt*!

"Literal" and Notes (1977):

From a childhood adventure,³¹
Which never leaves my memory,
Which blemishes my soul like a scar
From a healed harelip.
It was an autumn evening. Dead was father,
And you lay sick. I sneaked myself in
Where he lay pale in wax-candle-light.
I stood and stared from a corner,
And saw he held a hymnbook;
I wondered most about the deep sleep,³²
And why his wrists were so thin;
I smelled the smell of clammy linen; -
Then I heard steps in the passage; -
In came a woman, didn't see me, -
She went her way straight to the bed.
She set about groping, rooting around;
First she moved the dead man's head,
Then she pulled out one bundle, then more, -
She counted, whispered: more, more!
Then she dug out of the bed's pillows
A packet, bound up with knots;
She tore, she clawed with angry hands,
She bit it open with her teeth.

³¹"adventure": more idiomatically, no doubt, "happening"; but the word Ibsen uses means, apart from "adventure", also "fairytale", or any story told to children; and this gives a bitter twist to his opening. The speech which follows is very unlike the usual Brand mode of speech: in diction, syntax and rhythm. It is, as you see (and it has been possible to be very literal indeed in translating it), very direct, has short, staccato sentences, and is altogether trying to recreate the experience as tangibly as possible. The repetition of "She counted, whispered ..." helps to keep, at the same time, the tone of an "adventure" in the second sense.

³²"sleep": quite literally the original word means "unconsciousness", but such a Latinate word (for "*dvale*") would, to me, sound false.

She dug again. She found more.
 She counted, whispered: more, more!
 She wept, she prayed, she moaned, swore;
 She sniffed for traces of things hidden, -³³
 And if she found, - at once in fearful triumph³⁴
 She pounced, like the falcon, on her prey.
 At last was each secret corner emptied;
 She went out of the room like one condemned;
 She wrapped the find in a rag
 And groaned softly: so *that* was *all*

Geoffrey Hill (1978):

Then I'll tell you a story.
 It's here in my memory,
 burned deep, the scar
 of an early fear.

It was one autumn;
 It was one evening; a room
 candle-lit, shadowy.
 There my father lay.
 I'd sneaked in; I stayed
 bewildered, afraid,
 like a little owl,
 crouched there, very still,
 wondering why he slept
 on and on, why he gripped
 his old hymn-book,
 why his hands were claw-like
 and yet so paper-thin.

³³"sniffed": i.e. like a dog, or hound, sniffs.

³⁴"fearful triumph": there is an oxymoron in the original here--"*jublens angst*"/"the fear of the triumph"--which I think is meant to render the way a bird of prey swoops upon its victim.

And then ... and then ...
Mother, I can still hear
those footsteps at the door;
and again the door-hinge
creaks open and that strange-
faced woman creeps in.
I mustn't be seen!
Into the shadows, hide!
She goes to the bedside.
Now she begins to feel
between the bed and the wall,
pushing aside his head.
Something's there. Yes, tied;
flat oilcloth bound with twine.
It won't come undone.
She tears at it with her nails, bites
and gnaws through the tough knots,
stares, throws it down, gropes again.
A pocket-book and some coin.
She mutters between her teeth
"how much was it all worth,
then? How much? How much?"
Like stripping the corpse, the search
proceeds. Her shadow swoops; it looks
like a swooping hawk's.
She tears open a purse
as a hawk rips a mouse.
When there's no place left
she's a woman bereft,
whispering in disbelief
"was that all, was that all?",
flees like a hunted thief.
So ends my tale.

Michael Meyer (1959):

A memory from childhood. Something
I cannot forget. It was an autumn evening.
Father was dead. I crept in to where he lay
Pale in the candlelight. I stood
And stared at him from a corner. He was holding
A psalmbook. I wondered why he slept so deeply,
And why his wrists were so thin; and I remember
The smell of clammy linen. Then I heard
A step on the stair. A woman came in.
She didn't see me, but went straight to the bed,
And began to grope and rummage. She moved the head
And pulled out a bundle; then another. She counted,
And whispered: "More, more!" Then she pulled out
From the pillows a packet bound with cord,
She tore, she fumbled at it with greedy fingers,
She bit it open with her teeth, searched on,
Found more, counted, and whispered: "More, more!"
She wept, she prayed, she wailed, she swore.
At last she had emptied every hiding-place.
She slunk out of the room like a damned soul,
Groaning: "So this was all!"

James Kirkup in collaboration with James Walter McFarlane
(1972):

It comes from something in my childhood, something
I can never forget. It seared my soul, and left a scar
That marked me for life. It was an autumn evening.
Father was lying on his deathbed,
And you were ill. I crept in,
Where he lay white and still in the candle-light.
I stood in a dark corner, staring at him.
I saw he was holding his old prayer-book.
I wondered why he slept so silently and deep,

And why his bony wrists had grown so thin.
I caught the smell of cold and clammy sheets.
Then there were footsteps: a woman came in,
But did not see me. She went straight over
To the bed, and started to grope and fumble.
She shoved the dead man's head aside,
And snatched a bundle, then several more.
I could hear her whispered counting of the notes:
"More, more, more!" Then from the pillows she
Pulled out a packet tied with knotted string.
She clawed at it, tore at it with trembling hands.
And finally had to bite it open with her teeth.
She groped about again, found several more,
And whispered hoarsely: "More, more, more!"
She wept, she prayed, she moaned and swore.
She seemed to root out hidden treasure
Like a hog, by smell; and, striking lucky,
Time and time again would pounce,
In ecstatic anguish, like a falcon on its prey,
And pounce again. And at the end,
Every hole and corner had been rifled.
She left the room, moving like one condemned.
With her ill-gotten gains all bundled in a shawl,
She went out moaning to herself: "So this is all!"