A 'nødvendighetens skinn'?:
The Conclusion of Ibsen's *Lille Eyolf* and its Meaning

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Abstract
This article examines the contentious conclusion to Ibsen's late drama, *Lille Eyolf* (*Little Eyolf*) in terms of Ibsen's deep mistrust of humanist and idealist ethics. In the wake of their son's death and their shared guilt, the hero and heroine abruptly but bleakly commit themselves to a life of philanthropic altruism: a project that we cannot regard without scepticism. But when humanist idealism has consumed every other moral crutch in modern people like the Allmers, where else can they – or indeed we – turn?

Keywords
Ibsen, *Little Eyolf*, conclusion, humanism, livsløgnen

Readers have experienced difficulties with *Lille Eyolf* (*Little Eyolf*) from the time of its publication, particularly as regards what Frode Helland calls (2000: 243) the 'merkelig omvendelse' (strange conversion) arrived at by Rita and Alfred Allmers at the conclusion of the play. 'Is there at the end a change for the better between the characters, a possible, affectionate, reconciliation', as Laura Caretti puts it (2006: 70); 'Or is there simply an illusory hope for the future, all the more dramatic for being self-deceptive?' Henry James, for example, found the first two acts of the drama 'indeed immense – indeed and indeed', as he wrote to the actress Elizabeth Robins in November 1894, only to report a few days later that:

> no harm can be done equal to the harm done to the play by its own most disappointing third act…. It seems to me a singular and almost inexplicable drop – dramatically, *representably* speaking…. The worst of it is that it goes back, as it were, on what precedes, and gives a meagerness to that too – makes it less interesting and less significant… (Meyer 1971: 247)

Several critics have concurred with James in this respect. For Muriel Bradbrook 'the last act, which solves all the problems, is probably the least successful': 'psychologically accurate', possibly, but 'not dramatically convincing' (Bradbrook 1966: 134, 136). For Sverre Arestad (1960: 140) *Little Eyolf* is 'one of the least dramatic of Ibsen's plays' – in part because of that third act, containing as it does neither gunshots, nor slamming doors, nor other *coups de theatre*. 'Strikingly,' Toril Moi writes (2014: xix),

> many of the best modern critics have found *Little Eyolf* extraordinarily difficult. James MacFarlane calls it 'fearsomely convoluted', and the Norwegian Frode Helland considers it 'cryptic to the point of hermeticism'.

Again, the source of such difficulties apparently lies in the play's structure: 'Many critics have thought that Ibsen was wrong to place the death of Eyolf at the end of the first act, since it made the rest of

the play undramatic' (Moi 2014: xxvii) Even John Northam, who has written one of the most detailed accounts of *Little Eyolf* in English, and who calls it 'an astonishing play' (1973: 216), concedes that it 'goes beyond the limits of exploration plumbed in *Hedda Gabler* to the point of presenting an action whose real source is never defined'. 'A great deal of the criticism of this play', in Barry Jacobs' view (1984: 614), therefore, 'is either disparaging or apologetic'.

To better understand what Ibsen was trying to do at the end of *Little Eyolf*, I feel we need to track its progress much as a theatrical audience would, albeit in a critically informed way: in dramatic sequence and by taking account of the intellectual issues as they unfold. I say this because – as is so often the case in Ibsen's drama – the intellectual elements that emerge at the play's conclusion do so from a profoundly complex familial dynamic. 'The kinship links in these late plays', James MacFarlane suggests (1955: 8), 'trace an elaborate geometry, an intricate interweaving of ties parental and filial, of sibling and other blood relationships, of affiliate and affinal connections of astonishing variety'. So intent is Ibsen's concentration on such features that he might be said to be more interested in the family dynamic as such than the individual characters taking part in it: 'a chemist fascinated more by the transformations of a plate by acids and light', as James Kerans puts it (1965: 193), 'than by the faces and backgrounds emerging into the illusory stability of a photograph'. In making an attempt on the denouement of *Little Eyolf* we need as complete a sense as possible of those transformations that precede, propel, and underlie it.

Whatever problems critics have had with the third act of Ibsen's play, few have felt the need to be disparaging or apologetic about its first: an act that is worthy of comparison with the first scene of *King Lear* in terms of its revelations of the family dynamic, and that concludes with the death of the eponymous protagonist – if Eyolf can be said to be such a thing. For Arnold Weinstein that death is quintessentially dramatic. It 'changes everything, catalyzes everything'; 'Remove Eyolf from the scene, and the musical chairs begin to move' (Weinstein 1990: 303, 302). But in fact we are given to understand from the very opening – as we frequently are in Ibsen's drama – that things have been catalyzing for some time before the play opens, never mind

after Eyolf's death by drowning at the end of Act One. The musical chairs have been moving for the six weeks during which the freelance intellectual Alfred Allmers has been away from home, ostensibly on doctor's orders, for a walking holiday in the mountains; for the five years or so since his sleeping infant son fell off a table and was crippled as a result, while his parents were making love in a room nearby; and for the ten years of Allmers' marriage that has involved the repression of a mysteriously intense relationship with his younger half-sister, Asta, even as that marriage lifted the pair of siblings out of genteel poverty and gave him the intellectual opportunities he now enjoys. In that atmosphere of seething dread that Ibsen conjures up uniquely well, all these realities are uncovered, and with them the suite of dependencies the individuals concerned have used to keep those realities at bay. The family's core dependency, I want to argue – the *livsløgnen* or life's-lie that has them in its grip – is that key concern of Ibsen's: the role of rationalism, secular humanism, and intellectual idealism in human affairs in general and family life in particular. What the third act 'suffers from', if that is the word, is a certain powerful indecisiveness about the modern dependency on such things: an evil, no doubt, but one the abandonment of which might leave Ibsen's people with nothing to believe in at all.

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The play opens on a key element of 'the neo-religion of secular humanism' (Durbach 1982: 99): what George Bernard Shaw (1913: 130) calls 'the ideal home of romance'. A '*smukt og rigt udstyret havestue*' ('*elegant, lavishly appointed conservatory*') with '*mange møbler, blomster og planter*' ('*lots of furniture, flowers and plants*') leads out to a verandah overlooking the fjord and the '*skogklædte åser i det fjerne*' ('*wooded hillsides in the distance*'). The room is furnished with '*løse puder og tæpper*' ('*scatter cushions and throws*') illuminated by warm early morning sunlight, all presided over by a '*smuk, temmelig stor, yppig, blond dame på omkring 30 år*' ('*good-looking woman, quite tall, shapely, blonde, round thirty*'), wearing a '*lys morgenkjole*' ('*light-coloured morning dress*') (Ibsen nd: 5; Ibsen 2014: 91).[1] This

comfortable and prosperous home, supervised by a domestic goddess occupied in unpacking her husband's valise the morning after his unexpectedly early return from vacation ('he reassures Rita by coming back before his time', Shaw observes; 1913: 132), is set before the audience immediately as a bourgeois ideal, opulent, sunlit, and relaxed: a modern home for a modern family, with no apparent need for old-fashioned crutches and opiates like faith or tradition.

But this is by no means the 'innocuous family gathering' Arnold Weinstein describes (1990: 296) and 'the mood is far from simple', as John Northam points out (1973: 186). Rita withholds the news of Alfred's return from her sister-in-law on Asta's entrance, and prefers instead to make knowing and loaded remarks about the latter's admirer, the road-builder Borghejm. 'Kender du ikke' ('Don't you recognize') his suitcase, Rita asks, as if to imply that probably Asta would not; 'tænk dig til' ('would you believe') he has come home, she goes on; isn't his unexpected arrival 'det ligner ham' ('just like him'), furthermore? These questions are insidiously possessive, and Asta responds in kind, though modestly. 'Men desto dejligere var det så, da jeg fik ham igen' ('all the nicer to have him back'), Rita says; 'Ja, det kan jeg nok tænke mig' ('I'm sure it must have been'), Asta comments – as if to say that she has awaited her brother, too, in days gone by (5-6; 92). It becomes clear that though Alfred's walking tour was one apparently taken on medical grounds, Rita resented his absence wholeheartedly ('Alfred har aldrig før været borte fra mig. Aldrig så længe som et døgn engang. Aldrig I alle de ti år –'; 'Alfred's never been away from me before. Never for as much as a whole day. Never in all the ten years –'), just as Asta (interrupting her) supported it: 'men derfor så synes jeg sandelig det var på tiden, at han fik komme lidt ud iår. Han skulde ha' gået på fjeldtur hver eneste sommer. Det skulde han ha' gjort' ('then I'd say it was high time he got away for a while this year. He should have gone walking in the mountains every summer. He really should have') (7; 93).[2] This is a bitter and futile competition over who knows Alfred best and has his interests most at heart.

Potentially catalytic rivalries like these are not unheard of between wives and sisters-in-law. But deeper and darker movements of the chairs than these have taken place more recently. Asta has come to

call, tardily and unusually early, on some sort of impulse: 'jeg havde ikke rist eller ro på mig. Jeg syntes, jeg *måtte* herud og sé til lille Eyolf idag' ('I simply couldn't rest. I felt I *had* to come out and see little Eyolf today') (5; 91). In fact the Allmers' son has nothing to do with it. In Alfred's absence Asta has read her mother's correspondence and discovered that she is not his half-sister at all: her father is not Alfred's as they both previously believed, and she is the product of adultery, not a second marriage. She brings the written evidence in a metaphorically over-sized and carefully locked attaché case ('en temmelig stor låset mappe') – to which, furthermore, she has not brought the key (16; 101). (Her locked case is in poetic contrast to Alfred's open valise: she is a taciturn introvert, just as he is a voluble extravert.) Brooding on this personal catastrophe for weeks, she has felt unable to call on the woman who is no longer her sister-in-law, and the nephew who is no longer her nephew. (Rita admits later that Asta has recently become 'ubegribelig' ('completely unfathomable') to her (24; 108). Eventually she could stand her state of suspense no longer, and on impulse she seeks to rid herself of the shameful documents; but as she has no expectation that Alfred will be at home, and dreads any accidental discovery in the mean time, she brings them locked up, perhaps with the intention of delivering the key to him on his return, perhaps with the hope that the case will never be opened and life will continue as normal, or that the responsibility for the secret will at least devolve to him in either event. When she sees his valise she invents another explanation for her impulse: that she 'knew' he was coming home: 'så var det *det*, jeg følte!' ('So *that* was what I felt') (5; 92). In fact she is stunned by the coincidence. Everything in her life has melted into air, including her putative engagement to an eager road builder, Borghejm, who will hardly wish to marry an illegitimate woman in socially conservative Norway. And the most important relationship of her life has retrospectively been transformed, from something safely consanguineous to something dreadfully obscure. All she dares do later in the act is advert to something in the portfolio needing discussion, which eventuality Alfred airily dismisses – Asta's mother is not his, after all, though he ignorantly acknowledges (42; 123) that his father treated both mother and daughter unkindly.

Rita Allmers, too, has been in catalytic transition, stewing over her husband's desertion of her: something so devastating she is unable to hide it even from her sister-in-law. 'Men sligt savn, som jeg har følt efter Alfred, du!', she wails to Asta, forlornly: 'Slig en tomhed! Sligt øde! Uh, det var som om nogen var ble't begravet her i huset – ! ('How I've missed Alfred, Asta! How empty it was here! How desolate! Ugh, it was as if someone had been buried in this house – !') (6; 93). That the couple has not spent a day apart in ten years is odd enough; but neither (we can infer) have they been sexual partners since the day Eyolf was crippled due to their inadvertence. Thus Rita has come to blame her son for the loss of her husband – in fact, to wish him dead – and hate Asta in her role of surrogate mother. (For the ten minutes or so that Eyolf and Rita are on stage together they say not a word to each other; 'aunt' and 'father' are constantly on his lips, but he says 'mother' only once, and not to her. In the opening scene Rita evasively defers to Asta when it comes to confronting Alfred over his manner of raising the boy: 'det kan jeg virkelig ikke blande mig op i' ['I really cannot interfere in that'] (7; 93). She has abdicated her role as a mother, as Allmers had abdicated his as a husband.) Rita resented Alfred's walking holiday mightily, but also hoped that he would return from it to be hers once more. On the night of his arrival she changed into a nightgown, let down her hair, shaded the lights, and put out a bottle of champagne. All her husband did in response was enquire after Eyolf's digestion and fall asleep. '«Du havde champagne, men rørte den ej»', Rita quotes from a poet ('"You had champagne, but you touched it not"'). 'Nej. Jeg rørte den ikke' ('No. I didn't touch it'), Alfred replies, '*næsten hårdt*' ('*rather sharply*') (29; 112). If a husband stonily refuses to sleep with his thirty year-old and Junoesque wife after a six-weeks' separation from her and a welcome of this kind, I think we can assume he does not sleep with her at all. At the opening of the play, Rita tells Asta how 'forklaret' ('transfigured') her husband appears to be, and yet how dog-tired he was after all his hiking (6; 92). She clings to her dream of marital resumption, therefore, but also finds excuses for its failure to come to pass.

Allmers has also been in motion; but as he is one of Ibsen's myopically self-centred intellectuals – not as idiotic as Georg Tesman,

but not far off – his transformation is less profound. Ten years ago he was a schoolmaster, living in single blessedness with his devoted half-sister. Then the twenty year-old Rita lured him despite his initial 'skræk' ('fear') of her with her 'fortærende dejlig' ('all-consuming loveliness'), but also with her wealth – her '«guldet og de grønne skoge»' ('"gold and green forests"') as the couple calls them (54-5; 132). As Alfred admits (55; 132), he had Asta to think of, too (so as Rita jealously remarks, the half-sister is responsible for bringing them together); but the marriage also allowed him to become an intellectual, hard at work on a philosophical study, Det menneskelige ansvar (*On Human Responsibility*), which Asta considers the consummation of his existence much as Thea Elvsted worships Eilert Løvborg as a *literatus* in *Hedda Gabler*. Asta's expectation was that the magnum opus would be completed during his holiday, but Allmers returns announcing not only that he wrote nothing while he was away (much to Rita's satisfaction, as the book is another rival for his attention), but that he has decided to abandon it completely. 'Indvendig i mig er der rigtnok sket en liden omvæltning' ('Inside me a small revolution has taken place, it's true'), he says. '*Å gud* – !' ('Oh, heavens – !'), Rita gasps, in relief, expectation, and excitement (16-17; 102), assuming the revolution centres around her. But it is not his marriage Alfred has recommitted himself to; it is Eyolf, over whose life he now wishes to exercise true responsibility, in action, by teaching the child to come to terms with his disability and fulfil the life he may yet lead – achieve, indeed, what his father has failed to carry out. Rita is taken from exaltation to collapse as one rival for her affection is replaced by another, even more consuming, for whom she herself feels almost nothing.

Asta, Rita, and Alfred are Ibsen's three moving chairs, set in relief by two egregiously normal human beings. Eyolf himself is like any other boy. He likes wearing an army suit, thinks his father is a hero ('det, som *du* skriver, det duer'; 'the things *you* write are worth something'), and is wholeheartedly in denial of his injury: 'jeg synes, det vilde være så kækt, det, om jet også kunde klyve i fjeldene' ('I think it would be so nice if I could go climbing in the mountains too') (9; 94-95). It is clear he has no knowledge of the storms gathering around him, and feels deeply about his disability, as Asta insists (20; 104), only in

the sense of firmly putting it to one side and dreaming of giving the local boys down by the fjord an aristocratic thrashing. Borghejm is another such everyday citizen. He reacts with delight on seeing Alfred unexpectedly, and celebrates his vocation in naively egoistic terms: 'fjeldovergange' – 'mountains to *cross*', not just to be wandered about in by intellectuals (not that he would ever make that comparison). 'De utroligste vanskeligheder at overvinde! Å, du store, vakkre verden, – hvad det er for en lykke, det, at være vejbygger!' ('the most incredible obstacles to overcome! Oh, this great, glorious world – what luck to be a road-builder!') (23; 107). Muriel Bradbrook reminds us (1966: 134) that road building is a special profession in rugged Norway: one endowed 'with the kind of qualities that in our literature are associated with the Empire Builders of Kipling', which more or less says it all. Borghejm plays the surrogate father to Eyolf as Asta plays the surrogate mother. He has given the boy a bow and arrow, and Eyolf plans that he shall teach him to swim.

However the person who comes knocking at the door will not teach Eyolf to swim; she will drown him like an unwanted rat. *Rottejomfruen* (the Rat-Maid) has long been understood as a prodigious invention on Ibsen's part: 'an almost impressionistic, Munch-like amalgam of woman as goddess and crone,' as Errol Durbach writes (1982: 110); 'a young-old emblem of love and death', who can be seen both as a 'cruel distortion of Rita herself', as a lurer of men to their doom, but also as a version of Asta (Jacobs 1984: 606). ('Each comes and goes by by sea,' as James Kerans astutely observes (1965: 201), 'carrying a "little black bag" in which is concealed the death of Eyolf') 'Med allerydmygst forlov,' she asks: 'har herskabet noget, som gnaver her i huset?' ('Begging your pardon most humbly, but would your lordships have anything a-gnawing here in the house?') (12; 98). Certainly not, Alfred and Rita reply, with crushing irony. Obvious as it is, still the Rat-Maid's role bites extraordinarily deep; so deep because it is so obvious. This 'radikalt fremmedelement', as Frode Helland calls it (radically alien element) (2000: 253-254), produces a total shift in tone and style, as the bourgeois, emotional, and personal idiom of the play's opening engagements gives way to something atavistic, autochthonous, and mystical. 'The primitiveness of her "calling"', as Arnold Weinstein puts

it (1990: 298), 'seems totally at odds with their civilized agenda of education, responsibility, and the like' – just as her unearthly quality is. The Rat-Maid has been out locally at her trade, she says, helping an island community overrun with the rodents:

> Rottejomfruen: Folkene havde så sandelig bud efter mig. De kvied sig nok svært ved det. Men der var ikker anden råd. De måtte såmænd pænt bide i det sure æble. (*ser på Eyolf og nikker*) Sure æble, lille herre. Sure æble.
> Eyolf: *uvilkårligt, lidt forknyt* Hvorfor måtte de – ?
> Rottejomfruen: Hvad?
> Eyolf: Bide i det?
> Rottejomfruen: Jo, for de kunde ikke nære sig længer. For rotterne og for all de små rottebørnene, skønner vel unge herren. (13)
>
> (The Rat-Maid: The folk there certainly had call for me. They balked at it, for sure. But there was nothing else for it. It was a bitter pill, so it was, but they had to swallow it. [*Looking at* Eyolf *and nodding*] A bitter pill, little master. A bitter pill.
> Eyolf: [*blurting out, rather timidly*] Why did they have to – ?
> The Rat-Maid: What?
> Eyolf: Swallow it.
> The Rat-Maid: Why, because they couldn't stand it any longer. What with the rats and all the wee rat babies, don't you know, young master.) (98)[3]

Hers is a delectably sinister apparition, catalyzing the family dynamic in almost every direction. Her familiar, a black pug in a purse, lures and terrifies Eyolf just as Rita did Alfred: 'Jeg synes, han har det forfærdeligste åsyn, jeg har sét…. Dejlig, – dejlig er han alligevel' ('I think he has – the most horrible – countenance I have ever seen…. Sweet – he is sweet, though') (14; 99). But *Rottejomfruen* remembers a time when she did not require the dog's assistance in drawing creatures out to the fjord to drown. 'Hvad lokked De for noget?', Eyolf asks ('What sort of things did you lure?'). 'Mennesker. En mest', she replies ('People. One most of all') (15; 100), to make the association complete between herself, Rita, and

her own capacity to lure Eyolf to his death.

But as well as furthering and exposing the family drama, the Rat-Maid's vocation helps define the source of the action that Henry James, John Northam, and so many other readers have felt was unclear in Ibsen's drama, particularly where its conclusion is concerned. That is, she spells out the superstitious helplessness of modern people, who are forced to swallow a metaphorical bitter pill, now that every other source of moral and social sustenance has been nibbled away by the 'rats' of modern conscience: the bitter pill that Alfred and Rita chew between them in the aftermath of their son's death. In that sense she certainly generates 'a sense of potential complexity which is not fully identifiable in the main situation where the characters can imagine themselves to be on the whole wealthy, comfortable, happy and high in mood' (Northam 1973: 190), and she initiates a theme that propels the drama beyond the first act and towards its last.

With the Rat-Maid's departure Eyolf hobbles away to play by the shore, never to be seen again, and Rita withdraws to the verandah for a breath of air: 'Ug, jeg synes det gamle uhyggelige fruentimmer bragte ligesom en ligstank med sig' ('Ugh, I feel as though that ghastly old woman has brought the smell of death into the house') (17; 102). Asta vaguely alerts Allmers to the contents of her attaché case, and after Rita re-enters he theatrically delivers to his adoring womenfolk his vision of a life of dedication to Eyolf. 'Jeg vil føre det menneskelige ansvar igennem', he smugly concludes, 'i mit liv' ('I mean to practice human responsibility in my own life'): a speech that Rita receives with withering irony: 'Tror du virkelig, at du kan holde fast ved slige høje forsætter her hjemme?' ('Do you really believe you can hold to such lofty resolutions here at home?') (21; 105). Frode Helland comments mordantly:

> Han vil suge mening til sitt egt liv gjennom sønnen, omvendelsen utgjør et kannibalistisk prosjekt om å ernære seg av Eyolf. (2000: 266)
>
> (He will suck meaning into his life through his son, his conversion being a cannibalistic project to nourish himself on Eyolf.)

Thus the theme of feeding and being fed upon extends itself, as a response to the empty cravings of modern existence.

Borghejm, a person in whom lofty resolutions have become completely subsumed with practical achievement, now enters for the first time, and draws the reluctant Asta to the garden, with Rita's encouragement:

> Borghejm: Frøken Allmers, skulde ikke vi to spadsere en liden tur sammen? Sådan som vi plejer?
> Asta: Nej, nej tak. Ikke nu. Ikke idag.
> Borghejm: Å, kom så! Bare en bitte liden tur! Jeg synes, jeg har så meget at snake med Dem om, før jeg rejser.
> Rita: Det er kanske noget, som De ikke må snake højt om endnu?
> Borghejm: Hm, det kommer nu an på –
> Rita: Ja, for De kan jo også godt hviske. (23-24)

> (Borgheim: Miss Allmers, shouldn't we take a little stroll together, you and I? I mean, as we usually do?
> Asta [*brusquely*]: No. No, thank you. Not now. Not today.
> Borgheim: Oh, come on! Just a tiny little stroll! I feel I have so much to talk to you about before I leave.
> Rita: Maybe something you can't talk about openly yet?
> Borgheim: Hm, well that all depends –
> Rita: Because you could always whisper it, you know.) (107-108)

This is a crucial moment in the game of musical chairs. Asta has come to the house this morning with a guilty secret tearing at her heart, which has changed her position *vis-à-vis* Borghejm absolutely. But Rita's insinuation about romantic whisperings – 'De ikke må snake højt om endnu?' – not only hovers over their abortive courtship; it also anticipates a crucial revelation about Asta's sororial relation to Alfred delivered near the end of Act Two, which Rita says was delivered to her 'i en lønlig stund' ('in an intimate moment') (55; 132) between the couple. That normal desire for private speech between lovers is something Rita envies insatiably, as she is deprived of it.

Left alone with Allmers, Rita's possessive cruelty emerges almost immediately – and no whispering is involved. An 'insatiate harpy' is how Muriel Bradbrook describes her (1966: 137):

> Rita: Nej, jeg bry'r mig ikke en smule om at være fornuftig! Jeg bry'r mig bare om dig! Om dig alene i hele verden! (*kaster sig atter on hans hals*) Om dig, om dig, om dig!
> Allmers: Slip, slip – du kvæler mig – !
> Rita: *slipper ham* Gid jeg så sandt kunde! (*sér gnistrende på ham*) Å, dersom du vidste, hvor jeg har hadet dig – ! (26)

> (Rita: No, I don't care a whit about being reasonable! All I care about is you! No one in the world but you! [*Throwing her arms around him again*] You, you, you!
> Allmers: Let go, let go – you're choking me – !
> Rita: [*letting him go*] If only I could! [*Regarding him with flashing eyes*] Oh, if you knew how I've hated you – !) (109)

Rita is the very obverse of reason. 'She expresses hatred because she loves Alfred', Northam comments (1973: 194): 'she is physically demanding because she is physically neglected; she threatens infidelity because she wants her husband's attention; she resents Asta and Eyolf because they stand between Alfred and herself'. Allmers' nauseating display of self-infatuated selflessness has roused a diabolically involuted network of sexual and emotional jealousies in her, the effect of which is to drive Allmers only deeper into what she calls his 'vamle, lunkne talemåder' ('wishy-washy mealy-mouthed rubbish') about their marriage, their parenthood, and his pretentious offer of his 'stille inderlighed' ('quiet ardour'):

> Jeg bry'r mig ikke om din stille inderlighed. Jeg vil ha' dig helt og holdent! Og alene! Slig, som jeg havde dig i de første, dejlige, svulmende tider. (*hæftigt og hårdt*) Je la'r mig aldrig i verden afspise med levninger og rester, Alfred! (28)

> (I'm not interested in your quiet ardour. I want to have you completely and utterly! And all to myself! The way I had you

> during those first glorious, passionate months. [*Vehemently, harshly*] I'll never let myself be fobbed off with scraps and leftovers, Alfred!) (111)

The most insulting and infuriating of all Allmers' 'bogus ideals deeply rooted in his guilt' (Durbach 1982: 119) is his 'process of human change over the years', his 'forvandlingens lov' ('law of change'), which is not a law at all, no matter how many times he invokes it, but a platitude: not a means, tragic or comic, of coming to terms with life, but rather of evading it.[4] 'Jeg kan ikke gøre mig anderledes end jeg er', Rita says ('I cannot change the way that I am'), and were Allmers ever to divide himself between her and anyone else, she would have her revenge on him – a revenge that, just now, she can project only in childish acts of infidelity, with Borghejm of all people (30; 113). Like Hedda, Rita exults in taking someone from somebody else; is that not what Eyolf has done to her? If the child has ruined her life, does he have a right to one himself? 'Å, jeg kunde næsten fristes til at ønske – nå!' ('Oh, I could almost be tempted to wish – ah!') (31; 114). The checkmated lovers return, '*alvorlige og forstemte*' ('*solemn and downcast*'), and shouts and screams are heard from the shore. 'Where's Eyolf', Rita cries out in alarm but also surely in guilt: 'Å, bare det ikke er *ham*' ('Oh, please don't let it be him!') (33; 115). But the evil eye she thought Eyolf had cast on her – and on Asta and Borghejm, too – has lured him to the end of the jetty and his death, just as she was tempted to wish.

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So it is that the first act of *Little Eyolf* contrasts Alfred's addiction to self-serving moral abstractions such as the *forvandlingens lov* with change as it is actually happening, in concrete cases standing all around him: Asta and Rita in their relations to him; Borghejm in his relation to Asta; and Eyolf himself in sudden death. The second act rotates around Asta's grand revelation, accordingly, now tragically intensified by Eyolf's death. (In his first enthusiasm, Henry James wrote that 'The part – *the* part – is Asta – unless it be the Rat-hound in the Bag!', and Asta was the role that he felt Ibsen had 'blighted' in Act

Three.) Her illegitimacy cannot help but prey on her mind even after Eyolf's demise, even as Allmers blunderingly notes at the beginning of Act Two how eligible and (in particular) how 'trofast' ('faithful') Borghejm is (37; 119). Asta agrees, but understandably enough does not want to talk about her inability to commit to him for all his virtues. Shaw (1913: 134) and Durbach both believe that now she is freed of a sibling relation to Allmers an inhibition is removed and she only awaits 'an appropriate moment to declare himself' (Durbach 1982: 121). This, I think, is going too far; but Barry Jacobs (1984: 609) is surely right to argue that 'Asta has apparently never stopped being in love with Alfred, and this repressed love has prevented her from falling deeply in love with anybody else'.

The extent to which that love was expressed or repressed, and its relationship to the entire situation, dramatic and intellectual, is what Ibsen's second act involves. First, we learn that as a teenager Asta would dress up in Allmers' cast-off clothing and masquerade as his younger brother to please him – albeit in private, at home. 'De pæne søndagsklæderne, ja. Kan du huske den blå blusen og knæbukserne?', she asks, whether provocatively or not it is impossible to tell ('Do you remember the blue blouse and the knickerbockers?'). Alfred '*dvæler med øjnene på hende*' (gives her '*a lingering look*') in response (39; 120). 'Asta's male disguise seems at once an avoidance and an indulgence of sexual desire', as Michael Goldman suggests (1999: 99).[5] Is turning one's teenage sister into a boy and a brother an expression or a repression of sexual attraction to her? Is it a case of latent homosexuality, come to that, incestuous transgression, or simple narcissism? Is that attraction retrospectively legitimated, now that she knows they are unrelated, and the incest taboo is removed? It was James' view that Ibsen's major dramatic error in *Little Eyolf* lay in understating Alfred's reaction to Asta's revelation (Caretti 2006: 71). But in a sense the facts of the case make no difference to *him*: they have loved each other as siblings, and so far as he is concerned nothing can change what has passed between them in the past. His gross insensitivity relates to the difference Asta's discovery makes to *her*, in the present and the future, as a relative of his and as a young woman of illegitimate birth. Her bastardy floods everything in her life – above

all, her relations with Alfred, Eyolf, and Borghejm – with sexual shame. In all likelihood, there was nothing sinister about her cross-dressing, but it appears so in retrospect, and Alfred says nothing to assure her that the circumstances of her birth are not her responsibility. For all his cant about responsibility, he has no sympathy for others at all – or the sympathy only a solipsist can extend. (The case is strikingly similar to that of Gregers Werle in *The Wild Duck*, who gains a half-sister as Alfred loses one, but who never sees Hedvig as anything other than a tool for him to employ in furthering Hjalmar Ekdal's redemption.)

Asta's cross-dressing is one thing, however. The audience now learns that when she used to 'gik med dem' ('walk about') in this way at home (39; 120) Allmers called her *Eyolf*. So the surrogate brother and the lost son are related. Little Eyolf is gone, and Big Eyolf carries with her in that locked case the news that 'he' – that is, the sister-brother in a blue blouse safely on the other side of the incest taboo – is gone, too; or present in a wholly transfigured way. There is no son and there is no brother any more, and the sexual cat is well and truly out of the little black bag. 'What is so "wrong" about her', James Kerans astutely observes (1965: 196) – the extent of her failure to be the desired younger brother – 'is that she is sexually eligible for Allmers: as a girl she is not his brother, as illegitimate, she is not his sister'. Accordingly, 'the Eyolf in her – the young-brotherly, "constant" companion – has been killed' and a grown woman has taken the changeling's place. We can make out Asta wrestling in the dark with the change that all this brings to their relationship; Alfred himself, as we might expect, and despite his 'forvandlingens lov', insists that nothing has really changed at all.

Asta understandably assumes that her performance as a cross-dresser has remained their secret, locked up like the portfolio. 'Men, Alfred, dette her har du da vel aldrig fortalt til Rita?', she asks ('You've never told Rita about this, have you?'). Alfred's reply is typically equivocal. 'Jo, jeg tror jeg har fortalt hende det en gang…man fortæller jo sin hustru alting – sågodtsom' ('I think I did tell her about it once….a man does tell his wife everything – or as good as') (39; 120-121). A mother's reaction to an explanation of this kind from her husband as to his choice of their child's name can only be imagined; but there is

more. As we have seen, towards the end of the act Rita reveals that the 'lønlig stund' ('intimate moment') in which Alfred whispered his confession concerning Asta's nickname took place during their sexual tryst, the very moment Eyolf fell from the table and was crippled. 'Mindes du den – den fortærende dejlige stund, Alfred?', Rita asks him ('Do you remember that – that all-consumingly sweet moment, Alfred?') (55; 133). 'A strange topic of conversation for the occasion, one might think', certainly (Ewbank 1994: 135). James Kerans (1965: 104) and Arnold Weinstein (1990: 308) argue that Eyolf's magic name was uttered at the moment of sexual climax, but that seems too melodramatic for Ibsen's purpose. Recollecting Rita's hint in to Borghejm in Act One that 'De kan jo også godt hviske' ('you could always whisper it, you know') some kind of 'tribute in the afterglow' (Goldman 1999: 98) seems more likely. 'At last he seemed willing to kill off his fictional brother and become Rita's entirely,' as Barry Jacobs writes (1984: 607), 'but at that very moment the real Eyolf suffered his crippling fall'. Asta will never learn the sexual circumstances surrounding her brother's betrayal of her, and its uncanny coincidence with the parental neglect of her little counterpart and surrogate. But those circumstances explain the collapse of the Allmers' marriage and the withering sense of guilt that afflicts them both, causing them to swallow the bitter pill (or bite the 'sure æble') of empty disillusion. At the catastrophic moment of convergence both Eyolfs were betrayed and destroyed, and if the Rat-Maid comes to punish the parents for their criminal neglect, then Asta and her portfolio come to punish Alfred for incestuous hankerings. Soon after Rita's revelation to the audience about the naming of Eyolf Asta finally spells out the contents of her black bag, telling him to read the correspondence when she is gone (58; 135) – though of course he cannot, as she has not brought the key. She began to stage-manage a revelation during their first discussion in the act, brought to the point by Allmers' blundering remarks on her lack of resemblance to his father (42; 122), but she held off, telling him to let the dead rest in peace and to return to his wife. It is Allmers' decision that his marriage is over and that he and Asta can and should resume their old life together that finally steels and drives her to make her confession.

Rita's vicious reminiscence of the naming of Eyolf is certainly characteristic of an insatiate harpy. If she cannot bind herself and her husband together through love, she will do it with guilt. It comes at the end of a conversation where they scatter blame in more or less every direction. Neither ever loved the boy. Rita couldn't share love with anyone at all, as she admits; and Allmers' grand gesture of authorial abdication, she insists, had nothing to do with love at all. He gave up his work 'Fordi du gik her og fortærtes af mistro til dig selv' ('Because you were consumed by self-doubt'), she says (continuing the metaphorical trail of surreptitious 'gnawing' laid down by the Rat-Maid): 'Fordi du var begyndt at tvile på, at du havde noget stort kald at leve for i verden' ('Because you had begun to wonder whether you had any great vocation to live for in this world'). Predictably, he trots out the 'forvandlingens lov' theory once again, and she urges him to abandon it as an evasion: 'Gå i dig selv!… Og gransk alt det, som ligger under – og bagved' ('Look inside yourself!… And examine all that lies beneath – and behind') (49; 128). That Alfred can never do, even at Asta's prompting, and the only thing that the couple can agree holds them together is shared guilt in the sexual act that day: 'det, som vi nu går her og kalder for sorg og savn, – det er samvittighedsnag, Rita. Ikke noget andet' ('what we now call grief and loss – that's the gnawing of our consciences, Rita. Nothing else') (51; 129).

But it remains to be asked: what *is* 'the gnawing of conscience'? Whence does it come? What would the author of *On Human Responsibility* say? 'For en mening må der da vel være i det', he had insisted to Asta at the beginning of the act ('There has to be some point to it'): 'Livet, tilværelsen, – tilskikkelsen kan da vel ikke være så rent meningsløs heller' ('Life, existence – this visitation of fate can't be totally pointless, surely') (35; 117). We would call this a genuine commitment, if only to 'commitment', were Allmers someone with a real grasp of or interest in human responsibility. William Archer was of the view that Alfred's 'mood is one of bitter resentment against some unknown, malevolent Power that has wantonly *done* this to him' (Postlewait 1986: 125). But that Power is only an abstraction. In fact he is a combination of Gregers Werle on the one hand, with his 'ideal fordring' ('claim of the ideal'), and Hjalmar Ekdal on the other,

with his clamorous wish for a 'retfærdig verdensstyrelse' ('just power ruling this world'). An emotionally and intellectually empty vessel, he resorts to God, if only in a dream of the previous night in which Eyolf had returned to life whole. 'Å, hvor jeg takked og velsigned – (*holder inde*) hm – ' ('Oh, how I thanked and I blessed – [*breaking off*] hm –'). 'Hvem?' ('Who?'), Rita immediately responds: 'Nogen, som du ikke selv tror på?' ('Someone you don't actually believe in yourself?'). 'Du skulde ikke gjort mig tvilende, Alfred', during their marriage, she goes on ('You shouldn't have made me doubt'); what Allmers calls the 'tomme forestillinger' ('empty illusions') of religious faith would at least have left her 'noget at fortrøste mig til' ('something to trust in'); 'Nu går jeg her og véd hverken ud eller ind' ('Now here I am not knowing what to think') (51; 129-130).[6] Allmers' response to her bereft state is utterly uncharitable: in effect to say that if she regrets that evolution in her, why not rescind it, return to religious belief, and 'gøre springet over' ('make the leap across') by suicide to join their son in the afterlife (52; 130)? Their shared incapacity to take that gamble is something they assure themselves is a genuine existential reaction by trying to convert it into a humanist ethical principle: 'For her, i jordlivet, hører vi levende hjemme' ('For here, in this earthly life, is where we, the living, belong') (52; 131). Like the law of change, this kind of 'recognition' amounts to and commits the pair of them to almost nothing, and certainly not to anything like living and happiness. But it is enough to set them both off around a set of recuperative vistas to 'glemme angeren og naget' ('escape the remorse and gnawing guilt'): not travel, granted, but 'kaste os ind i noget', perhaps, in Rita's view ('throw ourselves into something'), or return to authorship, in Alfred's (53; 131). (This *naget/noget* half-rhyme is typical of the poetry of *Little Eyolf*; elsewhere Ibsen will rhyme *nager* ('rodent') with *gnaver* ('gnaw') and *hjertet* ('heart') with *huset* ('house'): see Helland 2000: 256) This last pipe-dream is enough to re-release his wife's inner harpy, and the cycle of blame brings them back to Eyolf's accident, his name, and the 'gengældelsen' ('retribution') (55; 133) they feel they each deserve – itself a form of passive evasion. Where would retribution come from, after all? Who can be said to intend and deliver it? Someone you don't actually believe in, like God? From the invisible source of Human Responsibility? As

John Northam writes (1973: 200): 'His humanism can find no positive value in this experience and he has taught Rita not to believe in the solace of religion. Their subsequent conversation reveals two people who are in fact lost'. In his desperation Allmers turns to Asta with the idea of resuming the 'eneste høj helligdag' ('one long festival') that was their life together (57; 134): a prospect that Asta annihilates with her mother's letters. When Allmers wriggles around even this by claiming that their earlier life together 'vil altid bli' lige helligt' ('will always be every bit as sacred') (59; 145) it only remains to her to throw his 'law of change' back in his teeth.

* * *

'The worst of it is that it goes back, as it were, on what precedes, and gives a meagerness to that too – makes it less interesting and less significant'. So James said of Act Three of *Little Eyolf*. Some things certainly are true of the play's conclusion: the great dramatic revelations are over, and Rita in particular, the insatiate harpy who is still full of vehemence ('*hæftig*'), fury ('*voldsom*'), fierceness ('*hæftig*'), and menace ('*truende*') towards the end of Act Two (as stage directions indicate; 53-55; 131-133), re-enters as an apparently crestfallen depressive. '*Det er sén sommeraften med klar himmel*' ('*late on a summer evening with a clear sky*') (60; 137), we do not know how many days later, but it cannot be long after Eyolf's death, if Borghejm has been asked to hoist a flag to half-mast as a gesture of mourning. Asta and Borghejm meet; both are leaving, in separate directions: he to his new road by train, she back to town by the steamer. Borghejm continues to be the straightforward if bluffly patriarchal individual he has been throughout ('Vær nu fornuftig – for *en* gangs skyld'; 'Be sensible, please – for once'). For what it's worth he regards Allmers' law of change as a 'dum' ('stupid') one (64; 140). He cannot help trampling over issues of which he is perfectly ignorant, urging her to consider marital happiness by asking her to imagine that Alfred hadn't been her brother during their happy years together (139; 63). (She '*vil rejse sig men bliver siddende*'; '*feels the urge to get up, but remains seated*': 63; 139) 'Og så *det* til', he goes on, '*det*, som med et eneste slag forandrer Deres hele stilling herude –' ('And then there's

this thing – something that changes your whole situation here at a stroke –'). 'Hvad mener De med *det*?', Asta asks, '*farer sammen*' ('What do you mean by "this thing"?' '*with a start*'). 'Barnet, som er revet bort', Borghejm replies: 'Hvad ellers?' ('The child that's been snatched away. What else?'), all unaware that a child in her has been snatched away from her beloved brother by her mother's sexual misdemeanour (64; 140). Thus the maladroit lover only reminds her how impossible any future relationship would be, with its locked portfolio of family secrets and sexual shame. 'Vilde De nøjes med at ha' mig *halvt*', she asks, accordingly, '*sér ned for sig*' ('Would you be content with only half of me?' '*lowering her eyes*' (65; 141), knowing what the reply must surely be from a man as conventional and persistent as him.[7]

Her decision to change her mind is the most conventionally dramatic moment in the third act. In their desperate isolation and loneliness Rita and Alfred plead with her to stay: in effect to become a surrogate Little Eyolf to Rita and a surrogate Big Eyolf to Allmers: 'just like you used to be' as Rita puts it. It is a frightfully ambiguous moment:

> Allmers: (*i dulgt bevægelse*) Bliv – og del livet med os, Asta. Med Rita. Med mig. Med mig, – din bror! (68)
>
> (Allmers [*with veiled emotion*]: Stay – and share our life with us, Asta. With Rita. With me – your brother!) (143)

No wonder Asta withdraws her hand with decision and impulsively invites Borghejm to join her, not on the train going in his direction, but on the steamer back to town in hers – presumably to get married. Now the significance of Borghejm's profession reveals itself. He may be one of Kipling's empire builders, but he is also a man whose work takes him great distances in remote country, more or less by definition; if there is a man with whom Asta can bury her secret and escape her past, it is him. 'En flugt fra dig', as she puts it to Alfred, 'og fra mig selv' ('An escape from you – and from myself') (69; 144).

The couple's departure leaves the Allmers all too evidently alone and at cross purposes in an environment where the ideal home has lost every atom of its romance. Rita is lost in superstitious vagaries about

eyes staring out of the darkness in admonishment and retribution, and Alfred is lost in rationalist rejection of such inventions: neither the superstition nor the rationalism even sounds real, let alone adequate. The eyes she sees are simply the lights on the steamer, the tolling sound she hears is merely its departure bell, but spelling these things out to her as Allmers does is uselessly unsympathetic. Rita is prepared to admit that sufficient change has taken place in her to reconcile her to the dreaded book, but only to 'for at få beholde dig her hos mig. Sådan i nærheden' ('keep you here with me. Close at hand, as it were') (72; 146). That proposal reminds Allmers of both the mountain vacation-cum-sabbatical on which he abandoned the project and Rita's possessiveness, and he now produces another instalment from his vacation-narrative: a near-death experience by exposure that, he now claims, lay behind his decision to return home and undertake Eyolf's education anew. 'There is no logical connection', as John Northam points out (1973: 210), 'between his experience and his decision to devote himself to Eyolf', but then Allmers has played fast and loose with logical connections ever since Act Two, seeing forces of retribution hither and yon, and even stating that the Rat-Maid must be the agent of it ('Hun har draget ham i dybet. Vær viss på det, du'; 'She has lured him into the depths. You can be sure of that') (36; 118). The mountain story remains just that: another potentially significant piece of jetsam in a rapidly evacuating charade. Rita certainly does not believe it commits him to anything, and is convinced that he will leave her just the same. Once again their bickering is broken into by yells from the shoreline, where the local villagers are behaving badly, 'Drukne, som de plejer' ('Drunk, as always'), 'Prygler børnene' ('Beating the children') in a set of 'de gamle rønnerne' ('old shacks') Alfred believes Rita should waste no time in demolishing, 'når jeg er borte' ('once I'm gone') (75-6; 149-50). (So much for the author of *On Human Responsibility*.) What follows is a crucial piece of dialogue:

Allmers: Ja, for så har du da i alt fald *noget* at fylde livet ud med. Og det må du ha'.
Rita: (*fast og bestemt*) Det har du ret i. Det må jeg. Men kan du gæte, hvad jeg vil ta' mig til, – når du er borte?
Allmers: Nå, hvad er det da?
Rita: (*langsomt, besluttet*) Så snart du er rejst fra mig, går jeg ned til stranden og får alle de fattige, forkomne børn med mig her op til vort. Alle de uskikkelige gutterne –
Allmers: Hvad vil du gøre med dem her?
Rita: Jeg vil ta' dem til mig.
Allmers: Vil *du*!
Rita: Ja, det vil jeg. Fra den dag, da du er rejst, skal de være her, allesammen, – som om de var mine egne.
Allmers: (*oprørt*) I vor lille Eyolfs sted!
Rita: Ja, i vor lille Eyolfs sted. De skal få bo i Eyolfs stuer. De skal få læse i hans bøger. Få lege med hans småsager. De skal skiftes til at sidde på hans stol ved bordet. (76-77)

(Allmers: Yes, because then at least you'll have *something* with which to fill your life. And that you need to have.
Rita [*firmly and resolutely*]: You're right. I do. But can you guess what am I going to do – once you're gone?
Allmers: No, what will you do?
Rita: [*Slowly, decisively*] As soon as you leave me I'll go down to the shore and bring all those wretched needy children up here to our house. All those rude, rough boys –
Allmers: What will you do with them?
Rita: I'll take them to me.
Allmers: You will?
Rita: Yes, I will. From the day you leave this is where they'll be, all of them – as if they were my own.
Allmers: [*Outraged*] In our little Eyolf's place!
Rita: Yes, in our little Eyolf's place. They'll live in Eyolf's rooms. They'll read his books. Play with his toys. They'll take it in turns to sit on his chair at table.) (150)

'Kanské jeg kunde få være med?', Alfred is asking in a matter of moments, despite his outrage: 'Og hjælpe dig, Rita?' ('*slået, fæster blikket på hende*'). ('Perhaps I could join you in that? And help you, Rita?' ['*impressed, eyes fixed on her*'].) (78; 151). Rita's sudden resolution at this juncture, and the couple's apparent commitment to the neighbourhood children as an act of social charity at the close of the drama – foreshadowed as it perhaps is by Rita's idea of throwing herself into 'som kunde døve og dulme' ('something that might deafen and deaden') late in Act Two (53; 131) – is the major critical issue concerning Ibsen's intention in the play. The sincerity of that instinct, and the soundness of their sudden appreciation of human responsibility; the transformation of little Eyolf's death and their relationship into meaningful things: are these true? Is Rita's conviction genuinely impressive? Certainly at the conclusion Rita speaks of the likelihood of a 'søndagsstilhed' ('peace of the Sabbath') descending upon the couple 'en gang imellem' ('now and then'), and Alfred anticipates the comforting presence of the spirits of their lost loved ones in their lives: 'Vor lille Eyolf', as Rita puts, it: 'Og din store Eyolf også' ('Our little Eyolf. And your big Eyolf too').

> Rita: Hvor hen skal vi sé, Alfred – ?
> Alfred: (*fæster øjnene på hende*) Opad.
> Rita: (*nikker bifaldende*) Ja, ja, – opad.
> Alfred: Opad, – imod tinderne. Mod stjernerne. Og imod den store stilhed.
> Rita: (*rækker ham hånden*) Tak! (79)

> (Rita: Where should we look, Alfred – ?
> Allmers [*eyes on her*]: upwards.
> Rita: Yes, yes – upwards.
> Allmers: Upwards – to the peaks. To the stars. To the great stillness.
> Rita [*giving him her hand*]: Thank you!) (152)

The lines certainly seem reminiscent of Milton's Adam and Eve in the aftermath of their sour apple – stoical, resigned, chastened, and re-

committed: 'The world was all before them, where to choose/Their place of rest', and so forth; looking up at the stars but also at each other, in benediction. But, given the entire progress of the drama to this point, can we take Rita and Alfred at face value? Or is the audience left with a massive ambiguity, a massive uncertainty as to Ibsen's reaction and its own?

What I can't help noticing is that every commentator who takes the Allmers' joint resolution to be sincere falls into the language of rationalist and humanist idealism that Ibsen as a rule is so suspicious of. The couple moves 'from an evasion of responsible commitment to others to a principle of ethical involvement' according to Errol Durbach (1982: 185, 125-126); 'life-affirming common sense' breaks out in 'a world of mundane and workaday responsibilities, illuminated by flashes of spiritual value and a sense of life's larger purposes'. For Barry Jacobs, similarly (1984: 613), Rita will lure her fjord-side rats 'not to death, but to the possibility of a better life', and hers is therefore a 'new commitment to human responsibility'. 'Both have gained a sounder, wider view of life', according to John Northam (1971: 193): 'It is a sort of victory; they have grown up'. What Rita 'aims to do is translate human responsibility into action' (Northam 1973: 214) – irrespective of the skepticism she entertained about Allmers' intention of doing just that with Eyolf's education. Arnold Weinstein (1990: 316) stresses 'maturation', 'the distance she has traveled', 'the energies…at last free to move outward, into the larger world, beyond', and so forth: 'Eyolf dies,' in short, 'so that children may live'. (Good news!) The play shows, Toril Moi argues (2014: xxix),

> that if we have the courage to face reality, the only viable response to the suffering of others, and to our own sense of guilt and responsibility for their suffering, is love, not in the sense of some new feeling or inner experience…, but simply in the sense of doing the things that a loving person would do.

But whether love can ever be defined as 'doing the things that a loving person would do' is surely the very point at issue here. (Is love doing loving *things*? Or doing things in a loving *way*?) What impels Allmers to

stay with Rita, according to James Kerans (1965: 203), 'is the possibility of finding meaning in life through aid to the anonymous "boys" or substitute Eyolfs whom Rita is to bring up from shore'. Indeed, 'in this gesture she reveals the essential motherliness of her nature' (Kerans 1965: 200), which we have had no inkling of before. (Like Hedda, surely, she is the very antithesis of the maternal: she was tempted to wish her only son dead in Act One, after all.)

It can only be replied to views of this kind that 'finding meaning in life' is itself a quintessentially humanist, idealist aspiration, and that in Ibsen's drama, as in all great literature, such an expression cannot be offered up uncritically. Our capacity to *find* anything of that degree of significance for ourselves, and our warring and wavering senses of what 'meaning' in life may actually *be*, are the very things that are in contention in dramas like *Little Eyolf* – explicitly so in that particular case. It is not good enough in such a context to be either blithely ironic in the manner of George Bernard Shaw ('And so they are delivered from their evil dream, and, let us hope, live happily ever after'; 1913: 139), or placidly epigrammatic in the manner of Sverre Arestad – or the manner of Allmers himself, come to that ('the individual achieves freedom…through acceptance of responsibility'; 1960: 144). The play drives us to consider the very reality of agency, 'meaning', and our capacity to find it outside egoism yet within the social dynamics that we inhabit whether we want to or not.

So it seems to me that the question, 'Does Ibsen expect us to believe this abrupt double conversion, or is it another of his contrapuntal, ironic endings?' (Jacobs 1984: 604) involves a consideration not only of the terms in which the 'conversion' is posited by Ibsen's commentators, but also of what the Allmers' alternatives are. They are in the process of swallowing the Rat-Maid's bitter pill: 'der var ikke anden råd' ('there was nothing else for it'), as she said (13; 98). Love, home, marriage, family, bourgeois comfort, 'gold and green forests', intellectual endeavour, faith, and tradition are all gone, and all that is left, apparently, is a set of *livsløgner*, humanist bromides about life-affirming common sense, ethical involvement, spiritual value, 'commitment', and the 'larger world'. Lost as they are, nothing has changed: Rita's proposal to shelter the lost lambs of the fjord is one ejaculated as a direct threat and

reprisal were Allmers to leave her. 'Men kan du *gætte*, hvad jeg vil ta' mig til, – når du er borte?', she asks, in that sadistic interrogative style we saw her use on Asta at the opening of the play ('Can you *guess* what I'm going to do – once you're gone?'). '*Så snart* du er rejst fra mig', she says ('*As soon* as you leave me'), the grubby foreshore urchins who let Eyolf drown will take possession of his books, toys, and furniture; the instruments of work and play Allmers arranged for his beloved's education will be fingered by the guttersnipes he snobbishly detests. 'She wants these boys to enjoy what she once preserved jealously for her own son', in John Northam's view (1973: 213). But this is the reverse of a triumph over selfishness; it is further insatiate mental violence directed at her husband, this time dressed up as altruism: 'an unaltered desire for possession', as Laura Caretti calls it (2006: 76). When Rita says, 'Du har skabt en tom plads indeni mig. Og den må jeg prøve på at fylde ud med noget. Noget, som kunde ligne en slags kærlighed' ('You have created an empty space inside me. And this I have to try to fill with something. Something resembling love of some sort') (77; 150), we are surely right to relate that 'tom plads' to the Rat-Maid and her unfortunate islanders, who were obliged to swallow her bitter pill or eat her sour apple, *faute de mieux*, balk at doing so as they might. Rita reverts to ethical involvement as a justification for her existence just as the islanders reverted to the Rat-Maid: because she has no choice, and because there is nothing else left, morally, intellectually, and emotionally un-gnawed away. Indeed, Frode Helland is surely right to compare her altruistic urge with the Rat-Maid's own *modus operandi* (2000: 287): 'Prosjektet forutsetter at også disse barna er som «rotter», at de er uønsket…. De skal fungere som fyllmasse i hennes tomme mørke'. ('The project assumes the children are like rats, that they are unwanted…. They will serve as filler in her empty darkness'.) To say it is 'a happy ending which the context profoundly questions', is a substantial under-statement; the Allmers' altruistic mission is more like 'another fiction, another illusion' (Ewbank 1994: 140, 146). 'Det de sier og det de deler, er et utslag av deres hardnakkede evne til å finne en fortelling som gir livet nødvendighetens skinn' (Helland 2000: 290.) ('What they say and what they share is a result of their tenacious ability to confect a narrative that gives their life a necessary veneer' – or 'hide',

'gloss', or 'appearance': *skinn* is profoundly ambiguous.) The 'program of education, love, and generous subvention' is 'tainted at the root' (Goldman 1999: 105, 106), and that is where Ibsen leaves us: with two people gazing at the peaks and the stars – but also in each other's eyes, at the same time – more in hope than expectation, 'enclosed in a life-denying cocoon of egotism' as John Reid puts it (2009: 15).

* * *

'How can he expect that others should/Build for him, sow for him, and at his call/Love him,' Wordsworth wrote in 'Resolution and Independence', 'who for himself will take no heed at all?' 'Like all people whose lives are valueless,' Shaw wrote of Hedda Gabler (1913: 116), 'she has no more sense of the value of Lövborg's or Tesman's or Thea's lives than a railway shareholder has of the value of a shunter's'. We can only value other people if we value ourselves, and vice versa. If Rita Allmers could not love and value her own child, how can she possibly be expected to love and value children who are not her own? If Alfred Allmers cannot carry out the most basic responsibilities of husband, father, brother – even intellectual – how can he be expected to carry out a responsibility to society?

'Do you believe', Ibsen asked a friend (Northam 1971: 194), 'that Rita will take on the rough children? Don't you think it's just a holiday mood?' It is a remark positively designed to leave us alone with the dilemma the play proposes. But when we have swallowed the bitter pill, what else can we do but 'hold to ties that save us from utter meaninglessness' (Durbach 1982: 126)? What John Northam calls 'breaking out into a direct relationship with life' (1973: 215) may be a hallucination or a *skinn* – perhaps even a *livsløgnen* – but without a belief in it modern, secular existence would disintegrate. In that sense, *Little Eyolf* goes somewhere beyond tragedy, and thus the real source of its action can hardly be defined.

Endnotes

[1] In this and later quotations, page references to the Norwegian source text and published English translation refer to, respectively, Ibsen, H. (n. d.). *Lille Eyolf*, Jauss, C., Wiger, E. N., and Taugbøl, S. B. (eds.), in *Henrik Ibsens Skrifter: Skuespill*. and Ibsen, H. (2014). The Master Builder *and Other Plays*, Rem, T. (ed.) London: Penguin. I should like to express my gratitude to Bård Aaberge, anthropology Ph.D. student in the College of Arts, Education, and Society at James Cook University, who undertook to check my Ibsen quotations and gave me a good deal of guidance besides.

[2] Alfred's walking trip is almost certainly an instance of the Norwegian notion of *friluftsliv* ('outdoor life'): the necessary and quasi-religious escape from society to discover one's real self in nature, about which Ibsen himself was profoundly ambivalent. (See Gurholt 2008.) Whether Allmers has achieved the anticipated intellectual reorientation of his life remains to be seen at this stage. With his son in mind he tells Borghejm 'En rigtig friluftsgut skal der bli' af ham' ('We're going to make a real outdoor boy of him') (24; 108).

[3] The New Penguin Ibsen translation of *Lille Eyolf* is no doubt an improvement on previous ones, but this passage is surely problematic. 'De måtte såmænd pænt bide i det sure æble' is literally 'they must together promise to bite on that sour apple' (as Michael Meyer translated *sure æble*, Ibsen 1961: 28). To 'bite on a sour apple' is a figure of speech in Norwegian, Danish, and German, so a parallel English expression like 'swallow a bitter pill' is an understandable choice: both meaning, approximately, having to put up with something unpleasant ('måtte finne seg i noe ubehagelig' as the *Ibsens Skrifter* editors gloss the phrase). But 'bitter pill' sends a different metaphorical message to the original all the same, being an unpleasant medication rather than a repulsive foodstuff. One refers to healing illness, the other to overcoming hunger. And the island folk had jointly to undertake to swallow this food, since the rats had eaten everything else; more wholesome food has been eaten away. *Little Eyolf* plays frequently on rats, gnawing, emptiness, and hunger, as a metaphorical comment on the moral emptiness of modern life: the emptiness that Alfred and Rita will confront and deny at the play's end, when a sour apple is all that is left to them. Ibsen's *sure æble* also takes us back to the Garden of Eden and the Tree of Knowledge, from which all his *livsløgner* ultimately derive.

[4] Some readers of the play regard Allmers' law uncritically, as he does: 'In *Little Eyolf*…the "law of change" stands for the real conditions of human life, the reality

the characters refuse to acknowledge' (Moi 2014: xxviii). But Allmers knows next to nothing about 'the real conditions of human life' or its responsibilities; that is Ibsen's point.

[5] Both Durbach (1982: 119) and Kerans (1965: 196) are of the view that Asta was required to dress up in this way by Allmers' father and stepmother; but it is clear in the play that she does this when they are orphaned, and 'var ble't alene i verden' ('left all alone in the world') (38; 120).

[6] 'Allmers er erklært ateist,' Frode Helland writes (2000: 270), 'men de metafysiske krav som religionen tradisjonelt ivaretar, er intakte hos ham. Oppgivelsen av gudstroen innebærer ikke for ham en samtidig oppgivelse av forestillingen om at det er en dyp mening bak det hele'. ('Allmers is a declared atheist, but the metaphysical claim that religion traditionally safeguards is still present in him. To abandon belief in God is not simultaneously to abandon the belief that there is a meaning behind it all'.)

[7] John Northam (1973: 207) argues that Asta initially rejects Borgheim because the road builder is 'as possessive as Alfred or Rita', but I think the word 'ihærdig' ('persistent'), used of him by Asta (137), is a better one: there is no sign of insatiate pathology in him.

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