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CRAIG AND IBSEN TEXT PERFORMANCE AND PRODUCTION*

In one of the very first volumes to study the considerable transformations in early twentieth-century theatre Sheldon Cheney makes a very interesting remark: ‘There are two great revolutionary figures in the history of the modern theatre: Henrik Ibsen and Gordon Craig’, immediately afterwards specifying that while the former had revitalized tradition in its best aspects, the latter had radically subverted it. His conclusion was that ‘Ibsen is the great reformer, Craig the great secessionist’.¹ Cheney’s reading presents the two as avenues to modernity: radical reform of theatre writing on the one hand and the ‘secession’ of dramatic form itself, out and out revolution, on the other. Two roles and functions which met in Craig’s staging of three Ibsen plays: *The Vikings of Helgeland* which premiered under the title *The Vikings* in 1903, *Rosmersholm*, in 1906, and *The Pretenders*, in 1926.²

The Craig-Ibsen relationship was singular and tortuous. Of the three productions two – the second and third – stemmed from external commissions, only one being the result of explicit choice. The temptation exists to reduce the significance of the ‘great reformer meets great revolutionary’ not to any specific interest but to opportunity tinged with opportunism, given Ibsen’s almost invasive presence on the European scene in the early twentieth century. Craig’s measuring himself against Ibsen, in other words – the fact that three of his total of nine productions were dedicated to Ibsen – is simply further proof of the dramatist’s importance in the birth of stage directing.³ However, while this ground-breaking moment certainly offered the opportunity for

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¹ S. Cheney, *The New Movement in the Theatre*, New York, Mitchell Kennerly, 1914, p. 275.

² I have given the English title only in the case of *The Vikings*, the only production staged in Britain and therefore given an English title. In the case of *Rosmersholm* the original title was left for obvious reasons, while *Kongs-Emnerne*, often cited under its English title *The Pretenders*, was staged in Copenhagen with its Norwegian title, while the anglicized form is present only in Craig’s published book of preparatory drawings for the production: E. Gordon Craig, *A production, being thirty-two collotype plates of designs prepared or realized for “The Pretenders” of Henrik Ibsen and produced at the Royal Theatre, Copenhagen, 1926*, London, Oxford University Press, 1930.

³ Cf. R. Alonge, *Teatro e spettacolo nel secondo Ottocento*, Roma; Bari, Laterza, 1993, p. 94.

Craig's Ibsen encounter, it is not enough to justify a degree of interest which unquestionably supersedes simple contingency. And the fact that two of his productions were externally commissioned in no way implies a lack of internal, personal dialogue with the texts, or of susceptibility to the dramatist's influence and fascination.

Craig's first important contact with Ibsen had come very early on, during his training as an actor. Due to family circumstances rather than proactive choice, this had been solidly within the Victorian tradition, and significantly, as he himself notes, it was this very encounter with Ibsen which provided the springboard towards 'emancipation'.⁴ The meeting was platonic though, and only took more concrete form in 1903, when he had stopped acting and had started directing with the Purcell Operatic Society. The result of this encounter was *The Vikings*, a production which had a determining role in his development. This was the first time he had engaged with a playwright of a precise and decidedly dramaturgical stamp and a text which was demanding both from a literary and directorly viewpoint: the first time he had had to deal with a text which was itself the complete work rather than simply a narrative base-line, as it had been for the musical theatre of Purcell. It was also the first time Craig had had to direct a company of professional actors, to boot versed in precisely the Victorian tenets from which he was quickly and radically distancing himself. This was not just of anecdotal interest, but was important in confronting him with an aspect of directing he had never come across with the Purcell Operatic Society, with mainly amateur actors and singers who on that account were less conditioned by received ideas of the stage and more open to "thinking outside the box" and welcoming to Craig's innovative solutions. Both aspects made of *The Vikings* the turning-point in the first phase of his directing career, and it was precisely the methodological and professional problems which arose on this occasion which are often, and rightly, adduced to explain a number of considerations on directing in his cardinal work, *The Art of the Theatre* (1905).

His second encounter with Ibsen, *Rosmersholm*, came only three years later, but so many important events had happened in the meantime as to make it a completely different period in his life. After *The Vikings* Craig had left Britain and at the invitation of Count Kessler had moved to Germany, where he had embarked on a project with Otto Brahm and Max Reinhardt. Nothing however came of this beyond Craig's gradual detachment from actual stage practice and his growing interest in theory. *Rosmersholm* represented a further attempt at theatre as operative practice. It also represented out-and-out failure. It grew out of his collaboration with Eleonora Duse who, after breaking off relations with D'Annunzio and meeting Lugué-Poe, was throwing herself into a new and more intense Ibsen phase. Duse herself took the decision to involve Craig in designing and making the sets for *Rosmersholm* – determined at the meeting arranged by Isadora Duncan, to which too much

⁴ 'At that time it was felt that if you produced a play by Ibsen you had got your knife into poor old England, because, it was said, Ibsen dealt in things not often touched on in England [...] I had moments of emancipation when I felt that there was nobody so splendid as Ibsen – until I emancipated myself still further, and discovered that Shakespeare beat him hollow on his ground'. E. Gordon Craig, *Henry Irving*, London, Dent, 1930, pp. 146-147. Interestingly, over the years Craig comes back to the Ibsen-Shakespeare comparison: when commenting on his preparatory drawing for *Rosmersholm* in E. Gordon Craig, *Towards a New Theatre*, London, Dent, 1913; and successively in E. Gordon Craig, *Henry Irving*, and in E. Gordon Craig, Foreword to *The Mask* (1928).

emphasis has perhaps been given –⁵ of very probably as a result her dissatisfaction with bourgeois realism, which she saw as a trap for Ibsen’s imaginary, and her growing curiosity towards the “different”, more symbolic and oneiric Ibsen to which Lugné-Poe had introduced her.⁶ When in 1921 she was planning her return to the stage, and was considering, among various possibilities, the possibility of measuring herself against Ibsen, she again, significantly, returned to the idea of a symbolic Ibsen although, as it often happened in her case, nothing more came of this. Silvio d’Amico, who met with Duse a number of times over the period, bore witness to her strongly-worded “temptation”:

‘I have a horror of realism’, she told me one of the first times we met, refusing to admit that her Ibsen was also a realist. She heard only the poet breathing through the protagonists of his plays.⁷

To release this Ibsen of pure poetry, so far from the realist confines in which someone like Zacconi, for example, had enclosed him – the very Zacconi who was to become her fellow traveller on her return to the stage, an extreme example of the actress’s many contradictions – a new set design was needed, and it was here that the name of Gordon Craig re-presented itself, after a considerable number of years. D’Amico writes:

Making it clear from the beginning that she wished her stage return to be in a play by Ibsen, she was anxious as to the set design, and spoke of Gordon Craig. I answered: ‘The problem of the staging of Ibsen is simply inexistent: He has already given us very precise instructions when he lists: a door, a stove, two armchairs...’. But she shook her head and replied: ‘No, no; we need to synthesize’.⁸

If, then, the meeting with Craig had been determined by external forces (and on the purely concrete level began and ended with one performance of *Rosmersholm*), it had also been important, and had strongly marked her Ibsenian imaginary. A further point confirms this. In 1905 Duse performed in her first and most celebrated version of *Rosmersholm*.⁹ If immediately afterwards she accepted the Craigian experiment, it was because the encounter had clearly opened up the possibility of a staging which she considered new and corresponding to her inclination. And Craig was hardly unknown to her: only the year before he had produced the sketches for Hugo von Hoffmannsthal’s *Elektra*, albeit this was never staged. He was also no longer just the talented son of Ellen Terry, but the author of *The Art of the Theatre*, which was making its mark in European theatrical circles. Commissioning Craig to stage *Rosmersholm*, then, was hardly a bold and risky

⁵ On this point see Isadora Duncan, *My Life*, New York, Liverlight Publishing Corporation, 2013 (first English edition 1927).

⁶ ‘This marked the origin’ – writes Alonge, commenting on *The Lady from the Sea* staged by Lugné-Poe in 1892 – ‘of the practice of reading some symbolic charge into every Ibsen character, some system of conceptual binaries (here Slavery and Freedom, Duty and Adventure, or the Fjord and the Open Sea)’. R. Alonge, *Ibsen. L’opera e la fortuna scenica*, Firenze, Le Lettere, 1995, p. 27. Symbolist readings are very marked in Craig’s productions.

⁷ Silvio d’Amico, *Tramonto del grande attore*, Milano, Mondadori, 1929, p. 51.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁹ On Eleonora Duse’s stage version of *Rosmersholm* from 1905 see F. Simoncini, *Rosmersholm di Ibsen per Eleonora Duse*, Pisa, ETS, 2005. Craig’s version is also examined here.

venture for Duse, but a conscious move towards an unorthodox (even by Duse's standards) Ibsen, and more resembling the dramatist described by Lugné-Poe, freed from the constraints of realism.¹⁰

Craig, for his part, was looking for a prestigious collaboration which would give visibility to the innovations he had in mind. This explains his reason for accepting a commission which allowed him no role in the general direction of the production, the locus for his specific vision of theatre, but was "limited" to stage design.¹¹ After very few repeat performances in Florence, Genoa and Nice, the production met an inglorious end which passed into theatre lore. In Nice the sets had to be cut, to adapt them to the dimensions of the stage. When Duse called him to solve the problem, Craig flew into a rage, the actress followed suit, and the ensuing quarrel put an end to both the production and any hope of future collaboration, including *The Lady from the Sea* which she had recently proposed to him.

Rosmersholm was further proof to Craig of the difficulties inherent in dealing with the theatre world, even as incarnated by the actress he most venerated, and when it was a further step towards a theatre conceived in theoretical terms. Significantly, the production was chronologically centred between the two most important points in Craig's conceptual development: 1905, the year of *The Art of the Theatre*, and 1907, the year of 'The Actor and the Übermarionette' and *The Artists of the Theatre of the Future*.¹² It could be read as a strategic marker separating an idea of directing still completely absorbed by pragmatics from a theoretical approach the metaphorical and abstract dimensions of which make almost irreconcilable with concrete staging.

Twenty years were to go by before he and Ibsen "met" again. In 1926 Johannes Poulsen wrote inviting him to collaborate on a production celebrating his and his brother Adam's 25 years of activity. The text proposed was *The Pretenders*. By this point Craig had no contact whatsoever with the European theatre world. His last production had been the celebrated Moscow *Hamlet* in 1912, since when he had taken up with *The Mask*, the review in which he concentrated all his theoretical energy and evolved the sense of a possible theatre discourse. *The Pretenders*, then, comes late in his career, and generally receives scant attention from scholars, who treat it as a rehash of subjects and approaches

¹⁰ That the encounter between Craig and Eleonora Duse was far from accidental is firmly asserted by Laura Caretti in L. Caretti, 'Craig, la Duse e l'arte del teatro', in G. Isola and G. Pedullà (eds.), *Gordon Craig in Italia*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1993. A curious detail – which of course is no guarantee that Duse had read Craig's writings – is the fact that the library of the Vittoriale degli Italiani, i.e. d'Annunzio's own library, contains the three original editions (English, German and Dutch) of *The Art of the Theatre*. This could mean absolutely nothing, but certainly testifies to the presence of Craig's theory in circles which were very close to Duse's.

¹¹ In a letter to Hofmannsthal (December 1906) Craig writes: 'I cannot go on with the short scene I created for Madame Duse, for *Rosmersholm*. The scene in itself is nothing, since (as you are well able to understand) a scene is simply a limb in a whole body, and control over all the limbs, in this case the actors, is impossible. Duse is the only thing I find in harmony with the play'. L. Caretti, 'Craig, la Duse e l'arte del teatro', p. 67. This is the sort of pronouncement which had ruled out any form of collaboration during his time in Germany, but in different terms: now Craig is lamenting the impossibility of directing the whole production but agrees to work with Duse.

¹² All three were then published together in E. Gordon Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre*, London, Heinemann, 1911.

already adequately explored.¹³ It is actually a significant production, and of considerable help in further explaining the turning-point which began in the twenties and initiated another phase in Craig's relations with the theatre which, while certainly less innovative and revolutionary than that which had characterized the first two decades of the century and of his career, was still of no little importance in his development.

The three Ibsen productions, then, mark the triple peaks of Craig's practical and theoretical evolution, and evince the processes in a transforming idea of theatre which emerges as a radical rethinking of stage language and codes. They are equally an enticing opportunity for observing at close hand the relations between a mode of deliberately authorial directing – to the point of contemplating the elimination of the literary text – and what can safely be defined the most influential and authoritative model in late nineteenth-century writing for the theatre.

The Vikings is first of all significant on account of context. Ellen Terry, the leading lady of the Lyceum and Craig's mother, had just ended her two-decade partnership with Henry Irving and had decided to form her own company based at the Imperial Theatre in London. She engaged some of the most prominent artists of the moment – including Oscar Asche, Holman Clarke and Hubert Carter – together with two of her children: Edith, as costume designer, and Gordon Craig as director. In creating what seemed a relatively traditional family company, Terry had probably unwittingly formed a team in which the role of director is made specific and autonomous.¹⁴

The company now existed but had not yet obtained a repertory. Terry's aim was to maintain her leading lady role with all its hard-won success at the same time as she felt the need to open up new horizons. In 1903 she was fifty-five, with an extraordinary career characterizing her as a finely-balanced actress of terse understatement, the icon of a certain type of Victorian sensitivity, making all this the central focus of Irving's theatre project. Entering a new and difficult phase of her career at this stage meant attempting different paradigms without betraying her own history. What she was looking for, in the words of her nephew Edward Craig, was a strong character in a text with an equally strong dramatic impact.¹⁵ The name which continued to surface was that of Ibsen, probably because in that period Terry was in close contact with Shaw, and Ibsen was as yet untested territory. Craig proposed *Peer Gynt*, while her mother more plausibly preferred one of the bourgeois dramas which most successfully showcase female

¹³ 'The production, documented in a splendidly illustrated volume, while on a considerably elevated level adds nothing of any significance to the English director's theatrical approach', writes, for example, Ferruccio Marotti in F. Marotti, *Gordon Craig*, Bologna, Cappelli, 1961, p. 143; Christopher Innes practically ignores it in C. Innes, *Edward Gordon Craig*, London; New York, Cambridge University Press, 1983; and Bablet too, while pronouncing *The Pretenders* an important production, dedicated little more than a page to it in D. Bablet, *Edward Gordon Craig*, Paris, L'Arche, 1962. A detailed and documented reconstruction, however, is to be found in F. Marker and L.-L. Marker, *Edward Gordon Craig and The Pretenders. A Production Revisited*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1981.

¹⁴ The programme read: 'Entire Production designed and directed by Edward Gordon Craig' (a copy is conserved in the Craig Collection of the Library of the British Institute in Florence). Ellen Terry referred to the "modernity" of this experiment years later in her autobiography: 'I hope it will be remembered, when I am spoken of by young critics after my death as a "Victorian" actress belonging to the "old school", that I produced a spectacular play of Ibsen's in a manner which possibly anticipated the scenic ideas of the future by a century'. Ellen Terry, *The Story of My Life*, London, Hutchinson and Co., 1908, pp. 326-327.

¹⁵ See Edward Craig, *Gordon Craig. The Story of His Life*, New York, Alfred Knopf, 1968, p. 160.

characters. *Peer Gynt* had a particular significance for Craig at that point however, and when he spoke about Ibsen's part in his emancipation he was speaking specifically of this particular Ibsen period, and not of the later, better-known works, which he considered less in harmony with his own artistic sensibility.¹⁶ Edward Craig provides a fascinating vignette of this youthful interest in *Peer Gynt*, as recounted by his father:

Peer Gynt he read aloud, shouting it into the wind as they sat on the hill-tops and looked down into the valleys. He had always seen himself as young Hamlet, but now he saw himself as Peer Gynt.¹⁷

This slightly histrionic enthusiasm for the text and character translated itself between 1899 and 1900 into a series of sketches and drawings for possible stagings.

Very understandably (where was her prominent leading lady role?) Ellen Terry rejected Craig's proposal, only to be offered *The Vikings of Helgeland*, another Ibsen of a very similar kind. This time Terry accepted, less out of conviction than from 'maternal love', as she records with a hint of self-irony. Even in the moments of greatest enthusiasm, she writes, she had never believed that her vocal cords could adjust to the wild, savage, pugnacious primitivism of the character of Hjordis. But "family loyalty" apart, there was also the sheer challenge of adding 'luminosity' to the character which would lift it out of its textual gloom.¹⁸

The Vikings became the show with which the Imperial Theatre opened: it also closed it after few performances, high production costs and low turnout of audience proving untenable. Terry tried again with *Much Ado About Nothing*, again under Craig's directing, which she expressly ordered to be less experimental, but this venture too failed to turn the company's fortunes around.¹⁹ The reasons, apart from sheer logistics (the theatre's decentralized location and lack of publicity), also included, though to a lesser degree, Terry's unconvincing interpretation of Hjordis and a lack of harmonization between the stylized and experimental staging and a style of acting which, for all Craig's efforts, remained conventionally nineteenth-century.²⁰

¹⁶ It was in the context of his stage 'emancipation' that Craig cited Ibsen and Shakespeare as the prime agents in his evolution – a singular statement considering that he had trained as a Shakespearian actor under Irving. By the expression 'discovery of Shakespeare' he clearly intended something more complex than the purely material fact applied to an author who was anything but unknown to him. Factoring in his many comments on Shakespeare over the years we can deduce that the discovery was of a model of theatre lending itself to a symbolic world. His interest in Ibsen is also, then, to be read in these terms, which helps explain the move towards the pre-bourgeois season of his production.

¹⁷ Edward Craig, *Gordon Craig, The Story of His Life*, p. 110.

¹⁸ See Ellen Terry, *The Story of My Life*, p. 325.

¹⁹ During rehearsals Ellen Terry wrote to Craig: "Then again, I believe in the old play, and the old me in it would not be acceptable to the Public in a different style to the only one they know". Edward Craig, *Gordon Craig, The Story of His Life*, p. 174. *Much Ado About Nothing* had always been one of her favourite showpieces.

²⁰ James Hunacker, reviewing *The Vikings*, wrote: "The show was condemned by a fundamental fault: the substantial mismatch between the roles and the actors interpreting them. The most fervent imagination balks at the idea of Ellen Terry as the ferocious warrior-spouse of Gunnar Headman. Miss Terry, with her soft, capricious voice, tender, arch, and deliciously arrogant, is now a mature lady. Assigning her the part of Hjordis has meant assassinating Ibsen". Ibid, p. 193. Craig himself, in the book dedicated to his mother (E. Gordon Craig, *Ellen Terry and her Secret Self*, London, Sampson Low, 1931), writes that the venture was always headed for failure and that Terry should have procured a good play in a good company, leaving him three quarters of an hour every evening for his

The Vikings was a production *manqué*, then: a phenomenon destined to repeat itself with *Rosmersholm* and to some extent to the other productions (except the very first), a result of the substantial incompatibility between the staging project and the on-stage realization. Like all Craig's other *manqué* productions however, it left a determining mark on the birth of modern theatre.

The aim of the present article however is not to assess if and to what extent *The Vikings* was a failure or a success, but to analyze the staging plan and evaluate it in terms of a directorly rewriting of the text which, according to Craig's emerging conviction, has to go beyond a simple act of *mise-en-scène*. It should be remembered here that Craig rejected any aspect of realism in his work, and that in his first encounter with an actual theatre script he had decided to ignore every word of the stage directions. This was not so much a question of requiring a freer hand with the set, as because the visual organization of the production, he maintained, should provide a new "*mise-en-pièce*" of the verbal and narrative plane. In actual fact his rapport with the stage directions was more complex than is generally acknowledged. It may be more correct to speak of a free reinvention of the staging rather than true autonomy of the directing project over that of the text.²¹

Craig started by subdividing the text into four acts, each one with its characterizing theme, as the programme explicitly stated. The act I was entitled *The Rocks*; the II *The Feast*; the III *Light*; and the IV *The Tempest*. It is immediately clear that the titles are more than a passing reference to Ibsen's settings, however differently they may have been translated in terms of *mise-en-scène*. The link is direct and explicit as regards the acts I and II: in the I, in the reference to the cliff of the stage directions, and in the II in that the dramatic situation – the banquet in Gunnar's home – is foregrounded as theme. Similarly in the act IV the tempest which hangs menacingly over the end of the play is presented as the central stage theme. The case of act III is more interesting in being different: *Light* which is absolute rather than specific and limited by a grammatical article – a quintessentially Craigian motif.

experiments. This needs to be considered however in relation to the transformations in Craig's ideas on theatre; from the twenties on, as it will emerge in the discussion of *The Pretenders*, he maintained the need to separate the concrete craft of the theatre from research into its principles. One positive voice emerged from the chorus of negative or doubtful comment, that of the critic of the *Playgoer* (June) who wrote 'rarely of late years has Miss Terry acted with more intensity', but it was to remain isolated. See C. Innes, *Edward Gordon Craig*, p. 96.

²¹ Christopher Innes actually wrote that 'when working on *The Vikings*, too, he asked Ellen Terry to cut all the stage directions before sending him the text'. C. Innes, *Edward Gordon Craig*, p. 83. In actual fact the promptbook conserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France of Paris presents the text – in William Archer's English translation, which Craig loathed – complete with lines and stage directions. The first directions of both act I and act II also have small handwritten additions: in the I, the passage 'it is a stormy snowgrey winter day' is underlined; in the II, where the direction has 'All rise; violent excitement among the guests', introducing the quarrel among them, he has added in ink 'up slowly', presumably marking his decision to contain the pathos of the situation in a solemn, formal atmosphere. E. Gordon Craig, *The Vikings. Promptbook*, 1903 (manuscript conserved in the Collection Craig, Bibliothèque Nationale de France of Paris). Craig also examines stage directions from a theoretical slant in *The Art of the Theatre* where he deems them an 'intrusion' of the writer into the field of the theatre expert. What he means is that the staging must be the complete dominion of the director, whose creativity should never be conditioned. In the present case this means not ignoring them out of hand, but refusing to make the staging a simple transposition of the author's representative intentions.

The entitling of the acts in Craigian stage discourse translates into a strongly foregrounding sign the intended purpose of which is to determine a markedly iconic dramaturgy, its visual aspect contributing to define the contours of the action and, more importantly, its possible signification. Stylistically and formally, its stage context is a stylization realized by expanses of empty stage delineated by drapes of a neutral colour successively overwritten chromatically by projectors transmitting the iconic sign which defined the dramatic tone of the different scenes.

In act I this sign takes the form of a large rock looming in the proscenium, a clear synecdoche of Ibsen's stage directions.²² Craig intended the duel between Oscar Ashe (playing Sigurd) and Holmar Clarke (Ornulf) to take place, interpreted as a ritualized encounter, in slow motion Samurai-type postures.²³ Reducing the cliff of Ibsen's stage directions to an isolated rock decontextualized from any natural or representative landscape was a precise marker of its symbolic status: no longer *a* rock but *the* rock, deliberately and directly recalling Romantic iconography in which the image of the rock looming over the depths of the sea stands for a condition at the extreme limit of human possibilities, of the sublime, and simultaneously of terror. The iconic sign foregrounds, literally and formally, the condition of the abyss represented in the act I, which Ibsen begins by depicting a climate of tension determined by a series of dramatic and conflicting agents (Ornulf, Hjordis and Kaare, all based on the revenge paradigm) and poised to precipitate into the abyss of the tragedy. The rock, then, served to emphasize in symbolic terms the highly-charged atmosphere dominating the whole act I.

The symbolic import is in some ways even clearer and more explicit in act II. The banquet at Gunnar's home is the emblem of an attempt at reconciliation and harmony aimed beyond the bounds of the immediate events. What Craig intends here is to project onto the visual plane the image of absolute order: the perfection rediscovered after glimpsing, in the abyss, that which, lacking all form, can never be called to a principle of order. To make his intentions clear Craig organizes his set around the geometrical image of the circle. The stage is empty, the grey curtains are arranged in a semicircle around the huge round table in the centre, slightly raised on a circular dais. Above this the image is visibly and symbolically delimited by a large circular lamp. The circle motif is reprised in the soldiers' shields, so disproportionately large as to privilege and foreground form over function, and clearly represents the symbolic figuration of the principle of unity, harmony and totality as fulfillment and infinite circle.²⁴ Then in the last pages of his promptbook,

²² The stage directions for act I read as follows: '*A rocky coast, running precipitously down to the sea at the back. To the left, a boat-house; to the right, rocks and pine-woods. The masts of two war-ships can be seen down in the cove. Far out to the right, the ocean, dotted with reefs and rocky islands; the sea is running high; it is a stormy snow-grey winter day*'. Henrik Ibsen, *The Vikings*, in *The Prose Dramas Of Henrik Ibsen*, trans. by William Archer, 1858, III [Project Gutenberg EBook #19205].

²³ The two actors refused to follow the directions, to them incomprehensible and paradoxical, for all Craig's efforts to enact his intended effect, such as using swords the weight of which would enforce heavy, stilted movements. Cf. Edward Craig, *Gordon Craig. The Story of His Life*, p. 171.

²⁴ In his preparatory drawings (conserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France of Paris), Craig returns almost obsessively to the circle motif. In the playbill, for example, he drew the profile of a Viking warrior of whom however only the tip of his helmet and facial features could be seen: the rest was covered by a gigantic circular shield left white, with no decoration, evidencing the purity of form. The circle similarly recurs in the decoration of fabrics, belts and various stage props, determining a thematic

immediately after the plan for the banquet-scene, its concentric-circle theme clearly emphasized, Craig has drawn an *ouroboros*, the serpent eating its own tail, a symbolic figuration of the life-cycle and completeness, unequivocally signaling that his choice of the circle was more than a formal and aesthetic solution.

In both the acts I and II, then, Craig resorts to a stylization which extends beyond the formal dimension into a strategic symbolism of the image aimed at alienating the action, turning it from the contingency of the tragic event into something “other”. This then projects us towards act III the title of which, as has been noted, takes a step away from any direct reference to Ibsen’s setting. This is the only time Craig can be said to have flouted the stage directions. His reasons are again to be looked for in the symbolic perspective he wishes to give to the text. In Ibsen the act III is of extraordinary importance: it is here that the accentuation of the human and psychological dimension of the characters in relation to the heroic, archaic and vaguely Romantic background is most evident. Ibsen achieves this through a series of *pas de deux* (Hjordis-Gunnar; Hjordis-Dagny; Hjordis-Sigurd; Sigurd-Gunnar) revealing the interweaving of themes which give body and life to the play: the conflict between love and friendship, between individual choice and destiny, between revenge and honour, and, lastly, between life and death, all, however, dominated by the common theme of separation. Every explanation and decision comes too late, building up to what seems a tragic diaspora of the characters the catalyst of which is Hjordis, in the guise of an avenging demon.

This coming together of the various themes makes the act III the act of revelation, guided by Craig towards a symbolic dimension which betrays the characters’ human qualities and their psychological depths, “resetting” them as absolutes. ‘Sigurd is little short of God. Gunnar is absolute man’, Craig emblematically puts it in a letter to Martin Shaw.²⁵ The Sigurd-Gunnar conflict, then, is transformed into the conflict between the human (Dagny, as well as Gunnar) and a principle which could be defined as divine, demonic, or more simply spiritual according to whether we polarize our attention on Sigurd or on Hjordis. It becomes, then, an archetypal conflict which introduces a dialectics and confrontation between symbolic principles which are absolutes.

It is clear to what extent the character of Hjordis, in particular, has to be modified to meet these terms. Craig puts it very precisely in the letter just quoted:

What’s all the pother about on the rocks, the Rock and the Giants, the swords ten inches thick and blood flowing, wrestling of limb and brain, if Hjordis is not the exact opposite of all this exterior might, what is the *storm* of the play but the counterpart of the storm inside her heart, and what has exterior storminess to do with her – absolutely NOTHING. [...] Soul is to her what physique is to everyone else in the play.²⁶

Hjordis, then, dialogues with nature’s most recondite and secret sources, placing herself at an aristocratic distance from the things of the world. She is presented as a

patterning which goes from the general stage layout to the minutest details. On two occasions the decorative element is the swastika, in which the sense of circularity is symbolically contained.

²⁵ C. Innes, *Edward Gordon Craig*, p. 93. Martin Shaw was Craig’s partner in the Purcell Operatic Society venture, becoming his close friend and accomplice throughout their young adult years and afterwards, when Shaw was invited to conduct the music for Duncan’s tournée. He composed and conducted the music for *The Vikings*, creating a singularly Wagnerian atmosphere throughout the whole play.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

wholly spiritual figure, unlike Ibsen's version where she is moved by the demon of ambition, pride, revenge and sense of self before the world. In the production she is – or should have been – the incarnation of the original *daimonos*, the spirit of dissolution and rebirth which torches the world but to regenerate and not to destroy it. The conditional is necessary because exactly how Craig planned to communicate this symbolism is far from clear, in the case both of Hjordis and of all the other characters. It would have meant working on the actors' interpretations, which went beyond his remit and possibly abilities; as it was, he limited himself to the visual level in terms of both the whole scenic arrangement and the single characters. The result was the effect of incompleteness noted by observers of the period who were also, however, unable to grasp the symbolic structure behind Craig's directing. Even its supporters, like Rothenstein and in some aspects Shaw, ended up by appreciating little more than its fascinating formal stylization.²⁷

The apparition of Hjordis which opens the act I was intended by Craig as the visual statement of the character's symbolic status. Like much of the performance, the scene was plunged in dense shadow. 'Into this symbolic night enter, in a blaze of limelight, a fair figure robed in complete fluffy white fur, a gay and bright Hjordis with a timid manner and hesitating utterance'.²⁸ As Ellen Terry recalled, a very different figure from the aggressive, provocative black-clad apparition complete with cloak and hood presented by Ibsen. In Craig's hands Hjordis becomes a shining apparition, with a 'luminosity' (to use Ellen Terry's own term) which turns her into a spiritual icon.²⁹

The aura of death surrounding Hjordis remained however. Craig retained it, obviously, but drastically modified the sign. Death is a condition of transfiguration, not of destruction: a mystical death, the almost natural outcome when the spirit penetrates matter and disrupts it. This, then, is Hjordis's dramatic role: to transgress the sense limits of the world on order to connect the visible with the mysterious forces of the invisible. Craig attempts to visualize a symbolic allusion of the kind in the act III, programmatically entitled *Light*, as we know. James Hunacker describes it as follows:

For many, however, the third act bore off the victory. A simple space of hall, a large casement, a dais, the whole flooded by daylight. Here the quality of light was of the purest, withal hard, as befitted a northern latitude.³⁰

²⁷ See the letter from William Rothenstein to Ellen Terry, in the notes to the edition of Terry's memoirs, in which he writes: 'Never before had we seen such a perfect marriage of dramatic suggestion in the foreground, background and grouping of the figures, and the actual delivery and gesture, which resulted in a perfectly noble expression of the tragedy of men's and women's lives'. Ellen Terry, *Ellen Terry's Memoir*, ed. by Edith Craig and Christopher St. John, London, Victor Gallancz, 1933, p. 267. Bernard Shaw, instead, in a letter to Terry to which she refers but which is not included in their published correspondence (Ellen Terry and George Bernard Shaw, *A Correspondence*, ed. by Christopher St. John, New York; London, The Fountain Press; Constable & Co., 1931), expresses appreciation of the production's visual impact while questioning other aspects of interpretation. See *Ellen Terry's Memoir*, p. 256.

²⁸ Ellen Terry, *The Story of My Life*, pp. 327-328.

²⁹ This 'luminosity' must have been sufficiently clear if Bernard Shaw, in the letter just cited, criticizes the opposition thus created between a dark and gloomy world and a luminous Hjordis as being the opposite of the situation Ibsen actually presents, where Hjordis is gloomy from the beginning, but moves in a luminous world (in actual fact Shaw's reading is contradicted by the stage instructions).

³⁰ Edward Craig, *Gordon Craig. The Story of His Life*, p. 173.

Geographical referent (somewhat forced and inappropriate) apart, Hunacker conveys the image of an empty space dominated by a ray of light from a large, alienated and decontextualized ‘casement’, creating a further symbol.

This aspect is properly dwelt on by Ferruccio Marotti who, however, while acknowledging the dramaturgical dialectics that relates it to the previous scene, privileges the general organization of the space more than the iconic dimensions of the window and describes it as ‘a scene in which the value of the circle – life now broken in two – follows that of a doubling of parallel planes, an allegory of revenge and pardon’.³¹ To us, instead, the symbolic focus of the scene is the element of the window shot through by the ray of light. Foregrounding itself in the absolute emptiness, devoid of any representative referent, the ray-crossed window becomes the symbolic image of the limen uniting and distinguishing visible and invisible, human and divine.³²

Whether successful or otherwise, whether visible or invisible, this was Craig’s symbolic intention in his stage setting. Confirmation is given in his plan for act IV, *The Tempest*, the iconic motif of which, however, is represented by the mound Ornulv raises to commemorate his dead children. Christopher Innes describes the mound as a cone of light which, through the shadow and velarium screening the proscenium arch, created the illusion of a solid body – a *coup de théâtre* which must have been both striking and suggestive. The mound was again circular: an evanescent, immaterial ring celebrating the fulfillment of death and the reaching of a perfection born of the tragic transfiguration of the world.³³

Reconstructing the symbolic intent behind *The Vikings* gives privileged and direct access to Craig’s attitude towards the literary text. Analyzing the living, organic production process, we understand precisely what he means by stating that the staging rewrites the play. Craig certainly goes *beyond* the text, in that he makes the production say things which transcend the playwright’s explicit will, while also being *inside* the text, in the sense that his choices never seem arbitrary or at odds with Ibsen’s account of events. There also exists however a motif which is *outside* the text, and which becomes the symbolic figuration of the *beyond*. The spirit-matter conflict in which the production can plausibly be schematized is a typically Craigian binary motif (as in the celebrated Moscow *Hamlet*, and a recurrent pattern in his theoretical works) which is found at the level of trace or reflection in the text itself. Schematizing further, we may perhaps speak of a director using a text to vehicle his own discourse rather than a director extrapolating a symbolic motif. This binary pattern recurs in very different places and instances, and as such necessarily bespeaks a lasting quest of Craig’s rather than a feature of the contingent literary work, making it possible to speak of an arbitrary reading of Ibsen on Craig’s part: something very different, of course, from a gratuitous reading. It is *The Vikings* which is arbitrary compared with *The Vikings of Helgeland (I Haermaendene paa Helgeland)*, in that the stage

³¹ F. Marotti, *Gordon Craig*, p. 55. See also *L’itinerario di Gordon Craig*, Marotti’s introduction to E. Gordon Craig, *Il mio teatro*, ed. by F. Marotti, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1971, p. XXVI.

³² The window, with all its symbolism, is of course a constant in fifteenth-century iconography of the Annunciation, a fact well-known to Craig as a passionate admirer of Italian Renaissance painting.

³³ In Ibsen too act IV represents some sort of rediscovered unity and harmony after the atmosphere of tragic diaspora characterizing act III. The world of the heroes, then, returns to unity and harmony, although not before exorcizing and expelling Sigurd and Hjordis, the characters embodying spiritual idealism.

language attempts to tell its own symbolic story at the same time as it accompanies and accommodates the words and action of Ibsen's script.³⁴

An analogous situation occurs in Craig's second Ibsen: *Rosmersholm*, which marked his meeting with Eleonora Duse, although Craig's work methods here are very different from those of *The Vikings*. There he had applied his idea of directing as hands-on manual construction of every aspect of the production from its genesis on, with *Rosmersholm*, things are radically different. If Isadora Duncan is to be believed – and for better or worse, she is the production's main historical memory – he limited himself simply to designing the set, without in any way intervening in the final realization. In strictly technical terms then it is incorrect to speak of *directing*, although to restrict his role purely to the visual aspect seems to me reductive: his intentions and energies were clearly those of a director even if this translated into a purely ideal and conceptual dimension rather than a “brick on brick” construction of the play. It should be noted, too, that if this may have been determined by the specific circumstances of working with Duse, it also happens to correspond completely to a turning point in Craig's directorly vision, which was gradually abandoning the concrete and the manual and looking towards a more “abstract” hypothesis: that of a stage/directing, a stage which alone, by a quasi-magical suggestion, defines the writing, atmosphere and symbolism of the stage action, involving the actors as a part of a spatial spell. The first hints of this are given in *The Art of the Theatre*, where the actor is considered exclusively a function of space. Successively, when he was working with Moscow Art Theatre, the biggest problem to arise was to be the fact that Craig's only directions to the actors regarded their arrangement in space. This he considered all the information needed to construct their characters.

Restricting the whole directorly task to the dimension of stage setting then, as with *Rosmersholm*, is a solution based not on contingency but on a conception of directing which in precisely that period was tending more towards a concept of theatre than of show production. His work on *Rosmersholm* was that of a director, plain proof of which is given by Craig's reading of the text in the programme, a reading which goes considerably beyond the stage dimension: it's a well-known document, generally cited in evidence of his anti-realist vocation while for present purposes it marks the second, important and above all explicit step in Craig's development as Ibsenian exegete.

The text begins in an openly explicit way: ‘Ibsen's marked detestation for Realism is nowhere more apparent than in the two plays *Rosmersholm* and *Ghosts*’ Craig writes.³⁵ The problem is not whether a symbolic reading of Ibsen is possible, and how, but that he is completely symbolic and overtly hostile to any form of realism. With this premise Craig precedes to read *Rosmersholm*, which he sees as centred on the conflict between Rebecca and the surrounding world. The conflict has no social cause, but is

³⁴ A further symbolic reference is present in the *color scheme* Craig adds to the list of characters in his *Promptbook* of the production, assigning each one his colour. Hjordis, for example, is: ‘Blue and purple all through indigo. Cobalt. Watermarine. Royal purple and red purple’ (Collection Craig, Bibliothèque Nationale de France of Paris). This is of course an aesthetic scheme, but it also underlines symbolic aspects of characterization, presenting Hjordis's blood-red depths shot through only with the luminous watermarine.

³⁵ Programme of the production realized in Florence (Teatro La Pergola, 5 December 1906). The text is given in both English and Italian, presenting curious incongruities and sometimes interesting mistranslations such as *Corno della Morte* (Death Horn) transformed into *Tromba di Marte* (Mars' Trumpet).

purely symbolic. In Craig's interpretation, Rebecca is 'the very figure of Life itself', not so much the photographic reproduction of a woman as the incarnation of Life in its original and absolute form – almost an archetypical evocation of the original vital principle around which, significantly, the sound of the Death horn grows persistently louder.³⁶ As already noted in the case of *The Vikings*, this Ur-principle is placed in strict relation with Death: not a Death which is in opposition to life but Life's double, accompanying true Life through to its ultimate completion. Craig advises us to look more closely, beyond appearances, and consider what we see as a ceremony:

Do you think you see a sad and gloomy picture before you? Look again. You will find an amazing joyous vision. You will see Life as represented by Rebecca West, the will to do, free until the end.³⁷

Rebecca's "drama" – generally interpreted as the failure of her ideals and aspirations, or, worse, as the check to her thirst for power – in Craig is translated into its opposite, the transfiguration of the spiritual principle. Within an interpretative framework of the kind the tragic dimension inevitably emerges from the conflict between the superior spirit and the banality of the world, represented by the congregation of *fools*, warped version of human beings, not living creatures, who hope 'to entrap Life, to bind it, to control it', but are condemned to failure. The tragedy, then, lies in the ultimate conflict between this world of the deformed and the one emblem of Life and mortal transfiguration which is its result.

In a word, Craig has translated *Rosmersholm* too into his own symbolic language. The narrative of Doctor Rosmer, the young Rebecca and the characters surrounding them, the dramatic fulcrum of which is represented by a conception of the world and its translatability, or more often intranslatability, on the plane of the real, is transformed into an archetypal and absolute narrative, that of the spirit-matter conflict: this is never explicitly enacted on stage, although Craig maintains it is the play's true "given". In this play too the director's symbolic account predominates over that of the writer, and manages to find for itself a far from inconsistent or arbitrary position within the text. What Craig is basically doing, with uncanny critical foresight, is distinguishing between 'text's intention' and 'writer's intention', thereby succeeding in turning Ibsen's play into a symbolic structure which is basically his own. Within this perspective the characters of Rebecca and Hjordis ultimately resemble each other and above all reassemble themselves within the same symbolic dimension, that of true Life as opposed to the falsity of the material world: an opposition generating a conflict which can only be resolved in the death-transfiguration of the protagonist. As in the case of his *Hamlet*, this regenerating death is shot through with explicit Christological overtones.³⁸

Craig's conclusions are particularly explicit in once more tracing what he considers to be the importance of Ibsen: 'I do not know where except in Ibsen we

³⁶ 'all the while we hear the soft crescendo of the Death Horn as its player approaches'. Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid. The question-mark is missing from the text – presumably a printing error – but is clearly required by the sentence-construction.

³⁸ Curiously, but significantly, Franco Perrelli also sees a similarity between Hjordis and Rebecca, although he applies it differently. He describes the death-union with Rosmer as 'very different from the marriage between the luminous Paganism of Rebekka (now, like Hjordis, a vanquished witch?) and the heroic Christianity of Rosmer (a quasi-Sigurd): a marriage which would symbolize the "third kingdom"'. F. Perrelli, *Introduzione a Ibsen*, Bari, Laterza, 1988, p. 101.

can today find such faithfulness to the old creed or such an advocate for the individuality of Flame'.³⁹ Ibsen, then, is the keeper of the 'old creed', managing to perceive the authentic forces of creation behind the opaque screen of appearances. But to do this and to retrieve the symbolic universe plunged deep in mystery and silence, it is necessary to employ 'the most subtle of our senses', he writes: to follow Ibsen along the same path of initiation and migrate like him from the realm of the visible to that of the invisible. It was this path that the stage/directing Craig had designed for *Rosmersholm* was visually synthesizing. The vast empty space, reminiscent of an Egyptian temple, of which Isadora Duncan speaks,⁴⁰ the 'great curtains merged into the floor like the roots of huge trees' which Edward Craig saw,⁴¹ and the 'representation of a state of mind' as defined by Corradini⁴² all describe an ambiguous environment which, while still of the world (the Rosmer's drawing-room is still in some points recognizable), was already projected beyond itself. The huge casement dominating the back wall – which makes such frequent appearances in Duse's anecdotes as the 'small' window, deemed indispensable for her part, which she had fought to maintain, while all the time Craig was planning this enormous aperture –⁴³ symbolizes precisely this transit space, the threshold between two worlds. The function is basically the same in the text (the window opens onto the white horses announcing the Rosmers' death, for example) but it resides above all in Craig's imaginary, from the act III of *The Vikings* through to the drawings for the unrealized sets for Von Hoffmannsthal's *Elektra* and Otway's *Venice Preserved*, where they are actually doors, but equally huge and equally symbolic limen. The same motif returns in act I of *The Pretenders*, when the women of Skule fervently observe the cathedral from which Haakon's mother emerges, having that moment passed God's judgment. In this case too, as Poulsen remarks, the window is completely decontextualized: an icon and absolute image in a production which was otherwise considerably less symbolic than his others.⁴⁴ The scene for *Rosmersholm*, then, evoking the principle of transfiguration and change of state, had to create the magical aura through which to tell the tale of Rebecca West as that of the ancient Flame which returns to earth to purge it of its baseness. Consuming itself through fire, it triumphs, the voice of the poetry of Being, over the prosaicness of the real.⁴⁵ All this, of course, exists only within Craig's project:

³⁹ Programme of the production realized in Florence (Teatro La Pergola, 5 December 1906).

⁴⁰ 'How to describe that instant, how to describe that which appears to our dazzled eyes, to our enraptured eyes? Can I speak of an Egyptian temple? No Egyptian temple ever shone with such beauty'. Isadora Duncan, *My Life*, New York, Boni and Liveright, 1927, p. 174.

⁴¹ Edward Craig, *Gordon Craig, The Story of His Life*, p. 217.

⁴² See F. Marotti, *Gordon Craig*, p. 85.

⁴³ In one of the many notes Duse wrote to Craig in the run-up to the production (conserved in the Collection Craig, Bibliothèque Nationale de France of Paris) we find: 'Hela! Il me paint pour Rosmer la petite fenetre (a gauche) pour Rebecca. Sans cette fenetre – je ne peux pas fixer Rebecca!' [The accents are omitted in the original].

⁴⁴ 'The rest of us would have shown the whole room, with its walls and with the window as a central point. Gordon Craig shows us, in the spirit of the great painters of the Middle Ages, only the window, which is what the scene is about, while the rest of the stage stands empty'. See F. Marker and L.-L. Marker, *Edward Gordon Craig and The Pretenders. A Production Revisited*, p. 47.

⁴⁵ A late drawing Craig gave Marotti to help him reconstruct the production (published in L. Caretti, *Craig, la Duse e l'arte del teatro*) shows a second opening on the right of the background, symmetrical to the first, through which is seen a ladder stretching infinitely upwards. Marotti refers to this staging

within the theatre of his mind (and probably nowhere else), never finding any other way to manifest itself beyond the ostentation of the idea itself, and devoid of the filter – or even the obstacle – of the production and above all of the actor. At the same time *Rosmersholm* tells a different story, that of an actress, Eleonora Duse, who for reasons of personal development penetrated this mysterious world and managed to breathe its atmosphere. The “legend” of *Rosmersholm* tells of a sudden epiphany on seeing Craig’s sets, which was to determine her interpretative decisions.⁴⁶ Things may possibly have happened otherwise, accordingly to the more concrete logic of the world of the theatre. Craig and Duse must have put their heads together rather more than “legend” has it. A series of notes from her attest not simply to an exchange of ideas, but to the impression that the mysterious and visionary Ibsen of Craig’s sets was not such a surprise to her. In addition to the famous note mentioned above, underlining her need of the ‘petite fenetre’, and another drawing insistent attention to “real” aspects of the play’s setting,⁴⁷ there is also one which very clearly evinces the symbolic light in which she read the history of Rebecca. Her summary of the last act reads: ‘Dernier acte. La Lune La Lune La Lune Jolie – amour – mort’. Following Craig’s reconstruction in an undated manuscript, but which is almost certainly from some decades later, these cannot have been – as is regularly supposed – long-distance instructions, but, at least in this specific case, of notes made during a personal conversation. ‘I asked her about the play’ – Craig writes – ‘she took a pencil and paper and said Act I ... etc. I can’t remember Act II ... etc. I can’t remember Act III La Lune La Lune La Lune – jolly amour amour.’⁴⁸ Although Craig later developed and completed the sets alone, there was clearly at least one moment when he and Duse compared ideas concerning not so much formal and technical aspects as their overall conception and vision of the production, a significant meeting of theatrical minds for both of them.

Exactly how things went will probably remain unclear, but Duse was clearly empathetic and enthusiastic: she had grasped the fundamental symbolic principle and was keen to bring to it her whole D’Annunzio inheritance which was waiting for an opportunity to transmit this time a poetry of the theatre and of the stage, and not of the word alone.⁴⁹

detail in his monograph (F. Marotti, *Gordon Craig*), although the only other reference to it is Noccioli’s (an important witness, not least since he worked on the production): his ‘Diario (1906-1907)’ speaks of a second door, covered with a blue fabric, which opened in the backdrop. See G. Noccioli, ‘Diario (1906-1907)’, in G. Guerrieri (ed.), ‘Eleonora Duse nel suo tempo’, *Quaderni del Piccolo Teatro*, no. 3 (1962), pp.29-73. While remaining problematical then in the reconstruction of the production, the opening certainly underscores the threshold as a dominant symbol in Craig’s reading of *Rosmersholm*.

⁴⁶ Duncan’s description of the scene’s impact on Duse reads as follows: ‘Eleonora’s hand was in mine. I felt her arms around me. She drew me close in a long embrace. Tears ran down her beautiful face. We remained some time in that close silence, Eleonora silent in admiration and artistic emotion, I in relief. Isadora Duncan, *My Life*, p. 176. All her subsequent acting choices, so different from those of her first version of *Rosmersholm*, derive from this initial emotional impact, and this alone. Duse’s enthusiasm is also recorded by Guido Noccioli in his ‘Diario (1906-1907)’.

⁴⁷ ‘Prière ni oublier pas que le 2° et 3° acte doit être jour [underlined three times]. 1° soir et IV nuît ni oubliez pas’. Collection Craig, Bibliothèque Nationale de France of Paris.

⁴⁸ Manuscript entitled *Eleonora Duse*, with Duse’s notes (Collection Craig, Bibliothèque Nationale de France of Paris). In reducing the text to three acts Craig is clearly making a mistake here.

⁴⁹ Duncan speaks as follows of Duse’s costume and gestuality as interpretants of Craig’s staging: ‘Duse, with that marvellous instinct of hers, was wearing a white gown with wide sleeves which draped down over her body. When she appeared she looked more like the Delphic Sybil than Rebecca West. With her

The third encounter with Ibsen – *The Pretenders* – was many years later, as already mentioned, and in many ways different from the previous two, less in terms of style than in his directorly slant and approach to the playwright. The twenty years since *Rosmersholm* had left their mark. Craig is now far from the madding theatre crowd, and while his vision has remained extreme and radical in its cardinal points, it has shifted and modified, giving different and substantially autonomous space to the *craft* aspect of the *mise-en-scène* compared with the *idea* of theatre. If earlier, at the time of the 1905 dialogue, the two components had been intimately linked in an initiatory progression from the craft of the theatre to the epiphany of art, they now seem to require separate elaboration. The idea for what it is, the craft for what it can do. This new scenario is very clearly illustrated in the introduction to his book of set designs for *The Pretenders* (both those he used and those which were discarded). Craig reconstructs the different work phases in almost diary form, beginning with the letter of invitation, followed by his doubts about taking on another production, down to his decision to accept, but more as a collaborator than as a director, and finally his body-and-soul involvement in every aspect of directing, although again in his own idiosyncratic and anomalous way. He describes its genesis as occurring in two discrete moments: the first in Genoa where, locked in his study, he transferred his ideas on staging into concrete drawings; the second in Copenhagen, in direct contact with the company, the scenographers and the craftsmen of the Royal Danish Theatre. Craig recounts the two as being profoundly different. The enclosed space of his Genoa study was at a distance from any concrete staging issue: a mental space where the production occupied an idealized and in some way “abstract” form: like a dream, Craig adds. But a dream, once dreamed, is complete, perfect and over, requiring no practical realization which would only diminish it and mar its perfection. This “dreaming theatre” in Genoa translated into a series of drawings which rather than production sketches were, as it was happening more and more to Craig, the actual idea of the production, one which, as he had learnt to his cost over the years, had no hope of converting itself into practice.

Things changed radically once he reached Copenhagen. For the first time in years he was in contact with theatre’s living body, and it was a profound shock. In a company of actors who welcomed him as a great authority, the fifty-four year old Craig was transfigured. Treading the boards once more intoxicated him, he rather histrionically remarks, and the idea of spending his time in his study producing sketch after sketch bored – even appalled – him. ‘I wanted to be on the stage most of the time and working with my friends the actors, not bothering about sceneries’,⁵⁰ he

deft genius she knew how to adapt to the main features of the set, and the beams of light she was wrapped in, she modified all her gestures, all her movements’. Isadora Duncan, *My Life*, p. 175. On the choice of costume – no insignificant element in the symbolic representation of the character – Edward Craig gives a different version, attributing it more credibly to Craig. See Edward Craig, *Gordon Craig. The Story of His Life*, p. 219. In support of this it is also the fact that when *Elektra* was being considered (later aborted), Craig was commissioned to design both sets and costumes. That Duse was formidably able to attune to stage atmosphere is attested by Craig himself in a telegramme to Martin Shaw after the première: ‘Duse was magnificent – threw her details to the wind and went in – She has the courage of 25! She, Ibsen and I played our little trio out, and come home happy’. *Ibid.*, p. 220.

⁵⁰ E. Gordon Craig, *A production, being thirty-two collotype plates of designs prepared or realized for “The Pretenders” of Henrik Ibsen and produced at the Royal Theatre, Copenhagen, 1926*, p. 13.

writes, hardly seeming to be the same Craig who had thought of banishing all actors from the stage since they made the art of the theatre impossible.⁵¹

The idea of stage/directing suddenly seemed to vanish, any hypothesis of staging as a visual equivalent of the text now gives way to a far more concrete event in which the scene serves to maximize the presence of the actor. Here, too, it is difficult to believe this is the Craig we have known until now. ‘The reason that we have scenes’, he writes, ‘is to assist the actors, to give them a world to walk in and out’ adding that, after the scene of Bishop Nikolas’s death, ‘Johannes [Poulsen] and his role of the Bishop were the only two things we ought to trouble about at a popular Jubilee’.⁵² What has happened? Why this drastic shift in position? There might seem to have been a sudden and unexpected decision to abjure all the radical tenets so often repeated in the previous years, but in actual fact all that has happened is that, face to face with practical production requirements, the rationale behind Craig’s directorly intentions changes radically at this moment of his development and his reflections on theatre. It is the realization of something concrete which now attracts him, not the theoretical dreams of his Genoa study. A dream once dreamed was perfect and over, he had already reasoned, and to be abandoned in favour of issues which are no longer ‘ideal’ but ‘practical’. The position is profoundly different, while he was reneging on nothing, he makes a clear distinction between craft and utopia: the one aiming to *produce* in the way most consonant with the requirements of the art of the theatre (although without subsuming it), the other to embody an idea of that art which however as yet was still impossible to translate into an actual production – part of the cost of a utopia. After long deliberation and reviewing of the work he had done for Poulsen’s *The Pretenders*, he decided on a single set made up of a number of small *screens*, quickly adaptable architecturally and easily identified on each transformation through a simple iconic sign.⁵³ This had the advantage of being *practical*, easily technically workable and adaptable to the actors’ needs: no longer, then, a stage/directing with mysterious powers to catalyze magically the actors, but a set which was an instrument, an object destined to support an interpretation.

He had already returned to this subject two years before the publication of *A Production* (two years, then, after the Copenhagen production) in an article on Eleonora Duse. Craig had here given a rather fictionalized version of their relations over the *Rosmersholm* period (denying the famous quarrel in Nice, for example), and had written of the set he had designed more than twenty years previously that it was immense but ‘almost unpractical’. What he meant was that in terms of dimensions, arrangement and formal stylization the set was highly charismatic, but in its radical purity could only cause great difficulties to the actors. It was an extreme gamble and as such, and not because it was theatrically efficacious, Duse had opted for it. With his wonted suggestive style Craig approached the subject through a fantastical reconstruction of the thoughts which had gone through the actress’s mind the first time she had seen the ‘Egyptian temple’ set intended for *Rosmersholm*. After the initial

⁵¹ E. Gordon Craig, *The Actor and the Übermarionette*, in *On the Art of the Theatre*.

⁵² E. Gordon Craig, *A production, being thirty-two colotype plates of designs prepared or realized for “The Pretenders” of Henrik Ibsen and produced at the Royal Theatre, Copenhagen, 1926*, pp. 8-9.

⁵³ These *screens* were mobile panels producing an architectural, abstract and potentially adjustable scene which Craig had invented in 1907, using them (unsatisfactorily, in his own opinion) in the Moscow *Hamlet* in 1912. They remained his chosen set solution. In *The Pretenders* the iconic sign is often realized by means of projected images.

shock, “This is not a scene for an Ibsen play – it’s a scene for something big but it’s not Ibsen”, its sheer immensity – Craig reasoned – would seduce her: “Yes”, she twinkled, “it will be really difficult and interesting to play in that scene”, and even the practical difficulties – what sound would her cardboard knife make? – assume the tone of a challenge: “Lost? What fun – why, it will sound like the crack of a rifle in that empty hall! Yes, it will tell”. In his reconstruction so many years later the scene becomes a radical and extreme challenge for the actress, to be met by her genius alone. “It’s a big empty scene”, she would consider, “Yes, very big and so empty. I shall know what to do to be seen, but poor Signora – and Signor –, they will be lost”.⁵⁴ The scene’s fascination, and the gamble and challenge it posed for her, were also its limit: it was adapted to Duse’s unrepeatable genius, but not to the more limited talents of the others. In this lay its ‘unpractical’ nature which made it perfect in the ethereal world of pure stage ideas and design, but unsuitable for an actual working set. In the case of *Rosmersholm* too, though never explicitly, as it will happen with *The Vikings*, Craig seems to be saying that his mistake at the time had been to look for a compromise between the strength of the idea – so absolute and ‘unpractical’ – and the actual stage production. This time, too, it would have been wiser to opt for a less radical set for Duse, adding an extra forty-five minutes of abstract, experimental theatre. ‘Craft’ and ‘utopia’ belong to different spheres and have different roles in the twenties’ and thirties’ mind-set of the great “revolutionary”.

The practical aspect is not only limited to the set, however, but becomes the conceptual term of reference in relation to the text. The motivation behind his judgment of *The Pretenders* as a theatre text no longer regards the symbolic Ibsen he had described in 1906, but the much more practical and concrete technical problems. He considers the play one of Ibsen’s ‘greatest’, just as *King Lear* is one of Shakespeare’s greatest: but the term ‘greatest’ merits a second glance. Craig, in our opinion, seems to be alluding not to the *quality* but to the *quantity* of the text. What characterizes *The Pretenders* is what characterizes *Lear*: the grandiose theatrical structure, or what we might call its literary monumentality, which for Craig is clearly a positive value. But it is also a problem. Both texts are ‘utterly unplaylike’ and excessively difficult to stage.⁵⁵ Both contain passages he defines as theatrically impossible. Such a judgment is less surprising coming from Craig who, back in 1905, in *The Art of the Theatre*, had declared that several scenes in *Hamlet* were unstageable because too perfect and complete at the reading stage. The basic motivation is not very different in 1930, although the reasoning possesses characteristics evincing a conceptual scenario which in part is new. If the problem is the irreconcilability of literature and theatre, this time Craig hones in on a specific aspect of the problem. A play like *The Pretenders* presents a whole series of interpretative subtleties, conceptual niceties and theatrical details which emerge only on reading, to the critical sense and gratification of the intellect. In the theatre, however, the gratification has to be clearly and instantaneously synthesized and presented, and in the same instant processed by the public, thus with its intellectual implications reduced as much as possible. To this should be added that the theatre-going public is not specifically intellectual, but a general public lacking interpretative finesse.

⁵⁴ E. Gordon Craig, ‘On Signora Eleonora Duse’, *The Dial* (May 1928), p. 368.

⁵⁵ E. Gordon Craig, *A production, being thirty-two collotype plates of designs prepared or realized for “The Pretenders” of Henrik Ibsen and produced at the Royal Theatre, Copenhagen, 1926*, p. 7.

Craig would seem to be defining theatre if not as an art of the masses – this surely would be putting too many words into his mouth – certainly as an art form catering for a varied community which takes to the theatre a more “innocent” spirit than that of the reading public. Whatever happened to that public which was to appeal to its own ‘subtler feelings’ before entering the mysterious realm of *Rosmersholm* and becoming protagonist of a quasi-mystic experience? Clearly the terms of comparison and judgment have changed. In a theatre of *craft*, like that with the Poulsen brothers, the problem of the audience, and consequently of theatre language, is another matter. Here it centres on the concept of transmitting images which are clear, strong and immediately comprehensible: “easy”, all reductive connotation removed.

The playwright who best corresponds to this is Molière, in Craig’s opinion: Shakespeare himself, his ideal, has already been deemed ‘unplaylike’, to which is now added theatrically ‘impossible’. In the case of Ibsen’s *The Pretenders* this impossibility translates into occasional thematic preciousness which reluctantly reduces itself to an often schematic simplification of the staging. The example he gives is curiously literal-minded but trenchant:

Skule, the Pretender, has what is called ‘the King Idea’, which Haakon, the other Pretender, steals. Now show a man stealing a purse or some material thing on the stage, is about all that Molière will tell you can show in the way of theft; to show Haakon stealing ‘the Kingly Idea’ is, if not impossible, at any rate unnecessarily complicated.⁵⁶

The trenchancy is particularly acute as applied to the dramatic organization of the text, and reveals Craig’s symbolic radar ever-tuned to points which would allow a reading beyond the text while remaining within it. This is basically what he had done with *Rosmersholm* and, earlier, with *The Vikings*. Yet the evocative potential of the dramatic form which then appeared as a positive value – indeed the *founding* value of this type of dramaturgy, placing Ibsen as the shining pinnacle of the symbolic and mystic ‘old creed’ in the modern world – is now seen only for his concrete scenic translatability. ‘Presumably Ibsen began writing for the ordinary theatre-going public, but he seems gradually to drift away from these and to address only the intellectual ones’.⁵⁷ The issue is simply *practical*: a fact of craft life.

Craig’s Ibsen parabola ends here, significantly returning to the impossibility of literature in the theatre on which he had based his creed, though it has now shed much of its original ideological edge. It is no longer a question of saying that Ibsen, as literature, cannot or even must not be performed; nor that the text is the gateway to the symbolic and iconic force of the theatrical sign, as his two preceding productions had more or less explicitly stated. The issue is to consider how theatre, using all the technical and linguistic resources of the *mise-en-scène*, can overcome the impossibility and translate it into theatre. In the meantime real theatre is elsewhere, playing out on the private, secret stages of the mind. Utopia has retreated to some protected sphere, while craft pursues its aim of modernizing theatre: a reformist objective destined, seemingly, to cohabit with the most revolutionary aspirations.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 6-7.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 7.