

Iakovos Kambanelis' play *Ibsenland* ... a "Ghost" paraphrase

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It is well known that in his contemporary dramas Ibsen made use of a retrospective technique. This epico-analytical structure finds particularly convincing expression in *Ghosts*, as here theme and technique are especially closely connected to each other. The dialogues in the play produce a present that is predestined by actions in the past, which the main characters of the play are fatefully caught up in and cannot escape. This character of inevitability has contributed to the fact that *Ghosts* has been called a modern tragedy in which the characters of the play are pawns in a game which they are not themselves able to influence and guide into controllable paths. With his subtle interweaving of theme and technique, Ibsen paves the way for an understanding of the action as a course with no alternatives, where everything is fatally bound together in a closed universe.

In *Ibsenland*¹ the Greek dramatist Iakovos Kambanelis has made an interesting attempt to deconstruct the interaction structure in *Ghosts* and to reconstruct an alternative understanding that opens up the way for new aspects of the triangle involving Mrs Alving, Chamberlain Alving and Pastor Manders. Old Ibsen themes like marriage and self-realisation are explored and nuanced by their being brought concretely into the context of sexuality and written culture.

Before I go any further into how Kambanelis writes his own version of Ibsen's pre-text into his own, I should like to draw attention to some formal adjustments of the basic text. In the first place Kambanelis has transformed it into an almost Strindbergian "chamber play", which is kept up by dialogue sequences between Pastor Manders and Mrs Alving. While these passages in Ibsen's play have an epic character, Kambanelis re-dramatises the stories about the past by reconstructing them in the form of theatrical representations and situations, that is to say he lets Pastor Manders and Mrs Alving play out in fact the roles Ibsen only talks about. In this way the past is made visible in corporal configurations in that both the main characters appear in young and aging stage versions of themselves. This direct visual presentation of the main characters in different situations in their lives irrespective of spatial and temporal logic is based on the avant-garde theatre's montage technique which makes it possible to visualise and articulate the lost time in immediate forms without going via epico-narrative passages.

In addition to the doubling of the main characters in the elderly Pastor Manders and the young Olaf Manders and the middle-aged Mrs Alving and the young Helena Alving, Kambanelis has made use of some modern presentation techniques that are suited to placing the characters in contexts in which they have the opportunity to comment on their own actions. Typical in this respect is the fact that Pastor Manders does not only represent an Ibsen figure, but at the same time also the actor who plays the role of Ibsen. This meta-textual double perspective is reinforced by the fact that Kambanelis has introduced a couple of fictitious characters in the form of two night watchmen whose function it is to make critical remarks on the reconstructed conversations between the double characters Pastor Manders and Mrs Alving, and to supply keywords that provide the opportunity to shed light on the relationship between an already established literary figure and its dramatic re-creation in a foreign play.

¹ Kambanelis, Iakovos: *Ibsenland*, translated by Marjorie Chambers, Athens 2001

Kambanelis' play is in the true meaning of the word an "afterpiece". It starts in the theatre late one evening after a final staging of Ibsen's *Ghosts*. They have already started removing decorations, scenery and properties so that the new play takes place in the no longer complete scenographic surroundings of the old one. The incomplete stage architecture emphasises the image of a lacking whole that requires a supplement to become comprehensible. Thus the new play grows out of the old one as a response to interpretation lacunae and comprehension deficits in Ibsen's text corpus, but also as free play of the imagination with possibilities and combinations.

Kambanelis has called his play *Ibsenland*, and he thereby hints that he considers his play as creative wandering in a dramatico-aesthetic topography marked by Ibsen, whom he calls his most important teacher in the art of drama. In a foreword to the English translation of his play he says that *Ibsenland* was in its time the name he associated with Ibsen's theatre. *Ibsenland* is thus both a drama-typological metaphor and a piece of further supplementary writing of an Ibsenian pre-text – or, as the author writes, "a free study on *Ghosts* and on two of the chief characters of the play, Pastor Manders and Mrs Alving". Kambanelis' practice consists in his accompanying the two characters, "trying to imagine their prehistory – situations and events in their past which they mention as being significant landmarks in their lives". The intention is, he emphasises, not to condense or finish a work that is already complete in its present form, but to use the magic of play and the power of imagination to guess at the protagonists' "behaviour at other times and other moments in their lives". In this concept of recycling scenes and motifs from Ibsen's play, the diverging experiential horizon is exploited as a text-generating principle. The difference between Ibsen's protagonists and Kambanelis' re-creation of them is "inevitable" since the younger author projects more recent experiences of forms of cohabitation and sexuality into Ibsen's characters and makes them explicit in a vocabulary that openly calls things by their right names without packing them into vague hints. What in this way is written out of the Ibsenian text's substratum is a hidden agenda and textual meaning variants that are inherently present as a possibility in Ibsen's play, but need to be actualised with reference to a later period's more liberal attitudes to sexual desires and the thematising of the sphere of intimacy.

One can approach this form of extrapolation on the basis of different theoretical concepts. If one imagines that under the visible text there lie hidden one or more more or less invisible texts, which in varying degrees mark their presence, one is concerned with a type of transtextuality. If one uses Genette's categories, one may in our case call Ibsen's *Ghosts* a hypotext and Kambanelis' play a hypertext. Through hypertextual transformations of the underlying hypotext are created new text variants that stand in different relationships to their reference text. If the transformation leads to deformations of the style or content, Genette calls this a parody or a travesty. If one considers Kambanelis' play with interpretive anchorage in such a theory, one may, as we shall see, with good reason characterise it as a combination of parody and travesty, because it radically changes Ibsen's hypotext both with respect to the way in which the characters speak and the content that is spoken about.

The fact that Kambanelis chose to write his text as a kind of supplement to Ibsen's *Ghosts* may rest on the fact that in Ibsen's pre-text he believed he could see a hidden inherent subtext that he wanted to make explicit. The subtextual theory is usually seen in analogy with Freud's distinction between manifest content and latent meaning. The author's intention is to get behind the manifest text level and seek out and reconstruct the subconscious meaning of the text "which runs within it, visible at certain 'symptomatic' points of ambiguity, evasion or

overemphasis”². It is well in conformity with this theoretical angle that Kambanelis in *Ibsenland* focuses on the underlying, subconscious element in his characters’ psycho-structure, the stratum of consciousness that lies closest to nature and which in Ibsen is practically veiled by the cultural discourse of a later period. His method consists in finding the cracks where the primitive, original and atavistic glimmers – like a palimpsest – through the surface text, and at these points of convergence he displays the hidden text in the text. Even though Ibsen, with his thematising of the taboo subject of syphilis, went far beyond what it was acceptable to speak about freely in the face of a bourgeois, Victorian public in the Christiania of the 1880s, Chamberlain Alving and his circle with their radical lifestyle and unmentionable diseases are simply to be regarded as a provincial derivative of a well-known subcultural anti-bourgeois attitude, which found its urbane expression in the provocative attitudes and dissolute way of life of the Christiania bohemians. Kambanelis has acted in accordance with this and made the chamberlain into a bohemian figure who spends most of his time in Christiania’s notorious establishments, but who in his temporary periods of residence on the family estate of Rosenvold imports this lifestyle into the rural surroundings and leads a depraved existence with alcoholic excesses all day and all night, with gross sexual advances to the women present – including the chamberlain’s wife herself.

What is perhaps most surprising in Kambanelis’ newly written version is the young Helena Alving’s sexual relationship with her husband, which in the course of time has developed from being marked by fear and disgust in the face of animal desire to becoming an urge she not only cannot resist, but which she is also irresistibly attracted by, and addicted to, with a desire that borders on uncontrolled sensuality. That Osvald is sent away from the home, she even justifies by saying that he cannot grow up in the presence of “two monsters – myself included”. The question is whether in Ibsen’s pre-text there are any indications that would justify the supposition that the young Mrs Alving, just like the chamberlain himself, may have developed a hypertrophied sexuality from which in her rational phases she disassociates herself and of which she is ashamed. Kambanelis connects the development of Helena’s form of psychopathologia sexualis with Pastor Manders’ hostility to sex and the official view of the Church on copulation as a necessary evil in the service of reproduction, which should preferably be done as quickly as possible with the attention focused on the final product of the intercourse. Against this background one can with a certain amount of justification regard Helena’s change of attitude as a revolt against the phobia concerning bodily contact that is articulated in the view of the State Church on marriage and its functions, which the Pastor expresses in such phrases as “marriage should (not) be an intoxicating romance, a garden of pleasures” (27) and the Church does not applaud “fun and games in the bedroom” (28). In Kambanelis’ play it is made plausible that Pastor Manders’ negative attitude to Helena’s obvious liking for him, his ignorance and total lack of experience of relationships between partners, and his preference for a life in celibacy devoted exclusively to church activities all drive her into an anti-position, where she enjoys “the pleasures of the flesh” while she at the same time experiences “the incurable loneliness of the soul”, to use Hjalmar Söderberg’s words.

Kambanelis’ play points out precisely what happens when corporal and spiritual needs are split up into separate compartments, each of which on its own claims all attention and prevents a psychosomatic integration of the sub-functions in a coherent and unified personality. While Pastor Manders with an Ibsenian feeling of vocation concentrates

² Eagleton, Terry: *Literary Theory. An Introduction*, Oxford, Blackwell 1983, p. 178

exclusively on his work as a clergyman, the young Helena gives in to her desire for purely bodily excesses, which include the enjoyment of all forms of perverted sexuality. Helena justifies this passionate desire by saying that during fondling, naked bodies develop a dynamic of their own which makes one feel “carried away” (38). Indeed, in Helena’s case the need for this sensual stimulation is far more strongly developed than the passive devotion Pastor Manders recommends as a recipe for/against the marital obligations. The notion of woman as “a beautiful animal” (39) is a variant of “la belle dame sans merci” in decadent art as it finds expression for example in Wedekind and Alban Berg’s “Lulu” or Oscar Wilde’s and Beardsley’s “Salomé”. In Kambanelis’ Helena, however, the desire is mixed with a large dose of loathing and self-contempt. Her “Passion” is both suffering and passion, in which the suffering caused by her depraved life gradually comes to dominate. She views her marriage as a “real hell” (47) – and the impression created by her depiction of “scenes from a marriage” shows that they are akin to comparable scenes in plays from Strindberg to E. Alby and Tennessee Williams.

In Kambanelis’ play Pastor Manders’ responsibility for Helena’s psychophysical trauma is discussed at the point of intersection between desires and social commitment. In a conversation between Manders and one of the two night watchmen, Manders is discussed as a stage role, and the actor who played this character in the present production claims that the public always tends to regard him as the villain, who bears the responsibility for the fact that Helena lands up in a marriage with the depraved Chamberlain Alving and is drawn into his circle of lugubrious demimonde characters. The reason that in the eyes of the public she is regarded as a victim of Manders’ hardheartedness is that he has rejected her obvious wish to enter into matrimonial relations on the grounds that he has decided to live in celibacy and to devote his life to pastoral tasks – without being absorbed by family duties. After Helena in a Nora-like outburst has fled out of her marital hell and sought refuge at Pastor Manders’ home late at night, she is again rejected and left to herself. The Pastor is terrified of making any concessions with respect to her unchaste offer and is afraid of being brought “down to (her) level” (39), as he puts it. Kambanelis gives here a picture of a woman who is hopelessly split between impulsive desires and a burning longing for a more sublime form of love, which she believes she could experience living together with Pastor Manders, for whom she has, and claims always to have had, a genuine liking. She purports on the one hand to hate the primitive virility of her husband, the chamberlain, who has cast “the shadow of vulgarity” (39) over her face, while on the other hand she directly encourages the Pastor to have sexual intercourse with her:

I beg you. Feel like a young man. Be a young man! Why do you insist on denying life? Other ministers get married, have a family. Why do you choose to die so young? Can’t you understand that I should belong to you and you to me? Come out of your tomb! (40)

The actual rhetoric here is designed to be understood in relation to the Biblical symbolism of the Resurrection. With her initiative Helena aims to give the Pastor a vital transfusion, to reawaken him from the death he has chosen himself, and to resurrect him as a man. However, in Kambanelis’ version too Pastor Manders is not to be moved. With his contempt for the vitalistic decadent mentality, he belongs to the series of Ibsenian idealists who sacrifice themselves for the interest of a cause. With his totally uncompromising lack of ability to give an inch, he is akin to *Brand*, which his name also suggests and also statements of the kind: “Don’t expect to tell me any different tomorrow” (27), but he also has a great deal in common with characters like Johannes Rosmer and Arnold Rubek, who give priority to politico-ideological and artistic tasks at the cost of human intimacy and happiness.

As is apparent from the play, the young Olaf Manders does however feel certain qualms and he is not entirely free from jealousy. Just before the wedding between Chamberlain Alving and Helena, née Sørensen, the Pastor feels the same feelings as the hunter in *On the Heights*, when from his elevated perspective the latter sees a stranger going to church with his bride. In applied form he expresses the same thoughts: “I was taking in every word she was saying and I was suffering, because I saw that the moment had come when somebody else would marry her” (25). This feeling of pain on seeing the chamberlain, a friend from the days of his youth, marrying the young Helena, has its deepest sources in a youthful giving away of the beautiful creature, who as far as the young student of theology and later pastor is concerned, is first and foremost an aesthetic, not an erotic object. He has for a long time been worshipping her beauty, living in her company in “a common union of souls” (25) and he admits to having written poems in her honour and having himself set music to them, indeed, he has written hymns to the Virgin Mary and used Helena as a model (22). To the Pastor’s great surprise, through her ambivalent attitudes Helena discredits his view that “she (as a woman) is by nature superior” (28). She proves on the contrary that she is part of nature – and this upsets Pastor Manders most deeply because in his opinion dirty and besmirched elements are mixed into his worshipping of Helena as the Holy Madonna, elevated far above all natural needs. The picture of Helena that he is finally left with is a picture of “a besmirched woman, as a snowflake and the smile of the Virgin?” (43) He imagines her in the chamberlain’s bed, “being violated (...) and secretly enjoying it, looking at me with half-closed eyes” (43). The provocative openness Helena displays when she tells of her wild nights of lovemaking hurts the Pastor so deeply that in a symbolic auto-da-fé he burns up “all our souvenirs – letters from the time I was at college in Christiania, and all the poems I had written to her. I gathered the ashes and kept them in a biscuit tin” (43). It hurts him not only because it shows that Helena has disregarded his advice about not letting oneself get carried away during copulation, but also because in spite of all the perversions and humiliations she has had moments of genuine happiness – and this confession is hard for him to bear, because he wept on the day when Helena and the chamberlain were married and he admits that he “really didn’t want them to be happy” (43).

In another place he says outright that it required a victory over himself to “stifle my feelings and devote myself wholeheartedly to my work” (30). Not until he was training to be a clergyman did he discover, according to himself, “the value of having the strength to be able to renounce! The strength to deny yourself! (31). Into this deliberation there flows a remark that he had never wanted “to become the typical pastor who gets married, who has children – who can’t do anything remarkable” (31). This intertextual allusion to the priest Straamand in *Love’s Comedy* shows how well Kambanelis knows his *Ibsenland* and how much at home he is in Kierkegaardian dialectics, where “the remarkable” is not realised within the ethical, but the aesthetic stage, in which Pastor Manders free of all marital ties makes a name for himself through his cultural writings, with articles, sermons, hymns and so forth. In a dialogue between the young and the aging Pastor Manders light is shed on the relationship between youthful commitment in the service of the Church and a comment on this commitment in a later period: “I was already quite a name,” says the young Olaf Manders, referring to his numerous publications, while the elderly Pastor replies that this career trip has been “paid for with the sacrifice of my virile body and youthful heart!” (44) – and then he says, turning to the absent Helena Alving: “Yes, indeed, Mrs Alving! And it still rankles with you that I didn’t destroy young Pastor Manders in order to gratify the follies of your temperament!” (44). Turning to the night watchman he adds that “for me that woman was deadly. It was as if she’d made a vow to shatter my integrity, and anything in my actions that was incompatible with her desires!” (44).

From the point of view of theatre history Kambanelis' play is interesting because in alternating sequence it lets present and past voices speak out in a contemporary dialogue that sheds new light on potential connections between pre- and post-textual relations, at the same time as "authorities" to promote the basis text are introduced from a staging of Ibsen's *Ghosts*, who put questions to the role-players and assess the additional information produced by the new dialogues between the roles that have been handed down. Thus Kambanelis' new version of Ibsen's *Ghosts* distinguishes itself through the fact that the dialogues flow between an 1880s and a 1980s framework of understanding and shed light on problematic issues that the pre-text does not articulate, but suggests as a possible actualising form.

Right at the end Oswald comes in, sent for to be present at the opening of "The Captain Sigurd Alving's Memorial Children's House". Here the problem of inheritance comes in in an ambivalent way since a distinction is made between a biological and an economic inheritance. Mrs Alving wants to finance the children's home with the late chamberlain's assets. This means that she wants almost blasphemously to honour the memory of a representative of frivolity and vice and legitimise the false ideal in Oswald's consciousness. At the same time she wants thereby to ensure that all her son inherits in the course of time comes from her property. But this monopolising of the inheritance does not work out since the son has already been genetically infected by his father with the fatal disease. Oswald himself acknowledges the irony in his mother's double motives for the way she disposes of property and he blames his mother for having let him grow up as an "orphan" and both parents for having been too cowardly to part company "from the moment they saw that they were incompatible" (58). Their real guilt consisted in the fact that they chose to remain in the "desert" (58) where they spent their lives and gave life to a son bearing within him the seeds of an early death. In spite of his long stay abroad, Oswald has on the basis of fragments of experience formed a picture of his parents that confirms his supposition that they tormented and tortured each other and that their life together was "a kind of hell". (57)

If one considers Kambanelis' play on the basis of the conceptions of self-realisation the main characters pursue, whether they consist in self-denial or self-indulgence, one can see that the synthesis of spiritual and corporal needs is unsuccessful and everything ends in powerlessness and resignation and death or living death. In one of the final sequences the elderly Pastor Manders advises Oswald, the very victim of extremely decadent sexual morals, to look with slightly kinder eyes on human failure and folly. In a general turn of phrase, which creates the impression of being a kind of solution, he reminds Oswald that he called him a "repairman" – and he adds: "When you're my age, you'll realise that in the end we're all repairmen". (59)

Finally Mrs Alving and the aging Pastor Manders wander through a windswept landscape heavy with rain, far out by the fjord, with "footprints on a lonely road" (61), *Ghosts'* landscape, but also *Ibsenland*, where the old master has left his tracks, which the younger Kambanelis followed in his own way and on the basis of the conditions of his own time, and left new tracks, tracks which do not lead to any certain knowledge, for as Pastor Manders says in his final line: "I know less now – much less." (61).