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IBSEN'S PEER GYNT AND PAA VIDDERNE.

In no other poem has Henrik Ibsen expressed the essence of his doctrine of life more concisely and more beautifully than in the remarkable production entitled, "Paa Vidderne."¹ There

¹ On the Mountain Plains.

is much in the philosophy of this poem which can be traced in its general significance throughout all of Ibsen's dramas. The one human quality for which Ibsen always had a profound respect was character. This in its ultimate analysis is the key-note which he strikes in his long series of arraignments against weak and cowardly humanity. It is character which Ibsen has glorified also in this wonderful poem, "Paa Vidderne." Ibsen has chosen some outward phenomenon as the symbol of an inner truth. The mountain plains, with their eternal snow and ice far up above the narrow valley, become for Ibsen the symbol of all that is great and heroic. On the mountain plains there is that grand individual liberty which Ibsen so highly prized. There it was that Brand went to fulfil the duties of his heroic mission. It is cold and bleak upon the heights but the air is pure and life-giving. The lower life in the valley is for the weaker the average man with his common place ideals, for whom Ibsen felt such a profound contempt. As soon as the heroic nature of the individual asserts itself, the lowland life becomes too narrow and stifling for him and he is impelled to seek the higher element of nature on the mountain plains.

Life on the high mountains, therefore, is for Ibsen a symbol of the higher life of man in which the individual realizes the sublime ideal of existence, namely, the fullest and highest development of self. It was this theme which occupied the poet's attention in his two greatest dramatic poems, "Brand" and "Peer Gynt." In these two works the central theme is the attainment of self: "at være sig selv." To be one's self is to kill self; "at være sig selv, er, sig selv at døde," (Peer Gynt, Act V).

Self denial is the mark of the hero. What more fitting symbol of nature could Ibsen have chosen for this heroic conception of life than the rugged mountain plains of Norway? Of Norwegian natural scenery it is almost exclusively the mountains that Ibsen has depicted in his works. His first impressions of mountain scenery he seems to have had from the year 1859. It was in this year that he wrote both "*Højjeldsliv*" and "*Paa Vidderne*." In the same year he began work upon "*Kjærlighedens Komædie*," the hero of which, the poet Falk, seeks refuge in the mountains from the narrow life of the Philistine world. This play was finished the same summer that Ibsen started out on his journey through the mountains of Western Norway in 1862. There is much in both "*Brand*" and "*Peer Gynt*" which reflects the impressions of this journey. One very important reflection is the description of mountain scenery and life, especially in *Brand*.

In "*Peer Gynt*" the whole scene in *Gudbrandsdal*, spread out before us in the first three acts, bears very strong impressions of the general setting depicted in the greatest of all Ibsen's poems upon mountain life: "*Paa Vidderne*." The resemblance is so striking that one cannot help but believe that the picture of mountain life portrayed in "*Paa Vidderne*" must have been in the poet's mind when he wrote "*Peer Gynt*," thereby coloring the setting in which the opening scenes of this poem are laid.

In "*Paa Vidderne*," the hero in exile upon the mountains, his return to the valley to visit his mother, the description of the beautiful, naive Norwegian girl, the little red hut, the cat, the aged mother, her death, and the scene in which the hero bears her aloft to heaven, all these have their counterparts reflected in the opening scenes of "*Peer Gynt*."

The poem "*Peer Gynt*" opens with the celebrated ride of Gudbrand Glesne along the Gendin-Edge, which Peer has attributed to himself. Åse is upbraiding Peer for going out to hunt the deer during the busy season when she needs him at home, (*Peer Gynt*. Act I. Sc. I). The hero of "*Paa Vidderne*," likewise, starts out upon a chase for the mountain-deer. He is going to bring back the skin for his mother and his betrothed.

In the third Act of "Peer Gynt," Solveig joins Peer in the mountains. It is not only due to her fidelity and love that she feels compelled to come to him. It is the stifling atmosphere of the valley below which she cannot endure. It is this which has forced her to seek the glorious freedom of the mountains above. When Åse, upon her death-bed, refers to Solveig's love for Peer, she says that "there is somewhere here a maid who longs for the heights:"

Peer Gynt. Act III, Sc. 4.

Åse.

(smilende.)

De siger, her findes etsteds
en jente, som stunder mod højden.

It is striking that Åse should have employed the same general metaphor which Solveig herself used in the previous passage in question (when Solveig joins Peer in the mountains). This phrase "stunder mod højden" (longs for the heights) expresses the same longing which the hero of "Paa Vidderne" feels when he struggles to rise above the sorrows of his life. In fact the general symbol of the heights as the expression of a higher and better life runs throughout the whole poem as a vital essence. The relief from the narrow life and oppressive atmosphere in *Gudbrandsdal* which Solveig feels when she reaches the mountains may well be a reflection of this vital essence of the poem, "Paa Vidderne." Both Solveig and the hero of "Paa Vidderne" feel that the mountains above will bring them relief from the sorrows of the world below. They both are at home on the heights. This conception is repeatedly expressed by the hero of "Paa Vidderne." He says: "no deed has any worth in the valley below, here on the heights my thoughts grow strong, only here can I live;" and again, "winter life on the wild mountain plains steels my weakened thoughts, here no sentimental song of birds beats through the blood." The hero feels compassion for his aged mother and his betrothed who, as he says, "are groping in the valley below." He wishes them to share with him the better life upon the heights. Finally, it is on the heights that the hero

wins his battle of life. He has won the victory over self and thus rises supreme over his grief. The final moment has come when he realizes that the significance of human life is to live according to the best that God has given him. He has outlived his life in the lowlands but there is a better life on the mountains above where he is near to himself and to his God. But the others who are ignorant of such an exalted mission in life still grope blindly in the darkness below.

Peer Gynt, though an outlaw, returns to visit his mother. He risks his life to be able to stand once more by her bedside, (Peer Gynt. Act III, Sc. 4). So too with the hero of "Paa Vidderne;" the loneliness on the mountain plains, far from the sympathetic touch of human love is too great for him to bear. The memories of home and mother finally break his iron will and he returns to pay her a last visit, just as Peer Gynt does. Human sympathy gains a victory over his resolve to follow the dictates of a life of renunciation. He is in fact a moral outlaw, for it is morally impossible for him to live with his mother in the valley below as it is legally impossible for Peer Gynt to do so.

The beautiful description of Solveig in "Peer Gynt" is to a large degree a reflection of the fair Norwegian maid with whom the hero of "Paa Vidderne" is in love. When Peer Gynt first meets Solveig he describes those qualities in her which have won his heart. She is modest and dutiful, she looks down upon her shoes and white apron, she clings to her mother's side, she carries a hymn book in her kerchief, (Peer Gynt, Act I, Sc. 3). When the hero of "Paa Vidderne" first meets his beloved, she shows the same girlish modesty which Solveig does. She holds her eyes away from him, she looks down upon her shoes and trembles. When on the mountain plains the hero catches sight of his aged mother and his sweetheart in the valley below, they are on their way to church. The maid is bearing her bible in her kerchief just as Solveig does as she trudges along clinging to her mother's side.

The description of Åse's hut in "Peer Gynt" is very similar to that of the hero's home in "Paa Vidderne." Peer lives alone

with his aged mother in a small hut. In "Paa Vidderne" the hero refers to the little red hut where he spent the happy days of his youth alone with his mother. In Peer Gynt's home the old cat which both he and his mother seem to love as one of the family is an important member of the household. So too, in "Paa Vidderne" the cat belongs to the memories of the home. When the huntsman whom the hero has met upon the mountains cynically remarks, as the flames devour the little cottage in the distance:

"det brønder jo bare, *det gamle hus,*
med juleøllet og *katten*"

we see the picture of a home very much like that of Peer Gynt.

Peer Gynt has been brought up on fairy tales. His whole life is a fairy tale. He can scarcely distinguish fancy from reality. His mother attributes his wild pranks to the many tales which she has told him when a child. So too in "Paa Vidderne," the hero tells how his mother sat by his bedside when a child, spun and sang until sleep bore him away into the land of dreams. But he cannot, like Peer Gynt, live upon dreams. Action must determine the course of his life.

When Åse passes away Peer stands by her bedside and bears her soul aloft in a fanciful ride to heaven. Throughout the whole scene there is that humorous and farcical atmosphere which is peculiar to the two characters and to the whole poem. Yet there is a strain of genuine affection and of true love which gives the passage an exalted character and makes it one of Ibsen's greatest literary achievements. In "Paa Vidderne" the hero likewise expresses a deep love for his mother and at her death he has her tenderly borne aloft to heaven. When Peer Gynt arrives at the gates of heaven the sound of dance and song can be heard from without. So too in "Paa Vidderne" it is the joy of a Christmas festival in heaven to which the hero bears his mother. Unlike "Peer Gynt" the poem "Paa Vidderne" is entirely serious in tone and Ibsen has given a fitting expression to the love of this deeper and more serious character. In a few dignified words he praises his mother's life of self sacrifice. The

soul's journey to heaven is also a very much more condensed and dignified picture than that of Peer Gynt's boyish attempts to bear his mother over the sorrows of this world into a better life.

The first three acts of "Peer Gynt" constitute a little comic tragedy in itself and may well be styled the First Part. When we consider the resemblance of this First Part of "Peer Gynt" to the poem "Paa Vidderne" both in its general setting and in these many individual details we cannot but believe that Ibsen must have had this poem in mind when he wrote "Peer Gynt." Not only the outward but also the inner setting of both poems conform to a large extent. "To follow the voice that bids me wander upon the heights:"

Paa Vidderne.

Nu er jeg stålsat, jeg følger det bud,
der byder i højden, at vandre.

is the same command which Peer Gynt has persistently refused to follow, blind to the real significance of his own motto, "at være sig selv." It is the same command which Brand, written only two years before "Peer Gynt," follows out to its logical conclusion. So too in "The Comedy of Love" (1862), and in "The Pretenders" (1864), both written between the time of composition of "Paa Vidderne" and "Peer Gynt" the same philosophical concept appears, only in a different form. In "The Comedy of Love" the idea of self-realization is conceived as a divine mission (kald) and in "The Pretenders" the tragedy turns upon the failure of Jarl Skule to interpret this divine mission written within himself. "Paa Vidderne" is Ibsen's first poetic expression of this philosophical concept (self-realization) and it is not strange that he should have been strongly impressed with the setting of this poem when he developed the theme again under different conditions in "Peer Gynt." In a critical analysis of the composition of "Peer Gynt" the influence of the poem "Paa Vidderne" cannot be left out of consideration.

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Kansas University, December 6, 1909.