

BRAND.

INTRODUCTION.

I.

THE dramatic poem *Brand*, in the final version here translated, was composed during the summer and autumn months of 1865, at Ariccia in the Alban hills, some fifteen miles south of Rome. In April of the previous year Henrik Ibsen had left Norway for the South, after a dozen years of play-making, literary feud and economic struggle, in her two capitals. His journey, ostensibly a tour for study, was in fact a flight—it has even been called a “Hégira”—the willing escape from his Homeland of a poet fretted by her provincialism, and a citizen burning with shame for what he deemed her disgrace. For her fellow Scandinavians in Denmark had just thrown down the gage of war to two great empires, and Norway had sent merely a scanty band of volunteers to help her “brothers in need.” He had travelled south by sea, almost within hearing of the German guns; among the passengers was that silver-haired lady, whose devout faith in the safety of her soldier son, according to Ibsen’s bitter verses, was so simply explained—“he was a soldier in our *Norwegian army*.”¹

In Berlin he saw the Danish trophies drawn

1. In his poem *Troens Grund*, written after his arrival in Rome the same year.

through the streets amid the exulting shouts of the populace, and the thought sprang to his mind of a great poem of chastisement which should bring home to his countrymen the national shame. It was in these days, as Ibsen tells us in an illuminating letter, and under these impressions, that *Brand* was conceived.

But the germ matured slowly. Other interests and ambitions supervened. The overwhelming experience of Italy, seen for the first time, and in the glory of an Italian spring, turned the current of his indignation for a time aside, and made the task of chastisement appear less urgent. To this rugged Norwegian of thirty-six, who had with difficulty blundered through an elementary examination in Latin, Rome with its half revelation of antiquity was not the less fascinating because it was very imperfectly understood. The sensuous glory of its sculpture, still more of its architecture, set his acute sense of beauty astir; the idyllic life of the artist-society which he frequented—comparable only, he thought, with that of Shakespeare's Arden,¹—added its enchantment; and he was soon shaping with eager delight, as he wrote to Björnson,² a new colossal drama already planned at Copenhagen, and devoted, not to the sins of modern Norway, but to the tragic and forlorn attempt of the Emperor Julian to bring the beautiful pagan world again to life.

Yet this was but a passing phase. The more burning thoughts of the present could not be

1. Letters, No. 74.

2. Letters, No. 17.

exorcised. The "fair Kingdom," where the winged children of his fancy disported themselves, was haunted by a sombre and silent guest, at whose approach they fled abashed. Thus symbolically Ibsen tells, in the little poem *From my Home Life*, how the delightful labours upon *Julian* suffered from the obsession of an incubus that would not let him go till he yielded. The result was that *Julian*, after many hesitations, was at length indefinitely deferred, while the poet concentrated his energy upon that first version of the great poem of chastisement, which we know as, the narrative or "epic" *Brand*.

At first, however, with more will than inspiration. As early as September, 1864, he could speak of it to Björnson, in the above-mentioned letter, as "a longish poem." It is a fragment, or series of fragments, consisting of some two-hundred octave stanzas of iambic verse. The execution is laboured, and the metrical form imperfectly congenial. Several cantos were written more than once, now in a galloping accentual rhythm, now in one more measured and severe. Narrative to Ibsen, as perhaps to Shakespeare, was never perfectly congenial except as a mode of dramatic speech, and he seems never to have decided whether the chastisement was to be effected mainly by direct invective or by the subtler process of holding up a glass before the guilty eyes. For the "epic" *Brand* might be described with equal plausibility as a novel in verse with declamatory episodes, or as a series of indignant apologues in a framework of story.

II.

In an opening scene, which has no counterpart in the drama, we are shown the boyhood of Brand and Einar (here called Koll and Axel), the protagonists of the First Act. Then follows Brand's meeting, years later, on the mountain pass, with Einar and Agnes (Dagmar), and with Gerd. The description is more actual but less powerful, and the movement of the story seems to be clogged by the weight and intricacy of the stanza. We miss the deft touch which makes a like elaborate strophe, in the hands of Chaucer or Ariosto, Byron or Paludan-Müller, respond to all the moods of the story at will. It is otherwise in the passages where the narrative is suspended, and indignation, in effect, "makes" the verse. Here Ibsen's stores of heavy artillery serve him in better stead, though its slow deliberate discharges still miss the fiery vehemence of the swift ringing rhymes of the drama. As there, the invective is delivered mainly through the lips of *Brand* (Koll) himself; but two notable passages occur only in the "epic" version.¹ One of these is the scathing description of a "seventeenth of May" patriotic meeting (v. 1173 f.), where the men who pleaded that a "little folk" like Norway could not be expected to do battle for its "brothers in need," tumultuously applauded the time-honoured assurance that the blood of the Vikings still beat in their

veins. In such meetings Ibsen had himself taken part at Bergen, and more lately, in 1860, at Christiania; and he paints the scene with the vindictive bitterness of disillusion.¹ Nay, more, in the orator of the day he pillories the great coryphæus of romantic nationalism, Henrik Wergeland, a poet whose infirmities he resented with the peculiar intensity of one whose genius was as he recognised deeply akin. He even adopts, sometimes verbally, the brilliant satire of Wergeland's rival, Welhaven; who just twenty years before in his *Norges Dæmring* (Norway's Twilight, 1833) had exposed Norwegian self-idolatry with choicer weapons than Wergeland's.²

The other passage is the lyric Prologue "To my Accomplices." Here Ibsen comes forward openly as the author of the indictment, but also as one who bitterly confesses to his share in the guilt. Grief and love, anger and remorse, visibly strive and intermingle in these vehement, arresting stanzas which, more even than his contemporary letters, allow us revealing glimpses into the glowing forge where the yet molten mass of *Brand* was slowly being hammered into shape. Patriotic grief dominates the first stanza:—

My Folk, my Home, my beautiful Norse Land,
Where moor and mountain banish the sun's
light,
Where the foot's passage fjord and crag have
banned,

1. *Ep. Brand*, ed. Larsen, p. 257 f., Koht and Elias, Ibsen's *Efterladte Skrifter* I. lxvi f.

2. Koht and Elias, u.s.

And more malign compulsions the soul's
flight;
To thee I sing a heavy-hearted strain,
Haply the last of mine that thou shalt hear;
For never did a poet sing again
After once standing by his Country's bier.

But presently the grief turns to anger, and the
anger to fierce self-accusation. The people have
forgotten duty in romantic dreaming, but it is
the poets, before all, who have misled them:—

This lying game, ye have played it from of yore,
This make-believe of Life in a dead time;
It is your childhood's sin, your manhood's crime,
The canker that will eat you to the core.
Yet not from all is equal vengeance due,
With ten-fold rigour shall the penal rod
Fall on the chieftains in whose steps ye trod,
And hundred-fold on us who sang for you!

For the poets had coqueted with the buried
past, "tricked out its mouldered body with
false charms," and hung the hall of Memory
with ancient arms and armour to the delight of
the modern pigmy beholder.¹ But in love or
in scorn the poet is still "Norway's singing
child," and the soul of Norway lives in the
imagery of the final stanza:—

My poem's like the heathery moorland brown,
That slopes above the homestead broad and
even;

But climb it, and beyond, a glittering crown
Of icepeaks soars before your eyes to heaven.

1. v 34 f. This stanza may be found, translated, in the
American edition of this translation (Scribners).

Low-strung my cither, plain the tune I play;
But rich harmonics thrill and quiver thro' it;
A poem is hidden in the poem, and they
Who understand it understand the poet.

The fierce indictment is absolutely sincere, but it utters only half the poet's mind. Behind Ibsen's negations, as behind Shelley's, lie passionate affirmations, of which they are the unconscious speech.

III.

But in spite of some impressive and revealing things, the "epic" *Brand* was a mistake. Ibsen himself worked with increasing reluctance and malaise. Happily, there came, in July, 1865, one of those flashes of creative inspiration which sometimes crown months of groping and seemingly futile toil; and suddenly, in his own words, he found "a strong and clear form for what I had to say." It was in St. Peter's at Rome (of all places in the world) that the story of the Northern iconoclast, hitherto a laboured product, first became a living thing. Hesitation was at an end, and the unfinished cantos were definitely abandoned.¹

1. Their subsequent fate was curious. When Ibsen left Rome in 1868 they were deposited, with other papers, in the Scandinavian Club of which he was a prominent and somewhat autocratic member, and they eventually found their way into a Roman lumber-store. There, in 1896, they were rescued by a Danish collector, Andreas Pontoppidan, only, however, to be once more entombed in his private museum of curios. It was only after his death, in 1901, that they were discovered by his executor, Karl Larsen, who at once identified them with the abandoned early version of *Brand* which had been known, since 1888, to have once existed. Six years later, after Ibsen's death, he published them in an exemplary edition *H. Ibsen's Episke Brand*, Copenhagen, 1907.

Released from the shackles of an uncogential form, Ibsen now began to write with an impetuous inspiration he had rarely known. In his lonely retreat at Ariccia, the dramatic *Brand* took shape with amazing rapidity. "It is blessedly peaceful out here," he wrote to Björnson in September; "no acquaintances, and I work both morning and evening, which I never could do before."¹ At this date he had almost finished the Fourth Act, "and I feel that I can write the Fifth in eight days."² The vast Fifth Act did not, in fact, come into being quite so rapidly, and it bore traces, as the others do not, of conflicting intentions. But by the middle of November the last instalment of MS. was sent to press, and in March, 1866, "*Brand, a Dramatic Poem, in five Acts*," was published at Copenhagen.

The publisher, F. Hegel (head of the great Danish house of Gyldendal), to whom Ibsen had been introduced—and it was not the least of his many services to his great comrade—by Björnson, had small hopes of the success of a drama in verse, so long, and so fiercely abusive of its Norwegian readers. Its Danish readers, in their turn, would be offended by its Norwegian provincialisms of spelling and vocabulary. A few of these latter disabilities Ibsen modified at Hegel's request. He himself expected a general onslaught by critics and public alike, and he awaited the issue in a fever of desolating suspense which forbade all work.³ But he was confident of the final issue: "I will and must conquer some day." And the day came

1. Letters, No. 20.

2. *ib.*

3. *ib.* No. 24 (to Björnson).

soon. Upon its publication, *Brand* immediately took the whole Scandinavian world by storm.

In Christiania, where Ibsen's name was in the worst odour, as in Copenhagen and Stockholm, where it was all but unknown, *Brand* threw for a time all other topics into the shade. "Wherever you go, and at whatever hour," a correspondent wrote from Copenhagen, in April, to the *Christiania Morgenblad*, the talk is only of *Brand*. The religious public, especially, crowded to buy the story of the great fanatic, and to be thrilled by his denunciations of a latitudinarian world. A few critical cavils, it is true, were heard, declaring its teaching unchristian, or its incidents impossible. Some found it too harrowing; and one sensitive lady even wrote a new finale, in which *Brand* is saved from the avalanche and breathes his last on a domestic deathbed with three devoted daughters watching beside it.¹ Even Ibsen's old literary comrades only half approved; "I suspect," wrote the genially sarcastic A. O. Vinje, "that Ibsen might make the big end of a big man."² But everybody read it. In two months the first edition was exhausted; three more followed before the close of the year, the eleventh in 1889, and the sale is still steady to-day. At Stockholm, in 1885, it was even put upon the stage, for which it was never meant; and the crowded houses which for fifteen nights sat through a performance of seven hours, left no doubt that this poem of epic scale and structure had the concentrated intensity and

1. L. Kieler, *Brand's Døttre* (Christiania, 1889).

2. In his *Journal Dølen*, April 29th, 1886.

grip of great tragedy. After that experience *Brand* passed into the accepted repertory of the Scandinavian, especially of the Christiania, stage; distinguished actors (such as Egil Eide) and actresses, recognised the immense opportunities of the rôles of Brand and Agnes, and of the slight but moving parts of Brand's Mother, and the Woman in the Second Act, and the Gypsy-wife in the Fourth. But its stage success is no measure of the significance that *Brand* has had for Norway. "Ibsen's influence in shaping the Norway of to-day and the Norwegian character has been incalculable," said one of the greatest of modern Norwegians, Frithjof Nansen, after Ibsen's death. And this influence he found in its most concentrated form in *Brand*. "The suggestive influence of a poem like *Brand* upon the men of my generation," he went on, "has been more than you would easily believe—more than most people in England perhaps would believe. But for my part, I say—to parody Kipling—'What do they know of Ibsen who only his prose-works know.'"¹

Outside Scandinavia, too, the author of *Brand* began to be named; it was the beginning of his European fame. In Germany first and chiefly, notwithstanding Ibsen's hatred of "Germanism," and the fierce antagonism to the German worship of the State, of which his hero is the mouthpiece. The union of a dramatic story with a rich and powerful intellectual substance commended it at once to the lovers of *Faust*, of which it was confidently declared to be an imitation. And after

1. Reported in the *London Tribune*, May 25th, 1906.

1870 it acquired a new and more potent appeal. To the generation which had just witnessed the colossal shaping of the empire Brand's gospel of masterful will spoke home with kindling power; and when Nietzsche a few years later proclaimed the Superman, the Norwegian poet seemed to have prophetically prepared his way. No less than four verse-translations appeared in Germany between 1872 and 1882.

Of other European countries *Brand* has made the deepest impression in England. Its biblical intensity appealed to the puritanism in our blood; it renewed the prophetic denunciations and the fervid genius of Carlyle. It has been repeatedly translated, first in prose; then, in 1894, two renderings in the original metres appeared almost simultaneously; one by the late Edmund Garrett, probably the most gifted of all Ibsen's translators, the other that contained in the present volume. Portions of it have also from time to time been performed.¹

IV.

In virtue of this wide appeal, *Brand* might well be counted the first work of the "European" Ibsen, whom he himself in later days distinguished from his "Norwegian" and "Scandinavian" former selves. But this would be an error. The "European" Ibsen was still in embryo, and

1. The crucial portion of the Fourth Act was played, in the present version, in London, in 1896, and occasionally since; a selection embodying the most crucial scenes of the first four Acts was played by the Stage Society of the Manchester University, on April 23rd and 24th, 1914 (see *The Nation*, of May 2nd).

it was Germany, after 1870, not the Italy of the sixties, that brought him fully into being. Not that *Brand* is untouched by the milieu in which it grew up. But this influence was chiefly negative and indirect. The Italian summer laid no fiery finger on the austere northern landscape, nor was the hero permitted any of those Mediterranean adventures which, a year later, diversified *Peer Gynt*. On the contrary, it is in atmosphere and temper the most intensely Norwegian of all Ibsen's poems. The sins of Norway are exposed with incomparable force; but *Brand* is far from being that naked sword of chastisement which Ibsen saw before him, "the handle towards his hand," as he watched the Danish trophies drawn through the streets of Berlin. Lapse of time and change of place have not diminished his purpose or his zeal in the cause; but they have allowed memory and imagination to reassert themselves with the poignancy which distance gives; and the image of Norway, his "beautiful homeland," rises before him like the face of the sleeping Desdemona, guilty indeed but intolerably dear. "Never have I seen the Home and its life so fully, so clearly, so near by," he told the students of Christiania in 1873, "as precisely from a distance and in absence."¹ Under the Italian sky, among the myrtles and aloes of Ariccia, he saw again his rugged and austere Norway; the sombre sublimity of the fjords, the torrents and precipices, the immeasurable upland solitudes; the peasantry, "wringing rocks for bread," steeped in super-

1. Speech, printed by Halvorsen, *Forfatter Lexikon*: Ibsen.

stitution and officialdom declaiming its cheap gospel of material progress, the "intellectuals" awkwardly simulating European culture, the clergy creed-bound and time-serving; but all with potentialities waiting to be explored, of spiritual insight and heroic manhood. A tour among the western fjords undertaken on a government commission in July, 1862, to collect folk legends, supplied a number of more specific reminiscences; a ruined parsonage in the sunless shade of a beetling crag, and a little decaying church hard by; a wild tramp across the moor and glacier of Jotunheim in wind and snow, and a precipitous climb down to the fjord-head at Fortun; such were the memories that surged upon the poet in his solitude among the Alban hills;—a Norway denuded of everything idyllic and picturesque, monotoned, penetrating, and intense as a Rembrandt etching, but eminently fit to be background and foil to the tragic story of Brand.

V.

For Brand himself, through whose lips Ibsen has denounced the sins of Norway, is unmistakably, in personality and genius, a son of the North. His name, meaning "sword" and also "fire," need not be too symbolically understood; but it is fitly borne by a viking of the soul, "a holy athlete," who makes war, not on the enemies of the church, but on the mercifulness of the christian spirit. The Brand of the drama has grown immensely in spiritual stature since the

days of the epic sketch. The Brand of the epic (Koll) is more human, a somewhat ordinary Norwegian clergyman still doubtful of his call, who debates with the artist Einar on not very uneven terms, and afterwards regrets his own intemperate heat: the Brand of the drama is a sublime seer, "towering as he talks," who scarcely knows whether he is a priest at all, whose God is a young Titan like Hercules, and whose flaming speech disarms Einar's light-hearted diletterism of every weapon but the facile sarcasm of conscious futility. The suggestion of the Hebrew prophet is not accidental. "I read nothing but the Bible," he wrote to Björnson (Sept. 12th); "that is potent and strong," and we need hardly hesitate to read for "the Bible" the old Testament, and especially the prophetic books, the Psalms, and Job. It is in the name of that "Jehovah," who led Israel out of Egypt that Brand assails the sentimental christology of his time; and the supreme crisis of the poem is clinched by the great and terrible saying, nowhere else in modern literature used with such overwhelming effect as here: "He that sees Jehovah dies."

Nevertheless, Brand's problem and his psychology are modern, and Germanic. To us he resembles the Carlyle of *Sartor*, and his Scandinavian critics were at no loss to find "originals" for him among their own contemporaries. Georg Brandes, Ibsen's own friend and correspondent, and most of the Danish critics, at once detected in Brand the illustrious *enfant terrible* of Danish orthodoxy, Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), who had flung his "Either—Or!" as Brand his "All

or Nothing," in the face of a temporizing generation. Norway preferred a Norwegian heretic—G. A. Lammers (1798-1878), who in 1856 had led a secession from the Church in Ibsen's native place. More recent critics have proposed a third "original"—Christopher Bruun—a friend and associate of Ibsen at Rome during the very months when the poem was taking shape. Bruun, to be sure, was no heretic—he later became a venerated church dignitary at Christiania—but this defect was more than made good by the circumstance that, after passionately and vainly urging his fellow Norwegians to help their Danish brothers he had himself fought as a volunteer in the war,—a heroic anomaly (in Ibsen's eyes), no less than Brand, in a nation of slackers and dreamers.

All these persons and their histories were known to Ibsen, and all contributed details or atmosphere to the grandiose figure of his hero. But none of them was Brand's "original." As for Kierkegaard, Ibsen scouted the idea; he had read little of the man's work, he said, and understood less,¹ and what is more important perhaps, Brand's cognate phrases are found to conceal fundamentally different thoughts.² Lammers, on the contrary, an open-air agitator, like Brand, Ibsen, according to H. Jæger, actually pointed to as his "model"; but in how limited a sense this is to be understood may be judged from the fact that, after four years of his "free apostolate," Brand's "model" publicly recanted, returned to

1. Letter to F. Hegel, 8th March, 1867.

2. Cf. Larsen, *u.s.* p. 242.

the Church, and died, not in a mountain wilderness, but as a painter of altar-pieces, like the artist of Brand's scorn.¹ Christopher Bruun, better than either, represents the ideals of Scandinavian brotherhood and international heroism which inspired the inception of the poem; and his bitter complaint that his "little nation could not be taught to think greatly," clearly sank deep in Ibsen's mind. But *Brand* was already far advanced when Ibsen made Bruun's personal acquaintance, and Bruun himself modestly claimed as his sole contribution to the character the wallet worn by Brand in the first act. "That wallet," he pleasantly told Larsen, "is mine. I carried it through the Danish war, and later across the Alps, and was very proud of it. And I have Ibsen's own word for it that it became Brand's wallet."² It is clear that Ibsen saw something Brand-like in the wallet's owner.

Nevertheless, the essential stuff of the character comes from Ibsen himself. Ibsen was complex, a man like Faust in whose breast two souls (or more) contended for mastery, and his vehemence denoted no uncontested autonomy of will, but the insecure triumph of one combatant over another whom he forcibly holds down. "Brand is myself, in my best moments,"³ Ibsen wrote to Hansen, and this, though not the whole truth, is the most vital part of it. His priestly calling, in which the critics found the key to his identity, and the religious public a chief source of his fascination,

1. Larsen, *u.s.* p. 246. Cf. *Brand*, I, 2.

2. Larsen, *u.s.* p. 247.

3. Letters, No. 74.

was in any case only telling costume.¹ It may be that his well-known declarations, some years later to Brandes and Hansen, put a heightened colour on the fact, for his own relation to Christianity had appreciably relaxed in the meantime, largely under Brandes's influence. But we cannot disregard assertions so emphatic as these. "I could have used the same syllogism" (*i.e.*, the logic of his "All or Nothing"), he wrote to Brandes, "just as well with a sculptor or a politician, as with a priest. I could have liberated myself as well from the mood which compelled me to write if I had taken, say, Galilei, instead of Brand; with the difference of course that he would have stood firm and not admitted that the earth moved." Or, he goes on, he might have taken Brandes himself, the brilliant Jew who was then fighting a single-handed battle with Christian Copenhagen as the champion of emancipated thought. Absolute devotion to a cause, whatever it was, that was the fundamental condition, and Ibsen himself, who had fought his way through want and obloquy to fulfil his "call" as a poet, the All or Nothing of poetry, had every right to his declaration that Brand was himself in his best moments. The purport is ethical, not theological, and that which resembles theology in it is the creation of the ethics. Brand's God is a projection of his absolute will. The "one eternal thing" for him, as he declares in the great climax of the first Act, is the spirit of man, of which Churches and Creeds were only passing moods, and which, now scattered in fragments and torsos

1. Letters, No. 59 (1869) and 74 (1870).