



Text and Supertext in Ibsen's Drama

Brian Johnston

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Brian Johnston's approach to Ibsen, now well known, is unlike any other. Johnston sees Ibsen's twelve realist plays as a single cyclical work, the "realist" method of which hides a much larger poetic intention than has previously been suspected. He believes that the cycle constitutes one of the major works of the European imagination, comparable in scale to Goethe or Dante. And he has shown Ibsen to be the heir to Romantic and Hegelian art and thought, adapting this heritage to the circumstances of his own day. This work demonstrates how the language and scene, characters and "props," of the Ibsen dramas establish a bold and far-reaching theatrical goal: nothing less than an account of our biological and cultural identity in its multilayered totality. Johnston argues that Ibsen's realist text, while stimulating the appearance of nineteenth-century life, also objectively and precisely builds up an alternative image in which archetypal figures and situations from our cultural past repossess the realist stage. Thus he sees the Ibsen "strategy" in his realist plays as twofold: (1) the dialectical subversion of the nineteenth-century reality presented in the plays, and (2) the forced recovery of the archetypal from the past, in a procedure similar to James Joyce's in *Ulysses*. By "supertext" Johnston means a reservoir of cultural reference upon which Ibsen continuously drew in his realist work just as in his earlier poetic and historical dramas.

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