

THE RAISING OF INGER

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“ Because [God] hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he raised him from the dead." And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked [. . .] (Acts 17.31-32)

Imagine a family whose members are determinedly loyal to each other, in which the second son, although deemed to be off his rocker, is cared for in the bosom of the family, in which the prized possession is a pig and her 15 newly born piglets, and in which the centre of gravity is a woman of love and kindness, a daughter-in-law who has given herself wholly to the family into which she has wed. Her name is Inger.



Mikkel and Inger

Such a family might be justly rewarded with peace and prosperity. As Job discovered, the human condition offers no such comfort. Into its loving heart sweeps death and despair: Inger loses at childbirth the baby who would be the first grandson to the family's patriarch, and then in the ultimate family catastrophe, this embodiment of gentleness dies herself.

Such is the tragic core of the Danish film, *Ordet (The Word)*, the film made in 1954 by Carl-Theodor Dreyer from a play by Kaj Munk. Dreyer, the author of that most visual of silent film masterpieces, *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*, invests the work with his own rigorous geometrical style, his favoured camera movement being the horizontal pan used to reveal the physical spaces in which the characters move and relate to one another. Yet this style is not intended to be passive, merely to make the viewer an observing member of the family (which it does do), but to provide a natural fluidity to the story, and to transform the reality of the family's common life around the farm and the place, a

reality that is both documentary and creative. For example, a hay wagon passes across a

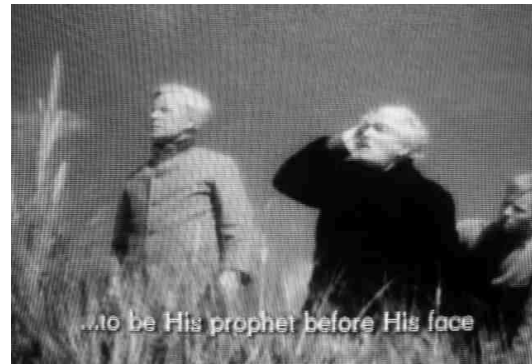
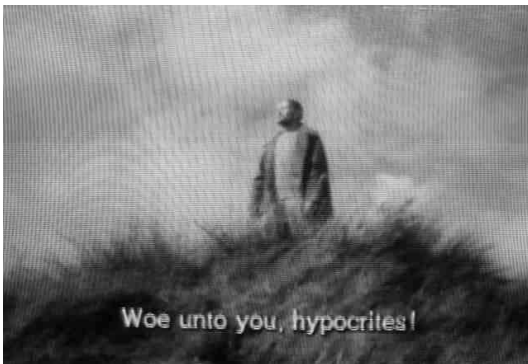


bridge, the camera placed well back panning left to right. Beneath the bridge can be glimpsed a boatman cutting reeds, the whole as if from some documentary on life in rural Jutland, but in fact ordered by Dreyer's eye, just as Dreyer orders the faces of the faithful gathered in the mission cottage, the camera

panning right to left across their intent figures, artfully lit and posed to recreate some tableau from the Dutch school of painting.

The cardinal role in Munk's play and in Dreyer's film is not in fact Inger but the patriarch's second son, Johannes. The film opens with a sort of blasphemy: wandering in the dunes at night, Johannes plays at being Jesus of Nazareth:

"Woe unto you, hypocrites. Woe unto you for your faithlessness, because you do not believe in me the risen Christ who has come to you at the bidding of Him who made Heaven and Earth. Verily I say unto you, Judgement Day is near. God has called me to be His prophet before His face. Woe unto ye of little faith for only they who have faith shall enter the kingdom of heaven. Amen."



Realizing he is missing from his bed, his family goes to search for him, and for a moment we see Johannes through their eyes as the lost sheep who must be found and brought home. From then on the play/film keeps Johannes relentlessly in focus throughout its length, shifting him from the margins to the centre so that, by the end, it is the family who are the lost sheep and he the shepherd, and it is Johannes who acts decisively amidst the family despair, raising Inger from the dead.

Appreciation of the film hinges on appreciation of Johannes' role. Do we see him as insane, wrapped up in a fantasy that he is Jesus of Nazareth? Has he been broken by some past psychological trauma? Do we think that *Ordet* as a work of art would be better off without him? Or are we as spectators in fact privileged to see him as a saviour with the capacity to raise up the dead?

Natural sympathy with the members of the family means that we are inclined to see Johannes through his family's eyes, see that his words have no meaning for them or for us. Yet as a member of the family, metaphorically speaking, present in the same room as him, we are obliged to determine for ourselves what view we are to form of him. When he is at the crest of the dunes standing against the twilight sky, his presence is disturbing but compelling, as if we had stumbled on a prophet in the wilderness, here in rural Denmark. As the story unfolds, our position becomes more privileged still: we come to see that the members of the community, above all the family patriarch of Borgensgaard, Morten Borgen, are hypocrites, religious but incapable of real faith. For



Pietà: Morten, Inger, Mikkel

Munk, the playwright, it is an irony which invests his work with dramatic power: the Borgen household serves God; the community they live among has been shaped by religion; Johannes' impersonation of Jesus is the ultimate delusion. And yet it is Johannes who is true to faith. From his belief in the resurrection of the dead comes his raising of Inger.

Over this dramatic irony, Munk and Dreyer sketch in the satiric. A new pastor has come to this rural community, neat, well-kempt, courteous, formal and particularly convinced that Johannes is ill in the head. He leans forward over his cup of coffee and politely suggests that Johannes should be in a home for the mentally ill, a suggestion

which Morten Borgen rejects with contempt: "My son remains in my house as long as I am alive."

The irony of faithlessness being found among the faithful is compounded by the presence of the doctor. Although he believes in the skill of medicine before the power of prayer, although he acts as the representative of the material world, although he grounds his judgement of Johannes' insanity in reason, yet it is the doctor (and not Morten, nor even Inger), who confidently asserts that Johannes will return to sanity as a result of some psychic shock.

In order to give his main plot depth, Munk the playwright introduced a sub-plot which Dreyer the film-maker might have been tempted to jettison in order to intensify the primary role of Johannes, just as *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* avoids any deviation from the conflict between Joan and her accusers. It concerns the love between Morten's youngest son, Anders, and Anne, the daughter of Peter the Tailor. This is Romeo and Juliet: love is youthful and innocent, and wrecked by the division between their respective families, for Morten and Peter hold entrenched positions about religion which prevent them from allowing the union of the two lovers to proceed. At one level, this division is the natural reflection of rural sectarianism. At another level the sub-plot adds meaning to the religious questions raised by *Ordet*. Religion in Denmark is primarily the Lutheran state church, but in the 1820s, a reform movement was started by N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783-1872), who sought to restore orthodoxy by the adoption of the Apostles' Creed as a central standard, and by creating a renewed understanding of the sacramental element in Danish theology. When Munk came to write *Ordet* in the early 1930s, according to R.P. Keigwin (who promulgated Munk's work in the English-speaking world), he had in mind to cast Morten Borgen as a vehicle of Grundtvigian ideas in opposition to the Calvinistic theology of Peter the Tailor. Thus Morten characterizes his opponent as sour, always having a long face, while Peter insists that his approach to salvation is the only true one.

Dreyer retains these elements in the film for two reasons: they allow the idea of the engagement of Anders and Anne to show in concrete form Inger's role as mediator in the family, recognized by all its members as the one most capable of cementing relationships, so that with her death, the viewer loses all hope that the love of Anders and

Anne might triumph over sectarian division. Secondly, it allows both play and film to contrast this sectarianism as a symptom of the loss of faith, especially in Morten, with the 'miraculous' faith of Johannes: to assert the centrality of the Creed, as Grundtvig did, is to say, "I believe in the resurrection of the body", the point at which Morten's version of Grundtvigianism stops short. Johannes, by contrast, is committed in mind and heart to the idea of resurrection, not just as a possibility but as a certainty. Here Dreyer does carry out some pruning of the play. In the film it is the reading of Kierkegaard alone which has changed Johannes' life, as we shall explore more fully below, but in Munk's play, when the pastor asks why Johannes is ill he is told by Mikkel, Morten's oldest son: "It was Bjørnson and Kierkegaard [. . .] Reading these two, he wrestled so hard with them. They filled his mind with doubt, especially Bjørnson's play called 'Beyond Our Power'. Do you remember it?" Bjørnson (1832-1910) was a Norwegian novelist, poet and playwright, who wrote *Beyond Our Power* in 1883 about the power of miracles, so the reference to him by Mikkel might be supposed to arouse the pastor's interest. Yet in his mouth Munk puts the telling words: " 'Beyond Our Power' -- that antiquated work! An incurable is supposed to be cured by a miracle -- I remember. It simply couldn't happen nowadays."

Ordet as a play is a potent source of ideas and when Dreyer attended the first performance in 1934, he thought straightaway that it would make an admirable film. Moreover, it is also a homage to Munk himself. The film appeared in 1955 when to a Danish audience the war and Munk's role in it would have been still very fresh. Munk was himself a pastor who had served in a rural parish, and whose role and courage made him a charismatic figure under the Nazi occupation of Denmark: he used his pulpit to voice national resistance to the Nazis and, ignoring the risks in doing so, he travelled across the country in order to spread his views. In 1944 he was executed by the Gestapo. Dreyer's homage is twofold. Firstly, the film was made in and near Vederso in Jutland, where Munk served his priesthood for many years. Secondly, it is possible to see in the prophetic figure of Johannes contradicting and denouncing the rationality of the world around him the figure of Munk himself engaged in a seemingly futile opposition to the occupying power, over which he is seen to have the last word.

Munk is also interesting for the fact that he had absorbed some of the ideas of his fellow Dane, Søren Kierkegaard, the 19th-century metaphysician whose extensive

writings took almost a hundred years to enter the mainstream of European philosophical and religious thought. For it is in Johannes that Munk invests a Kierkegaardian inheritance, so that he is as much an idea as a person: like Kierkegaard, he embodies a 'true' religion in contrast to the half-hearted versions of those around him; he is in opposition to the institutional church; he has performed the necessary miracle of faith that allows him to call on Jesus that the dead might be raised and to be answered. Human weakness is nowhere more real than in people's limited understanding of what faith means. Johannes, on the other hand has that spirit of 'inwardness' which manifests itself in self-commitment and inevitably asserts individual strength of will against social conformism. He believes *against* the 'custom and experience' of his family, of his community, of his church, so that faith in his power to raise the dead Inger does not waver.

It is surely Munk's reading of the raising of Lazarus in John's gospel (11.1-43) that prompted him to write his play. But it may also be Kierkegaard's reference to the miracle in the introduction to *Sickness Unto Death* which crystallized further his treatment of Johannes. In the gospel story, Jesus challenges his disciples: "Did I not tell you that if you have faith you will see the glory of God?" Kierkegaard comments: "Now we know that Christ was thinking of the miracle which would permit the bystanders, if they believed, to see the glory of God, the miracle by which he awoke Lazarus from the dead." Both Munk's play and Dreyer's film are about the faith that achieves miracles.

But faith also requires innocence. All roles in *Ordet* contribute to an understanding of its wholeness, and I have singled out Inger and Johannes, but there is a third key role. Inger has a young daughter, Lilleinger, and it is with her that Johannes' relationship becomes unfractured and lucid, for it is the child Lilleinger who takes Johannes words at their face value and whose innocence, unspoilt by doubt, allows her to share Johannes' belief in the resurrection of the dead. So it is not just the raising of Lazarus but Jesus's words about children (Matthew 18.3) that underpins *Ordet*: "Unless you become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

So, the performance of miracles requires faith and innocence. It also requires irrationality. When Paul goes to the Areopagus to tell the Athenians the identity of their unknown God, he concludes by saying that God will judge the world through Jesus, and

the assurance of this is that he has raised him from the dead. "And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked [. . .]" (Acts 17.32). The Christian faith was in no way more foolish than when it asserted that Christ was raised from the dead. Faith is unlike all accepted forms of human cognition, for it is by its nature miraculous, as Kierkegaard argued, perhaps in shrewd reminiscence of a remark by that quintessential sceptic, David Hume, whose *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* implied that no reasonable individual could sincerely endorse the doctrines of Christianity without being conscious of a "continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience".

The dramatic climax of *Ordet* is a sequence of miracles. Mikkel, the member of the Borgen family with no faith in God, delivers the final words of the film to show that he now believes his dead son to have gone to heaven, the raising of Inger thus enabling him to make the act of faith. There is the 'miracle' of Johannes' return after his disappearance, directed by Dreyer to reveal to both family and viewer that he has somehow changed, that he has the will to engage with the world around him. There is the 'miracle' of the reconciliation of Morten and Peter who put aside their doctrinal differences in the hour of grief, for whom Inger's death at least enables the union of Anders and Anne to proceed, and who, at the moment of Inger's return to life, recall the God of Elijah who raised from the dead the son of the widow of Zarephath, and sink their differences by agreeing God is "eternal and the same".

The ultimate miracle is the climactic one, namely the raising of Inger, who, laid in pure white in her coffin, unfolds her hands, lifts herself and embraces Mikkel. It allows us to be witnesses to a miracle in our own persons. For nine tenths of the film we are sunk in tragedy: we see the loss of Inger, we feel the loss of a son and heir to Borgensgaard, we sense the weakness of faith, we witness the irreconcilability of human views of God, we confront the shock of Johannes' prophecies that both child and Inger shall die. Johannes' appearance at the end is not as a *deus ex machina*, not a manufactured solution, but the triumphant assertion of the miracle of faith and what it can achieve for human happiness. The ending is entailed by the way Johannes has been characterized, so that in the end we see him face to face, and recognize in his name the

opening sentence of the Gospel of his namesake: "In the beginning was *the Word*/ I begyndelsen var *Ordet*."



Inger wakes



Inger raised