

THE ROLE OF *FRILUFTSLIV* IN HENRIK IBSEN'S WORKS

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Friluftsliv for my thoughts. By writing this Henrik Ibsen probably introduced for the very first time the word “friluftsliv”. Did he create the word? Nils Faarlund (1989:94) suggests that the French expression ”la vie en plain air” might have inspired Ibsen to construct the word for ‘free-nature-life’¹. It all comes down to speculation. But we do know that still around 1900 it was not obvious that friluftsliv was to become the name for this characteristic phenomenon in Norwegian culture (Tordsson 2003). The Norwegian polar explorer and scientist Fridtjof Nansen often used nature life in contexts where we would prefer friluftsliv².

Considering that Henrik Ibsen has become one of the very greatest names in world literature, it is strange that no serious attempts have been made to investigate possible meanings and functions of friluftsliv in his works. In several texts from the 1960’s and 70’s the literary historian Einar Østvedt (1967, 1972) presents Ibsen as a foot tourist and passionate wanderer. He sees Ibsen’s own mountain hikes in clear connection to Ibsen’s use of the mountain, both as symbol and as setting in his writing. Seen from a historic perspective Østvedt take some shortcuts. We do know, for example, that Ibsen wrote the poem *Vandresang*, starting with the line: *We are wandering with daring courage*³, to the actors’ hike from Voss to Hardanger after the end of the theatre acting season in 1853. It is not possible to say if Ibsen took part in the hike, or if he preferred to stay in Bergen close to the young lady, Rikke Holst (Meyer, 1971:119). Østvedt (1967:19) takes for granted that Ibsen was participating in the mountain trek.

The contribution to this theme from experts on friluftsliv is limited to a few sporadic articles, such as Breivik (1974) and Skipper (1998) while André Horgen’s (2006) work is the largest single offering. He focuses on Ibsen’s own friluftsliv, the growth in popularity of outdoor life in the nineteenth century and the historical discussion on who might have inspired the hunter in Ibsen’s poem wherein ‘friluftsliv’ first appeared. A literature-oriented contribution is made by Østberg (1980) in her analysis of the concept. Kirsti Pedersen (1999), and later as Kirsti Pedersen Gurholt (2007), interpreted friluftsliv in Ibsen’s work as gender-symbolism, to which I will return soon.

A real investigation and exploration of the role of *friluftsliv* within Ibsen’s works, demands another format than the presentation at hand allows. My purpose here is only to point to the locations in Ibsen’s writings, three in total, where ‘friluftsliv’ appears, and to make some comments on possible interpretations. As a closing I will ask how, if at all, the role of friluftsliv in Ibsen’s writings can have relevance to our modern understanding of friluftsliv.

First appearance: 1859

On the Heights is a long epic poem. In total it consists of 387 lines. We follow a young nameless man who leaves his home and the neighbour farm girl whom he loves. He secures his little house, takes his rifle, and heads for the mountains. First, his plan is to return, with a splendid reindeer pelt for his mother, and some as well for his sweetheart. But then he meets a stranger who urges him to leave all human ties behind and stay in the mountains. At this stage, in the middle part of the poem, is the stanza where Ibsen’s use of ‘friluftsliv’ for the very first time appears:

*I den øde sæterstue
al min rige fangst jeg sanker;
der er krak og der er grue,
friluftsliv for mine tanker.*
(HU XIV:395)

*In the lonely mountain farm,
My abundant catch I take.
There is a hearth, and table,
And friluftsliv for my thoughts.⁴*

The winter comes. At Christmas, the young man observes the family home in the valley burn to the ground, with his mother inside. The mysterious stranger points to the unusual colours and effects of the combination of moonlight and fire in the dark winter night. By summertime his sweetheart is another man's bride. The young man fills with sorrow, but at the same time it becomes obvious that there is nothing left for him down in the valley. He has expended his *lowland life* and the poem ends with an exclamation:

*Nu bytted jeg bort mit sidste stev
For et højere syn på tingen.*

*Nu er jeg stålsat, jeg følger det bud,
der byder i højden at vandre!
Mit lavlandsliv har jeg levet ud;
heroppe på vidden er frihed og Gud,
dernede famler de andre.*
(HU XIV: 400)

*Now I have traded my last harvest-song
For a loftier view of things.*

*Now I have hardened myself, I follow the commandment,
that bids me in the high country to wander!
I have lived out my lowland life;
up here on the heights there is freedom and God,
down there are groping the others.⁵*

It should be emphasized how the young man has had to make deep sacrifices in order to achieve a *loftier view*. His *bosom becomes as stone*. In the end he is *hardened* and follows a command to live in the mountains, to stay on the heights. I would argue that *friluftsliv* is introduced at an earlier stage in Ibsen's poem and does not belong to this extreme state of liberation, if it at all makes sense to still speak of liberation.

Second appearance: 1862

Love's Comedy is a drama in three acts. The action occurs during the summer in a garden on a street called Drammensveien (Christiania/Oslo). The main male character, Falk, is a poet and student. He is in love with Svanhild, the daughter of the household. Svanhild rejects Falk in

the first act. He offers her love, but not marriage. He wants to use her as a muse for his writings. Eternal love is impossible; it only exists in poetry, growing fainter in real life. In this way, Falk's view of love is united with the idealistic dream of freedom.

In Act 2, we see the young couple in love, contrasted with marriage as it was at the time. Love must be experienced when it arises, not held at a distance until it withers and decays. In Svanhild's words; does a place exist where the heart only feels "high-tide" and never "low-tide"? (HU IV:216). Is it at all possible to consider a place where the realities of society and the dreams of idealism unite? Can love survive marriage? In *Love's Comedy*, Ibsen uses this question to consider and discuss the relationships between the Ideal and the Real.⁶

In the conversation between Svanhild and Falk in the introduction to Act 3, an outside/inside perspective is constructed where freedom and inner riches are united with the idea of being an outsider; symbolic/outside of conventions - but the outside is also literally tied to being physically in contact with nature. An engagement party is being held inside the house for Svanhild's sister Anna and her fiancé Lind. Peeking into the house and party, Falk says: *We are the rich; we who own the treasure of happiness*⁷ (HU IV:217). Svanhild and Falk celebrate their own private engagement. They have neither party lamps nor dance music, but they have the light of the stars and the howl of the wind through the leaves of lime trees (HU IV:217).

When considering an earlier passage where Falk suggests to Svanhild that they rebel against a social order *that is not Nature-made, but artificial!*⁸ (HU IV:175), Nature now appears as a supporter in the rebellion against Culture, understood as the conventions of bourgeois society. In a Rousseau-like manner, Man's natural state is played against the society of the characters' own time.

For Svanhild and Falk, the intense feeling that love brings becomes the definition of love's content, what the origin of love was meant to be. An ideal love affair between two people should be built upon, and able to sustain these feelings. But this kind of love affair is not acceptable in conventional society. Marriage was a business transaction disguised in a dispassionate and apathetic relationship (Rønning, 2007:278).

This view of love is challenged in various places in *Love's Comedy*. Bjørn Hemmer (2003:105) asserts that the older businessman, Guldstad, stands as the drama's only worthy challenger to Svanhild and Falk's relationship. Guldstad is also interested in Svanhild, and as we know, it is he who wins her in the end.

Toril Moi says that the drama represents *a decisive step on the path towards modernism, not least because Love's Comedy creates a thoroughly fascinating woman in the character of Svanhild*. (Moi 2006:8). It is Svanhild who uses the word 'friluftsliv' near the end of the third act. She has chosen what can be called a marriage of convenience with Guldstad. Falk has said farewell, heading for the mountains with some students:

SVANHILD ser en kort stund efter ham og siger stille men stærk:
*Nu er jeg færdig med mit Friluftsliv;
Nu falder løvet; - lad nu Verden faa mig.*
(HIS, 4:211)

SVANHILD looks after him for a brief moment, and says quietly but firmly:
*Now I shall put aside my friluftsliv;
The leaf is falling; let the world receive me!*⁹

It might appear as if Svanhild chose the safest road to a good life instead of choosing love's insecure path. Besides, Falk had already said that his intention was only to use her as long as she inspired his poetic aspirations. Confronted with everyday life and reality Svanhild makes a choice; does she at the same time strangle idealism? I do not think so: by marrying Guldstad Svanhild also finds a solution of how to give Falk what he asks for. Only as a good memory can she be his ever lasting muse, an eternal and not fading inspiration. Guldstad, on the other hand, can be seen to represent the romantic become realist. It is likely that Svanhild is of the same mould and that friluftsliv in *Love's Comedy* becomes the representation of the Romantic.

Third appearance: 1899

'Friluftsliv' does not appear in other published works by Ibsen, either in his poems or dramas. But in one working manuscript for his last drama, *When We Dead Awaken* (1899), he uses 'friluftsliv' one last time in his writing. The working manuscript is an independent and older rough draft of the drama's last section.

Summarized, the events in the final drama can be described in this way: Rubek, a famous elder sculptor, arrives at a health spa on the Norwegian coast together with his younger wife Maja. They have been living in exile a long time. Rubek is disillusioned and weary of life. In the first act, he meets the model Irene, who once upon a time inspired his greatest artwork. She has had a difficult life since they first met, arriving at the spa as a patient. The relationship between Irene and Rubek becomes the drama's most important theme. They meet again at a mountain sanatorium in the second act. Will the reunion lead to an awakening from their lifeless existences? Maja meets Ulfheim, the hunter. Their relationship acts as a foil to the relationship between Irene and Rubek. In Act 3, in the last act of the drama, both couples meet on the mountain. A strong wind warns of storm. Ulfheim and Maja descend from the mountaintop. Ulfheim advises Rubek and Irene to do the same. They will not listen to him and are taken by an avalanche.

In the working manuscript, it is Rubek who uses 'friluftsliv' to describe characteristics of his wife Maja from the time he met her. The passage reads:

PROFESSOR RUBEK. *Mødes aldrig mer. Hvis du vil som jeg.*
FRU MAJA. *Mer end gerne vil jeg det.*
GODSEJER ULFHEIM: *Så er allting godt. Jeg havde jo helst røvet hende – med magt – med vold – men det får nu være –.*
FRU MAJA: *Så vil jeg da sige dig farvel, Rubek.*
PROFESSOR RUBEK: *Jeg har øvet en stor synd imod dig. Jeg har også taget dig med magt og vold –*
FRU MAJA: *Ja, dengang du købte mig –*
PROFESSOR RUBEK (nikker): *– købte dig, trods alt det gærende friluftsliv i dig.*
(HU, XIII:337)

PROFESSOR RUBEK: *We shall not meet again. If you wish as I.*

MAJA: *More than willingly do I wish so.*

LANDOWNER ULFHEIM: *So all is well. I would rather have taken her - by force - with violence - but that is now of no matter -.*

MAJA: *So, I bid you then farewell, Rubek.*

PROFESSOR RUBEK: *I have committed a great sin against you. I have also taken you by force and violence –*

MAJA: *Yes, that time when you bought me –*

PROFESSOR RUBEK (nods): *– bought you, despite all that fermenting friluftsliv in you.*

Is friluftsliv inside Maja? I do not think it should be interpreted literally in this way. Fermenting friluftsliv is an expression of vitality and perhaps obstinate willpower. This is substantiated by the statement being played against Rubek's 'purchase' of Maja. The basis for their marriage is described as a business transaction.

Discussion

As early as 1888, in a biography on Ibsen and his work, *On the Heights* is honored as being *something new which began to arise here in his work, without yet being fully conceived or clarified and consistent.*¹⁰ (Jæger, 1888:160). More than one hundred years later, Moi (2006:8) suggests that this new development, which is further clarified in *Love's Comedy*, is the investigation of idealism, and she concludes her discussion by stating that *it is possible to read When We Dead Awaken as Ibsen's final judgement on idealism.* (Moi, 2006:321).

This thread shows a coherent connection between the three text locations where 'friluftsliv' appears - one thread that, by extension, can be said to be true for all of Ibsen's contemporary drama. Yet with a perspective on friluftsliv and his view of Nature, our discussion here must undoubtedly include *Brand* (1866), both because in Ibsen's view, *Love's Comedy* was a forerunner of *Brand* (HU XVII:41), and because the avalanche that takes Rubek and Irene in the final scene of *When We Dead Awaken* thunders as an echo from the avalanche at the end of *Brand*.

A broader discussion should probably include the powerful outside/inside metaphor in Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkmann* (1896) and the ocean metaphor in his *The Lady from the Sea* (1888). The role of the stranger in relation to Ellida in the latter drama is easily comparable to the stranger in *On the Heights*. The longing for freedom these represent have different content, exemplified in the dialogue between Ellida and Doctor Wangel:

WANGEL: *Jeg begynder at forstå dig – lidt etter lidt. Du tænker og fornemmer i billeder – og i synbare forestillinger. Din længsel og higen efter havet, din dragning imod ham, - imod denne fremmede mand, - det har været udtrykket for et vågnende og voksende frihedskrav i dig. Andet ikke.*

ELLIDA: *Å, jeg véd ikke, hva jeg skal sige til det. Men du har været en god læge for mig. Du fandt, - og du voved at bruge det rette middel, - det eneste som kunde hjælpe mig.*

(HU XI:155)

WANGEL: *I begin to understand you - little by little. You think and conceive in pictures—in visual representations. Your longing and aching for the sea, your attraction towards him, - towards this unknown man, - these have been the expressions of an awakening and growing desire for freedom in you. Nothing else.*

ELLIDA: *Oh, I don't know what I should say to that. But you have been a good doctor for me. You found, and you dared to use the right remedy, - the only one that could help me.*¹¹

Asbjørn Aarnes (1999:214) with good reason questions whether Ellida exaggerates the doctor's role. It was actually she who, in the fourth act, insists on getting her freedom back before the stranger left. Freedom depends on a real choice.

Ellida's healing from the somewhat ambiguous illness provides an Ibsenesque interpretation tool that can help us clarify the complex relations between freedom, women and friluftsliv, both in *Love's Comedy* and *When We Dead Awaken*. Both Svanhild and Maja did make real choices.

Or did they? Pedersen (1999:52) sees an inner connection between friluftsliv in *On the Heights* and individual masculinity. About 20 years before Nora leaves her husband and children in *A Doll House* (1879), friluftsliv as a life style was not an option for either young ladies or farm girls. It was through marriage, being mother and wife, that women could fulfil their role. Still, we must not underestimate the choice Svanhild makes. Maybe Svanhild, not unlike Ellida, considers that if viewed as a normal man, as a husband and spouse, Falk could not compare with businessman Guldstad. In contrast to Thorvald Helmer in *A doll house*, both Guldstad and Dr. Wangel understand their women's needs. They do not see themselves as romantic heroes, but are truly in love with Svanhild and Ellida, respectively, and think they can contribute to a good married life.

The question of friluftsliv as related to freedom and idealism goes deeper than gender conflict and women's liberation. This is why Ibsen was not speaking nonsense when, in a speech in 1898, he rejects *the honor of having helped in the struggle for women's liberation*.¹² He also said:

Jeg er ikke engang paa det Rene med, hva Kvindesag egentlig er. For mig har det staaet som en Menneskesag. Og læser man mine bøger oppmerksomt, vil man forstaa det. (HU XV:417)

I do not honestly know what Feminism is. For me it has stood for liberation of all humanity. And, if one reads my books carefully, you would understand that.

Let me reconsider the liberation in *On the Heights*. The poem shows the cost of detachment for the young hunter. From the standpoint of the villagers, he has lost everything; still, it appears that he has won more than he has lost. The story does not give proof to assess whether his choice of lifestyle was acceptable in the society of his own time. This is an important question, because there is an unexpressed expectation for the gender-based interpretation of the story. From the first-person's point of view, the story ends in harmony. Even if he has grown *aware that my bosom becomes as stone*¹³ (HU XIV:400), he has found a solution to his problems. The ambiguity becomes visible to the reader through the author's choice of words.

Hardened and under a commandment the young man has chosen a life in the mountain heights. Is it a real choice when there is nothing left for him down in the valley? Is it more real than the choices Svanhild and Maja must make? What if we read his development as a result of the fact that he could not have his loved one because he was not good enough, or she was promised to some other?¹⁴ Then it makes sense that he searched for alternatives. If that was the case, he is closer to Søren Kierkegaard than he is to Kierkegaard's seducer. And he has more in common with Svanhild than Falk.

Ibsen biographer, Halvdan Koht (1954:160), sees *On the Heights* as an expression of Ibsen's own inner struggle at the time. The story shows how aestheticism takes the young hunter and engulfs his soul. Koht refers to Søren Kierkegaard's descriptions of the aesthetic stage, and accuses the hunter of making theater out of real life, or, in Ibsen's own words: of seeing through *the palm of his hand*¹⁵ (HU XIV:398). My interpretation goes against making aestheticism the prime theme of the poem. Rather than an unethical search for lust and joy, the young man is under the pressure of necessity. Distance and coldness appear as strategies for survival after he has lost the opportunity to have a good and valued life in the valley; he has both lost and abandoned his *lowland life*.

Moi (2006) sees Ibsen's investigation of how the various ways human life can become frozen, immobile, and meaningless, as expressions of the modernistic loss of idealistic energy and hope:

"In *The Master Builder*, Aline Solness is forever frozen in the moment when her dolls burned and her children died. Her husband, the master builder himself, fears that his creative and sexual life is finished. So does Arnold Rubek in *When We Dead Awaken*. After being released from prison, John Gabriel Borkman imprisons himself in his house for eight years, and when he finally ventures out, it is to a landscape of frozen ice and snow, where he dies. In all these plays, the frozen protagonists are opposed to characters representing youth, desire, vitality, and energy: Hilde Wangel, Fanny Wilton, Maja, and Ulfheim." (Moi, 2006:319)

In a way Svanhild also becomes clad in steel and frozen when she allowed rationality to control love and desire; when she let the *world receive* her. We can ask if *friluftsliv* is relevant only at points where feelings can ravage and life has not yet become frozen? Because the fermenting *friluftsliv* in Maja is fed new heat after meeting Ulfheim, this can not be the whole truth. *Friluftsliv* seems to belong to an intermediate position. When the hunter, Ulfheim, and his new captive survive the storm and descend the mountain, this is an example of using experience when meeting a specific situation, and at the same time, as Aarnes (1999:353) states, it is undeniably a trivial alternative in this Ibsen drama.

For most people, and for our understanding of *friluftsliv*, this may not be such a poor alternative? As Tommy Langseth (2003) discovered in his sociological contribution to the phenomenology of mountain hikes, experiencing nature is constantly invaded by thoughts of everyday life. Hikers in the 21st century think about work and about previous relationships as they wander through the mountains. Does mountain air allow a different perspective on the worries and joys of everyday life? At least it gives time to think: *and friluftsliv for my thoughts*. In addition, just taking such a trip - *friluftsliv* - is valuable in itself. It gives richness to life without using great amounts of money. It brings meaning to the individual's life.

When Maja descends with Ulfheim, she chooses survival - as Ellida and Svanhild did - which implies human company with all its frailty. Maja know that Ulfheim is no easy man to handle (Ottesen 1999:160). Friluftsliv does not solve all life problems. But it can help us feel better, learn more about ourselves and our relationship with nature. The avalanches in the final scenes of *Brand* and *When We Dead Awaken* invite us to listen carefully when Nature speaks; there are limits to what humans can do.

A closing

Ibsen seems to use friluftsliv in contexts related to freedom won through distancing from social expectations, both the physical and spiritual. Nature and the mountain make room for other actions and other thoughts than conventions require. Dwelling in nature has a profound place in friluftsliv, but following Ibsen, this can go too far. If all you hear is ‘the call of the wild’ you risk to lose your humanity in an individualistic struggle for freedom and to lose both the quality of distance and the intensity offered by friluftsliv. *Friluftsliv for my thoughts* expresses the young man dwelling well at a simple and remote mountain farm. He is all alone, but still has contact with everyday ordinary life.

This interpreted image is, as so often when it comes to Ibsen, ambiguous. There are still many good reasons to maintain that Ibsen’s use of ‘friluftsliv’ has nothing to do with friluftsliv in the modern meanings of the term. *On the Heights* is commonly read as a poem about aesthetics¹⁶:

*This story is only superficially about mountain hikes. In this story, loneliness or being alone in nature is a metaphor for Art's situation.*¹⁷ (Johansen, 1994:64)

While asking for the role of the word ‘friluftsliv’ in the poem, this statement becomes too simple. The development is described as meaningful within a contained universe, built on the polarity between the farmer as a fettered man and the hunter as a free man. The symbolism might be clear, but the metaphors function without any references. Neither the artist nor the art world is mentioned. On the other hand, the work of Horgen (2006) contains various historic examples which tell that the search to be alone in nature gave meaning at the time. It is also from this perspective that Rune Slagstad (2008:71) can write that Ibsen *was on a trial run for his mountain poetry*¹⁸ when he decided to walk over the Sognefjellet mountains in 1862.

On the other hand, this does not mean, as one Norwegian ethnologist asserted in the 1990s, that Ibsen would agree with her modern definition of friluftsliv (Nedrelid, 1992:282-283). When we compare the role of friluftsliv in Ibsen's works with the tradition and practice of friluftsliv at the beginning of the 21st century, I will close by proposing that Ibsen was not entirely *på viddene*¹⁹, but that he could hardly know this himself.

Notes:

¹ In this context Faarlund use "free-nature-life" ("fri-natur-liv") to stress "friluftsliv" as a concept saturated in values. The goal was to strip the concept of 'friluftsliv' from outdoor activities and settings where nature becomes mere scenery, an arena for recreation, or even a sparring partner. According to Faarlund (1977) it was a misuse of the concept of friluftsliv to call these types of outdoor activities 'friluftsliv'.

² This is the case even in his famous speech, *Friluftsliv*, from 1922 (Nansen, 1994). More about the relevance of Fridtjof Nansen in Norwegian friluftsliv can be found in Repp (2001).

³ Translated from: *Vi vandre med freidig mod.*

⁴ Translation by Reed and Rothenberg (1993:12). John Northam's version does not include 'friluftsliv': *Here in this deserted dwelling/I have housed my wealth of treasure;/There's a bench, a stove, sweet smelling/Air, and time to think at leisure.*

⁵ Here, after Moi 2006:174. The translation is based on John Northam (at www.ibsen.net), but Moi says she has butchered the verse to render Ibsen's words as literary as possible.

⁶ Usually the theme is partly held as a result of his marriage with Suzannah, and that Ibsen was in economic trouble and drank a great deal (Sæther 2008:99-100).

⁷ Translated from: *Vi er de rige; vi har lykkens skat.*

⁸ Translated from: *Som ej Naturens er, men kunstig skapt!*

⁹ With exception of the word 'friluftsliv', which I inserted instead of 'outdoor life', the translation is from The Oxford Ibsen, Vol. II, McFarlane (Ed.) (1962). (p.201). London: Oxford University Press.

¹⁰ Translated from: *At det var noget nyt, som holdt paa at arbeje sig frem i hans digtning, uden at det endnu var kommen til fuld klarhed og konsekvens.*

¹¹ Eleanor Marx-Aveling's translation. Here quoted from www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/h-ibsen/lady-sea.pdf.

¹² Translated from: *Den Ære bevidst at skulle have virket for Kvindesagen.*

¹³ Translated by John Northam from: *Mærker i bringens hvælv/alleslags tegn til forstening.* (at www.ibsen.net)

¹⁴ Ibsen had first-hand experience of this. In Bergen he asked Rikke Holst to marry him, but her father got angry and said no. In the latest Ibsen biography Ivo de Figueiredo says: *If it was her decision, she would have been his.* (Translated from: *Var det opp til henne, ville han fått henne.* 2006:150).

¹⁵ Translated from: *Gennem den hule hånd.*

¹⁶ Moi (2006) just refers to the young man as *the poet*.

¹⁷ Translated from: *Bare på overflaten dreier det seg om å ferdes i fjellheimen. I dette diktet er ensomheten i naturen en metafor for Kunstnerens situasjon.*

¹⁸ Translated from: *Var på en slags testtur for sin høyfjellspoesi.*

¹⁹ Play on words! In Norwegian, *på viddene* is also a metaphor. In this context it means that Ibsen did not entirely miss the point. Pedersen Gurholt (2007:296) has noted this earlier.

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References to Ibsen's works are to Ibsen, Henrik: (1928 ff.)*Samlede verker: Hundreårsutgaven*. Vol. I-XIX, (in the text as HU). An exception is made for *Love's Comedy*: here the reference is to the new critiqued version of Ibsen's works (2008); *Henrik Ibsens skrifter*. Vol. 4: *Innledning og kommentarer, Svanhild, Kjærlighetens komedie, Kongs-emnerne*. University of Oslo/Aschehoug. (In the text as HIS). In addition I have used some different translations. References for these you will only find in the end-notes.

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