

Recreant Strength

A creative piece in the form of your choice, which develops, explores, or comments on one of the issues or observations pertinent to this unit. – No set limit

A Note

This composition is based around the character of Petra, as originally presented in Ibsen's play, *An Enemy of the People*. It attempts to stand alone, and not require the responder possess knowledge of the original, although this may be of benefit. In order to clarify the nature of the relationship between the two, endnotes have been used to reference the original play.

Chapter 1

The last student had left, and she wiped the remaining traces of dust from the board, before turning to gather her effects and depart from the building herself. Petra walked outside, pausing to pull the door closed after her, and lock it in place. As she did so, she glanced up at the apparently imposing building, wondering, for a moment, what its previous inhabitants would have thought had they the knowledge of its present use. Some would call the building pretentious, for a schoolhouse. Petra did. But what of it? – It serves its purpose, albeit a purpose not completely lacking in irony, for her teaching was perhaps grinding against the thinking, the feeling, the architecture of the building in which such ideas were propagated.

Her grandfather had granted the building to her as a portion of his will, who, prior to his death, had offered this propertyⁱ which was but a component of his vast estate to her, for use as a school, following her dismissal from previous employ as a teacher as an inadvertent and unfortunate outcome of what he regarded as a practical joke played by her father – a 'practical joke'ⁱⁱ of which her grandfather was supportive, although, to her father's thinking, the apparent levity with which this prank was regarded by his own father-in-law was rather misplaced – although this thinking was tolerated as the musings of an old man.

At any rate, Petra's employment ceasedⁱⁱⁱ, and, as she desired to continue teaching – and the teaching of slightly different knowledge from that she previously was compelled to impart, although this was to the knowledge of few – she petitioned her grandfather to grant her premises upon which she may carry out this task, assuming the role of school master. Her grandfather, in return, offered to her a property that had not been inhabited for some two generations, although it was by no means in a dilapidated state, for use as she desired until such time as his death, at which point ownership of the property would pass to her – or to her husband, were she to marry.

The school had now operated for a period of not less than six years from her being given notice of the cessation of her previous employment under her care, in an imposing mansion on a sprawling property settled atop an escarpment with tolerable access to the town below, holding views over the same – notably, not that town in which her father's scandalous accusations had previously caused the fall of their

family name into disrepute; the property, at her request, had been one in a region some thirty miles north of her previous home, in the interests of the success of her school. Her grandfather acquiesced in this quite willingly, and she was thus established; teaching in a room fittingly equipped in the main house, and residing herself in a cottage nearby, saying that “The house is much too big for one person to live in, and itself another symbol of the opulent, ostentatious society to which the builders of this estate belonged – and, at any rate, my quarters are far more comfortable and a sight less draughty in winter than that old thing is!” – a statement which, perhaps, encapsulated much of her thinking on the classes of which she herself was a beneficiary, and, in times past, would have been a member.

But she was not. Petra considered herself of a more emancipated and freethinking being than her forefathers, and it was for this purpose that her school existed. One may suggest that many of the students who attended the school would not be entirely aware of this, and that even more so than their parents – for this was a school for children, such that Petra may influence them at an impressionable age, in her own attempt to somehow incite change in coming years.

The task of such enlightenment was not one to be taken on lightly – a fact of which Petra was acutely aware. She had lately written to her peer, Mrs. Busk, the head of the school from which she was previously dismissed.^{iv} Mrs. Busk was a woman whom Petra had described as having “tolerably emancipated”^v views, at least privately, and dismissed her as a result of pressure from the community than from any compulsion of her own. For this reason, Petra had written to Mrs. Busk in the hope that she would see merit in the seditious teaching that Petra practiced, to the point she would come and join her and strengthen her subversive assault upon the unwitting minds of a town in which knowledge was not a thing of value so much as something for others to possess and struggle with in their own time.

So it was that Petra continued her struggle. The parents who sent their children to this school believed they were there to receive an education in matters relevant to them, as well as some degree of literacy and mathematic instruction, in accordance with general expectations. It may be said that Petra’s notion of “matters relevant to them” was, perhaps, marginally more liberal in nature than that understanding of the same held by those who entrusted their children to her charge. Of this, Petra was acutely aware. Her instruction proceeded in such a manner that little was said in any explicit tones – subversive was the message, and the medium was of a similar disposition.

Petra continued to walk to her abode, once turning to stare disdainfully at the impressive structure lurking behind her. She tolerated it only whilst holding the mind that she instigated a new tradition, one which would shun all embodied in this altar to something she rejected absolutely, and value knowledge above blood, insight above status, and humanity above its material surrounds. As she closed the door to her cottage, she glanced out one last time at the structure, smiling softly, sadly, at the ironic beauty of the decision of parents whose children’s schooling here had been for the impression of grandeur and greatness afforded by the premises.

Chapter 2

It was a week later that she received a response from Mrs. Busk, delivered to her cottage on a day that corresponded fittingly in climate to the letter's contents.

"Dearest Petra," it began. "I am glad to hear you find yourself in such an agreeable situation at the present time, and am pleased that you may engage with something you can approach with such fervour as befits only a woman such as yourself, particularly in light of the regrettable situation which surrounded your departure from our common role here.

"Whilst I'm sure your activity is conducted with the best of intentions, I can't bring myself to support it in the manner you request – I apologise, but you must understand I am, unlike yourself, married, and with a child of my own now. My role at the school continues as previously, of course, but I couldn't possibly move south as you request – my husband is quite content here, as am I. You must remember my views were never quite so... potent as yours, also. I don't know whether I quite agree with it, either. I mentioned it in hypothetical terms to my husband, whose own opinions on certain matters aren't so free as ours, but not disagreeable to such in overt terms, as he is mostly a simple man and not, as you and I are, given to much thought of our own. His response bordered on overt disapproval in this instance, however.

"You must understand, I don't blindly follow his lead, and *do* think for my own on various issues – I have not changed so much since we last parted. In this case, however, I'm inclined to agree with his judgement, unenlightened though his views may be with regard to some matters. Simply put, he called the notion cowardly, and wondered why it were not better to simply explain in plain terms to those who enrolled their children in such a place exactly what education they would receive, and (this is my thinking), if they did not like it, their children may prepare to be surpassed by others in coming times – as your father expressed in his fateful address, "The truths of which the masses now approve are the very truths that the fighters at the outposts held to in the days of our grandfathers." And so it must be, I believe – it's not possible to sway the masses, Petra. Surely, by now, you must recognise that!

"Over time our ideas will become more palatable to them, but I do not see this being *accelerated* by your deception! As always, I do agree with your intent, you must understand. The revolutionary spirit you seem to have inherited from your father is honourable and spirited – but I cannot join you in this, not here. Not when my husband wishes to remain here, and I have a child but a few years old. Having said these things, I do wish you the best, even if we disagree on some matters. You always were the stronger of us both in this regard.

Sincerely yours,

Mrs. Busk"

"Well!" Petra placed the letter upon the desk in front of her, sitting back in her chair and looking away from the letter, squinting in her dim cottage as she heard the wind outside bluster against its walls, occasionally forcing drafts of chilly air through myriad cracks in its façade.

She stood, walked to the fire, and fed it some wood. Feeling it burn stronger and more brightly, she returned to the table where she lit a candle to brighten the room. It was not yet night, but coming on towards, and the room had felt oppressive in the dim light – an impression exacerbated by the nature of Mrs. Busk’s response. Petra’s temperament took a melancholy turn as she, at least for a moment, believed Mrs. Busk’s assertion that her actions were of no real consequence, that she was but a coward, and not achieving what this enterprise was purpose-built for.

It had struck her some time prior that common education was not enough – she must enlighten, it seemed, those who did not wish to be enlightened, through their children who, for the most part, similarly had no wish of enlightenment. And yet she did. The melancholy sensation she had experienced subsided, as she thought of herself as a catalyst, rather than as a magician – she recalled her father’s discourse to which Mrs. Busk alluded, and did not see her actions as being in conflict with his ideals she professed to share. The truths she held must be encouraged – she could not sit idle as the common populace went on ignorant of them, for how would they hear, otherwise? The masses *would* eventually come to share her ideals, of course, but not without active espousal, subtle enforcement, and firm encouragement of such values from the true freethinkers of the period.

“I am no coward!” Petra exclaimed to herself. “If she thinks that of me, let her – she said herself I was the stronger! And what, then, does that make her to be?” She stood, and extinguished the flame she had lit earlier (she had sat there for some time, ruminating as she re-read Mrs. Busk’s epistle over to herself), before walking out of that room to the entrance of her cottage, where she donned a heavy coat before stepping out of the house into the wind. It was some fifteen minutes walk to the town, and twenty or so to return on account of the incline of the hill, and the former was the journey she now undertook.

Chapter 3

Some time later, Petra arrived in the town, and, on finding her way there, proceeded to walk along the main street to an establishment she occasionally called at, where she found both dinner and company, including that of a Mr. Thomas Bonstetten and a Miss Christine Aubrey – the former of whom was a solicitor, and the latter also a teacher, at a different school in the town, on the far western side rather away from Petra’s own (hers being situated upon a hill with an eastern aspect across the town). Both persons were of a bright disposition, and Petra delighted in their company as much as they did in hers – there was, however, more to their companionship than mere pleasant company.

Their conversation was oft seen to carry thoughts along a current that flowed against the stream of common opinion and the accepted norm, and yet, to the present moment, neither were aware of Petra’s active endeavours to propagate such values in the minds of those entrusted to her care; she had not found it necessary to communicate this to them, as, in a way, it was intuitively known – they understood her values, and, as she was in a position that required she impart of her own knowledge into the consciousness of her charges, it stood to reason that such knowledge would assume the same nature as that which they had reason to understand

hers as; that is to say, knowledge of slight vulgarity in the minds of the common people.

Tonight, however, she wished to express rather more candidly her aims and ambitions. She had written to Mrs. Busk – whose physical distance rendered the disclosure of her aims of lesser consequence, should her purpose have been publicly denounced – for support, and none had been forthcoming – so now she turned to her friends in the same municipality, incurring a slightly greater risk than perhaps her last appeal had invited. The other two, Miss Christine and Mr Bonstetten, had arrived prior to her appearance, and were already talking with each other as she ordered her dinner, discussing, as they and few others did, the question of potential inherent knowledge of these truths they shared in those who did not recognise it.

“I don’t believe they can,” said Petra, upon her arrival at their table, somewhere near the corner of the room, a comfortable distance from ears that may seek to incriminate any of the three of them. “It’s not a matter of them knowing any inherent truth – you must understand, *our* truths were not known until some century ago, and, before then, there were others such as us who held the truths we now hold in disdain to be such, much to the opposition of a “compact majority”, as my father would say. There is no truth. There is nothing common between people – men and women do not construct their lives around something they inherently know but reject!”

“But what of the oppression of self which we would proclaim society guilty of?” Bonstetten replied. “Surely, as we hold these truths yet do not parade our conviction of them, others may similarly know these things and repress such knowledge, in favour of the comfort conforming to “normality” affords them!”

“But where does this knowledge come from, assuming, for a moment, it is not simply a fanciful notion in which you yourself find comfort?” Petra permitted herself a triumphant grin directed at Bonstetten, before proceeding: “Does this not defy the very tenet upon which the freethinking movement is based? You propose the notion of ‘conscience’ – we have foreknowledge to which we must conform, and yet defy this to follow what we believe to be the truth and that in good faith – we cannot be reconciled to something that is not.”

“Oh Petra, you are a regular nihilist!” Christine exclaimed. “Surely, ‘freethought’ is not simply the rejection of all else!”

Petra’s response didn’t waver under this accusation – if anything, it flourished. “Well, I prefer ‘sceptic’, but you are not far from the mark – I don’t believe in these things because they’re not provable, certainly – I don’t simply reject them for their origins, although there is much of that. For example, we have seen the establishment of many scientific principles in times past, prior to the period that has seen the development of our own enlightened truths – and yet I do not claim gravity itself to be false! It is concrete, a construct unchangeable by any regular force – by my reckoning, by any force at all, for I do not believe in anything greater than what we see, and there is nothing which could, to our present scientific mind, conceivably alter that law!

“But thought is not concrete. Values are not concrete. Humanity tries something, progresses, refines, tries again – and regresses, but only for a while. The notion of inherent truth rejects so much of what our movement believes I shouldn’t for a moment seriously entertain it – certainly, for a discussion such as this one, it provides adequate fuel, but only that. Only that. Think of Darwin’s observations not fifty years old! Even biology, nature itself – something which we can place a degree of faith in, as, although it may change, does so at a far slower rate than any human development – is not concrete! And history tells us humanity does change. Undeniably. That’s what the basis of history is, friends! What would be to tell if today were the same as yesterday which was the same as the day prior? And where would this change come from, if there were a homogenous knowledge within us all? I cannot believe in a deity, some greater being, which causes this change, instigates it – for where is there evidence of such a thing? For how are we to believe in that which we cannot see? Is this greater presence simply a concept? I believe the great French Revolution of the late 18th century had a correct understanding – worship, if the people require such a constraining convention, should be that of *reason!*^{vi}

“Their ‘divine goddess’ was simply the personification – or perhaps beatification – of that which we ourselves profess to ‘worship’; that is, this philosophy of reason and good sense in which we think, not in line with those who have come before us, but for ourselves – free thought! How can we consider ourselves emancipated if we cling to old, incoherent suppositions?”

And on that, Petra fell silent. Her companions quietly applauded her address with quite genuine appreciation, although their applause carried humouring tones – there were, after all, only the three of them seated there.

“Well.” Christine started, feeling something needed to be said to fill the momentary silence, as both she and Mr. Bonstetten paused to consider Petra’s statements. It was Mr. Bonstetten who spoke first, unknowingly broaching the subject that Petra had intended to bring to light later that evening. “And what of your teaching? How does this weigh upon that?”

“It does, of course! I had not spoken of this before, as I have not often spoken of my life before coming to this town, but I will tonight – for your question comes just as I have a need to reveal the answer.” At this, both Mr. Bonstetten and Christine looked at her expectantly, as though they had been wishing to hear of this for some time. Petra shifted somewhat uncomfortably under their gaze, as though not knowing where to begin, and then slowly commenced.

Chapter 4

“Several years ago now, I left my previous town and birthplace to come here, so that I may start my own school in a property I had inherited. One may consider it unusual that I should choose to move to live in a property so far from my old home, when the sale of this would be more than adequate to ensure the provision of both a school hall and accommodation for myself, although popular belief would run that terms of the will prevented it. Let me tell you, it did not – although I encouraged this rumour, as it were sufficient explanation for my arrival in this town and the establishment of a school.”

Her explanation proceeded, detailing the circumstances surrounding her departure from her previous town, which she considered unfortunate, although certainly not regrettable, given that the spirit of the catalyst was aligned with both her belief and that of her audience. Finally, she came to her mode of education. She had, in her coat pocket, brought with her Mrs. Busk's response – which she proceeded to read to them, after having explained her request to the woman. “And this – this is why I come to you tonight prepared to reveal these things.”

Christine spontaneously embraced her companion, exclaiming “Oh you silly woman! Why didn't you *say* something to us before now?” She checked herself, and returned to her own seat. Mr. Bonstetten wasn't quite so expressive as his female companion, but was similarly enthused at what Petra had told them – “That's remarkable – and you say you've been carrying on all this time without anyone being aware of it?”

“I have – or, at least, I hope no-one is aware of it, lest my purpose be disclosed and with that my students departure!” replied Petra, in slightly anxious tones. “The school is now at a point where a second teacher is required, at least, but I do not have the liberty of employing just any teacher, for reasons you now understand – Christine, would you come and join me? You can board at the school, if you wish, that is, if it's easier – there's a spare room in my cottage, and many more in the main house if you would prefer there – I don't, of course, as you're aware... but... oh, I don't know – will you come?”

“Of course I will! You needn't worry yourself much about that; I'd so enjoy being able to do away with all that nonsense we're forced to teach at most schools these days!” Christine was excited at the prospect, much to Petra's relief – and, although Mr. Bonstetten didn't seem quite so enthusiastic, this was perhaps attributable to his surprise at her having been engaged in this activity for so long without having said a thing to either of them.

Mr. Bonstetten, however, was quite as enthusiastic as Christine, although his expression of this excitement was rather more subdued. He ventured this question “I don't see how I could be of assistance to you, despite very much wanting to be. I'm a solicitor, not a teacher, and I don't think I'd do terribly well were I to change professions!”

“Oh, of course – but that does not much matter. It is more your support that I seek, although in Christine's case that is rather more practical than that which I would ask of you... don't let it worry you, Mr. Bonstetten! So long as you can stand behind the same cause, that shall be enough.”

They talked a while longer, before Petra departed to ascend the hill to her home; it was windier now, and rain threatened the escarpment she now ascended. It began to rain just as she caught sight of her home, and she ran the last hundred or so meters. She did not notice as her cloak caught on a shrub and an envelope fell from her pocket to beneath it, but kept running, until she entered the cottage ahead. Exhilarated from the outcome of that evening's revelation, she hung her cloak in the entrance hall, and proceeded to her bedroom where she slept despite the howling wind outside.

Chapter 5

The next morning, Petra awoke to the sound of continuing wind, although the rain had apparently ceased. She arose, prepared herself breakfast, and collected papers for the day from her desk. Eventually, she walked over to the main building, which she unlocked before entering the 'school house' she had fashioned from the dining room of the old manor. It was a good half hour before the first of her students would begin to arrive, and so she sat and read restlessly, until she conceded the futility of that in her present state (for Petra remained enthused in her idea conveyed the night before), and settled to writing a letter to her protégé in the clandestine teaching of more emancipated ideals, Christine – in this way, she occupied herself until the commencement of the teaching day proper.

At that moment, the discovery that would lead to the demise of Petra's enterprise was unfolding a short distance away – a result of her fateful (and as yet unrealised) loss of the evening prior. The envelope that had escaped her cloak the previous night had, by some prodigious force, found its way beneath the vegetation where it had fallen the previous night. It was rather sheltered from the elements here, and, at any rate, the storm did not last long. For several small hours of the morning, the weather calmed, and the night fell still, as did our letter, which, it must be said, was perhaps not as dry as it had been, but still most readable—it was, at that moment, suspended between the branches of a shrub, where it was secured against the worst of the destruction a storm may wreak upon it: that is, clear of mud and bodies of water, and not in a position where ink should drift downwards, or across-ways, or in any particular direction which would result in the obfuscation of the entire contents, rather than occasional watery smudges (something that the letter *had* suffered as a result of the storm).

In the hours closer to dawn, the wind had once again resumed its blustering passage across this region, and the letter was dislodged from its interim resting place but a few hours on, where it finally came to rest in the centre of the path which was the sole way of ascending the hill, which her students traversed daily as they approached the school. Once this had transpired, there was a degree of inevitability to its discovery by someone approaching the hill – and, as any trace of name or address had been washed from at least the outer aspect of the envelope, the possibility that one who discovered it would return it to Petra diminished to the point of nothing.

It comes as no surprise, then, to learn that a student trudged upwards towards the school, in the wind, to observe a white envelope flapping, wedged between the ground and a rock that it had blown askance into previously. He turned his head, checking for other people in the vicinity whose property it may have been. There were none. The envelope was damp still, the air being still moist from the rain that had fallen with such ferocious brevity the night before, and the wind not being of a dry nature, it had not the opportunity to dry significantly. Not sodden, merely damp. Cool to touch, and, to the boy's senses, only as damp as one finds everything out of doors to be on such a day – but he imagined it had been subjected to the rain, and was not in its present form simply as a result of morning dew, as there was on the front a nebulous marking, which one may safely assume to be the remnant of that which once denoted the address of a recipient. It was paired with a similarly caliginous address of

sender on the alternate face of the exterior; it was thus that the boy could not know, without opening the letter, to whom the epistle belonged.

For the present time he stowed it in his satchel, such that it would not be damaged through handling whilst presently damp, and there it remained for the duration of the day until the boy arrived at home that evening.

He opened the envelope, and removed the letter. The letter, of course, was Mrs. Busk's reply, and she had enclosed Petra's first petition to her in the same envelope in return (one may presume to save her the trouble – and potential embarrassment – of incorrectly disposing of it herself). In a fitting time, he unearthed that which was being progressively indoctrinated into him without his being fully conscious of it – and promptly showed the letter to his father, who, although of no outstanding rank, was a public servant of the municipality council, and of respectable standing within the community.

“And you had no idea?” enquired the boy's father. “But of course you didn't... her whole intent was to slowly corrupt you children! What a shameful stunt she tries to pull on our community!” It was still light outside, and the incensed man proceeded outside, to call on the parents of other children he knew had some association with Petra's school, either presently, or at some point in the previous few years – it was not a small town, despite there being two schools; Petra's was located on the eastern side, and she provided education to a relatively small number of students from the eastern side of the area, capitalising on the school's location and the illusions of grandeur this afforded it.

It was Petra's belief that the best way to propagate change throughout society was through the present leadership class – which, according to her father, and now according to Petra, who shared his understanding of matters in this regard, consists of a group above the common people, an elite group whose lot it was to lead these people, although this understanding was not enunciated publicly by either that class or by Petra. To achieve this, her school logically targeted an elite grouping – incurring a higher risk, of course, but potentially offering greater effectiveness as her students went on to assume their positions within these closed ranks of leadership. Her father held this to be the truth, but she had explained it to her friends the night prior, for she told them everything she had until then concealed, and their reaction perhaps suggested this to be an unrealistic conception she held against the evidence. Either way, she stood by it, if they did not, and it was done now. There was to be no undoing her targeted teachings now that the secreted deed had pierced the air, fallen into the eye, the mind, of society's elite ruling class. She would be brought before them, as the father of a student swept his influence widely through the minds of those she depended upon for pupils, for her own livelihood, as he was purging, cleansing, and restoring the preconceived ideals of the outskirts of society some generation prior.

Petra had no answer. Her work spoke for itself, and she wished it thus. Her companions from that fateful night now past denied knowledge; she was alone, surrounded by cowardice emanating from those now crying “recreant!” to her action. Resolutely, she departed from their presence. Petra was done with such pretences – the catalyst would *not* come from above, and assistance would not be forthcoming.

The latter realisation was not without irony, as she recalled the words her father had spoken some years past now, of his own struggle and discovery from the midst of this. His voice resonated as though present, although it was in fact simply a turning back of her mind: “It is this, let me tell you—that the strongest man in the world is he who stands most alone.”^{vii}

Alone, mostly, she felt most alone, and strangely stronger for it. Her battle of solitude continued, although it was perhaps something from which she had never been able to extricate herself from far enough to reminisce upon it. In this mind, Petra moved onwards, leaving unoccupied the building that had, for a brief time, functioned as a base for her project. It stood still, a structure embodying the opulence of a time past, which, with its hold upon the present, stoically mocked the failed initiative launched within its boundaries. She departed from it, an utterance emanating from her mouth – “Alone.”

References

ⁱ This property was actually offered by Captain Horster in *An Enemy of the People*, but, for the purposes of this narrative, the circumstances and character who offered such a property have deviated from Ibsen's work – whilst Horster remains favourable towards Petra's family at the end of the play, his own fate is uncertain (due to his support of the Stockmann family) and the house is most probably (certainly implicitly) in the same town as the events of the play, which is inappropriate for her to continue teaching in. The setting, however, is entirely ideal, and has been appropriated for use here, albeit with a different prior owner. Ref. Act I, *An Enemy of the People*.

ⁱⁱ Ibid. Act II, in which Morten Kiil says "But I should never have thought you the sort of man to pull your own brother's leg like this!"

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. Act V.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid. Petra: "Mrs. Busk's own views are tolerably emancipated, when we are alone together; but now that this report about me is being spread, she dare not keep me on any longer."

^{vi} The worship of the "Divine Goddess of Reason" was instigated following the overthrow of the Ancien Regime in France, 1789. This included the establishment of a new Revolutionary or Republican calendar, relative to 1792 (as opposed to the Gregorian date system, relative to Christ's death). A predominantly Catholic population objected to the de-Christianisation campaign that took place in November 1793, which ultimately was unsuccessful.

^{vii} *An Enemy of the People*, Dr. Stockmann's closing line, Act V.