

## The Biographers' Tale of Ibsen's Childhood

Jens-Morten Hanssen

**Abstract** At fifty-two years old Henrik Ibsen began to work on a book in the autobiographic genre. The text ended up as a fragment with ten pages of childhood memories. Ibsen's most recent biographer, Ivo de Figueiredo, deconstructs the text and turns it into a key text for his biographic project. Perhaps the entire description is a lie, says Figueiredo, at any rate it is literature and in this respect a prelude to Ibsen's later poetic calling. The article explores how seven Ibsen biographers—Henrik Jæger, Edmund Gosse, Gerhard Gran, Halvdan Koht, Michael Meyer, Robert Ferguson and Ivo de Figueiredo—address Ibsen's childhood memories. What function and role do they acquire in the biographers' presentations of Ibsen's childhood? This phase of his life is poorly documented. Several biographers resort to ingrained myths. Few except Figueiredo are struck by the strong signs of literary construction in Ibsen's text.

**Key words** Henrik Ibsen's childhood; memoirs; biographies; literary construction deconstruction

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Ibsen was known as an author who held his cards close to his chest. Any statements that he made to the public he made through his writing. He kept other types of statements to a minimum. Midway in his career however, he contemplated otherwise. In January 1881 Ibsen began to work on a book in the autobiographic genre. The text though ended up as a mere ten pages of childhood memories. Then he gave up. The text fragment addresses the period when the Ibsen family lived in Stockmann's Gaard where Henrik was born in 1828 and Altenburg's Gaard where they lived from 1831 to 1835. Knud Ibsen's notorious ruin escape mention, which is note worthy because all of the elder Ibsen's business activities were discontinued, his properties lost and the family was obliged to move to the country home Venst? p three kilometres outside of town, is not mentioned.

What I would propose to do here is to look more closely at this text and to explore how Ibsen's many biographers, in other words, those who presumably should be the most interested in the text, address it. What function and role do Ibsen's childhood memories have in the biographers' presentations of his childhood?

What is the text about? The contents can be summarised in three points.

1) Ibsen identifies the spatial coordinates of the first years of his life. He starts by telling where he was born (“in a house on the market-place,” Stockmanns Gaard) and describes the surrounding wonders:

It stood exactly opposite the front of the church, with its high flight of steps and conspicuous tower. To the right of the church stood the town pillory, and to the left the town-hall, with the prison and the lock-up for mad persons. The fourth side of the market-square was occupied by the High School and the Lower School. The church stood apart in the middle. (Jæger 5 – 6)

What is striking here, and Ibsen also makes a point out of this, is that everything in the description of the landscape is about architecture, about man-made building art. Robert Ferguson writes in his Ibsen biography from 1996 that the text provides a hint that “the world always seemed to [Ibsen] the creation of some cosmic set-designer” (Ferguson 255). We can instead perhaps maintain that Ibsen personally here is a cosmic set designer. Ivo de Figueiredo opens his recently-written Ibsen biography namely with a stage direction based on elements from the childhood memory text (Figueiredo15). Figueiredo’s biography gets underway, accordingly, in literal terms as a drama with a point of departure in Ibsen’s own set design.

2) Further, Ibsen describes his two earliest memories. The earliest stems from the time when Ibsen’s nanny carries him up into the church tower and allows him to sit in the open window of the tower and gaze out over the square, his home and the courtyard, held securely from behind by the nanny. Ibsen recounts his memory of the view in detail and then relates what happened when his mother caught sight of him up in the tower window. With a loud shriek she had fainted away, “as people used to do in those days” (Jæger 8), and cried and kissed and fondled him once she had him safely back in her arms again. The second memory is connected to a silver coin embossed with “King Fredrick Rex”, which Ibsen one day was rolling on the floor so that it disappeared into a crack in the floorboards.

My parents, I believe, thought this an omen of evil, as the coin had been a christening-gift. The planks were taken up; but, in spite of much careful seeking and groping, ‘King Fredrick Rex’ never came to light again. It was a long time before I ceased to regard myself as a great criminal. (9)

3) The second half of the text is characterised by descriptions of the street life in Skien. “Skien, in my young days, was an exceedingly lively and sociable town, quite unlike what it subsequently became” (11). He describes the Fair which was held in February every year, the 17th of May (where not much of a celebration was held) and Midsummer Eve (when there was, however, considerably more merriment).

The following seven Ibsen biographies have been studied:

\* Henrik Jæger, *The Life of Henrik Ibsen*, London 1890

- \* Edmund Gosse, Ibsen, London 1907
- \* Gerhard Gran, Henrik Ibsen. Liv og verker, Kristiania 1918
- \* Halvdan Koht, The Life of Ibsen, New York 1931
- \* Michael Meyer, Ibsen. A Biography, London 1967 – 1971
- \* Robert Ferguson, Henrik Ibsen. A New Biography, London 1996
- \* Ivo de Figueiredo, Henrik Ibsen. Mennesket, Oslo 2006

I will start with Ibsen's most recent biographer, Ivo de Figueiredo. He is in our selection the one who does the most with Ibsen's childhood memories and who employs them in the most interesting, though not uncontroversial, manner. For Figueiredo, Ibsen's childhood memory text becomes a classic example of self-staging, with extremely limited value in terms of information in the way of empirical data about Ibsen's childhood. Figueiredo reads the text as fiction. "Perhaps the entire description from his childhood is a lie. At any rate, it is literature, written by an author who did not just write plays and poetry, but also wrote his own life" (Figueiredo 19).<sup>1</sup> The most central part of the text in Figueiredo's interpretation is the tower window anecdote. According to Figueiredo the aging Ibsen here appears "as 'the poet sphinx' to be." "He was a poet and the poet did not belong in the nave of the church, in society. He belonged in the church steeple ever obliged to view the world from the outside and from above, to describe it and the human tragedy" (17). In the biographer's reading, the text becomes a mythical presentation of the poet's universe, his cosmology. There is no childhood, only stories. The aging Ibsen knew this, and therefore wrote a description of his childhood which simultaneously creates a mythical prelude to his own poetic calling (15 and 17).

It is tempting to characterise Figueiredo's reading as influenced by a relatively recent trend within literary theory: deconstructionism. First of all, this school insists on erasing the distinction between literary and non-literary texts. Secondly, it emphasises the importance of intertextuality. Thirdly, it makes a point of reading texts against the grain in order to disclose their inherent negation. Fourthly, it is sceptical of all pretensions of objectivity. These are elements that we can recognise in Figueiredo's interpretation of Ibsen's childhood memories. The text as such carries features of non-fiction. It pretends to say something about a historically given event, namely the childhood of the actual person Henrik Ibsen. Figueiredo then turns around and reads the text as literature; Ibsen's childhood hereby becomes fiction. He brings in the aspect of intertextuality by interpreting the text as a prelude to Ibsen's later writings and poetic calling. It is, in other words, a text written in relation to something outside of itself, a set of texts, a subsequent literary production, which Figueiredo insists that the text must be read in relation to. The biographer reads the text against the grain by interpreting it counter-intuitively. The text pretends to relate experiences from a little boy's life. Figueiredo claims that it is a kind of creation myth, the adult poet's account of how he became an author. Ibsen was *de facto* not an author in the present time of the text. The biography denies this. The little boy does not perhaps know that he is a poet but the text establishes him as a poet. The scepticism about objectivity in Figueiredo's interpretation finds expression in part by his denying the childhood as a given historical phase in Ibsen's actual lifetime, in part by

his making the events referred to in the text into mythical occurrences. There is no reality, only myths.

How have we ended up with Figueiredo's post-modern approach? At what point was Ibsen's childhood lost?

The childhood memory text was written in January 1881. For seven years it lay untouched in Ibsen's desk drawer, until he surrendered it to Henrik Jæger, who wrote the very first Ibsen biography in book format, published in Copenhagen in 1888.<sup>2</sup> In Jæger's book the text was made public for the first time, rendered in its entirety in the first chapter of the book, in other words, the section that covers Ibsen's childhood and upbringing.

What function does the text acquire in Jæger's book? Two aspects must be mentioned, not because they are so remarkable in their own right, but because subsequent biographers have chosen somewhat different solutions: The text is in Jæger's book placed in the chapter that addresses Ibsen's childhood. This implies that the text is—actually—about Ibsen's childhood. The text is presented in its entirety, which implies that it is important.

Henrik Jæger presents the text with the following laconic introduction: "Referring to his earliest impressions, Ibsen has written the following notes and has placed them at the author's disposal" (Jæger 5). Then the text is rendered. And the sentence that immediately follows asserts "What Ibsen related in this passage is enough to give us an idea of what the influences of his childhood must have been" (13). I wonder about that.

It is of relevance to linger a bit over the label that Jæger gives the text: "impressions." It is in reality quite appropriate as a characterisation. The term impression implies distance. One has experienced something, but what is at the base of the experience is at such a distance that what one is left with is not a living memory, but rather scattered impressions.

Childhood memory texts are a genre that must always be read on this premise. Childhood is always something that a writing subject, a narrator, looks back upon. It is not something that the narrator has, but something the person concerned has had, and which accordingly, in the moment he or she sits down to describe it, must retrieve from memory. The art of reminiscence is not an exact science. To the contrary, it is characterised by selection, repression, sublimation, conscious or unconscious manipulation and other psychological mechanisms. In literary memoirs, the actual factors forming the basis for the narrator's reminiscences will almost be irrelevant. What is of significance is the fact that something is remembered, how it is remembered and the type of narrative form the memories acquire, not whether the memories are in accordance with actual, historical factors.

When Ibsen sat down and wrote his childhood memories he was fifty-two years old. The events that he describes are accordingly 45-52 years back in time. To use Jæger's terminology: The text describes a more or less loosely constructed series of impressions from childhood that have been deposited in Ibsen's mind or memory. Actual events in connection with Ibsen's childhood are of secondary importance.

Following the cited text, Jæger describes the text in a few brief, analytical phrases.

gloom and melancholy had the larger share. The solemnity of the church, the horrors of the prison, the threat of the pillory, the terrors of the madhouse, combined to make an impression which might well cast a shadow over his youthful light-heartedness and infuse a precocious gravity. (Jæger 13)

This analysis immediately takes the reader aback, because it cannot be described as wholly on the mark. The tone and atmosphere of the memory text viewed as a whole cannot be characterised as being exclusively sad and gloomy. The latter part of the text focuses to the contrary on the merry city life of Skien, the market days in February, the celebration of Midsummer Night's Eve, etc. It is not necessary to search any further than Edmund Gosse's biography from 1907 before the analysis comes to the opposite conclusion. "It is interesting", Gosse writes, "to find that his earliest impressions of life at home were of an optimistic character" (4). Although Gosse in his foreword claims that Jæger's biography has become "obsolete" (vi), Gosse's chapter about Ibsen's childhood and upbringing is based on one source alone: Henrik Jæger's biography. Gosse has not taken the trouble to investigate other sources. Even using the same point of departure with regard to sources, however, they come to different conclusions. The childhood memories are presented in ways that are diametrically opposed: Jæger emphasises the sadness and gloom, Gosse the optimism.

What is the reason for this slightly tendentious reading on Jæger's part? The reason cannot be other than that the myths about Ibsen's difficult periods in Norway had already congealed into facts. If one reads consecutively the many Ibsen biographies that have been written, one can detect the outline of a common formula. One can virtually produce a format for how Ibsen biographies are to be constructed. A two-part rough structure would be as follows: Ibsen's life up to the time of his departure for Rome in 1864 is characterised by trial and error (predominantly the latter), struggle, opposition, toil, acidic reviews, financial difficulties, evasiveness and betrayal on the part of official Norway. After 1864, Ibsen gradually finds himself. He has success with *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* and eventually writes the modern drama, his finances are stabilised, he reaches his life's telos: namely to work as a free and independent author.

This was a myth that Ibsen personally not only took part in creating but for which he was chiefly responsible. If one considers carefully his time in Norway up to 1864, it is difficult to feel particularly sorry for Ibsen. He had had eight plays staged and seven published (in addition to countless poems). He had been a dramatist and stage director in Bergen and artistic director in Kristiania. After travelling abroad, Ibsen developed a reputation to a certain extent as a stiff-necked hater of Norway, to a certain extent as a severe critique of Norway. This has had an impact on his biographers and to an equal extent influenced the depiction of Ibsen's time in Norway.

It is certainly not a coincidence that British Edmund Gosse deviates somewhat from this formula. Gosse was first and foremost interested in telling the story of Ibsen's life to English-reading audiences. The official Norway's treatment of Ibsen in his biography therefore becomes somewhat peripheral. He thereby has a more unbiased view of Ibsen's childhood.

With Norwegian Gerhard Gran's biography from 1918, however, we find ourselves once again fully in the midst of the myth of Ibsen's difficult and sad childhood. Gran quotes approximately one-fourth of the childhood memory text. In addition to this a few sentences are slightly rewritten and included in the main text. But before Gran quotes from the text, he first presents Ibsen's childhood memories through the eyes of the adult poet:

When Ibsen in his old age seeks to retrieve his childhood memories, he does not find, like so many others, an innocent paradise lingering like a happy dream in his soul, no mother's tenderness, no father's concern, no pleasant Saturday evenings, no joyfully bright Sundays, no exciting undertakings in competition with happy friends; the images that emerge in his memory are all pervaded by a fantastic gloom, none of them are found on the sunny side (Gran 1: 3).

In terms of narrative technique, Gran here implements the omniscient third-person narrator. This type of narration is quite common in biographies, in spite of the fact that it raises some problems. Biographers are supposed to be able to substantiate all data and allegations through written sources. The omniscient third-person narrator is normal and unproblematic as a technique for a novel, but in a biography, the use of such a narrator in principle means that the biographer is exceeding his or her authority. A biographer is not all-knowing about the life of the biographic subject.

The above-cited paragraph could have been taken from a novel. Gran professes to have detailed knowledge about the emotions and moods that were in Ibsen's mind when he sat down on January 17, 1881 to write his childhood memories. He knows what Ibsen found (images pervaded by a fantastic gloom) and what he did not find (idyll). The critical reader must naturally ask how Gran has come to this conclusion. The sources provide no basis for such a portrayal.

Gran's biography starts with some quotes from *The Epic Brand*. The biographer establishes an identity between Ibsen as a child and the title character of *The Epic Brand*, whose childhood is characterised as such: "He was one of those children who seem old, one whom playmates in the break never succeed in drawing into their romping games, who quietly look on and are sufficient to themselves" (1).

Brand as a child sat "with his back turned to the sun" in much the same way that none of Ibsen's childhood memories are to be found "on the sunny side" (3). Gerhard Gran's depiction of Ibsen's childhood is a blissful hodgepodge of the following elements: 1) free interpretation on Gran's part; 2) an identification with Brand's childhood, e. g. a fictional character from Ibsen's writing; 3) a description in terms of the myth about Ibsen's difficult, sad and lonely childhood. Gran reads the childhood memory text in the same way as Jæger does. He finds only "fantastic gloom", but thereby overlooks that which might point in a more optimistic and bright direction. In sum, Ibsen's childhood in Gran's biography becomes fiction, a literary depiction; it becomes a literary depiction.

Halvdan Koht's biography from 1928 – 29 creates a contrast with Gran's biography. It stands out distinctively from all of the others in our selection. There are no di-

rect quotes from the childhood memories at all, not in the two chapters in the first volume that are about his childhood and upbringing in Skien and neither in the two chapters in Volume Two that address the time when the childhood memories were written, 1881. Did not Koht know about the text? Of course he did. If one goes over his biography with a fine-tooth comb, one finds three minor references (Koht 28 – 29, 184, 316 – 317). More importantly is that Koht twice as an editor was personally responsible for publication of the childhood memories: in the first volume of Ibsen's "Posthumous Works" in 1909<sup>3</sup> and in Volume 15 of the centennial edition of Ibsen's "Collected Works" in 1930<sup>4</sup>. Koht's Ibsen biography up until today reigns supreme in terms of its thoroughness and on the basis of scholarly criteria and is qualitatively speaking one of the best Ibsen biographies. It appears to still have the status of a reference work in Ibsen studies. It cannot be doubted Koht's superior command and extensive knowledge about the primary sources providing insight on Ibsen's life and work. So the reason why Koht gives the childhood memory text so little attention in his biography is without a doubt because he did not find it relevant. One must assume that Koht was of the opinion that it said essentially nothing about Ibsen's childhood. It is for him neither a central Ibsen text in other respects.

In Michael Meyer's Ibsen biography, however, published in three volumes 1967 – 1971, the childhood text makes yet another appearance. Meyer's treatise runs off with the prize for the most naive employment of the text. It is rendered in its entirety in the chapter about his childhood. As a means of reinforcing or perhaps rather repairing the text's (for Meyer) presumed authenticity, the biographer has taken it upon himself to insert three footnotes. The second of these footnotes is interesting. It refers to the same verse lines from *The Epic Brand* that Gerhard Gran brings up as a fictional equivalent. The footnote has a rather random placement and cannot be read in any other manner than as Meyer "buying" Gran's view about Ibsen's childhood and Brand's childhood being of the same nature.

Following the text Meyer writes: "Here Ibsen tantalisingly concludes his reminiscences. When he was seven, his childhood suddenly became clouded by misfortune and disgrace, and even in old age he evidently had no desire to commit his later memories to print" (Meyer 12). What Meyer finds to be important about the text, in other words, is where it ends, and what it has left out, namely, a description of Knud Ibsen's ruin and seven-year old Henrik's reactions to it. Meyer, however, then assumes that Ibsen's project in the text as such is to provide a credible description of his childhood. A continuation would have given us reliable information about this dark point in Ibsen's upbringing. The perspectives presented here show how highly problematic such a view is.

The two most recent Ibsen-biographies, by Ferguson (1996) and Figueiredo (2006 – 07) are both characterised by a healthy critical distance to their biographic subject. The biography as a genre has its historical roots in the panegyrics of antiquity, the so-called epideictic rhetoric. It is historically speaking also related to the hagiography, but has in modern times acquired its anti-hagiographic representatives. Ferguson goes the furthest in this direction. Several biographers address many of Ibsen's less sympathetic qualities, his boundless vanity, his uncompromising egoism,

his touchiness, his unstable temperament. Ferguson allows a kind of hermeneutic suspicion to pervade more or less his entire portrayal. Ibsen's allegedly difficult period and unkind treatment in Norway before he emigrated, is particularly by Ferguson, but also by Figueiredo, given a strong dose of nuance and is to a certain extent disproved.

Ferguson employs the text in the chapter about *Ghosts*. The childhood memories were written while *Ghosts* was being written. Ferguson implies through this structure that the text says more about Ibsen in the year 1881 than about Ibsen's childhood. This choice can appear to be less naive than Meyer's example. But Ferguson's commentaries on the text before it is cited show that he follows in Meyer's footsteps. Ferguson refers to the fact that Ibsen stopped writing at exactly the point at which his father's financial ruin began, with its baleful effect on the atmosphere within the family, and on their status in the community. Yet one regrets that he did so, and turned his back on an undertaking that might have proved cathartic and increased his sum of happiness (Ferguson 250).

Ferguson has, accordingly, also focused on that which is not found in the text and demonstrates a touching consideration for Ibsen's psychological well-being. Had he kept writing, it could have had a therapeutic effect on him! He would have been a happier human being! This view is first of all based on the assumption that Knud Ibsen's ruin was a traumatic experience for Henrik. It has not been proven beyond a doubt that it was. Second of all, it is based on the assumption that Ibsen through his text wished to reach a kind of clarity about his own childhood. The aspect of literary construction that Figueiredo points out is not a possibility that occurs to Ferguson.

Ferguson's comments following the childhood memory text are more general, but also more focused on Ibsen's personality and psychological constitution. What is most clearly evident, Ferguson claims, is the extent to which Ibsen's was always the bystander's perspective on life. And there are aspects that shed light on his lifelong timidity and his ambivalent attitude towards authority: the adventure in the church steeple; the episode with the policeman from whom he hid beneath his bed; his fascination with the stocks and their invitation to ritual humiliation; the solipsistic removal of any references to brothers and sisters (Ferguson 254 – 55) .

The strength of Ferguson's approach is that the text is related to and situated in the temporal context in which it occurred, 1881. The tendentious readings of Jæger and Gran, which emphasise Ibsen's unhappy childhood, have with Ferguson vanished into thin air. But Figueiredo's radical reading remains a far way off. Ferguson operates still with the perception of a historically given event, Ibsen's childhood, which Ibsen's text, admittedly from a highly distanced perspective, in part says something about and in part could have said more about (if Ibsen had written more).

In that we have now come full circle and are once again back to Figueiredo, let us lift up the perspective and reflect a bit about childhood and literary biographies in general. Why even write about authors' childhoods at all? What makes Ibsen an interesting subject for a biography is that he was a great writer. The point of departure for all literary biographies is the literary work of the biographic subject. But childhood is precisely the life phase in which the author has not yet become an author. He or



she has not written a word! One finds the answer to these rhetorical questions by referring to two of the features of the biography genre. First of all, a biography is expected to begin at birth and end at death. The lifetime of the biographic subject determines the start and finish of the biography's course of action. Secondly, the biography genre swears by teleology, in other words, the school of thought stating that everything that happens has a specific purpose and a specific aim. In accordance with this, the biographer seeks to establish causal connections in the biographic subject's life. The author becomes an author for specific reasons. And all the connecting lines refer back to childhood. The child becomes the adult human's father.

How do our biographers stand in relation to this? All seven establish different types of causal connections between Ibsen's childhood and his subsequent career as an author. All Ibsen biographies focus on the factors leading up to his life's *telos*: becoming a writer. This is the fundamental common thread in all Ibsen biographies. That Ibsen easily could have had the same childhood but become something other than an author, is a possibility that the biographies discount. To the contrary, they take as a point of departure that Ibsen was "a born artist".<sup>5</sup>

The function of Ibsen's childhood memories in this image is, as we have seen, varied. Figueiredo's use of the text is elegant and intelligent. He reads the text in the context of Ibsen's almost life-long project of self-staging. Ibsen was, starting from the time around 1870, very concerned about creating unity between life and work and about giving the impression that he was a poet because he was *obliged* to be a poet. Here the lines of causal connection run perhaps in the opposite direction. The childhood memory text naturally sheds light upon Ibsen's childhood, but the spotlight is situated in 1881. The causal relations are established in retrospect.

Figueiredo also clearly sees that the text is not very informative as a source of insight on Ibsen's childhood. The text has many elements that tend towards literary construction. An example: Ibsen tells of a black poodle with fiery red eyes that was in the church tower where the nanny allowed Ibsen to look out. This poodle once startled a watchman who was in the process of calling out the hour from the church window, so that the watchman fell out of the window and was killed. "This incident of the watchman and the poodle had happened long before my time," Ibsen writes (Jæger 7). This is, in other words, something Ibsen never experienced personally, but something he had only heard about. The text is full of typical Ibsen motifs. The tower is a reference to *The Master Builder*, "the mental institution" to *Peer Gynt*, the poodle perhaps leads one to think more about Goethe's Faust than Mopseman in *Little Eyolf*, but at any rate the motif has literary allusions, something that we can presume interested Ibsen more than reminiscing about some scruffy dog from Skien.

What is more difficult about Figueiredo's method is that Ibsen's actual childhood falls out into the sidelines. His biography is constantly at risk of getting lost in the forest of myths. Figueiredo writes that for him it has been

imperative to take the myths and the myths' reality just as seriously as the reality itself. In other words, this book is about Ibsen's life, but also the Ibsen myth that tradition has created over the course of more than a century and which it is

impossible to disregard. (Figueiredo 19)

It is certainly correct that it is difficult to penetrate behind the myths, but simultaneously, this is exactly what one expects a biographer to attempt to do. If one removes oneself too greatly from the perception of an actual, historical lifetime, which the biographer attempts to describe and present in a coherent form and in a reliable fashion, the biography genre is, as such, undermined.

Ibsen's childhood is the phase of Ibsen's life that is most poorly documented. The sources exist, but there are not many of them and the degree of reliability varies greatly. Many of the sources contradict one another. It is then tempting perhaps to resort to myths and literary construction. Ibsen's childhood is perhaps most suitably read as literature.

### 【Notes】

1. All translations from works published in Norwegian are done by the author.
2. Two years later two different English editions were issued in London (trans. Clara Bell) and Chicago (trans. William Morton Payne) respectively. In this paper the London edition has been used.
3. See Henrik Ibsen, *Efterladte skrifter*. Ed. Halvdan Koht and Julius Elias (Kristiania, 1909) 1: 304 – 310.
4. See Henrik Ibsen, *Samlede verker*. Ed. Francis Bull, Halvdan Koht and Didrik Arup Seip (Oslo, 1928 – 1957) 15: 365 – 71.
5. Confer the title of an Ibsen biography that we have not addressed here, Hans Heiberg's from 1967.

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