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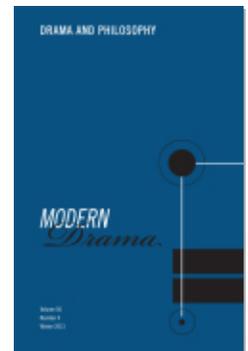
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## Hedda's Silences: Beauty and Despair in Hedda Gabler

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# Hedda's Silences: Beauty and Despair in *Hedda Gabler*

TORIL MOI

## READING PHILOSOPHICALLY

To read literature with philosophy can be an extraordinarily enriching experience. A critic who understands philosophy and also has a sense of history can explain what a literary work owes to the aesthetic and intellectual concerns of its day, and help us to grasp its preoccupations from a different angle. Sometimes she can illuminate otherwise obscure aspects of the text. Literary critics nevertheless often view philosophical readings with suspicion because they have seen too many reductive and condescending attempts to impose pre-existing philosophical paradigms on unsuspecting texts, too many “readings” which in fact treat literature as a quarry in which to dig for illustrations of a pet philosophy. They are right to react against such approaches. There can be no point in turning literature into a detour on the way to philosophy. To avoid treating literature as philosophy’s handmaiden, philosophical readings – by which I understand literary criticism that takes an interest in philosophy, whether understood as a set of questions or as a set of texts – must proceed from a faith in literature’s capacity to produce what Stanley Cavell calls “illumination of philosophical pertinence that philosophy alone has not surely grasped” (Preface xxv). Which amounts to saying, quite uncontroversially, that the best literature illuminates human existence in ways that philosophy, too, might – should? – find interesting.

How, then, are we to read *Hedda Gabler* philosophically? Philosophical work on other Ibsen plays usually takes the form of showing parallels between Ibsen and certain key philosophers, such as Hegel, Kierkegaard, or Nietzsche.<sup>1</sup> But *Hedda Gabler* offers few footholds for such an enterprise. In my experience, this play fights off any attempt to grasp it as an instance of an existing philosophy. Maybe this explains why there are few, if any, explicitly philosophical accounts of *Hedda Gabler*.<sup>2</sup> However, a philosophical reading does not have to take the form of comparing a literary work to a

given philosophy. When Cavell reads *King Lear*, he shows how that play understands tragedy: in so far as tragedy is a subject matter for philosophy, such criticism *is* philosophy ("Avoidance").

In this essay, I shall take my cue from Simone de Beauvoir and Stanley Cavell. Beauvoir writes that a literary text is an invitation to the reader to share the author's sense of exploration and discovery, an invitation to join the author on an "authentic adventure of the mind" ("Literature and Metaphysics" 272). Cavell, for his part, encourages us to "let the object or the work of your interest teach you how to consider it" (*Pursuits* 10). Neither Beauvoir nor Cavell provides any kind of recipe for how to do this, presumably because so much depends on the nature of the writing and the nature of the reader's interests. However, in their different ways, both consider reading to be a form of reflection, an active response to a work. This essay is an attempt to do what I recommend in "The Adventure of Reading", namely to let *Hedda Gabler* teach me what its concepts are.

I'll do this by focusing on three moments in *Hedda Gabler*, three moments in which Hedda remains silent, for different reasons, and with different effects. To grasp the significance of these moments is to understand why Hedda chooses to die. I shall bring out the connections between Hedda's yearning for beauty, her silence (her refusal or withholding of expression), and her despair. At the end of the article, I will draw on those concepts to engage Ibsen in a conversation with Søren Kierkegaard, not because Kierkegaard is the goal of my reading, but because *The Sickness unto Death* provides a telling historical and existential perspective on Hedda's silences. However, if we are to understand Hedda's silences, we need to understand the context in which they occur. For that reason, I shall begin by discussing the play's unfashionable seriousness, Hedda's quest for beauty, and finally, the recurrent question of whether we should read Hedda as a case study of the modern woman or rather of the modern subject in general.

### THE POSTMODERN PROBLEM WITH HEDDA

In recent years, *Hedda Gabler* has been one of Ibsen's most frequently produced plays. In the United States, some of the most noticed productions have had great stars in the part of Hedda: over the years, I have managed to catch Annette Bening in Los Angeles, Kate Burton in New York, and Cate Blanchett in Brooklyn. Although Cate Blanchett is an uncommonly thoughtful actress, the Australian production of *Hedda Gabler* in which she starred was a mess. Blanchett's Hedda was too witty, too exasperated, too impatient, and far too keen to fling her body around on every available sofa or chair. There was a lot of plumping of cushions and fidgeting with furniture. The pace was frenetic, to the point that Hedda's burning of Løvborg's manuscript

became just another hectic event. At the end of the play, Hedda killed herself in full view of the audience. Predictably, the audience was neither moved nor shocked. While less frantic, the productions with Bening and Burton turned Hedda into a cynical, world-weary deliverer of caustic one-liners, more likely to kill her husband than herself.

Missing in all these productions were the despair, the yearning for beauty, the depth of soul that give Ibsen's Hedda her complexity and grandeur. I am inclined to see such high-profile productions of *Hedda Gabler* as symptoms of a postmodern anxiety about seriousness and deep feelings. Such productions respond to what the Norwegian writer Dag Solstad calls "the 19th century's quite specific form of seriousness" by trying to repress it ("Kierkegaard og Ibsen" 35; my translation). Turning the play into fast and brilliant surface, such directors reveal their fear that *Hedda Gabler* is no longer relevant, that contemporary audiences simply won't be able to relate to Hedda's existential despair or her idealist yearning for beauty.

Such a postmodern emptying out of the play would have made no sense to the women who cried and moaned during the first matinée performances in London in the early 1890s. "Hedda is all of us," one of them declared (qtd. in Barstow 394). Postmodern directors, however, do their utmost to block identification, usually because they take as gospel the highly questionable idea that someone who identifies with a character necessarily must take that character to be real and thus fail to realize that she is dealing with theatre. (For a critique of such approaches, see Solomon 86–87.) But if we aren't capable of seeing the world as Hedda sees it, if only for a moment, we won't be able to acknowledge her plight of soul and body. If this – trying to see the world from the point of view of another – is identification, we need it to understand the play (see also Beauvoir et al.; Moi, "What Can Literature Do?"). Above all, we need it to understand why Hedda kills herself.

### BEAUTIFUL FREEDOM: HEDDA'S IDEALISM

To rise to the challenge of Ibsen's play, directors (and critics too) must manage to make Hedda's plight – and her talk of beauty – significant to contemporary audiences. A truly brilliant production of *Hedda Gabler* must make us realize that even if – or rather, particularly if – Hedda had become a general or a prime minister, she would *still* have felt unfree, isolated, incapable of love.

Hedda's dreams can't be satisfied by a career alone. Her yearning for beauty reveals that she is after greater things. She is, for example, revulsed to learn that Løvborg has not killed himself cleanly and beautifully. When she learns that he did not shoot himself in the head (as she herself will do), she assumes that he must have shot himself in the chest instead and exclaims, "I am saying that there is beauty in all this." This line isolates Hedda,

for neither her husband nor Thea Elvsted is capable of understanding what she means. While Tesman simply exclaims, "Beauty! What an idea!"; Thea Elvsted recriminates, "Oh, Hedda, how can you talk about beauty in such a thing?" (770; 385).<sup>3</sup> When Hedda finally discovers that Løvborg died in a brawl that ended with a gunshot wound to his genitals [*underlivet*],<sup>4</sup> she is disgusted: "What is it, this – this curse – that everything I touch turns ridiculous and vile?" (773; 388). As I have argued elsewhere, Hedda's horror of *det lave* [the low] ("vile," in Fjelde's translation) is a "horror of the ordinary and the everyday, which she here associates with farce (the ridiculous combined with the low). [In fact,] throughout the last two acts of the play, Hedda behaves like a producer and director desperately trying to stage a sublime idealist tragedy entitled 'Løvborg's Death'" (*Henrik Ibsen* 316). Nowhere in the play is the clash between Hedda's dreams of sublime beauty and the ridiculous ugliness of reality more stark than here.

For Hedda, to yearn for beauty is to yearn for freedom. Her concept of beauty is at once existential and aesthetic, as it was for Schiller and the German Romantics. For them, as for Hedda, artistic beauty – in poetry, for example – was the incarnation of human freedom. Ibsen himself indicated as much when he noted that "[i]n Hedda, there is a core of deep poetry. But her surroundings scare her. The very thought of becoming ridiculous" ("Optegnelser" 501; my translation). If Hedda had lived in 1800, she might have been able to voice her yearnings without fear of ridicule. Her tragedy is that she is a radical idealist in 1890, at a time when her ideals have long since become obsolete.

Critics have always connected the vine leaves Hedda wants to see in Ejler Løvborg's hair to an ideal of beauty (see, e.g., Høst 110). In the context of Ibsen's works, the vine leaves recall *Emperor and Galilean* (1873), where Emperor Julian wears them in a thoroughly ridiculous procession staged to celebrate Dionysus as the god of poetry and sublime ecstasy (see Moi, *Henrik Ibsen* 196–97; Durbach 39–43). Like Hedda, Julian, who is trying to revive faith in the Greek gods at a time when Christianity is in the ascendance, is out of step with his time. As *Emperor and Galilean* unfolds, Julian comes to realize the hopelessness of his quest for truth and beauty: his death foreshadows Hedda's.

### **HEDDA: A WOMAN EMBODYING HUMANITY**

The parallel between Julian and Hedda should warn us against the temptation to turn the play into a "woman's play." At the same time, however, it would be foolish to deny that *Hedda Gabler* powerfully illuminates the plight of women, as the women attending the 1890s matinées understood all too well. Errol Durbach is right to deny that *Hedda Gabler* is a "problem play [dealing with] essentially secular or political dilemmas," and he is also

right to say that it's absurd to imagine that, if we "give [Hedda] a seat on the *Storting* or the directorship of a bank, . . . she will stop firing her pistols aimlessly at the sky" (34), but he is wrong to imply that this means that any feminist reading – meaning any reading focusing on the fact that Hedda is a woman in a man's world – will fail to grasp its existential dimensions.

Beauvoir famously declared that woman is "the Other" (*Second Sex* 6). One implication of that claim is that, in a sexist society, women are regularly placed in situations in which they have to choose between the universal and the particular, between being perceived as "just human beings" (which, for a woman, means accepting an invitation to masquerade as an impossible, ungendered creature) and being perceived as women (which means accepting her exclusion from the universal). Beauvoir shows that both options are unacceptable. After all, no man is ever asked to choose between representing humanity and representing maleness. (I discuss this dilemma further in "I am not a woman writer").

The only way to resist being trapped in the false options offered by this dilemma is to remind ourselves (and others) that there is no greater tension between a woman's femaleness and her humanity than between a man's maleness and his humanity. In practice this means resisting both the temptation to discuss female characters exclusively as examples of femininity *and* the temptation to believe that any discussion of femininity, sex, or gender implies that one is no longer concerned with the universal, the general, or the human. (With male characters, this always goes without saying; with female characters, it somehow never does. Nobody pretends that they can't manage to see Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* as embodiments of a general problem of human existence, just because they are male.)

We don't have to choose between reading *Hedda Gabler* as a play about women or as a play about modernity. To do so would be to impoverish Ibsen's masterpiece. All we have to do is to acknowledge that Hedda is both a woman and a human being, which means that Ibsen's play is both feminist and universal. Unlike most other nineteenth-century writers, for whom the female characters could never be more than a foil for the hero's existential crisis, Ibsen dared to make a woman the bearer of his play's most fundamental philosophical preoccupations, to turn this specific woman's crisis into a scorching critique of the conditions of life in late nineteenth-century modernity. Ibsen, in short, gives women access to the universal, as women. This is a profoundly feminist move.

To read *Hedda Gabler*, then, we need to understand that Hedda's yearning for beauty and freedom is *both* an expression of a radical Romantic and Schillerian utopia, and a response to a sense of being made unfree in a highly gendered, sexualized, embodied way. In fact, Ibsen's genius made him realize that a female protagonist could embody the problem of freedom and meaning in modernity in a more profoundly dramatic way than a

male protagonist. That Hedda is caught in an explicitly sexualized trap at the end adds concretion and embodiment to her experience. Like Hamlet, Hedda embodies humanity, without losing an iota of her specificity.

### HEDDA'S SILENCES

There are three significant silences in *Hedda Gabler*. Two are enacted on-stage, one is evoked in conversation. The first silence takes place during the fatal scene between Løvborg and Thea, when Løvborg confesses that he has lost the manuscript of his new book about the cultural developments of the future. Listening intensely, Hedda never reveals that she has the manuscript in her desk, in the very same room where Thea and Løvborg are tearing each other apart. The second silence is Hedda's refusal to lie, her refusal to tell Judge Brack, or anyone else, that Løvborg stole the pistol with which he shot himself. The third silence concerns a moment in the past when Hedda refused to respond to Løvborg's sexual advances. From the point of view of Hedda's biography, what I here call her third silence is chronologically the first. From the point of view of the audience, it is the most hidden – only referred to, never enacted. This silence is deeply intertwined with the second (her refusal to lie to Judge Brack): for, as I shall show, Brack's sexual blackmail gives new meaning to the moment of non-response that happened in her past, and also makes Hedda decide to embrace that past moment as the defining moment of her life.

The three silences are quite different. In the scene concerning the lost manuscript, Hedda deliberately withholds information she ought to have shared. This silence goes unnoticed, for Løvborg and Thea are so absorbed in their own desperate drama that they have no idea that Hedda is hiding something. In contrast, Hedda's silence in the scene with Judge Brack is insistent and obvious. When Brack urges Hedda to speak, to say the words, she stubbornly refuses. The first silence is connected to the idea of excitement and expresses Hedda's avid curiosity and absorbed fascination. The second is connected to the idea of being besmirched and expresses Hedda's disgust and revolt. The first is profoundly theatrical; the second denies theatre altogether. Both silences are fatal, but in different ways, for the first leads to Løvborg's death, the second to Hedda's suicide. The third silence – the one that took place years before the play begins – is different. It reveals the deeper reasons for Hedda's second silence and thus tells us something crucial about who Hedda is. To understand *Hedda Gabler* – the character as well as the play – we need to understand these moments.

Before turning to the first silence, I must discuss the word itself. A phrase like "Hedda's first silence" sounds a bit odd in English. What are these "silences" I am about to investigate? The question arises because English, on the whole, makes do with two terms, "silent/silence" and "quiet," while

Norwegian distinguishes among three terms, the adjectives (and related nouns) *stille/stillhet* and *taus/taushet* and the verb *å tie*. The verb *tie* emphasizes the act of saying nothing. Like the German *schweigen*, it often implies that something is deliberately withheld (“*kan du tie?*” means “can you keep a secret?”). In comparison, to be *taus* is to say nothing, to remain silent or quiet, but without any necessary implication of knowledge withheld. Since I am concerned with moments in which Hedda does not speak, the major meaning of “silence” in this paper is *taushet*.

But *stillhet* is also relevant, not least because Hedda uses the word in one of her last lines. *Stille* stretches beyond human beings to bodies, landscapes, machines, cities, and nature. It indicates the absence of noise and, often also, like the English “still,” the absence of motion. It is often translated as “quiet,” “silent,” “calm,” even “peaceful.” At the end of the play, when Tesman complains that Hedda is playing a noisy dance tune on the piano on the day of Løvborg’s and Aunt Rina’s death, Hedda replies, “*Herefter skal jeg være stille*” (392): “From now on I’ll be quiet,” “From now on I’ll be silent,” or even “From now on I won’t move at all.” Although the line clearly does not mean “From now on I’ll say nothing,” it nevertheless implies that Hedda will remain silent in that sense too. In this case, as in expressions such as *stille som i graven* [silent as the grave], the meaning of *silent* overlaps with *taus* and *tie*. This is the field of meaning of *silence* in *Hedda Gabler*.

### WHY DOES HEDDA NEVER SAY THAT SHE HAS THE MANUSCRIPT?

The first silence occurs toward the end of Act Three. After a drunken night on the town, Løvborg discovers that he has lost the manuscript of his new book. Unaware that Tesman has found it and left it with Hedda for safe-keeping, Løvborg tells Thea that all is over between them: he doesn’t need her anymore, for he will never work again. She should go back home, try to live as if she had never met him. Devastated and outraged, Thea exclaims,

- |              |  |
|--------------|--|
| MRS. ELVSTED | <i>(in a fury of protest)</i> . [. . .] Where you are, that’s where I want to be! I won’t be driven away like this! I’m going to stay right here – and be together with you when the book comes out. |
| HEDDA        | <i>(in a tense whisper [i spænding])</i> . Ah, yes – the book!   |
| LØVBORG      | <i>(looks at her)</i> . My book and Thea’s – for that’s what it is.  |
| MRS. ELVSTED | Yes, that’s what I feel it is. [. . .] (759; 371–72).  |

What is going on with Hedda here? One Norwegian dictionary defines *spænding* as “intense interest, tense unrest, anxiety” (*Bokmålsordboka* online). This definition misses the phrase’s slightly upbeat sense of excitement. *Spænding* indicates the not altogether unpleasant tension we feel

when we are waiting for an outcome, in books, in theatre, at the movies, and in real life. The word points to the effects of plot and plotting. In *The Lady from the Sea*, Ibsen uses the cognate *spændende* [exciting] to signal the amoral *Schadenfreude* of the young Hilde Wangel, who thinks it will be *spændende* to watch Lyngstrand's deluded hopes and dreams come to nothing.

The exclamation mark indicates Hedda's excitement, as if she were thinking, "Good! Finally! *Now* they are coming to the really exciting bit!" Hedda's agitation also stems from her experience of power, for in this moment, she has total control over Thea and Løvborg's destiny. Although they don't know it, the audience does, for we just saw Hedda hide the manuscript. Everything now turns on her decision; as we watch, the tension [*spændingen*] mounts: will Hedda speak or remain silent?

Hedda treats this scene as a spectacle. It is as if she were watching a plot that has just reached a supremely interesting crisis. Uttering her remarks under her breath, she gives the impression of being completely absorbed by the spectacle unfolding before her. She is in her own world; her words are both spontaneous and not meant to be (over)heard. Hedda's excited "yes!" (in Norwegian she says "Ah, the book – yes!") indicates, perhaps, the moment in which she realizes that, for once, she is in a position of power, the moment in which she becomes the director of Løvborg's and Thea's tragedy.

In this one moment, she is freed from her own constant self-awareness. But her moment of freedom comes at the cost of a complete separation from others. It is as if there is a wall between her and the couple she is watching. Her absorption is without sympathy and identification, without a trace of acknowledgement of the pain of others. Hedda behaves as if she is watching a show; she is aestheticizing – or more specifically, *theatricalizing* – Thea and Løvborg. (This is true whether we think of Hedda as a spectator or as a director.)

In this heart-wrenching scene, Hedda says nothing about the manuscript because she thinks of Thea and Løvborg as characters, not real people. In his essay on *King Lear*, Cavell reminds us about the conditions of spectatorship in theatre: "A character is not, and cannot become, aware of us" ("Avoidance" 332). Nothing we can do will ever have the slightest impact on the characters. "The Southern yokel who rushes to the stage to save Desdemona from the black man" will always fail (327). For even if he kills the actor playing Othello, he will never kill Othello. There is no common ground between me as a member of the audience and Othello, or between me and Hedda. We are not in the same ontological space.

As members of the audience, our task is to acknowledge the characters, their plight, their suffering: "They are in our presence," Cavell writes. "This means, again, not simply that we are seeing and hearing them, but that we

are acknowledging them (or specifically failing to)" (332). What *Othello* does *ought* to impinge on me: We *should* be outraged (and filled with pity) by Othello's pain and Desdemona's innocence.

One of Ibsen's great themes is the dangers of theatricalizing others, and oneself. In this respect, Hedda has a long list of precursors: Julian in *Emperor and Galilean*, Nora and Helmer in *A Doll's House*, Hjalmar Ekdal in *The Wild Duck* are just some of the most obvious examples. In this scene, Hedda theatricalizes Thea and Løvborg by withholding her acknowledgement of their humanity, by which I here mean their capacity to have an inner life, to feel sorrow and pain. But she also does it by keeping herself in the dark. Cavell writes,

"How is acknowledgement expressed; that is, how do we put ourselves in another's presence?" . . . By revealing ourselves, by allowing ourselves to be seen. When we do not, we keep ourselves in the dark, the consequence is that we convert the other into a character and make the world a stage for him. (333)

Incapable of revealing herself to others, Hedda hides. We may be inclined to think of her as the exact counterpart to the Southern yokel: he takes theatre to be real; Hedda takes life to be theatre. But where the yokel is naïve, Hedda is knowing. The yokel makes a fundamental mistake: unfamiliar with the theatre, he fails to realize that his intervention will be pointless. Hedda knows perfectly well what she is doing. She is turning her friends (*friends?*) into characters, to see how it goes. It is as if she is deliberately experimenting with them.

Hedda hides by theatricalizing others. Her hiddenness reveals her sense of isolation, of being stranded in an alien world. It also reveals her sense that words are useless, that whatever she says, nobody will ever see who she is, nobody will ever acknowledge *her* pain. Hedda's position de-souls the two others, turning them into puppets on her strings, mere surfaces, bodies without an inner life.

Hedda's silence about the manuscript is her greatest act of cruelty. But it has a precedent, namely, her casual callousness about Aunt Julie's hat. In Act One, Tesman's old aunt turns up wearing a brand new hat, bought specially "for Hedda's sake" (698; 299). But when Hedda sees the hat, she gratuitously pretends to believe that it belongs to the maid. Hedda's malice appears to be triggered by irritation: irritation at the aunt's preoccupation with death and pregnancy, and at Tesman's delight at getting back his beloved pair of embroidered slippers. Hedda shudders at reminders of human finitude (birth and death) and hates the triviality embodied in the slippers. In the case of the manuscript, her sadism is unleashed by Thea and Løvborg's constant references to the manuscript as their child, the physical evidence of their loving relationship.

But if we can see all this, then it is obvious that Hedda's silence reveals her – not to Thea and Løvborg, but to the audience, for we know that she has the manuscript. But we are in the dark, powerless to intervene. Hedda is not and cannot become aware of us. She can intervene but doesn't want to. Sitting in the theatre, we want to intervene, but can't. If we carry out our task as spectators, we will have to sit still and acknowledge, not just Thea's and Løvborg's pain, but Hedda's, too. We will not be waiting *i Spænding*, but in horror for what Hedda will do next. Of course we know what she will do. Every night she will give Løvborg the pistol, tell him to shoot himself in beauty, and then she will burn the manuscript.

### WHY DOES HEDDA REFUSE TO SAY THAT LØVBORG STOLE THE PISTOL?

Why does Hedda kill herself? There are some obvious reasons: Hedda dies in order to avoid scandal, to avoid lowering herself, to escape Judge Brack's sexual blackmail, and to preserve her freedom. In short, Hedda kills herself because she is cornered by Judge Brack, for he is the one who has the power to keep her out of court. This is quite true, as far as it goes. But critics have generally not noticed that Hedda also colludes in her own entrapment. It's almost as if she is eager to place herself in Brack's power. This becomes clear in a crucial scene toward the end of Act Four: Brack has just told Hedda that he immediately recognized the pistol that killed Ejler Løvborg, and that the pistol is now in the possession of the police:

- HEDDA       What will they do with it?  
BRACK       Try to trace it to the owner.  
HEDDA       Do you think they'll succeed?  
BRACK       *(bending over her and whispering)*. No, Hedda Gabler – as long as I keep quiet.  
HEDDA       *(looking at him anxiously)*. And if you don't keep quiet – then what?  
BRACK       *(with a shrug)*. One could always claim that the pistol was stolen.<sup>5</sup>  
HEDDA       *(decisively)*. I'd rather die!  
BRACK       *(smiles)*. People *say* such things. But they don't *do* them.  
HEDDA       *(without answering)*. And what, then, if the pistol wasn't stolen. And they found the owner. What would happen?  
BRACK       Well, Hedda, – there'd be a scandal!  
HEDDA       A scandal!  
BRACK       A scandal, yes – the kind you're so deathly afraid of. Naturally, you'd appear in court – you and Mademoiselle Diana. [. . .] You'll have to answer the question: why did you give Ejler Løvborg the

- pistol? And what conclusions will people draw from the fact that you did give it to him?
- HEDDA (*her head sinking*). That's true. I hadn't thought of that.
- BRACK Well, luckily there's no danger as long as I keep quiet.
- HEDDA (*looks up at him*). So I'm in your power, Judge. You have your hold over me from now on. [*De har hals og hånd over mig fra nu af*].
- BRACK (*whispers more softly*). My dearest Hedda – believe me – I won't abuse my position.
- HEDDA All the same, I'm in your power. Tied to your will and desire. Not free. Not free, then! (*Rises impetuously*). No – I can't bear the thought of it! Never! (775–76; 390–91).

I am struck by Judge Brack's easy assumption that for Hedda to appear in court means explaining why she gave Løvborg the pistol. Surely, Hedda still has the option of testifying that Løvborg must have stolen the pistol? After all, if she were to insist on that explanation, nobody – not even Judge Brack – could prove her wrong. Yet within the space of a few seconds, both Brack and Hedda appear to have forgotten that this option even exists.

It is clear what Brack gains from the omission. But why does Hedda acquiesce in the idea that testifying in court must mean telling the truth about why she gave Løvborg the gun? After all, Hedda herself is hardly a champion of truth. Is it because she doesn't want to make Løvborg out to be a thief? But Løvborg's reputation has sunk so low that the accusation of stealing a gun will hardly stain it further. Clearly, she feels besmirched by the very thought of being called to testify alongside an infamous prostitute, and clearly, Brack is not wrong about her fear of a scandal.

But Hedda's refusal goes deeper. When she exclaims, "I'd rather die!" Brack smugly replies, "People *say* such things. But they don't *do* them." This is an obvious anticipation of Brack's famous last line: "But, good God! People don't *do* such things!" (778; 393). By linking these two lines so closely, Ibsen indicates that we can find the key to Hedda's death right here, in her refusal to say that Løvborg stole the pistol.

Sexual menace pervades this scene. With each line he speaks, Brack's demand for a sexual response from Hedda becomes increasingly explicit, as evidenced in his use of an increasingly intimate mode of address. Until now, he has called Hedda "Mrs. Tesman." Here, however, in a deliberate denial of her marriage, he first addresses her as "Hedda Gabler," then moves to plain "Hedda," and finally to the even more intimate "my dearest Hedda." Hedda's reply shows that she is perfectly aware of this: "You have your hold over me from now on." In Norwegian, Hedda literally says – "You have neck and hand over me from now on" – which is an old-fashioned expression referring to the right of feudal nobles to judge their own peasants without regard

to ordinary courts. Hedda has used the phrase once before, in Act Three, when Brack asked her not to receive Løvborg any more, so that he, Brack, could become “the one cock of the walk” (756; 369), the third corner of a triangle with Tesman. In both cases, Hedda connects the phrase with sex and sexuality. The phrase at once transforms Hedda from aristocrat to serf and stresses her status as a woman confronted with a sexual predator against whom the ordinary law of the land offers no protection.

But why does Hedda prefer to die rather than explaining in court (or anywhere else) why she gave Løvborg the gun? I'll begin by noting the obvious: Hedda dies to preserve her silence, to *avoid having to reveal herself*. Her hiddenness is at stake. To testify in court is to be tortured into forced expression, to be turned into a public spectacle. It is the exact opposite of theatricalizing others. This is bad enough. But the question of what she would say is worse. What *could* she say? That she told Løvborg to shoot himself “in beauty”? But why say such a thing to an unhinged alcoholic?

To get an idea of what Hedda refuses to say, we must turn to the scene where she gives the pistol to Løvborg, who has just declared that he intends to kill himself:

- HEDDA           *(coming a step closer)*. Ejlert Løvborg – listen to me. Couldn't you arrange that – that it's done beautifully?
- LØVBORG       Beautifully? *(Smiles)*. With vine leaves in my hair, as you used to dream in the old days?
- HEDDA           No. I don't believe in vine leaves any more. But beautifully, all the same. For this once – ! Good-bye! You must go now – and never come here again.
- LØVBORG       Good-bye, then. And give my best to George Tesman.  
*(He turns to leave.)*
- HEDDA           No, wait. I want you to have a souvenir from me.  
*(She goes to the writing desk and opens the drawer and the pistol case, then comes back to Løvborg with one of the pistols.)*
- LØVBORG       *(looks at her)*. That? Is that the souvenir?
- HEDDA           *(nods slowly)*. Do you recognize it? It was aimed at you once.
- LØVBORG       You should have used it then.
- HEDDA           Here! Use it now.
- LØVBORG       *(puts the pistol in his breast pocket)*. Thanks.
- HEDDA           And beautifully, Eilert Løvborg. Promise me that!
- LØVBORG       Good-bye, Hedda Gabler. (761–62; 375)

We notice that Løvborg addresses Hedda as “Hedda Gabler” as he says farewell. Immediately after this, Hedda burns the manuscript. Hedda refers to the pistol as *erindringen* – the souvenir, “the thing to remember me by.”

(In Norwegian, the word can also mean memory.) The pistol is the concrete reminder, a visible incarnation, of a different moment of sexual tension; namely, the moment in the past when Hedda almost shot Løvborg rather than let herself respond to his physical passion. This scene – the scene of what I have called Hedda’s third silence – is never enacted on stage. But it is brought up in a conversation in Act Two:

LØVBORG      You broke it off.  
 HEDDA         Yes, when reality threatened to enter into our relationship. Shame on you, Ejlert Løvborg, how could you assault your – your audacious comrade!<sup>6</sup>  
 LØVBORG      (*clenching his fists*). Oh, why didn’t you do what you said! Why didn’t you shoot me down!  
 HEDDA         I’m – much too afraid of a scandal.  
 LØVBORG      Yes, Hedda, you’re a coward at heart.  
 HEDDA         A terrible coward.  
 [. . .]  
 HEDDA         [. . .] (*Leans closer, without looking him in the eyes, and speaks softly*.) But there is something now that I can tell you.  
 LØVBORG      (*intently*). What?  
 HEDDA         When I didn’t dare shoot you –  
 LØVBORG      Yes?  
 HEDDA         – that wasn’t my worst cowardice – that night.  
 LØVBORG      (*looks at her a moment, understands, and whispers passionately*). Oh Hedda! Hedda Gabler! Now I begin to see it, the hidden reason why we’ve been so close. You and I – ! It was the hunger for *life* in you –  
 HEDDA         (*quietly, with a sharp glance*). Careful! That’s no way to think!  
 (739–40; 348–49)

In her confession to Løvborg, Hedda acknowledges that she grabbed the gun to hide the fact that she simply could not bring herself to respond to him, to express her feelings, to reveal herself. How can Hedda take the witness stand and explain that she gave Løvborg the pistol as a complex reminder of her own incapacity to love? Such a testimony would be humiliating, and pointless. Who would believe her?

Onstage, Hedda is never as physically close to anyone as in this conversation, which thus becomes an embodied reminder of the moment of sexual tension they are evoking here. In the past, Hedda’s passion remained hidden, unspoken, unacted on. Løvborg’s sexual advances demanded a passionate and spontaneous response, which she couldn’t give. In that moment, Hedda’s silence with Løvborg was bodily: what she withheld was not words but her sexual response. Hedda herself describes her fear of the

body and sexuality as a refusal of "reality" and connects it with her fear of scandal. Her refusal to acknowledge her own pregnancy is another example of the same fear of reality. In fact, Hedda's revolt against her pregnancy is more than a revolt against the ordinary destiny of women in her society; it is a refusal of sexuality itself. (For Hedda, to refuse sexuality is to refuse the very idea of connection with others, the very idea of expressing herself to and with them. As Brack closes in on her, this refusal becomes absolute.)

Hedda's yearning for beauty now comes to stand as more than a Schillerian revolutionary ideal: her yearning for freedom has turned into a death-dealing denial of sex and death, the very conditions of bodily human existence. This makes Hedda a sceptic in the Cavellian sense of being someone who cannot accept human finitude. For Cavell, "the choice of finitude . . . means . . . the choice of community, of autonomous moral existence" (*Claim* 464). To acknowledge one's finitude is also to acknowledge that we exist in a world with other creatures to whom we are responsible for our actions and words. How could Hedda, who feels radically estranged from everything in her world, bring herself to choose community?

The relationship between Hedda's "third," *bodily* silence (which is chronologically first) and the other two silences exemplifies what Freud called *Nachträglichkeit* [deferred action], for the two silences enacted onstage give new meaning to the one that happened in the past. This is particularly true because the moment of silence in the past was embodied and sexual. In Act Two, when Hedda remembers that moment, she sees it in a new light, from the point of view of a woman newly returned from her honeymoon. The play hints at her complete non-enjoyment of sex. To her, sex with Tesman is not only a violation, but revolting, tedious, and demeaning. Under sexual pressure from Brack in Act Four, she glimpses a future in which sex will be used to victimize her. It is at this point – when she considers a future of sexual blackmail – that Hedda decides to do what she asked Løvborg to; namely, to "honour the memory" – and in her case that means the memory of the first time she withheld her sexual response from a man.

Hedda's silence with Judge Brack is a deliberate choice. She chooses to make her moment of non-response to Løvborg – her embodied silence as a young woman – constitutive of who she is, to claim it as her identity, to acknowledge (but only to herself) both that she is the kind of person who cannot respond to others and that she lives in the kind of world where others are not worth responding to. In such a world, there is no point in saying anything, and no point in loving anyone, not even her own unborn child. Her relationship to words is doubled by her relationship to her body: Hedda's body is as incapable of expression and communication as her soul.

**BEAUTY WITHOUT VINE LEAVES**

For Hedda to explain – in court or anywhere else – why she gave Ejlert Løvborg the pistol would mean explaining all this. It would also mean explaining her talk about beauty and vine leaves. When she sent Løvborg off to the bachelor's party, Hedda had complete faith that he would return with vine leaves in his hair. When he didn't, and instead ended up in a drunken brawl in a brothel, his behaviour turned elevated thoughts of Dionysian ecstasy into the tawdry stuff of farce: "Then he had no vine leaves in his hair" (756; 368). When she gives Løvborg the pistol, Hedda claims to have lost faith in the vine leaves, yet she still demands beauty. But what is beauty without vine leaves?

Beauty without vine leaves is empty beauty, pure form without the utopian energy of the ideal. Such beauty will not ennoble or uplift anyone, for it is beauty without any connection to truth and goodness. It is the only kind of beauty suitable for the fallen – modern – society in which Hedda now finds herself. It is scintillating beauty that reaches no further than the façade: the beauty of theatre décor, not the beauty of the soul, the beauty that seeks to be the embodiment of human freedom.

Løvborg's death in beauty would save appearances, but it would hold no hope of redemption, either for Løvborg or for Hedda. Yet, formal beauty is better than no beauty: it is now the only repository of human freedom left. When the only refuge of freedom is empty form, human life is reduced to the unbearable, routinized, "bad everyday"; formal beauty may be the only beauty of which modernity is capable. (I take the term "bad everyday" from Fried 159.) Ibsen's modernism is complex because it recognizes, diagnoses, and acknowledges, yet refuses to celebrate this aesthetic turn.

When Hedda learns the truth about Løvborg's death, she realizes that acts of heroic beauty have become impossible. Would she say that her own suicide, a clean shot through the temple, was a deed done in beauty? Is her suicide a last, reckless act of freedom? Is it a final idealist masterpiece, doomed to remain unacknowledged by her mediocre surroundings? Or should we see it as a modernist masterpiece: a fully self-referential, formally brilliant, yet desperate demonstration of the failure of human expression? Is Ibsen saying that, as long as it takes place offstage, away from theatricality, suicide is the only form of authenticity left, a mute revolt against tawdry power? Or is Hedda simply succumbing to despair in a world that has no place for her? The genius of the play is that it puts all these ideas in play: they are all potential responses to the alienation, boredom, and triviality of modernity.

In the end, Hedda claims her hiddenness by dying offstage, after drawing the (theatre) curtains. Just before she shoots herself, she plays the piano wildly, and when Tesman tells her to stop, she replies, "From now on I'll be

quiet [*stille*]” (777; 392). Whether she speaks or remains silent is all one to her now. Hedda has lost all faith in the power of words. Her words will not reveal her, her silence will change nothing. Hedda's last silence is a withering critique of herself as well as of her world, a fatal attempt to preserve something like the lost freedom of her soul.

### **DESPAIR AND MODERNITY: HEDDA GABLER'S CONVERSATION WITH KIERKEGAARD**

I have almost finished my investigation of Hedda's silences. It would be tempting simply to end here. Yet, one question remains unexplored. What is the connection between Hedda's silence and despair and our own cultural moment? After all, I began this essay by claiming that postmodern directors are wrong to think that they need to play down her yearning for beauty and meaning for contemporary audiences.

At this point, I was helped both by literature and philosophy. As I was working on *Hedda Gabler*, I read Dag Solstad's conversations with Alf van der Hagen. English-language readers may not know that Solstad (born in 1941) is generally considered the greatest living Norwegian writer, whose fascination with Ibsen is well known. (Although Solstad has never, to my knowledge, commented on *Hedda Gabler*, I have always considered the character Nina Skåtøy in his masterly 1982 novel *Gymnaslærer Pedersen* to be a deeply moving Maoist incarnation of Hedda.) In his conversations with van der Hagen, Solstad connects some of his most incommunicative characters to Kierkegaard (van der Hagen 387). Thus, in Solstad's 2009 novel, *17. roman*, the desperately silent protagonist Bjørn Hansen, whose one ambition in life is to pass unnoticed by others, actually reads *The Sickness unto Death*. According to Solstad, what connects his recent protagonists to Kierkegaard's text is their “*innesluttethet*.” In Norwegian and Danish, the word *innesluttet* describes someone who is reluctant or unwilling to communicate. In his translation of *The Sickness unto Death*, Walter Lowrie renders it as “introversion” (196), and Howard and Edna Hong vary between “inclosing reserve” and being “self-enclosed” (63). Metaphorically, the word contains the idea of a self-enclosed circle.

The word struck me profoundly. I could not let it go. For *innesluttethet* is an almost perfect term to describe Hedda's hiddenness. Thus, Solstad's remark instantly connected his contemporary characters, not just to *The Sickness unto Death* but to *Hedda Gabler*. Here, I realized, was the key to my sense of Hedda's intense relevance. To explain why, I must place Ibsen in conversation with Kierkegaard. (Ideally, I would also like to discuss Ibsen in relation to Solstad, but this can't be done here.)

My reading of *Hedda Gabler* has focused on the play's key concepts. I have shown that Ibsen's text is fundamentally concerned with *modernity*,

*subjectivity*, and *meaning*. I have discussed Hedda's *silences*; her *hiddenness*, *disgust*, *despair*, and *suicide*, her yearning for *beauty* and *freedom*, and her sense of being besieged and besmirched by *triviality*, the utter banality of bourgeois existence.

Strikingly, Kierkegaard's meditation on despair, *The Sickness unto Death* (1849; published under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus) is concerned with almost exactly the same set of concepts. Both texts examine the modern subject's unsatisfied yearning for an authentic, passionate existence; both engage in a critique of modernity and modern subjectivity (see Mjaaland). Kierkegaard sees despair as a reaction to the triviality of petit-bourgeois life. *The Sickness unto Death* also contains substantial discussions of freedom. Suicide is a key theme. In fact, the only concepts crucial to *Hedda Gabler*, but not to *The Sickness unto Death*, are beauty and disgust. Conversely, Kierkegaard's concern with God and salvation is absent from *Hedda Gabler*. While Kierkegaard's despairing subjects exist in a universe where ethical and religious meaning is still available, Hedda can only reach for an increasingly absurd aesthetic ideal: beauty.

In *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard (or, if one prefers, Anti-Climacus) uses the word that struck me so forcibly – *Indesluttethed* – about the hiddenness of the despairing self, picturing it as a creature ceaselessly and self-consciously contemplating itself behind a “carefully closed door”: “[B]ehind it sits the self, so to speak, watching itself, preoccupied with or filling up time with not willing to be itself and yet being self enough to love itself. This is called inclosing reserve [*Indesluttethed*] (63; 177). While this may sound both egoistic and narcissistic, Anti-Climacus considers the self-absorbed wish to remain hidden to be a symptom of the two highest (because most self-conscious) forms of despair and refers to it as “inwardness [*Inderlighed*] with a jammed lock” (72; 186). The deeper and more spiritual the despair, the more the self seeks to remain hidden, to exclude others, to create a secret world in which it is ceaselessly preoccupied with itself. (*Inderlighed* usually gets translated as “inwardness.” But Kierkegaard, surely, also plays on the more common meaning of the adjective *inderlig*, which is “heartfelt,” “authentic,” “true,” particularly when used about feelings.)

Not surprisingly, people suffering from self-enclosing despair run a high risk of suicide (see 66; 180). However, Kierkegaard believes that, if the desperate person can find *one* confidant, *one* person to talk openly to, her inner tension may be reduced and she may avoid suicide. But, he adds, she may also “be thrown into despair by having found a confidant. In this way, suicide may still result” (66; 180). At this point, he turns to literature. This ought not to surprise us: Kierkegaard was himself a literary writer, and he was particularly interested in theatre, as Ystad shows (“Kierkegaard”). One might imagine, Anti-Climacus writes, a king or a tyrant who, every time he confided in someone, immediately had that person killed: “It would be a

task for a poet to depict this solution to a demoniac's tormenting self-contradiction: not to be able to do without a confidant and not to be able to have a confidant" (67; 181).

This sounds more like a task for Schiller (or maybe Lord Byron) than for Ibsen. The idea of a tragedy with confidants tells me that the literary imagination at work in the *Sickness unto Death* is steeped in Romanticism, idealism, and melodrama, an aesthetic that Ibsen had long since left behind. (Kierkegaard was born in 1813, fifteen years before Ibsen.) In his 1886 play, *Rosmersholm*, Ibsen makes it clear that the issue for the new generation of tormented souls is no longer the presence or absence of a confidant but the presence or absence of faith in language, in communication, as such. Thus, Ibsen depicts Rosmer's and Rebecca's final suicide as a complete rejection, not just of Rosmer's "ennobling" project (talk of salvation no longer means anything to the ex-parson Rosmer), but of the very idea that we can trust the meaning of words.

The bleakness of modernity is far more absolute in plays like *Rosmersholm* and *Hedda Gabler* than in *The Sickness unto Death* (for a discussion of *Rosmersholm*, see Moi, *Henrik Ibsen* 269–93). Hedda has no greater faith in language than Rosmer and Rebecca. In fact, her relationship to words is almost experimental: she says things just to see what happens next, and each time, as in the case of her disparagement of Aunt Julie's hat, she is surprised that words have consequences. In her universe, the very existence of confidants is ruled out: what's a confidant to someone who doesn't believe that her words carry meaning?

Ibsen and Kierkegaard illuminate each other. Just as Kierkegaard helps us to understand the connection between Hedda's despair and her silence, Ibsen helps us to realize how radically attitudes toward language, communication, and beauty changed from 1850 to 1890. At the same time, as we measure the distance between these two writers and these two historical moments, we also grasp the continuity between them – the yearning for passion, authenticity, and freedom, and the conviction that the modern world makes such values unattainable are equally strong in both. (The characters in Solstad's late works share the despair and the silence but struggle in a different way with the idea of meaning, or, rather, meaningful action.) To stage *Hedda Gabler* today, we only need to recognize that her silence and her despair still live on behind the more or less brilliant façades people put on in our own image-obsessed culture.

To read philosophy alongside literature is no different from reading or watching anything else alongside literature (film, painting, other literature, and so on): in every case, we draw on our experience – including our intellectual and aesthetic experience – in order to respond as fully and attentively as we can to the literary work. If the work can withstand such intensive scrutiny, and if the quality of our response does justice to the

work, we won't be able to doubt that literature – in this case, *Hedda Gabler* – expresses thought, knowledge, and truth. Whether the illuminations of *Hedda Gabler* are of “philosophical pertinence” (Cavell, Preface, xxv), however, is now – at the end of my essay – not simply a question for me, but for my readers. What kind of philosophy finds room for the illuminations of *Hedda Gabler*? What kind of philosophy does not?

I don't mean to shrug off the question of “philosophical pertinence.” Rather, I am trying to express my understanding of what it is to write literary criticism (a topic too vast to receive anything like full justice here!). Writing on *Hedda Gabler*, I describe my experience of the play as well and fully as I can, in order to invite you to see if you can share the experience, see what I see (here I draw on Cavell, “Music” 192–93; Cavell, “Aesthetic Problems” 93–96). Obviously, my expression risks rebuff. The fear is that I will discover that I am alone in my (aesthetic) judgement, that others will find me unintelligible, maybe even mad.

This is not a rejection of, but a search for reason. One of Cavell's most important insights is that the “wish and search for community are the wish and search for reason” (*Claim* 20). To find reason is to find that we are intelligible to others, and they to us, at least for now. In the case of aesthetic judgement, it is to discover that others can see what we see, for example, in *Hedda Gabler*. (This is not an all or nothing issue: you only need to see *something* for us to be able to discuss the matter further.) To write criticism is to search for community.

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## NOTES

- 1 For Ibsen and Hegel, see all three books by Johnston; for Ibsen and Nietzsche, see Helland, *Melankoliens*; (in English, see Helland, “Ibsen”); and Theoharis; for Ibsen and Kierkegaard, see Cappelørn et al., and also Ystad, “– *Livets*.”
- 2 The secondary literature on *Hedda Gabler* can be roughly divided into four categories: the early reception, where critics often complained that both the heroine and the play were incomprehensible (e.g., Koht; Egan); psychoanalytic readings (e.g., Rekdal, *Frihetens*); historical and historicizing readings; and variations of close readings, focusing on the play's themes, characters, and (theatrical) form; (for the last two categories, see Durbach, *Ibsen*; Lyons; Rekdal, *Et Skjær*; MacFarlane). All four categories include feminist readings (e.g., Finney; Garton; Hardwick).
- 3 In the case of *Hedda Gabler* and *The Sickness unto Death*, where questions of translation are important, two page numbers are given in parentheses – the first refers to the published English translation (in the case of *Sickness*, the Hong and

Hong translation), so that the reader can locate the passage; the second, to the original Norwegian text.

- 4 Most English translations miss the meaning of the word *underlivet*, which is the usual word for women's internal and external reproductive organs. The word is less frequently used about men. That Judge Brack uses the term as a euphemism for the genitals, is beyond doubt. Fjelde gives "in the stomach – more or less" (773).
- 5 I amend Fjelde's "Counsel could always claim," since Ibsen's text doesn't mention any lawyers but says, "There's always the option."
- 6 I amend Fjelde's translation, which completely loses the original's connection between reality and sexual violence. Where Ibsen writes "when reality threatened to enter into our relationship," Fjelde translates "when that closeness of ours threatened to grow more serious." In Norwegian, Løvborg wanted to *forgribe sig på* Hedda. The verb means to commit a crime. Used about a woman, it usually refers to rape, or to sexual abuse or assault. I translate "How could you assault." Fjelde has: "how could you violate my trust" (739).

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ABSTRACT: This essay asks what it means to read literature with philosophy and argues that we should discover the literary work's own concepts before engaging it in a dialogue with philosophy. The essay also considers the vexed question of whether *Hedda Gabler* should be read as a "woman's play" or, rather, as a critique of modernity. With reference to Simone de Beauvoir, it argues that this "choice" is itself an example of a sexist logic. By paying close attention to Hedda's three significant silences, the essay shows that Hedda chooses to place herself in Judge Brack's power, that the play's key concerns are *modernity, subjectivity, and meaning*, and that its key concepts are *silence, hiddenness, disgust*,

*triviality, beauty, freedom, despair, and suicide.* The essay ends by relating *Hedda Gabler* to Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death*, before returning to the question of the role of philosophy in literary readings.

KEYWORDS: literature and philosophy, reading, Ibsen, *Hedda Gabler*, Kierkegaard, modernity

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