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Imagining Hedda Gabler: Munch and Ibsen on Art and Modern Life

ABSTRACT

Among Edvard Munch's many portraits of Henrik Ibsen, the famous Norwegian dramatist and Munch's senior by a generation, one stands out. Large in scope and with a characteristic pallet of roughly hewed gray blue, green and yellow, the sketch is given the title *Geniuses*. Munch's sketch shows Ibsen, who had died a few years earlier, in the company of Socrates and Nietzsche. The picture was a working sketch for a painting commissioned by the University. While Munch, in the end, chose a different motif for his commission, it is nonetheless significant that he found it appropriate to portrait the Norwegian dramatist in the company of key European philosophers, indeed the whole span of the European philosophical tradition from its early beginnings to its most controversial spokesman in the late 1800s. In my article, I seek to take seriously Munch's bold and original positioning of Ibsen in the company of philosophers. Focusing on *Hedda Gabler*—a play about love lost and lives unlived—I explore the aesthetic-philosophical ramifications of Ibsen's peculiar position between realism and modernism. This position, I suggest, is also reflected in Munch's sketches for the set design for Hermann Bahr's 1906 production of the play.

Keywords: Munch, Ibsen, *Hedda Gabler*, aesthetics, nineteenth-century philosophy.

Norwegian by birth, international by reputation, Henrik Ibsen and Edvard Munch have come to incarnate the transition from modern life to the modernist sensibilities of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art in Scandinavia. Sometimes the transition is soft and almost unnoticeable, sometimes it is loud and dramatic, sometimes violent and painful. Through drama and paint Ibsen and Munch, respectively, have come to depict for us the tensions of modern times and existence. We find it in *Hedda Gabler*, Ibsen's 1890 play, written the very year before the author, after two decades of voluntary exile in Italy and Germany, returned to Oslo, or Kristiania, as the city was then called. Deeply fascinated by Ibsen, his senior by four decades, Munch would make a handful of Hedda sketches and a total of several hundred representations of Ibsen's work. How did Munch imagine Hedda Gabler, this most enigmatic of Ibsen's female heroines? How are we, more than a century later, to imagine her? These are the questions I will be focusing on in what follows—reflections that, in a few sections, may overlap with, but mostly spin off my introductory essay to *Ibsen's Hedda Gabler: Philosophical Perspectives* (Oxford UP, 2017).

THE RHYTHM OF DESIRE

Strictly speaking, Hedda Gabler is not present in her own play. By all reasonable standards, Hedda is a character in a late nineteenth-century play by Henrik Ibsen, i.e. a work of fiction. But even in Ibsen's play, in the fictional universe to which she lends her name, there is no Hedda Gabler. The play is named after an existence that is over—ended, capsized, *finito*—when the curtains open and the play begins. There is, to be sure, the play's protagonist. But she is now Hedda Tesman, the unhappy, newly married wife of Jørgen, whose emotional register is so crisp-dry that for him life itself is concentrated in his forthcoming study of medieval Brabantian handicraft. As a character and a possibility, Hedda Gabler died with that wedding. She is reduced to a passive apparition sustained by Jørgen's aunt Julle, who will muse about Hedda Gabler as she used to ride with her father. Mounted on her horse, Hedda was a token of high-class elegance. She represented a life beyond reach for Julle, but yet an object ever so desirable for her limited, petite-bourgeois imagination. She is also animated through the longings of another male character, he too a historian, Ejler Løvborg. Unlike Julle, however, who naively invests in the presence of Hedda Gabler, Løvborg knows that Hedda's existence as a Gabler is in fact a presence past.

Hedda's father, the General, is another character missing in the play. He passed before the beginning of the play's time. Yet he is the first character we encounter on stage. We see him, in the form of his painted portrait, centrally

hung above the sofa as the curtains open. (It is not irrelevant in this context that Ibsen, for periods of his life, was himself an avid painter.) Like Hedda Gabler, the General is no longer there, but unlike her, the person to which his name refers is now dead. Hedda Gabler's presence, her un-lived life, unrealized dreams and unfulfilled hopes, hover, albeit in a different way, in her life as Hedda Tesman. For Julle, Hedda may well be a trophy of social aspirations, but for the admiring Ejlert Løvborg, she represents something very different.

As a scholar, Ejlert is Jørgen's opposite. There is no investment in Brabantian handicraft from his side. Along the lines of Burckhardt or Nietzsche, Ejlert displays an unabashed fascination with the great civilizations, world history and, beyond that, the impossible task of writing, as a historian, a three-part treatise on the past, the present and, taking him well beyond his *métier* as a historian, the future. For Ejlert, Hedda Gabler is an object of absolute desire, possibly the only woman he has loved and is still deeply infatuated with.

Unlike her new and un-lived identity as Mrs. Tesman, Hedda's past as a Gabler is given materiality, rhythm, and presence as it resounds in Ejlert Løvborg's "Hedda—Gabler" (HG 215; HIS 103).¹ *Sagte og langsomt*, quiet and unhurried, read Ibsen's insistent instructions. There is so much longing, so much passion contained in the punctuation, voice and pace—comparable, perhaps, only to the opening lines (equally fiery, equally controlled) of Nabokov's *Lolita*. In Nabokov we get the rhapsodic "Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. 'Ta" (9).² Ibsen, by comparison, has us, somewhat less playfully, emphasize the E in Hedda (as her name is pronounced in Norwegian) and dwell by the A in Gabler, so that, in saying her maiden name, we cannot help giving it a waft of desire and openness. Both Ibsen and Nabokov play on the rhythm of a name, of desire as rhythm, and the rhythm of desire. The parallel to Nabokov is not simply a matter of giving form and shape to an unbound longing. For whether we like it or not, Ejlert Løvborg has a bit of a Humbert Humbert in him. A friend of General Gabler, he makes advances on the young Hedda as the two are perched on the sofa in her father's study.

¹ Further references to *Hedda Gabler* will be marked respectively as HG (*Four Major Plays: A Doll's House, Ghosts, Hedda Gabler, The Master Builder*. Ed. James McFarlane. Trans. James McFarlane and Jens Arup. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) and HIS (*Henrik Ibsens Skrifter*. Ed. Vigdis Ystad et al. Trans. Modified. Vol. IX. Oslo: Aschehoug, 2005–2010), followed by volume and page number.

² For Løvborg's play on Hedda's name, see HG 215, HIS IX 103. In the Arup translation, Ibsen's hyphen is, unfortunately, replaced by dots. The rhythmic play on the maiden name, to which Tesman would remain tone deaf, continues over the following pages.

Hedda, in other words, is wanted for very different reasons by Jørgen, Julle and Ejler. A fourth admirer, the cynical Judge Brack, can also be added to the mix. Does Hedda have her own identity? Does she emerge as a woman with her own wants, her own desires? Does she at all have an identity? And, if not, to what extent can she be known? It is hard to know, really—hard to know Hedda and hard to know an other überhaupt. But what we do know is that it is not easy to be an object of desire, to be somebody whose life is but a slate of social aspirations (for the Tesmans), a utopian blend of existential meaning and carnal satisfaction (Løvborg), and an uncouth demand for sexual favors (Brack). Thus the initial question reemerges: How can we picture this figure, this tabula rasa of investments, this woman who remains unknown—to others and to herself?

STAGE LIFE

A few months after *Hedda Gabler* had premiered at the Residenztheater in Munich, Ibsen walks home with a friend after a party. “Can you write plays about people you have never known?”, he reportedly asks his friend this spring evening in March 1891 (Ferguson 347, 361). Could he, as her author, have known Hedda? Hedda is perhaps the most complicated of all his protagonists. She is warm and cold, terribly fussy and, at times, embarrassingly simple in her responses to other people and to the challenges of life. Hedda is kind and mean. She is crazily ambitious and utterly passive. She is clearly desired and yet, from an audience point of view, it is oftentimes hard to see exactly what her attraction consists of. Could Hedda have been known? Is she at all knowable?

Known or unknown to herself and her author, Hedda Gabler, the lovely Hedda Gabler (“dejlige Hedda Gabler,” as the original has it), remains a mystery to readers, audiences and stage directors (HG 171; HIS IX 19). Ingmar Bergman, in his 1979 Munich production (he staged several versions of the play), captures her in an unbearably painful act of humiliation: when Hedda can no longer take it, when she shoots herself in the final act, not only does Judge Brack get his famously un-empathic and emotionally stunted closing line: “But, good God Almighty . . . people don’t do such things” (HG 264; HIS IX 203).³ Moreover, Bergman deviates from Ibsen’s instructions and has Hedda fall with her back vulnerably exposed to the audience and the Judge lift her head by her hair so as to reassure himself that

³ Again, Ibsen’s important modulation, this time in the form of an emphasis, is lost in translation: “Men, Gud forbarme,—sligt noget gør man da ikke!”

she really is dead, deader than dead, we might add.⁴ For with Hedda's suicide, what died—and this is even more harrowing than her actual death—is the hope of a life beyond the values of cold conventions and narrow social aspirations. Like Flaubert's Emma Bovary, Hedda is a dreamer. But unlike Emma, Hedda's existence is stripped of romantic reverie. Emma is bored and dreams of a life glorious, sweet and with a touch of glamor. Hedda, too, is bored. But she does not appear to believe in a life beyond boredom. If she dreams, she dreams of beauty. But beauty, for her, is simply a form of sense-making: an existence where the different pieces of her life would fit together, where there is room for action, self-expression and self-realization. This may well be why her final humiliation is so utterly crushing. As dreamers, as utopians of the everyday, we, the audience, are also being humiliated—our dreams, too, are being crushed, and yet we know that without such dreams, without such hopes and aspirations, human life is so gray, so lifeless, that it borders on the unliveable. Can Hedda, as she fights against this grayness, be imagined? On Theodor W. Adorno's reading, the poor Aunt Julle, evil incarnated, is both damned and damning because her very mission is to have us accept this grayness and stop imagining a life, a Hedda, beyond this dreamless existence, this world of nothing but the petty concerns of an anonymous *das Man*, to borrow a phrase from Martin Heidegger, Adorno's philosophical arch-enemy in the phenomenology camp (cf. Adorno 93–94).

PAINTING HEDDA

A painter of modern life, Edvard Munch was fascinated by Ibsen—by the man and by his work. He drew sketch after sketch of Ibsen's plays and characters. Some of them were commissions, most famously for the Max Reinhardt production of *Ghosts* at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin.⁵ There is, as mentioned, also a series of Heddas in Munch's collection. Munch's Hedda was, initially, painted at the invitation of Hermann Bahr, Reinhardt's companion in Berlin, but she ended up taking on a life of her own.

Hedda—the unknown and unknowable Hedda; Hedda as she is seen through the eyes of Julle, Jørgen and Brack.⁶ Hedda Gabler, as her name is given rhythm and presence through Ejlert's lack of self-containment; his needing, simply, to say her name as he once knew it, just as he needed, back

⁴ For a discussion of Bergman's production, see Frederick J. Marker and Lise-Lone Marker (191).

⁵ See Erika Fischer-Lichte (61–83).

⁶ In this respect, it seems Ibsen outdoes even Witold Gombrowicz, himself a master of indirect observation.

then, to overstep the boundaries of trust and make a pass on his friend's—the General—daughter. How did Munch imagine Hedda? How did he imagine Hedda—Gabler? Can the lingering of a hyphen, the dwelling on the vowels—the heavy, almost material quality of Løvborg's longings, the futile hope that time can be reversed, that Hedda Gabler's existence can, yet again, be resuscitated, given life, be brought back to the point at which her dreams and hopes still have a chance to leave a mark on reality—can all this find expression in paint form?

Among Munch's Hedda sketches, a simple watercolour image from the year immediately following Ibsen's death stands out.⁷ It is as powerful as can be. Munch captures Hedda in a state of frozenness and absolute isolation. He captures her, as it were, independent of the desiring gazes, of the investments of the aunt, the husband and the would-be lovers. In fact, there is not even furniture in the sketch, even though the placing and replacing of furniture figures significantly in Ibsen's portrayal of Hedda's caged existence. Perhaps for practical-theatrical reasons, perhaps as a result of artistic concerns, Munch presents his Hedda almost as an abstraction, though in other sketches she emerges in clothing that discretely matches the palette of the living room, as if she, too, were now but a piece of furniture in the Tesman's collection.⁸ In this simple watercolour rendering, Hedda stands forth with the uncompromising, existential either/or that structures her thoughts. This, Munch has us imagine, is Hedda as she really *is*, not as she is seen by the other characters, though we know far too well that here, too, she is seen—and that we, for that matter, are also seen, even if we happen to be more like actors without a stage. Hedda is alone, terrifyingly exposed in a poise of absolute composure. Her dress is sharp, of an armor-like quality, but her posture, arms by her side, reveals another side of her. The lifeless, almost rigid arms—in Munch's imagery we find this pose in, among other places, his pictures of women in the nude. Though naked, the women in question somehow appear less exposed than Hedda is. Or, to put it differently, in her blue-gray dress, standing there so cut off from all things human, Hedda seems even more drastically bared, even more drastically undressed than the nudes. In this way, Munch imagined Hedda for us, and his images, as it was intended for the Bahr production, was supposed to gain a life beyond watercolour, a life as embodied on stage.

⁷ Fig. 1. *Hedda Gabler*, 1906–07, watercolour and pencil, 660 x 487 mm. Munch Museum, Oslo. MM.T.1584.

⁸ Fig. 2. *Hedda Gabler* (sketch for scenography), 1906–07, gouache and watercolour, 340 x 500 mm. Munch Museum, Oslo. MM.T.1583.

CRAVING BEAUTY

Independently of its theatrical context, a striking aspect of Munch's Hedda portrait is its balancing the peculiar blend of realism and modernism that characterizes Ibsen's work, at least after he, with *Emperor and Galilean*, leaves behind the historical drama that made up the bulk of his production up until the 1870s. Munch presents Hedda—not as Hedda Gabler, not as Hedda Tesman, but as being anxiously pulled between these fraught identities—in a way that has her point back, perhaps, to the ever misplaced Madame Bovary, but also forward, albeit in a very different voice and a prose less disciplined, to James Joyce, whose youthful self was immersed in Ibsen and his language, and who, in 1901, wrote the old master a moving letter of respect and appreciation, sentiments that were later funneled into the rambling Norwegian references in *Finnegans Wake* (including the appearance of a master builder, or, as we read, *Bygmester*, Finnegan).⁹

If we no longer—as Adorno and Lukács had assumed in their famous Grand Hotel Abyss debate in the aftermath of the Second World War—have to choose between realism and modernism, then Ibsen's mature drama, marking the fluid boundaries between the two, gains a new relevance. Exploring the receptive space disclosed once we leave behind the idea of watertight literary periods and paradigms, we realize that while, in *Hedda Gabler*, the protagonist practically *is* the play, we are still talking about a work that synthesizes a mid-nineteenth-century concern with the individual heroine, the new woman and her role in a new bourgeois society, and a modernist awareness of the impossibility of true beauty in a world dominated by pragmatist morale and the ever-compromising middle grounds of the bourgeois. Like Munch and the Swedish playwright August Strindberg, Ibsen anticipates the currents of late twentieth-century art and thought. While *Hedda Gabler* is certainly not the only name play in Ibsen's *oeuvre*—we have *Catiline*, *Brand*, *Peer Gynt*, *Bygmester Solness* (as *The Master Builder* is called in the original), *John Gabriel Borkman*—*Hedda Gabler* is the only play that is named after a protagonist who no longer carries her name, thus displaying, in its very title, an eerie absence.

Many of Ibsen's characters are haunted by a desire for a beautiful life. And yet beauty will not be theirs. Beauty is something they think about, hope for, crave. In *A Doll's House*, having had its premiere 11 years prior to *Hedda Gabler*, we encounter at least two different versions of this: Torvald's (the husband's) narrow-minded dream of a beautiful, basically comfortable, existence, and Nora's less tamed desire for “the wonderful [det vidunderlige],” associated with true love and true acknowledgement. In *Hedda Gabler* we find

⁹ For a study of Joyce and Ibsen, see Bjørn J. Tysdahl.

a very different version of this desire. At one and the same time, Hedda is asking for very little and for far too much. Just as we know, from *Ghosts*, that Oswald Alving's hopes for a light and happy existence are bound to fail, so Hedda's desire for a beautiful (that is, meaningful) existence cannot but end in tragedy. Her tragedy, though, does not, like Nora's, have to do with her relationship to others. Nor is it, again like Nora, a matter of sticking to one's ethical-educational-existential ideals. Hedda's tragic conflict is not with other characters or ideals, but with her world and with herself: she fails to find meaning in the world as she knows it, yet also fails (due to gender? class? cultural situation?) to change her world so as to make it more inhabitable.

We do not, in Ibsen's universe, have many happy endings. Perhaps it is only in *The Lady from the Sea*, published two years before *Hedda Gabler*, that we get a promise of happiness. Elida Wangel's husband offers her the freedom to choose another man and another life, but she decides to stay, thus taking over and making both her marriage and her life her own. Also in *Little Eyolf*, where the main characters respond to the loss of a child with a genuine wish to do good for other children, is there a ray of hope. Yet the hope is relatively meager, as we know the parents' track-record is not exactly one of well-finished projects and responsible conduct. Their son, the drowned Eyolf, was maimed after he fell off a table where he was left while his parents spent time on their own.

Is there, then, no *promesse de bonheur* in Ibsen's drama? This was definitely the objection raised by his early critics: like his naturalist companions, Ibsen presents us with a universe so bleak, so deprived of a future, that the very institution of the theatre was said to be in peril. It is telling that of the forty works translated by the Danish stage director Johan Ludvig Heiberg, whom Ibsen met during a formative trip to Copenhagen in 1851, twenty-one were plays by Scribe.¹⁰ This was the era of the vaudeville, and of comedy and arts of the uplifting kinds. Breaking with this aesthetic (at times also aestheticizing) paradigm, Ibsen, it was feared, had opened the gates to a dour, unpleasant and earnest kind of theatre. If this was a new and truth-searching drama, then the critics could not help asking whose truth was on display and in whose name and under what banner it was issued in the first place.

Edmund Gosse, Ibsen's translator in England, wrote one of the first English language reviews of *Hedda Gabler*. While the pious Thea Elvsted, whose joy in life is to be Ejler and later Jørgen's companion in work, was praised for her character, Hedda was viewed as a monstrous version of the modern woman. Lacking in morale and respect for others, she was taken to display an egoism bordering on the insane; she was guilty of "indifferentism

¹⁰ See Elisabeth M. de Sousa (169–85, 172ff).

and morbid selfishness, all claws and thirst for blood under the delicate velvet of her beauty,” as Gosse put it. Gosse’s review is somewhat symptomatic of the larger reception. For, as the work premiered, reviewers got caught up in discussions of Hedda’s morality, or lack of it, rather than seeing her as a tragic figure, and her tragedy as associated with her sense of inhabiting a world in which values no longer had a place, where they withered and died, since a basic horizon of meaning, against which ideals could be identified, could no longer be found.¹¹ They did not, in short, see her as we can see her through the lens of Edvard Munch’s work: as a realist-modernist heroine captured in the existential cul-de-sac of a life that appears unliveable.

ART BEYOND BEAUTY

The reviewers’ orientation towards Ibsen’s pessimism is, doubtlessly, symptomatic of a certain vision of what art is and should be. Art should sustain, motivate and offer hope and ideals to live by.¹² However, as so many of Ibsen’s characters come to realize, a world of beautiful ideals can no longer be taken for granted—it is no longer ours. Further, the beauty Hedda and her likes are longing for is not a beauty beyond this world, not the beauty of transcendent ideals, but a beauty that colours the everyday fabric of intersubjective interaction, making the world a bit less mundane and, all the same, a bit more human.

Ibsen’s female characters do not long for the impossible. They long for a world that they can call theirs—a world where there is a future to speak of, where temporality extends beyond the past and the isolated moments of the present. Like Madame Bovary, the Noras Helmer, Helenes Alving or Heddas Gabler of this world are not irresponsible, utopian thinkers, but characters that stand forth, precisely, by virtue of their *care* for existence—they do, in a certain sense, take their world and their lives *seriously*. If this, as the reviewers initially pointed out, is nihilism, then it is of a kind that escapes the lethargy of Nietzsche’s passive nihilist, but also the fanfare of his world-creating counterpart.¹³

¹¹ Helpful material on this and other aspects of the work can be found in Christopher Innes’s *Henrik Ibsen’s “Hedda Gabler”: A Sourcebook*.

¹² As Ibsen puts it in a speech from 1887, he is a pessimist because he “does not believe in the eternal life of human ideals.” He adds, though, that this gives room for optimism—optimism about “fertility of [human] ideals and their ability to develop” (he believes in “idealernes forplantningsevne og . . . deres udviklingsdygtighed”) (“Tale Ved Fest I Stockholm 24 September 1887,” my translation).

¹³ Georg Brandes distinguishes between two different kinds of pessimism. Ibsen’s pessimism, he claims, is not of the sentimental and longing kind, but more related to moral indignation: he does not complain, he accuses, in Brandes’s Zola-inspired phrase (1).

Yet Ibsen's readers and audiences cannot but note that, in a wider sense, so many of Ibsen's characters are more than roles to be acted. His characters are also the playwrights or the dramaturgs of their own lives. Hedda is no exception. With her vision of a life that is not and cannot be hers, Hedda is stuck with her mundane concerns (the flowers, the hats, the curtains, her petty likes and dislikes) and, in her own words, with that very special talent for boredom. This is, though, not a situated boredom, as we experience it when waiting for the subway to arrive or are stuck at a party we did not want to attend in the first place. Hedda's boredom is of a kind that is unrelated to a concrete context; hers is a deeper and more profound kind of existential ennui. She needs beauty, her own definition of beauty, not the beauty of the other-worldly, idealist sort. And she needs the promise of a life that offers ideals that are not compromised, that, emphatically, *cannot* be compromised in terms of pragmatic-domestic concerns such as a well-furnished home, a well-groomed family, or a husband's more or less well-managed academic career. Having married into the Tesman clan, Hedda knows that beauty will not be hers. Hedda, though, has her own artistic skills. In her life, she fails to produce the beauty she longs for (though *her* suicide, unlike Ejlert's is indeed performed according to her criteria of beauty).¹⁴ Yet she produces a kind of play, a theatrical piece, within her circles.

By all conventional standards, Hedda's play is far from beautiful. She stages social relationships, turning friends and family into accomplices and audiences to her seemingly rather mean-spirited communication games. She shifts furniture around as if her home were indeed a stage. Hedda is a woman with her own theatre, yet this theatre fails to satisfy her; it does not and cannot live up to the beauty for which she longs.

Ibsen's female characters bear witness to an existence, a form of life, in which action no longer makes sense, no longer makes a difference, yet is so badly and thoroughly needed. Boxed into the small and well-defined universe of the *Kammerspiel*, there is a very distinct sense that one cannot go on, yet must (and, yes, there is, in this sense, a proto-Beckettian topos here). The moment the Ibsenesque heroine buckles is when the weight of this "must" gets too heavy. And just like the tragic female heroines brought forth by Flaubert or Zola, so the Noras, the Helenes, the Heddas of Ibsen's drama explore, in different ways, the costs of this impossible imperative. It matters, to be sure, that they are female characters. Yet the experiences they convey are deeply and profoundly human.

¹⁴ While the suicide is, in Ibsen's stage descriptions, performed offstage, we still learn, in the original, that she shoots herself in the head, although this part of the play is often altered in its more modern adaptations.

STAGING MODERNITY

What kind of world, then, is staged in Ibsen's drama? What kind of world is a character such as Hedda Gabler responding to and finding so colourless and dull? Where do we find the cold hearts of the Tesmans and the Judge, who observes Hedda almost as one would observe a helpless animal restlessly pacing its cage in a zoo? Is it the world of nineteenth-century Norway? Of nineteenth-century Europe? Or of a global cultural condition? And, further, is this a world that is still ours, as we watch the play being performed, over and over again, on stage?

In the scholarship, Ibsen, more often than not, is situated as part of nineteenth-century Norwegian culture, with its growing middle class, its emerging cultural identity, and its, for the time, fairly progressive discussion of gender. This, surely, is part of Ibsen's cultural backdrop and it may well be *one* way of shedding light on how, as a playwright, he allows such powerful female characters to take the stage—and thus creates an opening, in effect, for talented female actresses to realize themselves professionally, but also for a division amongst reviewers, with a general tendency towards a more positive response, in his time, from female audiences, especially with respect to a theatrical figure such as Hedda.

As a painter of modern life, as a painter inhabiting the very point at which modernity slides into full-scale modernism, Munch sketched Hedda and he sketched her spot on. He also made sketches for other Ibsen plays, including the woodcuts referring to *The Pretenders* and the program for *Peer Gynt*. The latter was a commission for Alfred Jarry and his avant-garde theatre in Paris. Munch, though, did not only draw Ibsen's characters. He also painted Ibsen himself. And among Munch's portraits of Ibsen, one stands out. Large in format and with Munch's characteristic pallet of roughly hewed gray-blue, green and yellow, the oil sketch is given the title *The Geniuses* (1909).¹⁵ Long after the publication and premiere of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, but only a few years after Munch's *Hedda Gabler*, Munch's sketch shows Ibsen, who had died three years earlier, in the company of Socrates and Nietzsche. Barely recognizable save for the eyebrows and sideburns, both of some nineteenth-century magnitude, Ibsen is situated slightly off centre, but is still the dominant figure. Nietzsche takes the centre space, but is somewhat smaller in shape and granted less massive a presence. Then there is Socrates, old, frail and pushed even further back. It seems that Socrates—and, with him, the ideals of the ancient Greeks—is

¹⁵ Fig. 3. *The Geniuses. Ibsen, Nietzsche and Socrates*, 1909, oil painting, 134.5 x 175 cm. Munch Museum, Oslo. MM.M.917.

about to wither, and Nietzsche and Ibsen, the heroes of artistic realism and philosophical naturalism, are prepared to take over.

The work was a sketch for Munch's commission for the great aula at the University of Oslo. Munch had imagined "large panels of Nietzsche, Ibsen, Socrates, against a background . . . where one can glimpse Egypt, with the pyramids and the Sphinx, the Alps and large cities" (qtd. in Templeton 37). In a spirit of *Lebensphilosophie*, it was to be accompanied by a panel showing how humanity "pushes itself up towards the light, a confused mass of humanity, one on top of another, straining towards the sun" (qtd. in Templeton 37). This, it is safe to assume, is a vision that marks the end of a romantic-idealistic era, whatever it might have been. If Munch himself was no painterly realist, he definitely appreciated the spirit of Ibsen's work, as it spanned the early historical plays, his realist and naturalist periods, and the later symbolic drama. As it is, Munch would himself be paying homage to Ibsen through a total of more than 400 paintings, prints and drawings.¹⁶

In the end, Munch abandoned his Socrates, Ibsen and Nietzsche motif—at least as far as direct portraiture is concerned. Instead, we get the famous sun, Oswald's sun, as Munch called it, with a reference to the dying protagonist, himself a painter, of Ibsen's *Ghosts*.¹⁷

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the context of Henrik Ibsen, Edvard Munch and *Hedda Gabler*, Munch's sketch is important for a number of reasons. Given the centrality of the painting—the festive grand hall of the University—it indicates how, in his view, painting, theatre and philosophy are all entirely crucial to the education of future generations. Munch's motif, for the sketch and the finished work, is even a bit tongue in cheek. For in this period, representatives of the university, as it was approaching its first centenary, were virulently opposed to the placing of a new National Theatre in its vicinity. A new National Theatre, they feared, would break the clean geographical axis from the Royal Palace to the University and further on to the National Assembly into an architectonic triangle that, along with governance and education, would include the dramatic arts.

Be that as it may, what matters for our context is that Munch, in the period around Ibsen's death, finds it appropriate to place Ibsen in the com-

¹⁶ Munch's work with the theatre is covered in Carla Lathe (191–206).

¹⁷ References to the sun, though, figure prominently in Ibsen's work. Perhaps nowhere so centrally as in *Emperor and Galilean*, where the dying Julian, in a pagan twist on Christ on the cross, utters "O, sol, sol—hvis bedrog du mig?" (HIS VI 742).

pany of central European philosophers, indeed the whole span of the European philosophical tradition from its early beginnings to its most controversial spokesman in the late 1800s. This philosophical landscape, Munch must have thought, is a suitable context for Ibsen, the dramatist. The assumption is equally fitting if we reverse it and also assume that Ibsen, on Munch's reading, suitably brings to stage the dominant trends in nineteenth-century European thought—that he, emphatically, *stages* the Nineteenth Century.¹⁸

Almost a century and a half after its initial publication, *Hedda Gabler*, the play and the character, has taken on a separate life, with or without the influence of her erstwhile creator. She has become part of our collective psyche, part of the theatre world and part of our understanding of what Sigmund Freud, another reader of Ibsen (and chronicler of female qualms and hesitation), would designate, in terms not quite captured in the English “discontent,” as *das Unbehagen in der Kultur*.¹⁹ From this point of view, there is a legitimate place for a Hedda in the transition from plain modernity to its hyper-reflected modernist articulations. And, as she is handed down to us by Munch, Hedda, in her blue-gray dress, stands there as an incarnation of the modernist imperative above them all: in the face of life un-lived, love turned cold, the only warmth that art can offer is that of giving voice to a pain that remains and will remain burning.

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¹⁸ Needless to say, this does not imply that the philosophical tenors make up the *only* or a privileged background to Ibsen’s work, simply that it is an important aspect of it and, further, aspect that, from a systematic point of view, is somewhat under-illuminated in the scholarship.

¹⁹ For an overview of Ibsen and psychoanalysis, see, for example, Liz Møller (112–28).

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Fig. 1. Edvard Munch, *Hedda Gabler*, 1906–07, watercolour and pencil, 660 x 487 mm. Munch Museum, Oslo. MM.T.1584.



Fig. 2. Edvard Munch, *Hedda Gabler* (sketch for scenography), 1906–07, gouache and watercolour, 340 x 500 mm. Munch Museum, Oslo. MM.T.1583.



Fig. 3. Edvard Munch, *The Geniuses. Ibsen, Nietzsche and Socrates*, 1909, oil painting, 134.5 x 175 cm. Munch Museum, Oslo. MM.M.917.