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The Virtues of *Hedda Gabler*

I

Sympathy for Hedda

From Ibsen's time to our own, the dislike for Hedda Gabler Tesman has been virtually unanimous. Here is Bernard Shaw, setting the tone for eighty years of detraction: ". . . though she has imagination, and an intense appetite for beauty, she has no conscience, no conviction: with plenty of cleverness, energy, and personal fascination she remains mean, envious, insolent, cruel in protest against others' happiness, fiendish in her dislike of inartistic people and things, a bully in reaction from her own cowardice."¹ Strong words, but typical. Beyond detesting Hedda, critics have typically explained her as a psychological case, as a madwoman or a severe sexual neurotic. Considering the contrast between her actions and her audiences, we should not be startled by these reactions. This is a century of social questions and social means, precisely what Hedda cannot tolerate. Also, very few professors are ready to countenance a woman who burns books—and important ones, at that.

Yet is this Ibsen's way, simply to certify or to condemn his characters? Not in the cases of Peer Gynt or Brand or Rebecca West or Solness or Borkman, to name a handful. Is the Hedda we normally meet in criticism the same woman about whom Ibsen wrote these notes? "With Hedda, there is deep poetry at bottom." "There is something beautiful in working for an objective. Even if it is a mistaken one." "She doesn't care about great affairs—nor about great ideas either—but about great human freedom."² There is more than a shadow of Ibsen himself in a note reading, "The play is to be about 'the insuperable,' the aspiration to and striving after something which goes against convention, against what is accepted into consciousness." If we take Hedda seriously, even provisionally so, we suddenly find that her mind is organized, creative. She is nothing like the woman without purpose or knowledge or vision portrayed by so many critics and actresses. Indeed, she is both creator and creature of a vision of "great human freedom." Frustrated by the mediocrity and compromise which surround her, Hedda throws her entire being into a passionate attempt to reclaim human life from its stifling, ignoble, bourgeois present.

Such a view is recent, owing quite a bit to the new feminism, and has been argued

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¹ *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1913 edition; rpt. New York, 1957), p. 109.

² These and all other subsequent references to the notes for *Hedda Gabler* are taken from *The Oxford Ibsen: Volume VII*, ed. J.W. McFarlane (London, 1966), pp. 476–497.

by John Northam, subtly and at length, in his book *Ibsen: A Critical Study* (1973). Northam sees that Hedda turns repeatedly in the play to such words as "free," "power," and "courage," words which define her central struggle to create a life above the average. Putting the case in this fashion has the advantage of making Hedda a considerably more ambiguous character, in part because the struggle to elevate life is a struggle about which we all have ambiguous thoughts. She is a serious thinker but lamed by her social conformity. She is a poet but a bungler. This conception of Hedda cannot avoid including much of the unlikeable woman (after all, we *are* discussing the same creation), but she becomes a notably more twentieth-century character now, a combination of romantic heroic with modern anti-heroic, both noble and absurd. Also, she seems an even finer piece of character-drawing on Ibsen's part, for Hedda taken seriously has at once more balance and more possibilities. And if she has stimulated interest for so long in one form and retains it now in another, this puts her in a very special class among dramatic characters. Indeed, one of the great pleasures of *Hedda Gabler*, as of most later Ibsen, is its complexity, its intellectual restlessness. Watching or discussing it, as Henry James saw immediately, makes for a brisk workout.³

II

Rhythm and Meaning

In drama—and especially in theatre—we learn bit by bit. Thus our reaction to any one piece of information or experience is conditioned by its place in a linear grouping. For example, compare Shaw's description of *Hedda Gabler* in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* with an actual experience (reading or viewing) of the work. Shaw begins thus: "Hedda's father, a general, is a widower. She has the traditions of the military caste about her; and these narrow her activities to the customary hunt for a socially and pecuniarily eligible husband. She makes the acquaintance of a young man of genius who, . . ."⁴ and continuing in this fashion, Shaw eventually reaches the beginning of the play's plot, then its end. But surely this is not the play as written. The first thing we know about Hedda is not that her father was a general and a widower but that she is asleep.

What she does upon rising begins the rhythm of *Hedda Gabler*. I am not referring here to its verbal or surface rhythm, a staccato dialogue style with, in most scenes, two characters trading short speeches. I mean instead the underlying rhythm, the on-going relations among parts (thematic elements, emotions, tempi). Obviously, this is a play in which the plot is virtually identical with the spine of Hedda's part, the *rhythm* of the plot inseparable from the rhythm of its central character, the linear combination of her ideas, emotions, desires, physical states, and so on. (It follows that the locus of any irony in this play will be outside its structure.) Another, less obvious general point is that the rhythm of *Hedda Gabler* is a function of its four acts, comes from the repeated statement of a particular pattern of experience.

³ "On the Occasion of *Hedda Gabler*," *New Review* (June 1891), reprinted in *Henrik Ibsen: A Critical Anthology*, ed. J. McFarlane (Penguin Books, 1970), pp. 130–32.

⁴ *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, p. 109.

In Act I, Hedda begins asleep and enters irritated and bored. She ends the act surprisingly interested in the professorial “duel” between her husband and Loevborg, taunting George Tesman about luxuries and threatening to play with General Gabler’s pistols.

What brings Hedda from boredom to excitement is news from the outside. (Like so many of Ibsen’s protagonists, Hedda is realistically house-bound, and like Nora Helmer, Mrs. Alving, Ellida Wangel, and others, she finds excitement and reality “out there.”) At first we see her in the world of the Tesmans, the simple, affectionate, bourgeois people whose virtues, underestimated even by Ibsen, make them the wrong people for Hedda to live among. She enters full of veiled insults and testiness about details and proceeds to grievous insult (Juliana’s hat) when cornered with that most homely artifact of George’s world, his slippers. After Juliana’s departure, Hedda paces about and looks long out the French windows. She says that she is thinking about the leaves, but she is also looking for relief. Then, in the next minute, that relief comes with Mrs. Elvsted. She stirs Hedda to her first real interest—Thea has changed, Thea is connected with Loevborg—and Hedda, stirred, begins to act, dispatching Tesman and deftly extracting Thea’s story. Judge Brack provides yet more interest, in part because Hedda finds him sympathetic and amusing. But the Judge also bears sensational news: Loevborg has had a great success and is now in town challenging Tesman’s professorship. Hedda hears most of this in silence, lounging back in her chair listening with obvious enjoyment. When she voices that enjoyment—“Ah, how interesting!” and “How exciting, Tesman. It’ll be a kind of duel, by Jove.”⁵—she is more engaged than we have seen her before. (If the contest over the professorship *is* like a duel, as Meyer translates, what are we to make of the psychological implication? Duels may be fought over professorships, but they are more commonly fought over women. Whose favors are in question?) From this emotional and dramatic climax, she moves on to taunt her husband and revel in her anticipation, quite in defiance of her own prospective material comfort.

The opening of Act II finds Hedda now loading her pistols, but again heavily bored. Thirty-five minutes later she is clutching Thea wildly, announcing her fervent expectation that she has helped Loevborg to become “free,” “burning and unashamed,” a Bacchic god “with vine leaves in his hair.”

The dramatic line of this act is considerably more exciting, for Ibsen has already cleared away most of his introductory exposition. He begins with the long and subtle discussions between Hedda and Brack. This is our first extended look into Hedda’s conception of her situation, how she is “bored to death,” how she lacks what is customarily called “an outlet.” She has backed into her marriage, now sees it for a mistake. Physically, she is repelled by marital sex and, however flirtatious with the Judge, frightened by extramarital affairs. Like so many women, she is left miserable among the conventional props of happiness. But Loevborg’s arrival will

⁵ I have quoted throughout this paper from Michael Meyer’s translation in *Hedda Gabler and Three Other Plays* (Garden City, N.Y., 1961). I have no pretense to knowing the Norwegian original and have adopted Meyer’s version, with the appropriate cross-references to other translations for checks on general accuracy, since I find Meyer both readable and actable.

change all that, and Hedda is already preparing her maneuvers. "If the worst comes to the worst," she says disingenuously to Tesman and Brack, "Mr. Loevborg can sit here and talk with me." And, after a polite interval in which Loevborg reveals that he will not compete for the professorship, she invites the visitor to stay and dine with Thea. But Hedda must "tell the servant" to change the table. Her order to Bertha, of course, is to prepare punch in the back room, a little gambit designed to separate Brack and Tesman from Loevborg, who is abstaining. This is followed by her use of the picture-album, an overt recreation of the setting in which she and Loevborg were once so intimate. Her final piece of drawing-room strategy is her most complicated, getting Loevborg to drink. She allows Thea and Loevborg to exult in their relationship, particularly in the "courage of [Thea's] convictions . . . where friendship is concerned." Hedda then feints (tempting Loevborg to drink), retreats in admiration ("Firm as a rock"), and pulls the string, turning to Thea with "Didn't I tell you so this morning when you came here in such a panic?" Thea's courage is unmasked as typical feminine doubt, the glue of her friendship dissolves, and Loevborg lunges to the punch-cup. As she explains later to Thea, Hedda has achieved "the power to shape a man's destiny." Her ideal for Loevborg is neither middle-class respectability nor literary eminence, but personal freedom and blazing transcendence. Here, as the vocabulary of Hedda's secret desire comes to the surface for the first time, so does the essential moral debate of the play, the debate over ideals. We leave Hedda in tremendous excitement, anticipating Loevborg's return.

At the start of Act III, Hedda is once more asleep. At its close, she is holding out for a new hope, Loevborg's "beautiful" suicide, his heroic renunciation. Her final action, burning his manuscript, is the most sensational thing we have seen so far in the play.

This is the simplest of the play's four acts, largely because it contains three long scenes in which Hedda listens to others talk. She now has very few tricks to play, because she is waiting for news of Loevborg's triumph. Tesman, the first to arrive, is characteristically little help. He is more interested in the manuscript than in the man, can only see as incorrigibility what Hedda believes to be Loevborg's heroism: his refusal of fear and compromise. Brack too reacts along now familiar lines, bringing Hedda the seamy details of the evening and, with them, the realization that Loevborg "didn't have a crown of vine-leaves in his hair." Hedda's vision of wild freedom has been dragged through the gutter and the whorehouse to the police station. Her disappointment is very sharp, as she makes clear when Loevborg enters talking wildly of his ruin, his despair, and his broken will. But when he rejects Thea with the lie about the lost book, Hedda's excitement begins to rise for the third time in the play. She believes him when he says that he is broken, that he can neither reform nor plunge into debauchery, and that he is bent on suicide. It is arguable that the discovery of his manuscript would change nothing. So she takes a final chance on Loevborg, asking him for a "beautiful" death. Both this and the burning of the manuscript can be difficult for an audience to absorb, but they are not illogical. Hedda sees a last hope—"Just this once," she says, and "Only promise me that!"—for some nobility, some act which defies drab mediocrity.

Act IV begins with Hedda walking aimlessly about the rooms, waiting again for

news from outside. The end of the act is her suicide, preceded by wild piano, gallows irony, and the electrifying conversations with Brack.

The substance of this final act is easily predictable and, for that reason, extremely fascinating. Hedda returns at the beginning to the Tesman world, which still chafes. Thea enters with the first inconclusive news of Loeborg. Brack brings the full story, or at least the version he has decided to tell them. Hedda weighs the shot to the breast—she had expected the head—and finds that it fulfills her requirements for “beauty” and “courage.” At last, before Tesman, Brack, and Thea, she can reveal her exultation. When Tesman and Mrs. Elvsted retire to work on the manuscript notes, Hedda is even more open with Brack about her stake in Loeborg’s suicide: “Doesn’t it give one a sense of release!” Hedda has continually sought to fulfill her vision of human potential through Loeborg, but now, at the moment of success, she is most vulnerable. As Brack proceeds with terrible deliberation to strip every glamorous detail from the event until it appears in all its degradation, down to the bullet which pierced Eilert in the “lower part” of the stomach, Hedda crumples before us. Her cry, “Oh why does everything I touch become mean and ludicrous? It’s like a curse!” is the beginning both of her suffering and of her insight. She has nothing left but to face her personal responsibility for her personal vision.

III

Some Observations

1. The obvious point of this act-by-act summary is to recreate Hedda’s movement, repeated with ascending intensity, from sleep or boredom to excitement and anticipation, including in this curve a disappointment of the hopes raised by the end of the previous act. This is the rhythm of the individual acts, the rhythm of Hedda’s character, and the very substance of the play. The play is *about* breasting lethargy and disappointment in the effort to realize a vision.

2. The same line or rhythm of plot is a powerful feature of the play even if we interpret Hedda as sick or wantonly destructive. It simply bears different results. If the play’s various interpretations had not been congruent with the action, *Hedda Gabler* would have been incomprehensible for the last ninety years, something it clearly has not been.

3. Hedda’s vocabulary of human potential consistently emerges at the ends of the acts: the contest or duel between Tesman and Loeborg (Act I), the vine leaves about the head of the burning, unashamed Loeborg (Act II), and the beautiful suicide (Act III). This imagery is essentially anachronistic. For some readers it is romantic in a bad sense, the stuff of school-girl fantasies. For others it is simply inevitable. What other language can a person in this society use? Perhaps most important, Hedda’s imagery describes a negative world, a vision of where she does not live. We can label it *primitive* (Hedda may have been literally “civilized to death”), *masculine* (Hedda is female in a world with uncongenial modes of feminine transcendence), and, above all, *free* (Hedda sees herself as imprisoned). These terms show us the heart of the matter.

4. An exchange with Brack in Act II:

BRACK: You're not really happy. That's the answer.

HEDDA: Why on earth should I be happy? Can you give me a reason?

Loevborg, in the photo-album scene, and Thea, at the end of the second act, have roughly similar conversations with Hedda. No one can understand what she wants. Isn't happiness enough? Very few critics have faced this question. If they had, it would have been apparent that Hedda is much less interested in happiness than in freedom, "great human freedom." In fact, she becomes happy only when she imagines the possibility of freedom. I think this represents Ibsen's most optimistic position—happiness might come with personal freedom—and an early example of a major twentieth-century thematic emphasis, particularly in the literature of the oppressed.⁶ But Ibsen is finally a pessimist, as we see at the play's end. Given the nature of modern society and the nature of the human animal, freedom (hence, happiness) is impossible.

5. I may seem over-eager to prove that Hedda is engaged in so serious a task as the redefinition of human potential. Yet exactly this redefinition was among Ibsen's formative ideas for the play. At first it was confined to Loevborg and the book about the future. In the notes, Ibsen imagined a book entitled "The Moral Doctrine of the Future" which simultaneously attacked contemporary bourgeois morality ("Life on the present social basis is not worth living.") and posited a new task for humanity ("Upwards, towards the bringer of light."). Such a work would recast our assumptions about "the great, the good, and the beautiful," and would make a point which has not lost its pertinence: "There is talk of building railways and roads in the service of progress. No, no, that's not it. You have to make room for the human spirit to take the great turn. Because that's on the wrong road." The "saving idea" or lever of change was to be a new possibility of "companionship between men and women," an idea with obvious ramifications for dramatic relationships among Loevborg, Thea, and Hedda. A plausible description of the intellectual history of *Hedda Gabler* is that Loevborg's ideas spilled over into Hedda's actions.

6. For three and a half acts, Hedda can only imagine experiencing freedom vicariously, by stimulating and watching another person, particularly a man, specifically Loevborg. This "cowardice" is her greatest flaw of character, to be sure, though perhaps a flaw she transcends in her final moments. It is also a modern, anti-heroic touch. It is not, however, an indication that her vision itself is bankrupt. To think so is to confuse character and idea on the most elementary level.

7. Hedda is certainly destructive. So are Antigone and Nora Helmer and Blanche Dubois. Misconceptions about women aside, I see no reason to be particularly disturbed at the simple existence of this fact. In one sense, Hedda is a social Luddite, constitutionally unable to accept the world of drivellers, pedants, and failures which is upon her. Such fury can be ironic, healthy, even heroic. Likewise with her suicide. May we not choose oblivion over the world as defined by Judge Brack? Sometimes, adaptation is not a virtue.

⁶ A recent example: "There's just one thing in this life that's better than happiness and that's freedom," says Sissy Hankshaw Gitchie in Tom Robbins' *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (Boston, 1976), p. 174.

8. One of the most problematic aspects of Ibsen's dramatic method is that Hedda acts a good deal before she *explains* the rationale for her actions. Remembering the remorseless linearity of drama, this creates both problems and peculiar esthetic delights, here as in other plays. The theatrical difficulty, of course, is to emphasize the sub-text in Hedda's first act and a half so that audiences watching her carp and maneuver can anticipate a rationale more interesting than neurosis or derangement.

9. What are Hedda's alternatives? Thea is often cited as one, but we only need see the play to note the difference between these two women. No matter how courageously she acts, Thea is a small, easily dominated person who finds her fulfillment through intellectual work guided by men. By contrast, Hedda is all force (theatrical "presence"). She also insists that people (Loevborg, for a start) create the future in action, not write about it. Tesman and his family hardly offer her a way, however nice they can be. Brack's cynicism and adultery are no help either; Hedda is intent on fighting off the former and has neither the attraction nor the courage for the latter. Any discussion of *Hedda Gabler* comes to this question of "alternatives" at some point, and I see none in Hedda's world which seems to win Ibsen's endorsement.

10. A major difficulty of this play is whether the audience can feel some sympathy for Hedda's ideals, since most will disapprove her methods. One way to generate such sympathy is to underline the qualities of the social forces blocking her. Another is to emphasize how much the vision of transcendence matters to her. As we see at the end, Hedda believes that this vision is necessary to life itself, that life unchanged is ridiculous and unbearable. A secondary structure of the play is formed over a long series of despairing moments, including her withdrawal from Juliana's kiss, her meditation on the leaves, her rejection of Thea's claim that another woman pointed a pistol at Loevborg ("People don't do such things. The kind of people we know."), a string of comments to Brack at the beginning of Act II, a remark to Thea and Loevborg in the drinking scene ("If one only had [courage]. . . . One might be able to live. In spite of everything."), her protest to Tesman early in Act IV that life's absurdity is "destroying me," and the realization of her "mean and ludicrous" failures near the end. The play's fabric is also studded with small, behavioral examples of her despair. One is her answer to Loevborg when he says, "Hedda Gabler married? And to George Tesman?" Hedda shoots back a look and a reply: "Yes. Well—that's life."

11. When Ibsen began work on this play, when he was at the note-taking stage, he clearly conceived of Hedda as a powerful, energetic character. He frequently used terms in describing her which, taken together, give a good picture of the final product: "attraction," "aspiration," "drawn," "working for," "chase after," "influence," "subterranean forces and powers," "demonic," "demand," "desperation," "torment," "hysteria." He was also fascinated by her ambitions and the social forces which opposed them, remarking on this repeatedly. When he wrote the "Earlier Draft" of the play, he put the key terms ("power," "courage," "cowardice," "free") securely in place and adequately described Hedda's fear of scandal and her

vicarious habit of mind.⁷ What he added in the final draft is illuminating. First, the ends of the acts, particularly of the first two, were enormously strengthened in revision. Second, nearly all of the imagery came in here. It is not until the last draft that we hear about the vine leaves and Dionysus, the autumn leaves, Thea's hair, George's slippers, Brack as the "cock of the walk," and the elaborate railway metaphor of Act II. The English symbolists Yeats and Symons used to complain that Ibsen's "vine leaves" and "harps in the air" were mere poetic veneer. In this case, they were right, though I think they undervalued Ibsen's imagistic strengthening of psychological issues.

IV

Character and Scenic Texture

The most expressive element of *Hedda Gabler* is the repeated rhythm traced above, an element which brings great solidity to the basic line of Hedda's search. But the play is hardly all spine and musculature. On top of the drama's inexorable motion is a "flesh" we have no good critical term to describe. Provisionally, we may call it *general scenic texture*, meaning thereby a combination of tempo, setting, tone, rhythm, and character-relations. Such texture is the peculiar quality of particular present-tense experience in a scene, as well as the resonances in any present which emanate from past or future. At any one moment scenic texture is more or less rich and complex, more or less dominated by linear thrust, more or less developed in terms of theme or information.

Typically, the opening moments of a realistic play are among its thinnest and least interesting. We attend to our lessons—the exposition—like dutiful students on the first day of term. This can be as true in Ibsen as in any other playwright, yet, at the beginning of *Hedda Gabler*, the scenes involving the Tesmans have considerable interest beyond their sheer information-value. At first, where Juliana finds sermons in the room which Bertha tidies, we watch these two women walking on tiptoe lest they disturb Hedda and George. Trepidation and an almost ritualistic preparation of the ground mix with bourgeois morality and humor. In the second of these scenes, George and Juliana go beyond sketching the background to reveal their own relationship: hearty, open, affectionate, both characters richly delighted with the family success. In production, these scenes are normally not much more than silly and expository. Yet, as Ibsen told an early producer, the Tesman family (including Bertha) requires careful rendering, since they form "a whole and a unity," with a "common way of thinking; common memories, and a common attitude to life." With an emphasis on the texture of the early moments, we will be prepared for Hedda's entrance and its underlying point: "For Hedda they appear as an inimical and alien power directed against her fundamental nature."⁸

Through the bulk of this play, the general scenic texture is in fact the present relationship of Hedda and one other character (Tesman, Brack, Thea, Loevborg).

⁷ The "Earlier Draft" quoted here and later is reprinted in *The Oxford Ibsen*, VII, 269–352.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 505.

Thus *Hedda Gabler* is so successful and pleasing on a moment-by-moment basis because Hedda herself is such a various and dynamic character. Between her heady releases from bourgeois confinement and her despair over entrapment, she demonstrates many sides and qualities: great alertness to manners and speech, quick scorn, strange humor, cowardice, the body of a good horsewoman, snobbishness, and a frightening distaste for both birth and death. And she is very intelligent, not because you or I share her perceptions (how often is *this* our standard of intelligence among characters?), but because her mind works very rapidly. She rarely needs to stop a speaker for an explanation, more typically pushes her interlocutor on to the next point, the next detail. Equally fast are her emotional and intellectual changes (see the first scene with Brack in Act II). As already pointed out, she is a woman of dramatic and quickly executed highs and lows. Particularly when Hedda becomes depressed, she does so in the midst of conversation, with surprising speed.⁹ When she interacts with the minor characters, Hedda's mercurial variety creates an ever-changing surface experience.

After she suffers among the Tesmans, she talks with Thea in the play's first serious *tour-de-force*, a gem among the acting-class scenes of modern theatre. Thea changes toward Hedda, being at first intimidated, later softened by Hedda's handling, and finally almost completely relaxed. She is eloquently emotional when discussing her marriage. Her remarks on Loevborg are as important for their effect on Hedda as for exposition. Through most of the scene, Hedda herself is constantly digging. She quickly discovers how to manipulate Thea from topic to topic, how to make her expose her own lies, and this manipulation, the spine of the scene, is the first faint indication that Hedda is not just nervous, but "after something." Thea, in turn, is relieved to be found out in her lies. She proves eager, even delighted to talk about Loevborg, her intellectual awakening, and her departure from home. Yet here we see Ibsen's mastery at scenes of interplay. For as Thea revels in her new courage and her power over Loevborg, the focus moves inevitably back to Hedda and her strange unexplained envy.

After the revelations and drama of this scene, Thea's part and her effect on the play's texture become increasingly negligible. Once Hedda gets the important information (Act I), she must put up with Thea long enough to defeat her (the drinking scene of Act II). Thereafter, Thea is reduced to a theatrically demeaning trick, running in breathlessly again and again. As the play progresses, her real personal accomplishments are overrun by her "conventional," "sentimental," "hysterical," and "petty bourgeois" characteristics, all qualities which Ibsen noted in planning the play. An actress can only look forward to her eloquent confrontation with Loevborg over the book in Act III.

A few seconds after Hedda has finished with Thea, Judge Brack enters, and with him comes a completely new relationship for Hedda, one which holds our attention

⁹ I am deeply indebted in a number of places here to the perceptions of a brilliant young actress, Marilyn K. Pittman, who played Hedda under my direction in March of 1976. I must also acknowledge serious contributions from conversation and rehearsal made by Stuart Dyson (Judge Brack), Ellen Dowling (Thea Elvsted), and Peter Shea Kierst (Tesman).

until the middle of Act II. From their first exchange—"May one presume to call so early?" "One may presume,"—it is clear that these people speak the same language, a more elegantly mannered language than that spoken by anyone else on stage. Together, Brack and Hedda are cynical, allusive, witty, and alert. Hedda gets information from him in a very different manner from the one which she uses with Thea. She plays with him, leads him wittily around the point. Brack is also one of the two characters (Loevborg is the other) who can dominate a scene with Hedda, and by the final act, where he quite dominates, this becomes a vital theatrical fact. However, the Judge has his shortcomings. From beginning to end, he fails to appreciate the seriousness of Hedda's mind, at least in part because his interest in her is so heavily sexual (a feature of the man considerably toned down from the early draft to the final one). He does not, of course, think very seriously or very highly of anyone. He is the spokesman of the party, to which Hedda occasionally belongs, which says, "People don't do such things." Herein lies the dramatic danger of Brack. He is so attractive on first and second meetings, so witty and so quick compared to the Tesmans or Thea, that we are liable to see too much of the play through his eyes, to see Tesman as too ridiculous, Thea as too insignificant, and Hedda herself as a woman who would be better off without her mind. But every time he is on stage Brack's greatest influence on the texture of scenes is to elicit from Hedda an extraordinary subtlety of response.

And then, in the middle of Act II, comes Loevborg, one of the most *talked about* characters in dramatic literature. Even Ibsen, in his notes, could not resist discussing Loevborg. Yet the other characters' preoccupation with him makes Loevborg's part, which is in fact quite slight, a rather risky proposition. This is particularly true of his elaborately prepared entrance in Act II. However, Ibsen's solution is brilliant, for on entering, Loevborg rejects his famous first book as merely "what I knew everyone would agree with" and then flourishes the second book, "the one in which I have spoken with my own voice." This is a very canny dramatic *coup*. At one stroke, Loevborg overcomes his reputation and provides his audience with another, even higher, achievement to admire. A man we can trust on such matters, George Tesman, has already noticed the scholarly solidity of the first work. In the third act he will attest to the visionary brilliance of Loevborg's book about the future.

Despite his electrifying entrance, Loevborg's is still a very difficult role to play. In an otherwise unexceptional production at the Moscow Arts Theatre (1899), Stanislavsky is said to have been among the few who could capture live the peculiar genius of the man.¹⁰ Even this is not the whole, however, for the key to Loevborg is what Ibsen frequently called his "demonic" nature. His family is one of influence, yet he has long been fascinated with the *demimonde*. He is brilliant but weak, as we see from his first entrance and his precarious hold on sobriety and self-control. His vices—hard drink and soft women—are never indulged without the ravages of guilt, confession, and absolution. He is a victim of a very common nineteenth-century division in his attitudes toward good and bad women, something undoubtedly worsened by Hedda's early rejection of his amorous advances. This

¹⁰ David Magarshack, *Stanislavsky: A Life* (London, 1950), p. 188.

"demonic" tension is critical when we come to Act III and the snapping of his spirit after his fall. But whatever his weaknesses, Loevborg is the moral actor of the play (Hedda is the director), the one who changes, the test case.

Both the weakness and the strength of Loevborg come into conflict with the same qualities in Hedda during the photograph album scene, and this is one reason that the scene is among *Hedda Gabler's* best. Until the end of the play, we never see Hedda so vulnerable. Loevborg, in turn, is often tough here because he is trying to stave off his instinct once again to grovel before Hedda. And the scene has been expected by both parties for so long that it must be a terribly excited one. Ibsen goes still further in order to boost the emotional and theatrical intensity. He splits the scene front-and-back, keeping Tesman and Brack in the back room within view and, as few directors seem to realize, *hearing*. This rear scene can hardly be anything but jovial and, as the punch flows, increasingly boisterous, forming a highly ironic backdrop to the whispered intensity of the Loevborg-Hedda conversation. Tesman's two excursions to the front room only increase the tension which then spills over into the action climax of the play's first half, the drinking scene. Treated in such strictly realistic terms, the album scene, like the films of Robert Altman, reveals the hidden poetic possibilities in the esthetics of realism.

Thea, Brack, and Loevborg are all interesting, complete characters and theatrically productive personalities for Hedda to play against. George Tesman is another matter. A precise idea about his character is important for several reasons. First, as with any spouse, he reflects on his wife. Second, he is on stage more than any character except Hedda, thereby controlling a large part of the play's tone. Tesman cannot make *Hedda Gabler* great, but he can ruin it. It is possible that, for one of the few times in his mature work, Ibsen made serious mistakes in the portrayal of Tesman. The problem is visible in the very genesis of the play.

In one early note, Ibsen called Tesman "undistinguished as a person, but an honourable, talented and liberal-minded scholar." In another, the playwright discussed Hedda's attitude: "She respects his learning, she can recognize his nobility of character, but she is embarrassed by his insignificant and ridiculous bearing, makes mock of his behaviour and utterances." In composition or in performance, holding these elements in balance is perilous: "ridiculous" and "undistinguished" on one hand, "honourable," "talented," and "noble" on the other. The silly side of the character was obvious in the planning stages. Ibsen made Tesman, like Hjalmar Ekdal, the spoiled son of his aunts. He imagined a scene in which the short-sighted professor would push his nose into a cactus while saying, "Oh, what a lovely rose." Ibsen saw something cruelly comic, a "burlesque touch," in the reconstruction of Loevborg's manuscript at the end. But he also knew that Tesman must appear "pathetic" to Hedda late in the play. In the "Earlier Draft," Tesman is nowhere near as comic as in the final one, nowhere near as thick-headed, verbose, or exclamatory. His principal verbal tic (translated variously as "Eh?" "Hm," or "What?") appears only three times. He hardly ever says "Fancy that!" or "Hedda, did you hear that?" He does not mistake Thea's maiden and married names. He does not play the fool with the slippers. His analysis of Loevborg's second book

(Act III) is deeper, longer, and reflects more positively on Tesman himself. And he expresses serious doubt of his own ethics for having let Loevborg slip off into Brack's orgy. A few differences between later and earlier versions make Tesman look ridiculous (at one point he asks Hedda if she wouldn't like to work on his scholarship, as Thea had with Eilert), but in balance the underdevelopment of the character in the first draft makes for a less laughable man, a more serious general tone.

In the final draft of the play, Ibsen loaded Tesman's character with the ridiculous and did not substantially increase the respectable, so that the part as we have it is a chancy combination of positive and negative qualities. Even before we have Hedda's or Brack's eyes through which to see him, Tesman looks foolish, in the "expecting" sequence with Juliana in Act I. In the next scene, his forced sentimentality over the slippers makes him unbearable to audience and Hedda alike. He forgets his engagements for the evening. He exclaims "It's impossible" in the face of obvious facts. His occasional interjections—"By Jove!" and "Fancy that!" and so on—are not occasional enough. After the first scenes of Act II, where he must interrupt Brack and Hedda, the case is usually hopeless. Directors tend to take Tesman as Hedda and Brack perceive him rather than counterbalancing these opinions against the man's reality, thereby making additional points about Brack and Hedda. How can we now appreciate his positive qualities: his emotional warmth, his indefatigable niceness, his scholarly respectability, and his generally high community reputation? When Loevborg brings his book to Tesman before he takes it to the publishers, does anyone notice what the gesture says about Tesman?

So, in theatrical or literary interpretation, the character of Tesman is crucially determined by emphasis and handling. A few examples, among very many in the play:

- when he says of Loevborg's book, "I'd never think of writing about anything like that."
- his first, non-verbal reaction to Loevborg's "I only want to defeat you in the eyes of the world."
- when he waits on Hedda and Loevborg, saying "I like waiting on you, Hedda."
- when he responds to Hedda's question about the party: "Vine leaves? No, I didn't see any of them."

To take only the last example, is Tesman ridiculous because he cannot make out Hedda's private metaphors? In general, is he stupid because he doesn't understand his wife? Does anyone else on stage understand her? By insistent shading, these and other details can be interpreted to show the better side of Tesman, creating at least a more various character and holding the tone of the play under a semblance of control.

Finally, of course, the various sides of Tesman are important because they influence our perception of Hedda. The specific theatrical problem here is a serious one. Place the emphasis wrongly in a scene or a beat and Hedda's line will simply disappear. We can see examples in the final scenes of Act I, but the problem reaches critical proportions in Act IV. Let the wanton, destructive Hedda, the character without intellect or conscience, play opposite the most absurd Tesman possible,

and what do we have? In such a performance, neither character will be taken seriously, either emotionally or intellectually, and the play quickly resembles nothing so much as one of the daffier works by Ionesco—a startling thought. I think a more intelligent response is to stress the solid and respectable bourgeois character of Tesman, particularly his emotional responsiveness and kindness, letting the comedy take care of itself.

V

Tragedy (Act IV)

A play with an expressive plot rhythm and various scenic texture could still be third-rate, boring, or quickly dated. But *Hedda Gabler* is not *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*. It is, instead, a masterpiece, one of the greatest plays of our history, a triumph of intellect and theme. As so often in his work, Ibsen is able to involve himself with vital cultural issues—freedom, happiness, modern society, life and death—at the most basic levels of his dramaturgy. The result is tragedy by nearly any reasonable definition of the term. Architecture, sophisticated writing, intellectual passion, and the tragic impulse all combine to maximum effect where maximum effect is naturally called for, the final act.

The action begins with a return to the Tesman family setting. This places Hedda in an intellectual and emotional context where birth and death are easily acknowledged as the ends and natural validators of life. Excepting the revelation to George that the manuscript has been burned, the first three scenes are almost exclusively dominated by the death of Aunt Rina and the approaching birth of Hedda's baby. Such an emphasis is most pertinent to the climax of this section, Hedda's cries of despair to the elated Tesman: "Oh, it's destroying me, all this—it's destroying me! . . . Oh, it's all so—absurd—George." Generally speaking, any production or critical interpretation which does not make sense of these lines is not working hard enough to understand the play. What is "all this" if not her immediate surroundings, the bourgeois world and the world of natural cycles which she so clearly rejects? The speech expresses much of the pressure under which Hedda has put herself in her singlehanded effort to create an alternative world. Her oppression by absurdity (and the modern resonance is inescapable) comes from the conflict between setting and dream, between a world where she must buy off Tesman with promises of affection and the world she hopes to see, a free condition which Eilert Loevborg may, at this very instant, be creating. The increase in this tension threatens her very existence.

The next section of the act consists of two scenes in which the suicide news is brought by Thea and Brack. In the first of these, where Thea's news is so inconclusive, Hedda says hardly anything. Once Brack enters with fuller details, she becomes more and more active. Yet the physical quality of the scene is extremely static. Ibsen writes no stage directions for movement from Brack's entrance to the section between Tesman and Thea on the manuscript. The absence of movement puts additional emphasis on character and on the dialogue style, which is at its most telegraphic. These in turn stress the scene's substance, which is subjectivity, the

four individual reactions to the news. Brack underlines this fact when he says, about the reactions both to Rina's death and to Eilert's, "that depends on how you look at it." And indeed, how they look at it is what we spend most of our time watching here. Thea almost immediately breaks down, so strong is her residual attachment to Loevborg. Tesman asks the questions that they (and we) need asked. Beyond this, his one aside to Hedda is a clear proof (his decision to reconstruct the manuscript is another) that his conscience is in revolt over the death. Brack is all eyes and ears. He has come here to deliver his news and to observe its reception, particularly by Hedda. The audience, knowing more than the Judge, is just as interested in her reactions.

At first, Hedda gives Brack exactly what he wants, clear indication of her complicity in the suicide, and she does so repeatedly ("So quickly!"—"Yes, he has [killed himself], I'm sure of it!"—the breast-head sequence—finally her explosive "At last!"). Why she should be this obvious in betraying her intimacy with the deed is an interesting question. Most likely she is so enthralled with the apparent reality of her success through Loevborg that, for once, she is utterly heedless of social or judicial consequences. For her exultation could not be greater. "At last! Oh, thank God!" she begins, and her exclamation bears the weight of her repeated failures and of her parting words to Loevborg ("Just this once."). In the act of settling "his account with life" she sees the "beauty" and "courage" which have all along been the qualities transferred from her own desires to Loevborg's poor, fragile life. But immediately, as a reminder that Hedda is not alone in her world, the others begin to insist on different motivations for the suicide, a scene not without its comic grace-notes. While this brief bit of absurdity is extended into Tesman and Thea deciding to reconstruct the manuscript, Brack holds his watchfulness, Hedda her triumphant mood. Each waits for the other two to leave the stage so that the real drama can resume.

It resumes in the two stunning scenes between Brack and Hedda which provide the tragic climax of *Hedda Gabler*. The first of them is as perfectly constructed as any scene Ibsen wrote, beginning with Hedda's "Oh, Judge! This act of Eilert Loevborg's—doesn't it give one a sense of release!" One of the brilliant things about Hedda's lines explaining her interpretation of Loevborg's deed is that we might have predicted what she would say here. We know what she wanted. We know her ideas of beauty, bravery, and courage. We know why another's act can be a release for her and what she wants release from. "At last" she has fulfilled herself. But the world of traditional tragedy, to which this play arguably belongs, reminds us that the heroine is most vulnerable to destruction at the moment of her greatest triumph. Hedda's destruction by Brack's new, squalid details concerning the suicide is so inevitable, so obvious from the moment it starts, and so painstakingly executed that we might be inclined to miss the oddest thing about it, the final detail on which Brack breaks her:

BRACK: . . . The shot had wounded him mortally.

HEDDA: Yes, in the breast.

BRACK: No. In the—hm—stomach. The—lower part—

HEDDA: (*looks at him with an expression of repulsion*) That too! Oh, why does everything I touch become mean and ludicrous? It's like a curse!

In what other serious play does the exact *placement* of a fatal gun-shot serve as the revelation which utterly undoes the protagonist? In what other play would we see its pertinence, accept its importance? This is one of the sequences where *Hedda Gabler* bears far more resemblance to *Rosmersholm* and *Little Eyolf*, with their unearthly dialogues, than to the building-block solidity of *Ghosts*. Over many viewings of this scene, I never fail to lose my incredulity at Ibsen's peculiar point here.

And so she begins to suffer. It is a tragic suffering which makes all her bad moments pale by comparison. We can see the depth of her misery as she resists Brack's inference that Loevborg stole the dueling pistol from the Tesman house. That one sordid detail is *not* true, and she will not allow it to stand from a complicated sensibility which prefers the truth of her failure to the ease of escape. We can see suffering too in her ironic interchanges with Tesman and Thea while they move to the front room. Then, resuming her dialogue with Brack by the stove (as far down-stage as Ibsen can put her and in the most hushed voice we have yet heard), she feels her pain and misery mount until an insight breaks upon her. It is the insight toward which she has moved since the beginning of the play.

The final exchanges with Brack are the triumph of the conversational style used throughout *Hedda Gabler*. One short speech follows another with the utmost delicacy of flow. Filling all the silences is our knowledge—and Hedda's—of the past two days' struggles. There are no surprises here in patterns of action or in the terms of the debate. We know more than enough already about Hedda's fear of scandal, her need for freedom. The scene excels instead in clarity and momentum. Brack is in the superior position, physically and personally. He has dominated and threatened her, before, but now he is doing a more delicate thing, cornering her. As she is cornered, Hedda shows herself to be still a competent antagonist. Brack at endgame insistently elaborates the distasteful interrogation about the pistol until she cannot fail to see her position. He is as intelligent and subtle as he is loathsome. She is driven to a terrible moment, the repudiation of all her efforts: "But I had nothing to do with this repulsive business." Yet she will not yield to his point.

The climax of the scene and of the play alike comes down to a disagreement over what "people do." We know their respective positions. Brack believes in the inevitability of mediocrity, convention, bourgeois confinement. However erratically, Hedda has endeavored to pose an alternative. Now, with the audience's attention completely focused, they have two exchanges which test the question. The first, preliminary one comes when Brack tells her that she has two alternatives to revealing her complicity. One is his holding silence, for a price.

HEDDA: (*looks nervously at him*) And if you don't?

BRACK: (*shrugs his shoulders*) You could always say he'd stolen it.

HEDDA: I'd rather die!

BRACK: (*smiles*) People say that. They never do it.

The second exchange is the end of the scene and Hedda's chance to answer. In this moment we realize for the first time that she might put her freedom to the test.

HEDDA: (*looks up at him*) In other words, I'm in your power, Judge. From now on, you've got your hold over me.

BRACK: (*whispers, more slowly*) Hedda, my dearest—believe me—I will not abuse my position.

HEDDA: Nevertheless. I'm in your power. Subject to your will, and your demands. Not free. Still not free! (*Rises passionately*) No. I couldn't bear that. No.

BRACK: (*looks half-derisively at her*) Most people resign themselves to the inevitable, sooner or later.

HEDDA: (*returns his gaze*) Possibly they do.

At this point, Hedda walks off to commit suicide. Everything she has touched has become mean and ludicrous: her hopes for Loevborg, her attempted normalcy with Tesman, her flirtatious friendship with Brack, every part of her young life. She once thought she could be free by creating the freedom of another. Now she realizes that her own captivity to Brack is imminent. She cannot stand that thought. Neither can she stand the thought that *everyone* would resign themselves, that *she* too would embrace the inevitable. This would make the captivity philosophical as well as sexual. Her final position is defiance, but like so much in this play, the eloquence of that defiance is channelled, suppressed, exceedingly indirect. "Possibly they do." This is expressiveness at its peak in the realistic mode.

Ibsen staunchly refuses to reflect on Hedda's suicide after the fact. We are simply presented with it—to some it will come as a surprise, to others it will seem predestined—and left to reflect later, among ourselves. We will bring to this reflection what we have brought *through* the play, a continuing sense of Hedda's self and actions. But interestingly enough, critics and audiences who rigorously dislike Hedda still find the moment oddly compelling, the character suddenly sympathetic.¹¹ They are usually at a loss to explain why. I find myself struggling with pity, terror, and elation. The suicide is certainly the release she has sought. It is an act of freedom, a pitiable one to be sure, but a part of that spirit which will not tolerate an oppressive or false definition of the world. It is also a very problematic thing: *a defiance of life*. This may be why so many people have such difficulty accepting Hedda, for most of us (in an unthinking or enlightened fashion) like life very much, thank you. How can we applaud a woman who repeatedly rejects what we enjoy? How can we accept her act and not accept her analysis? There is another subjective contradiction at work here, one that concerns modern middle-class society. Hedda's radical critique of that society may seem undone by our knowledge that she herself is a crippled social victim. But we must accept the fact of two conflicting currents in her character: social inhibition and the desire to transcend society, to change men and women. That these two cancel each other out in the end is less a "moral" than an enormously forceful personal conundrum.

¹¹ George Brandes remarked, in *Henrik Ibsen, Bjornstjerne Bjornson: Critical Studies* (London, 1899), p. 109, that Ibsen's finale manages "to make her, in some way or other, sympathetic to us." R. Ellis Roberts said that "the death of this woman, who has not said a kind thing, done a decent action or shown any qualities save malignity, selfishness, and stupidity, leaves the reader with a sense of real and irreparable loss." *Henrik Ibsen: A Critical Study* (London, 1912), p. 153.