Mapping Desire: Couching Hedda and Eilert's Conversation in Act II of *Hedda Gabler*

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We were watching Howard Jensen's production of *Ghosts* in Bloomington, Indiana. As was and is usual with Howard's productions, it was very fine work. The actors were giving performances that no one, including their mothers, had any right to think possible given their prior records of achievement. The design team contributed an elegant and evocative mis-en-scene. Each moment connected to the next describing a deftly articulated throughline. The action built to an excruciating final act. Howard was at the top of his game, dancing his own tarantella with one of his favorite playwrights. The final moment, like Jackie Kennedy's dash over the trunk of the speeding Lincoln limousine in Dallas, remains etched in memory: Oswald immobile, seated, head collapsed on his chest, legs akimbo, illuminated by a blinding "sunrise" that Meyerhold would have loved. Mrs. Alving, stage left, rooted to the floor, tears streaming down her cheeks but absolutely silent, her hands spasmodically thrusting towards Oswald's coat pocket and, sometimes immediately, sometimes after a frozen moment of pure intention, whip lashing back to her mouth, as Oswald muttered, "The sun—the sun." Tableau vivant. Lights fade to black: ecstasy and applause.

Directly to our front sat a group of highly intelligent, sensitive, and thoroughly decent graduate students in English. I knew several of them personally from our shared Ph.D. literature classes. My partner and I rose to leave. As we did so, one of the best and the brightest of the English grads, her face a mask of thwarted intellect, turned to the others and spat out: "What the hell is wrong with Oswald? Is he dying or what?" Exit in turmoil as ecstasy turns to farce.

I had a similar experience at Rhonda Blair's recent production of *Hedda Gabler.* It, too, was well directed, solidly acted, and designed to a fare-thee-well. After the final fade to black, a young woman from our own Division turned to several of her colleagues and said: "What's the story with Hedda? I mean, what is there to die for?"

So what is it about Ibsen that even intelligent modern audiences aren't getting? Could it be, as Evert Sprinchorn puts it, that we no longer have the facility to read the text of Ibsen's "hidden dialogue," or, at least, to apprehend the subtextual resonance of Ibsen's dialogue at speed?[1] Are the plays encoded in a manner peculiar to Victorian culture and can no dint of translation, short of adaptation, render Ibsen's vocabulary compelling for us? In what follows, I want take up the question of how Ibsen's text might be mined by actors and directors. Specifically, I want to examine

the rhythms of language and silence. In this juxtaposition, clues lie that, if exploited, might allow for a more immediate reception of *Hedda Gabler*'s action by its contemporary audience.

An aesthetic assumption, perhaps prejudice, underlies my argument. Following Frederick and Lise-Lone Marker, I am going to frame most of the interaction between actor/characters as behavioral.[2] I readily admit that non-traditional, non-Realistic approaches to Ibsen often succeed in recapturing the work's explosive power. This line of directorial illumination of Ibsen's texts begins, roughly, with Max Reinhardt's 1906 Kammerspiele production of *Ghosts* and continues to the present, most notably in the directorial oeuvre of Peter Zadek. But even Zadek, who in the seventies and eighties was the *infant terrible* of the German stage and a particularly controversial figure in Ibsen-centered criticism, even Zadek in the nineties moved back towards a traditional behavioral and Realistic aesthetic when dealing with the acting of his productions. The move closely parallels, as well, Ingmar Bergman's similar migration away from postmodernism towards behavioral acting on the barest of sets during the same period. Moreover, all the productions of *Hedda Gabler* in which I have appeared as an actor and the overwhelming majority of those that I have seen have been Realistic in their approach to acting. That, with one exception, they have all failed to realize the full potential of the text for theatrical excitement has less to do with their fundamental aesthetic than with the manner in which they failed to utilize fully the structures within the dialogue and action.[3]

For there is no question that Victorian audiences, especially those in England and Germany, heard and saw something in Ibsen's plays that was profoundly disturbing. In 1889, Clement Scott, critic of the *Daily Telegraph*, famously heard "syphilis" spoken aloud during Janet Achurch's production of *Ghosts*. Of course, he heard nothing of the kind. What he did do was to place several of Osvald and Mrs. Alving's lines into an interpretive *Gestalt*. This exchange in Act II starts to spell out syphilis as the source of Osvald's malady:

> OSVALD: I've never lived a wild life—not in any respect. You have to believe me mother—that's something I've never done!
> MRS. ALVING: I believe you, Osvald.
> OSVALD: And yet it's come on me—this horrible thing.
> In less than a minute "this horrible thing" finds further definition:
> OSVALD: He was one of the foremost doctors down there. He had me describe exactly what I was feeling: and then he began asking me a whole lot of questions that didn't seem to bear at all. I couldn't grasp what he was after—
> MRS. ALVING: So—?
> OSVALD: At last he said: Right from your birth, your whole

system has been more or less worm-eaten. The actual expression he used was *vermoulu*.
MRS. ALVING (*anxiously*): What did he mean by that?
OSVALD: I didn't understand either, so I asked him to be more specific. And then the old cynic said—(*Clenching his fist*). Oh—!
MRS. ALVING: What—?
OSVALD: He said: The sins of the fathers are visited upon the children.[4]

At this point, the vast majority of middle-class, Victorian men and women would know that Osvald and his French doctor thought that he was a victim of congenital syphilis. As Peter Gay points out, the Victorians were clearly aware of physiology and sexuality and the diseases associated with sexual conduct, but they were reticent, due to their construction of the bourgeois modes of conduct, to speak directly of these topics.[5] But for a modern audience, the encryption of Osvald's disease obscures our immediate perception of Ibsen's subtext. It takes us a minute to put together "wild life, vermoulu, sins of the fathers" and then to arrive at "congenital syphilis." For many, the shoe doesn't drop until Act III, when Mrs. Alving tells Osvald "your father was a ravaged man before you were born."[6] Even at that point, Clement Scott's "sewer of depravity" may not open, even in well-done productions, and even for literature students.

Similar challenges abound in *Hedda Gabler*. Compounding the clear reception of Ibsen's Victorian coding of behavior and language is the rapidity with which the play moves. Not only is the action of the play compressed into a mere thirty-six hours, but the dialog as well is Ibsen at his most concentrated, most abrupt, and most staccato. In the original texts of the work, no character speaks for more than four lines.[7] In Norwegian, a sonorous, multi-syllabic language, Ibsen's syntax feels like a series of "hammer blows," as his earliest English-language translator put it.[8]

If we go into a production of *Hedda* knowing that, in the main, it is, in Bill Ball's usage, "a dervish merry-go-round in which character's leap on, grasp for dear life, and then are flung off," then one of the things we can look for in the text is evidence of the places in which the torrent of language stops. And the sound stops in some vital moments. Take, for example, this exchange in Act II:

HEDDA: You think it was some kind of power in me?
LOVBORG: How else can I explain it? And all those—those devious questions you asked me—
HEDDA: That you understood so remarkably well—
LOVBORG: To think you could sit there and ask such questions!

So boldly.
HEDDA: Deviously, please.
LOVBORG: Yes, but boldly, all the same. Interrogating me about—all that kind of thing.
HEDDA: And to think you could answer, Mr. Lovborg.

Ibsen's hyphens—and they appear in the Norwegian original—are used in two distinct ways in the above, offering hidden stage directions to the actor and director. In one use, the hyphen invites that other speaker to arrest or cut off dialogue: "Those devious questions you asked me—That you understood so remarkably well—To think you could sit there and ask such questions! So boldly." In this usage, we can feel the characters driving forward as each seeks to move the conversational action towards their objective.

Within the speaker's own thoughts, however, the hyphen often encourages a pause, shorter or longer, as the character searches for the right language or for a clear thought. Lovborg does it in the passage above: "How else can I explain it? And all those—those devious questions you asked me." Ibsen underlines Lovborg's intellectual hiccup by repeating the structure "those—those." In this case, the hyphen points to the incendiary nature of Hedda's questions—to the use of what Peter Gay has described as "eros by indirection," for good bourgeois language that suggests the sexual nature of Hedda's questions but does not directly address it.

But the hyphen is used in yet another way in this scene. When Lovborg responds to Hedda's jab about his being able to answer her questions:

LOVBORG: Yes, that's exactly what I don't understand—now, looking back. But tell me, Hedda—the root of that bond between us, wasn't it love? Didn't you feel, on your part, as if you wanted to cleanse and absolve me—when I brought those confessions to you? Wasn't that it?
HEDDA: No, not quite.
LOVBORG: What was your power then?
HEDDA: Do you find it so very surprising that a young girl—if there's no chance of anyone knowing—
LOVBORG: Yes?
HEDDA: That she'd like some glimpse of a world that—
LOVBORG: That—?
HEDDA: That she's forbidden to know anything about.

The previously identified use of the hyphen, both as pause-maker and as a quick transitional device, appears in this dialog repeatedly. What is new is Lovborg's use of the hyphen in "That—?" Here, Ibsen and the translator Rolfe Fjelde, seem

to be encouraging the actor to sustain, physically and intentionally, the action of the question. The simple "that" in this usage suggests that Hedda's "that" is followed immediately by Lovborg's. Hedda's response to Lovborg comes only after the pause, suggested by the hyphen and the question mark. When Hedda speaks "That she's forbidden to know anything about" her response is figuratively underlined for emphasis by the pause prior to it and absence of any internal punctuation in "That she's forbidden to know."

In the rest of this first, critical Hedda/Lovborg scene, Ibsen continues to use the hyphen to denote both ideational and emotional hiccups and pauses. And as the temperature of the discourse rises, the hyphens emerge at moments critical to the audience's reception of the sexual tension first implicit and then explicit in the Hedda/Lovborg relationship.

> LOVBORG (*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 scandal.
> LOVBORG: Yes, Hedda, you're a coward at heart.
> HEDDA: A terrible coward. (*Changing her tone*) But that was lucky for you. And now you're so nicely consoled at the Elvsteds'.
> LOVBORG: I know what Thea's been telling you.
> HEDDA: And perhaps you've been telling her all about us?
> LOVBORG: Not a word. She's too stupid for that sort of thing.
> HEDDA: Stupid?
> LOVBORG: When it comes to those things, she's stupid.

Note the hyphenated paused embedded in Hedda's "I'm-much too afraid of scandal." It is a critical revelation of Hedda's hidden self, and, through the use of the hyphen, Ibsen points the actress to a tactic that will heighten that revelation. The small stop and, I might add, the manner in which the actress embodies that stop and in which Lovborg receives it, as Moliere once wrote, "reveals much."

It is important to note as well that immediately after Hedda's admission that she is a "terrible coward," Ibsen's stage direction asks the actress to execute a flying transition: "Changing her tone." I say flying because there is no punctuation that suggests a pause, and we are aware, by this point in the action, Hedda can be change her ground without pausing. For example, in Act I when faced with the revolting spectacle of Tesman's slippers, Hedda, without pause or hesitation, delivers a smash at Aunt Juliana's hat. So, in this case with Lovborg, Hedda, without pausing, shifts from an uncomfortable sexual conversation to one that is about Mrs. Elvsted and her relationship with Lovborg. That inquiry is not about

Hedda's hidden self and Lovborg has no hesitations talking about what hasn't happened between Thea and him so the dialogue runs without hesitation.

The rhythm of thrust and parry between Hedda and Lovborg in this beat about Thea's and Lovborg's relationship sets up the next emergence of hidden truths. More hyphens and key stage directions emerge to signal this change in direction:

> LOVBORG: When it comes to those things, she's stupid.
> HEDDA: And I'm a coward. (*Leans closer, without looking him in the eyes, and speaks softly*). But there is something now I can tell you.
> LOVBORG (*intently*): What?
> HEDDA: When I didn't dare shoot you—
> LOVBORG: Yes?
> HEDDA: That wasn't my worst cowardice—that night.
> LOVBORG (*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!

This interchange lies at the heart of the Lovborg-Hedda relationship. Ibsen encrypts in the dialog an overtly sexual past interaction between Hedda and Lovborg—one that was sufficiently violent or insistent on Lovborg's part to push Hedda to using her father's pistol. As we've come to expect by now in the play, the hyphen, and the pauses and change of motion inherent in them, signal that characters are in the process of revealing their hidden selves, their, in this case sexual selves. Hedda uses the hyphen in "When I didn't dare shoot you—" and Lovborg, recognizing what that little stop shelters, pushes her into the open with "Yes?" Hedda starts and then stumbles in response: "That wasn't my worst act of cowardice—that night." And faced with that small, hyphenated pause, Lovborg himself stops. That his pause is longer than Hedda's short trip before "that night" is clear from Ibsen's stage direction: "looks at her a moment, understands, and whispers passionately." Ibsen suggests, and I think rightfully so, that Lovborg cannot comprehend Hedda's meaning in a wink of an eye. Hedda's revelation is profound: that her response to Lovborg's overtly sexual behavior was not revulsion but excitement. And Lovborg's first response is to speak her maiden name, as he did at the opening of the *tete a tete*: "Oh, Hedda! Hedda Gabler!"

I am not suggesting that a "silence" a la Pinter needs to separate Hedda's confession from Lovborg's realization. I do suggest that the structure of the language

encourages the actor playing Lovborg to create the time in which Lovborg can process what he just heard. In those moments, Lovborg rewrites the text of the history of Hedda and him. He sees Hedda as a full-blooded sexual partner, one, who like him, recognizes her sexuality and her needs: "It was the hunger for *life* in you—" We know that the encryption here, "hunger for life," repeats the earlier use of a similar phrase in *Ghosts*, "the joy of life." In both cases, the euphemism stands for sexual desire. Ibsen helps the actor frame that subtext for the phrase by setting off "hunger for life" by hyphens. He creates even more time for the actor and audience to apprehend subtext by italicizing "life" in order to allow the actor more time in the word, and more time here means more opportunity to ladle in subtextual resonance.

Ibsen's stage direction to Hedda after "And I'm a coward" adds a disturbing element to the subtext of the hyphens that follow. He instructs the actress to lean closer to Lovborg, "without looking him in the eyes" and to speak softly. The attitude suggested, although capable of many variations, is one that is readily represented in nineteenth century iconography. It is a physical posture often associated with the interchange of intimate information. In representations of women speaking to women, it is the posture of gossip, of sharing an incipiently juicy tidbit. Between women and men, however, the posture almost always denotes flirtation. The eyes are denied to the male suggesting that what is about to be said transgresses bourgeois norms. But while the eyes are denied to the male, the woman's body inclines towards her partner, decreasing the distance from the male's. In this case, Hedda's eyes may be denied because, as the iconographic tradition has it, if viewed, they would reveal too much. They would too directly communicate what bourgeois culture requires should be only indirectly approached. Too much of what? Too much "joy for life," too much sexuality. Hedda's voice drops to a whisper, signaling shared intimacy and the imminent revelation of the hidden.

Nineteenth-century dramatic literature suggests as well that should the woman's dialog be successfully received, her eyes would shift to make direct contact with the man's. In this case, Ibsen directs the actress to look directly at Lovborg at the precise moment when Lovborg attempts to confirm that they share the same appetites. Hedda's cowardice will not allow such a revelation and she slams the door shut on Lovborg with a line and a look delivered like a physical blow.

Attention to the rhythms of the language, to the manner in which action is physicalized, to reception, and realization would aid in answering that challenge that I posed at the beginning of this paper: how do we get a modern audience excited by Ibsen? It appears as if Ibsen was aware that even during his own time his encryption of references to sexual conduct might be so successful that, at speed, his contemporaries would be left behind. Even so acute a pair of ears as Clement Scott's might miss the violent, powerful sexuality that lay at the historical core of the Hedda-Lovborg relationship. So, Ibsen embeds in his language hidden stage

directions that encourage actors and directors to use time, gesture, and sound to clarify the encrypted text.

In Foucault's second volume of the *History of Sexuality*, he notes, "Excess and passivity were the two main forms of immorality in the practice of *aphrodisia*."[9] In *Hedda Gabler,* the hyphenated pauses are, more often than not, the moments in which hidden "excess" breaks through passivity and, in these moments, the character of the conversation, by bourgeois standards, ascends to the immoral and to the excitingly theatrical.

Notes

1. Evert Sprinchorn, "The Unspoken Text in *Hedda Gabler*," *Modern Drama* 36 (September 1993): 353.

2. Frederick J. Marker and Lise-Lone Marker, "Ibsen and the Director: From Traditionalism to Travesty in Recent European Theatre," in *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen*, Bjorn Hemmer and Vidgis Ystad, eds., vol. 7 (Oslo: Scandinavian UP, 1994) 39.

3. That one exception was, of course, Howard Jensen's production at Indiana University in 1979.

4. Henrik Ibsen, *Ghosts*, in *Henrik Ibsen: The Complete Major Prose Plays*, trans. Rolf Fjelde (New York: Signet Books, 1978) 249-50.

5. Peter Gay, *The Bourgeois Experience*, 5 vols (New Haven: Yale UP, 1978-93) I:32.

6. Ibsen 267.

7. For this paper, the Ur-text of *Hedda Gabler* is the one printed by F. Hegel and Son in Copenhagen in 1890.

8. William Archer to Elizabeth Robins, Letter (23 March 1891).

9. Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: Volume 2 of The History of Sexuality,* trans. Robert Hurley, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) 47.

BOOK REVIEWS