



CHAPTER

3 Hedda Gabler and the Uses of Beauty

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Abstract

Ibsen connects the character of Hedda Gabler with beauty in two ways. First, there is her attractiveness, both functional and transient, which is associated in the play with the concept of loveliness (as indicated by the term ‘lovely’, [dejlig]). Second is her ideal of beauty [skønhed] and, relatedly, of freedom—ostensibly a peculiar ideal in that it appears to be both free from any meaningful content and, more importantly, useless. The play also explores usefulness and uselessness in relation to the work of its two historians. This chapter offers a critical analysis of how various Marxist critics, including Löwenthal and Adorno, tried to make sense of the relation between use, beauty, and those historians’ academic work. Ultimately the central notion at work in the play is that of not being conditioned by external forces, although Ibsen’s take on the possibility and desirability of such a condition remains highly ambiguous.

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What is a person for? What can a person be used for? These questions are pressed in several places in *Hedda Gabler*, notably, though not exclusively, with regard to the female characters. Returning from afar, Thea laments that, for her husband, she is merely ‘useful’ and ‘cheap’ (HG 188). While the contrast she intends to draw must be between her husband’s and Ejlert Løvborg’s treatment of her (HG 190), it is notable that Løvborg’s break with her takes the following form: ‘I have no use for you anymore’ (HG 242). Thea responds: ‘then what will I do with my life?’ The answer comes at the end. Thea and Tesman dedicate themselves to the reconstruction of Løvborg’s book: ‘I’ll devote my life to this work!’ says Tesman (HG 257). Aunt Juliane, having cared for her late sister for so long, seeks a replacement to look after—another invalid, or a new baby. Løvborg appears to have two options: unrestricted pursuit of pleasure or intellectual labour. In the end, he believes, he has ruined the latter and no longer desires the former. As she surveys her surroundings, Hedda can see, as potential ‘uses’ available to her: care of the young or the sick and domestic labour (Thea, the aunts, Berte); assisting the intellectual labour of others (Thea with Løvborg and later with Tesman); being an instrument of the pleasure of others or, perhaps, disreputable pursuit of one’s own pleasure (Brack, Løvborg, Diana). It is the notion of use or purpose that connects the two  contrasts in the play that I explore. One focuses on beauty, another on the academic labours of the two historians.

I. First Contrast: Beauty and Loveliness

For an outsider to the tradition of philosophical aesthetics, the questions ‘What is this thing for?’ and ‘Is this thing beautiful?’ might appear, at first glance, to be unrelated. Beautiful things can have purposes (railway stations), no purpose (patterns of light) or have the purpose of being beautiful (decorations). Finally, like Hedda, they can be people: not designed for anything, but able to dedicate their lives to particular projects. Nonetheless, in aesthetics, the two questions are traditionally linked. At the simplest level, this may reflect a psychological phenomenon: finding something beautiful (a flower) may be disrupted by thinking about what it is for (drawing attention to the plant’s sexually reproductive structure). Hence it is tempting to see beauty as something that distracts from or rises above use. Take Schiller’s example of the beautiful pot’s handle: it is obvious what it is for—lifting the pot—but ‘if the pot is to be beautiful, its handle must spring from it so unforced and freely that one forgets its purpose’.¹

Hedda’s beauty is emphasised long before the spectators catch sight of her and it is mentioned throughout. But the English terms mislead. Often, ‘beautiful’ translates a particular term, ‘*dejlig*’, which does not suggest beauty in the classical sense, but rather ‘lovely’, ‘delightful’, or even, in other contexts, a sensual ‘delicious’. Aunt Juliane speaks of ‘the lovely [*dejlige*] Hedda Gabler!’ (HG 171; HIS IX 19), for example. Again, just before Hedda’s first appearance, Tesman says: ‘Hedda . . . that’s the most wonderful [*dejligste*] thing of all!’ (HG 175; HIS IX 26).²

p. 73 Most often it is Hedda who is described as ‘*dejlig*’, but it is worth noting what else meets that description. It is how Thea describes (to Hedda) her ‘beautiful [*dejlige*], happy time’ when she shared Løvborg’s work (HG 190). It is how Aunt Juliane describes her sister’s death (HG 247) and how Tesman imagines his time with Juliane, Hedda, and their child (HG 249). (Indeed, ‘*dejlig*’ is frequently found in *A Doll’s House*, to describe, for example, Nora herself, her children, her clothing, and domestic, material comfort.³)

In all these cases, the term is used sincerely. When Hedda herself utters it, however, things are different. It is what she calls Thea’s flowers to Thea (HG 181; HIS IX 37), though she has previously only complained about the suffocating smell of flowers in the house. It is how she describes, mockingly, to Brack, Tesman’s enjoyment of his research (HG 201; HIS IX 75). And it is how Hedda describes, to Løvborg, echoing Thea, his new life with Thea: ‘you’ve consoled yourself so beautifully [*dejligt*]’ (HG 219; HIS IX 112). She is provoking him to undermine Thea—as indeed he does, calling her ‘stupid’ a moment later. When Løvborg then calls Thea ‘lovely’ in front of both of them, he is using a term that we know, and he may well know, Thea will hear as genuine and Hedda will not (HG 221; HIS IX 115).

p. 74 It is precisely Hedda’s ‘loveliness’, in this sense, which opens the way to various purposes or uses on offer to her: to be lovely is to fit into the world of the Tesmans. For them, Hedda’s charm is clearly connected with a biological function: note the emphasis on her ‘rounder [i.e., pregnant] figure’ that makes her seem so ‘lovely’ (*dejlig*) to Juliane (HG 178; HIS IX 32)—so lovely, that Juliane repeats it three times. Here too, as mentioned, belongs the ‘lovely’ time Tesman imagines with his aunt, wife, and child. But in making her the object of sexual desire, her loveliness has other uses: manipulation, of course, and establishing financial security.⁴ It is also ↪ Hedda’s loveliness (together with her status) that has protected her from the other uses on offer to her, at least up to the period shortly before the play begins. Just because she has so many admirers, she has not needed to settle for any of them.

It is important, therefore, that Hedda’s loveliness is threatened in a number of ways. First, by time: this is the suggestion of ‘my time was up’, in answer to the question as to why she married Tesman (HG 202, translation altered; HIS IX 78). Second, though, by other women. For each of Hedda’s male admirers, there is at least another female he admires, too: Brack has other, offstage interests, while Thea and Diana take care of the rest. Finally, she might fear that it is threatened by her pregnancy itself (HG 178). Loveliness and competition go together.

Hedda’s physical ‘loveliness’, with its worldly uses, contrasts with the other kind of beauty associated with her: her ideal of beauty. Here, the term is the more classical ‘beauty [*skønhed*]’ (HIS IX 165)—much rarer in Ibsen, and often associated with supposedly visionary characters like Solness (*The Master Builder*) and Rubek (*When We Dead Awaken*) (HIS IX 308 and HIS X 234). The purposes associated with loveliness place Hedda in some kind of predefined social role. We will look more closely at Hedda’s conception of beauty, but her ideal apparently serves to rule out use: no interest in intellectual labours; no care for others; no control by others. Hedda’s ideal is not, *prima facie*, to do with sexual beauty, domesticity, or biological function.

Unlike her physical beauty, her ideal seems to appeal to something that is not for something else. Ibsen's division of the lovely and the beautiful in this manner—between the worldly, physical, useful kind and its opposite—is emphasised by concentrating the division in one person: Hedda, the only element in the play that is called both 'beautiful' and 'lovely'.

II. Second Contrast: Two Visions of Academic Labour

p. 75 The second contrast that revolves around use or purpose concerns the two academics: Tesman and Løvborg. That Tesman is not a directly useful sort of person is also emphasised before the spectators meet him. Berte
↳ expresses surprise that Tesman has gone in for helping people (i.e., in becoming a medical doctor). Aunt Juliane replies that he wasn't made that kind of doctor (HG 169). Tesman's work is that of a specialist, focused on a specific place and time: 'the domestic crafts of mediaeval Brabant' (HG 175). The importance of his work as such is never discussed, only its relation to his social and financial status; the subject matter points to domesticity and 'loveliness'. Nothing in the play seems to depend on the content of Tesman's writing. By comparison, consider that other doctor, Stockmann, whose scientific discovery drives the plot of *An Enemy of the People*: there is no suggestion whatsoever that Tesman, who wasn't made *that* kind of doctor, will make similar, plot-altering discoveries. Tesman is deliberately contrasted with Løvborg, the antispecialist, writing on the past and the future. Løvborg's first book (on the past) had a definite purpose: to write something everybody liked so that he could make some money (HG 211). But the second, authentic book (about the future) reaches beyond the confines of the academy, with implications for us all. ('It just wouldn't enter into my head to write about anything like that', says Tesman [HG 212].) Løvborg's distance from Tesman's concerns is emphasised in his refusal to compete with him—not out of respect, but because the competition is unworthy: 'I just want to beat you in the opinion of the people' (HG 214, translation altered). All the past, all the future, and the opinion of the people: it is hard to get less specialised than that.

Ibsen could have married Hedda to a narrow-minded photographer, bank clerk, or town official. Why set this concentration of the lovely and the beautiful against the background of academic labours? In following, I assess some putative answers to this question. The notion of use, in any case a feature of the play, hovers behind both of the oppositions we have explored: it divides the lovely from the beautiful; *prima facie*, it divides a Tesman from a Løvborg.

III. The Marxist Ibsen: Compromised and Empty

p. 76 While these oppositions are firmly grounded within the world of the play, they were noticed and taken up by Marxist critics who therefore
↳ provide material for the next part of my discussion and against whose analyses I want to present my own. In 1936, Leo Löwenthal, an important figure in the Frankfurt School at that time, wrote '*Das Individuum in der individualistischen Gesellschaft: Bemerkungen über Ibsen*' ('The Individual in the Individualistic Society: Remarks on Ibsen').⁵ In the background of Löwenthal's reading of Ibsen lies the fact that Ibsen had not always found favour with Marxist thinkers. The sorts of charges laid against him fell broadly into two categories. First, Ibsen's dramas (it was claimed) were bourgeois in a problematic way. Ibsen's characters and themes are restricted, as Engels himself had noted, to 'the world of the petty and the middle bourgeoisie'.⁶ For those who located their hopes for revolutionary progress in the workers or the party, this appeared an act of desperate searching in exactly the wrong place. Even without a grand narrative of emancipation, Ibsen's apparent lack of interest in workers' conditions, their near invisibility in his plays, is striking. Then there was evidence taken from the plays themselves, notably readings of Dr. Stockmann's speech treated (perhaps unwisely) as the spokesman for Ibsen's own ideas when he rages against the masses. Finally, there were biographical points: Ibsen was a bourgeois thinker himself, and therefore he should be treated with some suspicion. Plekhanov, in his essay on Ibsen, stated the then conventional view that intellectuals were ideologists for their particular class.⁷ Finally, there was
p. 77 evidence from the horse's mouth: Ibsen had written that what was needed was 'a revolution of the human
↳ spirit' rather than, say, an actual revolution.⁸ A pacifying, reactionary response, so it seemed.

There was a second, related charge of emptiness: that his works lack determinate ideas about what should be done. Whether this was a cowardly personal failing or the misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, the fact remained that Ibsen could never point the way. Writing in the 1930s, shortly after Löwenthal, one reviewer of a contemporary collection of Marxist Ibsen criticism summarised the prevailing

view, lamenting ‘the failure of Ibsen to play a more important part in the thought of his era.’⁹ In the context of these criticisms, the link between Hedda’s strangely empty ideal of beauty and the poverty of the intellectual vision in the play can at least be reconstructed: Ibsen has no meaningful antidote to the bourgeois structures he places on stage. Neither in the specific researches of Tesman, nor in the grandiose but compromised plans of Løvborg, nor in Hedda’s empty ideals can anything satisfactory be found.

IV. Löwenthal’s Defence

p. 78 Löwenthal’s defence begins with the thought that Ibsen’s plays create ideal laboratory conditions for testing out the effectiveness and the validity of bourgeois values. It is not that Ibsen doesn’t care to represent workers. Rather, he asks us to witness what happens to the bourgeoisie when they are left to their own devices, hindered neither by the workers ‘below’, nor the state ‘above’. If the result is a disaster, the fault must lie in the values themselves. And, of course, the result is always disaster. An Ibsen play is an intricate, internal criticism of bourgeois values, in which the disastrous consequences of acting them out are revealed in the distance that inevitably lies between what agents say (on the one hand) and their actions, and the consequences of their actions (on the other). Not merely do Ibsen’s characters face alienating choices between work and family: where they ↪ finally do choose one or the other, they tend to ruin both (*The Master Builder* being the obvious example). Hence, turning away from the social world does not yield happiness or reward, any more than plunging oneself into it does.

Typical of the Frankfurt School, much of Löwenthal’s argument rests on the view that market relations creep in precisely where one would expect them to be weaker, or nonexistent: in apparently affectionate relations between spouses, parents, children and friends, as well as in the work of the artistic and intellectual characters. Bonds of affection reduce to the jealous guarding of property; the pursuit of fulfilment on the part of one generation ruins, even sacrifices, the next; characters’ wishes, when granted to them, inevitably reveal these wishes as problematic. Equally important, given the bourgeois emphasis on individual choice and freedom, are the mutually destructive conflicts between *parts* of individuals. It’s not just the artistic visionary pit against his wife and family (*The Master Builder*, *Little Eyolf*): it’s the artist’s own visions crumpled by his own business needs and by his own desire for a family life—a family life that is, itself, undermined by business relations.¹⁰

p. 79 Central to Löwenthal’s argument is the notion of being adaptable or fitting in (*anpassen*). One might expect this to mean being a jack-of-all-trades. In fact, it turns out to mean rather the opposite: adapting means, according to Löwenthal’s reading of Ibsen, treating the prevalent social order, the market, and its attendant moral values, as an absolute given, and adapting according to that thought. By all means, individuals may have some scope for adapting their responses within these strict boundaries. But, somewhat confusingly, a demand of the prevalent social order is that one *specialises* (i.e., one devotes one’s training and energies to the performance of a very particular function) which both serves a defined purpose and brings financial stability and respectability. (The jack-of-all-trades, in contrast—like Ballested [*The Lady from the Sea*—fails to get by.) This presumably draws on Max Weber’s analysis of the bureaucratic ↪ *Fachmann*—the professional expert or specialist—who is trained in one very particular area. Characteristic of the *Fachmann* is the ability to view people without emotion and to treat individual cases in a regular and reliable manner. Bureaucracy develops more fully, Weber thinks, the more it is ‘dehumanised’ [entmenschlicht]—that is, by ‘eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational and emotional elements that escape calculation. This is appraised as its special virtue by capitalism.’¹¹ The ‘dehumanising’ eradication of emotion in human affairs (associated with bureaucratic workers) and the competitive element inherent in relations under capitalism are, Löwenthal is suggesting, carried over by Ibsen’s characters into their private lives. This explicitly applies to Tesman (the *Fachmann*, or ‘*fagmenneske*’ in Ibsen’s Norwegian [HIS IX 191]) too, despite the fact that his specialism is academic, not commercial or bureaucratic. Even for him, there remains the need to specialise, fear in the face of competition, and stifled personal relations. Precisely because Tesman’s specialism isn’t directly economic or state-motivated, it indicates, for Löwenthal, how far market and bureaucratic forces (distinct, but linked by Weber in the *Fachmann*) reach into realms that, we might think, would be protected from them. Hence, Tesman’s work is the subject of an explicit competition with Løvborg. That, indeed, is one of the first things we learn about it—as well as that it is a competition he is likely to lose (HG 196). What is more, his specialist interests, forced on him by the market in which he competes, are also given as reasons why Hedda finds him boring and why

those of a higher status, who can afford to be broader in their interests, appeal to her more. Specialising and fitting in is part of what is said to ruin Tesman's personal affairs.

p. 80 These two elements of Löwenthal's argument—the bourgeois laboratory test and the problematic demand for specialisation—may defend Ibsen against the first of the Marxist charges: that Ibsen cares only for the bourgeoisie. But there is still the second charge: emptiness. Hence the second stage of Löwenthal's argument, which locates a positive vision precisely in some of the female characters. Löwenthal is by no means blind to the flaws of many of them and he does not say that women are free from bourgeois values. Indeed, he sees them as having to fit in or adapt twice over: first to the husbands and fathers to whom they are subordinated and, second, to the fears associated with a precarious and competitive existence. Nonetheless, maintains Löwenthal, Ibsen's significant female characters are not completely sacrificed to the demands of competition. This is evident in their preservation of alternative values, ranging from duty, pleasure and beauty to the miraculous (Mrs. Solness, Hilda Wangel, Hedda, and Nora respectively). Precisely because they *can't* take part in the business world as the men do, Löwenthal thinks, female characters may be protected from some of its deforming effects. This is not to say that the female characters offer a definite account of what must be done—Nora and Hedda both remain notoriously reticent—but at least Ibsen gave us something more substantial. Hedda has (Löwenthal thinks) some vision that goes beyond what the male characters have to offer, since she 'goes to her death with the unshakeable faith that beauty in life is the only humane end [Zweck]'.¹² Where the male characters have rationalisations for how things are, some female characters offer something absolute or unconditioned in response.¹³

p. 81 Löwenthal therefore offers a different vision of how the ideal of beauty and historical work combine in the play. Tesman's specialisation, and Hedda's dissatisfaction with 'specialists', arise from Tesman's simple acceptance of how things are, including the link between capitalism and increasing specialisation. Löwenthal does not discuss Løvborg, but he can be seen on this reading to highlight the contrast between Hedda and Tesman: as Tesman's opposite, he is the non-specialist who can hold Hedda's interest to a far greater degree. As a female character, excluded from—and therefore also sheltered from—the excesses of business, Hedda has not been forced, blindly, to adapt, and can therefore reject the specialisation that comes from adaptation. Her ideal of beauty, however problematic, is the more hopeful ideal. In particular, we might add (though Löwenthal does not discuss this), it is superior to its counterpart, loveliness, which is contained firmly within the bourgeois world that Löwenthal's Ibsen undermines.

A closer examination of *Hedda Gabler* certainly offers some qualified support for his view. Hedda's lack of adaptability is emphasised. Virtually her first uttered thought concerns the difficulty of getting used to things. This contrasts with Juliane on the one hand and Brack on the other.¹⁴ Her shielding from (and ignorance of) the world of money is also underlined: in her talk with Brack about getting Tesman into politics; in her mocking of Tesman for worrying about how to make a living; in her inability to connect the academic competition with her own spending plans. Via the beautiful, concludes Löwenthal, we find a sphere of pleasure that is incompatible with the present form that society takes and that therefore demands its transformation.¹⁵

V. Adorno: Empty Protest and the Departmentalisation of Mind

p. 82 Notice, however, that Löwenthal's two lines of argument do not necessarily complement one another. The first suggested that Ibsen offers an internal criticism, leaving bourgeois values entirely to themselves. The second has female characters as bearers of nonstandard ideals. Where do these nonstandard ideals come from? Either from beyond the bourgeois realm, one supposes, or as internal products of that realm itself. In the former instance, Ibsen's plays are not 'internal' criticisms after all and there is no defence against the absence of other external ideals—the values of the workers, for example, as per the earlier Marxist criticism. In the latter case, there remain two concerns. First, we would need to be convinced that Hedda's way of thinking in the play necessarily arises as a result of her environment or, in other words, that this is the sort of world that produces (Hedda)s. It is difficult to see why that should be the case. The next scenes of the play would be tepid, perhaps, but by no means *unstable*: Aunt Juliane finds her new invalid; Tesman and Thea reconstruct the book; Brack chases someone else's wife. Second, there is no reason to suppose that the ideals of the female characters, if they have arisen internally, will be any less 'tainted' than those of the male characters.

In November 1937, prompted by Löwenthal's Ibsen essay, Adorno wrote a letter to Erich Fromm. In the letter, Adorno protests against Löwenthal's suggestion that women are less tainted or malformed by capitalism just because they are more excluded from the process of production.¹⁶ In his later writing related to *Hedda Gabler*, the focus remains, effectively, on this crucial point in Löwenthal's analysis: namely, whether and how a critical view could arise from a group that was insulated from the processes it sought to criticise (or would need to criticise if it were to be significant). In the context of his analysis of the 'art for art's sake' movement, Adorno writes that it fails to offer a genuine opposition, because its notion of beauty is so thin. By merely labelling society and everything about it 'ugly', one has nothing more to offer than 'not-society': the beautiful, with nothing but this crude opposition to work with, turns into something 'strangely empty and imprisoned by thematic material, a sort of *Jugendstil* arrangement as revealed in Ibsen's formulaic descriptions of vine leaves entwined in locks of hair and of dying in beauty'.¹⁷ This is a revised version of the 'emptiness' charge to which Löwenthal was trying to respond.

p. 83 Adorno also picks up on the critique of the specialist in the play. In one of his speeches, 'Philosophy and Teachers', he contrasts 'intellectuals' with 'as Ibsen said more than eighty years ago, merely specialized technicians'—a reference to Tesman; philosophy, he claims, 'fulfils itself only ↵ when it is more than a specialty'.¹⁸ The professionalization, specialisation or 'departmentalisation' of mind (*Geist*) forms the subject of the very first of *Minima Moralia*'s aphorisms where, as in Löwenthal, it is associated with adapting to capitalist demands. A rich young man takes up 'a so-called intellectual profession, as an artist or scholar', and we follow his problematic path.¹⁹ In sum: if you need to work for your artistic or intellectual living, then you will need to specialise in a very narrow field and you probably won't be able to write work that is too critical of the social structures that direct where the money goes. If you don't need to work for a living because you are rich, then you probably won't want to criticise those social structures: they made you rich. But if, for some reason, you are rich but you do want to criticise those social structures, then your work won't be taken seriously, because you will be viewed as a dilettante. To be taken seriously, you would have to specialise, hence behaving as though you did not have the market independence that you do in fact have. 'The departmentalisation of mind', Adorno concludes, 'is a means of abolishing mind where it is not exercised *ex officio*, under contract'.²⁰

p. 84 It might be tempting to look at *Hedda* in the light of these remarks and to conclude that Løvborg's efforts are closer to Adorno's ideal. But note, first, that the contrasting fates, as described in *Minima Moralia*, of the specialist who needs to work for his living and the rich scholar who does not, do not map on exactly to the stories of Tesman and Løvborg. True, Tesman's specialisation is strongly associated with strict financial constraints and Løvborg's freedom of thought is connected with his social status. But Tesman does not consider Løvborg a dilettante, nor does the public fail to take up Løvborg's concerns.²¹ Adorno may gesture at the desirability of a broader outlook, but whatever *Geist*, in its non-specialised ↵ form, is intended to achieve, we can be reasonably sure that, for Adorno, it is not a prediction of how culture will unfold. If, for Löwenthal, 'adapting' meant treating the prevalent order as an absolute given, for Adorno it broadened to include taking apparently 'given facts' and using them as the basis for predicting an allegedly inescapable future, as in the grand philosophies of history suggested by Løvborg's second book.²² Those who make such predictions wrongly see themselves as cool, scientific forecasters. In fact, they are impassioned advocates of what they falsely take to be the way things must be. It is tempting to imagine that Tesman and Løvborg represent two opposing visions of intellectual labour: the former solid, factual but useless, the latter relevant, effective and popular, but ungrounded. In the play itself though, and in Adorno's analysis of these phenomena, matters are more complicated than this would suggest: Løvborg is not a specialist, perhaps, but his work is compromised by adaptation—sufficiently so that a Tesman can appreciate it.

On Adorno's line, Tesman, Løvborg and Hedda are united in a failure to offer any sustained resistance. In the light of Adorno's wider views, the problem of intellectual activity and the problem of the beautiful find the closest thing to reconciliation just when they are drawn together. Critics are required, on Adorno's view, to work out and engage with those works of art that promise, though do not deliver, a kind of beauty: this is a mutually necessary engagement between the beautiful and the intellectual that is conspicuously lacking in a play that separates them out and invites us to watch the demise of each.

VI. Beauty and Spontaneity

p. 85 In the earlier Marxist criticism and in Adorno's writing we find the idea that Hedda's ideal is somehow empty. In Adorno, the idea of beauty as *mere* protest suggests that it opposes society as a whole, the latter conceived as ↪ a kind of ill-defined blob. But, in fact, it must be acknowledged that Hedda is protesting against specific elements around her. She associates her ideal with self-control, control over others, the vine leaves of the Dionysian and, in the end, the beautiful death.²³ But whenever we find candidates for these elements in the play, Hedda is less than impressed with them. Løvborg's apparent self-control with respect to alcohol is precisely what she tries to undermine. Aunt Juliane has complete control over Rina's life and, to Hedda's astonishment, looks for a replacement once Rina is gone. Hedda herself would shortly be given complete control over another person—her child—something she cannot countenance. Her complaint that 'I don't and I never have [felt 'that I control a human destiny']' (HG 226) might be strictly true: but she *will* and she doesn't want to, at least in the form that it is readily available. Rina's death, which Juliane describes in glowing terms, has a certain dignity, if not beauty. In all these cases—Løvborg's new life with Thea, Hedda's future family life, Rina's death—there are traces of Hedda's ideal. All are described as 'lovely'. Importantly, though, in rejecting the lovely, Hedda does not seek the 'unlovely', by which I mean the sorts of things that a bourgeois morality would find immoral or distasteful. She is afraid of scandal and disgrace. In as much as the orgiastic or Dionysian plays a role in the play, it is offstage at Diana's and Hedda finds it repulsive. Indeed, both intoxicating passion and madness, features of the Dionysian, are explicitly ruled out of her ideal (HG 256). It is as though the 'beautiful' absorbs terms taken from the 'lovely' and the 'unlovely', but removes their content.

p. 86 Is there anything more substantial in Hedda's ideal, then, than this systematic appropriating of other elements? In a further analysis of the play, Adorno suggests that, while the *content* of Hedda's own ideal may indeed be hard to pin down, the fact that she takes up beauty as an ideal at all is more significant. There are two features of beauty that Adorno emphasises and that he contrasts with the morally minded characters in the play. First, its antiegalitarianism: some people will be considered ↪ beautiful and others will not. Second, its accidental quality: it will attach itself, unpredictably, to some and not others. For those, like Hedda and like us (Adorno holds), whose world is one in which moral values are used as a mask for wrongdoing, the commitment to beauty is a protest against a morality that is supposed to be universal in scope, accessible by all, and achievable by all: '[beauty] baulks at anything general, and posits as absolute the differences determined by mere existence, the accident that has favoured one thing over another'.²⁴ Where morality is supposed to rise above the merely accidental, beauty does not. Of course, the attachment to accident is problematic for precisely that reason—unlike morality, at least in principle, beauty is arbitrary and it cannot gain any kind of general grip. It is this group of ideas that allows Adorno to suggest that, in Hedda's case, 'beauty finds itself in the wrong against right, while yet being right against it'.²⁵

Appealing though this story is, the relationship between beauty and accident is tense in Ibsen's play. I have suggested that Hedda gathers her ideal together by rejecting elements of the 'lovely' and 'unlovely'. A final element of her ideal is what we might call 'spontaneity'. Two terms in the play relate to spontaneity. The 'voluntary [frivillighed]' first arises when Brack expresses the preference that his liaisons with Hedda be the result of her free choice, not blackmail (HG 240 has 'by mutual consent'; HIS IX 153). Hedda then uses it of Løvborg's (supposedly) courageous suicide (HG 258; HIS IX 190). The emphasis on an ideal voluntary act accords with other features of the play: Hedda rejects the suggestion that Løvborg's (ideal) suicide is an act clouded by passion; in the stage directions, she struggles to suppress her own 'involuntary [uvilkårlige]' expressions such as her 'involuntary sneer' (See HG 190; HIS IX 55, also HG 263; HIS IX 200); finally, she experiences her own involuntary outbursts as problematic, as evidenced in her description of insulting Juliane or complimenting the Villa (HG 206–207).

p. 87 Confusingly, though, the other term she uses, describing the beauty of Løvborg's (supposed) suicide, is 'uvilkårlig' (HIS IX 190). One common ↪ meaning of this term, in Ibsen, is 'involuntary': it is, as above, his standard term in stage directions for 'involuntary' behaviour. But to suggest that Løvborg's (imagined, beautiful) action is 'involuntary' goes against all that we have seen both in Hedda's behaviour and her description of the idealised suicide. It would render her ideal not merely empty, but contradictory. In the Ibsen translations, this problematic term is typically given as 'unconditional' (HG 258) or 'spontaneous'.²⁶ The point is that it should not be contingent or dependent on something else that is external to it. (The connection with 'involuntary' is presumably that an involuntary action escapes conditioning by the 'external' will of the agent.)

Of course, those around Hedda do not act capriciously, haphazardly, or without control: the Tesmans and Brack, in different ways, know exactly why they do what they do in a world of clearly defined purposes, adapting rationally as circumstances change. But Hedda implicitly treats the purposes of the Tesmans and Brack as imposed upon them from the outside: they are buffeted about by forces they cannot control—money, competition, class. Money troubles and motivates all characters, with the exception of Brack. Yet Hedda eventually calls Brack, too, a ‘specialist’ like her husband, precisely because he is propelled by an ‘external’ sexual force: he sees himself in sexual competition, wanting to eliminate the others to become the one, uncontested male amongst the females (literally, the ‘only cock in the basket’). Indeed, although Hedda tells Løvborg that she was cowardly for not accepting his advances, she sometimes treats her own sexuality as akin to an externally imposed force, refusing to acknowledge her desire or the consummation of the marriage and drawing her father’s pistols against those she finds attractive. Løvborg, returning in triumphant victory over drink and debauchery, will be ‘a free man’ precisely because he has won victory over such externally imposed forces (HG 226).

p. 88 This ideal—a beauty that is not imposed upon or conditioned by others—is questioned throughout the play along a number of different dimensions. First, we might question Hedda’s commitment to it. True, ♣ she rules out taking on duties: ‘No responsibilities for me, thank you!’, as she tells Brack, especially not those of a mother (HG 209). On the other hand, there are places that seem to cast doubt on her sincerity: one motivation for the burning of the book-child is that she did it ‘for your sake, Jørgen’: she saw an opportunity to help with his career. Elsewhere, she describes the conversation that led to her living with Tesman in Lady Falk’s villa as one in which she tried to ‘help’ him (HG 207). Moreover, twice in the play Hedda asks if she can be of any use, only to be firmly denied. First, she asks Aunt Juliane after her sister has died (‘Is there nothing I can do?’; the reply: ‘oh, you mustn’t think of it!’ [HG 248]). Second, she asks Tesman and Thea, who have started work on Løvborg’s legacy: ‘is there nothing you two can use me for here?’ ‘No’, comes the reply ‘nothing in the world’ (HIS IX 201, my translation). In such a context, one might wonder whether Hedda disdains usefulness not because of the imposition upon her, but because, when she tries to help, the result is disaster or rejection. If so, her choice of ideal is not, itself, freely chosen, but rather conditioned or arbitrary and she kills herself having been told that there is nothing she can be used for.

Hedda’s ideal is also questioned by the things that, she claims, exhibit it. Here, it is not that Hedda rejects an act that conforms to her ideal, but that she praises an act that does not. Løvborg’s (imagined) suicide is patently *not* non-arbitrary, unconditioned, or spontaneous: Hedda herself has orchestrated it, planting the idea in his head, giving him the means and lying to him about the destruction of the manuscript. She has tried to manipulate him into being autonomous. In any case, the inappropriateness of Løvborg as the representative of such an ideal is emphasised throughout the play. He is carefully described as within the power of one or other of the female characters, both before and during the setting of the play (Diana, Thea, Hedda, perhaps Diana and Thea again). ‘I got a sort of control over him’, says Thea at the start (HG 190). In the crucial scene, Hedda wrests control of him from Thea, by suggesting that she, Hedda, believes *in his power of self-control* more than Thea does (HG 223).

p. 89 What is more, in attaching her ideal to Løvborg, Hedda herself is shown, in her commitment to her ideal, to be buffeted around by external forces. She is flexible and adaptable when giving content to the ideal of ♣ beauty. When the men leave for the party, she has Løvborg returning at 10 o’clock, with vine leaves in his hair. When he does not: he will be reading his book (not taking part in the debauchery) with vine leaves in his hair. When it turns out that he *was* participating: it will be with vine leaves. When he has disgraced himself, he will shoot himself in the head (without vine leaves)—but, when he does not, the chest will do (HG 227, 230, 232, 246, 255). It is clear, at least, that Hedda’s ideal itself is not immune to external influence.

Finally, Løvborg is inappropriate because Hedda’s ideal rules out (as external conditioning) those wider forces, beyond the control of the individual, that explain human behaviour. Yet to explain human behaviour in terms of wider forces is precisely Løvborg’s intellectual project. If he is right, Hedda’s ideal cannot be realised. Now, of course, by Ibsen’s time there was a philosophical tradition of trying to reconcile the ideal of a free self with powerful historical forces. But, convincing or not, such traditions typically appealed to freedom as a social and moral ideal, made achievable or indeed achieved as history’s goal. It would be hard to imagine Hedda, or indeed Ibsen himself, pointing us in that direction. And so it is here that the backdrop of the two historians becomes important, offering Hedda a kind of false choice. Tesman’s lifestyle offers the bourgeois usefulness that Hedda disdains; but his narrow ideas leave the future open. Løvborg’s lifestyle at

VII. A Future for Beauty?

p. 90 Hedda's ideal is questioned in all these ways, but it does not follow that she fails to realise it herself, nor that it is futile as such. For Hedda chooses neither historian. Any encounter with *Hedda Gabler* must confront her death. The question it poses, on this line of interpretation, is: how powerful, and indeed how knowable, are the forces Hedda rejects? On Hegel's influential view, for example, naively to reject what is externally imposed, including one's own desires, is precisely to court senseless destruction and ↪ suicide: simply put, without the presence of such forces (in some form), there will be nothing left.²⁷ This would sit nicely with the thought that Hedda's prior attempt to keep the future open—by destroying Thea and Løvborg's book-child—is undermined, as Tesman and Thea reconstruct it. Hedda is swept aside, along with her ideal—to be unpredictably, freely beautiful is ultimately, then, to be useless and without consequence. The one (real) thing that Hedda calls beautiful (*skønt*) was her friendship with Løvborg, ruined and in the past (HG 218; HIS IX 108). It took place in secret and it led nowhere: nobody knows anything about it, as Hedda says in the same breath as calling it beautiful. The one time that Hedda is called 'beautiful [*skøn*]' is in an important exchange with Brack, as she is being denied access to their party and mocked for her desire to know what happens there: what happens is that, with Løvborg's text, the future is revealed.²⁸ Beauty, here, is denied the future.

Yet it must be admitted that the destruction of the manuscript does achieve *something*. For there will be a difference between Løvborg's predicted future and the future predicted by the reconstructed 'Løvborg'. If the former's predictions prove true or false, he has to some degree been vindicated or undermined. If the latter's predictions prove true or false, the responsibility may lie with his interpreters. In the synthesis of Tesman and Løvborg that ends the play, Hedda has carved out a space where the future's openness to prediction cannot, itself, be known. But she has also done more. Predictions, as Adorno suggests, work with what appear to be, but might not be, the unalterable facts. Of Hedda's suicide, Brack remarks in the final words that 'people don't do such things' (HG 264). If Løvborg thought the same, perhaps his predicted 'future' is compromised by what she achieves. If he could not have taken into account such unpredictable acts, then, at least, not all the conditions on human action can be known and described. Ibsen could not have p. 91 expected to offer the last word on the possibility, or indeed ↪ the desirability, of breaking free from the purposes apparently imposed upon us. He suggests, indeed, that one's very adherence to such an ideal might itself be viewed as an external imposition. Doubtless, by setting Hedda's ideal of the beautiful against the background I have described, he does a great deal both to motivate and to undermine it. What he does not do, however, is abandon the ideal altogether.

Notes

1. From Schiller's letter to Gottfried Körner, 19 February, 1793, in *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 170.
2. Compare Fjelde's translation in *Ibsen: The Complete Major Prose Plays* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1978), 699, 702, which translates both as 'beautiful'.
3. For example, '*dejlig*' is used as Nora is told she doesn't have to work (*A Doll's House*, in HG 6), to describe her 'lovely' children (HG 8, 22), how nice it is to have lots of money (HG 9), and being nicely dressed (HG 15, 36).
4. Lyons cites an earlier draft in which Ibsen considered taking this further, with Hedda asking: 'isn't it an honourable thing to profit from one's person?' See Charles R. Lyons, *Hedda Gabler: Gender, Role, World* (Boston: Twayne, 1991), 60.
5. See Leo Löwenthal, "Das Individuum in der individualistischen Gesellschaft. Bemerkungen über Ibsen," *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 5 (1936): 321–363. For a substantially revised English version, see his *Literature and the Image of Man: Communication and Society* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1986), vol. II, 157–176.
6. See his letter to Paul Ernest, 5 June 1890, in *Henrik Ibsen*, ed. A. Flores (New York: Critics Group, 1937), 21–24. In his recent book, *The Bourgeois*, Franco Moretti agrees with the description: 'no other writer has focused so single-mindedly on the bourgeois world'. See Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* (London: Verso, 2013), 169.
7. Georgy Plekhanov, 'Ibsen, Petty Bourgeois Revolutionist', trans. Emily Kent, Lola Sachs, and Pearl Waskow, in *Henrik Ibsen*, ed. A. Flores, 35–92. On Plekhanov in the context of Ibsen's Russian reception, see Laurence Senelick, 'How Ibsen Fared in Russian Culture and Politics', *Ibsen Studies* 14, no. 2 (2014): 91–108.
8. See Ibsen's January 1871 letter to Brandes, reprinted in James MacFarlane, *Ibsen and Meaning* (Norwich, UK: Norvik, 1989), 348–349 (my emphasis).

9. Leslie Reade, 'Review of *Henrik Ibsen, a Marxist Analysis*', *Science & Society* 3, no. 2 (1939): 274–277.
10. Terry Eagleton treats the internal conflict within individuals in Ibsen in much the same way: as revealing the instability he finds within bourgeois capitalism itself. See his 'Ibsen and the Nightmare of History', *Ibsen Studies* 8, no. 1 (2008): 4–12.
11. Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. G. Roth and C. Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), vol. II, 975.
12. Löwenthal, *Das Individuum*, 353.
13. Ibid.
14. Juliane: 'We must make the best of it [. . .] There's really no other way' (HG 168). Brack: 'one generally acquiesces in what is inevitable' (HG 262).
15. Löwenthal, *Das Individuum*, 361.
16. Letter to Fromm, November 16, 1937, translated and reprinted in Eva-Maria Ziege, 'The Fetish-Character of "Woman": On a Letter from Theodor W. Adorno to Erich Fromm Written in 1937', *Logos* 2, no. 4 (2003). Later, Adorno would develop his original criticism of Löwenthal in a more favourable direction: that *Ibsen's* female characters represented what was *then* a real possibility for change, but one that has since been missed. See *Minima Moralia*, Section 57, 92–93.
17. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. R. Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone Press, 1997), 237.
18. Adorno, *Critical Models*, trans. H. W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 21.
19. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 21.
20. Ibid.
21. Some critics have certainly treated Løvborg's work as self-evidently dilettantish—but note that Tesman, the specialist, doesn't say so. (Cf. Stein Haugom Olsen, 'Why Does Hedda Gabler Marry Jørgen Tesman?' *Modern Drama* 28 [1985]: 591–610, esp. 600.) Ibsen's friend Brandes thought, not implausibly, that Løvborg's concern with Tesman's opinion was a fault in the play.
22. These are the criticisms that Adorno develops in his critique of Spengler. See his 'Spengler after the Decline' in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967), 51–72.
23. The Dionysian is not explicit in the text itself, but, as Toril Moi notes, Ibsen has vine leaves in the hair of the Dionysus-worshipping Julian. See her *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 316.
24. *Minima Moralia*, Section 58, 93–95.
25. Ibid.
26. See Fjelde's translation, 772. Gosse and Archer also prefer 'spontaneous': see *The Collected Works of Henrik Ibsen*, ed. W. Archer (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), vol. X, 173.
27. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen Wood and trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), section 5, 37–39.
28. Brack and Hedda herself both refer to Hedda as a 'beautiful lady [skøn frue]' at HG 225–226 (HIS IX 124), though the translations have 'lovely lady'; or 'fair lady' (Fjelde, 744–745) obscuring the connection with the beautiful.