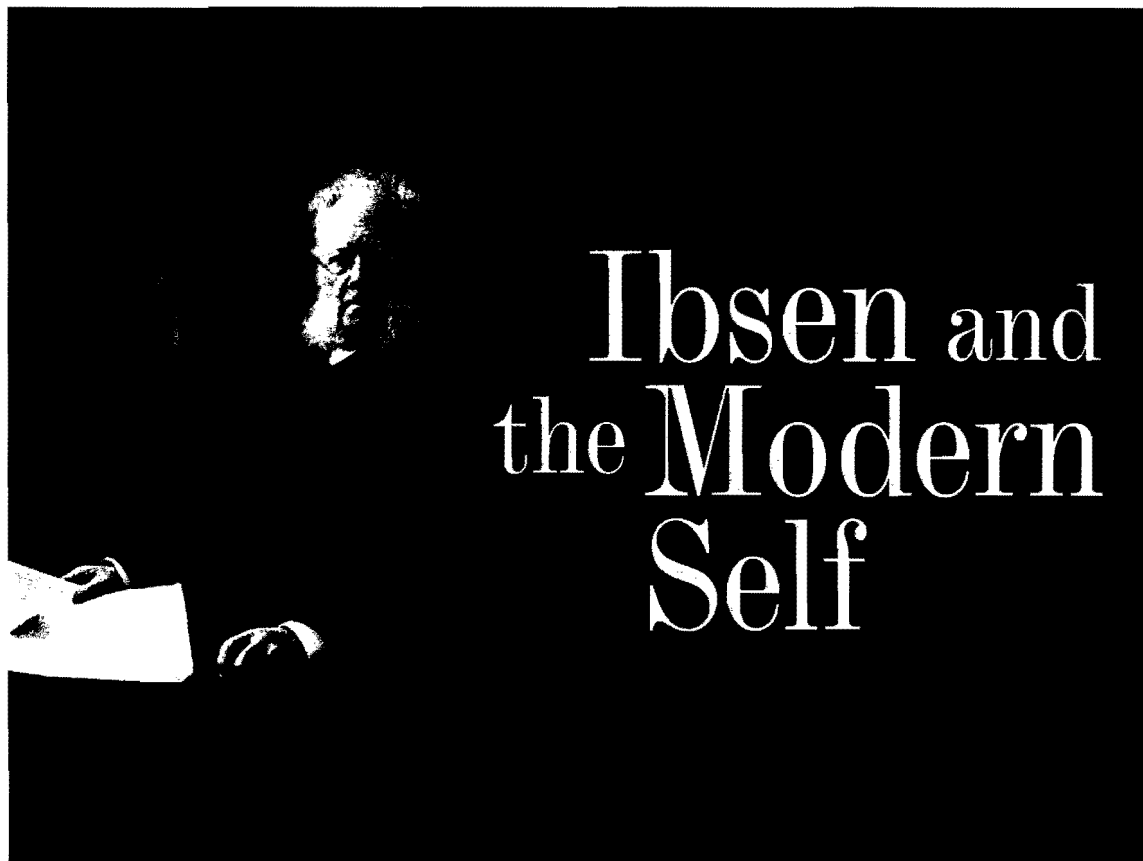


ACTA IBSENIANA



Ibsen and
the Modern
Self

Edited by

Kwok-kan Tam

Terry Siu-han Yip

Frode Helland



Centre for Ibsen Studies
University of Oslo



香港公開大學出版社

OPEN UNIVERSITY
OF HONG KONG PRESS



Ibsen a

The essays in
cultural chang
with new way
are leading scl
Adopting criti
ideology and
the self as mai

Acta Ibseniana VII-2010

Open University of Hong Kong Press
The Open University of Hong Kong
30 Good Shepherd Street
Ho Man Tin, Kowloon
Hong Kong
Fax: (852) 2396 5009
Email: ouhkpress@ouhk.edu.hk
Website: <http://www.ouhk.edu.hk/OUHKpress.htm>

Ibsen and the Modern Self

Edited by Kwok-kan Tam, Terry Siu-han Yip and Frode Helland

Cover photo: Henrik Ibsen by Gustav Borgen (1865–1926)

© Open University of Hong Kong Press, 2010

All rights reserved. No part of this material may be reproduced in any form
or by any means without permission in writing from the publisher.

ISSN: 1503-2981

ISBN: 978-962-7707-73-8

Printed in Hong Kong



Centre for Ibsen Studies
University of Oslo

Self-knowledge and aesthetic consciousness in Ibsen and Hegel

Kristin Gjesdal

The philosophical tenor of Henrik Ibsen's drama has typically been read against the background of Søren Kierkegaard's existentialism. As a result, interpreters of Ibsen's work have often overlooked the Hegelian currents of 19th-century Norway and Scandinavia at large.¹ Ibsen's teachers at the University of Christiania (now Oslo) were trained in Hegelian philosophy, and in commenting on contemporary drama, Scandinavian critics at the time would happily resort to Hegelian arguments and ideas. Furthermore, Ibsen socialized with a number of Hegelian academics at the Scandinavian Club in Rome, and between 1868 and 1875 he was close to the Hegelian circle congregating around the painter I. C. Dahl at the Academy of Art in Dresden.²

This essay argues that Hegel's critique of aesthetic consciousness thematically resonates and structurally shapes Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), by far his most well-known play.³ In particular the character of Torvald, who has often

¹ An exception here is Aarseth (2001). See also Aarseth (2007). Another exception is Johnston (1992). Neither Aarseth nor Johnston addresses the relationship between Ibsen and Hegel's critique of romanticism, which is the topic of this paper. Toril Moi (2006) discusses Ibsen's critique of Hegel and I am sympathetic to Moi's emphasis on the anti-idealist impulses of Ibsen's drama. However, my reading of Ibsen's relationship to Hegel is not concerned with his potential criticism of «Hegel's theory of women's role in the family and in society» (Moi 2006: 226), but attempts to illuminate Ibsen's drama in light of Hegel's politically more progressive notion of intersubjectivity and the philosophically more promising critique of aesthetic consciousness that follows in the wake of his turn towards the sociality of reason.

² See Aarseth (2001: 563). For a fuller account of Ibsen's visits to Rome and his travels with the Hegelian art historian Lorentz Dietrichson, see Nordhagen (1981).

³ This was the case from the very first reception of the play. *A Doll's House* was published in Copenhagen in early December 1879 in an edition of 8,000 copies, that is, in larger numbers than any of Ibsen's previous works. The first edition sold out within weeks, and second and third editions were launched within the next four months. See Meyer (1971: 263). All references to *A Doll's House*, inserted in the main text with page numbers only, are for the McFarlane translation (1981).



been seen as a merely passive backdrop for Nora's existential transformation,⁴ dramatically reflects the way in which modern subjectivity, left to take responsibility for its own life-choices, overestimates its power to the extent that it fails to engage in any real relationship to others and the external world. In playing out the implications of modern subjectivity as a problem of aesthetic consciousness, Ibsen highlights the shared concerns of Hegel's phenomenology and Kierkegaard's philosophy of existence.

Modernity and aesthetic consciousness

It is a well-known fact that Ibsen never presented himself as an eager reader of philosophy or contemporary literature. Ibsen, no doubt, was subject to the anxiety of influence. Nevertheless, in Ibsen's time, Norwegian culture and intellectual life was colored by Hegelian ways of thinking. In spite of their later anti-Hegelian sentiments, professors such as G V Lyng and Paul Martin Møller, both based at the University of Christiania, were trained in Hegelian philosophy. Yet it is Marcus Jacob Monrad's work and teaching that present the starkest testimonies to the Hegelian mindset of the time. Monrad was lecturing at the university in Christiania when Ibsen briefly signed up as a student. Ibsen and Monrad soon developed a more personal relationship (de Figueiredo 2006: 94–95, 190).

If Hegel's philosophy, with its emphasis on the historicity of thought, studies the development of culture in time, it also pays attention to the period that serves as a historical condition for its own existence: that of enlightened modernity. When addressing the era of modernity, Hegel (1995: vol. 3, 551) speaks of «a new epoch». Modernity, in Hegel's view, is characterized by reason's investigating and taking responsibility for its understanding of the world, and also for its own constitution and structure. Thus conceived, modernity is the era of self-reflection. Reason not only knows the world, but has gained knowledge of the very nature of knowledge itself.⁵ Self-reflection is intrinsically related to self-determination, thus also to freedom. And modernity, as it culminates in the ideals of the French Revolution, is the age

⁴ The rapidly emerging translations of Ibsen's play were often just called *Nora*, then subtitled *A Doll's House* (as in *Nora oder ein Puppenheim*, the German 1879 translation). For an account of the early translations of this play, see Ystad's forthcoming work «Innledning».

⁵ Hegel (1981: 17). Furthermore, Hegel claims that in the modern, philosophical period, our testing of knowledge is «not only a testing of what we know, but also a testing of the criterion of what knowing is» (1981: 55). See also Pinkard (1996: 191ff).

of self-reflection and freedom. As such, Hegel celebrates the modern period.⁶

Yet, in Hegel's dialectical scheme, every gain implies a loss; every step forward entails leaving something behind. Philosophical modernity, getting its first articulation in the work of René Descartes, is no exception. With Descartes, philosophy tears itself loose from the unexamined authority of the church and the tradition (Hegel 1995: vol. 3, 224). Modern reason emerges as self-grounding. But in emerging as self-grounding, reason faces the threat of nihilism. If reason is completely its own master, does that not imply that moral values and ethical conduct amount to no more than subjective preferences? If Descartes' philosophy is expressive of the modern conquering of a new philosophical territory, that of autonomous reason, Shakespeare's drama reflects the price to pay for this achievement.⁷ The character of Hamlet, gloomy, pensive, and incapable of action,⁸ incarnates the existential agony of self-determining reason, left, as it is, to make and make good on its own value schemes and life choices.

Modern agents cannot, most generally, live with the melancholy sentiments of Shakespeare's Hamlet. Instead of perpetually mourning the loss of absolute values, the modern mindset hypostatizes its own power. It breaks with a pre-modern quest for absolute external meaning and cultivates the realm of subjectivity proper. That is, it celebrates itself as the genius of its own existence, as an artist whose life is the ultimate work of art. This is the birth of modern autonomy, but also of the aesthetic consciousness that emerges as its pathological flipside. Aesthetic consciousness thus refers to a mentality in which the I, the single individual subject, consciously or subconsciously understands its relation to its surroundings in terms of a thoroughly aesthetic or even aestheticizing model. Immediacy, emotion, and self-expression are cultivated in excess. Within this model, the entire world emerges as a reservoir for subjective projections and pleasure. And because the individual I, to a greater or lesser degree, is taken to be responsible for its surroundings, this pleasure is at the same time reflective of the I's satisfaction

⁶ See the classical study by Ritter (1984). Robert Stern (2002: 157–168) discusses the importance of the French Revolution for the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in *Hegel and the Phenomenology of Spirit*. See also Pinkard (1996: 187–93).

⁷ Ibsen, who first saw Shakespeare staged in Copenhagen and Dresden in 1852, gave a talk on Shakespeare's influence on Nordic art in 1855. For a study of Shakespeare and Ibsen, see Koht (1965: 41–52). I discuss Hegel's reading of Shakespeare in «Reading Shakespeare, Reading Modernity: Hegel and Herder on Art and Modernity» (Gjesdal 2004: 17–31). See also Pinkard (2000: 5, 600–602).

⁸ Hegel emphasizes this dimension of Hamlet and describes him as being «full of disgust with the world and life» (Hegel 1975: vol. 2, 1226).

with itself. If the aesthetic illusion is threatened by the constraints of the extra-aesthetic world, aesthetic consciousness immediately drums up a new piece of aesthetic *Schein* that makes it possible to retain the image of its sovereignty.

Hegel connects this thinking with the philosophy of the Jena romantics, as it emerges in the wake of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*.⁹ He addresses this intellectual paradigm as that of the beautiful soul. Now, it is a relatively uncontroversial fact that Hegel's critique of the beautiful soul of the Jena romantics is philosophically off target.¹⁰ In his history of philosophy, Hegel (1995: vol. 3, 510) claims that in romantic philosophy, «subjectivity does not reach substantiality, it dies away within itself, and the standpoint it adopts is one of inward workings and fine distinctions; it signifies an inward life and deals with the minutiae of truth». According to Hegel (1995: vol. 3, 510), such an attitude leads to a condition in which «[t]he extravagances of subjectivity constantly pass into madness». Hegel never takes into account how, for example, Novalis's critique of aesthetic immediacy and his philosophy of history and education anticipate the dialectical thinking of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.¹¹

For all its historical faults, three aspects of Hegel's criticism remain important. First, aesthetic consciousness is perceived as a modern phenomenon and is, as such, related to the search, on behalf of the individual subject, for complete self-determination and independence. Second, aesthetic consciousness represents a variety of bad philosophical solipsism. This is why it needs to be overcome by a phenomenological model that, although it, like aesthetic consciousness, defends the idea of self-determining subjectivity, also takes into account the sociality of reason and sees subjectivity as constituted through intersubjective practices, bonds, and relations. Third, aesthetic consciousness is a totalizing model that cannot be changed or revised in light of external criticism or objections. Any change must be brought about by an inner crisis. This crisis, in turn, has to be of such proportions that it cannot be skirted or explained away, but demands a re-evaluation of the aesthetic

⁹ For the early Hegel's understanding of Fichte, see Hegel (1977) *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*. For his more mature view on Fichte, see Hegel (1995: 479–506) *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. For his understanding of romanticism as being fundamentally indebted to Fichte's paradigm, see his discussion of Schleiermacher, Schlegel, and Novalis (1995: 509–10) *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*.

¹⁰ For a study of Hegel's critique of philosophical romanticism, see Pöggeler (1956). See also Bohrer (1989).

¹¹ For such a reading of Novalis, see Haering (1954).

(or aestheticizing) paradigm itself. These three aspects of Hegel's critique of aesthetic consciousness will prove to be of crucial importance for modern philosophers all the way to Theodor Adorno, Martin Heidegger, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. What matters more in this context, however, is how Hegel's analysis might help illuminate the character of Torvald Helmer.

Beauty, autonomy, and economy in *A Doll's House*

For Torvald Helmer, emerging as a representative of a burgeoning, yet not entirely self-secure bourgeois lifestyle in 19th-century Norway, freedom is coded in the language of money and finances. Already from the very first stage directions, Ibsen explicitly brings to attention the economical framework of the household of the Helmers. We are introduced to «A pleasant room, tastefully but not expensively furnished» (1). Nora's weakness for macaroons, as it gives rise to the couple's first exchange on the stage, is subject to discussion because Torvald wishes to keep his wife well-proportioned and beautiful, but also because she «has been out squandering money again» (2). The subsequent exchange between Nora and Torvald keeps circling around the financial setup for the upcoming Christmas celebration, all the while with the subtext that Nora is incapable of dealing responsibly with money, and thus does not fully comprehend the necessary conditions for the life of the upper middle classes.¹²

In Torvald Helmer's view, there is a clear relationship between self-determination and a beautiful life. A life in self-determination *is* a life in beauty and, vice versa, a beautiful life is by definition free. Loans and mortgages, by contrast, indicate an unfree existence and are consequently considered ugly. This also applies to every sort of work that is undertaken in the spirit of utility, at least as far as the feminine sphere extends. A case in point is Kristine Linde's knitting, which Torvald bluntly recommends that she leave aside in order to take up more aesthetically pleasing needlework.¹³ Torvald's judgment reflects the idea that work that serves as a mere means, rather than an end in itself, is aesthetically unsatisfactory because it is a reminder of unfreedom. The freedom of the domestic sphere of the upper middle classes is expressed by the fact that its women, like Nora, are protected from, rather than involved in, the domain of necessities, and so better represent the lightness,

¹² For a more thorough study of the problem of money in Ibsen's drama, see Dukore (1980). See also Helland (2006: 134–50).

¹³ Whereas knitting «just can't help being ugly», embroidery is deemed «so much prettier» (68).



charm, and allure that is needed for the husband to lead an aesthetically enchanted life.

In spite of his condescending attitude towards Kristine, Torvald is no stranger to financial difficulties. Not that far back in time, Torvald's own life lacked the charm that he now takes for granted. As the play unfolds, we learn that Torvald, when he and Nora were newly wed, was so intent on obtaining a beautiful life that his hard work eventually made him physically ill. Indeed, at one point he was in such poor condition that Nora felt forced to forge her dying father's signature in order to obtain a loan so as to bring Torvald along to Italy. Torvald believed that the means for this trip were a welcome inheritance from Nora's father. Nora, by contrast, could not care less about the source of the funding as long as Torvald is healthy and well. Happily unaware that she had signed the mortgage papers a few days after her father passed away, Nora gradually pays off her debt by secretly taking on a little work on the side.

If Torvald had known that his recovery was rooted in debt, and, equally problematic, that Nora in this way contributes to the financial well-being of the family, he would have been unable to accept her sacrifice. It would have meant that his life was unfree, thus also lacking in beauty. As Nora puts it:

But the whole point was that he mustn't know anything. Good heavens, can't you see! He wasn't even supposed to know how desperately ill he was. It was me the doctors came and told his life was in danger, that the only way to save him was to go South for a while. Do you think I didn't try talking him into it first? I began dropping hints about how nice it would be if I could be taken on a little trip abroad, like other young wives. I wept, I pleaded. I told him he ought to show some consideration for my condition, and let me have a bit of my own way. And then I suggested he might take out a loan. But at that he nearly lost his temper, Kristine. He said I was being frivolous, that it was his duty as a husband not to give in to all these whims and fancies of mine – as I do believe he called them (14).

The financial balance – and the distribution of freedom and beauty – in the house of the Helmers is in other words far more complex than Torvald is aware of. At the level of its day-to-day content, his beautiful existence is rooted in one grand illusion.

But as important as the contentual connection between economy, self-determination, and beauty is the very structure of the idea of a successful life in the house of the Helmers. In all their permutations, beauty and freedom

are led back to a notion of subjective self-sufficiency. Nowhere is this clearer than in Torvald's relationship to Nora. No man, he insists in the final lines of the play (i.e., after Nora's fatal fraudulence has been uncovered), would have been willing to put love above his good name and reputation: «But nobody sacrifices his *honor* for the one he loves», he explains (84). Having decided that Nora must cut all emotional ties to her family, he demands that they, in order to save the façade that comes with his promotion in the bank, continue to keep up their appearance as a married couple: «And so far as you and I are concerned», Torvald insists, «things must appear to go on exactly as before. But only in the eyes of the world, of course. In other words you'll go on living here; that's understood. But you will not be allowed to bring up the children, I can't trust you with them» (76). Happiness, he explains, is out of the question: «All we can do is save the bits and pieces from the wreck, preserve appearances ... » (76). For a beautiful soul such as Torvald, any real existential challenge is evaded – and that also includes the recognition of the motivation for Nora's fraud – by further bolstering his illusion, rather than questioning it. At this point, Torvald's idea of a beautiful life has surfaced in its true ugliness: it is the idea of an externally beautiful life, a life of mere appearance. His illusory leaning on himself only, his wanting to be indebted to none, his wish to be the sole creator and master artist of his own existence has, so to speak, left him an empty shell: a subjectless persona. And, what is more, precisely in his aestheticizing attitude does he prove to be dependent on the recognition of others, only that the other from whom he craves recognition is not his wife, Nora, or his old friend, Dr Rank, but an abstract, anonymous «they». If Nora is a puppet under the mastery of, first, her father and then her husband (80), then Torvald is a puppet whose movements are directed by a nameless small-town mentality. This anonymous, non-personalized other, however, can offer no firm basis of recognition, hence also no point of transition from the idea of freedom as self-sufficiency to the idea of freedom as realized in and through the recognition of others.

Torvald's aesthetic solipsism

The final dialogue between Nora and Torvald – if a conversation in which one of the two parties systematically misunderstands the other can at all be called a dialogue – comes as no surprise. We have already encountered Torvald's lack of empathy with Nora's old friend, Kristine Linde («She is a frightful bore, that woman», is his merciless judgment (69)). In addition, Torvald responds to the nearing death of Dr Rank as nothing more than



«an ugly thing» (74), thus a fact that must, again, be avoided. Only to the extent that «His suffering and his loneliness ... provide a background of dark cloud to the sunshine of our lives» (74) can Torvald recognize a connection between himself and the life of his friend. While Torvald, right from the first two acts of the play, dreams of completing their beautiful existence by risking his own life in order to save Nora from something horrible, thus making her completely dependent on himself (74, see also 44), Ibsen's audience knows all too well that he is hopelessly incapable of such a deed.

In spite of his inflated self-understanding, Torvald is incapable of taking responsibility. On learning about Nora's fraud, he pushes everything over on her; her motivation does not count and her point of view is given no consideration. Torvald only worries that her mistake will damage his reputation. And it is this damage he desperately seeks to minimize when insisting that she now has to face the new domestic arrangement of a marriage in appearance only. For Nora, at this point, this involves no more than a continuation of the life they have already been leading for a long time. For Torvald it involves a major marital shift, because he is unable to realize that the relationship they have had so far never was genuine and that their marriage was based on little but unhealthy, aesthetic illusions.

Again, we see that Torvald's aesthetic consciousness is resistant to external challenges. It is expressive of a totalizing world-view rather than a local belief or set of such beliefs. No external criteria, no arguments or emotional reactions Nora could ever muster, could possibly have him change his mind. Rather than listening to her, he pushes her away: «You are ill, Nora. You are delirious. I am half inclined to think you are out of your mind» (83). Not even the fact that Nora is leaving him – which, no doubt, poses a significant risk to his reputation – can make him revise his understanding of their marriage. At the end of the day, Torvald has fallen prey to a pathological solipsism, a thinking that places the individual ego in the centre of the world and deems whatever event it faces beautiful or ugly depending on whether it satisfies its own, aesthetically bolstered subjectivity. When she, at the end of the play, leaves her family, Nora is lonely because the person she needs the most does not acknowledge her. She has understood that what she desires is a freedom that is gained through engaging in the interchange of mutually recognizing subjects. Torvald, by contrast, is lonely because he does not even realize that he needs others, least of all his wife, because he understands his own existence, along the lines of aesthetic consciousness, as his own creation, a creation of which he is the sole origin and genius.



Torvald Helmer and the dramatic logic of *A Doll's House*

Torvald's aesthetic solipsism has made the critics worry that he is simply too repulsive to work as a dramatic character. In his reading of *A Doll's House*, Robert Ferguson (1996: 242), for a start, claims that the play is but a piece of dramatic propaganda. Ferguson (1996: 242–43) reads Torvald as the representative of an unjust, patriarchal society, but as such he is portrayed as too monstrous to emerge with a real, scenic force. Torvald, for Ferguson, represents no more than the incarnation of an ill-placed gender politics. He never attains a genuine theatrical presence but remains, as it were, a mere role.

A different interpretative strategy is pursued by the philosopher Jay Bernstein. *A Doll's House*, he claims, is and remains aesthetically incomplete (Bernstein 1997: 167). The most obvious problem, he notes, is that Nora, while leaving all that she has – her home, her husband, her children – in order to find herself, is ascribed with an absolute calm and composure that indicates that she has already gained the self she is about to set out to find.¹⁴ Without her having already undergone the transformation she desires,¹⁵ such calm and composure is out of reach. Nora articulates her protest against society before she has reached a point of view from which such a protest can be articulated. Yet, in Bernstein's view, this glimpse of Nora as transformed, even though it represents, strictly speaking, a dramatic lapsus, captures the beauty of the play: «It is this that Nora's protest against society presupposes the transfigured one she is about to quest after that transforms the chill of the play's negativity into the warmth of affirmation, making Nora after all a beautiful heroine, an heroic beauty to be emulated and admired» (Bernstein 1997: 168). Nora's protest, Bernstein (1997: 167–80) claims, is the point at which we glimpse Ibsen's modernism, the modernism that would be brought fully into view in a later play such as *Hedda Gabler*.

Though embarking on divergent interpretatory routes, Ferguson and Bernstein base their criticisms on questionable assumptions. Ferguson, for a start, overlooks the fact that a certain exaggeration of character is and always has been part of literature more generally, and drama more specifically. One obvious example of this is Gustave Flaubert. In *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert's

¹⁴ Bernstein is referring to Nora's claim: «Never have I felt so calm and collected as I do tonight» (83).

¹⁵ Nora explains: «I must take steps to educate myself. You are not the man to help me there. That's something I must do on my own. That's why I'm leaving you». And a few lines later, «If I'm ever to reach any understanding of myself and the things around me, I must learn to stand alone. That's why I can't stay here with you any longer» (81).

famous novel from 1857, both Charles, Emma Bovary's husband, and her lovers emerge as flat, one-dimensional, and hyperbolic characters. Indeed, in this particular case, even the protagonist of the story, Emma herself, is portrayed as a one-sided personality throughout. Yet, in Flaubert's work, this is no literary blunder, but the very key to its aesthetic completion. Without ironical distance, Flaubert describes the world from the point of view of rather banal personalities, thus reflecting the boredom of post-revolutionary, post-romantic Europe.¹⁶ Furthermore, when taking into account the historical development of drama in particular, it seems clear that the classical tragedy, the prime example of which would be Sophocles' *Antigone*, is structured, precisely, around the characters' exaggerated realization of conflicting principles, so that the incompatibility of world-views, as in the case of Antigone and Creon, is at the same time expressive of a collision of ethical, political, and religious horizons.¹⁷ From a literary point of view, Torvald's one-dimensionality therefore cannot, as such, be said to constitute a problem.

Bernstein, on his side, runs the risk of approaching the play in an ahistorical way. While reading *A Doll's House* against the background of Adorno's theory of modernist literature, Bernstein argues that the play addresses the impossibility, in a world dominated by instrumental reason, of finding a point of resistance and critique. For Adorno, one of the things that modernist literature does is to bring to light the paradoxical impossibility *and* necessity of such a critique.¹⁸ It's a philosophical version, so to speak, of Beckett's famous «I cannot go on, I'll go on» (Beckett 1958: 179). But Bernstein, I fear, overlooks how Ibsen's literary aspirations were indeed quite different from Adorno's vision of modernist aesthetics (without this implying that there are no modernist sensitivities at work in Ibsen's drama).¹⁹ Ibsen was, after all, a 19th century Scandinavian writer, not a 20th-century German intellectual facing the horrors of the Second World War. The dramatic tension in *A Doll's House* is not, as Bernstein takes it, simply between Nora before and

¹⁶ For a treatment of the philosophical aspects of Flaubert's work, see Sartre (1972) and Barnes (1981).

¹⁷ Hegel (1975: vol. 3, 1217) elaborates this point: «it needs special emphasis that if the one-sidedness of a pathos is the real ground of the [tragic] collisions [of value spheres], this can only mean that it is carried out into actually living action, and the one-sided pathos has become the one and only pathos of a specific individual. Now if the one-sidedness is to be cancelled, it is the individual, since he has acted solely as this *one* pathos, who must be got rid of and sacrificed».

¹⁸ As Adorno (1997: 7) puts it, «[i]n artworks, the criterion of success is twofold: whether they succeed in integrating thematic strata and details into their immanent law of form and in this integration at the same time maintain what resists it and the fissures that occur in the process of integration».

¹⁹ For recent studies of Ibsen's modernism, see Helland (2000) and Moi (2006).



Nora after her utopian transformation, but also involves her relationship to Torvald, her father, her children, and her friends. Nora's relationship to herself is fundamentally mediated through the intersubjective relationships in which she engages. Torvald's self-relation, by contrast, is never mediated through her – at least this is not part of his own self-understanding. And this is why, towards the end of the play, she has to leave him.

A Doll's House is all about the struggle for recognition and the drama that occurs whenever a single individual, like Torvald, is stuck with the illusion of being absolutely autonomous and self-sufficient and the idea that such autonomy and self-sufficiency is a necessary condition for a free and beautiful existence. This illusion ends – must end – in tragedy, a tragedy that is in a certain way not just Torvald's or Nora's but an intrinsic part of modernity itself. For if there is one thing that characterizes modernity, it is, Hegel observes, the lack of external authority and meaning. As a historical and intellectual epoch, modernity is characterized by the need for the individual to legitimize his or her choice of values and orientations in life. Hence Nora and Torvald's conflict is not just acted out on the stage. It is a conflict that also involves us, the audience of Ibsen's drama – and that applies regardless of whether we recognize it or not. This is why *A Doll's House*, in spite of the happy ending Ibsen initially sketched for the play, emerges as the first of a series of tragedies of modern life.²⁰ As it is, the play was indeed drafted under the heading of «A Modern Tragedy» (Meyer 1971: 254).

In reassessing her life, Nora is showing an exceptional existential courage. She appears as a heroine of modernity, just as Antigone appears, at least to a philosopher such as Hegel, as a heroine of an ancient world-view in transition.²¹ However, most of us do not have Nora's courage. Most of us are not, like her, willing and able critically to assess the most fundamental values in light of which we lead our lives. In this respect, Torvald, with his aesthetic consciousness, is a lot more similar to us than Nora is. Hence, if the play is going to speak to us, if it is not just going to be about the Helmers, fighting out their marriage on stage, but about *our* lives and *our*

²⁰ Halvdan Koht (1954: 107) reports that *A Doll's House*, upon its initial launch, stirred debates of unprecedented proportions. Whereas a play such as *The Pillars of Society* (1877) was critical of the conventions of bourgeois life, it still rounded off with a happy ending. *A Doll's House*, by contrast, was in effect a death-sentence to the accepted norms and ethics of society, hence also to the traditional bourgeois theatre.

²¹ In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel (1981), depicts Antigone as a hero whose pathos is rooted in the bonds of care, love, and family relations. In *Aesthetics* (Hegel 1975: vol. 3, 1218), his claim is even stronger, namely that Sophocles's *Antigone* is the most perfect work of art ever created.

self-understanding, Ibsen cannot be content with simply depicting Nora's path towards autonomy. He also has to stage the resistance, the hermeneutic immunity, as it were, towards questioning the deepest-most values with reference to which we understand ourselves. At this point, the character of Torvald Helmer proves central. Without Torvald's exemplification of the existential tardiness, without his representing the will to inauthenticity, this never-budging desire to preserve the aesthetic appearance, and to do so even against better knowledge, the play could be read, as Ferguson does, as a piece of political propaganda, or, as in the case of Bernstein's interpretation, as an incomplete sample of dramatic modernism. But because of the way the character of Torvald is playing out the will to stick to our illusions, even at the point at which these illusions are at their most frail and implausible, the play transcends these potentially reductive frameworks. It concretizes, exemplifies, and presents us with one of the most fundamental challenges of modernity itself: the lack of fit between our individual self-understanding, as we are, at least according to the Hegelian analysis, left to create our own meaning and take responsibility for our own orientation in life, and the inevitable finality and limitations of human beings. Within such a framework, Torvald does not simply represent the masculine half of Ibsen's audience, be it past or present. Rather, he is that in us – even that in Nora – that resists the struggle for self-knowledge and self-insight: Torvald is that in us that meets every existential challenge by looking the other way and pretending not to see the agony that we, as first person singular individuals, must deal with and live out as part of the modernity that is, inevitably, ours. In this way Torvald is indeed more than a dramatic shadow figure designed to make Nora's struggle for self-understanding and recognition look even more profound. He is entirely central to the dramatic development of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*.

Conclusion

A reader well-versed in German idealism and its reception might object to this interpretation that even though the character of Torvald Helmer can be illuminated by viewing the play through the lens of Hegel's critique of the aesthetic consciousness of modern philosophy in general and romanticism in particular, Ibsen's dramatization of the human struggle for self-understanding – or, conversely, the systematic self-deception holding us back from such a struggle – points in the direction of existentialist philosophy rather than Hegelian thought. Consequently, philosophically-minded readers of Ibsen typically emphasize his indebtedness to the most well-known Scandinavian

philosopher of the time, namely Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard stages his philosophy in explicit opposition to Hegel's. In his work, Hegel's system is criticized for its lack of sensitivity to the individual, philosophizing subject. Against this, Kierkegaard emphasizes individual subjectivity – *hiin enkelte*, as he puts it – as the point of departure of philosophy proper, and sees philosophy as the individual's education towards a growing responsibility for its own existence. These topics figure prominently in Ibsen's earlier work such as *Brand* (1865) and *Peer Gynt* (1867).

Yet, popular as it is, the idea of there being an absolute opposition between Hegel and Kierkegaard is too simple. Even though Kierkegaard was critical of the systematic aspirations of Hegel's thought, he adopted several aspects of Hegel's critique of the philosophical tradition, the most obvious of which would be his merciless rejection of the beautiful soul. In fact, one could even go so far as to suggest that it is his indebtedness to Hegel that makes it so hard for Kierkegaard to acknowledge his own borrowings. Furthermore, Kierkegaard, when engaging in polemics against Hegel, was not simply targeting Hegel but, even more so, the contemporary Hegelians in Scandinavian intellectual life.²²

Hegel's philosophy is far more complex than what his critics make of it. In fact, the very idea that philosophy involves a dimension of self-transformation, tagged, as it often is, to an existentialist label, is Hegelian through and through. Hegel himself always emphasizes the edifying purpose of the phenomenological project. Readers should not, as in more traditional system-philosophy, simply accept a conclusion following from a given set of premises, but must see for themselves and make their own the way in which spirit moves from naivety to insight, from immediacy to reflection. This is what motivates Hegel's philosophical project, and the reason why the beginning philosopher cannot turn straight to *Logic*, but needs the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as a first and fundamental step. Rather than simply telling the reader about the development of Spirit, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* shows the growing maturity that follows from the development, detours, and mistakes that finally lead to absolute reason. In making this process his or her own, the reader undergoes a phenomenological *Bildung*. Hence the difference between Hegel and Kierkegaard at this point is not that Kierkegaard theorizes the engagement of the philosophizing individual and Hegel does not. The difference, rather, is that for Hegel, this process is, ultimately, historical and

²² See, again, Jon Stewart's (2003) account in *Kierkegaard's Relation to Hegel Reconsidered*.



intersubjectively mediated. It does not happen momentarily – in the transitory, yet undeniably sublime now of the *Øieblik* – but in and through time and historical tradition.

Ibsen's drama, both the early plays of ideas, like *Emperor and Galilean* (1873), significantly subtitled «A World Historical Drama», and the later works such as *Ghosts* (1881) and *When We Dead Awaken* (1899), stages the interplay between past, present, and expectations for the future. Several of his characters, among them Peer Gynt, explicitly relate to and make practical as well as existential choices against the background of their own tradition, be it that of Scandinavia, Western Europe, or an even wider cultural legacy going all the way back to ancient Egypt.

In writing plays, rather than philosophical treatises, there is no need for Ibsen to choose categorically between a Hegelian and a Kierkegaardian frame of mind. He can pick, choose, and combine different philosophical intuitions into a higher dramatic unity. Furthermore, in Ibsen's own time, most Kierkegaardian philosophers were schooled in phenomenology and made their first academic contributions as Hegelian thinkers. Hence for Ibsen, there is no absolute contradiction between a Hegelian and a broader existentialist framework. As a philosophically informed playwright, Ibsen performatively illustrates and brings to life the intellectual currents that were dominant in his time – and still are in ours. In doing so, Ibsen's drama highlights dimensions of these philosophical currents, such as the existential learning process involved in the phenomenological project, which are often downplayed or forgotten by the philosophical tradition itself.

Bibliography

- Aarseth, Asbjørn 2001: «Peer Gynt and Hegel's ideas on Egyptian art», in *Scandinavian Studies*, vol. 73, pp. 535–46.
- Aarseth, Asbjørn 2007: «Introduksjon og kommentarer», *Henrik Ibsens Skrifter*, vol. 5b. Ed. Vigdis Ystad et al. Oslo: Aschehoug Forlag.
- Adorno, Theodor W 1997: *Aesthetic Theory*. Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Barnes, Hazel E. 1981: *Sartre and Flaubert*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bernstein, Jay 1997: «Fragment, fascination, damaged life: The truth about Hedda Gabler», in *The Actuality of Adorno: Critical Essays on Adorno and the Postmodern*. Ed. by Max Pensky. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, pp. 154–82.



- Beckett, Samuel 1958: *The Unnamable*. Trans. Samuel Beckett. New York: Grove Press.
- Bohrer, Karl Heinz 1989: *Die Kritik der Romantik*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Dukore, Bernard F. 1980: *Money and Politics in Ibsen, Shaw, and Brecht*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press.
- Ferguson, Robert 1996: *Henrik Ibsen: A New Biography*. New York: Dorset Press.
- Figueiredo, Ivo de 2006: *Ibsen: Mennesket*. Oslo: Aschehoug.
- Gjesdal, Kristin 2008: «Ibsen on Hegel, Egypt, and the beginning of great art», in *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain*, vol. 55/56, pp. 67–86.
- Gjesdal, Kristin 2004: «Reading Shakespeare, Reading modernity: Hegel and Herder on art and modernity», in *Angelaki*, vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 17–31.
- Haering, Theodor 1954: *Novalis als Philosoph*. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag.
- Helland, Frode 2006: «Henrik Ibsen og det politiske: Et dukkehjem», in *Lesing og eksistens. Festskrift til Otto Hageberg på 70-årsdagen*. Ed. Per Thomas Andersen. Oslo: Gyldendal, pp. 134–50.
- Helland, Frode 2000: *Melankoliens spill. En studie i Henrik Ibsens siste dramaer*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Hegel, G. W. F. 1975: *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 2. Trans. T. M. Knox. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. 1977: *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. 1995: *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, three vols. Trans. E. S. Haldane and Frances Simson. Lincoln: Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. 1981: *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. A. V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ibsen, Henrik 1981: *Four Major Plays*. Trans. James McFarlane and Jens Arup. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ibsen, Henrik 1879: *Nora oder ein Puppenheim*. Trans. Wilhelm Lange. Leipzig: Reclam.



- Johnston, Brian 1992: *The Ibsen Cycle*. State Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Koht, Halvdan 1965: «Shakespeare and Ibsen», in *Ibsen: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Rolf Fjelde. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., pp. 41–52.
- Koht, Halvdan 1954: *Henrik Ibsen. Eit diktarliv*. Oslo: Aschehoug.
- Meyer, Michael 1971: *Henrik Ibsen, vol. 2, Farewell to Poetry 1864–1882*. London: Rupert Hard-Davis.
- Moi, Toril 2006: *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nordhagen, Per Jonas 1981: *Henrik Ibsen i Roma, 1864–1868*. Oslo: Cappelen Forlag.
- Pinkard, Terry 2000: *Hegel: A Biography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pinkard, Terry 1996: *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pöggeler, Otto 1956: *Hegels Kritik der Romantik*. Bonn: Friedrich Wilhelms-Universität, Dissertation.
- Rhodes, Norman 1995: *Ibsen and the Greeks*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press.
- Ritter Joachim 1984: *Hegel and the French Revolution: Essays on the Philosophy of Right*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul 1972: *L'idiot de la famille*, vols. 1–3. Paris: Gallimard.
- Stern, Robert 2002: *Hegel and the «Phenomenology of Spirit»*. London: Routledge.
- Stewart, Jon 2003: *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stewart, Jon 2007a: *A History of Hegelianism in Golden Age Denmark, vol. 1, The Heiberg Period: 1837–1842*. Copenhagen: C A Reitzel's Publishers.
- Stewart, Jon 2007b: *A History of Hegelianism in Golden Age Denmark, vol. 2, The Martensen Period: 1837–1842*. Copenhagen: C A Reitzel's Publishers.
- Ystad, Vigdis forthcoming: «Innledning», in *Henrik Ibsens skrifter*, vol. 7b. Edited by Vigdis Ystad et al. Oslo: Aschehoug, pp. 231–37.

