



# Tragedy and Tradition

## Ibsen and Nietzsche on the Ghosts of the Greeks

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### 1.

**In the afterword to *The Birth of Tragedy***, added fourteen years after the book was first published, Friedrich Nietzsche famously scorns the Wagnerian-Schopenhauerian impulses of his youthful work. Mockingly, but not without a serious streak, he adds that his aesthetic program should not have been written, but sung: “What a pity,” he writes, “I did not dare to say what I had to say at that time as a poet; perhaps I could have done it!”<sup>1</sup> Looking back at his book, Nietzsche resents the fact that he had theorized Greek drama, had approached it at the level of second-order discourse, rather than engaged it artistically. But in spite of his changing attitude to Richard Wagner, Nietzsche’s study of Greek tragedy—an art form that, in its expression of myth and religion, grows out of a musical force so powerful that it draws the audience into the play and, in the face of human suffering, initiates a celebration of life—has influenced generations of later philosophers and artists. In the nineteenth century, budding representatives of so-called Nordic modernism studied and worked in Germany, and German philosophy was read and debated at home and abroad. Nietzsche’s work played a prominent part in this movement.<sup>2</sup> In a Norwegian context, Edvard Munch not only painted his famous portrait of the philosopher, but also wrote extensive diary notes on him.<sup>3</sup>

Scholars have also pointed to the Nietzschean spirit that saturates the work of the dramatist Henrik Ibsen.<sup>4</sup> Like Nietzsche, Ibsen started off with a keen interest in ancient culture. Ibsen had studied classical literature as part of the entrance exam at the university in Christiania (now Oslo).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the newly erected university building in Christiania was planned with the aid of the classicist architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel, whose work should be familiar from the Altes Museum in

Berlin. Ibsen did not pass the entrance exam to the university, yet his early work captures the world of the Romans (*Catiline* [1849], *Emperor and Galilean* [1873]) as well as the Nordic sagas (*The Vikings at Helgeland* [1857], *The Pretenders* [1863]). Nowhere, however, does Ibsen offer a more penetrating—some would say more profound, others more bleak—picture of our relationship to the tradition than in his 1881 *Ghosts*, a play whose treatment of issues like syphilis and incest left it steeped in scandal, if not entirely dead upon its first performance. To the extent that *Ghosts* was defended, it was with reference to its formal and thematic closeness to classical tragedy. Later readers have emphasized the Sophoclean tenor of this work—it is a play about the protagonist's belated knowledge and self-understanding—though they have debated what conclusion to draw from Ibsen's reference to Greek tragedy.<sup>6</sup>

In the following, I address Ibsen's relationship to classical tragedy in *Ghosts*. Against the readings of *Ghosts* as an ethical or cognitive drama of a Sophoclean bent, I suggest that Ibsen, in this play, does not so much imitate Greek tragedy as he problematizes, questions, and investigates our modern relationship to the past. He does so, further, by focusing on the experiential aspects of the play, on the relationship between actors and audience, as they are organized through the unity of characters, the unity of space, and the unity of time. Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, published a decade prior to *Ghosts*, offers a set of concepts through which this endeavor can be understood. Likewise, Ibsen, in staging a play that explicitly and implicitly tackles our relationship to the past and the conditions of possibility for a tragedy of our time, makes it possible to see what Nietzsche might have had in mind when he suggested that his treatise on Greek drama should have been *sung*, rather than written or spoken.

## 2.

In approaching Ibsen's *Ghosts*, contemporary readers often home in on Helene Alving, the play's protagonist and the only character who, save the very opening scene, is present throughout the entire play and whose experiences, hopes, and fears make up its dramatic core. As the play opens, Helene's son Oswald, an aspiring painter, has just returned from his Parisian exile to celebrate the opening of an orphanage raised to honor the memory of his deceased father. However, Helene's conversation with Manders, a pastor and family friend, reveals a picture of Mr. Alving that is far from flattering. Though characterized by vitality and a zest for life, Mr. Alving was never the model citizen they all wish to remember. He was an unfaithful husband and an irresponsible father whose practical jokes involved exposing his son to pipe-smoking

and possibly, according to the medical dogma of the day, thereby passing on his syphilis to his son.<sup>7</sup> As Oswald's health deteriorates, his fear and desperation—not so much his fear of dying, as his fear of losing the joy of life from out of which his art was made—can only be dampened by his erotic investment in Regine, the maid and daughter of the local carpenter, Jakob Engstrand.<sup>8</sup> However, Helene soon reveals that Regine is the offspring of Mr. Alving's illicit affair (Regine's mother was a maid with the Alvings) and thus, in truth, is Oswald's biological half-sister.

Within this pentagonal character structure—Helene Alving and Oswald; Jakob Engstrand and his (step-)daughter, Regine; plus Pastor Manders—the drama revolves around Helene Alving's gradual acknowledgement of the unpleasant truth about her marriage, her son's upbringing (he is brought up by foster parents so as to be spared his father's reckless lifestyle), and Regine's alienated life in the household (as maid, daughter, Oswald's half-sister, *and* his possible lover). To further complicate the situation, her acknowledgement is triggered in part by reflection on her past feelings for Pastor Manders and vice versa. At some point, Helene had even fled her marriage for the pastor, who then overcame his feelings for her and sent her back to her rightful spouse—and to an existence that, from Helene's point of view, involved constantly maintaining a façade.<sup>9</sup>

Against this background, *Ghosts* is taken to mirror the belated self-knowledge, the gradual insights and awakening, that characterizes Sophocles' best known tragedies. With its incestuous undertones and focus on the systematic refusal to see (or know) the truth, Oedipus is a character who springs to mind. Like Oedipus, Mrs. Alving owns up to the truths of her life, and, like Oedipus, these truths are gained too late for her to change her course of action. Helene Alving's insights involve her realization of the emptiness of her marriage, but ultimately, in an act of sudden self-sacrifice, she also takes responsibility for having stifled her husband's joyful and life-affirming character in her futile efforts to create a home of decency.<sup>10</sup> The outcome of her tragic flaw is a legacy of incest concretely embodied in the relationship between Oswald and Regine.<sup>11</sup>

Focusing on Mrs. Alving's conversations with the pastor, Brian Johnston and others view Helene's moment of guilt-struck self-knowledge as key to the overall meaning of the play. These commentators read *Ghosts* as the tragedy of Helene's recognition, arriving far too late, of her failure to play along with and celebrate her husband's *joie de vivre*. As Johnston sums up the piece,

The dead military father, Alving, has been wronged by his wife Helene. . . . Helene tries to allay the ghost of her husband once and for all with a fraudulent ritual: as she is making arrangements for

this her son, Oswald, returns from abroad and soon will league with his sister, Regine, against the whole world of pious untruth created by Helene against the values represented by her husband.<sup>12</sup>

On this reading, *Ghosts* is a classical tragedy to the extent that it addresses moral responsibility or, more precisely, the belated realization of the failure to take moral responsibility. According to this view, Helene Alving is no victim, but a woman who failed to grow up and thus must accept her contribution to the unhappy fates of her late husband (debauched as he died), Oswald (gradually giving in to the syphilis his father apparently passed on to him), Regine (having lived as a servant in her father's house, and perhaps also having fallen in love with her half brother), Engstrand (unknowing about his daughter's true family, possibly also his wife's true love), and even Manders (unable to give in to his desires for Helene Alving). Mrs. Alving has not simply been wronged, but is, indeed, the very source of the misery and pain by which she is surrounded.

This reading, however, is marred by three problems. First, Ibsen himself presents *Ghosts* as a sequel to *A Doll's House*, which was published the year before.<sup>13</sup> In light of Nora's departure from her husband, Torvald Helmer, and Helmer's pathetic lack of sympathy for Nora's struggle, the interpretation of Helene Alving as a remorseful female Oedipus figure—a wife and mother who should have known, but failed to see—does not make much sense.<sup>14</sup> Nora suffered gross misrecognition from her husband, and nothing in that play suggests the moral or even moralist cure of keeping up the façade of an impeccable, bourgeois life. Rather, the two plays seem in unison in exploring the cost of bourgeois marriage, especially (but not exclusively) for the female spouse.<sup>15</sup> Second, it is an open question whether the timetable undergirding such a reading of *Ghosts* makes sense. Mr. Alving neither “fell” nor contracted syphilis because of his wife's feelings for the pastor and her later decision to accept a marriage in pretense. Mr. Alving was a fallen man even before they married (G 123). Third, when Mrs. Alving is reflecting on her “guilt,” it is clear that her propensity to do her duty, and thus also to quell her husband's excesses, comes from succumbing to the expectations of a traditional, bourgeois family structure. Her fault, as it were, is not to have stifled her husband's joy of life, but to passively have taken over the expectations of bourgeois culture (G 155) that are, throughout the play, represented by Pastor Manders.<sup>16</sup> An alternative interpretation of the play's Greek (Sophoclean) echo is thus called for.

In response to the readings sketched above, Joan Templeton has suggested that “the shape of the tragedy is Sophoclean only in the most

general way: the crisis of the drama is the revelation of the dreadful truth about the past.<sup>17</sup> In Templeton's reading, the play is not so much about Helene Alving's realization of her failing commitment to her husband, but grows out of her failure to listen to herself. Hence, the play is not Sophoclean because it traces Helene Alving's gradual self-discovery, but because it portrays a subject who does not live according to the truths she possesses. As Templeton makes her point, in *Ghosts*

there is no vacillating protagonist searching for the truth, or denying some truth already evident to everyone else, but a woman who berates herself over and over again for not telling the truth she, and she alone, already knows, condemning herself with great anguish for having obeyed other people's rules instead of her own mind and heart.<sup>18</sup>

It cannot be doubted that Helene Alving betrays herself. Yet, I wonder to what extent this reading really gets beyond the interpretations Templeton seeks to challenge. Whereas Johnston's reading suffers from its almost exclusive focus on Mrs. Alving's alleged duties to her husband and her son, Templeton's reading, though less conservative in spirit, also hones in on Helene Alving's orientation toward the truth of her life. While the insights uncovered are not the same (and maybe are not even compatible), both of these interpretative models are geared toward the knowledge gained by the protagonist, i.e., they are cognitivist in spirit. In both these lines of reading, what places *Ghosts* in a dialogical relationship with classical tragedy is the reflection of a Sophoclean orientation toward a tragic truth-content, a process of belated learning or insight on behalf of the protagonist and, by implication, the audience. This is the kind of reading I would like to question by turning, briefly, to the broader philosophical reception of Greek tragedy in the period leading up to and involving the period of Ibsen and Nietzsche.

### 3.

Between 1770 and 1830, between Johann Gottfried Herder's writings on theater and G.W.F. Hegel's lectures on fine art, philosophical aesthetics consisted mainly in a discussion of how best to understand our relationship to classical Greek art.<sup>19</sup> It must be noted that this discussion was not guided by implicit classicist premises, but emerged from a break with the classicist aesthetics of imitation and its emphasis on form. In the paradigm of classicist poetics, the question of modernity, of the difference between the world of the ancient Greeks and that of the modern mindset, was not an issue.<sup>20</sup> With Herder and the anti-classicists,<sup>21</sup> by contrast, the debate about Greek art is transformed into a

discussion of modernity, as it develops through a survey of the relationship between classical Greek and modern theater.<sup>22</sup>

I take this to be a fundamental watershed in the philosophy of theater. Later discussions of Greek tragedy must be understood against this background. Only because there already *was* such a strong connection between aesthetics, on the one hand, and classical tragedy, on the other, could Hegel, in his lectures on fine art, declare that “[b]ecause drama has been developed into the most perfect totality of content and form, it must be regarded as the highest stage of poetry and of art generally.”<sup>23</sup> And only in light of this connection could Nietzsche, half a century after Hegel’s lectures, further hope to overturn the entire paradigm of post-Socratic philosophy by calling for a reinterpretation of Greek tragedy.<sup>24</sup> In Nietzsche’s view, only a reinvigoration of Dionysiac art can mend the loss of myth that took place with the death of Greek tragedy (BT 109). While Hegel emphasizes the truth content of art (and thus laid the ground for the kind of readings pursued by Johnston and Templeton),<sup>25</sup> Nietzsche, with his emphasis on the myth-carrying power of tragedy, celebrates how the Dionysiac and the Apolline “both transfigure a region where dissonance and the terrible image of the world fade away in chords of delight; both play with the goad of disinclination.”<sup>26</sup>

*The Birth of Tragedy* is a treatise on the essence of Greek drama. Yet, it is also a book about the possibility of a living modern theater, a theater that can break through the reflective mindset of us moderns and reconnect with dimensions of reality that escape the discursive forms of philosophy and science, on the one hand, and the otherworldliness of religion, on the other. If the demise of tragedy is the demise of myth (BT 110), then the question is whether we moderns can find a way to retrieve the mythical power of art. Tragedy is not a kind of art that is characterized by its search for truth or by cognition of the didactic or self-reflective kind—this, rather, would be the “Socraticism of science.” Theater, for Nietzsche, evokes an experience so fundamental, so existentially profound, that the Greek actors had to shield themselves with masks (BT 46). Further, this experience is not exclusive to the actors, but is shared by actors and audience alike; in the experience of tragedy, actors and audience are united in standing face to face with the deepest truths of existence. In Nietzsche’s interpretation, tragedy, at its best, offers a balance between the Apolline drive toward clarity and individuation and a destructive Dionysiac force that abolishes all individuation, an equilibrium between words and music, actors and chorus. His question, though, is not simply whether this kind of tragedy can be reborn in modernity (even if the last section of the book, with its celebration of Wagnerian drama, pulls in this direction).<sup>27</sup> Rather, he conveys the hope that we moderns will be able to produce a kind of drama that

can present us, in a way that suits our artistic-existential sensitivities, with insights of an equally groundbreaking character, a theater that unites actors and audiences in an experience that pulls us out of the everyday and presents us with a celebration of life that eclipses, if only in passing, human suffering and the finitude of individual existence. When Nietzsche abandons his hope that Wagner's musical tragedy can offer such a possibility—such a unity of actors, chorus, and audience, such celebration of life in the face of human pain—he nonetheless keeps open the possibility of an adequate modern work of art.<sup>28</sup>

In sketching this Nietzschean framework of understanding, I am not proposing that Ibsen is a Nietzschean dramatist in the strictest meaning of the term. Ibsen always claimed not to have read much, and especially not to have read much academic literature.<sup>29</sup> There is no reason to believe that he was familiar, at the level of detailed discussion or fine-tuned arguments, with the subtle nuances of contemporary philosophy, nor is there reason to read his plays as declarations of a philosophical program of sorts.<sup>30</sup> Rather, I wish to emphasize two points of a more general nature. First, in the nineteenth century—in fact, in the very decade leading up to the publication of *Ghosts*—the debate about modern tragedy was, to a significant extent, staged as a debate about our relationship to classical Greek tragedy (how can the spirit of Greek tragedy be kept alive without turning into a matter of sheer imitation?). Second, this understanding of tragedy did not focus on the self-knowledge or truthfulness of the protagonists (as it is argued by Johnston, on the one hand, and Templeton, on the other), but, rather, on the theatrical experience, the dialectic between play and audience. From this point of view, an emphasis on Helene Alving's self-knowledge—be it a gradual knowledge about her failure to support her husband *or* a knowledge of her being torn between her duty to herself and her role as mother and wife—is not only too cognitivist, but also potentially ahistorical.

In this way, the framework of nineteenth-century thought offers a set of conceptual markers, bringing to the fore a set of questions and problem areas, that can help shed light on *Ghosts* and its relationship to Greek tragedy. Against the background of Nietzschean philosophy, it becomes clear that the reference to tragic knowledge or self-discovery risks being no more than a way to frame the play, to objectivize it and make it domesticated and approachable, i.e., to turn it into a learning piece, an object of moral or political reflection of the kind that Nietzsche so clearly despised.<sup>31</sup> In spelling out the Greek legacy as a matter of adopting a theater of knowledge or learning, one could worry with Nietzsche that the play is no longer what tragedy was for the Greeks (overwhelming, scary, abject, yet part of their world), but is turned into a

didactic artifact that mirrors the way Greek art oftentimes emerges to us: grand, fascinating, and yet somewhat museum-like and dead in the sense that it presents a set of values that are no longer ours. It is, with a pun that is just too obvious to ignore, making Ibsen's play into a mere shadow of what Greek art might have been—making it into a *ghost*.<sup>32</sup>

#### 4.

Is there, then, no way for late nineteenth-century drama to realize the call (be it Nietzschean in origin or not) for a theater that transcends the objectivizing attitudes of us moderns? In my view, Ibsen's *Ghosts* represents a possible answer to this question from within the framework of drama itself. In order to see why this is so, a closer analysis of the play is called for. In pursuing such an analysis, I would like to focus on three different aspects of the play: (1) the unitary panoply of characters; (2) the unity of place; and (3) the unity of time—i.e., the features that made *Ghosts* appear as a tragedy of classical proportions in the first place.

(1) A clear and well-organized set of characters is a central part of classical poetics.<sup>33</sup> So, it seems, is also the case with Ibsen's *Ghosts*. At the center of the five-strong gallery hover the twin parent-child relationships of Helene and Oswald Alving, on the one hand, and Jakob and Regine Engelstrand, on the other. In spite of a notable difference in background and class—Helene is the wife of the deceased captain and the description of her home as well as her husband's position suggest she is well off, while Engstrand is a carpenter of little means<sup>34</sup>—both parents have lost their former spouses and are seeking the belated acknowledgement of their offspring. Both Helene's son and Engstrand's daughter grew up with foster parents.<sup>35</sup> In both cases, the acknowledgement asked for is also a reconciliation and reconsolidation of the parent-child relationship around which the drama revolves. Further, the desire for reconciliation is sheltered in the form of a substitute home-making.<sup>36</sup> In Helene Alving's case, she wants to rid herself of the dowry from Captain Alving by building an orphanage (the uninsured building that burns down in act two, making the pastor exclaim, "*This is a flaming judgment*" (*straffedommen*, 'punishment') on this house of iniquity" [G 147]). In Engstrand's case, he wishes to create a home for retired seamen—a project he, like Helene, wants to name after the deceased captain.<sup>37</sup> Neither Oswald, nor Regine invests much in these surrogate homes. Nor do they warm to their parents' attempts at reconciliation.<sup>38</sup> In fact, they both appear to need their parents only to the extent that they can assist in the effort to get away from the families to which they never fully belonged.<sup>39</sup> Regine had been dreaming of Oswald taking her to Paris, but upon realizing that such travel plans are forever barred by

his illness, is quick to announce her departure: "If I'd known Oswald had something wrong with him. . . . And anyway, now that there can never be anything serious between us. . . . No, you don't catch me staying out here in the country, working myself to death looking after invalids" (G 156). Being turned down by Regine—who, she assures them, "got some of this joy of life as well" (ibid.)—Oswald needs his mother to end his life the moment the illness becomes unbearable.<sup>40</sup>

Initially, the two stunted families of the Alvings and the Engstrands seem to be manipulated by Pastor Manders and his tiresome sense of etiquette (which, with his repeated references to an anonymous third person, the "one" or "the they" [*man*, in Norwegian] appears as a distorted version of the chorus of classical tragedy).<sup>41</sup> He, God's representative on earth, is the one pushing for confessions, allocating forgiveness, telling the parents how to parent, the children how to be sons and daughters. Yet, Manders' authority soon proves shallow and the values he represents increasingly porous until the point at which he is entirely irrelevant to the play and its protagonists and leaves with Engstrand to start working on the promised Captain Alving's Home (G 152).

As Manders fades, however, another person takes the stage, a person who is no longer alive, but whose past doings nonetheless guide the action for the remainder of the play: the dead Captain Alving, the ghost. The play's four (or five) characters gather around a middle that is no longer there, yet is all-present and present all the time. To the extent that the characters go through a process of self-examination, they do so by examining their relationship to the deceased Captain. Alving is the non-existing center around which the drama revolves. (The dead protagonist whose life, though long over, seems to pull the strings of the living—this is a topic that Ibsen to some extent explores through Hedda Gabler's relationship to her dead father, and even more so in *Rosmersholm* [1886] and *Little Eyolf* [1894].<sup>42</sup>) The present absence of the captain adds an eerie feeling to the play, making it exceedingly painful to watch and read, as it inevitably discloses a void that is not simply that of Helene or Oswald, but one that no one, just by virtue of being a son or daughter, is entirely protected against. The audience would have to be rather thick-skinned not to take part in this as a shared experience: that of being descendants and family members, that of living with your losses and coming to terms with the past.

This, it seems, is Ibsen's version of the classical assemblage of characters. It is a character gallery as tight and simple as can be, yet, in its simplicity, it shelters death, impurity, and shame.<sup>43</sup> Further, the existence of the characters is not, as it were, limited to the stage, but extends into the extra-aesthetic life of the audience.

(2) In *Ghosts*, Ibsen adheres to the unity of place.<sup>44</sup> The play opens with a dialogue between Regine and her father in Helene Alving's sunroom (and the adjacent living room), which marks the entrance to the house and the transition from indoor to outdoor and vice versa. The indoor-outdoor space of the sunroom is a perfect backdrop for a drama about the hardship—if not the straight out impossibility—of being fully and completely at home (since home is also the site of the *ur*-drama of parents, children, and the troublesome, yet much needed, bonds of nurturing and care). There are references to other places: Paris and a town that can only be reached by ferry. Though we hear about the orphanage and the retirement home for the seafarers, the two proceeding acts take place in the same location.<sup>45</sup>

In classicist poetology, the unity of place is intended to create an orderly backdrop against which the tragic action gains contour and gravity. Throughout Ibsen's play, the sunroom offers such a unity, yet the changing light reflects the increasingly gloomy atmosphere of the characters' mindsets and the dysfunctionality of their exchanges. However, in *Ghosts*, the space is no sheer background for the action. It is, indeed, unclear whether the characters need the unified space to emerge or if it is, rather, the characters that necessitate a certain *locus*. The very idea of a ghost—in Norwegian the term used is not *spøkelse* (ghost), but *genganger* (as in the German *Wiedergänger*), one that returns and cannot find peace—presupposes the identity of a place to which the spirit of the dead can return. A *genganger* does not venture to explore new places. It is place-bound, haunting whatever or whomever occupies the venue. In *Ghosts*, the unity of the place is thus no simple continuum against which the action is played out, but, indeed, a presupposition that allows it to take place: without such identity, there is no *gengangere*. This is even more so as the dead Captain Alving's ever-stronger presence temporally corresponds with the passing of the day and the emerging darkness. Ghosts do not appear in broad daylight. And in the play, the fading day reflects an increasingly claustrophobic atmosphere, an environment in which the four individuals (five, if we include the pastor and the way his life was shaped by his unrecognized love for Helene Alving) gradually let go of their call for autonomy and self-determination and stand forth as the products of a past no longer subject to change and amendment.<sup>46</sup> The sick relationships of the captain become more and more foregrounded. The past plays, as it were, a more and more significant part, eats up more and more space until there is no more oxygen left for breathing, no future, and thus no possible ending save that of madness and death.<sup>47</sup> Upon realizing the truth about his life, Oedipus blinds himself, but keeps living; caring for her syphilitic son, a similarly pitiful existence is await-

ing Helene, as she is doomed to administer the morphine that will end her son's life *and* to live with the knowledge that she took the life of the being to whom she once gave it.<sup>48</sup>

(3) The unity of time, another trademark of classical tragedy, is carefully observed in Ibsen's *Ghosts*. Marked through changes in weather and light, we are taken from morning or early afternoon and into the evening. Act three is introduced with the following temporal cues: "It is dark outside, apart from a faint glow in the background, left" (G 148). This sets the stage for the last act's revelation of the lies in and through which Oswald and Regine, the son and daughter, have understood themselves. Oswald learns that his "father was a broken man before [he was] even born" (G 155), and Regine is presented with the truth that she "belonged here in this house . . . just as much as [Oswald]" (*ibid.*). Moreover, the darkness is needed for the utterly sad ending in which Oswald, having seen the truth about his father, his mother, and himself, realizes that he is about to drift into madness and asks his mother to give him the twelve morphine tablets he has stored up (G 161), only to decline so rapidly that he, still perched in the sun-room and its evening dark, "sits motionless as before" and repeatedly mutters, "The sun . . . The sun" (G 164).

Strict as it is in terms of its time span, the intensely harrowing hours that are played out in *Ghosts* are only meaningful against the background of lives already lived, or, rather, lives poorly lived and existence that is only nominally inhabited. Further, Helene Alving's self-understanding, at least in act one, is contrasted with Pastor Manders and his hollow references to the authority of the tradition (in the form of an anonymous "one" or "they").<sup>49</sup> To Helene Alving, all that is passed down appears to be potentially ghost-like: taken for authoritative and true without really being examined and appropriated. As she puts it,

It's not just what we inherit from our mothers and fathers that haunts us. It's all kinds of old defunct theories, all sorts of old defunct beliefs, and things like that. It's not that they actually live on in us: they are simply lodged there, and we cannot get rid of them. I've only to pick up a newspaper and I seem to see ghosts gliding between the lines. Over the whole country there must be ghosts, as numerous as the sands of the sea. And here we are, all of us, abysmally afraid of the light. (G 126)

The ghosts presuppose the time of the living, yet their existence is atemporal: they return to something that is ever different, yet they remain petrified and timeless. Hence the timeframe of Ibsen's *Ghosts* is, all the same, the time of the drama, the life of its characters, *and* the spooky temporal modus of a past never redeemed, of histories petrified and traditions deprived of life. To some extent we have to wonder if

this is not also the time in which we all live as finite historical beings. This is even more the case, as the real tragedy, in a significant sense, is not simply one of retrospection and the gradual unfolding of the past. Instead, it starts the very minute Oswald drifts into madness: His mother realizes that she faces the choice of whether or not to kill him, the curtains fall; the audience leaves the theater in the awareness that Mrs. Alving will have to live with the consequences of her decision and that they, too, will have to cope with the way in which the past shapes and gives structure to the horizon of the present.

This, I take it, is Ibsen's play, in *Ghosts*, on the poetological guidelines of a strict panel of characters, the unity of place, and the unity of time. He alludes to a certain dead and stifling tradition, yet uses this tradition—that of classical tragedy—so as effectively to keep it alive through change and alteration. By subverting a traditional demand for clean form and structure, the very point that was used to defend the play against its critics upon its premier,<sup>50</sup> Ibsen goes beyond a sheer imitation of classical tragedy and creates a modern drama, a drama for his own time. Yet, he retains the wish, *pace* Nietzsche, to create a tragedy in which the audience is drawn, so to speak, into the experiential center of the play itself.

## 5.

How, then, can we relate this Ibsenesque gesture back to Nietzsche's insights? Keeping in mind Nietzsche's modification in "An Attempt at Self-Criticism," this is, to some extent, a question of what aspect of his work one has in mind.

After his break with Wagner, Nietzsche felt the need to distance himself from his former friend, but also from his own youthful admiration of Wagnerian mythology. In this spirit, Nietzsche clamps down on the style of the book. It is constructed, as he puts it, "from precocious, wet-behind-the-ears, personal experiences"; it is "badly written, clumsy, embarrassing"—in short, an "impossible book" (BT 5). Yet, what bothers Nietzsche is not simply his previous admiration for Wagner, but, at a deeper level, the way he had been staging contemporary music drama as an answer to Greek tragedy, as an artform that exceeds the framework of modern aesthetics and reintroduces a Dionysiac element (BT 11). Romantic art, Nietzsche points out, is the "most un-Greek of all possible forms of art."<sup>51</sup> And by mixing up Greek tragedy with modern concerns, Nietzsche worries that he had "*ruined the grandiose Greek problem*" (BT 10).

However, Nietzsche does not retract each and every philosophical dimension of his youthful work. One way of understanding "An

Attempt at Self-Criticism” is to see it as a qualification that, while staying true to the central question of *The Birth of Tragedy*, is no longer committed to a Wagnerian response. The question the book raises—addressed as a quest for the Dionysiac (BT 6) and the challenge of maintaining the Greek capacity to affirm life in the face of suffering (BT 12)—cannot generate a positive answer or culminate in a new mythology. However, if a new mythology cannot be given, the question still remains—though in and with the wisdom of our limited capacity to provide a final, philosophical answer. As Nietzsche now warns us, “[t]he Greeks will remain as utterly unknown and unimaginable as they have always been” (BT 6). This, in my view, explains Nietzsche’s turn from philosophy of art to philosophy of history, his genealogical project as it takes shape in the meta-philosophical as well as the historical texts.<sup>52</sup> The insistence on Greek culture being cognitively out of reach for us moderns triggers the understanding of genealogy as a systematic reflection on the conditions for and limitations of historical knowledge. Further, it might explain why Nietzsche, sixteen years after the publication of *The Birth of Tragedy*, suggests that the answer to its questions—How can we moderns relate to the force of Greek culture? How can we, too, find artistic outlets for an affirmation of life?—can only be given performatively, in the form of a poem or a play, and furthermore, a poem or a play that captures us in the way Greek tragedy captured and involved its original audiences.

Ibsen did not write philosophy. Nor is his drama of a Wagnerian or musical kind.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, to the extent that his work can be said at all to present the audience with something resembling a chorus—so central to Nietzsche’s reflections on the birth of tragedy from music—his version of a collective or collectivizing voice is the dried out, empty reference to “the they” that saturates the wretched Pastor Manders’ thinking. Ibsen offers no new mythology and promotes no return to the ancient Greek gods (or, for that matter, the God of the Lutheran era). The very relationship to the past is and remains, for Ibsen, an open question. In *Ghosts*, neither Manders’ conventionalism nor Helene Alving’s radical approach appears to offer a healthy solution to the question of how we moderns ought to relate to the past—be it in our own personal history or that of tradition. In writing drama rather than philosophy, Ibsen not only explores this topic through the various positions played out on stage, but also by way of the theatrical dimensions of *Ghosts* (the set of characters, the unity of time, the unity of space). Indeed, to the extent that Ibsen offers a tentative response to the problem of relating to the Greeks, he does so by way of dramatic gestures rather than outspoken character lines or credos. Unlike the neo-classicists (or, with Toril Moi, the idealists by which Ibsen was surrounded), Ibsen does not borrow

from a neatly hammered out structure that echoes Sophoclean tragedy. What matters to his drama is how he makes use of this structure—or, rather, how the structural framework of *Ghosts* ceases to be an organizing principle or form and ends up being integrated into the experiential core of the play. In *Ghosts*, the symmetrical relationship of the characters and the unity of time and place do not simply mark the boundaries of the action, but, indeed, disclose the meaning of it. This meaning, if this is what we want to call it, is not related to a cognitive process of learning on the part of the protagonist or the audience. It is, rather, a process that, existentially shattering through and through, undermines all such didactic orientations.<sup>54</sup>

In *Ghosts*, elements of tragedy that were seen as formal criteria of that genre are brought into the very meaning-structure of the play. Further, this meaning-structure is such that the audience is not (as Nietzsche worries with regard to romantic art) existentially sealed off from it. No one would, I think, be able to see themselves, as sons and daughters, as part of a culture that at least partially determines the field of practice and the space of self-understanding in which we operate, as exempt from Helene Alving's desperate announcement that "we are all ghosts . . . every one of us" (G 126). The reality of the play is not that of the stage but that of a world inhabited by characters, actors, and audience alike. In writing such a play—in playing in this way on Greek tragedy to create a genuinely modern theater—Ibsen keeps tradition alive, *not* by imitating its dead forms, *not* by sticking to its strictest letters, but by bringing out and recreating the very spirit (if we can brave a Nietzschean phrase) out of which tragedy is born so as to keep it alive for ever new generations of playwrights and theater audiences. This, I take it, is the way in which philosophy of tragedy, with the Nietzsche of the afterword, is not only spoken, but also *sung*—staged, played out, and tested in the ongoing series of ever new productions and interpretations.

## 6.

Scornful as it might first appear, a genuine philosophical insight reverberates in Nietzsche's comment that his youthful reflections on Greek tragedy should have been sung. In reflecting on our relationship to tradition and the past, the philosopher cannot provide a set of normative guidelines for how we ought to keep tradition alive. Such guidelines would take away the very historicity, the context-sensitivity, required for history to be alive in the first place. In an essay such as "On the

Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” Nietzsche discusses this approach under the label of antiquarian history, which he contrasts to genealogy. Further, a later work such as *On the Genealogy of Morality* is but one example of how the past can be kept alive through Nietzsche’s preferred genealogical method. As far as Nietzsche’s remark about poetry goes, he himself never produced a play or a poem in the traditional form, yet his philosophical alter ego, Zarathustra, to whom he refers in “An Attempt at Self-Criticism,” figures as a poetic-philosophical exploration of insights already addressed in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Like Dionysus, he, too, manages to laugh in the face of truth.

Nietzsche’s struggle with our modern relationship to the Greeks—our fascination with past culture, but also the way in which tradition curbs our affirmation of the present—can help shed light on what Ibsen is doing when, in *Ghosts*, he appropriates *and* at the same time fundamentally shatters the resources of the classical tradition. Vice versa, Ibsen can help us detangle the theatrical implications of Nietzsche’s reflections on tragedy. Ibsen never offers a conclusion with regard to our relationship to the past. Like the Nietzschean poet, he dramatically puts various approaches and attitudes into play, and explores their existential, social, and political ramifications, forcing the audience not simply to shrink with horror at the sight of Oswald’s deterioration and Helen’s tragic fate, but also to consider their own ghosts—not so much in order to exorcise them once and for all (which would only call for the return of the repressed), but so as to find less painful ways to live with and confront them. In this way, Ibsen demonstrates how an encounter with the past need not only be spoken, but should also (and not without a trace of laughter) be *sung*—that is, be acted out in and through a living drama.

## NOTES

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. Ronald Speirs, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 6; henceforth BT, followed by page number.
2. See Harald Beyer, *Nietzsche og Norden* (Bergen: John Grieg, 1958–9).
3. For a discussion of Munch’s reading of Nietzsche, see Ingeborg Winderen Owsen, “Friedrich Nietzsches innflytelse og betydning for Edvard

Munch,” *Agora* 13:3–4 (1995), pp. 94–111; and “Edvard Munch: Between Gender, Love, and Women’s Rights,” in *Munch 1863–1944*, ed. Mai Britt Guleng, Jon-Ove Steihaug, and Ingebjørg Ydstie (Milan: Skira Editore, 2013), pp. 296–305. Munch was also in charge of the scenography for several of Ibsen’s plays, including the 1889 staging of *Ghosts* at the Freie Bühne in Berlin.

4. See Frode Helland, *Melankoliens spill: En studie i Henrik Ibsens siste dramaer* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2000), pp. 117–43. Further discussion of the Nietzschean influences in Ibsen can be found in Thomas Van Laan, “Ibsen and Nietzsche,” *Scandinavian Studies* 78:3 (2006), pp. 255–302. Van Laan also considers Nietzsche’s comments on Ibsen and grants that even though these remarks are mostly negative, Ibsen might have influenced Nietzsche, not the least through their mutual friendship with Georg Brandes. Toril Moi discusses *The Birth of Tragedy* and keeps open the possibility that Ibsen may have been familiar with Nietzsche’s arguments. She also entertains the possibility that a Nietzschean perspective might have sifted through in Ibsen’s early play *Emperor and Galilean*. See Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 196–7.
5. Though his field of study was to be pharmacy, Ibsen’s short stint at the University of Christiania involved a mandatory entrance exam covering classical texts such as Sallust’s *Catiline* and Cicero’s *Catilinarian Orations*. For a discussion of this point, see Andrew Runni Anderson, “Ibsen and the Classic World,” *The Classical Journal* 11:4 (1916), pp. 216–25. Ibsen also spent a number of years in Italy, and was socializing and travelling with the art historian Lorentz Dietrichson. For an account of Ibsen’s visits to Rome and his travels with Dietrichson, see Per Jonas Nordhagen, *Henrik Ibsen i Roma, 1864–1868* (Oslo: Cappelen, 1981). Robert Ferguson, who claims that there is no evidence that Ibsen read Greek tragedy, suggests that he took a keen interest in Greek sculpture. See Robert Ferguson, *Henrik Ibsen: A New Biography* (New York: Dorset Press, 1996), p. 262. Against this background, it is not implausible to search Ibsen’s work for references to classical culture and traditional material in the wider sense of the word. The question, it seems, is not whether Ibsen should be read with an eye to ancient tragedy, but, rather, how to make sense of this relationship.
6. *Ghosts* is subtitled “A Domestic Drama [*Familjedrama*] in Three Acts.” A few years earlier, Ibsen had expressed a desire to write “a modern tragedy” (a comment that probably referred to his plans for *A Doll’s House*). For Ibsen’s notes for a modern tragedy, see Michael Meyer, *The Farewell to Poetry*, vol. 2 of *Henrik Ibsen* (London: Granada, 1971), pp. 254–5.
7. Oswald retrieves this episode in the following way: “I distinctly remember he sat me on his knee and gave me the pipe to smoke. ‘Smoke lad’, he said, ‘go on, lad, smoke!’ And I smoked as hard as I could, till I felt I was going quite pale and great beads of sweat stood out on my forehead. Then he roared with laughter” (Henrik Ibsen, *Ghosts*, in *Four Major Plays*, trans. James McFarlane and Jens Arup [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008], p. 109; henceforth G, followed by page number). For a discussion of

- the medical aspect of Ibsen's reference to syphilis, see Per Vesterhus, "Hvordan ble Oswald syk?" *Tidsskrift for Den norske legeförening* 127:13 (2007), pp. 1814–6.
8. Oswald's painting is, as he puts it, all about the "joy of life. Light and sunshine and a holiday spirit . . . and radiantly happy faces" (G 145; see also G 144), which he contrasts to the atmosphere of his mother's house. Further, when Oswald realizes that he is dying, he asks his mother to help him take his life if it becomes unbearable *and* insists that she remains "cheerful" (G 158).
  9. As Manders, after having gone on about a wife's duty to her husband, realizes the truth about Helene Alving's marriage, he exclaims: "I feel quite dazed. Am I to believe that your entire married life . . . all those years together with your husband . . . were nothing but a façade?" Mrs. Alving responds: "Precisely that. Now you know" (G 117).
  10. Among the numerous references to Mr. Alving's zest for life, some are genuine, others mere euphemisms for a reckless lifestyle (see G 109 [the pastor's comment] and G 154 [the discussion between Oswald and his mother]). It is clear, though, that it was Manders, upon urging Helene to stay with her husband, who led her on to her "path of duty and obedience" (G 114). Upon realizing the effect of this path on her husband and son, however, Helene takes responsibility for their respective demises with the following lines: "They'd taught me various things about duty and such-like, and I'd simply gone on believing them. Everything seemed to come down to duty in the end—*my* duty and *his* duty and . . . I am afraid I must have made this house unbearable for your poor father, Oswald" (G 155).
  11. Significantly, the metaphor of the ghosts is first introduced when Helene Alving catches Oswald and Regine flirting. Just after Helene has shared with Manders the desire to spend Alving's dowry on the orphanage so as to purge the house of his ghost and be able to "feel as though that man had never lived in the house [and] there'll be nobody else here but my son and his mother," the two are interrupted by Regine's sharp whisper "Oswald! Are you mad? Let me go!" upon which Helene responds: "Ghosts! Those two in the conservatory [her husband and Regine's mother] . . . come back to haunt us" (G 120). The horror of this scene is further intensified by the way in which the passage is introduced against the background of the pastor's defense of traditional family values, which leads Oswald to point out that many of his unmarried artist friends in Paris lived with their partners in more moral ways than "some of our model husbands and fathers" who "took themselves a trip to Paris to have a look round on the loose" (G 112).
  12. Brian Johnston, *The Ibsen Cycle: The Design of the Plays from Pillars of Society to When We Dead Awaken* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), p. 194.
  13. See Francis Fergusson, *The Idea of a Theatre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 490.
  14. I discuss the character of Torvald (emerging, as he does, as a beautiful soul that is incapable of a genuine, human relationship) in "Self-

- Knowledge and Aesthetic Consciousness in Ibsen and Hegel,” in *Ibsen and the Modern Self*, ed. Kwok-kan Tam, Terry Siu-han Yip, and Frode Helland (Hong Kong: Open University of Hong Kong Press, 2010), pp. 1–16.
15. Stanley Cavell emphasizes the moral perfectionism played out in *A Doll's House in Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 108–11. For a discussion of this point, see Rainer Forst, “The Injustice of Justice: Normative Dialectics According to Ibsen, Cavell, and Adorno,” *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 28:2 (2007), pp. 39–51.
  16. See, for example, G 113–4.
  17. Joan Templeton, “Of This Time, of This Place: Mrs. Alving’s Ghosts and the Shape of the Tragedy,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 101:1 (1986), p. 64.
  18. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
  19. The implications of this point exceed the history of philosophy of drama. For, to the extent that one is willing to acknowledge the eighteenth-century debate on Greek tragedy and sculpture as philosophy of art, Kant’s aesthetics, with its turn to the beauty of nature (rather than a primary focus on art) deviates from the already existing discourse. Further, Hegel’s turn to philosophy of art—his claim that in adopting the expression “aesthetics” we all the same “exclude the beauty of nature”—is not so much a bold, post-Kantian move as a return to the pre-Kantian tradition. For Hegel’s point, see G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 1, trans. Thomas Malcolm Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 1.
  20. This paradigm includes Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. For Lessing’s contribution, see his *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, trans. Helen Zimmern (New York: Dover, 1962). Against the dominance of French classicism, Lessing simply suggested a new interpretation of Aristotle as the basis for German theater. As he sums up his ambition to build a German theater in Hamburg, Lessing claims that “[n]o nation has more misapprehended the rules of ancient drama than the French” (*ibid.*, p. 264).
  21. It is fair to say that Herder never had a good grasp of French tragedy, nor on the classicist theoreticians. His criticism is geared more toward their German acolytes. However, even his discussion of German classicism is often rather exaggerated and polemical in nature.
  22. Herder is clear that modern theater must respond to a modern situation. His discussion initially rotates around Shakespeare, but is soon expanded so as to involve contemporary theater as well. For Herder’s view on Shakespeare, see Johann Gottfried Herder, *Shakespeare*, trans. Gregory Moore (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). See also my “Reading Shakespeare—Reading Modernity,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 9:3 (2004), pp. 17–31 and “Shakespeare’s Hermeneutic Legacy: Herder on Modern Drama and the Challenge of Cultural Prejudice,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 64:1 (2013), pp. 60–9. Already in his work on the ode in the 1760s, Herder discusses the possibility of modern art *post*

- Shakespeare. See Johann Gottfried Herder, *Selected Early Works 1764–1767*, trans. Ernest A. Menze with Michael Palma, ed. Ernest A. Menze and Karl Menges (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), pp. 69–85. For a larger overview of this debate (mostly by way of German original texts), see Roy Pascal, ed., *Shakespeare in Germany* (New York: Octagon Books, 1971). For a history of Shakespeare on the German stage, see Simon Williams, *1586–1914*, vol. 1 of *Shakespeare on the German Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
23. G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 2, trans. Thomas Malcolm Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 1158.
  24. Excepting his propensity to visionary dreams, Socrates, and with him most philosophy, appears to Nietzsche as a “negative force . . . [driving toward] the disintegration of Dionysiac tragedy” (BT 71).
  25. For Hegel’s discussion of truth in art, see, for example, his *Aesthetics*, vol. 1, p. 8.
  26. BT 115. Moi offers an interesting discussion of the presence of these Greek gods in *Emperor and Galilean*. See her *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, pp. 196–7.
  27. I am thinking of the infamous lines where Nietzsche declares that the great champions of art need “a mythical home . . . a ‘bringing back’ of all things German!” These lines are swiftly followed with a pro-Wagnerian remark: “And if the German should look around with faint heart for a leader to take him back to his long-lost home, whose paths and highways he hardly remembers, then let him but listen to the blissfully enticing call of the Dionysiac bird [referring, perhaps, to the bird leading Sigfried to Brünhilde] which is on the wing, hovering above his head, and which wants to show him the way” (BT 111).
  28. Nietzsche significantly ends his afterword with a reference to his own mythopoetical figure Zarathustra, who incarnates the Dionysiac spirit in his ability to “laugh the truth” (BT 12). For a study of Nietzsche’s life and work as literature, see Alexander Nehamas, *Life as Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 200–34.
  29. As mentioned, Ibsen’s knowledge of Nietzsche may, in part, have been mediated through Georg Brandes, whose study of Nietzsche was published in Copenhagen in 1888. See Georg Brandes, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, trans. Arthur Chater (London: William Heinemann, 1914). Robert Ferguson, however, traces the Nietzschean tenors back to Ibsen’s early poetry (see Ferguson, *Henrik Ibsen*, p. 86).
  30. Ibsen is known to have characterized Nietzsche as an extraordinary talent, though he quickly adds that he does not have any in-depth understanding of [Nietzsche’s] work. In the scholarship, the Nietzschean influence has often been explored with reference to *The Master Builder* (1892). See Frode Helland, “Ibsen and Nietzsche: *The Master Builder*,” *Ibsen Studies* 9:1 (2009), pp. 50–75.
  31. For Nietzsche’s critique of morality as it springs out of Socratic optimism, see, for example, BT 70–1. In the wake of *A Doll’s House*, Ibsen denied

that he was a political or didactic writer. This, however, does not imply that Ibsen's drama does not have a political dimension.

32. If this is the only way in which the insights of the tradition can be used, one might as well follow Émile Zola, who in his 1881 call for a naturalist theater declares that "there is more poetry in the little apartment of a bourgeois than in all the empty, worm-eaten palaces of history" (Émile Zola, "Naturalism in the Theatre," trans. Albert Bermel, in *A Sourcebook on Naturalist Theatre*, ed. Christopher Innes [New York: Routledge, 2000], p. 49). Ibsen, by contrast, writes a "domestic drama," yet does so in a way that demonstrates that the palaces of history can be approached in ways that make them less "worm-eaten." Unlike Ibsen, the slightly younger August Strindberg explicitly draws attention to this point. For a discussion of Strindberg (and tragedy in a Scandinavian context), see Leonardo Lisi, "The Art of Doubt: Form, Genre, History in *Miss Julie*," in *The International Strindberg: New Critical Essays*, ed. Anna Westerståhl Stenport (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2012), pp. 249–76.
33. Aristotle had simply insisted on the need for the characters to be better than average; see Aristotle, *The Poetics*, trans. Gerald Frank Else (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970), 1453a14–1454b18. The question of characters (their status and their unity) is one of the points that will matter in the eighteenth-century German debate on Shakespeare—and that already Voltaire had brought to the foreground in his 1729 *Letters*; see Voltaire, *Philosophical Letters: Or, Letters Regarding the English Nation*, trans. Prudence Linder Steiner, ed. John Leigh (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2007), pp. 69–70, and Herder, *Shakespeare*, pp. 29–30, 32. For a contemporary account of how the characters ought to be "better than present humanity," see Stephen Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 166–7.
34. In the Norwegian original, this shines through in the descriptions of Engstrand's physical character (G 91), as well as his manners and way of speaking, which is contrasted with his daughter Regine's attempts at covering over her heritage with a propensity for French (reflecting the hope, it turns out, of Oswald taking her along to Paris). Upon realizing that Mr. Alving is her father, Regine bluntly declares: "I think you might have brought me up like a gentleman's daughter, Mrs. Alving. It would have suited me a bit better than this. [*Tosses her head.*] Still, what the hell . . . ! What difference does it make! [*With a bitter glance at the unopened bottle.*] I'll be drinking champagne with the best yet, you see if I'm not" (G 157).
35. In Regine's case, this makes her foster-father her real father, and vice versa. In Oswald's case, it makes him free to bluntly denounce his mother's call for sonly love for his father as mere "superstition" (G 158) and meet his mother's anxiety that she, too, is unloved with the pragmatic consideration that she can "be extremely useful" to him now that he is sick (G 158).
36. This topic is later explored in *The Master Builder*, as well as in *When We Dead Awaken* (1899). In both cases, Ibsen draws a distinction between a home (*hjem*) and a house (*hus*).

37. The pastor eventually gives his blessing to the home when Engstrand offers to take the blame for the fire that, it turns out, was caused by the pastor's throwing a snuffed candle into a pile of wood shavings (G 149–50).
38. When realizing that Engstrand is not her true father, Regine condescendingly denounces him as “that rotten old carpenter” (G 156).
39. As Oswald comments that the home for seamen will probably also burn down, he adds, “[e]verything will burn. There'll be nothing left to remind people of Father. And here am I, burning down too” (G 153).
40. Again, Oswald refers to Regine's sturdy mentality, telling his mother, “Regine would have done it. Regine was so marvelously light-hearted. And she'd soon have got bored with looking after an invalid like me” (G 162).
41. See, for instance, Manders' insistence that, although politically radical literature and magazines can be read, “one doesn't talk about it. . . . One doesn't have to account to all and sundry for what one reads and thinks in the privacy of one's own room” (G 102). Likewise, Helene Alving retorts to Manders that his righteous assumption that it was good for her to stay in her marriage is “simply taking it for granted that popular opinion is right” (G 116). This topic—that of popular opinion—gets systematically explored in *An Enemy of the People* (1882).
42. In *Little Eyolf*, though, the deceased child is not identified with an unredeemed passion for life, but with the guilt of his parents, who left him unattended.
43. In his reading of *Rosmersholm*, Freud famously points out how Ibsen thematizes the incest taboo. See Sigmund Freud, “Some Character Types Met With in Psychoanalytic Work (1915),” in *Art and Literature: Jensen's Gradiva, Leonardo da Vinci and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 14 of *The Penguin Freud Library*, ed. Albert Dickson (London: Penguin, 1985), pp. 308–16. Freud does not discuss *Ghosts* in his study.
44. Aristotle points out that “in the case of tragedy it is not possible to represent many different parts of the action as of the time they are performed but only the part on the stage” (*Poet.*, 1459b24–6).
45. As the second act opens, we find ourselves presented with “[t]he same room. A heavy mist still lies over the landscape” (G 121). Likewise, act three opens with the following instructions: “The room as before. All the doors are standing open” (G 148).
46. Needless to say, Oswald's illness is not a matter of free will or of a tragic flaw. This was pointed out in Peter Hansen's contemporary review of *Ghosts* and was read as a naturalist impulse that undermined the tragic format of the play. However, as far as the Oswald character goes, his imminent death plays a rather small role and does not occasion reflection or drive the dialogue to the same extent that Helene's awareness of her son's disease does. In this sense, Oswald's death matters primarily to the extent that it contributes to Helen's tragedy—and her tragedy is indeed a result of choices made (or not made) and a life only half lived. For a dis-

cussion of Peter Hansen's review, see Ivo de Figueiredo, *Henrik Ibsen: Masken* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 2007), pp. 235–6.

47. This is acted out, for instance, in the following exchange between Mrs. Alving and Oswald: "OSWALD: Don't leave me! Where are you going? MRS. ALVING [*in the hall*]: To fetch the doctor, Oswald! Let me get out! OSWALD [*also in the hall*]: You are not getting out. And nobody's getting in" (G 162). At a metaphorical level, the process takes place when Helene, with her motherly love that borders on the incestuous ("I haven't made you completely mine yet—I must still win you" [G 158]), is presented with the brutal truth that Oswald might soon become childlike again and thus become hers: "Struck down by this ghastly thing, lying there helpless, like an imbecile child, beyond all hope of recovery" (G 162).
48. In fact, Helene only reaches her incestuous parental goal of owning Oswald completely, of there being "nobody else here but my son and his mother" (G 120), the moment he is no longer there. Her impossible battle is won, as it were, the very moment it is lost. The topic of excessive parental love resounds in *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896), where Erhard is forced to choose between his mother and his aunt (who raised him), both of whom demand his undivided love.
49. Manders' references to "the they" of the anonymous *petit bourgeois* peaks as, having been quick to judge the fire in the orphanage as a punishment on the Alvings, he realizes that not God, but he himself has started it and only worries about his job and reputation. Responding to Engstrand's remarking that "the papers are [not] going to let [him] off very lightly" Manders notes, "[n]o, that's just what I am thinking. That's just about the worst part of the whole affair" (G 150). This reference to "the they" is a topic that is followed up in *An Enemy of the People*, another play that echoes the tenors of Nietzschean philosophy.
50. For a discussion of this point, see de Figueiredo, *Henrik Ibsen*, pp. 234–40. See also Øystein Rottem, ". . . den antike tragedie, gjenopstaaet paa moderne jord: et notat om skjebnesynet i Henrik Ibsens *Gengangere*," *Edda* 91:4 (1991), pp. 345–58.
51. BT 10. Much along the lines of Hegel, Nietzsche understands romantic art as subjective. In the context of *Ghosts*, it is worth noting that among the harshest critics of the play was the Hegelian Marcus Jacob Monrad, who, at this point, let go of his supportive attitude towards Ibsen's drama. See de Figueiredo, *Henrik Ibsen*, pp. 238–9. For a general discussion of Ibsen's anti-idealist streak, see Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*. Moi, who convincingly links Ibsen's anti-idealism to his modernism, does not discuss *Ghosts* in much detail, though remarks that "[h]is most intensely anti-idealist—and, at the time, most controversial—play is *Ghosts*" (*Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, p. 89).
52. I am thinking in particular of "On The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. Reginald John Hollingdale, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 57–125; and *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan John Swensen (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998):

The *Genealogy* accuses previous philosophy of proceeding “essentially ahistorically” (ibid., p. 10) and inquires, along the lines of *The Birth of Tragedy*, into the human capacity to say “yes’ to life” (ibid., p. 24). It also proposes that cheerfulness is “a reward for a long, brave, industrious, and subterranean seriousness” (ibid. p. 6).

53. Though the reading drama *Peer Gynt* (1867), when Ibsen decided to stage it as a theater production in 1874, was given a musical backdrop by Edvard Grieg.
54. The contemporary Norwegian writer Amalie Skram testified to this dimension of the play in her review “Mere om ‘Gengangere’” (see Amalie Skram, *Samlede Verker*, vol. 7 [Oslo: Gyldendal, 1993], pp. 352–9, esp. 355).