

*John Lingard*

### **The Conflict of Signs in Ibsen's *The Lady from the Sea***

In Act 3 of *Caesar's Apostasy (Emperor and Galilean, Part 1)* Prince Julian attends a séance to learn his destiny. He is confronted with a sequence of signs: a voice from a circle of light, which tells him to "found the kingdom" (2.340);<sup>1</sup> the shades of Cain and Judas; and a purple cloak brought by an imperial messenger who interrupts the séance to honor Julian with the title of Caesar. When Maximos the Seer tells him that the sequence has created "a conflict of signs" (2.344) (tegn imot tegn), Julian impetuously accepts the cloak, declaring: "Here is no conflict of signs" (2.345). He has, in J. W. McFarlane's summary, selected only "the more agreeable signs" (227), unaware that he is fated to be the third "great helper in denial" (2.340) of Christianity, the second kingdom.

Even before the séance *Emperor and Galilean* has revealed itself as a play about sign-dependency and the reading or misreading of signs. The word "sign" (tegn) occurs nineteen times in Part 1 and twenty-two times in Part 2.<sup>2</sup> Its contextual synonym, "varsel" (omen), occurs thirty-four times: twice in Part 1 and thirty-two times in Part 2 where Julian's reliance on signs and omens will lead him into madness.

The action of *Emperor and Galilean* is based on a conflict between the great "world-historical" kingdoms of paganism and Christianity. Each has its own favored sign-system.<sup>3</sup> Julian's pagan revival is increasingly image-based, supported as it is by statues, temples and sacrificial rites. The Christians come to rely almost entirely on their sacred scriptures and hymns. Julian seeks to obliterate this sign-system by burning "every



Kitty Kielland: *After Sunset* (1886). 80 x 115.5 cm.

[*Stavanger Faste Galleri, Rogaland, Norway*]

written jot that treats of Christ" (2.413), but his persecution only serves to strengthen Christian faith in "the word" of Christ:

Their [the pagans'] gods are marble and silver  
and gold

They shall moulder into clay.

.....

Let our bodies be murdered; let our scriptures  
perish.

The word shall stand;—

The word shall stand! (2.420)

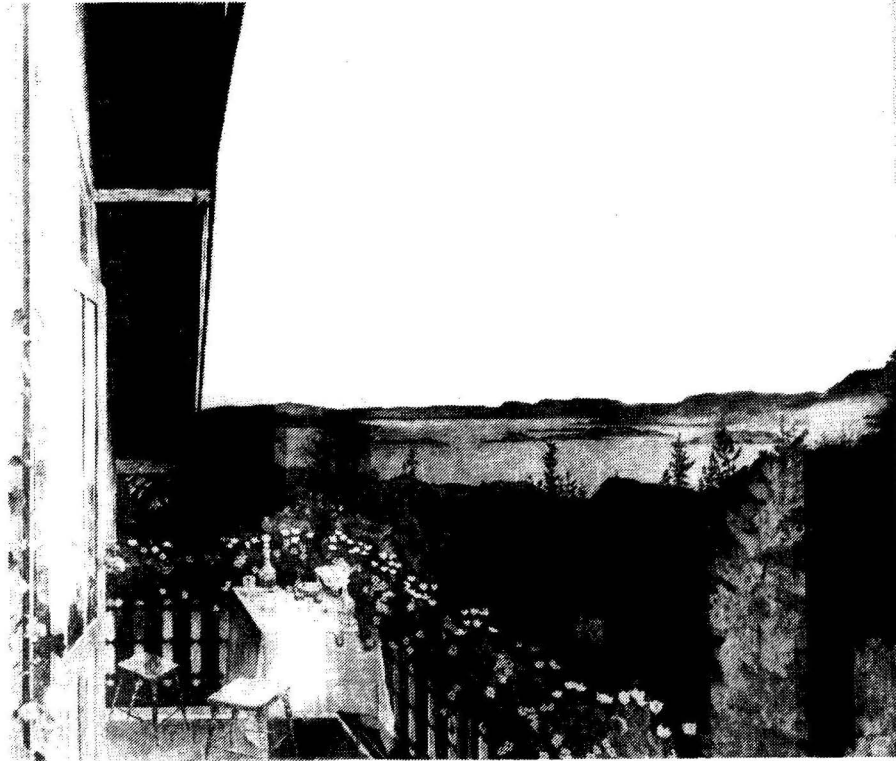
In the end the word does stand, not in the sense of Christian dogma, but of what survives in the human spirit when all external sign-systems have mouldered into clay.

Ibsen has mirrored the ideological conflict of sign-systems in an ironic use of theatrical signs. To use Keir Elam's distinction, a sign in the theatre can be either transparent—in the sense that the audience is encouraged to see through it to a symbolic reality—or opaque—in which case the audience's vision stops short with the sign itself (9-10). *Caesar's Apostasy* is transparent theatre in the tradition we associate with grand opera or Henry Irving's Shakespeare. There is a romantic glow to language, action, and *mise-en-scène*, which parallels Julian's youthful sense of the numinous in Hellenistic architecture, sculpture and ritual. Maximos's Ephesos, for example, promises a world "where torches light themselves and statues smile" (2.333). *The Emperor Julian* is contrastingly opaque. Edmund Gosse felt that Ibsen's abandonment of verse was particularly damaging in this second part: "It is as if Orpheus should travel hellwards without his ivory lyre" (73); but that "sense of flatness and deadness" (70) which Gosse complained of was surely intended by Ibsen to signify Julian's cultural atavism. Julian's pagan sign-system, empty of spiritual content, becomes literally a "heap of broken images" (Eliot 63), as the plenitude of romantic theatre gives way to the empty space (Brook) or void of modern epic and absurdist drama. "All the omens are silent" (2.446) as Maximos tries to impress on Julian, and we are left with the "broken altar" (2.424) which Robert Brustein uses as his final image of the theatre of revolt (3).

In his cycle of modern plays Ibsen did not of course follow Julian into that void—certainly not in a theatrical sense. He created instead a new plenitude—a form of symbolic realism—in which a stark usurpation of transparent by opaque theatre is refined into a subtle layering of theatrical signs. Especially in the four psychological plays—*The Wild Duck*, *Rosmersholm*, *The Lady from the Sea*, and *Hedda Gabler*—we are aware of a continuous tension between surface and depth, between reality and symbol. This tension is evident in the dialogue which tends to imply what Harold Pinter has termed "a language locked beneath it" (Pinter 14) of unspoken, perhaps unspeakable, thought; it is also represented scenically by the contrast between a more or less ordinary or domestic area and a stranger, more dangerous inner stage area:<sup>4</sup> attic, mill-race, carp pond, and private room. In *The Lady from the Sea* Ibsen introduces a third conflict of sign-systems by placing a series of static conversation scenes against an unusually rich and possibly unrealizable scenic background which reflects or anticipates the symbolist landscapes of late nineteenth-century Scandinavian art. The settings for Acts 2, 3 and 5 could, *mutatis mutandis*, be conveyed by such paintings as Kitty Kielland's *After Sunset* (1886), Eilif Peterssen's *Summer Night* (1886), Harald Sohlberg's *Summer Night* (1899), or Richard Bergh's *Nordic Summer Evening* (1899-1900).<sup>5</sup> Neil Kent says that these artists "used the northern landscape to allude to metaphysical moods and to the existential predicament of being both a part of the natural world and at the same time alienated from it" (9). There could hardly be a better introduction to Ibsen's northern landscape and the existential predicament of his heroine in *The Lady from the Sea*.

Any reader of *The Lady from the Sea* who is familiar with *Emperor and Galilean* will be struck by the repetition of Maximos's phrase "sign against sign." It occurs in Act 4 during a conversation between Dr. Wangel and Arnholm about Ellida's mental illness (3.366), and has the curious air of being a quotation, as if Arnholm, the headmaster, is showing off his knowledge of Ibsen's plays. Most critics note the repetition, but McFarlane is the only one, to my knowledge, to have demonstrated its significance.<sup>6</sup> McFarlane describes the reality of Ibsen's dramatic world as:

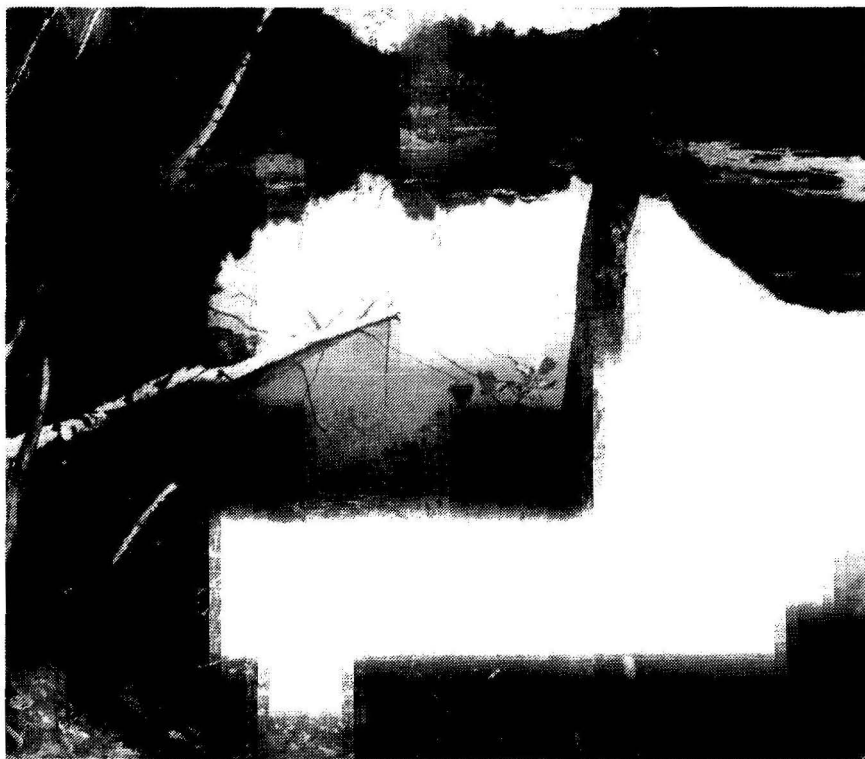
a composite construction of signs: signs coexistent and signs successive, signs seemingly contradictory, often apparently irreconcilable, signs reliable and deceptive: "tegn imot tegn." These signs and references are



Harald Sohlberg: *Summer Night* (1899). Oil on canvas. 114 x 135.5 cm.

[Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo, Norway]

Photo: J. Lathion



Eilif Peterssen: *Summer Night* (1886). Oil on canvas. 133 x 151 cm.

[*Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo, Norway*]

Photo: J. Lathion

rarely simple indices of an evident truth, but are themselves in many instances "interpretations" of what is actually "the case." He who then seeks for meaning in Ibsen's drama must always be ready to allow for the deceptively deceptive nature of these signs, if his grasp of the realities of this fictive world is to be what Ibsen requires of us. (99)

The present paper is an examination of *The Lady from the Sea* as "a composite construction of signs." It seeks to demonstrate how the world-historical conflict of *Emperor and Galilean* has been localized to an attitudinal conflict in which the different ways the characters see things—in terms of language and logic or image and the imagination—lead to intense alienation and suffering. The small fjord town where the action takes place is described by Arnholm as "a meeting point" and "nodal point" (2.353). Within its boundaries there is another meeting point, Dr. Wangel's estate which contains a more obviously symbolic meeting point: the pond.<sup>7</sup> Finally, the protagonist, Ellida Wangel, is singled out from the other characters primarily because her own mind becomes a meeting point for the play's "often apparently irreconcilable" conflict of signs, a point made explicit in Ibsen's stage directions at the end of Act 4: "*She clutches her head with her hands and gazes ahead of her without moving, as if torn by conflicting thoughts and emotions*" (3.371).

In a letter to the Norwegian Government of 1860, Ibsen claimed that "by giving its support to poetry, sculpture, painting, and music, the state has distinctly implied its recognition of the drama, which is by its very nature a unification of all these other arts" (*Letters* 28). Sculpture, painting, music and drama are all referred to in the opening scene of *The Lady from the Sea*, and the ironic context implies that Ibsen is now less certain that drama is "by its very nature" a unification of the other arts. In an earlier draft of the play Balleesen (later Ballested), "The starving sign-painter with his dreams of being an artist" (*Oxford* 7.449), is discovered painting some fence posts. When the young sculptor Lyngstad (later Lyngstrand) enters the garden, the embarrassed Balleesen crosses to "*an easel with a canvas on it*" and excuses his more menial task with the claim that there is nothing "shameful about art giving a helping hand to handicraft now and then" (*Oxford* 7.127). The significance of Balleesen's vacillation between easel and fence posts is revealed when he confesses that he was once part of a long-since bankrupt theatre company and had

specialized in "scene painting and design" (*Oxford* 7.128). When (in the final version) Ballested announces that he is town barber, dancing master and leader of the local brass band (3.333), Ibsen's ironic catalogue of theatre arts is almost complete. Ballested will add a direct allusion to poetry in Act 5 when he quotes from Adam Oehlenschläger's verse tragedy *Hakon Jarl*: "Soon are all the seaways closed, as the poet says" (3.372) (Bull 181). As he tells Lyngstrand, "One has to acclimatize oneself to diverse functions in these small towns" (3.333).

In a metadramatic sense this catalogue implies that drama no longer unifies the other arts. On the contrary, it will tend to reduce each art to fragment and handicraft. This may be why we are told that the company belonged to a man called Skive—which can mean "slice" or "butt" (as in "the butt of jokes")—and that it "broke up and scattered to the four winds" (3.332). There is an analogous image of artistic fragmentation in *Emperor and Galilean* in the scene where Julian gazed in disgust at the shattered limbs of Apollo's fallen statue (2.421). In *The Lady from the Sea* Ibsen uses the problem of achieving artistic unity as a metaphor for the characters' difficulty in finding integration on a social, familial or psychological plane.

Ellida's sense of alienation manifests itself most obviously in her "homesickness for the sea" (3.346). Ballested wishes to paint her as a mermaid who has strayed in from the open sea and can't find her way back again: "So here she is, dying in the shallows" (3.331). In her Act 3 conversation with Arnholm Ellida expresses her belief that people would have been much happier if they had adapted from the very first to living on or in the sea. Arnholm's reply is commonsense Darwinism:

ARNHOLM (*in a humorous tone*). Well all right. But what has happened has happened. We've taken the wrong path once and for all and become land animals instead of sea animals. All things considered it's rather late to correct the mistake now.

ELLIDA. Yes, that's sadly true. And I think that people sense that in themselves. That they carry it with them like a secret regret and sorrow. Believe me,—it's there that people's unhappiness has its deepest source. (3.355)

The attempt—made by Ellida herself and Dr. Wangel—to find the source of Ellida's own melancholy will itself become a nodal point for the play's



conflict of signs. The audience too is encouraged to read dialogue, gesture and *mise-en-scène* for "traces and signs" (3.366) (spor og tegn) of her "mental distress" (3.364). In Act 4 Wangel tells Arnholm that there are two possible explanations for "a rather violent attack" of anxiety that came over her three years before. One is rational and scientific: the fact of her pregnancy. The other is "essentially inexplicable": namely some form of telepathic control exercised over her by the stranger (Weigand 224). It is this wavering between the rational and the irrational, between science and superstition, which prompts Arnholm to remark: "So then, sign against sign" (3.366) (Altså tegn imot tegn).

The audience will find this conflict reflected most immediately in the tendency for Ibsen's theatre language "to leap from the everyday to the visionary, from literal statement to metaphor" (Ewbank 50). At one extreme there is the scientific or academic language of Dr. Wangel, and Arnholm the headmaster. At the other there is a language reflective of Ellida's need to "think and feel in images and in visual representations" (3.381). These languages clash most obviously in the extended passages of dialogue between Ellida and Wangel, which become a conflict between literal and metaphoric languages. Wangel will always press Ellida for *facts*—the Stranger's name and nationality, for example—whereas she can only describe her past to him in "images and visual representations." In Act 4 Wangel is jubilant when he catches Ellida in a logical inconsistency: she claims to remember the Stranger vividly and yet she was at first unable to recognize him in their meeting by the pond. When Ellida turns the tables it is by seizing on Wangel's literal-mindedness:

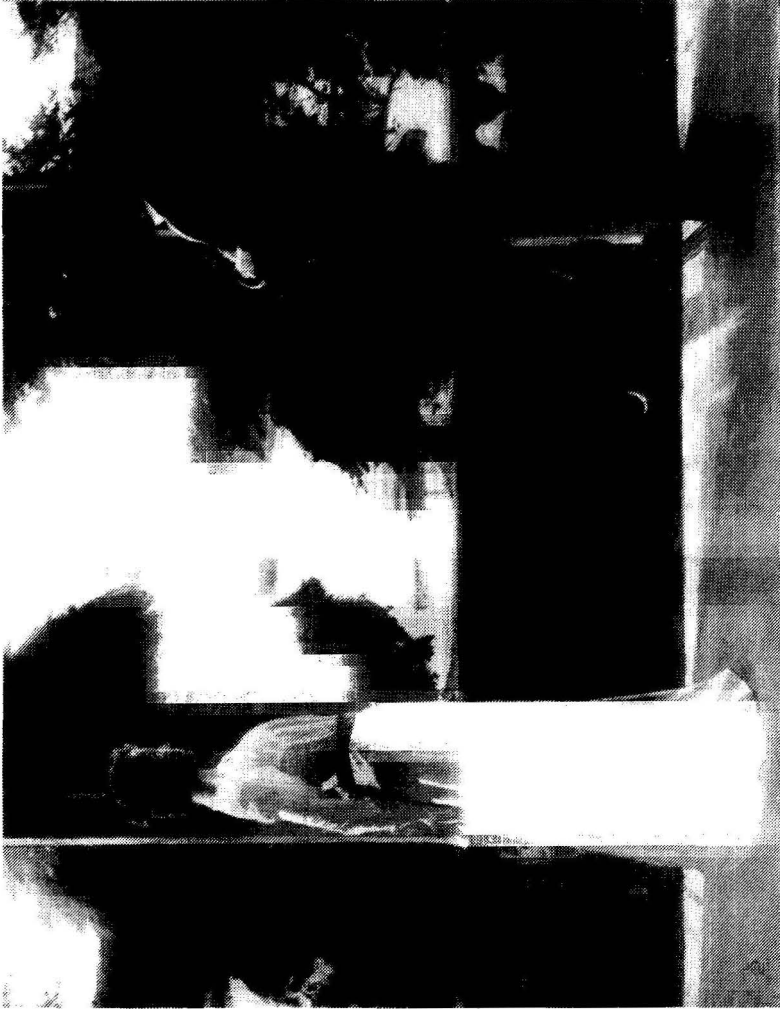
WANGEL. Divorce then? A full legal divorce—is that what you want?

ELLIDA. My dear, you understand me so little. I'm not concerned about the formalities, because I don't think that kind of outward thing really matters. What I want is that we two should agree to let each other go of our own free will.

Significantly it is only when Wangel finds a *metaphor* for divorce that we sense a spark of mutual understanding between husband and wife:

WANGEL (*bitterly, nodding slowly*). Cancel the deal . . . I see.

ELLIDA (*excited*). Exactly! Cancel the deal. (3.369)



Richard Bergh: *Nordic Summer Evening* (1899-1900).

[Göteborgs Konstmuseum, Göteborg, Sweden]

Photo: Ebbe Carlsson

Her attraction to the Stranger is partly at least based on the fact that he speaks her language. When, for example, he asks if she is "ready for the journey," Wangel thinks he is referring to travelling clothes and luggage, whereas the Stranger means her readiness to go with him "of her own free will" (3.379). This simple contrast is made complex by the tendency *each* style of language has to slide from clarity to obscurity, from the transparent to the opaque. In terms of Ellida's metaphor for the evanescent quality of human happiness, language in this play is like the fjord which can be "shining and blue" at one moment and at the next darkened by clouds (3.355).

The everyday language of literal statement, for example, can suddenly cloud over, creating the kind of communicative impasse we associate with Pinter's dialogue. In Act 1 the usually reliable words "mother" and "birthday" suddenly turn into deceptive signs:

HILDE. Have you been swimming then?

LYNGSTRAND. Yes. I was out in the sea for a little while. I saw your mother down there. She went into the bathing hut.

HILDE. Who did?

LYNGSTRAND. Your mother.

HILDE. I see. (3.333)

There is a similar ambiguity about the word "birthday." At first Lyngstrand thinks the flag and flowers are signs of Dr. Wangel's birthday; when he is told by Hilde that they are for "mother's" birthday he naturally assumes she means Ellida:

LYNGSTRAND. It was Miss Hilde who gave it away. I just looked in for a moment earlier today. And I asked the girls why they were making things so festive with the flowers and the flag—

ELLIDA. Well?

LYNGSTRAND. —and so Miss Hilde said: because it's mother's—birthday today, you see.

ELLIDA. Mother's—! I see.

The words "mother" and "birthday" have become "deceptively deceptive" signs. Like Ellida, the audience will be aware at this moment that Hilde was referring to her dead mother, the first Mrs. Wangel. What they cannot know at this point is that Hilde passionately wants "mother" to mean Ellida. Nor will the symbolic sense of "birthday" as Ellida's day of rebirth and self-discovery be evident until the end of the play. This sense that the words have at least three levels of meaning—from the everyday, through the psychological, to the symbolic—creates a complex layering effect in the last lines of Act 1: "ELLIDA (*busy with the flowers*). Come now—why shouldn't I help with the decorations too—for mother's birthday?" (3.342).

In *Caesar's Apostasy* Julian still possesses something he claims to have lost: "the fire of the word" (2.311). From the very first scene of *The Emperor Julian* his rhetoric is flat and dead, a prose version of Peer Gynt's after-dinner philosophizing to his treacherous "friends" (2.717-79). In the last two acts his language oscillates between visionary clarity and the ravings of madness. There is an analogous development in Ellida's language which passes from the visionary and metaphoric, through fragmentation and silence, to rebirth. When, for example, she first tells Wangel about the Stranger there is a rhapsodic glow to her images of the sea:

WANGEL. What did you talk about then?

ELLIDA. We talked mostly about the sea. . . . About storms and calms. About dark nights at sea. We also talked about the sea on days of glittering sunlight. But most of all we talked about the whales and the dolphins and about the seals which like to lie out on the rocks in the warm midday sun. And then we talked about the gulls and eagles and all the other seabirds. Imagine—isn't it strange, when we talked about this kind of thing, it seemed as if both the sea animals and seabirds were related to him.

WANGEL. And you—?

ELLIDA. Yes, I almost felt I was related to them too, all of them. (3.348)

But this nostalgia is short-lived. A cloud passes over Ellida's memory and her imagery becomes sinister and opaque:

Suddenly I can see him there, alive, in front of me. Or really just a little to the side. He never looks at me. He's simply there. . . . It's his breastpin I see most clearly, with a big, bluish-white pearl in it. That pearl is like a dead fish's eye. And it seems to stare at me. (3.351)

Sinister images of the sea have of course already been created: by Ballested in his painting called "The Dying Mermaid"; by the Stranger in his promise (reported by Lyngstrand) to return and fetch Ellida "like a drowned man from the black depths of the sea" (3.341); and by Lyngstrand in his projected statue of a drowned sailor returning to haunt his faithless wife: "And now he's standing by her bed and looking at her. He'll stand there dripping wet like someone who's just been pulled up out of the sea" (3.341). Beneath these gothic-tinged images, however, lurks another fear: that the sea is imageless. Ellida's "homesickness for the sea" is perilously close to Ulrik Brendel's "homesickness for the great nothingness" (3.323) in *Rosmersholm*. Ibsen expresses this signlessness through the metaphor of silence: Lyngstrand remembers the Stranger tearing up a newspaper "so quietly, so very quietly" (3.341); Ellida feels the threat of madness hovering over her "like black silent wings" (3.380); Hilde promises Lyngstrand that she will be "as silent as the grave" (3.378) about Bolette's promise to think about him; and Lyngstrand says that the English ship has arrived "like a thief in the night. . . . So very silently" (3.379).

We have already seen how two key words in Act 1 could have at least two levels of meaning—psychological and symbolic—below that of the ordinary and everyday. The entire theatrical sign-system of *The Lady from the Sea* is made up of deceptively deceptive signs which lead us from surface to depth: from the sound of words and music, through attractive or sinister visual images, to an equally ambivalent silence. This pattern is so marked that it might be more useful to speak of sign *below* or *beyond*, rather than sign *against*, sign.

Ibsen places the most memorable instance of this layering effect in the middle of Act 3 and thus at the very centre of the play. The setting is an unusual version of the inner stage:

*A corner of Dr. Wangel's garden. The place is damp, marshy and overshadowed by large old trees. To the right can be seen the edge of a stagnant pond. A low open fence separates the garden from the footpath*

*and the fjord in the background. The mountain ranges and peaks on the other side of the fjord can be seen in the far distance. It is late afternoon, towards evening. (3.352)*

Initially the audience's gaze is drawn towards the romance of distance, as in the previous act where Ellida gestures towards the "deep" perspective of the outer fjord (3.343) and exclaims: "Out there lies the sea" (3.345). When, however, Ellida is left alone on stage, we become aware of the closed-in nature of the setting; then Ibsen shifts from a horizontal to a vertical perspective:

*Ellida stands for a moment and gazes down into pond. Now and then she talks quietly to herself in broken sentences. (3.356)*

It is a strange and powerful moment of theatre. As she gazes into the pond Ellida seems to be gazing into the unconscious mind, attempting to decode its depths with fragments of sentences. Clearly too the stagnant pond, with its "horribly ancient" (3.353) carp, is an image for what H. G. Meyer calls "the presocial" (66) and "prespiritual" (58). The scene, with its "broken sentences," isolated heroine, and symbolic use of still water, foreshadows Maurice Maeterlinck's *Pelléas and Mélisande* of 1893, a wholly symbolist work in which language is powerless against "the great nothingness." Ibsen differs from the symbolists—Maeterlinck and Strindberg, for example—in his dramatization of *individual* psychology through subtle variations in language. There is an even distribution of despair in symbolist drama which makes such variations redundant. In other words, Ellida's "broken sentences" betray a curable, not an incurable, malaise. A useful analogy can be found in what Robert W. Shaw calls "trouble spots" of knowledge in such writers as Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy:

One of these "trouble spots," the one that most persistently defeats ordered inquiry, is the idea of an unconscious that lies under or behind ordinary consciousness. This idea of something primary and privileged, but fugitive and evasive, just out of sight, often expresses itself as nostalgia for Utopia or a lost paradise. . . . The repressed or subliminal forms of awareness that appear as half-recognized repetitions in the language of *Great Expectations* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* assume that

something outside consciousness is more primary than what we are conscious of knowing. (22)

Shaw goes on to link these "repressed or subliminal forms of awareness" with "the silence of the unspeakable" (26), which is felt, for example, in the novelists' use of tmesis, "the figure of speech that sunders grammatical elements" (25). Shaw also writes that "the unconscious is literally the 'unutterable,' the plenitude or void that exists on the far side of silence" (57). Almost every detail of Shaw's analysis can be applied to the present "trouble spot" in *The Lady from the Sea*. Ellida's "broken" sentences are symptomatic of "ordered inquiry" defeated by something "under or behind ordinary consciousness," which is represented by the depths of the pond. We remember too that the Stranger always appears, in her memory-image of him, standing "a little to the side" (3.351), as indeed he does in this scene, just as Shaw's "lost paradise" expresses itself as "something primary and privileged, but fugitive and evasive, just out of sight." "The silence of the unspeakable" corresponds to Ellida's inability to tell Dr. Wangel "det utsigelige"—"the unspeakable thing" about their marriage. Finally, Ellida's sense that the sea is *both* a magical place full of gulls and seals and all the other seabirds and sea animals *and* Brendel's "great nothingness" reflects Shaw's "plenitude or void that exists on the far side of silence."

Ellida has two terms with which she attempts to define her private world of fear and desire: "det utsigelige" (the unspeakable); and "det grufulle" (literally, that which is full of terror), a term she herself glosses as "that which both terrifies and attracts" (3.370). It is hard to find an English equivalent for "det grufulle." The dictionary translation "ghastly" or "horrible" (Haugen 162) loses the sense of attraction. McFarlane's "awesome" has unfortunately been debased by current usage, and Michael Meyer's "demonic" would sound too literary on stage. I would suggest "the uncanny" as the closest equivalent. It is idiomatic without being slang and has a powerful resonance by its association with Sigmund Freud's "das Unheimliche" which he defines as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" ("The Uncanny" 340).

What is the uncanny, unheimlich, unspeakable thing which has such "an incomprehensible power" (3.349) over Ellida's mind? An approach at least to an answer can be made by examining the distinct way in which

the conflict of signs happens in this particular play. In *Emperor and Galilean* sign obliterates sign in a linear and horizontal progression. In *The Lady from the Sea* Ibsen presents instead a vertical layering of signs, which moves from the ordinary and everyday to what Freud calls "the deepest and most primitive strata of mental development" (Freud, "From the History" 402). The pond is of course the central image of this layering. As Dr. Wangel presses Ellida for information about her past she presents him with a series of confessions, each of which seems startlingly revelatory but only proves to be another layer, not the thing itself.

At first, Wangel is convinced that Ellida is unhappy and refuses to live with him as his wife, because she feels excluded from the tightly-knit family unit of himself, Bolette and Hilde, with their common memories of the first Mrs. Wangel. Then he points to her homesickness for the sea. Ellida's first important confession—of her ritual engagement to the Stranger—leads to a curious passage of dialogue at the end of Act 2, in which Ellida "teases" Dr. Wangel by referring to "the unspeakable," then cuts him off with "No, no, no! Don't ask!"; then, in what *seems* to be a direct revelation of "the unspeakable," says, "(in a trembling whisper) The child had that man's eyes" (3.551), meaning that for her to resume a sexual relationship with Wangel would be to risk a kind of psychic bigamy.

This confession comes at the end of Act 2, and we are given no further *direct* explanation of Ellida's mental disturbance. Nonetheless there seem to be two more unheimlich elements in Ellida's mind which remain unspoken. The first is a fear of Oedipal repetition, something which is more overt in *The Wild Duck*, *Rosmersholm* and *Hedda Gabler*. In his famous analysis of *Rosmersholm*, Freud demonstrated that Rebekka West's spoken confessions form a smoke screen hiding the "unspeakable" knowledge that she has lived incestuously with her father ("Some Characters" 314-15). A similar motif is implied in the earlier draft of *The Lady from the Sea*. There we learn that Ellida's father had drowned, a fact which blurs his identity with that of the Stranger who "drowns" three times in the story: after the murder of his captain; after a shipwreck in the channel; and in Lyngstrand's projected sculpture. Then, in Act 2 of the draft, Ellida seems on the point of confessing that she blurs the identities, not only of her father and the Stranger but of Wangel himself, in her mind:



I mean that when you are out in the boat and a gale blows up and here I am in mortal terror for you, it's not you I picture to myself in the boat . . . or rather, it is you in fact, but I see you in the shape of the stranger . . . and also something altogether unspeakable. (*Oxford* 7.147)

In the final version Ibsen himself repressed the incest motif, leaving much fainter traces than, for example, this speech of Ellida's. Nonetheless S. M. Gruenberg seems justified in her claim that "the power which draws Ellida to the sea is her father's image to which she has remained excessively attached, and that this attachment is not devoid of erotic elements" (89).

If it is the image of her *drowned* father which Ellida describes as "something altogether unspeakable," it would follow that there is also an association between the Stranger, her father and death. Ellen Hartmann argues that Ellida's choice at the end of the play is "far easier to understand if one sees the stranger as death . . . as a representation of Ellida's death-wish" (329), rather than just an embodiment of freedom and romantic love. I would add that an interpretation of the Stranger, and of course the sea, as agents of death, makes it far easier to place Ibsen's repeated and otherwise redundant references to Bergen and to "the English ship" and "the Englishman." It is a well-known fact of Norwegian history that the plague was brought to Bergen in 1349 by an English ship. By the winter of that year up to two thirds of the population had died. This apparently overwhelming disaster was, according to the historian Andreas Holmsen, a blessing as well as a curse, since it "relieved the pressure of overpopulation" and allowed the farming communities to make a fresh start. Holmsen writes that the black death was a kind of "deliverance" (350).

If Ibsen intended this historical reference—and it seems almost certain that he did—then the play's controversial "happy ending" will seem stronger and less sentimental than might otherwise be the case. The final tableau of united or reunited couples—Ellida and Hilde, Ellida and Wangel, and Bolette and Arnholm—watching the departure of the English ship, becomes an image of the fragility of any civilization in the face of its most ancient and unheimlich enemy and deliverer, known of old and long familiar: "*The great steamship glides soundlessly out across the fjord. The music is heard moving closer to the land*" (3.382). Sign against sign.

## NOTES

1. Unless otherwise stated, Ibsen quotations are from *Samlede Verker* (3 vols.) in my own translation; references to volume and page numbers are given parenthetically in the text.
2. Information on word frequency in Ibsen is from Noreng, ed., *Henrik Ibsens Ordsfatt*, a computerized concordance to the poems and plays.
3. The term sign-system is borrowed from Elam (14-15).
4. For a discussion of the inner stage in Ibsen's romantic plays, see Lingard, "To Elgeseter and Beyond: Ibsen, History, and the Inner Stage"; Ibsen's inner stages are remarkably similar to the architectural and natural interiors in Sophoclean drama, such as the Theban palace, Philoctetes's cave or the grove at Colonus, areas associated with sacrifice.
5. Color plates of these and other Scandinavian landscape paintings of the period can be found in Kent, Nasgaard and Varnedoe; it is a pity that the fame of Edvard Munch has more or less eclipsed his Scandinavian contemporaries such as Kielland and Sohlberg whose heightened realism seems more akin to Ibsen's later plays than does Munch's expressionism.
6. See also Weigand (224-25) and Skipenes (94).
7. See Åse (186-89) for a discussion of the pond's symbolic function in the play. Åse relates the pond to Ellida's situation "as it *really is*" (186) and to her conscious rather than unconscious mind (187).

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