



Article

Medusa's Gaze and Geijerstam's Gay Science in the Swedish *fin de siècle*

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Abstract: Gustaf af Geijerstam's *Medusas hufvud* (Medusa's Head, 1895) is one of the "account-settling novels" of the late nineteenth century. These novels reflect on the aesthetic reorientation after the breakdown of the "Eighties movement" in Sweden. One important dimension of this transformation was the growing emphasis on gendered visions of authorship. I argue that Geijerstam's novel is an attempt to create a male author role and a male intellectual sphere. The establishment of a male literary sphere requires homosocial desire, an artistic passion that Geijerstam understands as similar and different from sexual desire. This terminology is employed, after Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, to insist on a productive continuum between the repositioning on the literary field that the novel represents and the thinly disguised homosexual tensions between its three male characters. However, the homosexual tensions are also related to secrecy, disgust, and terror (most clearly visible in the important Medusa motif). I finally argue that Geijerstam employs the erotic triangle, where the woman functions as a "mediator" for a relationship between the men, as a plot device that lets him simultaneously explore and dissimulate this homosocial desire.

Keywords: Gustaf af Geijerstam; *Medusas hufvud*; decadence; *fin de siècle*; homosocial desire; queer; homosexuality; erotic triangle; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick



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*Yet it is less the horror than the grace
Which turns the gazer's spirit into stone*
—Percy Bysshe Shelley, "On the Medusa of Leonardo Da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery"

1. Introduction

Gustaf af Geijerstam's *Medusas hufvud* (Medusa's Head, 1895) has gone down in Swedish literary history as one of the "account-settling novels" ("uppgörelseromaner") of the late nineteenth century. In these novels, some of the most prominent male authors of the "Eighties' movement" ("Åttiotalet") looked back on the development and subsequent breakdown of the group that had ushered in social realism and the ideal of "putting problems under debate" (Georg Brandes' famous slogan).¹ In this article, my goal is to provide a new perspective on Geijerstam's novel by analyzing the forms of male homosocial desire and the erotic triangles that play a crucial role in the narrative. I use this terminology, after Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985), to insist on a productive continuum between the repositioning in the literary field that the novel represents, and the thinly disguised homosexual tensions between its three male characters. If patriarchy, as Sedgwick proposes, relies on the simultaneous fostering of male bonds (with the concomitant establishing of exclusively male spheres of society) and the violent exclusion of homosexuality, the act of drawing them back together becomes a revealing and important endeavor.² This dimension of *Medusas hufvud* has also been curiously overlooked in the existing scholarship—unless Melker Johnsson's virulent attacks on the novel in his study of Geijerstam and the Eighties' movement should be understood as a tacit recognition of the book's potentially subversive content; he identifies something decidedly "unhealthy", and even "unmanly" in it (Johnsson 1934, p. 358).³

My queer rereading of the novel thus also aims at elucidating its relationship to a more general transformation of the literary field. It has been well documented in recent studies how important visions of gendered writing became at the breakdown of the Eighties movement (Gedin 2004; Witt-Brattström 2007). As Ebba Witt-Brattström pointedly puts it, this is the period when “men were forced to define themselves in relation to women” in a stand-off between what she calls the “New Woman” and the “male Aesthete” (Witt-Brattström 2007, p. 10).⁴ The commercial success of many women writers, both domestically and abroad (Gedin 2004, pp. 356–59; Leffler 2019), undoubtedly created new tensions and rivalries. More specifically, David Gedin’s Bourdieu-inspired study of the rise and fall of the Eighties movement has shown how the male authors (including Geijerstam) increasingly dissociated themselves from and even attacked their female counterparts. In his view, the female authors’ commercial success and strong investment in social realism became the two strategic targets in their attempt at creating an autonomous male author role through a “double rupture” (from the market and from society) (Gedin 2004, pp. 354–76).

It is against this backdrop that the ongoing reflection on male bonding in Geijerstam’s novel should be understood. However, before delving further into these questions, I will start by recapitulating the plot of the novel. The opening “Prologue” is a scene from an intimate social gathering where a young poet, who has been identified as the symbolist Sigbjørn Obstfelder (Schoolfield 2003, p. 288), speaks about the harsh cultural climate of the day. The opportunistic and vulgar thrive, he claims, while the true artists, who are unable or unwilling to adapt to the fleeting fashions of the market, are reduced to poverty and loneliness. The earlier ideal of social realism has also definitively lost its appeal.⁵ The poet calls this dire situation “Medusa’s head”, and claims that only “the best of us” see it and become paralyzed and disheartened (af Geijerstam 1895, p. 16).⁶ Medusa, a central motif in the decadent *fin de siècle* art and literature, is of course one of the Gorgons in Greek mythology. She is a woman who has living snakes for hair and whose gaze turns anyone who sees her into stone.

After the prologue, Sixten Ebeling’s personal notes follow. He is haunted by the poet’s words as he returns home after the gathering. They remind him of a former friend, Tore Gam, who had joined the literary circle in Stockholm ten years earlier. At the time, the two aspiring intellectuals quickly became close friends and even started living together, before having an abrupt fallout. Obsessively thinking back on their relationship, Sixten then has a vision of Tore’s ghost in the middle of the night. Terrified, he shoots at it with a revolver, only to find out in the next day’s paper that Tore had committed suicide during the night. The second half of the novel consists of Tore’s own diary notes leading up to his suicide. Here, Tore recounts his disillusionment and mental breakdown. He especially details how he becomes increasingly alienated from his wife and family as his “sickness” (pp. 191; 218) develops. At the same time, he identifies strongly with the fate of a third male character, Reinhold, an astronomer and mystic who is forced into exile and eventually dies in a mental asylum.

2. Medusa’s Riddle

The cultural shift that constitutes the background of the novel, the breakdown of the Eighties’ movement and the emergence of the authors of the “Nineties”, is one of the most thoroughly studied topics in Swedish literary history.⁷ Unsurprisingly, the existing readings of Geijerstam’s novel have tended to treat it as an *example* of this monumental shift, or as a more or less strategic repositioning within the literary field. Scholars have thus often tried to place it somewhere on a continuum between social realism and a *fin de siècle* or decadent aesthetic. This pattern was established already by Johnsson in his 1934 book *En åttitalist* (A Man of the Eighties), where Geijerstam appears as an opportunist in decline who masked an essentially naturalistic novel with the help of fashionable decadent props, such as the Medusa theme (Johnsson 1934, pp. 346–70). In a similar vein, Claes Ahlund (1994, pp. 111–23) and George C. Schoolfield (2003, pp. 287–89) focus on the decadent themes in the novel, such as the descriptions of cultural decline, the critique of

modernity, and the novel's narrow focus on isolated male aesthetes. Per Arne Tjäder (1982, pp. 168–83) and David Gedin (2004, pp. 354–76), finally, analyze it together with the other “account-settling novels” of the late nineteenth century as a reaction to the breakdown of the Eighties’ movement.

These readings all have their merit, but they clearly favor the literary-historical perspective over the internal structure and movement of the text itself as a “thick” cultural artifact (to talk with Clifford Geertz). They thus crucially avert their eyes from Medusa and the queer “riddle” that she symbolizes (“[l]ife’s own riddle” [p.13], as the poet calls the Gorgon’s gaze, with a formulation that makes the reader think rather of a sphinx).⁸ As can be seen from the recapitulation of the plot, the Medusa symbol is carefully situated between two interconnected discourses or levels in the novel that could provisionally be called the “cultural” and the “homosocial”.⁹ On the one hand, there is the general shift in the literary scene after the breakdown of the Eighties’ movement, the cultural decline that the poet talks about in the programmatic prologue, and, on the other hand, the intimate experiences of the three male characters recounted in Sixten’s notes and Tore’s diary. Several parallels connect the two discourses in the novel. Most obviously, the three male characters represent aspects of a utopic intellectual and artistic project that could provide the vital reorientation requested in the prologue. Sixten is thus a historian, Tore an author or “litterateur” (p. 37), and Reinhold an astronomer.¹⁰ Together, they represent an all-male version of the spectrum of human knowledge, spanning arts, the humanities, and the natural sciences.¹¹

This schematic correspondence, however, only scratches the surface of the significance of the Medusa motif as a symbol of male bonding. As Sixten puts it, the poet’s words about Medusa and his own memories of Tore are “deeply linked, in a strange way” (p. 100). Tore’s ghost even takes on the traits of Medusa as it appears in Sixten’s bedroom in the middle of the night. His “head was bare”, Sixten notes, his “eyes were seeking mine, and they stared at me with a piercing gaze that made my blood freeze [*stelna*] in mortal terror” (p. 114). Following this, in a parallel scene in the second part of the novel, Reinhold looks at Tore with a similarly characteristic Medusa gaze:

Eyes, mouth, forehead, every feature was the same! Yet, whatever gave life [. . .] to this surface had disappeared. [. . .] Looking in his eyes, one had the impression that the soul tried to infuse them with life, but to no avail. [. . .] It was as if he could stare, like a dead man stares, with open eyes whose lids never close. (pp. 203–4)

These descriptions clearly hark back to the turn-of-the-century iconography, where, as Bram Dijkstra has shown, Medusa was a particularly appreciated motif (Dijkstra 1986, pp. 309–11). Geijerstam draws on Medusa’s resemblance to an undead creature, locked in a grimace of death or a silent scream (as in the many representations of Medusa’s severed head). The decadent Medusa was also, as in these *male* versions of the Gorgon, often represented as an uncanny combination of woman and man, a “gynander”. The gaping mouth, surrounded by phallic snakes, provided an almost irresistible template for representing the dangers of a transgressive and dangerous sexuality. The creature’s face was frequently represented as a thinly disguised “vagina dentata” (Dijkstra 1986, p. 310).

In Geijerstam’s novel, however, the phallic Medusa triumphs. It is difficult to overlook the phallic imagery and the fantasies of penetration that, throughout the narrative, accompany the Medusa theme. On this point, the novel resembles Sigmund Freud’s late essay with the same name. In “Das Medusenhaupt” (“Medusa’s Head”, 1922), Freud associates Medusa’s petrifying gaze with the terror—and secret pleasure—of seeing the “castrated” genitals of the mother. He contends, somewhat surprisingly, that the “multiplication of penis symbols” that is Medusa’s hair, “signifies castration” (Freud [1922] 1955, p. 273). However, the child’s arousal leads to an erection, which in the myth translates into the petrification suffered by Medusa’s victims.

Tore/Medusa, as he shows himself to Sixten, similarly appears as if he had “grown before [Sixten’s] eyes [. . .] and filled the entire room with unspeakable terror” (p. 95).

In turn, Sixten, scared stiff, points his inadequate little gun at the apparition and fires (a Freudian reading would undoubtedly revel in the description of how the shot closely, as if “by miracle”, missed the portrait of Sixten’s father on the opposite side of the wall [p.118]).

Furthermore, as if this were not enough, Tore takes his life by letting himself be crushed by a train that takes on the traits of a potent Medusa that penetrates the mountainous landscape, an image that is repeated several times:

And I hear [. . .] the heavy moaning [*tunga stönandet*], as the train rushes in between the mountain walls, see it grow out of darkness, shrouded in gray-white smoke, out of which the red eyes glow like blood [. . .]. (p. 295)

The gorge is deep on one side [of the station] so that one can hear the train, but not see it, until its red eyes suddenly appear in the dark [. . .]. [. . .] This place has always seemed dangerous to me, and I could never escape a strange feeling of discomfort when I, in the dark, heard the moaning of the locomotive that stopped the moment the red eyes, with their terrifying glow, transformed the entire machine into a dreamlike face [. . .]. (p. 288)

The train is repeatedly said to be “moaning” (pp. 288; 295) and it has a pounding “giant pulse” (p. 258), as it penetrates the mountain and puts “nature in bondage at its feet” (p. 259). There are many such passages at the end of Tore’s diary, as the thoughts of his own death start increasingly to occupy him. Here, the trains invariably inspire dread, but also visions of an eroticized dream landscape that clearly breaks with the otherwise realistic descriptions of Stockholm and its outskirts in the novel.

The Medusa motif in Geijerstam’s novel is, as I have tried to show, much more than a fashionable prop used to invoke a general sense of decline or vague anxieties about the destabilization of gender roles. It rather functions as a template that permits the author to represent forms of homosocial desire and male bonding. However, Medusa’s role in the narrative can also be interpreted as a defusing presence that “mediates” between the men. When the men appear “as Medusa”, Tore’s ghost in front of Sixten and Reinhold in front of Tore, it is as if they put on a mask, and the myth functions as a way of defusing or concealing the homoerotic tensions that it simultaneously engenders. In a sense, the sheer multiplicity of meanings assigned to Medusa in Geijerstam’s novel as well as in the *fin de siècle* more generally—fear of modernization, secularization, and anxieties about gender roles, for example (cf. Ahlund 1994, pp. 190–94)—“reroutes” the homoerotic tensions that the novel constantly generates. This is not surprising as mythic representations, in Roland Barthes’ words, produce meaning by “deforming” the underlying semiotic system. The relationship between the two levels of representation is like the relationship between conscious behavior and unconscious drives (Barthes [1957] 1991, p. 121). In the next part of the analysis, we will see that this is also an important function that the erotic triangle has in the narrative.

3. Erotic Triangles

The erotic triangle is a pervasive theme in Geijerstam’s late work. It is not only the central plot device in *Medusa’s hufoud*, but also in several other novels published around the turn of the century, such as *Kvinnomakt* (*Woman Power*, 1901) (af Geijerstam 1901), and *Själarnas kamp* (*The Battle of the Souls*, 1904) (af Geijerstam 1904). In his glowing review of *Äktenskapets komedi* (*The Comedy of Marriage*, 1898) (af Geijerstam 1898), Rainer Maria Rilke focuses entirely on Geijerstam’s peculiar treatment of this “old” theme (Rilke [1902] 1965, pp. 645–51). Rather than concentrating on the rivalry between the competing men, like so many of his contemporaries, Rilke describes how Geijerstam’s couples “let” the third part enter as if in “mutual understanding” (Rilke [1902] 1965, p. 650).¹² The prudent Rilke does not spell it out for us, but the reader can easily fill in the blanks. The truth is that Geijerstam’s characters often gravitate towards a more or less harmonious *ménage à trois*, a situation that is hinted at in several novels, but most clearly described in the harmonious relationship between Hugo, Elise, and Karl at the end of *Kvinnomakt*. Furthermore, if the

triangle “fails” or breaks down, it is often because the identification between the two men is too strong or immediate.

Geijerstam’s intuition for the homosocial drives inherent in the erotic triangle anticipates later theoretical developments.¹³ In her seminal readings of English literature, Sedgwick focuses much of her attention on the triangular structure where, most often, two men desire the same woman (Sedgwick 1985, pp. 21–27). Her point of departure is René Girard’s description of the triangular structure of “mimetic desire”, where the bond that links the two active parts of the triangle is as intense and important as the one that links either of them to the beloved person. The desired person or object (in Girard’s account, this could potentially concern any object) plays the role of a “mediator” that reflects the desire of the active parts of the triangle (Girard 1961). Specifically, he shows that the object of desire in several major works of literature is chosen, not for its own qualities, but first and foremost because it is the object of desire of a chosen *rival*. This analysis thus pulls the “commonsensical”, heterosexual relationship back into a larger structure. Compare, for example Claude Lévi-Strauss’ description of marriage as an exchange “between two groups of men, [where] the woman only functions as one of the objects in the exchange” (Lévi-Strauss [1949] 1969, p. 115).¹⁴ As I have already mentioned, this “larger system” of desire in *Medusas hufvud* involves the desire for male bonding as well as for the creation of an exclusively male author role.

4. The Erotic and the Aesthetic

In fact, the novels by Geijerstam that employ the erotic triangle as an important plot device are also centrally preoccupied with the differences and similarities between the kind of desire that unites men and women, and the artistic desire that unites male intellectuals and artists. He frequently evokes the decadent image of men “giving birth” to works of art, in contrast to women who merely give birth to children.¹⁵ In *Kvinnomakt*, for example, Hugo points out that he can only father children (instead of books) after marrying Signe (af Geijerstam 1901, p. 97), a situation that is rectified at the end of the novel when he enters a *ménage à trois* with Elise and Karl. Additionally, in *Medusas hufvud*, Sixten similarly talks about a “critical period”, a kind of male menopause when the aging male writer becomes incapable of creating new works of art, just like an aging woman is incapable of bearing children (p. 243). At the same time, however, the importance of secrecy and riddles in all these novels, along with the frequent expressions of inexplicable dread, antipathy, disgust, and terror (as exemplified by the Medusa theme) clearly signal the ambivalence of this connection. For Geijerstam, the erotic triangle is a concrete way of navigating these questions.

This is especially the case in *Medusas hufvud*. The equivocal tension between erotic desire and literary creation is immediately established when Sixten and Tore meet in a café in Stockholm in the beginning of the novel. Looking back on this fateful moment, Sixten recounts how he misinterpreted Tore’s exuberant mood as he entered the café: “He had come in as a person in love, he walked as a person in love, he talked, ate, drank, looked at me and smiled as a person in love” (p. 36). At first, Sixten mistakenly thinks that Tore has come back to Stockholm to be with a woman he has fallen in love with and, since he “adores being around people [who are] in love” (p. 36), he cannot help but start talking to him. From the start, he manifestly tries to form what Sedgwick calls a “commonsense” triangle (two men desiring the same woman) as he invites Tore to his table “thinking that he might want a third person at supper to display his joy to” (p. 37).

The truth, however, is that Tore has broken off his university studies in Uppsala to pursue a literary career in the capital. It was not desire for a woman, then, but artistic passion that Sixten identified in the young man. However, despite this mistake, the two men immediately become friends. They start working together, despite the fact that Tore is a “litterateur” (p. 37) and Sixten a historian, and even decide to share an apartment “to dispel the desolation of lonely nights, that otherwise often lead men in [their] situation to rush into a marriage” (p. 41).

The problems start when Tore becomes infatuated with a third man, the astronomer and mystic Reinhold. To say that “he was fond of [Reinhold] would not come close to describe the feelings that he held for this man” (p. 48). Sixten, in turn, responds with “antipathy” (p. 49). This is not simple jealousy on Sixten’s part (“not at all the result of [him] feeling neglected” [p. 49]); the relationship with Reinhold rather seems to reveal something disturbing about Tore that the two friends are unable or unwilling to speak about:

It was as if we had decided from the first moment that we would not bring up Reinhold in our conversations. If Tore had been with Reinhold one evening, he would not tell me, but I sometimes had the impression, upon returning home, that they had been together. (p. 50)

The relationship with Reinhold gradually changes the way Sixten sees Tore, until he feels “revulsed by the fact that [he] once had admired him” (p. 68). Even worse, it is as if Tore’s infatuation with Reinhold, by implication, reveals something inadmissible about Sixten himself that he desperately tries to keep silent. As he admits at the end of his notes, this secret fear is at the heart of his strongly negative feelings towards Tore: “*I wanted to simply silence that part of myself that was secretly related to this man*”. (p. 87, Geijerstam’s emphasis). Outwardly, it also becomes increasingly dangerous to be associated with Tore from now on. As his career progresses, Sixten becomes more and more reluctant to be seen with the radical author in public. Tore, in turn, with a sensibility “that is typical of women and some nervous men” (p. 59), senses this antipathy and the break seems unavoidable.

It is at this point that Tore’s fiancée abruptly enters the picture, and the entire dynamic changes, on both the cultural and the homosocial arena. Most importantly, the woman completes the “commonsensical” erotic triangle (two men desiring the same woman) that Sixten from the very beginning tried to establish. Tore thus triumphantly, “like a victorious hero”, displays the young woman to his friend, so that Sixten can “watch her with [Tore’s] eyes” (p. 74).

She turns out to be an ideal “mediator” in Girard’s sense, an anonymous placeholder that serves to facilitate the relationship between the men (her own name, Mary, tellingly only appears in the last chapters of the book, after Sixten’s betrayal and Reinhold’s death). In his notes, Sixten also has great difficulty grasping her character. He constantly describes her in negative terms, such as “silent” and “oblivious” (p. 76), or with oxymoronic formulations: “a mixture of bravery and timidity, [. . .] openness and secrecy” (p. 77). Above all, she appears as a kind of mime. Even though she remains silent during the entire conversation between the men, she “followed her fiancé’s every movement” and “her face, her mouth, her eyes, yes, even her facial muscles seemed to participate in the conversation” (p. 76).

The woman’s role in this important scene, where the two men are united one last time, is that of a protective screen or, perhaps, a surface of projections. The moment the conversation becomes agitated we are told that “the blood drained from her cheeks”, but “[w]hen the conversation took another turn, [. . .] her cheeks flushed rosy red” (p. 77). At the point of climax, when it looks like Tore and Sixten are going to have a heated argument, the fiancée suddenly kisses Tore’s hand, and the scene drastically changes. The gesture makes Sixten inexplicably sentimental, and it appears to him as if the three of them are momentarily united in a harmonious embrace, closer than ever before:

[The kiss] worked as a bond of unity [*föreningsband*] between the three of us. It brought us into a calm state of harmony that made us forget all that was low, mean, and abject inside as well as outside us [. . .]. (p. 82)

The contradictory tensions are momentarily at a point of equilibrium. The role of the “mediator” as simultaneously a conduit of homosocial desire (establishing a “bond of unity”) and a protective screen that dissimulates desire (making them forget “all that was low, mean, and abject”) can hardly be more clearly formulated than in this passage.

5. Geijerstam's Gay Science

At the same time, however, this defusing of the dangerous homosocial drive, as it is channeled in the heterosexual relationship, negatively impacts Tore's capacity as an artist. Specifically, he is forced to start working for a second-rate newspaper to be able to marry and afford his own household (thus leaving the cohabitation with Sixten that was explicitly entered to avoid an imprudent marriage [p. 41]). As Sixten reminds him, marrying means entering bourgeois society and quitting the bohemian avant-garde (p. 64). The newspaper also clearly symbolizes the stupidity and shallowness of the general public that Tore is forced to write for when he has entered the conformist bourgeois society. The pack of newspapers on his desk is "a symbol" for "all the wretchedness that occupies the world's population during a day and forces the others to demean themselves to fit into this world" (p. 162). As a result, Tore fails as an author. He only manages to publish one insignificant book, "of the kind that the public does not read and the publishers do not pay" (p. 91).

His failure as an author turns into hatred of his own family. It is especially during Christmas, when he is forced to sell as many texts as possible to afford celebrating with his family, that these feelings come to the surface in his notes. It is the "fanatical impression of unnatural hatred against [his] own children, this race hatred against the coming generation" (p. 179). However, he is conflicted, as the artistic desire and the desire for family life pull him in opposite directions: "I felt how I loved [the family], more intensely than ever despite the hatred" (p. 180). There is a perfect symmetry between the two parts of the novel here: the love that quickly turns into hatred when Tore is too closely tied to the heteronormative family life exactly mirrors the revulsion that Sixten experiences when Tore is too emotionally engaged with Reinhold and the aestheticism and homosocial desire that he symbolizes (in both cases Geijerstam uses the, during the nineteenth century, vague but strong term "race hatred" [*rashat*] [pp. 68; 179]).

Tore's story can thus be read as a cautionary tale about a man who is unable to balance and differentiate between the forms of desire involved in the erotic triangle (symbolized by his passion for Mary and Reinhold, respectively). His failure to navigate the conflicting desires exposes the destructive brashness of his character. However, it is at the same time this transgressive and equivocal energy that makes him a positive character.¹⁶ Thinking back on their relationship after Tore's death, Sixten catches a glimpse of a new masculine intellectual project, a "happy" science where all the conventional rules are suspended and the boundaries between disciplines and even bodies are erased. Comparing himself to Tore, Sixten finds that his own lifework as a historian is a failure ("I continue to construct the false idol of scientific glory" [p. 306]), since he did not dare to

throw [himself] into the study of history with the happy power of will that had driven enthusiastic men to dedicate their lives to science in order to put their own personalities at stake in the great development that they simultaneously overlook and belong to. (p. 88)

This is a Darwinian vision of evolution by other means: "enthusiastic men" giving birth to intellectual and artistic works. It is the equivocal boundaries of this all-male intellectual and artistic sphere, and the contradictory forms of desire it elicits, that Geijerstam tries to grasp in *Medusas hufvud*.

6. Conclusions

In this essay, I have attempted to analyze Geijerstam's *Medusa's hufvud* from a different perspective than the habitual comparisons with time-honored categories of Swedish literary history, such as the "Eighties" or the "Nineties". Instead, my queer rereading of the novel aimed at placing it within the discussions about gendered writing that were prominent during the final decades of the century (and that largely cut across these categories). As we have seen, *Medusas hufvud*, as well as Geijerstam's late work in general, is preoccupied with the creation of a male intellectual sphere and with the nature of the homosocial relations that could foster and support such a project. At the same time, Geijerstam's queer triangulation and his speculations about male "procreation" constitute a decidedly *decadent* pattern in the

text that is not clearly visible when it is treated as a simple repository of decadent tropes. Tore's inability to balance the forms of desire inherent in the erotic triangle makes him a "decadent subject", to use Charles Bernheimer's term. As Bernheimer has shown in his seminal study of decadence, disgust with biological life and the futurity of the heterosexual family often leads to a glorification of queer aesthetic worlds in decadent works of art (Bernheimer 2001, pp. 56–103). Here, artistic creation is often, as in *Medusas hufvud*, a substitute for normal procreation. The "race hatred" (p. 178) that Tore's children inspire in him and the frequent invocations of Darwin and the dream of a different evolutionary destiny all point in this direction (cf. pp. 88; 163).¹⁷ As Bernheimer puts it, the male decadent is often faced with the anxiety-inducing choice between dying in life and living an aestheticized death (Bernheimer 2001, p. 101).¹⁸

Even though *Medusas hufvud* would fail the Bechdel test (it does not contain two named women talking about something other than a man, in fact, it does not even contain two named women), women do play a central role in the narrative. The novel is, as I have tried to show, a meditation on the differences and similarities between men's desire for women and men's desire for men, in the widest sense of the word.¹⁹ The Medusa myth and the erotic triangle thus both served as means for Geijerstam to simultaneously explore and dissimulate this nebulous homosocial desire.

In fact, this central preoccupation is inscribed already on the first pages of *Medusas hufvud*. The prologue with its discussion of the literary climate of the Swedish *fin de siècle* significantly starts with the portrait of a vaguely eroticized and anonymous "young woman", who is strangely difficult to interpret for the reader: is it art (a portrait) or reality?

A drapery hung down the piano and served as background to a curious portrait of a sick, young woman, whose white hands were illuminated by the light from a tall floor lamp, so that the light-green lampshade cast a shadow over the face and left the whole portrait in semidarkness. I remember that I observed these delicate, sickly hands that were strongly illuminated, observed them above the lively faces that leaned towards each other in smiling conversation [. . .]. (pp. 8–9)

Placed in the opening of the novel, the portrait is the starting point that the narrative flows from. However, the sickly woman is seemingly cut into pieces and the play of light and shadows crosses the boundaries between art and reality. Behind this formidable aestheticized protective screen, then, the ensuing conversation in the prologue about the salvation of the nation's culture—"the great dream, that the Nordic countries would again be a power [. . .] in spirit" (p. 10)—can safely take place. It is, as we have seen, a conversation between men.

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Notes

¹ Axel Lundegård's *Röde Prinsen* (The Red Prince, 1889) (Lundegård 1889), Oscar Levertin's *Lifvets fiender* (The Enemies of Life, 1891) (Levertin 1891), and Ola Hansson's *Resan hem* (The Journey Home, 1894) (Hansson 1895) are also commonly referred to as "account-settling novels".

² Sedgwick argues that homosexuality must be understood as part of a greater "gender system" involving, for example, "male friendship, mentorship, entitlement, rivalry" (Sedgwick 1985, p. 1). In this system, some relations and forms of desire are encouraged ("men-promoting-the-interests-of-men") and some suppressed ("men-loving-men") (Sedgwick 1985, p. 3). The suppression of homosexuality is not gratuitous, she argues, "but tightly knit into the texture of family, gender, age, class, and race relations. Our society could not cease to be homophobic and have its economic and political structures remain unchanged" (Sedgwick 1985, pp. 3–4). However, this discontinuity in the homosocial spectrum inevitably leads to tensions, slip-ups, and inconsistencies that this type of cultural analysis often tries to bring to light.

- 3 Only George C. Schoolfield has discussed this theme in the novel, as he remarks in passing that: “The homosexual subtext of the novel cannot be overlooked, as hinted at in [Sixten] Ebeling’s jealous aversion to Reinhold and [Tore] Gam’s blind devotion to him. [. . .] [T]he best-seller Geijerstam may have been afraid to risk the loss of his public by an overemphasis on this still almost taboo trait in Gam—readers may have concluded that Gam simply admired Reinhold as a supreme self-destructive idealist”. (Schoolfield 2003, p. 289).
- 4 All translations in this essay are my own unless otherwise indicated.
- 5 As Sixten later describes the realists of the eighties: “They called themselves realists, and I have always admired the public that did not understand how unrealistic this realism actually was”. (af Geijerstam 1895, p. 32). What became known as the female “indignation literature” (cf. Gedin 2004, pp. 192–214) is similarly berated as the source of “the hatred between the sexes that has put its unnatural stamp on a whole period’s people and literature” (af Geijerstam 1895, p. 179).
- 6 (af Geijerstam 1895) is quoted with page references in brackets after the quote. All translations from the novel are mine.
- 7 Some of the most important studies are (Ahlström 1947; Lundevall 1953; Tjäder 1982; Gedin 2004).
- 8 Sixten also talks about “life’s enigmatic gaze that I never wanted to face” (p.127).
- 9 I use these terms as a practical shorthand, while the point of the essay is to show how intertwined they actually are in Geijerstam’s novel.
- 10 The “litterateur” (*litteratör*) was an author who published his or her works in journals and newspapers as well as in books. This role was important in the Eighties’ movement, see (Gedin 2004, pp. 73–80).
- 11 A contemporary parallel to Geijerstam’s fantasy of an all-male intellectual sphere is August Strindberg’s confessionless “cloister” for male intellectuals that appear in his letters from around the middle of the nineties and, later on, in works such as *Till Damaskus III* (*To Damascus*, 1901) (Strindberg [1898] 1991) and *Svarta fanor* (*Black Banners*, 1907) (Strindberg [1907] 2010).
- 12 Geijerstam was, as Rilke points out, far from alone in being interested in erotic triangles. This plot device was, in fact, one of the hallmarks of Scandinavian theatre at the time. (Lönngren 2007) is a book-length study of this particular theme in Strindberg’s work that has also been valuable for this study.
- 13 As Lönngren (2007) has shown, this intuition is also clearly formulated in Strindberg’s work around the same time. See, for example, this telling passage from *Svarta fanor*: “Jealousy is man’s longing for purity, it keeps his thoughts from being drawn into another man’s sexual sphere through his wife. A man who doesn’t feel jealousy and tolerates everything is a sodomite. I know of a man who enjoyed his wife’s flirting and who loved her friends . . . ” (Strindberg [1907] 2010, p. 24).
- 14 This is the point of departure for Gayle Rubin’s seminal essay “The Traffic in Women” (Rubin 1975).
- 15 On this common metaphor, see (Showalter 1981, pp. 187–90).
- 16 This contradiction or, to use Judith Halberstam’s term, “queer failure”, has confused and even annoyed some readers of the novel, especially Johnsson: “Tore is not allowed [by Geijerstam] to be what he is, a weak and pitiable human being, but is necessarily given the mark of tragic greatness”. (Johnsson 1934, p. 360).
- 17 In this sense, the novel is unusual in a Swedish and Nordic context as it resembles what the editors of *Nordic Literature of Decadence* call “core decadence”; rather than a naturalistic examination of decadent themes, the novel hints at an espousal of decadent values (cf. Lyytikäinen et al. 2019, pp. 5–7).
- 18 More recently, Tim Clarke (2021) has made similar points about decadence in his discussion of “morbid vitalism” from the point of view of Judith Halberstam’s (2011) concept of “queer failure”.
- 19 Compare Sedgwick: “For the most part, I will be using “desire” in a way analogous to the psychoanalytic use of “libido”—not for a particular affective state or emotion, but for the affective or social force, the glue, even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred or something less emotively charged, that shapes an important relationship. How far this force is properly sexual (what, historically, it means for something to be “sexual”) will be an active question”. (Sedgwick 1985, p. 2).

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