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The Modern Language Review, Vol. 87, No. 1. (Jan., 1992), pp. 134-142.

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IDEALS AND VICTIMS: IBSEN'S CONCERNS IN *GHOSTS* AND *THE WILD DUCK*

Errol Durbach asked in 1980, 'Is there a major American play, from *The Iceman Cometh* to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* — all permeated with the fear of living life without illusions — which is *not* a variation on the dialectical argument of *The Wild Duck*?'¹ (Durbach's emphasis). The question is meant to be rhetorical, but the problem is that it is no easy matter to find any argument, let alone a dialectical one, in *The Wild Duck*. Ibsen was a dramatist, not a philosopher; he sometimes wrote arguments between his characters, but arguments he did not write.

Durbach's question presupposes that *The Wild Duck* is primarily about the practical limits of truth and the need for everyday illusions. This may still be regarded as the standard interpretation. It takes Ibsen as at least partly rejecting his own emphasis on the importance of truth and the facing of reality. For James McFarlane, '*The Wild Duck*, in asking whether it really does add to the sum total of human happiness to put the average person in possession of the truth, redresses the balance'. John Chamberlain, in his magisterial survey, refers to 'the common opinion, fostered by William Archer, for instance, that in the person of Gregers, Ibsen is really castigating himself for injudicious truth-telling'.²

Michael Meyer shares this opinion, for he lauds as 'one of his most penetrating passages' a paragraph from *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* in which George Bernard Shaw wrote that Ibsen 'left the vulgar ideals for dead and set about the exposure of the choicer spirits [...]. His first move in this direction was such a tragic-comic slaughtering of sham Ibsenism that his astonished victims plaintively declared that *The Wild Duck*, as the new play was called, was a satire on his former works'.³ The lesson may perhaps have been salutary for Shaw himself.

Perhaps because the play is so enigmatic, this interpretation has prevailed despite the obvious difficulties it raises. As Ronald Gray put it, 'we have more inhibitions than his [Gregers] puritan zeal comprehends, and Ibsen, in showing the results of zeal of that order, is plugging away at the obvious'.⁴ On the one hand, it is indeed obvious: on the other, Ibsen certainly did not regard his countrymen as excessively concerned with truth, and there is no point in satirizing a view that is not fairly widely held. Nor is there any sign in his notes or letters that he contemplated some kind of public recantation: on the contrary, he was just as convinced after *The Wild Duck* as before that society and individuals are ridden with delusions and pretences which they would be better off without.

Ibsen, of course, never appoints an official spokesman from among his characters, and in a single play he may reflect aspects of his own personality in more than one character. None the less we may well suspect that in *The Wild Duck* there is far more of Ibsen himself in Hjalmar than in Gregers. Ibsen, like many writers, was very sensitive about the long periods he sometimes spent without producing anything,

¹ Errol Durbach, *Ibsen in the Theatre* (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 11.

² James McFarlane, *Ibsen and Meaning: Studies, Essays and Prefaces 1953-87* (Norwich: Norvik, 1989), p. 252; John S. Chamberlain, *Ibsen: The Open Vision* (London: Atholone Press, 1982), p. 105.

³ Quoted in Michael Meyer, *Ibsen* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 558.

⁴ Ronald Gray, *Ibsen, A Dissenting View* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 105.

when the prospects of another work may have felt as remote as Hjalmar's 'invention'. Support for this suspicion comes from an intriguing remark in a letter written long before he began work on *The Wild Duck*: 'If I am not a poet, what have I to lose? I shall try my hand as a *photographer*'⁵ (my italics).

Another interpretation, which has lasted longer than it deserves, is the attempt to provide a positive ending to the play by finding some positive significance in Hedvig's death. To quote from a highly sensitive study of Ibsen: 'Yet the play convinces us that the impulse towards a poetry of living, though frustrated in utterance, is not killed in her. In one person at least, there is an integrity of purpose towards a finer morality that is, in the crisis, invincible.'⁶ It has to be said that this is the sort of stuff that Gregers Werle himself might come up with on a bad day, and indeed in the play he it is who first puts the idea of sacrifice into Hedvig's mind. He also asserts that 'Hedvig has not died in vain', which must count as strong evidence that she has. There are undoubtedly hints of Christian sacrificial imagery in the play, but when Molvik attempts to offer Christian reassurance over Hedvig's body, he is brusquely silenced by Dr Relling.

In complaining 'But no one in Ibsen ever looks at the *child*, at the living, suffering reality'⁷ Durbach is unfair to Relling, who gives in Act iv a quite explicit warning that Hedvig is a child at a very vulnerable stage, and the adults should be careful not to harm her with their antics. This warning sharpens the element of guilt in the desperately unhappy death of an unfortunate and misused child. As Durbach rightly comments, 'there are few other children in drama whose death is as painful as Hedvig's' (p. 79). He relates it to the recurrent Romantic theme of the *Kindermord*, but adds that 'Ibsen's child-deaths [...] expunge all sentimentality from the genre'.⁸

This hardly seems a laughing-matter, but to H. J. Weigand, and in Sir Peter Hall's recent production, the play remains pure comedy throughout.⁹ Certainly many lines in *The Wild Duck*, and a good few in *Ghosts*, are richly funny and quite properly played for laughs. Even so, Ibsen's extant advice on the first production of *The Wild Duck* shows him concerned that the comedy should not be overdone. 'Hjalmar must not be acted with any trace of parody.'¹⁰

Ibsen himself insisted that his works were to be interpreted as a whole. 'Only by grasping and comprehending my entire production as a continuous and coherent whole will the reader be able to perceive the precise impression I sought to convey in the individual parts of it.'¹¹ Without claiming to comprehend Ibsen's entire production, I believe that there are striking parallels between *Ghosts* and *The Wild Duck*, which were separated only by *An Enemy of the People*. Considering these two plays together helps to clarify the many puzzling features in each, and Ibsen's main concerns in writing them.

⁵ Letter to Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, 9 December 1867 (quoted in Meyer, p. 287).

⁶ John Northam, *Ibsen: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 146.

⁷ Errol Durbach, *Ibsen the Romantic* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 92. All subsequent references to Durbach are to this book.

⁸ Durbach, p. 79. Anyone interested with this aspect should see Durbach's interesting discussion.

⁹ H. J. Weigand, *The Modern Ibsen* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1925), p. 145.

¹⁰ Letter to Hans Schrøder, Director of the Christiania Theatre, 14 November 1884, quoted in Meyer, p. 559.

¹¹ *Ibsen: Letters and Speeches*, ed. by Evert Sprinchorn ([London]: MacGibbon & Kee, 1965), p. 330.

A major cause of confusion in *The Wild Duck* is that Gregers Werle is readily accepted as both an idealist and a seeker after truth; Durbach refers to his 'searching for truth' (p. 88). This is, indeed, his own conceit of himself, but he is a character whose word is not to be lightly accepted. John Northam captures half the point in writing: 'The play does not demolish idealism, it demolishes this particular individual's claim to be an idealist' (p. 142). The play certainly demolishes this particular individual, but it does not leave much of idealism standing, and in this Ibsen is being entirely consistent.

The point is that to the modern English reader, 'idealism' and 'truth' naturally go hand in hand. This would not have been so obvious to most nineteenth-century thinkers, and it was quite the contrary to Ibsen. As an illustration, let us remember another upholder of the claim of the ideal: 'Really, this is too much for my nerves; how a man under such circumstances is to hold high the banner of the ideal —.' The speaker is Hilmar Tønneson in *Pillars of Society*, II;¹² far from being a seeker after truth, he is an obvious hypocrite, handled without sympathy by Ibsen. The idea of 'ideas' also appears in a consistently unfavourable light in the letters. To take just one example: 'How the old ideas will come tumbling about our ears! And it is high time they did' (to Georg Brandes, 20 December 1870, *Ibsen: Letters and Speeches*, p. 106). But the most striking instance appears in *Ghosts*, II:

FRU ALVING: But what about the truth?

MANDERS: But what about the ideals?

FRU ALVING: Oh! Ideals! Ideals! If only I weren't such a coward!

These examples leave no doubt that Ibsen saw ideals as artificial and invented, often in the sense of conventions, and, far from leading to the truth, as a primary source of delusion.

As Weigand wrote in discussing *Ghosts*, 'the claims of the ideal are irreconcilably pitted against the claims of truth' (p. 87). Leo Lowenthal puts it pithily: 'In male idealism, truth becomes mere talk.'¹³ What has made this so difficult to see in practice is that idealism is merely one of the more unusual obstacles to truth; even without it, few people can see the truth, and when they do, they may have overwhelming reasons for concealing it. Hence, in both *Ghosts* and *The Wild Duck*, we find idealists, people who cannot grasp the truth, attacking the survival strategies of others, strategies which are themselves built on untruth.

The idealist 'prosecuting counsel' in *Ghosts* is Pastor Manders, and the succession of speeches in Act I, indeed, feels not unlike a trial. Manders, provoked by being reminded that Fru Alving does not share his rigidly conventional views, launches into an impudent indictment of her life and conduct. Her reply convinces all but the most hostile critics that her actions have been based on the best of intentions, but none the less confirms that there is something seriously amiss: most of her life has been based on pretence. The man who might have saved her from that pretence is Manders himself, and he would not do so because of his commitment to his ideals.

¹² None of the points raised here depends on any particular English translation; if it did, it would almost certainly be wrong. Accordingly, I have taken quotations in translation from William Archer's original versions, having a fondness for his Victorian English (Henrik Ibsen, *Collected Works*, trans. by William Archer and others, 12 vols (London: Heinemann, 1906-12)). In view of the many different versions now available, I have made no attempt to provide page references.

¹³ Leo Lowenthal, *Literature and the Image of Man* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1957); chapter reprinted as 'Henrik Ibsen'; *Motifs in the Realist Plays*, in *Ibsen: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Rolf Fjelde (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1965), pp. 139-57 (p. 154).

The resemblance between Manders and Gregers Werle is underlined by their common incompetence in all practical matters, a measure of the extent to which their fixed ideals preclude them from seeing the world adequately. Manders allows the Orphanage to burn down without insurance, whatever his part in it, and if Gregers does not physically burn down the Ekdal home, the chaos he causes with a stove suggests that that is more good luck than anything else.

Returning to Gregers Werle, we can now see that it is not his *claim* to be an idealist which is demolished; he is demolished as an idealist fairly enough. What is demolished is his conceit that his self-inflicted ideals have anything to do with the truth. Relling's dismissal of Gregers as suffering from chronic integrity, while perfectly illustrating Relling's utterly cynical cast of mind, is far too generous to Gregers, as many subsequent critics have been. He is devoid of integrity in the sense which matters above all to Ibsen: integrity in facing up to reality.

The defects in Gregers's grasp of truth are patent, whether or not they are wilful, and Ibsen is remorseless in showing that delusions never lose their pernicious effects by being sincerely held. His conviction of his father's total depravity is held fast in the face of mounting evidence that Haakon Werle has made what efforts he could to mitigate the results of whatever harm he has done. Equally, his vision of Hjalmar's greatness of soul is undisturbed by Hjalmar's actual behaviour. Chamberlain surmises that the opinions Gregers voices to Hjalmar 'are substantially true' (p. 135) but the point is that they are substantially irrelevant. There is indeed much sadly amiss in the Ekdal household, but Gregers's assumption that it stems from Gina's lack of frankness over her past, gleefully piling the blame onto his own father, is a prime example of the real blindness of those characters who are not threatened with physical blindness. What we see is a selfish and indolent husband, virtually living off his family which he exploits thoughtlessly and shamelessly. There is no ambiguity in Ibsen's portrayal of the Ekdal household: on the contrary, in noting that it is Hjalmar's falsity which drives Hedvig to her death, Gray not unfairly adds, 'the demonstration is laid on with a trowel' (p. 103).

Of course, it is perilous to regard anything in Ibsen as unambiguous, and his trowel has not laid thick enough for everyone. Durbach's vision of 'the domestic idyll of their home' is beyond belief (p. 90). David Thomas innocently feels that 'the politics of family life in the Ekdal home are sufficiently balanced and harmonious to provide mutual society, help and comfort, which has been traditionally regarded as one of the key purposes of marriage'.¹⁴ Perhaps so, but to be regarded as a defender of the traditional view of marriage is one interpretation which would have distressed the author of *A Doll's House*.

John Northam is much more aware of what is going on when he writes of Hjalmar at home: 'It is a very unpleasant display, not improved by the way Hedvig instinctively uses wheedling and flattery to bring him round' (p. 120). To see Hjalmar's bonhomie as a contribution to family life would be naive in the extreme: Ibsen at his most psychologically penetrating shows it as an essential part of Hjalmar's manipulation. The mother and child are clearly all too used to rushing around to earn his bonhomie and to avoid his sulks and reproaches; the bonhomie is dearly bought, but we are given enough glimpses to believe that the sulks are well worth avoiding.

¹⁴ David Thomas, *Henrik Ibsen* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 109.

If anyone doubts that Ibsen was still as critical of marriage and the conventional family in *The Wild Duck* as he had been in *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*, consider the opening of Act II, where we find Gina and Hedvig accounting for the day's shopping, and making it clear that most of the meagre resources go on indulgences for Hjalmar. This little exercise in domestic science is not obviously the most gripping theatre: Ibsen is making a point, and making it firmly. His contemporary, Marx, once said that the most interesting question in history is how those who produce least manage to get the major share of the goods. It is impossible to miss Ibsen's point, but it is not generally accepted as showing where his concerns still lay.

The idealists, Manders and Gregers, serve to focus our attention on survival strategies. In *The Wild Duck*, the survival strategy at stake is not Hjalmar's. Badly as he may behave, his behaviour is simply natural to him, and although he exploits his situation to the full, he cannot be accused of bringing it about by any strategy. The survival strategy which Gregers undermines is Gina's, as she realizes, even if he does not. Although she has to work herself to the bone for it, and endure an amount of privation, by keeping Hjalmar happy she sustains a conventional marriage and a family situation in which to bring up her child.¹⁵ My view is precisely the opposite of those who insist that Hjalmar, despite his selfishness, provides a cosy family structure: it is Gina who, by her selfless but unequal devotion, is maintaining the appearances of a cosy family. Even before the irruption of Gregers, the effort required was clearly considerable; Gregers provides the push to shake a desperately unsound structure.

The parallel with *Ghosts* will be becoming clearer. Those who see Helene Alving as a 'wonderful woman' (Northam, p. 86) and those who see her as a monstrous matriarch (H. G. Meyer)¹⁶ may be equally scandalized to find her equated to the 'waddling', uneducated Gina. The similarity is that each has battled to maintain the appearance of a respectable family life against difficult circumstances. The effort has been made in each case (H. G. Meyer notwithstanding) from the best possible intentions: as I. A. Richards once put it, a famous and much-travelled road is paved therewith. So it proves in both these plays. The price of respectability has been wholesale deceit, including the deception of the child in the family. It has frequently been observed how Fru Alving's beautifully ordered home seems to be under attack from the hostile elements of the rain and the dark: it is vulnerable to attack, because, like Valhalla in a closely contemporary piece of theatre, it has been built on unsound foundations.

Chamberlain Alving is dead before *Ghosts* opens, so we have no opportunity to compare him, as a husband, to Hjalmar. One might expect him to be capable of a good deal of bonhomie on occasion, and concede that Helene Alving would be a rather more formidable match than Gina. None the less we are left in no doubt that the marriage was unsatisfactory, and that Fru Alving remains an unfulfilled woman. For all that her survival strategy seems to have succeeded in its aims, her life has been endured rather than enjoyed.

So why do these women work so hard to carry out strategies which leave them in such unhappy situations? For it is impossible simply to blame their husbands, however they behave. The husbands, even though they benefit, do not manipulate

¹⁵ Durbach believes that it is Hedvig who 'sustains the illusion of a happy marriage' (p. 89), but while she may well be part of the motive, the child has had no opportunity to *choose* such a strategy.

¹⁶ Hans Georg Meyer, *Henrik Ibsen*, trans. by H. Sebba (New York: Ungar, 1972).

the outcomes, and might not even want them if they had any free choice. The answer, of course, is convention. As Northam writes of Fru Alving, 'the radical woman can still see only one way of acting, and that in conformity with the appearances society wishes to be presented with' (p. 88). Gina cannot be described as a radical woman, and with her limited education she does not have the chance to see any other way of acting.

If Gina and Fru Alving are disparate in social class, education, and importantly, in the ability to articulate, they have a couple of fundamental similarities. Their acceptance of the conventional wife's role is one, and their capacity for love is the other. Chamberlain notes of Gina: 'Her capacity for affection can be deeply moving, especially by contrast with the men's endless talk about feeling' (p. 115). Fru Alving's need to love makes a more searing impression, as it is so tragically frustrated. Even after Manders's rebukes to her, she sees the child in him and longs to hug him; it takes a particularly warm spirit to recognize the child in so pompous an individual as Manders. The language she uses towards Oswald is alarmingly inappropriate to a man of his age, a point which H. G. Meyer and D. R. Davis,¹⁷ among others, have dwelt on heavily. But she must surely be acquitted of the charge of possessiveness, when she had had the heroic strength of will to send her child away from her because she felt he was in grave moral danger at home.

Whether or not that danger was really acute enough to justify such an extreme course is, of course, another question. In his original notes for *Ghosts*, Ibsen planned Fru Alving as a religious fanatic in youth. There is little sign of fanaticism in the mature character he presents to us, but there are clear hints, in the way she relates matters to Oswald, that her reaction to the Captain's sensuality may have been more severe than it deserved.

We are left in no doubt where the blame for this lies, and it is not with Fru Alving. As she explains it: 'They had taught me a great deal about duties and so forth, which I went on obstinately believing in. Everything was marked out into duties' (*Ghosts*, III). This criticism of upbringing has been pre-echoed by Oswald: 'Here people are brought up to believe that work is a curse and a punishment for sin, and that life is something miserable' (*Ghosts*, II). In *The Wild Duck*, the mothers of Gina and Gregers Werle have exerted equally baleful influences in not so different ways. Indeed, Gregers very much suggests a son brought up by a mother as moralistic and repressed as Fru Alving, but without the latter's fairness and concern for her husband's reputation. Haakon Werle in turn had suffered an oppressive upbringing for 'the whole of his youth', as we hear from Fru Sørby in Act IV. The transmission of physical disease from parent to child is a powerful metaphor for the way society transmits its mental diseases of delusion and conformity from one generation to the next by way of upbringing. In Michael Meyer's words, 'what *Ghosts* is really about is the devitalizing effect of inherited convention'.¹⁸

The undoubted contradiction between Fru Alving's willingness to release the young Oswald, and the heavy motherliness in which she smothers him in the play, is itself informative. Is she trying to make up, too late, for earlier failures, or does she perhaps also need to compensate for other disappointments? Little attention has

¹⁷ Derek Russell Davis, 'A Reappraisal of Ibsen's *Ghosts*', *Family Process*, 2 (1963), reprinted in *Henrik Ibsen*, ed. by James McFarlane (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), pp. 369-83.

¹⁸ Introduction to *Ghosts*, in Henrik Ibsen: *Ghosts*, trans. by Michael Meyer (London: Hart-Davis, 1962), p. 18.

been paid to Fru Alving's regret, early in Act I, that Manders would still not pass a night under her roof. Is it really as innocent as it sounds? Her reference to them as 'we two old people' has a distinctly wistful ring to it, and later she explicitly mentions her loneliness. Why has a woman so supremely competent used such an incompetent individual as Manders as a business manager, even if not all his advice to her were as disastrous as his refusal to insure the Orphanage?

Taking these clues together with her continuing affection for Manders, the implication seems to be that Fru Alving was still hoping, in bringing Manders back into contact, that he would find the courage to return her love. The possibility is suggested by the late marriage of Haakon Werle with Fru Sørby in *The Wild Duck*, and by Fru Linde's appeal to Krogstad in *A Doll's House*: 'Nils, how if we two shipwrecked people could join hands?' (Act III). It happens, and the two long-frustrated lovers are reunited in their maturity.

Fru Alving's less openly expressed hope is also less successful, and her dismissive 'Don't let us talk of old times any longer. You are now up to your ears in Commissions and Boards of Direction' takes on a new significance as her final acceptance of the loss of a dream to which she has long clung. It is after this that we see her clinging to Oswald so inappropriately, as if all the love so long suppressed must now be focused on its only remaining recipient.

If this reading is correct, the tragedy is all the more poignant in that it could so easily have been alleviated. Despite some translations which let him call himself a priest, Manders is a Protestant pastor under no obligation of celibacy. Now that Fru Alving is a widow, there is no obvious reason why he should not accept her love, as he had once, in himself, wished to do. However, his 'victory over himself' has been a fatal one. He can now only recoil from the warmth which is still so generously offered to him, totally bound up in his self-righteousness and his social importance, poor assets which he is all too likely to lose if he continues to let himself be deceived by Jakob Engstrand. His conventionality, which once thrust Fru Alving back into her wretched lot of 'duty and obedience' remains to deny her (and also, in all probability, him) any solace from its consequences. Manders is beyond salvation precisely because he is more 'righteous' than the blackmailing Krogstad or the exploitative Haakon Werle.

There would not, of course, be any more hope for Oswald whatever Manders did, but the play is centrally concerned with Fru Alving's tragedy: indeed, Ibsen's original title was *Fru Alving*.¹⁹ In his notes for *Ghosts*, Ibsen wrote, 'These women of the modern age, mistreated as daughters, as sisters, as wives [...] embittered in mind — these are the ones who supply the mothers for the new generation. What will be the result?'²⁰ His sensitivity to the conditioning of women extends to the dialogue he writes for them, differentiating in a lifelike way the vocabulary which men and women are allowed to use, as Inga-Stina Ewbank has convincingly shown.²¹

Ibsen shows how harmful, in his view, the result is bound to be, by making the child of this marriage suffer the dramatically obvious harm of fatal illness. His belief in the heritability of characteristics and illnesses, which seems exaggerated to us,

¹⁹ Halvdan Koht, *Life of Ibsen*, trans. by E. Haugen and A. E. Santaniello (New York: Blum, 1971), p. 328. Koht gave no source for this information, so it may be assumed he took it from Ibsen's papers, of which he was the editor.

²⁰ Translation from *Henrik Ibsen*, ed. by James McFarlane, p. 92.

²¹ Inga-Stina Ewbank, 'Ibsen and the Language of Women', in *Women Writing and Writing About Women*, ed. by Mary Jacobus (London: Croom Helm, 1970), pp. 114–32.

was widespread in his day.²² It is irrelevant that Fru Alving is in no way to blame for Oswald's illness. Indeed, she is almost as much the victim of it as he himself is. Ibsen is concerned to force to our attention ingrained social ills, what one might well call mankind's inhumanity to man. He is strikingly free of any wish to blame or pillory hapless individuals, as witness his unvindictive treatment of even such an obvious exploiter as Karsten Bernick in *Pillars of Society*. What David Thomas perceptively writes of Brand can be applied with equal justice to all Ibsen's major characters: 'He is already a victim of his past when the play opens' (p. 45).

The final evidence that the main concerns in *Ghosts* and *The Wild Duck* are the same is that both end with the loss of the child. Hedvig is even more of a victim than Oswald, since his mother had tried desperately to shield him from danger, while Hedvig, as a female child, was herself one of 'these women of the modern age, mistreated as daughters'. What Inga-Stina Ewbank writes, comparing *Ghosts* to *King Lear*, clearly applies equally to *The Wild Duck*: 'The play's protagonist sees his or her child destroyed by what is basically his or her blindness to the most important values of life.'²³

Ibsen knew that habitual falsity in the family is not merely an abstract error, as Gregers would think it, or a moral evil, as Manders would, but a fearfully destructive influence on all who have to live with it, not excepting those, like Hjalmar, for whose convenience it may have arisen. John Chamberlain very perceptively notes, 'And such lack of self-respect [Gina's] [...] is not only repugnant but also, it seems, infectious: Hedvig's adulation of her supposed father is completely uncritical' (p. 138). The child brought up in this atmosphere will herself never attain any measure of self-respect, any sense of her own worth as a person. Blindness would indeed be particularly bewildering to such a girl, as she would thereby be denied the only role she has been taught, the role of a servant. Her death can be seen as taking this role to an extreme conclusion: she kills herself to please her father, and so does not live to slave for a husband. Chamberlain takes issue with any too severe judgement of the Ekdal household on the ground that 'the Ekdals are far from untypical' (p. 138). That is all too true: Ibsen did not trouble to attack evils he did not know to be widespread. The world is full of Hedvigs.

Halvdan Koht observed that 'if we look for the concept that is contrasted with happiness, we almost invariably find the world "duty"' (p. 332). Leo Lowenthal has made the important point that 'time and again Ibsen's people sacrifice themselves and do what they believe to be their duty, only to achieve negative results. Sacrifice of human lives becomes absurd, unless it is linked with a value that transcends those lives'.²⁴ Just as in religious contexts, sacrifice is justified only if it can be offered to a worthy end. Alving, Hjalmar, and the expectations which society imposes on women, duly inculcated by parents or guardians, are not worthy ends, and the lives ruined for them are utterly wasted. *Ghosts* ends in unrelieved tragedy, but the ending of *The Wild Duck* is hardly less doleful: Hedvig's brave young life is squandered, and the surviving adults remain incorrigible, except that they will now age more miserably.

²² See Marvin Carlson, 'Ibsen, Strindberg and Telegony', *PMLA*, 100 (1985), 774-82.

²³ Inga-Stina Ewbank, 'Ibsen's Dramatic Language as a Link between his "Realism" and his "Symbolism"', in *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen*, ed. by Daniel Haakonsen (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1965-66), 1, 96-123, 100.

²⁴ In *Ibsen*, ed. by Fjeld, p. 151.

So I would summarize my objection to the question raised by Durbach, with which I began, by arguing that *The Wild Duck* is no more about truth and illusion in general than a history of Britain would be about islands in general. James McFarlane believes that 'Gregers, by contrast [with Relling] rubs their noses in the truth'. Gregers does nothing of the kind; he never has any idea what the truth is. He has no capacity to see the real problem because he is cut off in a world of his own, a world no less ridiculous for being composed of half-baked ideals rather than the half-dead Christmas trees of the Ekdal attic. The real problem is the perversion of human lives, particularly those of women, by social conformity, further developing the theme of *Ghosts*. The play dwells on the question of truth because that perversion is sustained by self-deception among both men and women.

It remains to suggest why, if Ibsen's concerns remained the same, he should have developed them in such different ways. *The Wild Duck* certainly makes its points in a less direct way than *Ghosts*, and one obvious reason for this is 'that blessed wild duck'. The wild duck image springs directly from Ibsen the poet, finding means to endow his dramatic prose with the multiple significance of poetry, but it has also given scope for endless distractions from the stark points which I have outlined above. None the less, if these plays are the product of Ibsen the poet, they show him as a poet in the spirit of Philip Larkin, who, creating a poem on the influence of parents, could express his feelings adequately only by using a four-letter word in the first line.

Another important reason is the concern Ibsen felt over the furiously hostile reaction to *Ghosts*. In a letter of 24 June 1882, he wrote to Sophie Adlersparre, 'I agree absolutely with you when you say that further than *Ghosts* I dare not go [. . .]. A writer must not leave his people so far behind that there is no longer any understanding between them and him.'²⁵ That this fear was very much on his mind is confirmed by his comments on the new play to his publisher, Frederik Hegel: 'It takes place entirely within the confines of family life [. . .] it can't offend anyone.'²⁶ Ibsen might have remembered that *Ghosts* lay equally 'within the confines of family life'.

It is significant that the play separating *Ghosts* and *The Wild Duck* was *An Enemy of the People*, in which Ibsen relieved his feelings about the storm of criticism he had suffered, by satirizing both himself and his critics. He did not intend to play Dr Stockmann again; he had found that the direct assault on people's prejudices rarely provoked more than outrage and defensiveness. Yet he had in no way moderated his views or, I believe, his determination to express them. In *The Wild Duck*, he makes his points more in the manner of a parable, hoping to inspire his audiences to reach his conclusions for themselves, even if some of the points are still 'laid on with a trowel'. We must remember that he read the Bible more than anything else. The inescapable weakness in this approach (and here the original Teacher in parables would surely sympathize with him) is the inability of most of us to draw conclusions which damn our social conventions.²⁷

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²⁵ Translation from *Henrik Ibsen*, ed. by James McFarlane, p. 95.

²⁶ 14 June 1884, translated in Meyer, p. 549.

²⁷ I thank Ms M. I. Freeman for first inspiring my interest in the topics addressed here, and Mrs M. A. Flint for reading and discussing drafts of this paper.

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[Footnotes]

²² **Ibsen, Strindberg, and Telegony**

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PMLA, Vol. 100, No. 5. (Oct., 1985), pp. 774-782.

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