

The Novelty of *The Wild Duck*: The Author's Absence

Thomas F. Van Laan*

When Ibsen sent the manuscript of *The Wild Duck* to his publisher, he remarked:

This new play stands in certain ways in a place of its own in my dramatic production: the course of action is in various respects divergent from my previous plays. Concerning this I will not, however, say anything more. The critics, it is to be hoped, will find the points in question; in any case, they will find a good deal to argue about, a good deal to interpret. In connection with this, I believe that *The Wild Duck* can perhaps tempt some of our younger dramatists into new paths, and I would consider this to be desirable.¹

As Ibsen predicted, the critics have found a good deal to interpret in discussing *The Wild Duck*, and many of them have tried their hands at defining what Ibsen must have had in mind in stating that the play is different from his previous works. Most of them hit on a single aspect of the play, such as its use of symbolism (particularly the symbol referred to in the title), its attitude toward revolt, its tragicomic tone, its constant indefiniteness and uncertainty, its attempt to make tragedy out of the actions of characters of low social and moral stature, and its deliberate destruction of the theatrical conventions of a popular dramatic sub-type.² Since Ibsen's statement about his innovations in *The Wild Duck* always refers to them in the plural, perhaps most reliance should be placed on one of the first critics to speculate about what Ibsen may have had in mind, Hermann J. Weigand, who found in the play "several deviations from Ibsen's usual dramatic method." Weigand argues, among other things, that *The Wild Duck* is not a "drama of ripe condition," that in it the dramatic spectacle "is rather a spatial tableau than a causal chain," that

*Thomas F. Van Laan is Professor and Chairman of English at Rutgers University. His work is well-known to those interested in dramatic theory and criticism.

“some quite important aspects of the past are purposely, perhaps, left rather hazy,” that the character we are initially asked to view as protagonist—Gregers Werle—is later exposed in such a way as to require us to detach from him our sympathy and involvement, and that the “prime function” of the symbolism of the wild duck is not to focus our understanding of the action but rather “to characterize Gregers,” the symbol-monger who is the essential source of the duck’s very status as a symbol.³

I agree with Weigand that Ibsen had several innovations in mind—in fact, many more than Weigand mentions—including most of those cited by others who have tried to define the play’s novelty. All of the innovations, however, are similar in impact, and together they produce a single major effect of a sort that Ibsen had previously been explicitly concerned with, having discussed it in a letter to Sophus Schandorph on January 6, 1882. The subject of the letter is *Ghosts*, and in it Ibsen complains that the Scandinavian reviewers tried to make him “responsible for the opinions that some of the characters in the play express.” This, he asserts, is completely incorrect:

And yet there does not exist in the whole book a single opinion, a single utterance that can be charged to the author’s account. I was very careful of that. The method, the kind of technique that is the basis for the book’s form, entirely in itself prohibited that the author come into view in the speeches. My intention was to evoke in the reader the impression that during the reading he experienced a piece of reality. But nothing would more thoroughly work against this intention than to admit opinions of the author into the dialogue. And do they believe at home that I possess so little critical ability in dramaturgy that I would not realize this? Yes! I have realized it, and I have acted accordingly. In none of my plays is the author so removed, so entirely absent, as in this last one.⁴

The novelty of *The Wild Duck*, as I see it, involves a radical development of this idea of the “absence” of the author. In *Ghosts* the absence consists of Ibsen’s not using the characters’ speeches as sounding boards for his own opinions; in *The Wild Duck*, it consists of his seeking deliberately to undercut every device through which a dramatist can make his presence felt. An author establishes his presence by privileging certain responses and meanings rather than others, thereby controlling the way that his readers or spectators view his work in part or in whole. In fiction, the primary device available for this purpose is the narrator, but drama lacks such a device. In order to establish his presence, the dramatist must rely entirely on *secondary* narrative devices, such as assigning his play certain generic characteristics, selecting a particular character as protagonist, elevating some aspects of the dramatic experience to symbolic status, and the like. In *The Wild Duck*, Ibsen guarantees his absence by merely seeming to create such devices while in actuality refusing to endow them with full and stable existence; in the process he devises a new and rare kind of dramatic artifact. To explain and demonstrate my understanding of the play’s novelty, I want to take up the most important of these secondary devices one at a time and compare how Ibsen uses them in his immediately preceding plays (and occasionally in some later ones) with the form they take in *The Wild Duck*.

The first of these secondary devices, and the one that for the dramatist comes closest to the narrator of prose fiction, is the *raisonneur*, a character who frequently comments on the action and whose speeches are recognizably more authoritative than those of any of the other characters, allowing him, in effect, to serve as the author's mouthpiece. Although he is sometimes the protagonist, the *raisonneur* is more often a minor figure with no, or little, other function in the play. Ibsen employed no *raisonneurs* in the strictest sense of the term in his first four plays of contemporary middle-class life, although from time to time various characters assume a *raisonneur* function. Lona Hessel, who works constantly to make Bernick—and therefore the audience—face the truth about his actions, concludes *Pillars of Society* by announcing, "the spirit of truth and freedom—that is the pillar of society." Partly by virtue of her role of protagonist and even more so through the explicitness with which she articulates her new views to Torvald, Nora often becomes a *raisonneur* in *A Doll House*, especially in the final episode of the play. *Ghosts* is the play about which Ibsen proudly and defiantly asserted that there is not "a single utterance that can be charged to the author's account," and yet Mrs. Alving's view of things, especially in her debates with Manders, often seems definitive—again, partly because she is the protagonist. But all of these characters, however frequently they assume this function, remain fully embedded in the dramatic action: there is much going on that their comments do not and cannot touch, and they all manifest various limitations on their authority deriving from their personal stakes in what is happening. Much the same can be said of the character from these four plays who is most frequently seen as a mouthpiece for Ibsen, Dr. Stockmann of *An Enemy of the People*. Dr. Stockmann is essentially right in his actions and his intentions; he is also essentially accurate in his reading of his fellow citizens; and his speeches often echo—or are echoed by—Ibsen's own statements in his letters and other private communications. But Dr. Stockmann also manifests important comic and tragic dimensions that ultimately prevent him from becoming an unequivocal stand-in for the dramatist.⁵

Given Ibsen's treatment of these potential *raisonneurs*, it would seem to be a little surprising to find Maurice Valency describe Dr. Relling of *The Wild Duck* as "the *raisonneur* of the play"⁶—except that in saying this Valency is echoing the view of probably the vast majority of those who have seen or read the play. Relling certainly looks like a *raisonneur*. Not appearing until the third act, he is a minor character whose absence would not in any significant way necessitate an alteration in the plot; furthermore, he is constantly expressing his views of the other characters—often summing them up in terse phrases—and frequently, particularly in two episodes, near the beginning and at the end of the final act, which have the appearance of extra-dramatic debates on the action, he explicitly denounces the ideas of Gregers Werle, the do-gooder who causes the Ekdals so much difficulty. Valency does, however, perceive some complexity in Ibsen's use of the *raisonneur* in *The Wild Duck*. He notes that Gregers is "cast in the first instance as the *raisonneur* of the play" and that, as a result, "the *raisonneur* of the conventional *pièce à thèse* suffers an interesting transformation" (173). Furthermore, he adds that "Ibsen did what he could to dissociate himself from his doctrine" by making Relling "a drunkard and a

disgrace to his profession.” Nonetheless, he still concludes, “there can be no doubt that this estimable quack speaks for that side of Ibsen which had by now supplanted Brand” (174).

As a few commentators on *The Wild Duck* have noted, Ibsen’s efforts to dissociate himself from Relling go much further than the points—rather major ones!—that Valency concedes—so much further, in fact, as completely to unfit the character for the role he supposedly performs. Not only “a drunkard and a disgrace to his profession,” Relling is also “a loser in life.”⁷ Ibsen goes out of his way to give him a history and a seeming personal stake in the action, for Relling is a former suitor of Mrs. Sørby, whom he lost to someone else—apparently because, as she observes, he “frittered away what was best in him” (VII 336; F. 462; M. 209).⁸ Once we recognize these efforts to undermine Relling’s authority and to establish him as a character in his own right, rather than as a detached, autonomous observer, it is fairly easy to realize that Relling’s commentary is itself always suspect. Støverud, who has provided the most thorough examination of Relling from this point of view, reveals the speciousness of his comments on others by pointing out that his treatment of them, especially as it is displayed during the lunch scene in Act Three, makes him appear “not so much as the kind-hearted benefactor of the Ekdal family as the man who gets quite a kick out of playing with them, almost like a cat playing with a mouse” (112).⁹ This reading of Relling’s comments on others—and by implication his assertion that “life-lies” are necessary for preserving the average person’s happiness (VII 369; F. 477; M. 227)—empties them of any validity or objectivity, defining them instead as devices by means of which Relling, through manipulation of others, gains the power and sense of superiority that give him at least a semblance of self-worth. Støverud even suggests that Relling’s opposition to Gregers might very well be seen as a struggle to avoid losing the “outlet for his own lust for power” (113).

Despite the thoroughness of his skeptical reading of Relling, Støverud does not point out what seems to me to be the most damning aspect of Relling’s commentary as a supposed *raisonneur*. Those who take Relling to be Ibsen’s mouthpiece in spite of his more obvious limitations do so, I suspect, because of his opposition to Gregers, who is so clearly misguided in the particular goal he is trying to fulfill and so clearly the cause of disaster for a group they have come to adore. The wrong-headedness of the one and the right-headedness of the other in the particular case apparently obscure the more important underlying difference between the two in their general views of humanity. Relling’s every word and every image demonstrate that he views humans in general as helpless beasts, as sick beings incapable of any betterment, especially of their own making, and requiring some kind of anodyne to allow them to survive. Gregers, on the other hand, however misguided he may be in the particular case, at least operates from an assumption that humans are eminently capable of self-betterment. To side with Gregers in *The Wild Duck* is dramatically impossible, but to side with Relling is to give up in despair. Gregers quite rightly tells Relling at the end of the play, “If you are right and I am wrong, then life isn’t worth living” (VII 396; F. 490; M. 242).

The dramatist who eschews a *raisonneur* and thus deprives himself of the surest means of incorporating his own reading of the action into the text—as

Ibsen ultimately does in *The Wild Duck*—can still manage to achieve some sense of this effect through another secondary narrative device, the protagonist. The selection of one of the characters as protagonist establishes the point of view from which the spectators experience the play. What happens becomes meaningful in terms of its happening *to* the protagonist, and the spectators respond emotionally to it as well as arrive at an understanding of it in light of its relevance to the protagonist's fortunes or misfortunes. Because of this focusing of the action in relation to a single figure, and because of that figure's consequent prominence on the stage, the spectators also tend to accord the protagonist's statements and attitudes a high degree of authority. They experience events as the protagonist experiences them, and they are inclined to understand them as they are understood by the protagonist—unless, that is, the dramatist acts to undermine this process of identification in some way.

As I have already suggested, Ibsen does just that to some extent in the four preceding plays. A spectator cannot wholly identify with Bernick, the protagonist of *Pillars of Society*, because most of his actions, in both the past and the present, are morally unacceptable, because it is another character—Lona Hessel—who obviously has the right view of what is happening, and because Bernick's best action—his reformation toward the end of the play—puzzlingly lacks full conviction. Nora Helmer of *A Doll House*, on the other hand, is someone we can both admire and be concerned for, and her value as authoritative protagonist is enhanced by her soliloquies and her articulate representation of her case in the final scene; but even she necessarily loses some of her ability to control our vision through such qualities as her selfish preoccupation with her own concerns in her first-act conversation with Mrs. Linde, her attempt to exploit Rank's devotion to her in Act Two, and her cold, almost cruel indifference to her husband's bewilderment and tentative awakening at the end of the play. Mrs. Alving of *Ghosts* is more consistently admirable, but something happens to her status as protagonist toward the end of the play with the coming to prominence of her dying son Oswald as a potential rival for the protagonist's role. In some ways, Dr. Stockmann of *An Enemy of the People* is the character in these four plays who comes closest to the typical protagonist of drama, but, as I have already pointed out, he too is called into question by the troublesome comic and tragic dimensions that complicate his portrayal. What must be recognized, however, is that despite the character limitations I have cited, each of these four plays does establish a clearly identifiable protagonist who for the most part functions in the typical way.

This is worth stressing because something remarkably different happens in *The Wild Duck*. As Weigand points out (155), initially Gregers Werle seems to be the protagonist. In Act One, although Ibsen puts some stress on Hjalmar Edkal and on Haakon Werle, Gregers becomes identified as the focal character of the play because he so clearly takes charge in the act's two major duologues—asking questions to learn about Hjalmar's situation in the first, pressing his views of his father's actions in the second—and because, toward the end of the second of these duologues and thus virtually at the end of the act, he formulates a plan of action based on what he has learned and what he

supposes, hinting to his father (and to us) that he intends to undo the damage he imagines his father has done to Hjalmar and stating explicitly, “now I finally perceive a mission to live for” (VII 225; F. 409; M. 150). In the subsequent acts, Gregers continues his investigating and tries to carry out his mission, but—in part through the efforts of Relling and in part simply through further exposure of Gregers’ disturbed and obsessive nature and his blindness to the true dimensions of the situation—the audience soon feels compelled to distrust Gregers and to withdraw any eagerness to see him succeed. Even before this turn in Gregers’ role fully develops, however, another character—Hjalmar—usurps his position of prominence in the play, clearly becoming the dominant figure and the unequivocal center of attention. Hjalmar further qualifies as protagonist because he also adopts the pattern of learning and then resolving to act on what he has learned. Nevertheless, Ibsen’s characterization of Hjalmar as sentimental and comically melodramatic, as being likely to turn a serious situation into farce and—by this means—into catastrophe, keeps the audience detached from him and especially from seeing the action through his eyes. A third character—Hedvig—assumes the role of protagonist toward the end of the play when, as a consequence of the action as a whole and perhaps of her choices within it, she goes to her death. But Hedvig also remains an unsatisfactory candidate for selection as *the* protagonist of *The Wild Duck*. She is, after all, only a child, she is not sufficiently prominent or well enough developed to assume such importance, and her death takes place offstage, leaving obscure its exact relation as a conscious act to what has preceded it.

John Chamberlain, who has produced the most thorough discussion of this odd treatment of the protagonist in the play, concludes by saying, “*The Wild Duck* has no protagonist, despite the fact that Hjalmar talks like one and Gregers and Hedvig seem both to speak and behave like one.” In contrast to the normal structure of drama, he adds, *The Wild Duck*, instead of ranging its characters around and in relation to a protagonist, focuses upon a number of equally important major characters—these three and several others—all of whom are seen ambivalently in relation to the central themes of the play.¹⁰

The absence of an authentic *raisonneur* and a clear-cut protagonist helps prevent any employment in *The Wild Duck* of another secondary narrative device. Meaning is often conveyed in drama and fiction by the technique of privileging a particular kind of discourse in relation to any other existing discourses. A particular way of speaking about characters and issues, with its distinctive language and its expressed or implied values, can be privileged because of its source (a *raisonneur*, some other authoritative character such as the protagonist, or a sympathetic group), because it is innately more sound—or, at least, more in harmony with the views of the implied audience—than the discourse or discourses that are to be rejected, or for both reasons.

A Doll House pits a discourse urging individual judgment and human equality, originating with Nora, against a discourse favoring social conventions and established hierarchies, primarily stemming from Torvald, with Nora’s discourse coming off as the clear victor—increasingly so with each passing year. In *Ghosts*, a discourse that is similar to Nora’s and shared by

Mrs. Alving and to some extent Osvald stands out against the religious and social pieties of Manders (and the parody of them by Engstrand) and Regine's discourse of extreme self-interest, although toward the end of the play a new discourse, originating in Osvald's pleas to be exterminated, comes to dominate. In *An Enemy of the People*, a clear-cut contrast exists between Dr. Stockmann's discourse of community responsibility, moral integrity, and liberal individualism (which attracted Arthur Miller to the play) and the opposing discourse, stemming from his antagonists, of self-interest and unthinking sloganeering. Although Dr. Stockmann occasionally falls into the sloganeering of his antagonists, thereby subjecting himself to undercutting comedy, in each of these plays a single way of speaking about its characters and issues readily establishes itself as the right way, its rightness being reinforced by the various wrong ways setting it off.

The Wild Duck has no "right" discourse of this kind. In addition to the absence of an authentic *raisonneur* and a proper protagonist, another feature of the play prevents the formulation of any group discourse. One of the qualities that keeps Relling from becoming the *raisonneur* he is often thought to be is his possession of a distinctive and limited idiolect, a personal language that, in addition to helping characterize him, can express only a highly individualistic interpretation of whatever it seeks to articulate. In detailed studies of *The Wild Duck*, John Northam and I have separately shown that in this play Ibsen, who constantly developed and was justifiably proud of his ability to differentiate characters through their individual languages, treated all of his characters as he does Relling.¹¹ Each of them has his or her own distinctive way of speaking, a private language reflecting his or her own peculiar and limited response to the reality that together they make up and define. The separate languages are so distinctive that one of the typical, often repeated notes in the play is the failure of one character to understand what another is saying. Since each of these distinctive languages is ranged against all the others—rather than against an obviously "wrong" counter-discourse—no single language can establish itself through its own power as the "right" discourse of the play, as a key to its meaning, and the action of *The Wild Duck* does nothing to single out one or more of them as authoritative in relation to the others.

Even when an obviously "right" discourse is lacking, characters can still provide commentary on their fellow characters, if not on issues, through another secondary narrative device. This one helps put a character in perspective by juxtaposing him to a parallel character, who serves him as a foil, a reinforcement, or an undercutting parody. Ibsen often used this device in the traditional manner, both before and after *The Wild Duck*—as witness the illuminating contrasts provided by Mrs. Linde (and her marriage to Krogstad) in *A Doll House* and by Borgheim in *Little Eyolf*, the undercutting parodies provided by Brendel in *Rosmersholm* and Foldal in *John Gabriel Borkman*, and the numerous parallels of all kinds in *The Lady from the Sea*. Hilmar Tønnesen of *Pillars of Society*, crankily complaining about deviations from acceptable behavior and verbally waving aloft his "banner of the ideal," is like Brendel and Foldal, for he parodies the other members of his society, especially Bernick. But in his case, something has gone wrong with the device, for he also comes dangerously close to parodying Lona Hessel. If Tønnesen

represents Ibsen's deliberate experimentation with the device—which does not seem likely—an even more elaborate experiment can be seen in Jacob Engstrand of *Ghosts*. Most obviously a parallel to Manders, whose pious talk he echoes in such a way as to make it sound like a Tartuffean mask, Engstrand also parallels Mrs. Alving (his building plans expose the hypocrisy in hers), the late Captain Alving (his dissoluteness undercuts the third-act effort to make Alving's more heroic), and Regine (both try to manipulate others, especially Manders, to further their own ends). Engstrand parallels so many of the other characters, and in such different ways—as foil, as parody, and as reinforcement—that he helps to undermine any contrast in the play between the morally good and the morally bad. His function is to implicate them all in the corruption beneath the surface that in *Ghosts* Ibsen attributes to society as a whole.

After returning to the traditional form of the device in *An Enemy of the People*, where most of the others, especially his brother, serve as foils to Dr. Stockmann, in *The Wild Duck* Ibsen adopts a new version of his experiment with Engstrand. Here the key figure is Gregers Werle, who in different ways is involved in parallels with three other important and sharply differentiated characters, Hjalmar, Hedvig, and Relling. Hjalmar is initially like Gregers in sharing his tendency to think in terms of having a “mission” to fulfill, and as the play goes on Hjalmar adopts more and more of Gregers' distinctive language and way of thinking. Since through his habitual extravagance Hjalmar always makes his borrowings from Gregers appear more ridiculous than they were in their original form, Hjalmar serves Gregers as undercutting parody, helping to expose the folly of his habitual way of seeing things, the rationale behind his intentions with the Ekdal family. Hedvig is in general strikingly different from Gregers; she is a positive character, a figure of naive wisdom whom we are compelled to admire, and it is she as much as anyone who through her loving acceptance helps hold together the family Gregers inadvertently works to destroy. But in their scene together in the third act, Ibsen establishes a strong bond between Gregers and Hedvig, a bond that Gregers later exploits in persuading Hedvig to adopt his notion of the efficacy of sacrifice. In becoming to some degree a parallel to Gregers, Hedvig necessarily loses some of her positive impact on the audience; there is no parody here—rather, the parallel serves to expose an aspect of Hedvig not otherwise visible—but there is certainly important undercutting. Gregers and Relling treat each other as exact opposites, and in many ways they are, both superficially and in the deeper matter of their contrasting views of humanity. But in one significant respect they are exactly alike, for both try to impose their views on others, both use other humans as raw material for constructing their dramas of life—in effect, as playthings to manipulate. This parallel helps to undercut Relling—among other things, reducing his capacity to qualify as the play's *raisonneur*. More important, by turning opposition into likeness this parallel also helps to undermine any possibility that the materials of the play can be formulated into simple and unequivocal patterns of meaning. The parallels in which Gregers is involved individually greatly enhance our understanding of various aspects of the play; but since he is involved in so many and with such different characters, and since he is so much more than a

mere parallel providing illumination of others, in him the *device* of the parallel character cannot provide the kind of sharply defined, clearly focused, and straightforward messages from the author that it normally provides—as, for example, in the cases of Ulrik Brendel and Foldal.

One major importance of Ibsen's creation of modern tragicomedy in *The Wild Duck* is its undercutting of another secondary narrative device. As E. D. Hirsch, Jr., has established, a work's genre is of central importance to our efforts to understand it.¹² Once we have recognized its genre (when it is an established and familiar one) or discovered it (in the case of a new one) we have acquired efficiency in responding, at least in a general way, to its individual details as we encounter them. We are able to distinguish the important from the unimportant, to perceive how a particular detail relates to other details and to the developing whole, and to view the action in the appropriate mood. Ibsen's first four dramas of contemporary middle-class life all basically belong to a genre developed in France by Augier and Dumas *fils* in the 1840s and 50s and established in Norway in the 60s and 70s by Ibsen and Bjørnson: the social problem comedy. *Pillars of Society* and *A Doll House* are fairly straightforward examples of this genre. In *Ghosts*, Ibsen moves beyond it into tragedy—but not without carefully guiding his spectators in making the necessary adjustment. In *An Enemy of the People*, he overlays it with elements of traditional comedy and of tragedy (as I have already stated and have argued more fully elsewhere¹³), but not without making it clear that the basic genre remains predominant. In all four of these plays, in other words, Ibsen provides clear generic signals as a primary means of controlling his spectators' relationship to the action.

As the first modern tragicomedy, *The Wild Duck* greatly disoriented its original audience, which could not know how to respond. Since Ibsen, tragicomedy has become one of the predominant modes of modern drama, and although naive audiences still respond to the play with bewilderment, more sophisticated spectators will quickly discover familiar ground. Because of the power of the play, however—in its juxtapositions and combinations of the extremes of comedy and tragedy—not all of its original impact has worn off. More important, to classify the play as a tragicomedy is only to begin a discussion of its generic characteristics. As Valency has pointed out (169-70), *The Wild Duck* is also in some respects “a *pièce à thèse* which demonstrates the advantages of domestic life, and the folly of destroying the home because of some supposed flaw in its moral foundation” and, in other respects, a parody of the popular genre of the cuckolded husband. There is some comedy in its first act, but Gregers gives this act a tone of earnest melodrama, and at its conclusion we assume we are watching a play about his serious moral quest to redeem his father's crimes. The tragicomic quality of the play takes over in Act Two, but it is not always in evidence, for the debates between Gregers and Relling, particularly the one that opens Act Five, make *The Wild Duck* momentarily a play of discussion. Furthermore, the tragicomedy itself is of two kinds: sometimes seriousness and near farce alternate; sometimes, as in Act Five, they combine. Overall, then, *The Wild Duck* is not a single genre, new or familiar, but a combination of several genres, with a constant shifting from one to another. Normally, genre helps orient spectators in relation to a play's meaning; in *The Wild Duck* it disorients them.

Setting is another secondary narrative device that helps orient an audience to a play's meaning, both in general ways and more specifically. The settings of Ibsen's first four dramas of contemporary middle-class life, with their domestic focus, suggest in a general way a particular sphere and particular areas of concern—although the view of the fjord landscape in *Ghosts* also suggests for that play the additional relevance of the natural world and—at the very end—the cosmos. More specific indications of meaning through setting can be seen in such devices as the continuous single location of *A Doll House*—unchanging and closed in from the outside world, it serves to dramatize the cage from which Nora escapes when slamming the door at the play's conclusion—and the multiple settings of *An Enemy of the People*—combining locations in Dr. Stockmann's home with other, more public locations, they help to dramatize the theme of the interaction between the individual and his society; the final setting, Dr. Stockmann's study (which Ibsen introduces at this point rather than returning to the Stockmann living room of the first two acts), to some extent indicates in and of itself the play's resolution, Ibsen's siding with the lone, thoughtful individual in his conflict with the public sphere. In all four of these plays, the settings, single or multiple, are loaded with informative detail helping to characterize their inhabitants. More important, in view of the innovations of *The Wild Duck*, all these settings are fixed, solid, and definite. They orient an audience at once and keep it oriented until they change—at which time, the process is repeated.

Disorientation through setting in *The Wild Duck* begins with the shift from Act One to Act Two, with which Ibsen first informs us that the play he is writing is different from the one we thought we were watching: the serious moral melodrama about the misdeeds of the wealthy becomes an entirely different kind of work, in a quite different mood, about the sources of happiness in the lives of the lower middle-class. At this point as well, the split in the setting between front and rear also becomes disorienting: in Act One the rear is an extension and fuller representation of the luxurious space of the front; in Act Two and beyond, the front and the rear are in tension, the front representing the mundane, everyday world of the Ekdals' existence with its intermixing of work and recreation, the rear—which can be glimpsed only—refusing to represent the mysterious place where most of them go to escape. At one point in Act Three the front of this setting becomes complicated, for the arrival of Old Werle leads to the clearing of the space so that he and Gregers can conduct an unnecessary (in plot terms) rehash of their earlier quarrel, thereby symbolically restoring the setting of Act One. But the rear of this setting is even more complicated. In essence, this part of the setting—ultimately the most important setting in the play—is seen only through the eyes of the characters, and since each of them, using his or her distinctive language, defines something different when informing us what it is like in there, we get not one attic but several, one for each of the Ekdals as well as further ones for Gregers and Relling, and they range from the distractive nuisance seen by Gina and the junk heap imagined by Relling to the mysterious, retributive forest of Old Edkal and the depths of the sea in the vision momentarily shared by Hedvig and Gregers. In *An Enemy of the People*, the setting is multiple because there are several locations, each specifically

defined. In *The Wild Duck*, the basic setting—that of Acts Two through Five—while seemingly continuous like that of *A Doll House*, is also multiple, but in this case because it is many places at one and the same time. And because it is multiple in this sense, it prevents the spectators from orienting themselves to the real world of the play.

Gregers' distinctive language is much involved in Ibsen's undercutting of another secondary narrative device, symbolism. Ibsen is well known for his symbols, and they are often spoken and written about as if they were obvious and transparent signposts unequivocally encapsulating the meaning or some aspect of the meaning of the plays in which they occur. This view of his use of symbols is often true. In *A Doll House*, for example—to cite a minor case—Nora's changing in the final act from her costume for the masquerade party to her everyday clothes (especially as it is accompanied by her statement, "Yes, Torvald, now I have changed") straightforwardly points to and reinforces the larger change she has gone through. To take a more complex example, the orphanage in *Ghosts* clearly represents Mrs. Alving's attempts as a whole to conceal the truth about her dead husband, its burning down readily suggests the impossibility of such attempts, and its ultimate fusion with Engstrand's planned brothel hints at the hypocrisy in Mrs. Alving's original intention. The chief symbol of *An Enemy of the People*, the polluted baths, becomes a bit suspect because its status as symbol originates with Hovstad, a user of the "wrong" discourse of the play, but for the most part its meaning—and, more important, its authenticity as a source of meaning—comes through with full force.

In *The Wild Duck*, Ibsen greatly magnifies the effect created by Hovstad's initiation of the symbolic status of the baths in *An Enemy of the People*. As several commentators have argued,¹⁴ the primary "symbol" of the play, the duck, derives its status as a symbol entirely from a single source, Gregers Werle, whose characteristic view of reality is one that converts its individual details into signs laden with meaning. After establishing Gregers' penchant for symbolizing at the end of the first act through his enigmatic remark to his father about blindman's bluff, Ibsen then carefully shows us the process by which Gregers, piecing together remarks by his father and Old Ekdal, converts the actual bird into a symbol of the Ekdals' situation and his own effort to "save" them. Furthermore, Gregers' version of the duck is but one of many, none of the rest of which is at all explicitly symbolic in the way that Gregers' is. The duck, in other words, is not a symbol in the proper sense but a kind of Jamesian central reflector, itself remaining opaque while—like the attic that houses it—vividly reflecting the sensibilities of the various characters who view it. In fact, because the symbolizing of the duck comes from Gregers, we are cautioned that symbolization is not the play's method but his, and therefore a method we should be suspicious of. Even worse, Gregers' penchant for symbolizing, as it transfers to Hjalmar, and as Gregers imposes it on Hedvig, is the primary cause of the disaster in the play; and for this reason, symbolizing is defined not only as dubious but as evil.

On the other hand, Gina's report about Gregers and his stove at the beginning of Act Three provides what looks like an obvious symbol, a somewhat farcical parallel to his attempt to take things in hand and resolve the

“problem” of the Ekdals. But this symbol comes from Ibsen, not Gregers (and certainly not Gina, who is totally incapable of the symbolic method). Thus, some signals in the play warn us against symbolization, while others encourage it, and this can only bewilder. It makes it impossible to know how to respond to apparent symbols, especially what seems to be the ultimate symbol of the play, the highly visible parody of the Christian narrative that has been spotted by several commentators, in most detail by Brian Johnston.¹⁵ In this parody, Old Werle is a God-figure who has driven the Ekdals out of paradise—as represented by their former well-to-do status and by the forests of Højdal in which Old Ekdal once hunted with such delight—forcing them to make do with a feeble surrogate of paradise in the attic. And Gregers, Old Werle’s son, sees himself, as some of his imagery and remarks make clear, as the Christ come to save them—the only problem being that it is not Gregers but Hedvig who must endure the sacrifice. Many details in the play point to and reinforce this parody; it is clearly “there,” an indisputable aspect of the play. But what we are to make of it we cannot know, for even in creating it Ibsen has made it impossible for us to adopt the kind of symbolic thinking we need if we are to accept either its validity or its relevance.

Thus far, in examining the secondary narrative devices of *The Wild Duck*, I have been dealing with matters requiring not just perception but also a capacity for interpretation, for discovering implication and significance, and such discoveries are, of course, always problematic, although rarely so much so as in this play. Turning now to what would seem to involve unequivocal givens—such things as the basic facts of the situation and the action of the play (what we see happening before our eyes)—we shall find that in *The Wild Duck* we are on no firmer ground with respect to these matters. For most plays, the situation prevailing at the outset consists of a number of concrete, finite, and definite facts—about which we are informed rather quickly or, in alternative narrative patterns like Ibsen’s retrospective method, more gradually during the course of the play—and the action arising from this situation consists of the new facts we witness as they formulate themselves. To possess these facts, moreover, is to have a firm basis for knowing how to grasp what is going on. Normally Ibsen works like other dramatists in this respect. In *Pillars of Society*, for example, although Bernick manages to put one or two of his past and present crimes in a somewhat favorable light, we eventually learn that it was indeed he who committed them, and we also see him publicly confessing to (some of) them in a way that makes clear his having undergone a rather thorough change through having had to contemplate them. Similarly, in *A Doll House*, we are never in doubt that Nora committed the forgery with which Krogstad charges her, nor of her actions within the play, such as her attempted manipulation of Rank, and at the end we see and hear her actually leave after learning from her own words what she thinks her leaving means. In *Ghosts*, there is some question as to how Alving’s dissoluteness is to be ultimately interpreted, but there is never any doubt about its authenticity. In *An Enemy of the People*, we are at times prompted to question Dr. Stockmann’s motives, but it is a given of the play that the baths are actually polluted, and this is bound to have an important impact on our view of the Doctor and his adversaries, even when he occasionally begins to sound like them.

The Wild Duck contains no such certainty, about either the basic facts of the initial situation or some of the major facts of the action arising from it. As several commentators have shown in detail, all important facts concerning the past remain shrouded in ambiguity and uncertainty; McFarlane, discussing what he calls the "blurring" of such details, sums up as follows: "facts in the final version are not there to prove or determine or demonstrate, there is no concern to annex certainty, but instead the design is built up by hint, allusion, suggestion or obliquity generally: Hedvig's paternity, Ekdal's alleged crime, Werle's treatment of his former wife, all these things are deliberately blurred in the interests of the design as a whole."¹⁶ As John Chamberlain (150-53) has conclusively shown, McFarlane, who was concentrating on *past* events, might well have added to his list what would seem to be the most significant new fact of the action evolving from this past, the death of Hedvig, for by having it occur behind the closed doors of the attic, Ibsen makes it impossible for us to know whether it is accident or suicide, and, if suicide, whether she performed it out of a Gregers-like notion of loving sacrifice or out of despair.

But the basic core in any Ibsen play is not one or another of its particular facts but what Mrs. Alving in *Ghosts*, finally seeing her husband's disoluteness in a new light, calls the "*sammenheng*"—roughly, the whole story in its coherence and meaning, the way everything fits together. The typical action of most of Ibsen's dramas of contemporary middle-class life evolves in three, sometimes overlapping, stages: a number of givens about both the past and the present are established, a major character—normally the protagonist—discovers their *sammenheng*, and then the protagonist performs an appropriate and ultimate crystallizing action based on this discovery. In *Pillars of Society*, Bernick, having realized the consequences of his crimes, decides to confess; Nora, in *A Doll House*, decides to leave Torvald; Mr. Alving, in *Ghosts*, decides to tell Oswald her newly discovered "truth" about his father in order to free him from what she sees to be a false and crippling sense of guilt, but then she must yield to the more demanding discovery that he is in imminent danger of full mental collapse and wants her to put him to death; Dr. Stockmann in *An Enemy of the People* makes not one discovery but three, the last of which prompts his desire to create a new society to replace the old. In being guided by these characters, through their articulation of their discoveries as well as through witnessing how they respond to them, we get our major cues for understanding the action in which they are central.

In *The Wild Duck*, the typical Ibsen pattern of action is undercut in all its phases. I have already shown how the basic facts of this play, which we and the potential discoverers of the *sammenheng* are given to work with, are "blurred" into indistinctness. The moment of discovery is there in Hjalmar's realization that Hedvig is Werle's child rather than his, but this discovery is a parody of the normal event, for it is not independently confirmed for us, it is made by Hjalmar, whose readings of reality we have been trained to suspect, and it is the result of his fully internalizing the customary mode of Gregers Werle, of whom we are rightly even more suspicious than of Hjalmar. Despite its parodic nature, Hjalmar's discovery prompts him to act in a certain manner, that is, to reject Hedvig; however, because of the way Ibsen dramatizes the apparent connection between Hjalmar's rejection and Hedvig's death, we

cannot know with any certainty exactly what this connection is. Hjalmar's reaction does send Hedvig into the attic, apparently to shoot the wild duck in an act of sacrifice designed to win back her father's love, but then follows the odd, equivocal sequence leading up to the sound of the gunshot signaling her death. Hjalmar is speaking to Gregers, melodramatically accusing Hedvig of disloyalty and even worse, defining her as an ungrateful child scornful of his love and secretly plotting to abandon him in order to enjoy the riches offered by Old Werle and Mrs. Sørby. As he warms to the climax of his fantasy, trying to assure Gregers of its validity, he says, "If the others came, they with their loaded hands, and called out to the child: leave him; with us you have your prospects in life— [. . .] If I then asked her: Hedvig, are you willing to give up life for me? (Laughing derisively) Yes, thank you—you'd hear, all right, what answer I'd get!" What we then hear is the sound of a pistol-shot from the attic (VII 387; F. 486; M. 237). This looks like a pretty self-evident sequence, all the more so since a few lines earlier Gregers and Hjalmar have claimed to hear the duck quacking behind the closed doors. It is easy to imagine that Hedvig has heard her father speaking so harshly about her and has answered his question by firing the shot that takes her life, and if we put things together in this way, we can also easily conclude that her death is a suicide. Our discovery of this *sammenheng* does not, however, tell us whether the suicide is an act of love or an act of despair; but this is only a minor aspect of its problematic nature. For the fact is that we cannot see what goes on in the attic, cannot know whether our discovery has any validity; in making it, we have nothing more to go on than a few dubious clues and a process of piecing things together that both Gregers and Hjalmar have rendered invalid through their disastrous uses of it. For us to conclude that Hjalmar's spoken fantasy is the immediate cause of Hedvig's death is to indulge in the same kind of thinking that he employs in concocting it.

It is not surprising that no one can discover the *sammenheng* of *The Wild Duck* since the conduct of its action throughout is as disconcerting as are the play's conflicting generic signals. We are put off from establishing a sure relation with what is going on as early as the opening sequence with Werle's servants, not only, as Durbach says, because "each attempt to elicit information is deflected into qualified conjecture or non-committal possibility" (88) but also because in using the servants Ibsen opens the play with what looks like a clumsy and old-fashioned device for exposition but what is more likely a parody of this kind of device. Ibsen then gives us a false beginning—in suggesting that the play is to be about Gregers' efforts to redeem the consequences of his father's evil deeds—before shifting to what seems to be the real focus of the action. In making this shift, he also forces us gradually to revise our evaluations of characters like Gregers and his father as well as our assumptions as to the kind of action we are watching. And so it goes throughout, until we come to the ending, which, except for Hedvig's death, is scarcely an ending in the usual sense but a kind of coda that re-introduces nearly every character that has been in the play, giving each an opportunity once again to speak in his or her customary language. This coda suggests that for most of the characters there has been no action, for they continue essentially unchanged, and it suggests that the action resulting in Hedvig's

death—whatever it is—has had no real effect on any of the bystanders and is therefore essentially meaningless.

Ibsen's deliberate absenting of himself from *The Wild Duck*—his undercutting of each of the secondary narrative devices through which a dramatist can control his audience's understanding—makes the play the most extreme example of what John Chamberlain calls his "open vision." Some of this "openness" is evident in Ibsen's four preceding plays, but, for the most part, these plays readily lend themselves to the formulation of clear-cut meaning, a meaning we are led toward by the author's obvious presence, his careful direction of our responses through his deft deployment of the conventions of his medium. These conventions are available to all dramatists, not just the practitioners of realism, but their overturning in *The Wild Duck* coincides with Ibsen's growing dissatisfaction with the narrow version of realism he had been steadily practicing from *Pillars of Society* on and which he had perfected in *An Enemy of the People*, the unequivocal masterpiece of the social problem comedy. The earlier move toward tragedy in *Ghosts* suggests that Ibsen had already felt a need to transcend the genre he was perfecting, but it is not until *The Wild Duck* that he tries to create something entirely new. None of Ibsen's subsequent plays is as radical as *The Wild Duck* in its subverting of the conventions through which meaning is established, but each of them achieves something of this kind, and each in its own way tries to extend the boundaries of realism through seeking to accommodate elements of mystery and myth. Durbach (95) defines the vision of *The Wild Duck* as "the realisation that there are no absolute and immutable values, no transcendental essences prior to the existence of complex and delicate realities." If Durbach is correct in this definition, and I believe that he is, then it can be said that Ibsen's experiment in this play with the total absence of the author was an attempt to devise a form appropriate to the vision. In his previous plays, Ibsen had tended to create actions designed to expose and disable certain "transcendental essences" that he felt to be invalid. In *The Wild Duck*, he created a fully "open" action that is bound to expose and disable any and all transcendental essences that its viewers—both those within the play and the subsequent commentators on it—might be disposed to read into this action. And in doing so—in suggesting that reality is prior to the limiting and distorting formulations we make of it—he moved far closer to reproducing reality on the stage than he ever did while working within the only conventions that, at the time he began *Pillars of Society*, had as yet been developed for the theatrical representation of reality.

Rutgers University

Notes

1. Letter to Frederik Hegel, September 2, 1884, in Henrik Ibsen, *Breve*, ed. Halvdan Koht and Julius Elias (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1904), II 137. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations in this article are my own.

2. The symbolism of *The Wild Duck* is the aspect of the play most frequently cited in attempts to explain what Ibsen was referring to; see, e.g., Francis Bull, "Introduction" to *The Wild Duck* in the *Hundreårsutgave* of Ibsen's *Samlede verker*, reprinted in *Ibsens drama: Innledninger til hundreårsutgaven av Henrik Ibsens samlede verker* (Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1972) 145; Halvdan Koht, *Henrik Ibsen: Eit diktarliv*, Ny, omarbeidd utgave (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1954), II 153-54; J. L. Styan, *Modern*

Drama in Theory and Practice, vol. 2: *Symbolism, Surrealism and the Absurd* (Cambridge UP, 1981) 25; Michael Meyer, *Ibsen: A Biography* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971) 539. Bull and Koht both point out the wide applicability of the duck as a symbol—it casting light on all, or nearly all, of the characters—Koht adding that the duck symbolizes “deep and hidden currents in the characters’ souls and unveils them for us.” Meyer adds that the duck as symbol has a “structural purpose,” holding the play together “as though the wild duck were a magnet and the characters in the play so many iron filings held together by this centripetal force.” Styan agrees that the duck serves to “bind the play together,” but he regards the novelty of the play to involve not just this single symbol but the “calculated infusion” of several “symbolic elements,” including the use of lighting to “match the darkening mood of each act,” Hjalmar’s photographic apparatus, “and the mysterious attic door.” The play’s attitude toward revolt is cited, not surprisingly, by Robert Brustein (in *The Theatre of Revolt: An Approach to the Modern Drama* [Boston: Little, Brown, 1964] 73), who writes that “it is the only play in which Ibsen completely denies the validity of revolt.” Also not surprisingly, the play’s consistently tragicomic tone is cited by Karl Guthke in *Modern Tragicomedies: An Investigation into the Nature of the Genre* (New York: Random House, 1966) 147. Its constant indefiniteness and uncertainty are cited by Torbjørn Støverud in “*The Wild Duck—A Study in Ambiguity*,” in *Milestones of Norwegian Literature* (Oslo: Johan Grundt Tanum Forlag, 1967) 103-4. Brian W. Downs, who makes the observation about characters of low social and moral stature, also echoes those who cite the uncertainty and the structural use of the duck; see *A Study of Six Plays by Ibsen* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1950), reprinted in Henrik Ibsen, *The Wild Duck*, trans. and ed. by Dounia B. Christiani (New York: Norton, 1968) 151, 166-67. The play’s deliberate destruction of familiar theatrical conventions is cited by Maurice Valency, who writes, “the melodramatic elements of the familiar play of transgression and retribution are obviously deformed in accordance with a new and radical concept. The figures and the design of the narrative are all recognizably traditional, but the manner of their representation goes somewhat beyond the demands of realism. One’s first impression is of a familiar scene viewed in a distorting mirror. In fact, the technique is analytical in a manner that suggests the post-impressionists.” Although he does not explicitly associate them with what Ibsen may have had in mind in the letter to his publisher, Valency also finds other innovations in the play. *The Wild Duck*, he states, is a play of despair, “but the source of emotion is the despair of the author, not the despair of the characters. . . . The pleasure of the play derives, accordingly, not from the identification with the protagonist, as in tragedy, but from a feeling of intimate communion with the author in the contemplation of the action, a feeling akin to the pleasure of poetry.” Moreover, according to Valency, since “the entire action is portrayed impressionistically, so that we are constantly aware—as in impressionist painting—of the individuality of the author’s perceptions,” “*The Wild Duck* . . . marks a subtle, but important step away from the illusionism which especially characterizes realist drama, and it points the way toward a conception of theatre in which the author, rather than the characters, becomes the center of attention, a concept which Strindberg and, after him, Pirandello developed rapidly in the next decades.” See *The Flower and the Castle: An Introduction to Modern Drama* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1966 [1963]) 170-76.

3. *The Modern Ibsen: A Reconsideration* (New York: Dutton, 1960 [1925]) 146-164.

4. *Breve*, II 102.

5. For a thorough discussion of these comic and tragic dimensions, see Thomas F. Van Laan, “Generic Complexity in Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People*,” *Comparative Drama*, 20 (1986): 95-114.

6. Valency 171. On page 170, Valency concludes his summary of *The Wild Duck* with, “The moral of the play is then announced by the family doctor: ‘It is best not to stir up old troubles.’”

7. Støverud 112.

8. All citations from *The Wild Duck* are my own translations of the text in Volume VII of Henrik Ibsen, *Samlede Værker* (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandels Forlag, 1900); for convenience of readers without access to this edition, I also cite the translation by Rolf Fjelde in *Henrik Ibsen: The Complete Major Prose Plays* (New York: New American Library, 1978) (cited as F), and the translation by James Walter McFarlane in vol. VI of *Ibsen* (London: Oxford UP, 1960) (cited as M).

9. This reading of the scene is echoed by Else Høst (*Vildanden av Henrik Ibsen* [Oslo: Aschehoug, 1967], who compares Relling to a puppet-theatre director (82). Støverud also points out that Molvik’s supposed “demoniac” condition is less a device for saving Molvik from “self-contempt and despair”—as Relling claims (VII 368; F. 476; M. 226)—than “an excuse for doctor Relling’s own weakness for alcohol, and Molvik’s attacks are timed, at least part of the time, by the doctor’s need of a companion when he wants to go boozing” (113).

10. *Ibsen: The Open Vision* (London: Athlone, 1982) 109.

11. John Northam, *Ibsen: A Critical Study* (Cambridge UP, 1973), Chapter 5 113-146; Thomas F. Van Laan, “Language in *Vildanden*,” *Ibsenårbok*, 1974, 41-63.

12. See *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1967), especially Chapter 3: “The Concept of Genre.”

13. See footnote 5.

14. Cf. Downs 118; Errol Durbach, *Ibsen the Romantic: Analogues of Paradise in the Later Plays* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1982) 93; Northam 123-129; Van Laan, "Language in *Vildanden*" 50-51; Weigand 161-64.

15. "The Metaphoric Structure of *The Wild Duck*," *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen* (*Ibsenårbok*, vol. 8) (Oslo, 1965/66) 72-95.

16. McFarlane, "Introduction" 8-9; cf. Durbach 88-89; Northam 114-17; Støverud 104-107; Weigand 147-51.

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