

Allegory in the Technological Age: A Case Study of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*

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Ibsen's use of the studio in *The Wild Duck* offers the opportunity for exploring an explicitly modernist approach to allegory. I intend to take advantage of this opportunity by appealing to Walter Benjamin's commentaries on two allegorists of industrial society, the amateur collector and the photographer.¹ Old Ekdal, Hedvig, and Hjalmar take possession of the captain's treasure, enrich his collection, and ultimately construct a human habitat from the poverty of objects at their disposal. The photo apparatuses strewn about the studio point beyond the semiotics of professional classification to an estranged mode of making and a crisis of experience subjected to control by technology. The dramatic and theoretical texts are sufficiently complex to warrant a gradual and patient exposition. I hope that by first developing the general contours of modern allegory from the dramatic text with a minimum of theory, it will be easier to follow the broader theoretical premises later. But I should point out now that I will give a materialist reading of modern allegory--as distinguished from theological or psychological readings--based on the allegorical hermeneutics of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* by the early Marx. I will therefore only concentrate on the materialist implications of Benjamin's commentaries, ignoring the more recondite messianic speculations and the distinctly surrealist sensibility that color his understanding of allegory.²

I

The camera is a machine that reproduces images of the phenomenal world by chemical or electronic processes. Its gaze is inherently indifferent to

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the subjects and essentially confines itself to the limits of sentience drawn by sight and the visual field determined by technology. Photos can signify the mutilation of human experience, the dismemberment of the activity of human making resulting from advanced social divisions of labor. The camera that reproduces only disconnected fragments of a surface reality creates effects that are analogous to the distribution of isolated and repeatable tasks of a complete activity to different categories of the labor force.³ Photography is both sign and signified of modern allegory because its form conveys the fragmentation and ruin of modern culture and the experience of loss and dying inner life associated with it.⁴ In *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie* Walter Benjamin, who was especially sensitive to happy encounters between technique and art, argues that early photography did not merely capture this experience of disjunction and loss, but left decipherable traces of a forgotten human sentience.⁵ I will return to the figurative meaning of these traces in connection with my interpretation of the loft. However, since I am interpreting the practice of photography in the play as a historical and not purely technological fact, as a practice implying a relationship between technology and a mode of human making, it is important not to lose sight of Benjamin's attentiveness to historical specificity. Benjamin claims that the context for photography changed after 1880, a date usually associated with the definitive institutionalization of late capitalist society and clearly pertinent to *The Wild Duck*, which was completed in 1884.⁶ Briefly, Benjamin's argument is as follows: 1. A combination of technical innovations--cameras became more sensitive to light and the quality of photos could be enhanced through the technique of retouching--eliminated the play of light and shade by which early photography made visible a hidden life glimmering through the facticity of the isolated fragment. Technology erased the suggestive human traces from the copy of appearances. 2. The human countenance of early photography was suggestive of silence. It did not as yet bear the signature of mass culture. In contrast, the subjects of post-1880 photography were embalmed in poses ". . . whose rigidity betrayed the powerlessness of this generation in the face of technological progress." (*Schriften*, II-I 377) The human being had become mere subject of an ideological discourse. The signature was the indelible mark of estrangement from the realities of late capitalist life and from a forgotten human sentience which early photography could still remember. This is why Kierkegaard could say of photography that it makes us all look the same, so that we shall only need one portrait.⁷ Photography after 1880 discloses the extension of the rule of equivalent exchange from political economy to cultural reproduction.

The post-1880 marriage between technology and cultural reproduction defines the practice of photography in the studio. As a mode determining human interactions it also supercedes the marriage between virtuous partners

haunting the untimely hermeneutics of Gregers' classical bourgeois consciousness. Hjalmar is a commercial photographer called upon to document the social rites of the bourgeoisie. (II 159) His photos have no redeeming artistic value; it is good for the digestion to look at pictures after dinner suggests the Flabby Gentleman. (I 136) All photographers in the Ekdal household are familiar with the technique of retouching photos. (II 159; III 178, 182, 184) Gina is the original, self-taught photographer. (III 184) Having lost her place as maid in the Werle home, she acquires the technical skills to survive in a harsh market reality. Photography enables her to marry into former gentry because she has marketable skills Hjalmar lacked. Inasmuch as Gina's severely circumscribed upward social mobility and the decline of the Ekdal family come to rest in the practice of commercial photography, the activity signifies primarily their exposure to capitalist market relationship and a human experience reduced to the brute fact of survival. By capitalist market relations I simply mean that Haakon's wealth and social power stand in direct relationship to the human and economic devaluation of the Ekdals. The historically specific use of technology accounts for the resemblances between the objective indifference of the camera's eye and the subjective indifference of the photographer. There are no passages indicating that photography is anything other than a job for Gina; and Hedvig would rather learn the creative craft of engraving (III 182), although she occasionally helps retouch photos. But in a family that still poses as a patriarchy Hjalmar is supposed to have a professional calling. Yet he is the most reluctant photographer in the family who would rather tackle a good herring salad or putter with pliers and chisel in the loft. (III 179) The relationship between producer and product is both disjunctive and analogous. Hjalmar's indifference conveys the inner emptiness of a life that is uncaring, listless, insensible, and undifferentiated. His (in)difference is at odds with the experience affected in photos. Subjects of portrait photography strike poses. In the etymological sense of the word they pause, interrupting the context of their reality in order to make a copy that presents them as particular, differentiated, and socially significant characters. Photos misrepresent a reality in which human interactions are mediated by a depersonalizing technology. But for the allegorist the disjunction between the image/sign and the social signified is itself a sign of the allegorization of culture. The psychic mechanization associated with the practice of photography is analogous to the experience suggested by the serialized reproduction of fragmentary images of poses embalmed in a still. The death of inner life precipitated by the impoverishment of human sentience in making is duplicated in the death masks of the human countenance affecting particularity and significance as frozen and decontextualized gestures. Photography ultimately discloses the fragmented and reified character of ideological representations.

Ibsen the allegorist does not allow us to see Hjalmar's billboard photos, although the stupefying unreality of a culture reduced to posturing appearances could easily be conveyed pictorially in production. But Ibsen has created a character whose emotional life and utterances resemble faithful reproductions of a haphazard collection of stills. I think one can safely say that Hjalmar is, in fact, a *poseur* and that he misrepresents his reality as a social *declassé*, indifferent photographer, and powerless *pater familias* in cultural mythologies that had currency in another era. I will return to the social context of his fables later, in connection with Gregers' ideological narrative of the ideal couple. For the moment I am concerned with the effects of a mode of production mediated by technology on Hjalmar's life and the culture that his utterances bring forth. Hjalmar has gotten a bit rotund over the last sixteen years; but he claims he has virile, broad shoulders. (I 131) His hair is curly; but he prefers to call curls waves. (II 153) He becomes understandably unravelled when his father goes to prison; but the world-destroying experience of complete social collapse stands objectified as a manifestation of his fiery temperament. (IV 206) "In the poor photographer's home the roof is low, I know that well. And circumstances are narrow. But I am an inventor, Gregers--the breadwinner of my family--and that lifts me above the circumstances of my surroundings. Ah, lunch!" (III 190) Hjalmar's insincere sincerity transfigures the social destruction of his family wrought by the capitalist Haakon into a quaint, sentimental tableau of the struggling genius and household head, living the legend of distinguished, romantic marginality and heroic self-sacrifice while his stomach clamors for more nourishing food. But Hjalmar does not *live* legends. He pulls them out of the cultural deep-freeze as if they were last year's leftovers. Even unspeakable grief and joy, those shades of sentience to which silence alludes, are reified in mindless chatter about ". . . the tragedy of the house of Ekdal" (III 187) and his ". . . "poor, shipwrecked old father . . ." (II 159) Hjalmar plays classical domestic drama in a world domesticated by the power of capital. The flotsam and jetsam of a defunct culture have sedimented in his cavernous mind and closed all roads to his intellect and heart. This transference from object to subject, more precisely from product to producer, redirects critique from purely psychological and moral considerations of character to a materialist context of human making. How much, Marx asked, do men work *through* machines and how much *as* machines? (M 291) Hjalmar's life is as mechanized as his photo apparatuses or Haakon's saws. Conversely, the cultural debris which he recycles through his utterances signify culture at best as waste product and at worst as dead matter reprocessed for propaganda purposes and cultural subjection. Modern allegory simultaneously conveys the abstractness of cultural fragmentation and the abstractness of human experience misshaped by a market-directed technology.

The collector is the true inmate of the interior. He makes the transfiguration of things his business. To him falls the Sisyphean task of obliterating the commodity-like character of things through his ownership of them. . . . The collector dreams that he is not only in a distant or past world but also, at the same time, in a better one, in which, although men are as unprovided with what they need as they are in the everyday world, things are free from the drudgery of being useful.⁸

For Benjamin, the amateur collector is an allegorist just like the photographer. His world is made up of bits and pieces rescued from the forgotten context of a distant past. Both inhabit and interpret cultural ruins. In other words, the reality of cultural disintegration invites their destructive ministrations. But unlike the photographer of post-1880 society, whose image/fragments are standard evidence of the *rigor mortis* of psychic life, the collector treats each object/fragment as a hologram, i. e., a fragment in which can be discerned the signs of a forgotten, palpable reciprocity between subject and object. The photographer records the uniform grey of indifferent and undifferentiated life controlled by a means/end technology. Life and objects have value as labor and raw materials in the service of profit. The collector, who salvages what can no longer be processed for profit, rediscovers the spectrum of colors and shades in the reciprocity between a vibrant inner life and objects that return our gaze.⁹ The collector's experience is analogous to that of children who perceive in the cultural waste products ". . . The face that the world of things turns toward them. . . ."10 Like the child the collector exalts the objects of his or her reverence and thereby delivers them from the semiotics of price and profit. Child and collector do not attempt to reassemble the broken pieces of the past, though. But they rediscover and experience intuitively forgotten but enduring bonds with nature. (*I, O-WS* 69). This remembrance of a forgotten, whole world constitutes the figurative truth of the allegorical fragment.

One of the genealogical links between Benjamin's amateur collector and the inmates of the studio interior is the sea captain. Old Ekdal, Hedvig, and Hjalmar are the real and spiritual heirs of his abandoned treasure. They treat it with reverence, add to the collections, and ultimately create a world from the poverty of objects. Another link is formed by the child who shares the experience of the collector. Hedvig is her kin. The objects in the loft are not emblems offering clues to past historical eras or insight into revealed truth. The flightless, wild duck and the captain's name--Flying Dutchman (III 181-82)--intimate that the loft harbors the dream of a freer life. The same is true of Ekdal's rabbit hunts and his petrified forest. Both recall the free life of the bear hunter who roamed the uncharted forest before it became raw material for Haakon's saw mill. But this freedom is not associated with a

particular historical period. There are lots of books in the loft which Hedvig does not read because they are written in English. The loft does not produce knowledge governed by concepts. And the pictures of castles and churches that Hedvig finds in Harrison's *History of London* do not refer to romantic transfigurations of the Middle Ages. When Gregers asks Hedvig if the world in the loft is different, she replies emphatically: "Quite, quite different. And there are so many strange things in there" (III 181). One should be attentive to the phenomenological import of the perceptions that cluster around her intuitive description. To experience something as strange does not only imply that it is outside the purview of one's previous experiences. The strange object is both near and distant; and this simultaneity of past and present, distance and proximity, conveys a relationship that is reverential and shy. The inmates of the interior care for the singular and unique object. Hedvig is attentive to detail when she describes the old bureau with drawers and bits that slide out or the big clock with figures that are meant to pop out. (III 181) The same can be said of Hjalmar and his father when they disassemble and reassemble the old hunting rifle or take pliers and chisel to build a path to the duck's water trough. (III 179) There is a subtle but pervasive ambience of silence and quiet passion emanating from the loft, a stillness punctuated intermittently by happy chatter and rifle shots announcing Ekdal's rabbit hunts and abruptly broken by the shot that ends Hedvig's life. Benjamin describes this ambience as aura: "Experience of the aura (thus) rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man" (*I OSMB*, 188). Objects are perceived as being capable of returning our gaze. The aura that emanates from them discloses a forgotten human sentience (*ein vergessenes Menschliches*) that embraces subject and object in a play of proximity and distance. Hedvig's nurturing relationship to a 'useless' duck or Ekdal's caring preservation of the forest are commemorative ceremonials of remembrance. Oblivious to the garrulous recitations of studio mythologies in which subjects act out the drama of their reified existence, the inmates of the interior remember a past and better world where objects silently reveal to them a human reality erased from the subjects and objects ruled by the means/end rationality of technology.

The experience of aura is not associated with the romantic topos of paradise lost, mythical or historical. Aura discloses experiential possibilities that are fully immanent in the activities of human making. In the 'real' world human relations are controlled by a market-directed technology although, according to Gregers, they ought to come under the jurisdiction of the cultural father. In the loft the wild duck's place is preeminent. As an emblematic figure she signifies the intricate connections between humans and the natural world. Hedvig's affections for the duck run especially deep because "... there's so much that's strange about the wild duck. No one knows her,

and no one knows where she came from" (III 183). I will disregard for the moment the obvious analogy between Hedvig's and the duck's indeterminate natural origins. The uncertainty of the duck's genealogy is significant in and of itself. It suggests that nature is not subjected to a classificatory code determining a genealogical hierarchy. The otherness or strangeness of nature derives negatively from the fact that it falls outside the purview of cultural administration. But to be free from the power of administrative control is a condition of the auratic experience which the materialist Benjamin links to the activity of the craftsman:

If we designate as aura the associations which . . . tend to cluster around the object of perception, then its analogue in the case of the utilitarian object is the experience which has left traces of the practical hand.¹¹

The activities in the loft leave unmistakable imprints of the practical hand. Hedvig takes care of the wild duck while the men build and putter with pliers and chisel. Objects also reveal traces of a human presence. The bureau with sliding slats, the intricate design of the clock, paintings, engravings, all bear the signature of human reverence for the material worked on by anonymous hands. In shaping natural objects the craftsman brings the entire spectrum of human sentience and skill into play. While the thing created may serve utilitarian ends, the unique and singular imprints of the creator's hand bring the object nearer to the beholder. Thus the reciprocity between creator and thing created is an *embodied* reciprocity because the forgotten human traces that Benjamin associates with aura ultimately convey the truth of natural history in human history. Temporality is a phenomenological given of natural history. The engraving of death holding an hour glass in one hand and a little girl by the other is a traditional allegorical emblem of all that is untimely, ephemeral, and unconsolated about human life. However, I think it would be mistaken to reduce the subtle intrications between human experience in crafting things and natural history to medieval emblems of death. In the engraving death confronts the secular beholder as an abstract, universal concept. Temporality is torn from the interior of human experience and stands outside the observer as a rigidly objectified, measurable quantity of time, analogous to clock time. The horror Hedvig feels when looking at this picture (III 181) is understandable because, when viewed in isolation, it conveys a nihilistic version of temporality in which the incompleteness of life condemned to die empties time of all specific content. But in the loft the old clock no longer keeps track of time; and this detail is significant because it alludes to a uniquely human transformation of temporality. Once again Benjamin is pertinent:

What is aura intrinsically? A strange tissue of space and time: unique, non-recurrent (*einmalige*) appearance of a distance, no matter how near the appearance may be. To rest, one summer noon, and let the gaze follow the mountain range along the horizon or a branch casting a shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour participates in the appearance--that means to breathe the aura of these mountains, this branch. (*Schriften*, II-I 378)

In the experience of aura temporality nestles in the interior of the observer as a unique and unrepeatably moment in which *this* observer experiences the subtle shadings of a distant nearness with *this* branch or *this* mountain range. The craftsman also experiences the relationship to the natural object as distance because the nature s/he works on is intrinsically unknowable. I believe this distance is implied in the genealogical mystery surrounding the wild duck. But the creative transformation of natural objects brings them nearer to us without abolishing distance. This delicate and reverential interplay between proximity and distance suggests a vision of human activity that is ephemeral yet fully embodied, a vision that protests against the blindness of a radical disjunction between humans and nature without proclaiming the false universality of undifferentiated identity.¹²

II

Although I am using the *Political and Economic Manuscripts of 1844* for the purpose of broadening the context of the play, I should point out that text and pre-text are not fully identical. When Benjamin referred to the powerlessness of the generation of the 1880s, he was, in fact, describing reactions to late capitalist power structures. The new modalities of capitalism have been extensively examined by Adorno, Horkheimer, and most systematically by Habermas. Stated in summary fashion, they have noted the following important changes: 1) the concentration of corporate capital accompanied by a large-scale proletarianization of small property owners, who were forced to sell their labor as workers or office employees; 2) the transfer of functions previously performed by the bourgeois family--capital accumulation, welfare, and education--to private and state institutions; 3) the rise of a mass culture that obscured real power relations; 4) the broad 'instrumentalization' of human life which was uniformly subjected to the demands of private profit.¹³ All of these changes are relevant to a materialist reading of *The Wild Duck*. The imbalance between concentrated economic power and a powerless middle-class is dramatized by Haakon's rise to economic prominence and the social decline of the Ekdals. The destruction of the family culture, cutting across social class, is also part of the context.

Neither the Werles nor the Ekdals are capable of transmitting the patrimony of a patrilinear family order. But the *Manuscripts* are important for two good reasons. Marx stresses the devaluation of human experience and of nature in capitalist societies.¹⁴ There is also a strong resemblance between the allegorical hermeneutics of the *Manuscripts* and the allegorical dialectic of the studio and the loft which I have attempted to clarify through Benjamin's commentaries on the photographer and the collector.

Marx discovers a repressed, embodied relationship to nature in the debris produced by capitalism analogous to the intuitive discoveries of the players in the loft. For Marx the allegorization of human experience is rooted in a system of concealed, indirect domination. According to Norman Geras

... it is precisely an *impersonal* kind of domination exercised by the totality of economic relations over *all* the agents of capitalist society, embracing also the capitalist whose overriding interest is the extraction of as much surplus labour as possible from the worker.¹⁵

The presence of professional paraphernalia in the studio or the books and ledgers lying on Haakon's office desk point to a generalized dependence on the market and to the erosion of a previously sheltered domestic interior. The ambiguities surrounding Haakon's business ventures have been interpreted as proof positive of the text's open vision or as signs of Haakon's craftiness.¹⁶ But in the late capitalist context of the play it makes more sense to associate these ambiguities with the systemic, concealed nature of power. Haakon is a successful lumber merchant who got rich by harvesting logs illegally on government land. Apparently he pocketed his partner's share of the business when Ekdal went to prison. Hjalmar suggests as much when he explains how his family became impoverished: "We hadn't a shilling to spare--quite the reverse in fact. Debts. Mostly to your father, I believe--" (I 132). Whether Haakon had no part in the swindle that made him rich or whether he was complicit does not really matter much. The fact that the issue of individual responsibility is ultimately undecidable--except by formal legal procedures--indicates that what occurs is propelled by its own inner logic. This impersonal modality of power would also explain Gregers's blindness. In his search for the culprit he clings desperately to the ideological fiction of the autonomous ethical subject of liberal bourgeois culture. But the Marxian interpretation of domination and *The Wild Duck* do not conform to the scenario of melodrama. They stage the dialectic of modern allegory.

According to Marx alienated labor is the source of private wealth. The separate instances creating the photorealism of experience need not be recited in detail. The production process is independent of the workers; the objects

produced confront the producers as an alien power; the instruments and organization of production control the worker such that nature and human nature are experienced as alien and hostile powers: "Estranged labour not only (1) estranges nature from man and (2) estranges man from himself, from his own active function, from his vital activity; because of this it also estranges man from his *species*" (*M* 328). What links the different manifestations of alien life might best be clarified by the concept *instrumental reason* coined by Max Weber and extensively used by the *Frankfurt School* critics to designate, a.o., the allegorization of late capitalist life.¹⁷ Horkheimer defines the concept as follows: "It is essentially concerned with means and ends, with the adequacy of procedure for purposes more or less taken for granted and supposedly self-explanatory." (*ER* 3) While the need for self-preservation is usually invoked as ideological apology for the ends of instrumental reason, it actually co-ordinates and subjects human experience to calculable norms of efficient management and behavioral conformity to the requirements of corporate profit. The production process is not only independent from the agents of manual and intellectual production because they do not own the means of production. It is independent of all agents because it is organized in accordance with technological criteria of efficient and profitable production to which all agents must submit. Everything occurs without regard to the human reality of the agents unless of course that human reality can be exploited for profit. Workers sell their physical strength or technical skills in the market for pay. What they produce must appear alien because the full range of sentience that comes into play with the recognition of an essential connectedness with nature is repressed in the activity and erased from the products. Process and product are ultimately reduced to commodities, interchangeable entities whose value is solely determined by instrumental considerations of cost, price, and profit. This undifferentiated computation of nature and human nature is profoundly allegorical. The natural world, human activity, or the unique person or object have no intrinsic value. All phenomena are stripped of their singular and unique qualities. Emptied of all contents they point listlessly beyond their singular appearance to the carceral uniformity of instrumental reason.

Horkheimer contrasts instrumental reason with classical reason, with philosophy concerned about ends and the process of harmonizing human life with inner and outer nature. (*ER* 6-15) Classical reason stopped short at the boundaries set by the recognition that humans are also part of nature. This reverence for embodied life is also central to the *Manuscripts*: "If you ask about the creation of nature and of man, then you are abstracting from nature and from man" (*M* 357). The human being who objectifies herself or himself in the act of making things experiences the indissociable bonds with nature *and* her or his otherness at the same time. The human being is part of nature and

yet different from nature. The allegorical dialectic that sustains the Marxian utopia of human *praxis* is often obscured by the language of Feuerbachian anthropology and Hegelian dialectics. The process of objectification can thus easily be misread as a dualism--the disjunction between the *in-itself* and the *for-itself*--or as an identity:

For as soon as there are objects outside me, as soon as I am not *alone*, I am *another*, a reality *other* than the object outside me. . . . To be *sensuous*, i.e. to be real, is to be an object of sense, a *sensuous* object. . . . To be sensuous is to *suffer* (to be subjected to the actions of another). . . . But man is not only a *natural* being; he is a human natural being; . . . he is a being *for-himself* and hence a *species-being*, as which he must confirm and realize himself both in his being and in his knowing (*M* 390-91).

Objectification does not abolish the otherness of nature and other human beings. Transparent identity is impossible. But there is no radical, irremediable disjunction either:

Man appropriates his essence in an integral way, as a total man. All his human relations to the world--seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, contemplating, sensing, wanting, acting, loving--in short all the organs of his individuality . . . are in their *objective* approach or in their *approach to the object* the appropriation of that object. (*M* 351)

The process of making, the objects made, and the perceptions formed by a mode of making that allow the free expression of human sentience *also* make the unknowable familiar without abolishing its otherness and the distant near without abolishing distance: "It is therefore in his fashioning of the objective that man really proves himself to be a *species-being*. Such production is his active species-life. Through it nature appears as *his* work and his reality" (*M* 329). But this vision of a world in which humans and objects are freed from the curse of alienated labor elicits a reverential attitude toward this person or this artefact in this unrepeatable moment. The remembrance of a repressed, embodied mode of human making in which relations to objects and others are subtly interwoven in the play of proximity and distance has the power of social and political critique. Interpreted in the broader context of the *Manuscripts* the intuitive remembrance of this vision in the privacy of Hjalmar's loft can only be read as a critique of the devaluation of human experience in capitalist society.

Estrangement appears not only in the fact that *my* life belongs to *another* and that *my* desire is the inaccessible possession of *another*, but also in the fact that all things are *other* than themselves, and that my activity is *other* than itself, and that finally--and this goes for the capitalists too--an *inhuman* power rules over everything (*M* 366).

Marx expresses here what I interpret as an allegorical disjunction between sentient being and the inhuman authority of instrumental reason. In the dramatic text this disjunction is the work of Haakon's saws. Since his expensively furnished office front stage connects directly with the dining room rear stage, the visual field tends to obscure the relevance of Hoydal and the saw mill to the household. At first sight the space appears to introduce the viewer to the discrete charms and refinements of a substantive and cultivated bourgeoisie. But the papers and ledgers on the desk also indicate that the office is a place where Haakon squares his accounts with reality. Thus the office also connects the household to Hoydal as a signifier whose presence is carefully erased from the intimate sphere of the family. This is why the characters never fully comprehend what the saws destroy. Of course, the forest is converted into lumber. Lumber begets profit and profit social power. But the effects of the instrumental exploitation of nature are not limited to the destruction of Ekdal's hunting ground. In a terse reference to *The Master Builder* Benjamin remarked that ". . . the attempt by the individual to do battle with technology on the basis of his inwardness leads to his downfall." (*R, P, CNC* 155) This statement can only be understood fully when the intrications between the private and public life of the traditional bourgeoisie have been clarified in Part III. Yet it is important to note here that the text communicates the antonymic tensions between cultivated inwardness and the sway of an instrumental technology. By characterizing the invited guests as *bald* and *flabby gentlemen* (I 135-41), the *didascalias* reveal the dehumanizing power of instrumental reason. Sentient being is reduced to citations of a stigmatized nature mocking any pretense to inner cultivation. Haakon's saws cut into the sentient fabric of dramatic characters, splitting them into inhuman aliens who are controlled by powers they cannot comprehend and isolated, suffering humans, whose sentient being has no currency in the market of monetary exchange. Haakon's predatory violence is quite real, but also the alien power in him. "At your age," he tells his son, "it's time you find something more useful to do." (I 144) Haakon is other than himself insofar as the sum of economic and social relations have shaped his perceptions and actions in accordance with the requirements of capital. Gregers can be useful not by drudging like a common clerk at Hoydal, as he has done for years, but by consenting to be a partner in the business. But such 'promotion' would

require a subject who conforms to the criteria of an exploitative, impersonal work process. Haakon has only contempt for Gergers's desperate attempt to hold a cynical bourgeoisie accountable to the moral standards of its predecessors: "Werle (mutters scornfully after Gergers): Hm! Poor wretch! And he says he's not a romantic!" (I 148) The pejorative reference to Gergers's romanticism and all that which can be loosely associated with the concept--imagination, ideals, moral courage--attests to the inhuman power of instrumental reason through which Haakon speaks and thinks as *another*. His psychic life is no less industrialized by his saws than Hjalmar by his cameras or by the ideological detritus of a defunct culture. But Haakon has only unmitigated contempt for a culture that was ideally lived as moral constraint in market relations and relations of desire. This is why his reputed infidelities appear emancipatory when compared to the repressive order of virtue so blindly defended by Gergers. But here too the norms of instrumental reason interpose themselves between his desire and the other. His relationship to Gina appears to have been no more than an exercise of the right to use and abuse one's property. The reverence for the distant yet near other that permeates the silence of the loft is far removed from the devaluation of eros to brief and forgettable sexual encounters. Haakon's desire--and this holds true for Gina--is the inaccessible possession of another.

Human beings can never be completely instrumentalized; that is the root of their suffering and the source of hope. They do feel, sense, love, or pursue ideals, although they do so badly when the preternatural vampire called instrumental reason sucks the life-blood from their bodies. Even Haakon Werle, whose past is a battlefield strewn with shattered lives according to Gergers (I 147), is not just the predatory other:

I should like to have you living at home with me for a while.
I am a lonely man, Gergers. I've always felt lonely, all my life, but especially now that I'm growing old. I need to have someone near me--. (I 146)

Here Haakon Werle is an embodied character living his unredeemed pathos in an isolation cell like the rest. When human beings are callously reduced to human resources and compelled to adjust their activity and psychic life to a highly rationalized and depersonalized production process, natural history, i.e., the sentient connectedness with nature, becomes a contemptible other because it runs counter to the imperatives of exploitation and ruthless domination of nature. Ekdal's and Relling's drunkenness, Hjalmar's felicitous quest for food, Haakon's desire or physical frailties are eruptions of a devalued sentience, signs of a repressed and bludgeoned life, but signs of life nevertheless. All characters experience the otherness they have become and, for most, that

otherness is the mark of humiliated life. Gina is not only an alien in her home because she has to hide her past, but because her malapropism, impatiently corrected by Hjalmar (III 185), brand her as the other, proletarian presence in a petty-bourgeois household. When Gregers accuses Hjalmar of denying his own father--Hjalmar had refused to acknowledge his father's unexpected and unwanted appearance at the Werle dinner party--Hjalmar responds:

(whispering violently:) What Could I do?

Gregers: You denied your own father?

Hjalmar (in pain): Oh, if you were in my place--you'd--. (I 139)

The *didascalia* clearly indicate that his pain and humiliation are real. Just as his spouse at home, Hjalmar is other than himself, a socially marginalized subject in the hierarchy of wealth and cultural legitimacy deriving from it. Only the child Hedvig is truly not other than herself until she is finally confronted on two sides with the violence that represses the insight of the allegorist into the common humanity of the species that *knows* its natural history. Her suicide only appears ambiguous on the surface. Gregers, who draws the child into his scheme of rescuing Hjalmar from the web of life-lies spun around him by the good Dr. Relling, asks her to sacrifice the wild duck for the sake of her father: ". . . Yes, but what if you now gave up the wild duck for his sake?" (IV 222) Hjalmar, who had rejected her because he is convinced she is Haakon's child, questions rhetorically if Hedvig would be capable of sacrificing her life for him: "If I were to ask her: 'Hedvig, will you sacrifice your life for me?'--(He laughs scornfully.) You'd hear what answer she'd give me!" (V 240) At that point the pistol shot is heard from the loft. The character Hedvig may have sacrificed herself for her father or she may simply have been incapable of killing the wild duck. But the deeper allegorical significance of her death is quite independent of psychological motives or intent. In rejecting the natural (illegitimate) child, Hjalmar insists at least formally on the containment of nature (desire) in culture (marriage). And by demanding the blood sacrifice of the wild duck, Gregers is equally bent on reactivating the mechanisms of cultural domination of nature. Gregers wants to reinscribe Hjalmar in the patrilinear tradition of the order of virtue through Hedvig. Her death is the ultimate and desperate gesture of protest against the allegorization of sentient life by capitalist culture in the modalities of Gregers's moral imperative and the amoral imperative of instrumental reason. Thus the dramatic resolution of conflict is consistent with my reading of the loft. Capital demands the sacrifice of the fullness of sentient being which Benjamin associates with childhood experience.

III

The centrality of the institution of marriage and child rearing to the Enlightenment and to domestic drama has been thoroughly documented.¹⁸ Gregers's teleology of the ideal couple and the sobering reality of family life in both households as well as Gregers's and Relling's concern over Hedvig's education indicate a continuity between domestic and late domestic drama. But the twin pillars of classical bourgeois culture, marriage and cultural fathering, are processed as ruins in the allegorical form that contrasts the devaluation of human experience in late capitalist society with the remembrance of a sentient, distant nearness to inner and outer nature. Gregers's utopia is no longer embedded in a living context of shared beliefs. Late capitalist society has effectively neutralized the family as agent of capital accumulation and education. In order to understand the untimeliness and allegorical nature of his ideal, the general outlines of the *Frankfurt School's* materialist reading of the practice and ideology of the liberal bourgeoisie should be borne in mind.¹⁹ According to Habermas the contradictory relations between practice and ideology derive from the fictitious identity of the roles of male property owner and the role of human being pure and simple. (*TPS*, p. 56) A highly abbreviated version of the general argument of the *Frankfurt School* would read somewhat like this. In the 18th century a small group of property owners competed against each other in the market. They believed that commodity exchange was regulated by just laws. Honesty, thrift, hard work, and the avoidance of pleasure would reap just rewards in the market. Virtue was the indispensable prerequisite of success in the market and success proof positive of virtuous conduct. One married to merge fortunes and educated children as ethical, autonomous individuals in accordance with the requirements of commodity exchange. As Horkheimer put it, the individual of Enlightenment culture was constructed ". . . to win the fight against nature in general, against others in particular, and against its own impulses." (*ER* 105) This culture was familial and patriarchal. The property owner rules supreme over spouse and children. But this is only one side of the equation. The liberal bourgeoisie insulated the family as much as possible from the alienating pressures of the market. It simply understood kinship relations differently and ideally:

It [the family] seemed to be established voluntarily and by free individuals and to be maintained without coercion; it seemed to rest on the lasting community of love on the part of the two spouses; it seemed to permit that non-instrumental development of the faculties that marks the cultivated person. (*TPS* 46)

Although the non-instrumental development of an inner realm of common humanity bears certain resemblances to the experience of collector and child, it is not the same. I will return to this issue shortly. If children are educated for market competition on the one hand and treated as human beings in a non-coercive and loving enclave on the other, i.e., according to contradictory postulates, then the educational strategy must be coercive without giving the appearance of domination. In effect, children are taught to internalize the father voluntarily as conscience by appealing to their sense of shame. External authority is replaced by the authority of conscience. Self-inflicted violence lived as sacrifice of self substitutes for the violence of others.²⁰ This idealized oedipal narrative in which subjects recognize themselves as an autonomous, ethical avant-garde of a utopian order ruled by reason is the story in which the traditional bourgeoisie wrote its own continuity in time as a patrilinear order of virtue that appeared to conform to the laws of humanity itself.²¹

This is the story Gregers remembers; but it is a story that can no longer be told. The authority of the *pater familias* and the ideal of the ethical, inner-directed individual are largely dependent on the autonomy of the small property owner. As long as the father has real economic power over spouse and children, indirect and psychological persuasion can be effective. And as long as the family is kept at some distance from economic necessity, it can cultivate the human being for his or her own sake. But when the market no longer behaves rationally, the ethical imperative becomes a free-floating signifier mocked by an amoral materialist practice. This is what occurs in *The Wild Duck*. The impoverishment of the Ekdals is the source of Werle wealth. The broad extension of instrumental reason devours the interior of the family. Haakon's office and Hjalmar's cameras equally refer to the intrusion of instrumental market relations into the family interior. And the *pater familias* survives only as photorealist discursive fragment in Hjalmar's confused mind and as decontextualized categorical imperative in Gregers's obsessive narrative. In fact, the family is already a private hell for the preceding generation. Haakon's marriage to Gregers's mother apparently was a mismatch between a predatory but vigorous capitalist and a spouse given to moral rigorism and self-sacrifice. (IV 212) Hjalmar realizes at long last that his marriage, far from having been voluntary, was cunningly arranged by Haakon Werle. (IV 205) Under circumstances which he cannot control Hjalmar is incapable of transmitting the patrimony of virtue and educate Hedvig in accordance with the secular gospel of enlightened reason and morality. The irrelevance of the father as moral authority internalized as conscience is further substantiated by the actions of Dr. Relling, whose therapeutic counsel can be summed up in his own apodictic statement: "Deprive the average human being of his life-lie, and you rob him of his happiness." (V 229) As Jacques Donzelot has pointed out, family physicians and priests became the primary agents of an official policy

of family planning designed to help families adjust to the order of late capitalism.²² In order to infuse a dose of moral and educational hygiene into an anemic intimacy sphere, this avant-garde of modern therapeutocracy attempted to strengthen the role of the mother and weaken the culturally superfluous authority of the father. Gregers's enlightened utopia has been dismantled and instrumentalized by administrative control.

I cannot imagine a Gregers who does not convey the real grandeur of the humanistic ideals he defends so vigorously and so alone. And yet, this solitary intellectual, who is so alien in his body that he cannot even light a fire in the stove, fights for a disembodied utopia. After Gina defiantly admits to an affair with Haakon, he believes that he has witnessed the rebirth of the ideal couple: "From such a crisis there must spring a mutual understanding on which a whole new life can be founded--a partnership built on truth, without concealment." (IV 207) Gregers's utopia cannot be the source of hope he imagined it to be because the desire for a relationship that withstands the penetrating power of virtuous light necessarily contains desire in a subject that is at war with its own impulses. Nature as desire is not simply repressed. It must be an ever present yet always subjugated menace to culture. Hedvig has to be a natural daughter so that nature can be saved from itself by culture. And Gina must transgress and freely admit her fault so that conscience can sustain itself on guilt remembered. Gregers's response to the impersonal violence of instrumental reason is to displace violence inward and recreate the scene of the sado-masochistic individual. But in the loft, where the players intuitively rediscover their common, sentient humanity in the reverent care of distant nearness, the individual has been quietly liquidated. Haakon's marriage to Mrs. Soerby cannot be construed as the new dawn of the ideals of a by-gone era because the family no longer has discernible social functions. But their relationship comes closest to the truth of the allegorists of the loft: "Mrs. Soerby: . . . Now he [Haakon] can talk to me as freely as a child." (IV 212) While one can surely sympathize with Hjalmar, whose sense of justice is offended by the good fortune of the 'villain', one should bear in mind that he has accepted Gregers's melodramatic scenario. In the context of allegory, this abrupt change of fortune is not mere dramatic irony. Haakon, who is growing old and blind, experiences his sentient life as a species being. In being once again the child he had so violently repressed in himself, he becomes truly Hedvig's natural father.

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Notes

1. *The Plays of Ibsen*, vol. 3, tr. Michael Meyer (New York: Washington Square Press, 1986), II 149. Subsequent references to act and page number will appear in parentheses in the text.

Primary sources consulted: Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982, @ 1958); "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz, tr. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1989, @ 1978); "Unpacking my Library" & "On some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations*, tr. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1977, @ 1969); "Kleine Geschichte der Photographie," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, II-I, eds. Rolf Tiedemann & Herman Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977) 368-87; *Walter Benjamin Briefe*, vol. 2, eds. Gershom Scholem & Theodor W. Adorno (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1967) 848-57. Secondary sources consulted: Torsten Meiffert, *Die enteignete Erfahrung* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 1986); Marleen Stoessel, *Aura: Das vergessene Menschliche: Zur Sprache und Erfahrung bei Walter Benjamin* (München: Karl Hanser Verlag, 1983); Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin* (New York, 1982); Bainard Cowan, "Walter Benjamin's Theory of Allegory," *New German Critique*, 22 (Winter, 1981) 109-22; Sandor Radnoti, "The Early Aesthetics of Walter Benjamin," *International Journal of Sociology*, 7 (1)8 (Spring 1977) 76-123; Helmut Pfotenhauer, *Asthetische Erfahrung und Gesellschaftliches System* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler Verlag, 1975); Hannah Arendt, *Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht* (München: R. Piper & Co. Verlag, 1971); Hans Heinz Holz, "Prismatisches Denken," in *Über Walter Benjamin* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1968) 62-110.

2. On the theoretical complexities of Benjamin's conception of allegory see esp. Torsten Meiffert, *Die enteignete Erfahrung*.

3. Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* in *Karl Marx, The Early Writings*, tr. Rodney Livingstone & Gregor Benton (New York: Vintage Books, 1975) 291. Handicraft is the complete activity that is being dismembered acc. to Marx. (Subsequent references to the *Manuscripts* will appear in the text in parentheses as *M* & page number.)

4. For a Lukacsian materialist reading of modern allegory see Radnoti, "The Early Aesthetics of Walter Benjamin."

5. *Gesammelte Schriften*, II-I 368-85. All subsequent references to this essay will appear in parenthesis in the text as *Schriften*, II-I & page number. (All translations from the original are mine.)

6. Although the transformations were gradual, Jürgen Habermas places the end of the liberal era around the great depression of 1873, when free trade and competition gave way to national policies of protectionism. [See *Transformation of the Public Sphere*, tr. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1989) 143.]

7. Cited in Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, 1977) 207.

8. "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," in *Reflections* 155. (Further references to be given in the text and abbreviated as *R, P, CNC*.)

9. "To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return." "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations* 188. (Further references to appear in text as *I, OSMB*)

10. "One-Way-Street," in *Reflections*, 69. (Further references to appear in text abbreviated as *R, O-W S*.) Elsewhere Benjamin writes: "I am not exaggerating when I say that to the true collector the acquisition of an old book is its rebirth. This is the childlike element which in the collector mingles with old age. For children can accomplish the renewal of existence in a hundred unflinching ways. Among children, collecting is only one process of renewal; other processes are the painting of objects, the cutting out of figures, the application of decals—the whole range of childlike modes of acquisition, from touching things to giving them names." ("Unpacking My Library," in *Illuminations* 61.)

11. "On Some Motifs In Baudelaire," *Illuminations* 186. Benjamin appears to attenuate the materialist thrust of his argument in a letter to Theodor W. Adorno: "But if aura is indeed about forgotten sentience (*ein vergessenes Menschliches*), then not necessarily about such sentience as may be associated with work." (*Walter Benjamin Briefe*, vol. 2, 849.) I see no contradiction here since human experience shaped by a mode of production is not confined to the activity itself.

12. De Man's Heideggerian ontology and Lacan's psychoanalytical narrative elaborate metaphysical paradigms of allegory. The disjunction between subject and object is inscribed in

the heart of being. Thus de Man writes: "Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance to its own origin and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference. In doing so, it prevents the self from an illusory identification with the non-self, which is now fully, though painfully, recognized as the non-self." [*Blindness and Insight*, (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983) 207.] In de Man's epistemology, mind as consciousness is dissociated from nature. The allegorical experience is necessarily only an experience of loss and reification since metaphysical dualism has its origin in an impossible desire or renunciation of desire for coincidence with a *transcendental* source. [See esp. Terry Eagleton, "The Critic as Clown," in eds. Carey Nelsen & Lawrence Grossberg, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: U. of Chicago P, 1988) 619-31.] For Lacan, entry into the symbolic excludes the subject irremediably from libidinal resources and the phenomenal world. Desire and the phenomenal world are transcendental signifiers with which the subject cannot coincide. [See esp. Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York & Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983) 157-93.] Theories of allegory developed from these paradigms are undialectical. They stress only the gap between sign and signified. But nature is also a source of nourishment and subject to creative human transformation through labor. In Benjamin's materialist account, temporality is not lived as empty time because completion in temporality is possible through labor. Thus the incompleteness associated with temporality is not converted to presence, but unfolds fully in the unique and non-recurring moment.

13. See esp. Jurgen Habermas, *Transformation of the Public Sphere* 117-250; "Crisis Tendencies in Advanced Capitalism," in *Legitimation Crisis*, tr. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975, @ 1973) 33-94; Max Horkheimer, "Authority and the Family," in *Critical Theory*, tr. Matthew O'Connell (New York, 1975) 47-128; Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, tr. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1972) 120-67; Horkheimer & Adorno, "The Family," in *Aspects of Sociology*, tr. John Viertel (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972) 129-47; Alexander Mitscherlich, *Society without the Father*, tr. Erich Mosbacher (New York, 1969). For a discussion of late capitalist developments in the United States see Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1985) 113-45.

14. The most important text on the subject is surely Elaine Scarry, "The Construction and Deconstruction of Making within the Material Realm," in *The Body in Pain* (New York & Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985) 243-77. My reading of the *Manuscripts* and *The Wild Duck* is deeply indebted to Scarry's phenomenological analysis of sentience. But since her analysis of Marx does not account for late capitalist developments, I am unable to incorporate her theoretical premises fully into my interpretation, except on one important point. Scarry locates the utopian moment associated with embodied labor—the craftsman's and farmer's—in the very structure of human making and not in a specific, past mode of production. (257)

15. "Essence and Appearance: Aspects of Fetishism in Marx's *Capital*," in Geras, *Literature of Revolution* (London: Verso, 1986) 63-87, 67.

16. See John S. Chamberlain, *Ibsen: The Open Vision* (London, 1982) & Georg Lukacs, "Ibsen and Ideology," in ed. Charles R. Lyons, *Critical Essays on Henrik Ibsen* (Boston, 1987) 85-105.

17. See Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, vol. 1, eds. Gunther Roth & Claus Wittich, tr. E. Fischhoff et al. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1968). Weber distinguishes between the formal rationality of economic action for quantitative calculation and accounting and substantive rationality concerned with human needs and values. (85-85) Weber stresses the loss of individual authorship in late capitalist societies. Only the means of action can be considered, not the human ends themselves. I have used Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Oxford UP, 1947) as the basic text for understanding the use of the concept by the *Frankfurt School*. References to the study will appear in the text in parentheses abbreviated as ER. [For an excellent analysis of the use of the term *instrumental rationalism* (formal rationality) by the *Frankfurt School* see esp.

Jessika Benjamin, "Authority and the Family Revisited," *New German Critique* (Winter, 1978) 13, 35-57.]

18. In addition to sources cited in note (13), see esp. Michael Anderson, *Approaches to the History of the Western Family, 1500-1914* (London, 1980); eds. Philippe Aries & Georges Duby, *Histoire de la vie privée*, vols. 3 & 4 (Paris: Seuil, 1985); Jacques Donzelot, *La Police des familles* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1977). For a discussion of German domestic drama and Enlightenment culture see Gunter Sasse, *Die aufgeklärte Familie* (Tubingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1988); on European classical domestic drama see Peter Szondi, *Die Theorie des bürgerlichen Trauerspiels im 18. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973).

19. For the most systematic analysis of the interrelations between the family, economic practice, literary practice, and public power see Habermas, *Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 1-143; for an analysis of the historical origins of private morality and the politics of morality see Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1988)

20. Nobert Elias, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1981) argues that this gradual transformation from direct to indirect control is inherent in the process of Western civilization. See esp. "Die Dämpfung der Triebe, Psychologisierung and Rationalisierung" & "Scham und Peinlichkeit," vol. 2, 397-409.

21. "The three elements of voluntarism, community of love, and cultivation were conjoined in the concept of humanity that was supposed to inhere in humankind as such and truly constitute its absoluteness." Habermas, *Transformation of the Public Sphere* 47.

22. "The *hygienic norms* pertinent to raising and educating children could be effective because they offered children, and correlatively women, the possibility of an increased autonomy in the family against patriarchal authority." *La Police des familles* 57-58. (My translation.) This valorization of the maternal is hardly emancipatory since the mother is merely a conduit for policies decided elsewhere in the interests of capital. See W. Sohlich, "Ibsen's *Brand*: Drama of the Fatherless Society," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* (Spring 1989) III 2, 87-105.