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The "Demonic" In Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*

By LOUIS CROMPTON

Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* has been universally recognized as a masterpiece of modern dramatic art. Two generations of critics, starting with George Brandes and George Bernard Shaw, have admired its powerful ironies and brilliant dramaturgy. Finally, it has been made the subject of a detailed and extremely perceptive analysis by Hermann Weigand, Ibsen's leading twentieth-century exponent, in his study *The Modern Ibsen*. All have seen it as a curious drama of mixed genre in which elements of satire, comedy, and tragedy exist together in a state of high tension. Beyond this, the critics have gone on to explore some particular vein in the rich texture of the play: its exposure of the dangers of jejune "idealism," the elaborate comic irony surrounding the figure of Hjalmar Ekdal, the teasing symbolism.

In approaching these problems, no commentator has as yet, however, weighed fully the significance of the idea of "demoniacism" which Ibsen introduces briefly in the third act. This is perhaps not surprising, since its introduction is hedged with even more than Ibsen's usual equivocation. Relling, the doctor-boarder in the Ekdal household, uses the concept of the demonic to excuse the conduct of the drunken theological student, Molvik, before Gregers Werle:

Relling: It comes over him like a kind of possession, and then I have to go on the loose with him. Mr. Molvik is a demonic, you see.

Gregers: Demonic?

Relling: Molvik is demonic, yes. . . . And demonic natures are not made to walk straight through the world; they must meander a little now and then.

Most readers have tended to overlook this exchange, and for good reason. Relling in the last act rejects his diagnosis as a piece of gibberish invented to salve Molvik's self-respect. Molvik's image of himself as a demonic, according to Relling, functions like old Ekdal's hunting expeditions in the attic, and Hjalmar's "invention"; it is a compensation for social failure, the "life-lie" that keeps him, as it keeps the other characters, from the dangers of paralyzing despair.

The fact is that Relling has provided us with one of the central clues to the meaning of the play, despite his retraction. The

demonic in nineteenth-century literature was traditionally the man whom fate had disappointed or injured (Ahab, Raskolnikov) or the frustrated or betrayed lover (Manfred, Heathcliff). In him we find an acute sense of grievance accompanied, first, by a compulsive desire for retribution, and, secondly, by a characteristically fiery defiance of conventional morality. (The demonic is distinguished from the revolutionary in that he acts from personal rather than social reasons: his quarrel is more often with fate or destiny than with society.) Norwegian literature with its tradition of the untamed Viking hero is particularly fertile in the type; Ibsen himself uses it in the person of the "Stranger" in *The Lady from the Sea*.

In *The Wild Duck* the idea functions ironically. The maundering theological student who is supposed to be a "demonic" is a sufficiently ludicrous figure. Nor, on the face of it, could anyone seem so temperamentally ill-equipped for the role of a "demonic" as Hjalmar Ekdal. Hjalmar is inveterately comfort-loving; given an environment of domestic quiet and an adequate supply of bread, butter, and beer, he seems the last person in the world to strike a Byronic pose. His "poetic" nature at first inclines solely to rendering sentimental airs on the flute, and to other expressions of what he calls "my natural melancholy." By the end of the play, however, this external calm has been shattered, and a new note has been sounded: that of demonic protest.

There is, in fact, a double irony here. Not only is the rejected idea of the demonic a clue to Hjalmar's development, but Relling himself acts the licensed demonic all unconsciously. Because he functions as a *raisonneur* in exposing the fallacies of Gregers' doctrinaire idealism, we should not remain blind to the confusions and ambiguities of Relling's own character. A failure in his profession, he rationalizes his dissipations by presenting himself as the protector of those more derelict than himself. Paradoxically, part of his own "life-lie" is his image of himself as the creator of judicious "life-lies": an unmistakable glint of self-esteem shines behind his contentiousness.

But his most surprising trait and the one most relevant to the present discussion is his self-dramatization. When Mrs. Sorby announces that she is going to marry Werle, Relling protests and she defends herself by retorting: "He hasn't frittered away all that was good in him, at any rate. A man who does that must take the consequences." Mrs. Sorby is a realist, one of the few centers of sanity in the play, and there is more compassion than scorn in her remark. But she has nevertheless inadvertently presented Relling with what, at the end of the play, he calls one of "the confounded duns that keep pestering us, in our poverty, with the claim

of the ideal." His reaction is highly neurotic; he mutters the threat "I shall go out with Molvik this evening," and sees himself licensed in his debauch by his "demonic" role of rejected lover.

The evolution of Relling's emotional state from apparently cool detachment to desperation is a kind of prologue to the main drama. In it, Hialmar passes through a similar sequence of moods. Since Hialmar's character is "high-flown" and histrionic, and since he suffers from a fundamental incapacity to see himself as he really is, we have less a real person than a succession of poses, all basically inauthentic. There is the "melancholic" pose of act one, the "conscientious husband and father" pose of act two, and finally the "outraged lover" pose he adopts as a result of learning, at the end of act three, of Gina's earlier relationship with Werle. Determined to stage a dramatic repentance and forgiveness scene with his wife as a way of establishing his moral supremacy over her, he complains, after he has explained his new knowledge of the past to her, that she is not "writhing with penitence and remorse."

Hialmar: Oh, this dull, callous contentment! To me there is something revolting about it. Think of it—never so much as a twinge of remorse!

Gina: But tell me, Ekdal—what would have become of you if you hadn't had a wife like me?

Hialmar: Like you—!

Gina: Yes; for you know I've always been a bit more practical and wide-awake than you. . . .

Hialmar: What would have become of me!

Gina: You'd got into all sorts of bad ways when you first met me; that you can't deny.

Hialmar: "Bad ways" do you call them? Little do you know what a man goes through when he is in grief and despair—especially a man of my fiery temperament.

Hialmar's near speechlessness is a measure of his temporary confusion. The usually modest and self-effacing Gina has, for the first time, directly challenged his claim to superiority. Moreover, she does this by insisting on her own practicality, thus exposing the "life-lie" with which Hialmar has, up till this point, disguised his domestic parasitism—his fantasy of an invention that will make them rich. Hialmar's next step demonstrates a fundamental pattern of the play; feeling one pillar of his self-esteem rudely shaken, he desperately shifts his ground, abandoning his role of model husband in the drama of domestic virtue for the much more threatening part of the *âme damnée* in a drama of romantic passion. (Ibsen has earlier introduced into the play the image of "The Flying Dutchman"—the demonic sailor who is

forced to wander through the world undergoing repeated betrayal by the women in whom he puts his trust.¹) Exercising his native right to see himself as a "mad" Norwegian, Hialmar, from this point on continually projects himself into the part of the storm-tossed, fate-embittered hero, desperately defying the Gods. No development could be more humorous, more pathetically ironic, or more fraught with tragic possibilities. Another artist would have weighted the situation in one direction: Ibsen daringly arouses all three dramatic responses in the audience's mind.

The dynamic pattern of the play now involves the intensification of this conflict in Hialmar through a series of crises. Soothing and exacerbating incidents work alternately on his sensibility to produce the final outburst. And, as is so often the case with Ibsen, we can see dead and buried events from the past reënacted before our eyes. For although *The Wild Duck* at first appears to rely on Ibsen's famous retrospective technique to a much lesser extent than plays like *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*—and has for this reason been called a "spatial" rather than a "temporal" drama—the difference is perhaps not so complete as critics have generally supposed. It is one of degree rather than of kind. By a careful weighing of various hints it is possible to see how the present altercation is repeatedly influenced by events that had taken place fifteen years earlier.

At that time Hialmar appears to have exploited the role of demonic following his father's ruin. We hear a faint echo of this emotional crisis in the opening act. When old Ekdal passes unexpectedly through the room, Hialmar exclaims dramatically, "Gregers, I am going! When a man has felt the crushing hand of Fate, you see—" In reaction to this blow Hialmar had entered into a dissolute period which, we may assume, culminated in his making Gina his mistress. (Such a development would account for Hialmar's uneasy hedging when Gregers asks him how his engagement came about, and for Gina's real doubt as to Hedwig's paternity.) Gina is harking back to this time when she tries to calm Hialmar after his reference to the exigencies of his "fiery temperament": "Well, well, that may be so, and I've no reason to crow over you neither; for you turned a moral of a husband, that you did, as soon as you ever had a house and home of your own." Reminding him of his material comforts is Gina's time-honored way of managing Hialmar, but unfortunately this is the very point on which Gregers has made him newly sensitive, and she leaves herself open to his self-righteous rejoinder: "In a swamp of deceit, yes."

Another detail in the "demonic" pattern is the debauch that takes place between acts four and five: it is both a repetition of

Hialmar's earlier juvenile revolt and a preparation for the final catastrophe. Most commentators have failed to weigh its full significance. Again it is Relling's attitude that is most likely to lead us astray. When Relling replies to Gregers' pompous question, "What is your explanation of the spiritual tumult that is now going on in Hialmar Ekdal?" with the derisive reply: "Devil a bit of spiritual tumult have I noticed in him," we should not allow our satisfaction in seeing Gregers worsted to blind us to Relling's own obtuseness. If Gregers is too idealistic, Relling is too cynical, and Hialmar becomes a shuttlecock at the mercy of two opponents of equally limited vision.

For, in reality, there is a spiritual conflict going on within Hialmar, though it is different from what Gregers supposes. If Hialmar is a ludicrously theatrical and comically self-deceiving person he is also extremely sensitive, and the night's dissipation has unstrung him completely. We catch the full force of his feelings in his *sotto voce* mutterings: "You're a scoundrel, Relling!—You're a low fellow!—Ah, you shameless tempter!" and in his amazing declaration: "I wish I could get some one to stick a knife into you." The emotion is for once authentic and no mere posturing to excuse himself in Gina's eyes; the extremely unheroic notion of the hired assassin assures us of this.

Hialmar is, in short, suffering from very considerable guilt feelings. This feeling of guilt leads, in turn, to his over-dramatization of his sense of betrayal at Gina's hands and to his entertaining the preposterous fantasy that Hedwig is also leagued against him. With consummate artistry and touches of real theatrical brilliance he piles absurdity on absurdity in the face of Gregers' anguished reassurances:

Gregers: Hedwig will never, never leave you.

Hialmar: Don't be so sure of that. If only they beckon to her and throw out a golden bait—! and, oh! I have loved her so unspeakably! I would have counted it my highest happiness to take her tenderly by the hand and lead her, as one leads a timid child through a great dark empty room!—I am cruelly certain now that the poor photographer in his humble attic has never really and truly been anything to her. She has only cunningly contrived to keep on a good footing with him until the time came.

Gregers: You don't believe a word of that yourself, Hialmar.

Hialmar: That is the terrible part of it—I don't know what to believe,—I never can know it. But can you really doubt that it must be as I say? Ho, ho, you have far too much faith in your claim of the ideal, my good Gregers!

If those others came, with the glamor of wealth about them, and called to the child:—"Leave him: come to us: here life awaits you—!"

Gregers (quickly): Well, what then?

Hialmar: If I then asked her: Hedwig, are you willing to renounce that life for me? (*Laughs scornfully.*) No thank you! You would soon hear what answer I should get.

Instantly the fatal pistol shot rings out. The play-acting has ended in the bloody irony of Hedwig's suicide.

Here anyone else might well be paralyzed by the bizarre disparity between reality and theatrical pretense. However, even after the catastrophe, when his grief is for a moment real and touching, Hialmar cannot resist the temptation to play the demonic hero, particularly since his own guilt can now be regarded as trivial in the face of heaven's guiltiness:

O thou above—! If thou be indeed! Why hast thou done this thing to me?

We need only set the hollow rhetoric of this speech against Gloucester's "As flies to wanton boys" or Ahab's "There can be no hearts above the snow-line" to savor the full irony of the moment. Only Ibsen would have ended on a note so dramatically powerful and at the same time so ambiguous. What is an audience to do: weep, or laugh derisively? Satire and pathos remain inextricably mingled to the end.

It remains only to say a word about the symbolism of the play. Critics have been generally agreed on only one point: its perplexing nature. One approach has been to isolate it from the action and commend it as being in itself "beautiful and poetic"; such a judgment, however, is open to the rather obvious objection that the play itself does not strike one as being, in any simple sense, the one or the other. A contrasting attitude has been to take the symbolism as completely ironic and to see the drama as a satire on "symbolmongers." In favor of this point of view it may be said that it is, after all, Gregers who describes the duck in terms of religion and that his linking of the duck with "the depths of the sea" and with a rite of expiation strikes the reader as both morbid and dangerous. The "depths of the sea" are murky indeed and "the devil's own mess that grows down there" is not only Hialmar's evasions of reality but the mess that Gregers makes of Gina's orderly domestic arrangements.

Hermann Weigand argues strongly for the second reading:

There can be no doubt that its prime function is to characterize Gregers; for all this symbolism, applied to

Hialmar, is grotesquely inept. There is nothing of the wild duck in his make-up. The more Gregers harps on their fancied likeness, the more vividly does the incongruity between Hialmar's domestic rabbit-soul and that creature of the wilds impinge upon our consciousness. What this symbolism does is to reveal the mentality of Gregers. We perceive his penchant for wallowing in symbols to be one of the most conspicuous traits of his character.²

Weigand abandons the attempt to give a coherent interpretation of the symbolism with the remark that it can best be taken as a kind of elaborate joke, a "subtly compounded sauce imparting to the whole dish an exotic flavor of particular delight to the aesthetic gourmand."

But is this a solution we can accept? In a play dominated by its central figure to the extent that *The Wild Duck* is dominated by Hialmar we would certainly be predisposed to look for some intimate connection between the leading symbol and the leading character. If the relevance of the wild duck to Hialmar's personality remains merely oblique is that not a serious artistic miscalculation on Ibsen's part?

Weigand's mistake seems to have been in regarding the qualities associated with the duck as fixed in some concrete reality outside of the drama rather than as subjective creations in the minds of the characters. The duck is not *really* wild and free, or rather the reality of its wildness and its freedom is not at issue; what is important is that Gregers has projected these qualities upon it. They represent the very qualities of abstract moral purity he himself lusts after. The phrase "a wild goose chase" would communicate the idea of his quest in idiomatic English, with the same connotation of the poetic, the illusory, and the absurd.³ To say, moreover, that the image of the wild duck as Gregers conceives it is "grotesquely inept" when related to Hialmar is to miss the potent irony in the fact that it is just this incongruity that is significant. Given Hialmar's nature, we might expect that any image of himself he entertains would be "grotesquely inept" in some fundamental fashion.

If we approach the play without any preconception as to the ideal nature of the wild duck we find that its relation to Hialmar is remarkably direct, for all its subtlety. The duck is, for one thing, an amusing image of his contented domesticity. There is a comic moment in act one in which Gregers remarks on Hialmar's changed appearance: he has grown appreciably "stouter." Hialmar delicately rejects the epithet and replaces it by a phrase more in keeping with his image of himself—"more manly." Hedwig's al-

most maternal solicitude for Hialmar's comfort is paralleled by her concern for the duck, and we are later told that the bird, as a result of this pampering, has become "quite fat."

This analogy serves to point up the unflattering reality of Hialmar's life as a domestic parasite at the same time that the quality of moral aspiration Gregers associates with the duck underlines the mistake he has made in estimating Hialmar. The Norwegian word *vild* has all the complex suggestiveness of its English cognate: it suggests "uncivilized" in the sense of uncontaminated (as in Rousseau's image of the noble savage); it suggests desperation and dissipation, and the further notion of the fantastic, extravagant, and illusory. Semantically the chord is rich and dissonant. But if the term *vildand* is not without a comic overtone in suggesting a waddling fowl transformed into a symbol of heroic nobility, the tension between the ambiguous adjective and the modest substantive becomes even greater, and the comic irony that much more powerful if we catch in *vild* the note of demonic protest and recollect that the play is about a "duck" driven to the point of histrionic madness.

The real bird, significantly, remains invisible and remote throughout the play, like some precious household totem. "Not a hair of its head shall be injured," Hialmar reassures Hedwig ludicrously enough, at the end of the second act. We hear it only once, at the height of Hialmar's frenzy in the final scene. "It is the wild duck quacking," he stops to tell us, and thus adds the last touch to the grim humor of the occasion. Despite the poignancy of the drama enacted around it the wild duck remains at the end of the play unscathed. Ibsen seems to be saying that man's illusions are invulnerable, no matter how roundly shaken.

NOTES

¹ This is Wagner's version of the story. In his opera the hero is a Norwegian.

² *The Modern Ibsen* (New York: Henry Holt, 1925), p. 163.

³ The Norwegian word *and* ("duck") has a secondary meaning of "mare's nest" or "illusory discovery."