Thomas Bredsdorff

The Sins of the Fathers: Bergman, Ronconi, and Ibsen’s ‘Wild Duck’

What is The Wild Duck ‘about’? What is the relationship between text and subtext in a work whose usually understood message ‘against idealism’ appears to contradict the conclusion no less usually drawn from A Doll’s House? Thomas Bredsdorff here analyzes the approaches of two major modern directors of the play – Ingmar Bergman, in his Stockholm production of 1972, and Luca Ronconi, who directed it five years later in Rome – and suggests the ‘hidden dialogue’ at work in such a comparison. He also explores the issues of patricide and power which may be deduced by applying the insights of Erich Fromm concerning the nature of human aggression, basing his own conclusions on a careful examination of Ibsen’s highly pertinent stage directions.

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IF ‘A DOLL’S HOUSE’ is a story about love and marriage, The Wild Duck is a family drama about power. As with the majority of Ibsen’s most durable plays, there are many layers and many ways into the text. But behind all the complicated relationships between three generations of two families, and beneath the ideas about the claim of the ideal and about the ‘life-lie’, remains the question: who is in whose power, how is power created and shifted between people, and what gives rise to it? The play is not least about the power which exists in the imagination and in the language of those involved.

A small family – father, mother, grandfather, pubescent daughter – is leading its peaceable everyday life. The husband is a photographer, but dreams of becoming an inventor. The woman is the practical housewife who keeps all the wheels oiled and turning and looks after the business over and above. The grandfather is a demoted lieutenant, who dreams of his days of prosperity and of being a big-game hunter – a dream he realizes by shooting rabbits in the loft. The teenage daughter’s joy is the wild duck she keeps up in the loft among the rabbits, and she dreams of one day making real pictures ‘with churches and castles and great ships sailing on the sea’ (III, ii).

Thus the little family’s life could have continued had not a childhood friend of the husband’s come on the scene in his feverish pursuit of honesty and demanded that these people face the truth: that the loft is not the wide open spaces, and that the household is not self-sufficient, but is kept afloat economically only by subsidies from the childhood friend’s father.

And he has his own reasons for forking out: he once had a relationship with the photographer’s wife, and diverted a legal charge against the grandfather. In the opinion of the childhood friend, it should be possible, when all this comes out into the open, for a true marriage to be made between the two spouses. Yet the whole plan leads to nothing but misery and death.

Text and Subtext

As is always the case with Ibsen, events have been preceded by a great deal of past history, and part of this is summarized in a conversation between two minor characters in the opening
scene of the play. However, the most important of past events — the very origin of Gregers’s plan — is presented on stage before our very eyes. It is here that Ibsen’s use of subtext gathers momentum.

The photographer, Hjalmar Ekdal, and his childhood friend, Gregers Werle, meet after a long separation. In the middle of their conversation the subtext suddenly bursts through all the seams of the dialogue.

HJALMAR: I assure you, you would never recognize Gina now.
GREGERS: Gina?
HJALMAR: Yes, dear man, don’t you recall? She was called Gina.
GREGERS: Who was called Gina? I really have no idea —
HJALMAR: But don’t you remember that she was employed here in the house at one time?
GREGERS: (looks at him) You man Gina Hansen?
HJALMAR: Yes. Of course I mean Gina Hansen.
GREGERS: — who used to keep house for us in the last year of mother’s illness?
HJALMAR: Yes, precisely. But my dear fellow, I’m positively sure that your father wrote to you and told you that I’d got married.
GREGERS: (having stood up) Yes, he did tell me that; but he didn’t say — (Pacing back and forth) No, wait a moment; — perhaps he did in fact — now that I think about it. But father’s letters to me are always so brief. (Perches on the arm of his chair) Listen, tell me now, Hjalmar — this is funny — how did it come about that you met Gina — I mean: your wife?
HJALMAR: Well, it was quite simple. Gina wasn’t long in the house here — there was so much upheaval here at that time — your mother’s illness — Gina couldn’t cope with all that, so she handed in her notice and left. That was the year before your mother died — or maybe it was the same year.
GREGERS: It was the same year.

Ibsen’s signal to the reader that there is something particular afoot is his use of stage directions. If one assumes that these are merely a signal as to when the actor should get up, walk around, or sit down, one is soon made wiser by trying to follow them and only them. There are not nearly enough to keep the actor occupied. But wherever they do appear, they are a signal that the character is moved: that he is saying something unvoiced, that he has an intention which the inattentive reader does not notice. The text has a subtext.

Gregers is piecing everything together. He knows that his friend has been married. Now he knows that it is to the girl who used to be employed in his parents’ house. He senses a causal connection. Five exchanges later, he draws yet another piece of the jigsaw from the unsuspecting Hjalmar. Ibsen is again using the same manuscript technique to steer the reader’s attention.

GREGERS: (gets up and walks around for a moment or two) Tell me — once you had got engaged — was it then that your father got you — I mean — was it then that you began to take up photography?
HJALMAR: Yes, just so. I was very keen, you see, to get established and settle down as soon as possible.

Ibsen must surely be unique among dramatists in the assured way in which he links the stage directions to the subtext. They do deal with the externals, with the arrangement of ‘business’, but they always refer also to the internal dimension. It is as if they say ‘Nota Bene: now something is happening which you cannot hear!’

A little earlier in the dialogue, Gregers has learned that it is his old father who has given Hjalmar a start in life. This Gregers has interpreted as an expression of his father’s magnanimity: ‘That proves he has a heart after all’. Now that he knows it is the dismissed housemaid Hjalmar has married, and has learned at what point the help came, the suspicion that began a few moments earlier begins to grow.

It was not good-heartedness which motivated the merchant Werle: it was self-interest. An abandoned mistress was to be provided for. Gregers wants to know the sequence of events by way of confirmation: how was it? — first the engagement, then the financial support. Hjalmar’s answer is to a different question: yes, I was provided for in order that I could get married.

Knowledge consists of two elements — facts, and the way in which they are pieced together.
Hjalmar has all the facts; only Gregers is piecing them together. This he does because he has a will to piece them together. Where that will stems from is a matter to which we shall return.

What we have here, in this first scene between two of the play’s main characters, is the fundamental structure of the dialogue: beneath the formal apparent co-operation, the fundamental isolation of the subtext.

And its power mechanism. For what Gregers learns — his piecing together of the facts — puts him in a position to bring about certain desired effects. The dialogue results in Hjalmar’s literal adoption of Gregers’s initial interpretation of old Werle, at the precise moment where Gregers has abandoned that interpretation. ‘For he has a heart, you see’, are Hjalmar’s final words in that scene. Gregers has meanwhile resolved to change Hjalmar’s life. This he intends to do by allowing him a share of his new-found knowledge, dispensed at suitable moments, in suitable doses.

For knowledge is power. But not necessarily the power to bring about desired effects. Gregers Werle’s machinations do not lead to the foundation of any true marriage. They lead — as everyone knows who has read, seen, or even just heard of The Wild Duck — to the ruin of a family, and the inadvertent murder of the daughter, Hedvig.

Let us none the less follow Gregers Werle step by step in order to discover how things can go so badly. Is the misery solely the result of untimely idealism on others’ behalf, or does Ibsen give us other keys to the tragedy?

Power and Idealism

In the home of the photographer Ekdal three generations are living side by side. The most obviously powerless of them is the eldest, the grandfather Ekdal, whose position in the family is made apparent by his first two entrances. He walks from his room through the studio, to return from the kitchen with a steaming mug. His explanation is that he needs it for the copying work which is his contribution to the household economy: ‘the ink’s as cloudy as porridge’. And what is more, he does not wish to be disturbed in his room.

It is not only the spectator who understands his subtext. The grand-daughter and the daughter do too. They ‘look at each other’, as Ibsen writes in his stage directions. And Gina Ekdal says to her daughter Hedvig: ‘Where do you imagine he has the money from?’ — ‘money for booze’ is the implication. They have no need to explain to each other that the hot water is for a toddy. Ekdal drinks on the sly. They are well aware of the fact, and neither of them makes any attempt to be an apostle of the truth where he is concerned. Old Ekdal is permitted to have his ‘secret’ in peace.

The same applies to his son, Hjalmar Ekdal. Officially he is the head of the family. In reality it is Gina, his wife, who does the work and controls the family. It is she who takes the photographs, while the photographer Ekdal only retouches them. Gina knows all too well that he most often sleeps when he withdraws after lunch to his sofa to ponder his ‘invention’.

But she is not one to confront him with any truths. That father and son Ekdal play together at hunting in the loft is not something she wishes to change. That must remain their own affair, so long as the household functions.

It is into this game of ninepins that Gregers Werle enters like a dog — ‘an extraordinarily smart dog’, as he prefers to see himself. The germ of his undertaking was planted in the course of the dinner in the first act. Now he rents a room in the Ekdal house in order to execute it. The undertaking demands that he work upon all four members of the family.

Gregers draws information out of them one by one, using the same tactics as we saw him employ in his first conversation with Hjalmar. He conceals from the person he is talking to what for him is the main issue, hiding it in his text as a secondary detail.

The couple have been married for ‘nearly’ fifteen years, he learns from Gina, piecing the information together with the fact that Hedvig will be fourteen ‘the day after tomorrow’, and was thus probably conceived while Gina was still in merchant Werle’s household.

He learns from old Ekdal that the wild duck has come from Werle — yet another piece of the jigsaw he is busy compiling. With the help of this knowledge, he takes up a position superior to that of the people into whose house he has
moved, and whom he wants to rescue from their fantasies and their ignorance of the true context of events.

Neither old Ekdal nor his son has any suspicion. Gina does — ‘suddenly attentive, she looks at him’ — but only one person in the house offers any resistance to him, and that is the Ekdals’ downstairs neighbour, Dr. Relling. Ibsen’s language indicates as much, in that Relling always responds directly to Gregers Werle’s subtext, not to his text. Relling sees through him, having crossed paths with Gregers on a previous occasion. He knows that Werle went around introducing people to ‘the claim of the ideal’, and now ridicules him for it.

When Gregers first talks of his mission, doing so through a metaphoric description of the atmosphere in the Ekdal home — ‘an odious swamp’ — Hjalmar dismisses him without any sign that he properly understands what Gregers has in mind. When Gregers makes his second attempt, Relling is present and reacts directly; he reads the subtext and shows it by turning the ‘implicature’ of the text against Gregers himself: ‘Forgive me for saying so, but might it not be you yourself who are bringing the stench in from the pits up there?’

And when Relling is forced to give up his attempt to obstruct Gregers Werle’s treatment of the Ekdal couple, because he can see that the cure has already begun to take effect on Hjalmar, he exhorts them at least to leave the child in peace. But too late. Hedvig has already been drawn so far into the marriage cure that she ends by doing harm to herself.

When she does so, it is not because Gregers’s cure has had its effect on her. He has admittedly required her to shoot the wild duck, as a sign that she wants to participate in Gregers’s cleansing process, the ‘putting down’ of illusions. It is Gregers’s belief to the last that this is what she is doing, when a shot resounds from the loft. But it is herself she has shot, not the wild duck, after her father has rejected her, because Gregers thought it would be healthy for him to discover that he was not the child’s natural father.

But Gregers has no effect on Hedvig. ‘Strange’ is the word she applies to everything he says and effects. ‘The depths of the sea’ is where he wants to imagine the wild duck has been. With her easily alerted linguistic imagination, she is uneasy at the idea that the whole loft is ‘the depths of the sea’ — ‘because it’s only a loft after all’.

For her there is nothing unhealthy about this. Her imagination is constructive. She has ideas of applying it in art and teaching herself to engrave pictures. But Gregers Werle’s scheming is the death of her.

Bergman’s Stockholm Production

This is, in broad detail, how The Wild Duck has most commonly been read, with Gregers at the top as the wielder of power, Hedvig at the bottom as the victim, and the two Ekdals with Gina in the middle as the broken-hearted survivors. This reading has surely never been more beautifully and more warmly defended than in Ingmar Bergman’s Stockholm production of 1972.

Bergman’s interpretation takes as its starting point a scenographic idea. The interpretation is indicated already in the stage set. The attic studio of the photographer Ekdal here does not fill the whole stage. It is only a small, two-dimensional room downstage, enclosed by a low, three-panelled screen. Through a door at one side the two hunters go out into the loft in front of the narrow studio, while the roof-beams are projected on to the extensive backcloth.

The loft with the Ekdal’s dream world, the ‘forest’ with the animals and the hunt, is no longer a small, shadowy room behind the flat, as in Ibsen’s stage directions. It now lies around and in front of the flat. When Hedvig and her father point to the wild duck, they are not hidden in the impenetrable darkness. They stand out on the proscenium and point — at us.

In this way we, the spectators, are designated as the world which Gregers Werle wants to bring to self-awareness — and which he causes to collapse in the attempt. The production was conceived at a time when the concept of and the demand for bringing people to consciousness dominated public debate.

One precondition for the success of the interpretation is that the object of this process of making conscious, and of the demand for truth — namely, Hjalmar — can also be made an
Two scenes from Bergman’s production of The Wild Duck. Top: Hedvig and Gregers Werle (left), with Old Ekdal and his son (centre), and Gina Ekdal (right). Bottom: Gregers confronts Hedvig and her mother.
object of identification: that he should become a reasonably warm and lovable father of a family, who functions relatively well on what Gregers terms illusions. When he returns home from the dinner at the Werle household and boasts of the many pointed remarks he has hurled in the face of the fine grand chamberlains – ‘I just gave them a piece of my mind’ – he is comical, because what he is saying, or at least what he would have his two women believe, is not true.

But Bergman has Hjalmar sing this phrase and thus lend it a reconciliatory touch of self-irony. ‘His sensitivity is honest, his melancholy beautiful in its form, not a trace of affectation’: it was in these words that Ibsen described Hjalmar in a letter of 14 November 1884, where he specifically vetoed any kind of parody in the acting of the role. So Bergman at least has Ibsen on his side in this aspect of the interpretation.

The whole burden of the play’s statement thus rests with the character who carries the claim of the ideal in his back pocket, as he sets about bringing others to full ‘consciousness’. Everything about this character is exterior, for he burns with a cold flame: the humourless laughter, the stilted walk, like one who preaches ideological revolution without realizing that he himself would hate the revolution more than anyone, if ever it should actually come about.

But Bergman does not read the text quite so simply. He has balanced his opposition to the Gregers Werles of his generation by making his antagonist in the play, Dr. Relling, also an unsavoury fellow, who quite deliberately ensures that people do not have their eyes opened, and who himself is a conscious purveyor of life-lies to those he thinks in need of them. If Gregers Werle is the more dangerous, he is at least a misled idealist, while Relling is a staunch cynic.

In this way Bergman succeeds in defending the estranged Hjalmar Ekdal to the very last, while at the same time placing Mrs. Sorby in the pivotal position between the two opponents, Gregers and Relling. Where Hedvig bears all the pain in this performance, Mrs. Sorby bears all its utopian optimism.

She is the one who marries old Werle and openly tells him about all the sorts of things other people hide from one another – the very things Gregers wants to force them to look in the eye. The efforts of this missionary of the truth bounce off her, because with her truth comes from within.

In her bright red dress and coat, she stands out like a leitmotif of the performance, in contrast to its other dusty greens and browns. Only in one other detail of the play does a bright red colour appear: on one of the chairs in the Ekdals’ home. It is the one on which, at the end of the play, old Ekdal sits in his uniform with his dreams. ‘The forest takes its revenge’: with this line of connection to the past, his fantasy about the world in the loft is defended like some sort of truth, in harmony with his being.

To deny an average person his ‘life-lie’ is to deny him his happiness: this is the truth which Bergman extracts from the play, modifying it in two ways. He lets the honest Mrs. Sorby take all the weight she can carry. And he extends the loft-space to encompass everything that cannot be reduced to the level of concept, including the whole audience. Much of what goes on in the little lighted room in the centre is important, ‘the debate of the day’. But catastrophic consequences ensue if it cannot encompass and comprehend the whole surrounding loft. For the forest takes its revenge, and the revenge strikes the innocent.

Only one character is left out of Bergman’s reading of the text: the old merchant Werle. This is understandable. In himself he is not particularly interesting. He may be seen as merely the begetter of the intrigue.

But by pushing him into the background, one layer is lost of the character of Gregers Werle, whose begetter he also is. Gregers has yet another subtext which remains silent in Bergman’s interpretation. The idealistic wielder of power is himself subject to a power.

Ronconi: Power and Realism

One alternative to the Bergman reading of The Wild Duck with merchant Werle in the centre can be demonstrated by reference to another performance of equal distinction, Luca Ronconi’s Rome production of 1977. Through the two performances, two of the period’s leading
From Bergman's production. Top: Gregers and Hedvig (left) with Hjalmar Ekdal and his father. Bottom: Mrs. Sørby plays hostess at Merchant Werle's.
directors pursue a hidden dialogue about Ibsen’s text.

Ronconi’s interpretation, too, is right from the beginning demonstrated through the stage set. He has taken as his point of departure the fact that poor, misguided Hjalmar Ekdal is a photographer by profession: the whole production is in black and white, and it opens with three illuminated photographs in a dark room. They decorate the wall in the house of the old industrial baron Werle.

His dinner guests, whom Ibsen lets us hear mainly from off-stage, have been placed by Ronconi in two static groups by the proscenium, with the place-settings before them on the floor. And when they move it is with the reeling movements of blind men.

In this way we are prepared for the emphasis on old Werle, who here is blind, with dark glasses and a white stick. He sees nothing, but has determined everything. He is the power, the man who owns money and people, the begetter of evil in the tragedy.

The begetter, too, of son Gregers, the misguided idealist, who here is white-haired and made to look of an age with the old man, just one of the pawns in the old man’s game: Gregers, who may babble about ideology and cause the death of a young girl and the ruin of a marriage, but in so doing is only a fitting camouflage for the real oppression exercised by the financier Werle, which is not disturbed one little bit by Gregers’s idealism.

The surrealistic shock-effect of the performance occurs in the second act, which takes place in the home of the photographer Ekdal. The little studio in the flat, where Werle has set him up with his abandoned mistress, is made up of three rooms, and the shock comes when one discovers that the three rooms are exactly identical, like photocopies of one another. Ekdal and Gina and Hedvig appear in turn in each of them, addressing the others as if they were taking up the positions they occupy only in one of the other rooms. And when the door opens, it is the same door which opens simultaneously in all three dividing walls. In comes Gregers – not from the side of the stage, but out from one of the dividing walls in the centre of the stage. It is unsettling in the elementary manner of a surrealist painting by Magritte.

And the loft with the wild duck is created by means of the whole set – all three rooms with three matching sets of furniture – being slid out sideways, while the actors remain where they are. And so, on a large empty stage, with a metal crate in the corner for the wild duck, the doublings have finally ceased, the light is dimmed, and the characters confront one another. In the world of fantasy it is finally possible to exist without one’s vision becoming distorted.

The idea of the photographic technique, which begins by seeming just rather droll, slowly becomes loaded with meaning. The photograph – the most realistic of all representations – is, in the last analysis, the most unrealistic, with all its potential for copying and retouching.

At any rate, this is how Ronconi uses it. It is the blind Werle who ‘sees’ reality, for reality is power, and he knows what power is built on. He has it, and is holding on to it. The sighted, whom he owns, live in the misleading world of the photograph, each supported by his own illusion – Gregers by his, Ekdal by his, it makes no difference.

In the fantasy of the loft they enjoy for a short interval a world which is whole and free from oppression. But Gregers, who thinks he is rebelling against his father, actually brings order into the latter’s world by wiping out the world of the loft.

Hedvig shoots herself behind a lowered curtain. We are not to be allowed to lose ourselves in grief over her death alone. Anger is to be directed not at Gregers, but at his father. When the curtain is raised again, her body is lying there, but now the loft, too, is divided into three like a set of photocopies, with three identical crates for the duck. The fantasy of the loft has been eradicated. The loft has now been made into the illusion which it must become if it is to be mastered.

The absolute ruler is the merchant Werle. He landed his former friend Lieutenant Ekdal in the soup, through their shady business dealings up in the Hojadal forest, for which Ekdal alone was punished. And he got his friend’s son to bear the consequences of his seduction of Gina. But his own son is equally tacit and unexplained in Bergman’s and Ronconi’s productions.
Two scenes from Ronconi’s production of *The Wild Duck*. 
The Substitute Patricide

Gregers Werle and his father have their first confrontation after Hjalmar has inadvertently put Gregers on the track of ‘a mission to live for’. This is a different kind of dialogue from the one between the two childhood friends. Here it is not only the one character who has a subtext: both have one, and are equally intent on grasping that of the other.

WERLE: I’ve seen to it that Ekdal gets copying work to do for the office, and I’m paying him much more than his work is worth —

GREGERS: (without looking at him) Hm — that I don’t doubt.

WERLE: You laugh? You think maybe I’m not telling the truth? Oh, you won’t find mention of it in the books, I admit; I don’t keep a record of that sort of payment.

GREGERS: (smiles coldly) No, I suppose there are certain payments of which it is best not to keep a record.

WERLE: (looks up sharply) What do you mean by that?

GREGERS: (summoning up his courage) Have you kept a record of what it cost you to have Hjalmar Ekdal learn photography?

WERLE: Have I kept a record? Why on earth—?

GREGERS: I know now that it was you who financed it. And I know too that it was you who so generously made it possible for him to get established.

WERLE: You see — and then you say I’ve done nothing for the Ekdals!

All those stage directions! Old Werle is at pains to prove his magnanimity, Gregers to prove the opposite. A moment later Werle indicates that he has understood his son’s intention. He steps in with a counter-move. He proposes to him that he go into the firm as a partner. But the son reads his father’s text in the same way as the father reads the son’s: he ‘looks at him coldly’, and says ‘There’s something behind all this’.

It is this encounter which, within the framework of the play, becomes the motivating force for Gregers Werle’s plan:

WERLE: You’re going? Leaving the house?

GREGERS: Yes. Because now at least I can see a mission to live for.

When Gregers later gives a name to his mission, he calls it ‘laying the foundations of a true marriage’, ‘a partnership founded on truth without concealment’ — almost exactly the same as what Nora says she wants in the great confrontation at the close of A Doll’s House. But Nora is a heroine, while Gregers is a villain.

This might mean one of two things: that Ibsen has in the space of five years shifted to a diametrically opposite position — or that the emphasis lies elsewhere, that there is a text in Gregers’s speech beneath the one we hear, and beneath the one which we have so far decoded.

The play’s structure points to the fact that the latter is the case. For old Werle, who by his very existence gets Gregers going with his mission, is after all the same man who in the course of the play enters with Mrs. Sorby into a marriage of the very kind Gregers advocates — much to Hjalmar’s bewilderment: ‘I feel there’s something so offensive in the thought that now it is he, and not I, who is building a true marriage’.

Only if one reads a subconscious subtext beneath Gregers’s conscious subtext will the whole thing make sense. Gregers wants to hit out at his father with his plan, wants to free himself from his power and create something for himself to live for — not to be old Werle’s hired assistant, as he has been hitherto, nor to be his partner, as he is invited to be henceforth. He wants to be his own master.

The tragic element lies in the fact that he can only envisage being so by being a master of others. The son rebels against the father by making himself a patriarch vis-à-vis his friend, and in so doing comes to murder his daughter.

Ibsen was reproached for the fact that his ‘message’ about marriage in A Doll’s House took no account of the children. Both in the dramatis personae and in the structure of the play’s ideas, they appear only as dummies. By contrast, in The Wild Duck there is almost nothing but parents and children. Only as a son is Gregers fully motivated. And only as a ‘father’ can he be responsible for the damage he does.

It is as old as psychoanalysis itself to explain this as an expression of the Oedipus complex — the son belatedly living through the universal drama which a healthy man ought to have outgrown by the age of four: the wish to kill
his father in order to take possession of his mother.

But suppose it is not a universal drama, but a local one in this patriarchal family. Suppose it is about something which happens while the drama is taking place, not something which is laid down well in advance. Suppose it is about adults and power, not about children and sexuality. It may be wise to look beyond the children these adults once were, and instead to focus on the children they still are.

'We are father and son, after all', says old Werle. This need not refer to old sores from the time when sexual identity comes into being. It can also refer to a thoroughly contemporary power-relationship — to a guardian-relationship which not only determines the adults' upbringing, but also the society in which they live.

Power without Legitimation

The period in which Ibsen's world is rooted has been described in recent feminist criticism as being characterized by patriarchy in decline, because the patriarch has become barren. He has lost the life-giving strength previously accorded him by ideology, but he has not lost his power. What remains is a light without warmth, a power without legitimation, but a power nevertheless: the power which prevails in *The Wild Duck* and against which Gregers directs his impossible and untenable rebellion.

In her study of women in the period of the modern breakthrough, Pil Dahlerup says of Georg Brandes that he is known for his support of women's emancipation in Scandinavia, 'but he was far more intensely preoccupied with the question of what it means to be a man'. Something similar can be said about Ibsen. No other single literary work exerted an influence on women's emancipation comparable to that of *A Doll's House*, but few works tell us as much as *The Wild Duck* about what it means to be the son of a father in a patriarchal culture.

The son wants to murder the father. It is superfluous to suppose that it is a memory of what he perhaps once wanted to do as a child, for it is now that he is an adult that the father's power is a threat to him. But to want to murder the patriarch only leads the son into the father's footsteps: he himself becomes the 'patriarch', who governs others at will.

His power over their consciousness is even more devoid of legitimation than was his father's, and therefore brings with it the most fearful consequences for women and children and powerless men like Hjalmar Ekdal. Or, in the rigidly logical conclusion of Ronconi's interpretation, the son's exertion of power is nothing other than the ultimate phase of his father's — the full development of the patriarchal power through a substitute. Just as Hedvig becomes a substitute in the drama's ritual patricide.

But Gregers does have a motive which is legitimate, even if in the course of the play he forfeits every right to it. He wants to escape from his father's power and have power over his own life. He wants to take a grip on the world, make his own mark on it, instead of remaining invisible in his father's shadow. Gregers too is a human being, even if he acts inhumanely.

In Ronconi's allegory of power, old Werle stands in the centre. In Bergman's, what is central is the counterpart of power — all that is creatively irrational: the loft, the wild duck, the hunt, Hedvig's pictures, the forest which takes its revenge, old Ekdal, and, first and foremost, the figure which is the real centre of Bergman's interpretation, Hedvig herself.

These two equally consistent interpretations can neither cancel one another out nor be fused together. They both have an independent existence. But in both of them lives Ibsen's *Wild Duck*, which therefore encompasses more than either. One can also say that *The Wild Duck* encompasses different forms of the exercise of power, which can be viewed from different angles.

Idealism — or Will to Power?

The play's action is anchored in a socio-historic drama of which the protagonists are social classes. The merchant and financier Werle represents one class, the ruling one, while ex-housemaid Gina, née Hansen, represents the other. On her side are gathered the other economically and socially powerless characters
— her daughter, her father-in-law, and her husband.

In this drama Gregers plays an ambiguous role. By virtue of heredity and opportunities he belongs to the ruling class. By choice he allies himself to the oppressed. But thanks to the methods he chooses, he becomes an even worse oppressor of his allies than was his father.

One can read this as an expression of the fact that power is nothing in itself, but only a manifestation of fundamental objective antagonisms which are of an economic nature. Gregers’s subjective choice — to take the side of the oppressed against the oppressor, his father — is an objective impossibility. Either the choice is immaterial, or it makes a bad situation worse. Gregers flounders in history’s net. He is only the ruler’s involuntary tool. He is swallowed up and disappears in society’s history. He himself has none.

Such is the pattern in Ronconi’s interpretation of the text. And, through it, Gregers’s ambiguity disappears during the course of the drama. So does his guilt. He ends by becoming an unambiguous figure: a tool.

Conversely, if one disengages the play from its position in the history of society, one is faced with a series of individuals, whose life in itself is happy and could have continued happily, if only this do-gooder had not appeared on the scene. One person holds much power, others hold little — but happiness does not depend on one’s position within society’s economic antagonisms: it depends on the right to have one’s dreams undisturbed by busybodies.

Mrs. Sorby and merchant Werle together realize an ideal: a free and open relationship. It is something one can choose for oneself, but never, as Gregers does, on behalf of others. Gina and Hjalmar Ekdal live in a different kind of relationship, which basically is no less an ideal — as can be seen from the fact that Hedvig and old Ekdal have ideal living conditions within it: they can live out their dreams.

This Relling realizes. And, as Bergman’s example demonstrates, it is difficult to avoid Relling becoming the play’s definitive spokesman of the truth, although he not only conceals the ‘life-lie’ he encounters (Ekdal’s), but also cynically fabricates lies (for the benefit of Molvik). From this point of view the play has only one villain, Gregers. His villainy consists in a will to power, which is concealed from himself as idealism.

In the previous interpretation, power is nothing in itself. It is only a superficial symptom of a hierarchy of strength which is founded in economics, so that any moral criticism is only superficial. In the present interpretation, power — the will to power — is the real source of harm, and the morality which ought to hold in check the will to power becomes impotent as a result of the illusion — that there should be any kind of legitimate core to Gregers’s notion of serving a higher cause. Behind the idealism is concealed nothing but destructive egoism.

In this interpretation, too, Gregers ends by becoming an entirely unambiguous figure: a tyrant. But Ibsen did not want Gregers to become a simple pawn in the game. On the contrary, he saw him as a key figure, on whose subtle characterization the success of the performance depends: ‘Gregers is the play’s most difficult character in respect of the performance’, he wrote, in the letter already cited.

Aggression, Benign and Malignant

If power becomes either nothing or all — a mere symptom — or the very element of destructiveness in man, it is perhaps because there is a problem latent in our normal use of a concept like power. We need only look at the word ‘aggression’, which involves a similar problem. It can be used both of harmful, destructive actions — of the highwayman who slays his victim — and of actions which do no harm, but which on the contrary have the character of a defence and development of life: of the mountaineer who strives to reach his goal, or the farmer who clears the land and ploughs the earth.

Erich Fromm (for the examples are his), in his The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness (1973), took issue with the notion of man’s fundamental evil and attempted to solve the problem by drawing a distinction between benign and malignant aggression. Only the former does he call ‘aggression’, the latter by contrast ‘destructiveness’.
Aggression is an innate characteristic, a condition of our species, the instinct without which it could not survive. Destructiveness, on the other hand, is historically conditioned. The writers against whom he argues (Konrad Lorenz, B. F. Skinner) establish correctly that benign aggression is innate, equate it with malignant aggression — and then incorrectly conclude that destructiveness, too, is innate and therefore incurable.

Later in his book Fromm identifies the concept of power with the ‘malignant’ half of this two-pronged concept:

I have used the word ... power in reference to sadism [one of the variants of destructiveness], but one must be clearly aware of the ambiguity. Power can mean power over people, or it can mean power to do things. What the sadist is striving for is power over people, precisely because he lacks the power to be. Many writers, unfortunately, make use of this ambiguous meaning of the words ‘power’ and ‘control’ and in order to smuggle in the praise of ‘power over’, they identify it with ‘power to’.

I believe the problem is the other way round. I believe the word ‘power’ has been almost completely identified with the one of the two meanings which Fromm terms ‘power over’. And since this meaning, in contrast to Fromm’s emphasis, is so widely condemned both in words and ideas, we only concern ourselves with power as an evil — as a symptom either of a moral evil, of man’s destructiveness, or of a historical antagonism, the class struggle.

We thereby blind ourselves to an important connection. ‘Power over’ generally appears as the evil, ‘power to’ as the good. But there is nothing to be gained by denying that they have the same root — nothing, that is, other than an illusion: the illusion about the power-free community of people.

Fromm’s purpose is to decide where the evil — destructiveness — comes from. His argument for the view that it has its root in education, and therefore in history, and his refutation of the arguments of animal psychologists and behaviourists to the effect that it is ‘natural’, are extensive, consistent, and well documented.

But it is neither helpful, nor essential to his argument, to distinguish as he does between ‘benign’ and ‘malignant’ power, as if they were inherently different: they may well be one and the same in essence, while the transition from one to the other might still be conditioned by history, society, and education.

For the distinction can have a dangerous consequence. It can lead us to the illusion that what is good and right is not to desire any power for oneself. Yet it is only when we delude ourselves with the notion that we are not seeking power that we are really in danger of exercising the power that is evil.

This is what happens to Gregers Werle. He seeks a mission. It is what we all do, and it is legitimate. He wants to step out of the shadow left by his father, and to be seen. But he is powerless against his father. And powerlessness can be just as dangerous an evil as power, as Gregers’s story demonstrates, for it quickly turns into power over other people, instead of being replaced by ‘power to’ — that is, power over his own life.

Gregers does not know his own subtext, he does not know that it is about power. That is why it turns into power of the evil kind. It is Gregers, not the Ekdal family, who is the really powerless character in the play. In Ibsen’s world the patriarchal family is a heavier yoke to carry than the class struggle.

It has been said that the thesis of the play is the ‘polyinterpretability of the consciousness of the “other”’ — in other words, the fact that, since we must always deduce thought and motive from words and actions (deduce the inner meaning from the exterior), we can never know anything about each other, since everything can be interpreted in various ways.

I have posited that this characteristic of The Wild Duck is not the play’s thesis, but rather its dramatic technique — which, with Gregers as the central and most complex figure, then serves to make the statement that he who feels powerless can become a killer. He who has no power over his own life, and who does not admit to that kind of desire for power, can all too easily become the one to exercise power as an evil. Powerlessness can become a dangerous power.

It is a very specific microcosm which Ibsen uses in The Wild Duck for his analysis of the hidden exercise of power — this family where
the children have become adults and yet have failed to become grown-up. It is the patriarchal family in a particular phase of life.

The Son and the Daughter

If we now persist in our effort to see the drama of *The Wild Duck* as a power game in the present, and not merely as a slavish repetition of an unfinished drama from infancy, there will finally emerge yet another layer under Gregers's text: the ultimate subtext.

Full of idealism, he wants to complete a mission with respect to others' lives. It is the transference of his desire to be equal to his father, but leads only to Hedvig's being murdered in place of merchant Werle.

And yet, Gregers's innermost desire is not to kill either Hedvig or his father. Gregers is propelled by a pain which lies deep in his motivation — not the oedipal pain of not being able to possess his long-deceased mother, but the pain of not being loved.

In the initial confrontation between father and son, merchant Werle identifies Gregers with his mother: ‘She and you, you always stuck together. It was she who turned you against me from the beginning.’ Gregers completes the identification by shifting the emphasis away from person and towards what she had to suffer through being abandoned. Gregers replies to this protest: no, it was not she who turned me against you, ‘it was all she had to suffer and endure before she went under and came to such a wretched end’.

‘You want to be independent, you don’t want to be indebted to me for anything’, says Werle to Gregers, and in the same breath offers him a partnership in his firm. Gregers declines the offer on the spot. He does not want to be bought, he wants to be reckoned with, and that means, essentially, to be loved.

Gregers's first contribution towards an interpretation of his father in the conversation with Hjalmar — ‘he has a heart’ — is not only an interpretation which Gregers puts behind him as an illusion, it is also a wish-fulfilment dream — which remains unfulfilled. And with this we have penetrated to an even deeper layer of the text we began with, the initial dialogue between the former friends Hjalmar and Gregers. It includes a casual remark from Gregers, the presence of which, on a first reading, can be explained by its function in the intrigue.

But that does not exhaust its significance. It has an emotional content too, of which the form now becomes apparent. Gregers's sentence runs: ‘But father’s letters to me are always so brief.’

Hedvig dies when she lose her father's love. Gregers, who is not loved, ends by understanding his destiny as that of being ‘the thirteenth at table’ — that is to say, the one who must die. Thus the parallel is drawn between the two protagonists of *The Wild Duck*, Gregers and Hedvig. For he who is not loved dies.

Where there is an id there must be an ego, said Freud with his bright rationalistic belief that the penetration of emotion by reason is the way to the overcoming of suffering. Where there is no love, there will be power, says the pessimistic Ibsen. That is the tragic core of *The Wild Duck*, approached from opposite angles by Bergman and Ronconi, but only just touched upon by either of these two master builders of modern theatre.

*Translated by Andrea Cervi*