

# Ibsen's Evangelical Detective: Evidence and Proof in *The Wild Duck*

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ABSTRACT: The forensic language in *The Wild Duck*—its emphasis on the search for “proof” and “evidence” in uncovering a number of putative crimes and misdemeanours—relates the play to the Detective Fiction genre of the late nineteenth-century. The argument of the paper suggests that Ibsen calls in question the basic premises of the genre (the need, for example, to uncover truth and trace evil to its source thereby restoring a chaotic world to a form of Edenic order) and subverts the most fundamental expectations of the crime fiction reader. Gregers Werle acts on the assumption that the investigator can redeem a fallen humanity by uncovering incontrovertible fact and revealing undisclosed motives; but his deeply subjective, evangelical methods disorient the world even further, leaving the audience with the sense that the uncertainties of existence make such “detection” both irrelevant and dangerous.

RÉSUMÉ: L'utilisation d'un langage légal dans *Le Canard Sauvage*, qui met l'accent sur la quête de « preuves » et « d'évidences » en dévoilant de nombreux crimes présumés et de délits, associe la pièce au genre policier de la fin du 19<sup>e</sup> siècle. L'argument principal de cet essai suggère que Ibsen remet en question les prémisses élémentaires de ce genre littéraire (par exemple, le besoin de découvrir la vérité et de retracer le mal jusqu'à sa source, ramenant ainsi un monde chaotique à une sorte d'ordre édénique) et renverse les attentes les plus fondamentales du lecteur de romans policiers. Gregers Werle agit sur le principe que l'enquêteur peut « sauver » une humanité déchue en dévoilant un fait irréfutable et en révélant des motifs secrets. Toutefois, ses méthodes profondément subjectives et évangéliques désorientent davantage encore le monde, laissant à l'audience l'impression que les incertitudes de l'existence rendent une telle enquête à la fois inutile et dangereuse.

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“**B**evis —!”<sup>1</sup> cries Hjalmar Ekdal in Act V of *The Wild Duck*. “Proof!” But it is not absolutely clear from the context what he wants his wife Gina to prove. “Jeg synes, du skulde bevise,” she replies: “I think proof is up to you.” Proof that Hedvig is his child? Proof of paternity? Proof that her past relationship with Old Werle has been without consequences? In 1884 and in the absence of DNA, no such proof is possible; and failing all certainty, Hjalmar’s response is to rewrite the past history of his relationship with his child as one of deception and guile on Hedvig’s part. Gregers—whose scheme of moral rehabilitation is about to collapse—protests. The child, he assures Hjalmar, can provide evidence of her fidelity—“vidnesbyrd” (263): testamentary proof, an act of formal witness. “Å, hvad vidnesbyrd kan hun gi mig!” Hjalmar cries—“What evidence could she give me.”

Ibsen’s forensic discourse, the insistent and reiterated language of the crime-novel, Gregers’ self-appointed function as private investigator of the crimes and misdemeanours of his father and his relentless attribution of motive in the quest for certainty, all suggest the tropes of detective fiction—or, at any rate, the themes and concerns and protagonists of nineteenth-century mystery narratives. The genre, initiated by Edgar Allan Poe in 1841 with *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* and the creation of his great cerebral detective Auguste Dupin, I would suggest, is one possible context in which to read *The Wild Duck*<sup>2</sup>—bearing in mind that, a few years after Ibsen’s play, Sherlock Holmes joined the detectives of Poe, Dickens, and Wilkie Collins,<sup>3</sup> making his appearance in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) to formulate the principles and methodology of detection that nearly all subsequent mystery writers tacitly acknowledge.

I want, very briefly, to outline the classical tactics and the world-view of nineteenth-century detective fiction—if only to demonstrate how Ibsen, in *The Wild Duck*, so thoroughly undermines and destabilizes the assumptions of contemporaries like Conan Doyle. It might seem merely fanciful to make the point that Dr. Doyle was an eye specialist for whom clarity of vision was a commitment, while Ibsen was chronically astigmatic and tended to see experience as a blur—a world of contradictions and ambiguities, where everything is subject to contrariness. And Doyle, like his creation, was also a man of science for whom precision, accuracy and rational inductive processes were paramount. Open the stories of Sherlock Holmes at random, and you will encounter this sort of declarative statement by the great detective about his procedure:

It has been a case for intellectual deduction, but when this original intellectual deduction is confirmed point by point by quite a number of independent incidents, then the subjective becomes objective and we can confidently say that we have reached our goal.

(1042)

Even those contemporary detectives,<sup>4</sup> who are habitually driven by subjective impulse, would surely agree that the gut response must translate into evidence before proof incontrovertible can be established. And, like all the detectives for whom he is a prototype, Sherlock Holmes's motive (as W.H. Auden suggests) is "a love of the neutral truth" (410); and his mission is "to restore the state of grace in which the aesthetic and the ethical are one" (409). Auden's final judgment of the genre, moreover, invokes the evangelical or eschatological vision that surely accounts for the marvelous satisfaction provided by such fiction and that Ibsen—as if anticipating the genre—so totally subverts in *The Wild Duck*: "The fantasy, then, which the detective story addict indulges is the fantasy of being restored to the Garden of Eden" (24).

This last point, I think, is crucial. The chaos and violence and incomprehensible atrocity that surround us in the fallen world we inhabit, are all resolved when the mystery is subject to rational inquiry and evil is tracked to its source. Detective fiction, as Robin Winks points out, is "moral fiction" (9). It consoles us, makes the incredible credible once again, and the incomprehensible comprehensible. "In this sense, then," writes Winks, "detective fiction is...conservative, almost compulsive in its belief (to which, of course, there are exceptions) that one may in truth trace cause and effect, may place responsibility just *here*, may pass judgment, may even assess blame" (10). In restoring us to Eden before the Fall, it follows, the detective is a kind of redeemer—"the exceptional individual [in Auden's phrase] who is in a state of grace" (410). The dreadful realization, in *The Wild Duck*, is that this is precisely Gregers Werle's sense of his own role in the fallen world, his mission indeed being to restore humanity to Eden and trace evil to its individual source, thus ridding society of anxiety and guilt and illusion. My point is simply this: that unlike other detectives in the narrative tradition, Gregers relies neither on inductive logic nor deductive inquiry. He is motivated by deeply subjective eschatological impulses, and he collects "evidence" without any concern for the ambiguity of facts and the fallibility of his proof-seeking motives. Instead of restoring the chaos of the world to order by resolving the mysteries of existence in a rational universe, Ibsen's detective tropes destabilize these assumptions and leave his audience with the questionable veracity of proof in a world without stable values. It is in this sense that *The Wild Duck* calls in question the most basic assumptions of the classic detective novel and projects us into a post-modern world of disorder and disturbing uncertainty.

Ibsen's out-of-focus world in *The Wild Duck* is not, of course, chaotic and violent and atrocious. It is a world of delicate accommodation to circumstance, illusions that sustain fictional personal significance, and the sort of humdrum life that avoids too much reality. There is no urgent need for detection—unless one fabricates a crime and seeks for the certainty of motive in the most equivocal aspects of human behaviour. It is a twilight world in which no one sees very clearly—some, indeed, are going blind—and where it is virtually impossible to

acquire reliable information. The tone of the play is established, as the curtain rises, by the two servants tidying Old Werle's study—one incorrigibly curious who asks questions about Werle's private life, the other incorrigibly determined to deflect them. The answers are all non-committal: "Fan' ved"; "Kanske det" (168)—"The Devil only knows"; "Could be." That is as much as we glean, as audience members, about most of the putative facts of the play. But Gregers persists, and he infects Hjalmar—all too gullible, who absorbs others' suspicions by an insidious process of osmosis—with his own unfounded insinuations. There is a typical moment towards the end of the play, when Hjalmar's confusion rises to panic level as he vilifies his little daughter (whom he is persuaded to believe is none of his):

HJALMAR: Det forfærdelige er jo netop at jeg ikke véd, hvad jeg skal tro,—at jeg aldrig kan få vide det. Men kan du a virkelig tvile på, at det må være, som jeg siger?  
(264)

HJALMAR: The horrible thing is exactly this—I really don't know what to believe—and I'll never be able to find out. But can you really doubt that it must be what I'm saying?

Confusion and certainty alternate wildly in his utterance: his bewilderment in a world that will not yield the information he seeks, and his determination to cling to the unproven inferences of Gregers' irresponsible hypotheses.

"One forms provisional theories," says Sherlock Holmes, "and waits for time or fuller knowledge to explode them" (1038-39). All is subject to disproof in detective fiction—and part of the pleasure derives from the reader's anticipation of these explosions. But Gregers' theories are not provisional and are therefore not subject to revealing knowledge or disproof. His hypothesis derives from a deeply esoteric assertion of his father's evil, based in large measure upon his dead mother's delirious accusations that Old Werle is a lecherous seducer of the servants, and his own uncorroborated suspicion that his father is a crook who incriminated Hjalmar's father in the illegal harvesting of crown land and allowed Old Ekdal to go to prison on his behalf. He returns to the village, after many years, to right these wrongs and to save the Ekdal family from the filth and the corruption in which his father has mired them. (Dirt, disease, and images of a fetid environment are Gregers' habitual description of the fallen world that needs his redeeming agency.) The point, of course, is that he may be right about Old Werle. Or he may not. "Fan' ved .... Kanske det." But Ibsen never permits us to move beyond the equivocal nature of existence and resolve the uncertainty. The question of proof arises, once again, in the first major confrontation of father and

son at the end of Act I when Gregers confronts Old Werle with his possible guilt in the illegal felling on government land:

WERLE: ... Men kendsgerningen er nu den, at han blev dømt og jeg frifunden.

GREGERS: Ja, jeg véd nok, at der ingen beviser var.

WERLE: Frifindelse er frifindelse.

(179)

WERLE: ... But these are the facts—he was found guilty, and I was acquitted.

GREGERS: Yes, I am well aware that there was no proof.

WERLE: Acquittal is acquittal.

There is no proof, and a court of law has found Old Werle innocent of collusion. Why then does Gregers persist in his charge? It may be because Old Werle does not offer a sufficiently spirited defense of his own acquittal, and relies too heavily on the verdict of the law. But there is something even more sinister in Gregers' search for evidence. He is determined to draw his own negative inferences from highly equivocal evidence: the fact, for instance, that his father has given Old Ekdal some work in the office—and pays him far more than the going rate; the fact that he has set up Hjalmar in his photography studio; and the fact that he has concealed these costs from the public eye by excluding the expenses from the business accounts. Proof of a guilty conscience? Or proof of the old man's charitable responsibility to a former partner and his family? "Fan' ved ... Kanske det." What is clear, however, is that evidential proof has been divorced, in Gregers' method of detection, from comprehensive motive; and his accusations grow increasingly more incriminating as they grow more deeply subjective.

The most damaging and impertinent inquiry, however, remains Gregers' investigation of Hedvig's "legitimacy." It is based upon hearsay evidence that he treats as certainty, circumstantial events that he treats as incontrovertible fact, contradictory proofs that he simplifies as unassailable clues, and attributions of motive that take no account of the complexity of human response to the uncertainty of experience. Gregers alone claims perfect vision in an out-of-focus world where, literally, myopia blurs every fact and every attitude. "Du har sét mig med din mors øjne," Old Werle tells his son (184). "You have seen me with your mother's eyes"—the eyes of a demented and jealous woman whose accusations of his father's infidelity Gregers is only too willing to believe. Convinced that Old Werle palmed off a discarded (and possibly pregnant) mistress on to Hjalmar, he begins a line of prejudiced and compromised investigation that piles uncertainty upon uncertainty. Was the child, whose fourteenth birthday is two days away, conceived in or out of wedlock? "Fan' ved ... Kanske det." Gina and Hjalmar have been married for fifteen years—short of a couple of crucial months during which she has been ambiguously involved with both putative

fathers. Gina never denies that she had a sexual relationship with the old man after his wife's death, information wrongly concealed from Hjalmar but not necessarily proof positive of Hedvig's bastardy. Nor, indeed, is Hedvig's encroaching blindness unambiguous proof that the purblind Werle is her father. As Hjalmar points out, the child's failing eyesight has been diagnosed as an hereditary affliction but, despite evidence of an equivocal nature, Gregers jumps to his conclusions:

HJALMAR: (*sukker*) Arveligt, rimeligvis.

GREGERS: (*studsende*) Arveligt?

GINA: Ekdals mor havde også svagt syn.

HJALMAR: Ja, det siger far; jeg kan jo ikke huske hende.  
(196-7)

HJALMAR: (*with a sigh*) Hereditary, most likely.

GREGERS: (*with a start*) Hereditary?

GINA: Hjalmar's mother also had poor eyesight.

HJALMAR: Yes, that's what my father says. I can't really remember her.

Gina offers information that Hjalmar cannot convincingly corroborate, but there is sufficient doubt of a reasonable nature to indicate a need for extreme caution. Both Relling and Gina see the extreme danger to Hedvig in pursuing this manic line of inquiry; and Gina's equivocation may indeed be a protective ploy to shield the child and the family against destruction. But Gregers persists, infecting the impressionable Hjalmar with grievous uncertainty about his wife's decency and his child's legitimacy to the point where the distraught man finally confronts Gina with the accusatory question. It is one of Ibsen's masterstrokes of uncertainty in the play:

HJALMAR: Jeg vil vide, om—dit barn har ret til at leve under mit tag.

GINA: (*retter sig ivejret; øjnene lyner*). Og det spør du om!

HJALMAR: Du skal svare mig på dette ene: Hører Hedvig mig til—eller —? Nå!

GINA: (*ser på ham med kold trods*). Jeg véd ikke.

HJALMAR: (*dirrer let*). Du véd det ikke!

GINA: Hvor kan jeg vide det? En slig en, som jeg er—  
(247)

HJALMAR: I want to know if—your child has the right to live under my roof.

GINA: (*gathering herself up, with flashing eyes*). And you ask me that!

HJALMAR: You will answer me on this point: does Hedvig belong to me—or—?  
Well!

GINA: (*looking at him with cold defiance*). I don't know.

HJALMAR: (*trembling slightly*). You don't know that!

GINA: How can I know that? Such a woman like *me* —

Does she know or doesn't she? Treated like a whore and forced to respond to insulting charges, Gina maintains a defensive and sarcastic attitude. Fuelled by an ice-cold anger—her dignity offended and her child virtually dispossessed by malicious rumour—she claims ignorance as the ultimate weapon in her arsenal of outraged womanhood. If, indeed, she *knows*, she is determined *not* to tell. And if Hjalmar is denied all certainty, so are we, the audience. *Doubt*, in the modern theatre, has become the stock-in-trade of post-modern dramatists like John Patrick Shanley. But, in Gina's dubious disclaimer of ignorance, Ibsen was the first to cast doubt on doubt itself.

What matters, finally, is how to comport oneself in a world of complex ambiguities, where evidence eludes proof, where possibility remains unresolved and truth seems ever elusive. *The Wild Duck* is full of strategies to counteract the miasma of insecurity and uncertainty that, for most of the inhabitants of Ibsen's world, is intolerable. From Relling's cultivation of the "life-lie" for everyone but himself, to Old Ekdal's fantasy of the past recovered in the play-world of the attic, these alternative fictions to a world of indeterminate reality manage, somehow, to assuage their fears of meaninglessness. Old Werle's strategy, however, is the most compelling—if only because he confronts uncertainty with what might conceivably be an ethic of moral responsibility. What is at issue in the so-called investigation is the deed of gift that Old Werle draws up to provide Old Ekdal with a modest pension that will pass, on the old man's death, to Hedvig. Hjalmar, well-coached by Gregers, leaps immediately to the conclusion that the deed of gift is a bribe, a trap, a tacit confession of paternity—the evidentiary proof he has been seeking. It may indeed be so. "Fan' ved." But, as in all assessments of Old Werle's motives, Ibsen obliges us to consider the "tvertimod"—the contradictory evidence—in these gestures of reparation. It is at least feasible, in a world of dire uncertainty, that the ethically motivated individual will act as *if* he were responsible, as *if* a dubious moral obligation were real. Faced with the indeterminacy of Hedvig's paternity, we watch the behaviour of these two putative fathers. Hjalmar brutally casts the child aside as none of his. Old Werle provides her with an income, on the assumption that she *may* be his daughter. It is, of course, a highly equivocal situation in the play. Do we read Old Werle as the heavy villain of Gregers' scenario? Or is he a moral centre whose decency belies the charges leveled against him by his son, or by Hjalmar's spiteful judgment that his blindness is a form of "retfærdige gengældelse" (244)—the retributive justice of Fate that cost him his eyes? It is the reader-as-director who must ultimately contemplate such issues raised by the deliberate indeterminacy of the text.

If the themes of detective fiction—crimes and misdemeanours, proof and detection, investigation, accusation and judgment—are explicit in *The Wild Duck*, then the surprise of the play is to cast the detective himself as the prime suspect

whose lethal meddling derives in large measure from a combination of absolute certainty and esoteric subjectivity. Auden's evangelical view of the professional detective as an exceptional individual who, in a state of grace, restores society to a condition of Edenic wholeness, is counterbalanced by his definition of the amateurs "who have no motive for being detectives except caprice, or because ... they are motivated by avarice or ambition and might just as well be murderers" (410). Gregers is the quintessential amateur whose evangelical motives replicate those of the professional, and who is motivated by a combination of proselytizing zeal and a profound hatred of his father. Ibsen describes his psychic condition as "overspændt" (183, 185)—one of those pre-Freudian attempts to describe the psychic life, variously translated as "highly-strung," "hysterical," or "neurotic." Moreover, in this world of fantasists in search of fictions to reconstruct stability out of doubt, Gregers' own particular fantasies abstract from reality by turning existence into allegories that plunge uncertainty into even deeper levels of obscurity. The duck—even more than Desdemona's handkerchief—is the most grotesquely over-allegorized object in dramatic literature: at one and the same time a cuckoo in the Ekdal nest, an embodiment of the evil imposed by Old Werle on the Ekdal family, and an emblem of their crippled state. "Nej, véd du hvad, Gregers," says Hjalmar after one of Gregers' symbolic explications of his existence, "—dette her skønner jeg ikke et ord af" (204). "Well, you know something Gregers—I don't understand one word of this stuff." Hedvig's confusion is even more extreme: "Men det var ligesom han mente noget andet, end de han sa—hele tiden" (204). "But it was as if he meant something quite different from what he said—all the time." The most sinister of these allegorical meanings, of course, is the implicit correlation of *The Wild Duck* with the child of dubious origins and Gregers' unthinking disregard of its consequences. "Se på barnet," Gina cries in the face of this disaster. "Se på barnet!" (248) "Look at the child ... Look at the child!" But to see the child as a living reality—not as evidence, not as proof, not as the object of disreputable motive—is an image that Gregers is powerless to restore. "Jeg vilde alt til det bedste," he says apologetically. (248) "I meant it all for the best." And to restore the world to its unfallen state, Ibsen's evangelical detective embarks on his ultimate strategy of social redemption.

If Auden is correct in suggesting that the fantasy of detective fiction is that of being restored to the Garden of Eden, then no work in the genre could be more literal in that fantasy than *The Wild Duck*. If Gregers' range of reference is partly forensic, it is overwhelmingly evangelical in its pseudo-messianic theology—a theology that often reads like a pastiche of some "paranoid prophet's" <sup>5</sup> prayer book. Claiming as his purpose-in-life ("en livsopgave," 221) the pursuit and proselytizing of a vaguely intuited Claim of the Ideal that he carries around in his heart ("den ideale fordring ... i brystet," 225), he offers the gift of clear-sightedness and freedom to the benighted and deluded community of the Ekdals. "Jeg har i sinde at åbne Hjalmar Ekdals øjne ... [og] Hjalmar kan jeg fri ud

af al den løgn og fortielse” (226): “My mission is to open Hjalmar’s eyes ... [and] free him from all these lies and deceptions.” Assuming the burden of the world’s guilt, he hopes to expiate his own sick conscience (“min syge samvittighed,” 227) even as he raises the fallen world into the redemptive light of understanding (“et opgør, som en hel ny livsførelse skal grundes på” 236). Forgiveness and transcendence and the confrontation with reality are the prerequisites for his recovered paradise; and to assert the effectiveness of his vision, Gregers demands of Hedvig an action that will transfigure the world even as it provides evidence of her love and the proof of his own saving evangelism. She must manifest, as his neophyte and convert, the clear-sighted joyous and courageous spirit of sacrifice (“det sande, glade modige offersind” 256). She must shoot *The Wild Duck*, that nexus of evil and self-delusion that his devil-father has imposed upon the Ekdals. Sacrifice is proof for the evangelical detective. The pistol-shot reverberates in the attic, and Gregers is triumphant in provoking this symbolic testimonial to his prophecy:

GREGERS: ...Det var vidnesbyrdet!

HJALMAR: Hvilket vidnesbyrd?

GREGERS: Det var en barnlig offerhandling.  
(265)

GREGERS: That was the evidence!

HJALMAR: What evidence?

GREGERS: It was the child’s sacrificial act.

But it is not the evidence he was hoping for, nor a confirmation of the proof that Hjalmar demands. Nor does the play help us define a motive for Hedvig’s suicide to explain the child’s last unfathomable act. Despair, confusion, a sympathetic affinity with her pet, her response to Hjalmar’s hateful rejection? We cannot see what happens in the closed-off attic; and all we are left with is conjecture in a world of mystifying uncertainty. After the ghastly failure of the ultimate redemptive scheme, after the ludicrous and painful mock-obsequies of the defrocked priest and the posturing father, Ibsen leaves us with the cynicism of Relling and the provisional despair of Gregers—provisional, that is to say, on his having been in the wrong (which he does not absolutely acknowledge as being the case). The dialogue that brings the curtain down on *The Wild Duck* is the most indeterminate statement in Ibsen’s entire dramaturgy of uncertainty:<sup>6</sup>

GREGERS: I så fald er jeg glad, at min bestemmelse er, hvad den er.

RELLING: Med forlov,—hvad er da Deres bestemmelse?

GREGERS: At være den trettende mand tilbords.

RELLING: Å, fan' tro det.  
(269)

GREGERS: In that case, I am happy that my destiny is what it is.

RELLING: May I ask—what is your destiny?

GREGERS: To be the thirteenth person at the table.

RELLING: Ha—the devil it is.

The thirteenth at table? Christ? Judas? The saviour? The bearer of evil? The professional detective who is himself in a state of grace? The amateur whose ethics are outrageous?

Ibsen ends his play with a phrase, similar to one used in the first few seconds of Act I, which epitomizes the murkiness and the ambivalence of experience, the dubious satisfaction of the quest after unequivocal certainty, the unresolvable mystery at the heart of things, and the extreme danger that lies in the pursuit of the sort of truth that detective fiction persuades us is still possible. Proof and evidence in *The Wild Duck* belong to one of the lower regions of the Inferno.

#### NOTES

1. *Samlede Værker*, VI, “Vildanden” 258. All subsequent references in Norwegian are to this edition of *The Wild Duck*. Translations are my own.
2. There are, of course, other examples of the detective narrative in drama: Oedipus, for example, who relentlessly pursues proof and evidence of crime to the point of self-incrimination; or Hamlet, whose dilatoriness and hesitation can be read as a scrupulous investigation of murder to justify a dubious form of justice.
3. Inspector Bucket, in Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852/3) is considered the prototype of the detective in Victorian fiction; and Collins's Serjeant Cuff is the detective in *The Woman in White* (1860).
4. Henning Mankell's Kurt Wallender is a good example, in Scandinavian crime fiction, of the detective whose intuitive revelations must be dredged into conscious conviction before he can solve the crime.
5. Mary McCarthy refers to Gregers as one of those “paranoid prophets” whose language is a form of “God-identification, in which the symbolist imposes on the concrete, created world his own private design and lays open to question the most primary facts of existence” (79).
6. I have reviewed other critics' responses to this ending in “Ibsen and the Dramaturgy of Uncertainty.”

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