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Ibsen and Darwin: A Reading of *The Wild Duck*

ASBJØRN AARSETH

The question of the possible influence of Darwin's scientific ideas on Ibsen's plays, on *The Wild Duck* in particular, has been addressed more than once in Ibsen scholarship, and yet the answers produced so far are hardly exhaustive. The subject deserves attention by anyone interested in Ibsen as a mediator of modernity, since the works of Darwin, and particularly his most famous book, *On the Origin of Species* (1859), although controversial at first, came to acquire a central position in the modernization of European intellectual life at roughly the same time as the Norwegian playwright became famous in Europe for his works.

Two different questions present themselves in this connection. First, it is necessary to establish the channels of information through which Ibsen could have had access to any of Darwin's ideas. He did not read English and would have had to rely on translations, either Norwegian, Danish, or German if he wanted to read Darwin's writings. It is possible that he picked up some main points of the debate by listening to the conversations of learned friends, or by reading articles about Darwin's observations and theories in the periodicals of the time. The question is whether such publications can account for the details in a play such as *The Wild Duck*, which seem to suggest some familiarity with certain specific passages in Darwin's work.

Second, after we have identified some traces of Darwin's possible influence in Ibsen's play, we will have to consider the literary or philosophical purposes behind these Darwinian elements. It is not very interesting in itself to discover a literary loan, the debt of one writer to another. What makes this relationship important is the way it dramatizes how Ibsen worked with this material, how he recreated it to make it comply with his artistic or thematic needs.

It is well known how the new and daring theories about the biological relationship between humankind and the animal species provoked debate in learned circles as well as among artists and the general public. One of the

most important consequences was to establish in the public mind the notion of a genetic connection between humans and animals. This new way of looking at the origin of the human species gradually cleared the way in the natural sciences and in art for a new attitude toward the place of the human as one among many earthly species. We can observe in literature a gradual change over time in the use of animal metaphors in the presentation of human characters. Ibsen's early works use animal metaphors for moral and satirical purposes, but as his plays develop, the relationship between the human and the animal becomes much more deeply woven into the thematic texture of the drama.

Darwin's way of observing the behaviour and characteristics of human beings and comparing them to certain animal species seems to have encouraged the tendency in the art of literature towards a metaphoric connection between the human and the animal, although this device was by no means unknown to earlier generations of writers. In plays by Ibsen both before and after the appearance of Darwin as a public figure there is a rich variety of animal symbolism. Somehow the physical resemblances perceived between human beings and certain animals of the higher order must have attracted the creative imagination of the playwright in a particularly productive way, regardless of any inspiration from the work of Darwin. The animal world, both as it can be observed in nature and as it appears in art, literature, folklore, and classical mythology presents itself to any writer with an aptitude for satire. At the same time, the greater part of Darwin's early work is based on the systematic observation of animals, and this careful, detailed description provides the most promising resource for anyone who wants to study the effects of Darwin's writings on Ibsen's dramatic production.

There is no clear evidence of any influence from Darwin in Ibsen's dramatic poem of *Peer Gynt* (1867), and so the play provides a useful instance of Ibsen's pre-Darwin use of animal imagery. The relationship between human-kind and animal, which constitutes a significant thematic contrast in this poem, is on the whole construed in a pre-Darwinian way. Based, like Goethe's *Faust*, on the allegorical structure of the medieval morality play, *Peer Gynt* presents not only various characters with a human appearance, but also a number of beings and mythological figures made up of both human and animal attributes.¹ These mixed beings, originating from Norwegian fairy tales, ancient Egyptian monuments and paintings, European myths, medieval bestiaires, or literary sources, produce a spiritual environment for the various roles of Ibsen's main character that define his changing existential situation in terms of moral and intellectual qualities of an undeniable idealistic disposition. In Darwin's view of nature there is in principle no room for moral judgments, nor, obviously, for beings from folklore or mythology. There is, then, no substantial evidence to indicate that Ibsen was directly familiar with any of Darwin's works before the 1870s (see Tjønneland 183).

In 1872 a young Danish poet and fiction writer, J.P. Jacobsen, who had a strong interest in as well as considerable knowledge of biology, completed his translation of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*.² In 1874–75 Jacobsen's translation of Darwin's *The Descent of Man* was published. Some years later, in 1878, during Ibsen's second stay in Rome, he met Jacobsen, then a promising writer of prose fiction. Among the subjects they are reported to have discussed was Darwin's theory of evolution. According to Gunnar Heiberg, a young Norwegian writer staying in Rome at the same time, who became Ibsen's friend, and who frequently listened to Ibsen and Jacobsen discussing aspects of Darwin's theories, Ibsen had probably neither read nor planned to read Darwin; he merely wanted to be informed on these issues for purposes of playwriting (Bull 209). The friendship between Ibsen and Darwin's translator could be sufficient to account for the presence in Ibsen's work of one or two verbal echoes originating in Darwin's writings. There is hardly any reason to assume that Ibsen, as a result of his reception of the new ideas of evolution, abandoned his basically idealist view of the relation between humans and the other species. In his earlier work he had regarded animal motifs as useful in the subtle art of human characterization, and he may have found the ideas of Darwin helpful for the same purpose in some of the prose plays as well. Even when there may be a Darwinian resonance, as in the speech that Dr. Stockmann delivers to the townspeople in Act Four of *An Enemy of the People* (1882) about various animal species and their properties as a result of systematic breeding (Ibsen might easily have learned about the mentality of pedigree poodles and the egg production of a purebred Japanese hen from his conversation with Jacobsen), the impression of a legitimate "source" in Darwin remains intriguing, if unconfirmable.

But in Ibsen's next play, *The Wild Duck* (1884), we come across more comprehensive as well as more specific evidence of influence from Darwin. This play contains some very remarkable echoes of *On the Origin of Species*.³ It even seems as though the playwright wants his audience and readers to become aware of the presence in the play of a specifically Darwinian way of thinking. In the first act, as the dinner guests of Mr. Werle are gathering in the study after the meal, they are talking in groups about the quality of the food and wine they have enjoyed and commenting jokingly on the necessity to contribute to the entertainment of the company in return. Mrs. Sørby explains to Hjalmar Ekdal, who is not a regular guest at Mr. Werle's dinner parties, that the chamberlains think that the guests on such an occasion should work for the food. At this point one of the chamberlains exclaims, "My Lord, it's all in the struggle for existence" (Ibsen 401), an obvious reference to "Struggle for Existence," the title of chapter three of *On the Origin of Species* and, of course, a fundamental concept in Darwin's work. As a slogan in the 1880s, this concept was generally known to be a central part of the theory of evolution. Ibsen would have quoted Darwin in translation, but while this phrase is

variously translated into English as “the struggle for survival” or “the fighting for survival,” Ibsen’s original phrase is “*kampen for tilværelsen*,” the precise phrase used in the full title of the Danish version of Darwin’s work.

In *The Wild Duck* human beings are frequently described in terms of animal appearance or behaviour. This tendency can be said to belong to Ibsen’s creative imagination, his own unique way of conceiving characters. In the opening scene, one of the servants chatting about the Werle family on the occasion of the dinner party refers to Mr. Werle’s former reputation for womanizing with the expression that he has been “a real goat in his day” (Ibsen 393). Old Ekdal, entering the study where the servants are preparing for coffee serving, asks a favour of the senior servant, which is granted to him, and yet he mutters an invective with reference to the same servant: “*Torski!*” Literally this means “cod,” but the translation is not always to the point; Fjelde renders it as “Bonehead!” (Ibsen 394). At the end of Act Three Gina characterizes Gregers Werle in a related way: “[...] he was always a cold fish” (Ibsen 452).

Of course, the principal “animal” thematic is connected to the wild duck: the animal performs both on the literal, material level and in the register of metaphor. The contrast between the rich people belonging to Mr. Werle’s circle and the people of modest means living under the roof of the Ekdal family is indirectly suggested by the existence of the domesticated animals maintained in the attic behind the wide double door at the back of the stage, animals held in captivity and made to forget the real wild life in the forest. This use of animals to mark a social distinction extends seamlessly to the metaphorical. In its inauthentic, shadowy existence, the domesticated duck may be said to correspond to the losers in society, to the characters who need an existential illusion, a “life lie,” in order to have the strength to carry on with their dreary lives. This metaphor pervades the play, even in the language of the prosaic Mr. Werle: “There are people in this world who plunge to the bottom when they’ve hardly been winged, and they never come up again” (Ibsen 405).

When Gregers arrives at the Ekdal flat in the second act, he finds the living conditions of the Ekdal family rather limited, particularly for old Ekdal, who used to be a hunter roaming in the forest at Høydal. Gregers says to him, “[...] here you’ve nothing in the world to stir your blood and make you happy” (Ibsen 424). But the old man does not accept such a disparagement of his present existence. He insists that they open the double door so that Gregers can see the treasure of the family. The door is opened, and the audience is able to see “[...] an extensive, irregular loft room with many nooks and corners” (Ibsen 425), with a couple of chimney shafts and parts of the room lying in shadow. In a scene that is a superbly composed example of what the Greeks used to call *teichoscopia* (literally “view from the wall,” reporting something that remains unseen to the theatre audience), the animals living in this large shadowy loft room are pointed out and named, one species after another, with four in all:

GREGERS (*peering in at the doorway*). So you keep poultry, Lieutenant Ekdal!

EKDAL. I'll say we keep poultry! They're roosting now; but you just ought to see our poultry by daylight!

HEDVIG. And then there's a –

EKDAL. Shh, shh – don't say anything yet.

GREGERS. And you've got pigeons too, I see.

EKDAL. Oh yes, it might just be we've got some pigeons. They have their nesting boxes up there under the eaves; pigeons like to perch high, you know.

HJALMAR. They're not ordinary pigeons, all of them.

EKDAL. Ordinary! No, I should say not! We have tumblers, and we have a couple of pouters also. But look here! Can you see that hutch over there by the wall?

GREGERS. Yes. What do you use that for?

EKDAL. The rabbits sleep there at night, boy.

GREGERS. Well, so you have rabbits too?

EKDAL. Yes, what the devil do you think we have but rabbits! He asks if we have rabbits, Hjalmar! Hmm! But now listen, this is really something! This is it! Out of the way, Hedvig. Stand right there – that's it – and look straight down there. Do you see a basket there with straw in it?

GREGERS. Yes, and there's a bird nesting in the basket.

EKDAL. Hmm! "A bird" –

GREGERS. Isn't it a duck?

EKDAL (*hurt*). Yes, of course it's a duck.

HJALMAR. But what *kind* of duck?

HEDVIG. It's not just any old duck –

EKDAL. Shh!

GREGERS. And it's no exotic breed, either.

EKDAL. No, Mr. – Werle, it's not any exotic breed – because it's a wild duck.

GREGERS. No, is it really? A wild duck?

EKDAL. Oh yes, that's what it is. That "bird" as you said – that's a wild duck. That's our wild duck, boy.

HEDVIG. My wild duck – I own it.

GREGERS. And it can survive up here indoors? And do well?

EKDAL. You've got to understand, she's got a trough of water to splash around in.

HJALMAR. Fresh water every other day. (Ibsen 425–26).

So the duck is obviously the jewel of the crown in the eyes of father and son, Ekdal and Hedvig. In his introduction to the play in the centenary edition, published in 1932, Francis Bull refers to a poem by the Norwegian poet Johan Sebastian Welhaven, "Søfuglen" (The Seabird), whose story has some similarity with the story told about the wild duck here. But Bull also mentions the possibility that Ibsen, in his use of the duck, may be influenced directly or indirectly by Darwin's reports about how wild ducks degenerate in captivity (Bull 23). In *A Study of Six Plays by Ibsen*, Brian W. Downs makes a more

concrete guess. He suggests that Ibsen, either directly or indirectly from his friend J.P. Jacobsen, may have learned of the following observation in Darwin's work *Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication*: "We have seen how soon the wild duck, when domesticated, loses its true character, from the effects of abundant or changed feeding, or from taking little exercise" (qtd. in Downs 148–49).⁴

Yet this work of Darwin's was not among those translated into Danish, so it is a less probable source, although Ibsen could have come across it in a German version. A better guess regarding the source would be Darwin's most famous book, which was available in Danish, *On the Origin of Species*. In chapter one Darwin discusses "Variation under Domestication" in a number of species. In this chapter he develops the argument that racial variation within each species takes place after domestication, and that in most cases the species is undifferentiated as long as it stays in its wild state. One passage is particularly interesting in connection with Ibsen's play:

Having kept nearly all the English breeds of the fowl alive, having bred and crossed them, and examined their skeletons, it appears to me almost certain that all are the descendants of the wild Indian fowl, *Gallus bankiva*; and this is the conclusion of Mr. Blyth, and of others who have studied this bird in India. In regard to ducks and rabbits, some breeds of which differ much from each other, the evidence is clear that they are all descended from the common wild duck and rabbit. (18)

On the following page there is a sub-chapter entitled "Breeds of the Domestic Pigeon, Their Differences and Origin." Here Darwin carefully describes the varieties of domestic pigeons, indeed remarking that it is the *variety* produced by domestication that distinguishes them from the wild pigeon: "The diversity of the breeds is something astonishing. Compare the English carrier and the short-faced tumbler, and see the wonderful difference in their beaks, entailing corresponding differences in their skulls" (20). And a bit further down: "The pouter has a much elongated body, wings, and legs; and its enormously developed crop, which it glories in inflating, may well excite astonishment and even laughter" (20). We see here that not only the names of the four species represented in the loft room of the Ekdals – fowl, duck, rabbit, and pigeon – but also the two varieties of one of the species – the tumbler and the pouter – referred to by old Ekdal, are mentioned by Darwin within a couple of pages in his famous book of 1859.

The names by which the animals are called in the original version of the play correspond exactly to the names used by Darwin's Danish translator: *høns*, *vildand*, *kanin* and *due*, and the two varieties of *due* (pigeon) are both by Jacobsen and in the play named *tumlere* and *kropduer*, "tumblers" and "pouters." This is hardly a coincidence. In theory Jacobsen may have talked about these species in his conversation with Ibsen in Rome in the late 1870s, but it is

not very likely that the source is merely this oral connection. In my opinion this striking accordance of names is proof beyond reasonable doubt that Ibsen had read at least part of the first chapter of the Danish translation of *On the Origin of Species*.

What are the consequences for our understanding of *The Wild Duck* if we grant that the four animal species in the Ekdal menagerie were drawn from Darwin's discussion of "Variation under Domestication"? It is clear that the playwright did not assume the interest or approach of Darwin's study. While Darwin wanted to report the consequences of captivity on the evolution of the species, Ibsen is a liberal Romantic writing drama for a Romantic audience, and in his moral universe freedom is an absolute value. Darwin finds an astonishing variety and interest in domesticated species; for Ibsen, domestication means degeneration.⁵ This difference in value judgement is not merely a difference of opinion between Ibsen and Darwin as individuals; it is characteristic of one basic distinction between drama, where human emotions are involved, and scientific observation,⁶ for the animals confined in the loft room and made to forget life in the real forest serve as an eloquent metaphor for the vulnerable and wretched human beings in the Ekdal family and their dissipated neighbours. The chamberlain guests at the party given by Mr. Werle in the first act of the play can be regarded as a target of satire suggested metaphorically by the same animals. The chamberlains⁷ obviously are far better off socially than the Ekdals and their equals, but the kind of indoor life they seem to prefer, smoking cigars, drinking wine, and avoiding sunshine, cannot be invigorating in the long run.⁸ In the list of characters, three of them are described in a way that evokes the unfortunate consequences of domestication: *a fat man, a bald-headed man, a nearsighted man* (Ibsen 391). Of course Gregers Werle, who at his father's dinner party is seeing Hjalmar Ekdal for the first time in many years, is respectful in his description of the old friend: "You're almost becoming stout" (Ibsen 396), but even this potential sign of health seems to parallel the depredations of domestication – after all, in the next act, when Hjalmar shows Gregers the wild duck, he notes, "She's gotten fat" (Ibsen 427).

Unless we take a closer look at the circumstances of the play as a whole, the character of Hedvig does not seem to be the victim of any irony in terms of the Darwinian connection. As the only child among adults, she is usually seen as the sentimental centre of the play. She insists that the duck belongs to her, and of course she identifies herself with it. She is also fascinated by the various objects as well as the entire atmosphere she experiences in the loft room. This, and the fact that she shoots herself at the end in order to prove to her father that she loves him, have led some critics to consider her as the positive heroine of the play. Yet, like her father and her grandfather, she insists on the wildness of the duck, this is in a way as much her existential illusion as it is theirs. In terms of the opposition of protected indoor life versus exposure to open air,

or captivity versus freedom, Hedvig undoubtedly has to be aligned with the creatures in the loft room, much like the chamberlains of Act One and most of the other characters. During the conversation between Gregers and Hedvig in Act Three, he asks her whether she has no wish to get away and see the real world. Her answer confirms that she is bound to her own domestic captivity: “No, never! I’m going to stay at home always and help Daddy and Mother” (Ibsen 437).

Ibsen adapts Darwin’s reading of the variety of domestic species to his own moral anatomy of contemporary life, particularly his ironic regard for the life-style and the aspirations of these characters. While Ibsen uses an observation regarding the development of animals under domestication reported by the scientist, he adapts it to his own thematic purposes. The influence from Darwin is palpable, but it is not at all a mere transference of ideas or images from one text to another. It is rather a case of the imaginative and aesthetically effective application of a piece of scientific information.

That domestication means degeneration is not, as we have seen, Darwin’s view. What he has observed is that animal species under domestication tend to develop new varieties. It is Ibsen’s view that such change, due to captivity, is against nature, and must therefore be regarded as degeneration.⁹ Ibsen remains a Romantic to the end, but a Romantic surprisingly engaged in responding to and adapting scientific inquiry to his own fundamental artistic practice. While Darwin describes the “struggle for existence” in such a way as to suggest that the diversity of domestic species represents a signal triumph in that struggle, for Ibsen the reverse seems to be true. For Ibsen, the moral obligation is to follow the natural impulse: Be free, and you will remain true to your species.

NOTES

- 1 For a discussion of the thematic implications of animal figures and motifs in *Peer Gynt*, see Aarseth, particularly pp. 15–50.
- 2 A Norwegian version of *On the Origin of Species*, translated by Ingebret Suleng, was published in two volumes (Kristiania 1889 and 1890), but there is no evidence to suggest that Ibsen consulted this edition.
- 3 More accurately, echoes of *Om Arternes Oprindelse ved Kvalitetsvalg eller ved de heldigst stillede Formers Sejr i Kampen for Tilværelsen*, which is the exact Danish title of the book, published in Copenhagen in 1872.
- 4 After the quotation Downs adds in a footnote, “It would indeed be possible to argue that this sentence re-echoes also in *The Lady from the Sea*.”
- 5 The difference in evaluation is also emphasized by Tjønneland, who tends to regard it as an indication of a lack of Darwin’s influence on Ibsen (Tjønneland 186).
- 6 In a recent article H. A. E. Zwart argues in favour of a reading of *The Wild Duck* as a dramatic presentation of “the struggle between a romantic and a scientific percep-

tion of animals,” a struggle that “is still structuring the ethical debate on animals of the present” (Zwart 92). While the care of the Ekdals for the well-being of the animals in the loft room may be in line with a new attitude in scientific observation of animal behaviour in the late nineteenth century, it should not be forgotten that the emphasis of the play is not on experimenting with animals but on certain characteristics of humans, illustrated by the conditions of animals in captivity.

- 7 The literal meaning of the title “chamberlain,” originally a royal appointment to honour outstanding citizens, is a bedchamber attendant for royalty or nobility, a person whose proper sphere is the interior of the house. Compare with the reported habits of Chamberlain Alving in *Ghosts* (Aarseth 70).
- 8 If we see the chamberlains in the allegorical light of beings belonging to the indoor life, we will understand their conversation as more significant than “mere social chit-chat” (Chamberlain 117).
- 9 In *When We Dead Awaken* (1899) there is another reflection of Ibsen’s attitude to the idea of the domestication of animals. The sculptor, Professor Rubek, is explaining to his wife that the portrait busts he has been making, commissioned by rich citizens, have secretly been given various animal characteristics, so that they really resemble horse faces, mule muzzles, dog skulls, pig snouts, and bull faces – likenesses that only he is able to see. His wife replies, “All our dear, domestic animals,” and the sculptor comments, “Only the dear, domestic animals, Maja. All the animals that human beings have distorted in their own image. And that have distorted human beings in return” (Ibsen 1036).

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