

# The owl of Minerva catches the rats : little Eyolf dreams of Hegel and Freud

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**THE OWL OF MINERVA CATCHES THE RATS:  
LITTLE EYOLF DREAMS OF HEGEL AND FREUD**

In drama it is the *dramatis personae* who appear as themselves the poets and artists, since they make their inner life an object to themselves, an object which they remain powerful enough to shape and form.

Hegel, *Ästhetik*

A menagerie of symbols closes 19th century reflections on the nature of art. Two powerful poet-philosophers engage the feather and the fur in dialogues that raise the question of the truth of art – speculation shared by the philosopher Hegel and the poet-dramatist Ibsen. Lest it seem extravagant to put the two in one cage along with their totem beasts, and to label them both “poet-philosopher”, I will begin with a justification of this yoking.

Hegel, standing isolate in his difficult writing, would seem far from being a “poet”. Yet his literary pretensions are grandiose; he has even been read by some recent analysts as novelistic, since the “Phenomenology” can be interpreted as a *Bildungsroman* whose “hero” is *Geist* in its endless quest to grow up in time. Ibsen, setting his arguments under the shelter of the procenium, would seem to be poet far removed from philosophy, yet his plots, however simple, hide great movements of thought as well as action. And there is certainly evidence that Ibsen and Hegel occupied the same 19th century universe of art. To examine this claim in several of its details is one concern of this talk. Another concern is to interpret the poet-philosophers under the methodological dowers they passed on to their heirs, one of whom is Freud. Psychoanalytic thought has been shaped in both Hegelian and Ibsenite metaphors, and it is striking that all three of the 19th century creators relied upon a certain zoological imagery in their thinking. For Freud, his case studies are full of animals: creeping, flying, galloping, chewing, clawing beasts in contrast to the relative restraint of Hegel and Ibsen’s symbols, the owl and the rat. Ibsen’s thoughts also entertained that Biblical symbol, container of beasts, the Ark of Genesis,

loaded with animals, and he would, he proclaimed, if given the chance, “torpedo the Ark”.

I sorger for vandflom til verdensmarken.  
Jeg laegger med lyst torpedo under arken.

You furnish the deluge for the world.  
I'll gladly torpedo the Ark.

This poem, a reply to one of Ibsen's revolutionary friends, made the point that within history only the Flood stood as an act that could be called total, and that even such an obliteration was incomplete, for Noah then became the “dictator”. “Let us do it again, radicals”, said Ibsen. And he goes on, “Both men and orators will be needed for that. If you bring about a deluge on the face of the earth, I'll gladly place a torpedo under the Ark”. (*William Archer on Ibsen*, ed. by T. Postlewait, Westport, Conn., Greenwood Press, 1984.)

The “Ark” for Ibsen was the ship of modernity with its cargo of illusions; and his poem in which he imagines the Ark torpedoed was his answer to those who chided him for not openly espousing radical causes. Few understood his radicalism then, and even now it is underestimated. Subversion occurs not only in politics; it occurs also in art. When it has an artistic source and end it is difficult to articulate because it lies deeply within dramatic structures we enjoy as stage representations. Yet particularly in the last of Ibsen's plays, which I will examine, as soon as the curtain rises we are alerted to aesthetic conflicts whose resolution lies not in the action alone but requires as well our thought to realize completion.

Which of his many ideas might be considered basic to the others? I shall begin with the idea – an idea Ibsen slyly proposed – that modernity endowed the arts with powers and truths they in fact do not possess, at least in the forms attributed to the great works of Ibsen's immediate predecessors. But where in philosophical history did the thought ever occur that art is an avenue to truth? Of course, it is most notably a part of the argument in Aristotle's *Poetics*. For Ibsen the source, more likely, is in the repetition of Aristotelian argument in the lectures G.W.F. Hegel delivered in Berlin in the 1820's.

Hegel's position can be presented in two basic claims: 1. That art has a history; 2. That art is truth.

1. In his claim that art has a history, Hegel meant that not only do cultural objects, of which works of art are a part, develop in a systematic way that permits a narrative of maturation (in effect, a *Bildungsroman*),

but also that historical reality expresses inner reality: that is, conscious and unconscious beliefs, attitudes, and in the German vocabulary, a world outlook (*Weltanschauung*). If a historian could find the right method by means of which to unfold the inner meaning of cultural objects, the history of culture could be philosophically interpreted according to that method. It is, Hegel claimed with all due modesty, *his* philosophy that provides the method; in fact, the philosophy *is* the method. Although he never lived to publish his interpretation of the history of art, Hegel gave three sets of lectures in Berlin in the 1820's that were pulled together as *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* (Lectures on Aesthetics) and published shortly after his death. The thesis of the lectures is apparently simple: the arts exhibit a developmental sequence from Symbolic, to Classical, to Romantic, after which they are lifted up into higher, more inclusive spiritual expression as religion and philosophy. The sequence then is this: the Symbolic is embodied in architecture (associated with Egyptian cultural development); Classical in Greek sculpture, the human form in three dimensions; the Romantic in poetry, of the sort Hegel read in his own day – a good example would be Byron's "epic" verse. In short, the arts strive to overcome themselves, but in the process express the level and depth of human consciousness and self-consciousness at the moment of the ascendancy of each art in turn. The main point I want to stress is that the Hegelian argument traduces art in a certain way by making it subordinate to philosophy. Since art, Hegel believed, no longer provides the spiritual comfort it once did in the Golden Days of Greek and Medieval Art, what is required of art in modernity is a "Science of Art" on Hegelian principles, for with modern culture, art comes into all it can be and can realize through interpretation, that is, through a philosophical reading of the cultural expressions of the past. That reading constitutes the substance of the "Lectures".

2. Art is truth. More difficult to state than the first claim, that art has a history, the second comes down to this: interpretations realized in the Hegelian method express and reveal the truth of art. Art is one means to the uncovering of inner spiritual reality and one corridor of its development through history. To follow out that corridor is to understand one of the many ways Mind or Spirit (*Geist*) expresses itself in time. Just what is revealed depends upon the interpretation as given by Hegel. But it does not stop with Hegel; philosophers and art historians after Hegel work in the same tradition. Close to Hegel's way with cultural objects, though



relying upon different methods to reveal developmental consciousness, is the work of Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and the Hegelian art historians, e.g. Worringer, Riegl, Wölfflin, and many others down to our own academic departments of philosophy and art.

I summarize Hegel's way with the arts and modernity to prepare the ground for his contentious claim, which is repeated in much of today's philosophy and cultural criticism: art has come to an end. It is this claim which is reflected in a subtle and persuasive way by Ibsen in his last plays, and I think it necessary to understand the source of the claim, though the claim itself is a reflection of a pervasive cultural feeling of alienation and discontinuity which was not "invented" by Hegel, but rather was *expressed* by Hegel. It is also expressed, in different terms, by the dramatist Ibsen who has a poet's interpretative point of view in contrast to Hegel's philosophical point of view. I would place the difference between them as a continuity of the same conflict and confrontation that was expressed by Plato when he wrote, "Between philosophy and poetry there is an ancient enmity".

I would not say that Hegel's lectures were known to Ibsen directly, and I do not hold with Brian Johnston (*The Ibsen Cycle*, Boston, G.K. Hall, 1975) who sees Ibsen as repeating in his dramas the dialectic of Hegel's philosophy. But I do think it highly likely that Ibsen knew of Hegel's thought through newspapers (he was an inveterate thorough reader of the many ample papers of his day, and he did live in Germany for many years: 1866-91 with trips elsewhere and back to Norway) and conversation. The idea that there could be a world without art as a cultural necessity certainly occurs to the dramatist as he works out his last plots. The question Ibsen raises is not so much about art coming to an end and being overcome, as it were, by religion and philosophy, but rather of art being so harsh in its crushing of illusions that it ceases to function as an aesthetic event. Then art – his art – becomes an avenue to truth, but one that is at the same time subversive of art itself.

In Hegel's thought art does not subvert itself, but rather plays its foreordained part in the unfolding of cultural consciousness; art lacks flexibility, and must be what it is as it is in its historical location, and that place is passed by when Spirit expresses itself in levels of consciousness more inclusive than art. To Ibsen, art reveals potencies of flexibility that guarantee it a long development and enable art to turn upon itself in a reflexive scrutiny that is truly philosophical. Art itself can realize the philosophy of art, but when it does so it runs the risk of negating itself as beautiful while affirming itself as truth teller.

## II

In my consideration of Ibsen's late plays, I shall discuss *Little Eyolf*, (1894) and Ibsen's last play, *When We Dead Awaken* (1899). One of the problems presented to the reader/audience in Ibsen's late plays concerns their endings. Last acts in late Ibsen strike us as symbolic in puzzling ways because they may appear on first reading as inconsistent with acts I and II, and give us the experience of moving into a different order of speech.

The final act of *Little Eyolf* in particular has disappointed and puzzled many critics; and at the same time it has been called the greatest that Ibsen ever wrote. Henry James, having read the first two acts of *Little Eyolf*, wrote to a friend, "I can't stay my hand from waving wildly to you! It is indeed immense – indeed and indeed. It is of a rare perfection – and if [act] III keeps up the tremendous pitch of one and two, it will distinctly stand at the tiptop of his achievement. It's a masterpiece and a marvel".

But three days later, James wrote again, "I fear, in truth, no harm can be done equal to the harm done to the play by its own most disappointing third act". To resolve James' disappointment, interpretative strategies of several kinds will be helpful and they will bring out both James' understanding of the first two acts of the play, as well as his misunderstanding of the final act when he wrote: "My idea that Asta was to become an active, *the* active agent, is of course blighted." In my reading, I shall suggest that Asta does fulfill her role admirably, but as the goddess of death, something perhaps far from James' identifications. We are forced to undertake interpretative strategies not only because of the disjunction, but also because of the different kinds of events and objects that fill the last plot-events. A certain discomfort with interpretation where Ibsen is the writer leads us to rethink the opening events and to look back to the beginning for symbolic presentations that prepare the way for conclusions.

I shall do that, to begin with, for a reading of *Little Eyolf*. Ibsenite conflicts begin within the family, and soon reveal forces from the past working their consequences in the present action. A curious stage direction in the opening of *Little Eyolf* suggests symbolic overtones we at first are apt to miss:

"Asta Allmers enters through the door on the right, dressed in a light-brown summer suit, with hat, jacket and parasol. *Under her arm she carries a large, locked portfolio*. She is slim, of middle height, ...etc.". We shall see that the locked portfolio plays an important part in the denouement of the presumed half-sibling relationship between Asta and her

“brother” Allmers. We are subtly warned there are secrets in this drama to be unlocked, just as in the psychoanalytic theory of dreams, there are “locked” dreams to be “opened” and interpreted.

Before the time of the action that opens the play *Little Eyolf*, we learn that Alfred Allmers, father and husband, has dedicated his life to writing the great philosophical book on Human Responsibility:

There I sat bent over my desk, writing, day after day. And sometimes half the night. Writing away at that great thick book on *Human Responsibility*.

In a dedication to pure thought that has been all consuming and a task that removes him from closeness to his wife and son, Allmers’ has been the philosopher’s choice, to create a book for a better life, essentially a political act, whose purpose is to strengthen moral demands. In the first action of this drama, we meet Allmers upon his return from a mysterious journey, a removal from the family to mountain vastness and silence; we hear him announce he has given up writing his book, and that from now on he will dedicate himself to his son’s improvement. Little Eyolf will be Allmers’ total dedication. His decision to give up the book and, as it were, to replace it with Little Eyolf, enters the conversation in an image that complements Asta’s locked briefcase. The conversation states it succinctly:

*Allmers:* ...I did not write one single line on the book.

*Asta:* You didn’t write —!

*Rita:* [His Wife]: Of Course! I couldn’t understand why there was so much blank paper in your bag.

The emptiness of blank paper following upon Asta’s locked briefcase sets the base line – the latent thought – that hides underneath the higher manifest voices that we hear in conversation. We, the audience, are witness to a drama that on the surface seems replete with dynamic interaction, but underneath hides an inaccessible and possibly blank emptiness that we must inscribe. Psychologically, we would say this expresses an abiding anger, even hatred, which erases all possible efforts to write, as Allmers was unable to fill the blank pages he carried with him. So too, the playwright must fill his pages with meaning and fears he may falter in the act. We, the audience, are asked to unlock the briefcase and inscribe the empty sheets, which we in fact do if we apprehend the symbolism of the drama, and these early symbolizations project the terrifying loss of meaning which the drama explores, and withholds from the characters, for both parents, Allmers, Rita, and supposed half-sister Asta seek meaning in the

empty universe, emptied of the presence of the child. The only character who finds reality filled with meaning is the Rat Wife. I shall turn to her in a moment.

When we first see the nine year old Eyolf, he is dressed in a uniform with gold braid and lion-embossed buttons; his leg is paralysed; he limps with a crutch under his arm. The child insists that he will be a soldier, that he will be able to go to the mountains with his father, and that he will be able to engage in sports, such as swimming. Confronted with the child's wishes, Allmers, inhibited and himself crippled by a deep sense of guilt, says conflicting and evasive things. He exclaims, "How this gnaws at my heart".

The Rat Wife now makes her appearance, an uncanny, frightening, and apparition-like figure, carrying her ugly little dog in a sack. She asks, "Have your honors any troublesome thing that gnaws here in this house". Allmers says, "No. I don't think so". She replies, "Ah, I'd be glad to rid you of it if there was any gnawing thing that troubles you". And Rita says "We understand but we have nothing like that in this house".

Little Eyolf is both repelled and drawn to the Rat Wife. When the Rat Wife takes out the little black dog that she carries in a sack, Eyolf exclaims, "the most horrible face I have ever seen ... and at the same time he's beautiful, beautiful". Eyolf's description of the dog expresses a dream-dualism: the dog is horrible, ugly, and at the same time, beautiful. And we know that from the name, the dog is human-like as it is dog-ish. Contraries merge as in dream experience, and this collage is realized through names. Indeed, names are of great importance to Ibsen, and he chooses them carefully, often in the process of writing, shifting them around from character to character and settling upon the final printed cast of characters only in the final version. To anticipate that care, I note that the dog's name is Mopseman, "Pug-Man".

The Rat Wife tells how she leads the dog three times around a house, plays on her pipe, and all the rats in the neighborhood come out of the houses and follow her down to the water to their drowning, "The dear sweet things". "And all the little creatures that crept and crawled, they follow us further and further out to the deep waters. They have to". Eyolf asks, "why do they have to"; she replies, "Because they don't want to. Because they're so afraid of the deep water. That's why they have to swim out to it". Eyolf, "And then they drown?" Rat Wife: "Every Single one. And then they've all the dark and quiet and peace they could wish for, little angels. Down there they sleep so sweet, so long a sleep. All the little creatures men hate and persecute".

As we hear the Rat Wife and Eyolf we are drawn into a dream-like kaleidoscope of images which combine contrary properties. In brief, they are:

1. The dog, Mopseman (=Pug-Man) who is both repellent and beautiful.
2. The rats follow the Rat Wife and her dog to their drowning because they *have to* and because *they don't want to*.
3. The people on the island who *sent* for the rat wife to purge their houses of rats did not like it *and* they had no choice.
4. The rats are "sweet little creatures" and they are to be killed.
5. The Rat Wife has the power to *lure* not only rats but humans too, and she lured men, and one man, "my own true love" who is "down under with the rats".

When the Rat Wife leaves Eyolf, unnoticed, slips out after her. A little later shouts are heard; they say a child has been drowned. That concludes Act I.

Notice that the scene with the Rat Wife, so powerful in its uncanny suggestiveness and its mesmerizing influence on the child, Eyolf, is followed immediately upon the departure of the Rat Wife, by Asta and Allmers' discussions of old family letters that Asta has been reading, but which are unavailable at the moment because, as Asta says, "I haven't the key of the briefcase with me today". I remind you that the hidden text here alluded to is announced in the stage directions before any words are uttered: "Asta Allmers enters through the door on the right, ... Under her arm she carries a large, locked portfolio." Allmers is assured that Asta will reveal to him their contents later. So we too, the watchers and interpreters, are led to our drama's confrontation with death by the dream-like metaphors of the Rat Wife as we await with suspense the hidden meaning of that which is written.

The whole of Act I, then, functions in terms of symbolic objects, events, and implications. We must find the key to the scene we have just witnessed. Inside the portfolio are letters written by Asta's mother, the dead mother who is the everpresent parent in Asta's effort to establish her identity and to find a sexual object other than Allmers.

Act I seems very realistic and, except for a certain uncanny aura around the Rat Wife, we might be in an everyday family household conversation. That old family letters are not to be read because under lock, and no key available, refers to the very texts we are hearing/reading: a key lies hidden, as in a dream; once found, it will reveal to us depths that are



hidden, as the watery deep is hidden from Eyolf; but once drowned his eyes see everything in life.

In my reflections upon the first act of *Little Eyolf* – as I seek coherence in the drama as a whole – I realized that names have dream-like condensations built into them. I wondered about the name of the child. As in so many cases of Ibsen characters, the name has a meaning, and here as in so many of the early drafts of the scenarios Ibsen experiments with names, moving them from character to character, and often “trying out” various names until he gets the right one. In Old Norse “Ey” means island, a small terrain surrounded by water. In English the various “eil” and “isle” terms refer to a water surrounded place. The “olf” suffix means, as far as I can determine, “Wolf”. “Ulfr” is Norse “wolf”. Thus “Eyolf” compresses within its brevity Island-Water-Wolf. And this foundation underlies the exchange between Little Eyolf, The Rat Wife, and Allmers<sup>1</sup>.

Before the Rat Wife enters, she is identified by Allmers as “Mother Lupus”, and the child says, “Lupus? That means wolf, doesn’t it?” And we can supplement Eyolf’s precociousness with our knowledge, for in an early draft of the play the Rat Wife was “Miss Wolf” (Miss Varg). The child is praised by Allmers for knowing this.

The Rat Wife’s powers to seduce and to destroy (as Lupus) and Allmers’ giving up of his philosophical inquiry into human nature stand facing one another in the family constellation depicted in Act I. What connects the two events? I propose, the two events stand in an essential conflict that has defined tragedy from its earliest creations in Greek drama: that is, the inevitable as it is also the unresolvable conflict between sexual forces and political aspirations, private as opposed to public, inner as opposed to outer demands. The Rat Wife commands and activates instinctual forces. Allmers’ aspirations in contrast turn to Little Eyolf as his object of reconstruction; he will henceforward live for the child, enabling him to realize perfection, as the great philosophical book would have brought the Good News to humankind generally. And I use the Biblical phrase “Good News” intentionally for there is an exchange between Allmers and Eyolf that uncovers his unconscious identifications:

1 I am grateful to Leif Sjöberg for the etymological information on Ey-Olf: *Gamalnorsk Ordbok*, Oslo, Leiv Heggstad, 1963, p. 132: “ey”: 1.) island; land surrounded by water; 2.) island. Flat land next to water. p. 746: “Ulfr,” = Wulf. In *Lexicon Poeticum*, Ulfr = Lupus

*Eyolf:* ...Papa, what *you* write – that's important.

*Allmers:* ...Yes, yes, if *you* say so—But mark my words – there'll be someone coming in time who'll do it better.

*Eyolf:* What do you mean, someone? Oh, tell me!

*Allmers:* Just wait. He'll come, sure enough, and announce himself.

Not only are Allmers' gifts, he believes, more fitted to the family than to society, he has internalized the fantasy that he is John The Baptist, and Eyolf, Jesus Christ. So now, as Act I unfolds, we see that Allmers' fantastic aspirations conflict with the Rat Wife's powers to seduce for she shall lead the child to his death by drowning. We who watch see that loss as a part of a larger sexual force whose initial expression was the crippling of the child.

We learn in Act II that Allmers and Rita left the baby Eyolf unattended on a table as they made love. We also learn that in the intimacy of their sexual moment Allmers told Rita that the name "Eyolf" was the nickname given to Asta in their youth, when they lived together in the belief that she was his half-sister, and together they dressed her in boy's clothing – those of her "brother" – and called her "Eyolf". Now the secrets within the locked briefcase begin to be revealed. Allmers' sexual intentions had his half-sister-girl-boy as their object. His repression of that force leads him to blame Rita for Eyolf's drowning, for when the baby fell off the table he was crippled for life and unable to participate in the sports other boys enjoyed; had he known how to swim he would not have drowned. His crutch remains floating on the water as symbol of that incapacity, that injury, and the inevitability of uncontrolled sexuality, the fateful force that drives each character towards death.

In Act II Allmers finally confronts – through Asta's insistence – the reality that they are not half-siblings, hence they are free to enter into a sexual relationship. Allmers insists that the truth uncovered changes nothing; his wish no longer to live with Rita, and for him and Asta to resume their idyllic life together seems to him still possible. But Asta cannot accept that interpretation and says, attacking Allmers' underlying metaphysical beliefs, "Don't forget – it's [their relationship is] bound now to the law of change – as you called it a moment ago". (Allmers had said that the relationship of brother-sister "is the only relationship that isn't bound by the law of change".)

I turn now to Act III, and we watchers must reconsider the dramatic intention, for the conclusion of the drama makes demands on our interpretative powers. Many themes are sounded and interwoven. 1. Little Eyolf is present through his gaze, the eyes that see everything among the living.



2. Asta is implored to stay by both Rita and Allmers. 3. Each person leaves or threatens to leave, abandoning the others, in the end only Rita and Allmers remain. 4. Allmers reveals to Rita his mountain experience as he “walked with death”. 5. Although Allmers reviles the crude, drunken, child-neglecting poor folk down by the dock, Rita tells him that if she is left alone to do as she wishes, she will save the children through offering them love and shelter. 6. Finally, Rita and Allmers invoke the spirits of the two Eyolfs – the Little Eyolf and the Big Eyolf (Asta) – in an ambiguous conclusion. How shall we understand this knot of plot elements?

I read the conclusion as a political reality that has now to be confronted in the long delayed, devastating admission of a tragedy generated through sexual fault. Dreaming has its context as does human action in the world, and in a drama, dream occurs in the action as if it were an event in the outer world: that is, drama opens the mind that dreams to the audience who now inhabit the dream world through allowing themselves to enter into the stance of representation: we go into the theater as if we enter a mind which furnishes a representational reality. As Hegel pointed out, the characters in a drama are themselves poets and artists; they make their inner life an object both to themselves and to the audience. Conversation in Act III has the quality of this analytic search and representation.

*Rita* [sadly shakes her head]: We never won his [Little Eyolf's] love, Alfred. I didn't. Nor did you.

*Allmers* [wringing his hands]: And now it's too late! Too late!

*Rita*: It's so desolate...everything.

*Allmers* [with sudden vehemence]: You are the guilty one in this!

*Rita* [rising]: I?

*Allmers*: Yes, you. You are to blame for his being...the way he was. You are to blame for his not being able to save himself in the water.

*Rita* [defensively]: Alfred...you mustn't blame *me* for that!

*Allmers* [more and more out of control]: I do! I do! It was you who left that little baby on the table unattended.

*Rita*: He was lying so comfortably on the cushions. Sleeping so soundly. And you had promised to keep an eye on him.

*Allmers*: Yes, I had. [Lowers his voice.] Then you came and tempted me to come to you.

*Rita* [looks at him defiantly]: Why don't you say you forgot all about the child, and everything else.

*Allmers* [with suppressed fury]: Yes, that's right. [Lowers his voice.] I forgot the child...in your arms.

*Rita* [agitated]: Alfred! Alfred! That's disgusting of you!

*Allmers* [in a low voice, raising his fist to her]: In that moment you condemned Little Eyolf to death.

*Rita* [wildly]: You too! You too! In that case!

*Allmers*: Very well. Bring me to account, if you will. We are both guilty. So there was retribution in Eyolf's death, after all.

*Rita*: Retribution?

*Allmers* [more controlled]: Yes. A judgment on you and me. Now we have our deserts. Secret and cowardly feelings of remorse held us back from him while he was alive. We could not bear to look at the thing...he dragged himself about on...

*Rita* [quietly]: The crutch.

*Allmers*: Exactly. ...

This is followed by a reported dream of Allmers:

... [in quieter mood]. I dreamed of Eyolf last night. I thought I saw him coming up from the jetty! He could run, like the other boys. As if nothing had happened to him. Absolutely nothing. This crushing reality was only a dream, I thought. Oh how I thanked and praised...[Stops.] Hm...

*Rita* [looks at him]: Whom?

*Allmers* [evasively]: Whom ?

*Rita*: Yes. Whom did you thank and praise?

*Allmers* [dismissively]: I told you, I just lay there dreaming...

*Rita*: Somebody you don't yourself believe in?

*Allmers*: Just that something came over me. I told you, I was asleep...

*Rita* [reproachfully]: You shouldn't have turned me into an unbeliever, Alfred.

Throughout the drama we are forced to live in dream structures – and one reason why it is so painful to witness, is because we want to *wake up*. And now we are given an actual dream just as the crutch is mentioned. We learn – and this takes us by surprise, as it does Rita who believed she knew all of Allmers' thoughts – that Allmers gave thanks to an unnamed being, a higher being. We now are compelled to assemble the latent content: a higher being becomes identified with the ever watching eyes of the child whose cold watery grave will extinguish the hot passion of sexual attraction. There is a kind of pre-Socratic primitivism of opposed elements recollected in the terror Allmers expresses.

Allmers' inhibitions that have kept him from acknowledging an unconscious belief in a spiritual presence give way under the pressure of dream. Upon awaking he unconsciously turns towards an unknown cosmic presence, and that admission, just now come into his consciousness elicits from Rita anguish; for they together in their dream of a beneficent future for Eyolf have denied a hidden universe of powers that humans cannot subdue. Yet Allmers, in his searching the unconscious as he has all along through his removal from society, has encountered that hidden reality,

though he dare not name it. And the plunge into primary process of the dream threatens Allmers' life-long defense against the expression of such hidden forces. Allmers then, to solidify the defense against such a threatening force lying beyond his conscious control, attempts to define the physical relationship that will obtain in the future between him and Rita.

The exchange culminates in the shared recognition – unacknowledged before this moment – that the name “Eyolf” has a unique connotation, and dire consequences because of its confused denotation.

*Allmers* [slowly, looking fixedly at her]: There must always be a wall between us from now on.

*Rita*: Why must there...?

*Allmers*: Who knows whether a child's eyes, opened and wide, will not watch us night and day.

Allmers dream now opens up a whole deep dream sequence that turns around the drowned child lying on his back under water staring up at the living. And it now becomes clear that it was Asta as Eyolf who brought Rita and Allmers together ... the Big Eyolf who was and Allmers then believed still his half-sister. For the name, as in a dream, moves from character to character.

Rita forces Allmers to admit that he was attracted also by her wealth, ‘the gold and the green forests’, and then hears that it was for Asta that he sought Rita's wealth and then Rita exclaims: “So it was Asta who brought us together.” Allmers protests that Asta knows nothing about this.

*Rita* [then says, with a gesture of repudiation]: Nevertheless it was Asta. [smiles and gives a scornful glance.] No. It was little Eyolf. Little Eyolf, Alfred!

*Allmers*: Eyolf?

*Rita*: You used to call her Eyolf, didn't you? I think you once told me that...in an intimate moment. [Comes nearer.] You remember that ‘devastatingly lovely’ moment, Alfred

*Allmers* [shrinks back in terror]: I remember nothing! I don't want to remember!

*Rita* [follows him]: It was the moment...your second little Eyolf became a cripple.

*Allmers* [supports himself against the table; dully]: Retribution

*Rita* [menacingly]: Yes. Retribution.

Allmers insists that “there must always be a wall between us from now on”. In the place of their expressions of sexuality there must be a sublimation that Allmers refers to as “Resurrection”. To this Rita replies she cannot live without physical sensuality, and then learns that her passion was unrequited, for what Allmers felt towards her was “Terror” (Skraek). And

finally we learn that Rita knew about Asta's nickname because Allmers used it in an "intimate moment"<sup>2</sup>.

If we can step back from the stage and thereby gain distance from our intense emotions as we respond to the exchange between Rita and Allmers, it may be possible to look at the underlying forces that work here. Ibsen has thrown us into the same position as his characters, that is, to force us to give up all illusions about the ultimate meaning of life ... in this case, of the play. The text presents itself as, like the letters revealing the truth about Allmers and Asta's relationship, under lock without a key immediately available.

Although Allmers and Rita seek to repair the past and do penance for their treatment of Little Eyolf, they are riven with guilt and we who watch are brought to feel that it is doubtful they will find a reconciliation with the past and with each other because they are caught in an irresolvable conflict between sexual drive and political aspiration.

Thus it is that Ibsen endows his art with unrivalled power: no beliefs about choice, action, effectiveness in the world will lead to rectify loss or to requite mourning. Rita and Allmers can look into the vast silence as Allmers says they must, but they do not in that final moment that closes the action look upward: they look into each other's eyes! We who watch cannot look upwards either, but are riveted to the stage-plane of representational reality. We can only generate meanings out of our need to find an interpretation for this action so that we do not have to give up all *our* illusions! The drama in its ambiguities and complexities drives us to create interpretations, and then demonstrates to us – if we can be honest with ourselves – that they are all empty, devoid of meaning, unverifiable. We are put in the position in which we can only generate illusions about the meaning of the drama *as it shows us the emptiness of the illusions projected by the characters*.

- 2 Ibsen, in his youth, an avid reader of Kierkegaard, reflects something of the philosopher's ruminations on dread, *The Concept of Dread*, Ch. II, sec. 2, "Subjective Dread". Kierkegaard writes: "...in describing love, pure and innocent as they may represent it, all poets associate with it an element of dread. ... But why this dread? Because in the culmination of the erotic the spirit cannot take part. The spirit indeed is present...but it cannot express itself in erotic experience; it feels itself a stranger. It says as it were to the erotic, 'My dear, I cannot be a third party here, therefore I will hide myself for the time being.' But this precisely is dread...for it is a great stupidity to suppose that the wedding ceremony of the Church, or the husband's fidelity in keeping himself unto her alone, is enough. Many a marriage has been profaned, and that not by an outsider." (Trans. Walter Lowrie, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1944, p. 64.)

### III

To understand Ibsen's final crushing of illusions, we must turn to his final play, *When We Dead Awaken* and use it to help us see deeply into the depths of the watery world to which Little Eyolf has been taken.

Recall that Hegel's dialectic of art history ends with The Romantic; thereafter art comes to an end, (although it does not stop), to be lifted up and transformed into philosophy of art and philosophical interpretations of art. Ibsen understands the ending of modernity and the possible end of art in terms of a different narrative. He explores the falling dusk of modernity in the growing illumination cast upon sexuality. Ibsen conveys his world outlook through the ways he treats the themes of incest and death, of longings for incestuous wholeness on the one hand, and salvation through death which perhaps is achieved by Little Eyolf for whom we live on in a strange, disturbing way. The sacrificial child has brought to the surface – as if rising from watery depths – in the survivors and in the observing audience, the self-delusions which the drama forces us to analyze even after it is ended. Our survival as audience – whether of a particular performance or of the play as a dramatic event presented through a scenario – is endowed with a legacy we cannot disown: it is a self-understanding brought to us by Little Eyolf through confronting the self-delusions his death reveals.

The child is created not simply by sexual congress; the child comes to be through an act of imagination as an art form itself. We are challenged as audience to master this meaning hidden within *Little Eyolf* if we look to the last play Ibsen created, *When We Dead Awaken*. There the work of art comes first and is turned into a child; in *Little Eyolf* the child comes first and is transformed *into* and *as* art.

Sexual metaphors have traditionally helped us to interpret artistic creativity; in *Little Eyolf* the metaphor is the reality, is the thing itself. The child who comes into being as first whole then crippled is a sexual product in a basic, some think unaesthetic, sense. But in the deepest aesthetic sense, the child is Allmers' work of art. Reading the play and interpreting the family in this way opens up to us Ibsen's power as artist to transcend the taken-for-granted Romanticism of modernity, and to overcome it with a post-modern revision that some might call a "deconstruction".

In *When We Dead Awaken*, Ibsen's last play, the metaphor is reversed; Ibsen uses the more traditional way of seeing art as offspring of the artist and therefore art as child, rather than, child as art, the way I read *Little*



*Eyolf. We Dead* brings together the sculptor-artist Rubek with the woman, named Irene, who was his model. Irene says to Rubek:

But that statue in wet, living clay...it I loved. As out of that raw and shapeless mass gradually there emerged a living soul, a human child. That was *our* creation, *our child. Mine and yours.*

Eyolf, in contrast, child in the flesh to be metamorphosed into work of art, is a creation of Allmers and Rita, and truly of our own, we who wordlessly watch. The child Eyolf feels the attraction of love not to his parents who have shown no love to him, but he feels attraction to the Rat Wife who he is compelled to follow into a watery death.

The death of the child is the end of art.

My grounds for making the claim are, first, the scene transcribed from *When We Dead Awaken*. I place the art-child beside the child-art, and I see a parallel between Rubek and Allmers as narcissistic creators, though in different media, one a sculptor, the other a philosopher. The philosopher would translate child into thought, imposing on Eyolf the goals of human improvement, and that expresses in dramatic interaction the Hegelian philosophy-metamorphosis that “saves” art for thought and makes it not just consonant with, but also available to the modern world which cannot love the object in and for itself, but must transform it into idea.

In offering this interpretation I am compressing into a single *is* of psychoanalytic interpretation a whole interpretative unfolding very like that Freud offers in his compressed statement “Cordelia is death”, in his study of *King Lear* in the essay, “The Theme of The Three Caskets”. Freud’s statement summarizes a psychoanalytic interpretation that Lear is preparing for death, and that a central theme of the play is the philosophical self-reflection that to philosophize is to learn how to die. In this sense, Lear’s demand towards Cordelia to care for him is like the demand of Allmers towards Asta.

In looking at the ending of *Little Eyolf* in relation to the play as a whole, the theme of death is powerfully present. It is introduced at the opening of the play when Allmers returns from his solitary walk high in the mountains. In the final scene there is a reprise; Allmers talks of this as a walk with death; that was his vision. We see Allmers is a man who is trying to come to terms with death. In Freud’s essay on “The Theme of The Three Caskets”, the three women in the life of each man are the Three Fates, the Norns of Skandinavian folklore. They are the mother who bears, the wife who loves, and the bringer of death. Freud in his reading of *King Lear*,

identifies the three daughters with the Three Fates, and Cordelia as Atropos, the invincible. In Freud's reading of Lear, the feared goddess of death through a reversal becomes the beautiful and seductive goddess of love.

In *Little Eyolf*, three women also function in terms of this metaphor: Rita, Asta, and the Rat Wife. Asta is the Cordelia figure. In this sense, Asta becomes the central figure in the play, for it is her insistence that Allmers face the reality of their relationship which forces him to return to his mountain walk with death. Allmers returns to this encounter at the end of the play as he already remembers it in the opening of the drama; which now he interprets with full recognition that he cannot avoid death himself, that he is not John the Baptist who announces Little Eyolf as Jesus Christ.

It is interesting in this connection that Henry James' disappointment reflected, I believe, both his understanding in his reading of the first two acts of the play, as well as, I would say, his misunderstanding of the final act when he wrote, "My idea that Asta was to become an active, *the* active agent, is of course blighted". I am suggesting that Asta does fulfill her role, but as the goddess of death. The death that Allmers must ultimately face is one without the spiritual immortality provided by religious belief, without the possibility of Romanticism's reunion through death, and without the illusion of a transformation of the child into the perfect work of art. We are left wondering and sceptical of Allmers' capacity to accept these harsh renunciations, but the consciousness of the losses is in us, the audience.

Eyolf, the "creation" of the philosopher-artist, Allmers, is drowned by the allure of the Rat Wife. The philosopher-creator of the child expects the child to transcend the "mere" flesh and blood child who demands and deserves love. Allmers has withheld love, and can not bestow it upon the remodelled child either, for that recreation is an expression of his own narcissism. We are helped to see through Ibsen's latent intentions if we turn once more to the last play, *When we Dead awaken*.

Irene says to Rubek:

*Irene:* Poet!

*Rubek:* Why poet?

*Irene:* Because you are soft and spineless and full of excuses for everything you've ever done or thought. You killed my soul – then you go and model yourself as a figure of regret and remorse and penitence... [smiles]...and you think you've settled your account.

*Rubek* [defiantly]: I am an artist.

*Irene* [looks at him with a suppressed malevolent smile and says gently]: You are a poet [smooths his hair] You great big, middle-aged baby – can't you see that?



Rubek [displeased]: Why do you keep calling me a poet?

Irene: Because there's something exonerating about that word, my friend.  
Forgiving all sin, and drawing a veil over all human frailty. ...

Irene's words challenge the truth of art, and they seem to be aimed at the very object, the play, we are watching within which the words are uttered. It is the poet himself who says: distrust all poetic utterances.

The art-child is destroyed by the critical gaze of modern nihilism, the Hegelian critique of modernity which replaces art with death: the death of beauty which cannot survive the critique of modernity, for modernity in its last spasms would transform art into philosophy. Art in modernity, Ibsen sees, has lost not only beauty, but also has pushed us into a self-serving wallowing in representations of guilt and remorse, replacing the pleasure of beauty with the perverse pleasure of objectifying into monuments humanity's worst modes of self-delusion. The poet in our time – art in our time – creates monuments to narcissism. That is the deepest perversion of *Little Eyolf* which is explicitly stated in *When We Dead Awaken*.

Ibsen, like Hegel, but in very different metaphoric images, represents the cultural possibility that art is at an end, that art is dead. Modernity, sensitive to the loss of art and unconsciously mourning the loss, has spontaneously generated a defense against the death of art: that of scientific-technological pragmatism. This defense has its representation in *Little Eyolf* through the character of the engineer-road builder, Borghejm, the sixth, as yet unexplored character. He expresses common sense rationality, science, the urge and power to conquer nature (for him, recall, life is just a game), and the sexual directness to propose an uncomplicated marriage to Asta. Perhaps it is to him, we the audience, are drawn in our discomfort and in our mourning for the drowned child. Borghejm's proposal to Asta comes just when she is struggling to come to terms with the knowledge that she and Allmers are not half-siblings. The incestuous and adulterous threat is now countered by the possibility of a marriage into full conscious involvement with external reality, but one that sacrifices an awareness of the water lilies that shoot up to the surface from the depths – the flowers that Asta gives to Allmers as a last gift from "Little Eyolf". Setting internal sexual conflicts against external problem-solving for the future of human civilization establishes and defines one of the basic conflicts of modernity.

#### IV

Ibsen's dramatic strategies struggle with and protect his art from the mournful attitudes Hegel expressed when in a poetic moment, he wrote, "The Owl of Minerva spreads her wings and takes flight at the falling of dusk". There is an unequivocal, irremediable sadness in the shadow Hegel casts over our time. We are in its penumbra; we cannot take joy in modernity, but mourn the loss of the great moments of cultural creativity that lived without the need of philosophical interpretation. Ibsen-drama stands as challenge to Hegel's posture of mourning, demanding of us that we recreate the vitality of tragic experience as it once was and can continue to be. Its continuity rests upon opening up the internal psychic world, as Freud did, and then creating art in the presence of this reality.

To open up internal psychic reality to our apprehension, Ibsen, like Freud, created dream narratives, for *Little Eyolf* itself may be read as a dream-play in which all the ways dreams use linguistic and visual materials are encountered. In this way of reading *Little Eyolf*, the presence of the Rat Wife and the Rats require further consideration.

In considering the symbolism of the rats, we are reminded of Freud's search for the meaning of the rats.

In the Rat Man's obsessional fantasies, Freud reports: "No light was thrown upon the meaning of his obsessional idea until one day the Rat Wife in Ibsen's *Little Eyolf* came up in the analysis, and it became impossible to escape the inference that in many of the shapes assumed by his obsessional deliria rats had another meaning still – namely, that of *children*." And in a foot-note Freud adds, "In legends generally the rat appears not so much as a disgusting creature but as something uncanny – as a chthonic animal, one might almost say; and it is used to represent the souls of the dead." (Std. Ed. Vol. X, p. 215.) Continuing with this thought, we may see the dog as a psychopompos, the dog who leads souls to the afterlife, and the Rat Wife as a Hermes figure, both trickster and escort of souls in their journey to the underworld. We have been given the image of Eyolf lying on the bottom, before being swept out to sea, deep down in the clear water, on his back, with his eyes wide open and quite still, the ever watching eyes of the child haunting the consciences of Rita, Allmers, and Asta. As Hermes, the escorter of souls, had the power of divination by pebbles seen under the water, Little Eyolf's eyes, become pebbles endowed with the power to curse and to save.

We in our post-modern time, are conveyed by an interpretative yoked pair: the historical outlook of Hegel, and the psychological interpretations of Freud. Ibsen, as dramatist, has successfully kept the pair in tandem, and protected the chariot of art from overturning. It is in his last plays that we see Ibsen's reflections upon the loss of art in the sense that Hegel insisted was necessitated by the historical need in our time for a "science of art". And it is in his last plays that we come to understand the way Ibsen imagined the emptiness of post-modernity might be filled by a dramatic art of deeper psychological insight and exploration, and thus to neutralize the imperialistic conquest of art by philosophy. Art has a reason to be: it endows us with an awareness of its own nature; it becomes theory of art *as art*, and it becomes art *as theory of art*. In Ibsen's art, it internalizes the Hegelian critique and it exploits that which later became the Freudian discoveries to create a truly post-modern drama. Ibsen recognized the changes in the history of art which Hegel brought into consciousness, and which then was addressed, though ever so subtly, by Ibsen's work as dramatist. And it is in the drama that the post-modern consciousness can best and most fully be confronted, for cultural pre-suppositions and outlooks are most clearly seen in character development.

The extent to which *Little Eyolf* participates in the Freudian perception and interpretation of tragedy can be grasped, I believe, if we think it in terms of Freud's "Theme of the Three Caskets" and Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Freud's essay concludes with interpretations of *Lear* as a thematic collection that has its sources in myth and fairy tale. Of course Ibsen was aware of those sources too, and in addition Ibsen saw performances of *Lear* when beginning his career in the theater. *Little Eyolf*, as I have pointed out, shares with *King Lear* the philosophical quest, the search for dying well. Ibsen creates another case to be added to those Freud adduces, a plot in which three women guide and respond to the life of one, in this case the child, Little Eyolf, whose "partners" are Rita, the mother who bore him, Asta, the woman who loves him, and the Rat Wife, Atropos, who carries him off. The three women enter into Allmers' life also, in a slightly different configuration. Rita and Asta split the mother-lover relationship, and the Rat Wife is recognized as Death, the devourer, with whom Allmers walked high in the mountains, the Wolf (Mother Lupus) who carries souls to the next life. There are condensations and displacements in this drama that offer us ironic perspectives; one of the most forceful and subtle is the name of the child, Eyolf, whose roots lie deep in our watery past: "Eyolf"

condenses within its short sounds the two themes that give structure and coherence to the drama: water and wolf. We are back in the Ark.

### Résumé

Les dernières pièces de théâtre d'Ibsen peuvent être considérées comme des pièces philosophiques: elles reflètent et explorent les idées des *Leçons sur l'esthétique* de Hegel; mais elles s'y opposent souvent. L'idée centrale de l'interprétation hégélienne de la modernité repose sur la notion de viabilité de l'art ou plutôt sur sa non-viabilité et son impasse. Ibsen fait état de cette affirmation pour la refuter. Les drames que nous avons étudiés dans cet article sont *Le petit Eyolf* et *Quand nous nous réveillons de la mort*. Le sort de l'enfant, Petit Eyolf, dont le nom contient les notions d'eau et de loup, est d'être attiré dans la mort par la "femme-rat". Sa noyade représente la mort de l'enfant-art, détruit par la perte de la reconnaissance du tragique dans le monde moderne. Ibsen s'efforce de faire revivre et de reconstruire la tragédie sur la scène de la modernité. Le sens caché et plus profond du *Petit Eyolf* fut proposé au départ par Freud dans son étude "The rat Man" dans laquelle les rats sont assimilés aux enfants. Avec *Le petit Eyolf*, Ibsen a créé une version moderne du *Roi Lear*, dans la mesure où la motivation philosophique consiste en la recherche d'une mort digne. A travers le drame tragique qu'Ibsen a conçu dans un esprit moderne, l'enfant grandit dans notre conscience jusqu'à prendre la stature d'une conscience tragique, similaire à celle que Freud a décrit et analysé dans "The Theme of the Three Caskets".

