

## ROMANTIC REMAINS: IBSEN'S DECADENCE, WITH AND AGAINST GEORG LUKÁCS

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This article emerges from two big questions: Who is Ibsen for the Hungarian Marxist critic Georg Lukács? and How does Ibsen fit into Lukács's understanding of the history of western bourgeois literature? At stake in looking for answers to these questions is a more comparative (and less idealized) understanding of what makes Ibsen's dramas modern or proto-modernist – or, most aptly in the case of his late works, neo-romantic. Of course, many scholars have insisted on versions of Ibsen's romanticism. For example, in *Ibsen the Romantic: Analogues of Paradise in the Later Plays*, Errol Durbach explores both Ibsen's romanticism and his counter-romanticism: "the paradoxical simultaneity of Romantic and counter-romantic attitudes which makes Ibsen a Romantic of extraordinary individuality, both celebrant and critic of a vision potentially redemptive and potentially ruinous" (Durbach, 1982, 6). Unlike Durbach, Lukács locates Ibsen decisively as a counter-progressive writer of the "era of decay." I am interested in Lukács's readings of Ibsen, precisely because he insists on this counter-progressive (and thus anti- or failed realist) current in Ibsen. I would argue that Ibsen turns or returns to the strange and extraordinary, the fantastic, and the subjective in his neo-romantic period, but does so in a mode of radical skepticism that both rejects the supposed progress of 19<sup>th</sup> century realism – that is, its claims to have moved beyond the romantic moment – and looks askance at the 20<sup>th</sup> century, predicting a repetition of idealization as degradation. Perhaps obviously, this version of neo-romanticism is most explicitly represented by *When We Dead Awaken* (1899).

I agree, then, with Lukács's assessment of Ibsen as a kind of perversely romantic and counter-progressive writer – at least when it comes to his late works. However, I agree neither with Lukács's substantiation (his evidence and readings of the plays) nor with what he finds to be the literary and political implications of Ibsen's neo-romanticism. For Lukács, counter-progressive literature is reactionary, decadent and out of step with the inevitable course of history. For me – following the work of literary scholar and queer theorist Leo Bersani in *The Culture of Redemption* – redemptive and progressive demands on literature are often anti-aesthetic. That is, they erase or ignore certain functions of art, believing as they do that "the work of art has the authority to master the presumed raw material of experience in a manner that uniquely gives value to, perhaps even redeems, that material" (Bersani, 1990, 1). Such demands are often overly dismissive of radically negative modes of critique; and, most importantly for my own readings of Ibsen's late plays, they tend to be insensitive to irony.

Of course, I do not have space to address all of Lukács's references to Ibsen: because I am interested in ideology and realism rather than dramatic form here, I will consider his readings of *The Wild Duck* and *When We Dead Awaken* in two essays from his later period, "Marx and the Problem of Ideological Decay" (1938) and "Tribune or Bureaucrat?" (1940). I then turn to my own reading of *When We Dead Awaken*, which

takes place both with and against Lukács's claims in these essays, and which enables a distinct definition of what might be called Ibsen's decadence. Importantly – because he is generally viewed as a scholar with distinct early and late periods – there is quite a bit of consistency in Lukács's understanding of Ibsen. He appears both to admire Ibsen deeply and to disapprove of him (admittedly, his disapproval edges out his admiration as time passes). For example, in an essay from 1906 called "Thoughts on Henrik Ibsen," Lukács is already asserting that Ibsen was "born too late," in the age of reason, and therefore amidst the ruins of romanticism. In "conflict with [himself] and [his] own age," he produced works of "Romanticism *à rebours*" (Lukács, 1995, 96-99). Like Flaubert, with whom he has a "spiritual affinity" (shaped in part by their shared provincial origins), Ibsen admired the sovereign individual, stood in judgment over society rather than engaging in true social criticism, disdained the bourgeoisie, and grounded his realism in (romantic) irony (1995, 99-100). When he published "Tribune or Bureaucrat?" in 1940, Lukács was still insisting on Ibsen's "lateness," or on the fact that the conditions of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century no longer allow for the sovereignty of the romantic position. What was utopian critique based on love of life for *proper* romantic authors – Goethe, Scott, Balzac and Tolstoy – had become, *selon* Lukács, reactionary and fatalistic dwelling on impasse and inhumanity (Lukács, 1980, 218).

But Ibsen neither celebrates the inauthentic nor has the aesthete's extravagant relationship to the sensual world, so why can he be called decadent? Scholars who utter Ibsen and decadence with the same breath often focus on themes of heredity and degeneration in his oeuvre, but such themes were also commonplace in naturalism. For Lukács, *The Wild Duck* and *When We Dead Awaken* are decadent because they comprise a non-progressive and reclusive aesthetic production that cannot get beyond the tragedy of the aristocratic individual. Thus, Ibsen's decadence has more to do with his own antiquated attachments and less to do with themes of degeneration or synthetic sensuality. In "Marx and the Problem of Ideological Decay," Lukács accuses Ibsen of having failed as a realist in the end because he failed to engage in a "cheerful parting from the past" (proper comedy *selon* Marx; and Lukács's example of a successful realist comedy is *Don Quixote*) (Lukács, 1980, 161). With *The Wild Duck*, Ibsen reaches "the very threshold of a magnificent and exemplary comedy of the self-destruction of bourgeois ideals" (Lukács, 1980, 152). However, he continues to cling to a false heroism or "tragic nobility," at once elevating and mocking his characters, who are thereby rendered unrealistic (Lukács, 1980, 161-162). Lukács's primary example of a character overly promoted yet too debased is Gregers Werle. And this can serve as a primary example of my disagreement with Lukács's substantiation, because Ibsen does not, I would argue, "[cling] desperately to the contents of Gregers Werle's proclamations" (Lukács, 1980, 161). (Whether Gregers is too debased is another question.) The tragic interruption of the comedic is proof for Lukács of the triumph of irrationalism; and the elevation of Gregers is proof of Ibsen's attachment to an outmoded idealism. In other words, this interruption and this elevation mean that Ibsen's own, subjective and romantic world-view – again, out of step with progress, but in tune with modern decay – has triumphed rather than realism: "[...] the further [...] general ideological decay

progresses, the greater are the moral and intellectual demands placed on the writer if he is to avoid falling into decadence and seeks to tread the path of genuine realism. This path is dangerously narrow, and surrounded by tragic abysses” (Lukács, 1980, 166). Lukács defines “realist triumph,” on the other hand, as “the correct and profound reflection of reality [by which a writer rises above his] own individual and class prejudices” (Lukács, 1980, 138). In Ibsen, then, the limit or “barrier” to “realist triumph” is Ibsen – again, born too late, in the historical situation of the era of decay. Plays like *A Doll House* and *Ghosts* manage to triumph, *despite* Ibsen’s own world-view; but *The Wild Duck* reveals that the romantic-ideal is still central to Ibsen’s ideology, only in reverse or perverse form (*à rebours*): “It is no accident, then, that Ibsen’s deliberate resort to symbolism commences precisely in *The Wild Duck*” (Lukács, 1980, 162).

With reference to Ibsen’s return to romantic topography – heights and valleys – in *When We Dead Awaken*, Norwegian scholar Pål Bjørby asks, “Men hvorfor denne repetisjon av slikt tankegods i 1899?” (“But why this repetition of such ideas in 1899?”) (Bjørby, 2009, unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Norwegian or Dano-Norwegian are my own). One answer, put forward by Bjørby himself, is that Ibsen’s romantic geography is built on, and limited by, the German Romantics’ heteronormative perception of ancient Greek concepts of creativity and materiality: “Fundamentet for den ibsenske dikter og kunstners livsoppgave er ganske enkelt kunstens og estetikens klassiske, heteronormative kjønnsforskjeller; en tilstand av kjønnspolitisk ideologisk hegemoni” (“The foundation for the Ibsenian poet and artist’s life mission is quite simply art and aesthetic’s classic, heteronormative sexual differences”) (Bjørby 1990). Lukács offers another answer to Bjørby’s question in “Tribune or Bureaucrat?” Here, he describes the splitting of art from life as the “[central complex]” of much early modernist literature. In the romantic anti-capitalist aesthetics of Flaubert, Baudelaire, and Ibsen, this split is figured by the artist-muse relationship:

at the end of a long life, and one full of struggle against baseness and the debasing effect of this society [...] this man [Ibsen] once again depicted his self-accusation in terms of the tragedy of artist and model [...] if the artist wants to be honest and true to himself as an artist, and to pursue his path as an artist to its end, then he has necessarily to kill all life in and around himself. [...]

This dramatic epilogue of Ibsen's was the tragic summary of a conflict that matured in the 19th century and became ever more insoluble. (Lukács, 1980, 221-222)

Again, we can see here the consistency of Lukács’s claims for Ibsen’s decadence, or the implication that he is still – as late as 1899 – focused on romantic-idealist concerns, figured by the isolated artist, rather than turning cheerfully to the new century. But Lukács’s reading describes only the surface plot and macro-thematic structure of *When We Dead Awaken*. It takes too seriously Rubek’s claims about turning to (really turning back to) the life of the artist. *When We Dead Awaken* is definitely interested in the late

19<sup>th</sup> century insolubility of romanticism, but the play is also ill at ease with the romantic aesthetic necessity to which Lukács refers. If Rubek has repeatedly failed to be true to himself, it is because the art versus life binary is itself defunct. Ibsen – who isn't Rubek (whether he represents some aspect of Ibsen's self-accusation is another question) – doesn't really keep life and art apart in this play. Instead, he allows art and life, and life and death, to collapse into one another through repetition and citation.

### **On the heights again**

I now shift gears by turning to my own reading of *When We Dead Awaken*. Importantly – and here I read Ibsen's last dramatic word in agreement with Lukács – the collapse of the art/life binary *does* take place in a negative mode in this play. In other words, the implication in Ibsen's last play is less that art is life than that life is artful, or that there is no access to the ideal and authentic, no matter where one turns. Not only does this apply to artist and muse (Rubek and Irene), both of whom have lived differently gendered versions of death in life, but it also applies to the seemingly hetero-binary pair of husband and wife (Rubek and Maja), despite the fact that Maja at a certain level represents a kind of life at odds with art and the ideal. Again, this collapse takes place via citation, or through the characters' tendencies to repeat and reuse one another's language. It also takes place via the dramatic events of path-crossing and the head-over-heels tumble taken by Rubek and Irene as the play comes to a close. No matter how hard we try to distinguish art from life, idealization from degradation, the vital from the degenerate, these categories collapse into one another, meeting at the middle. Finally, my reading of *When We Dead Awaken* – which is heavily influenced by queer theory's willingness to revalue the negative – reveals why Ibsen can be called a decadent: his particular brand of neo-romanticism contains a critique that resists progress, insisting upon the correspondence between idealization and degradation.

In act two, a build-up to the final path-crossing on the heights begins to establish a point of collapse between Maja and Rubek, a critical point at which their differences mean less and their common actions, desires, and iterative citations matter more. At Rubek's bidding, they decide to end their monogamous relationship before the first half of the second act is over. However, it will be some time before Rubek and Maja manage to be rid of one another. Explaining the reasons behind his desire to change their living arrangement, Rubek tells Maja of his earlier decision to put life first, or to put existence "i solskin og skønhed" ("in sunlight and beauty") in the place of art-making and the artist's call (Ibsen, 1899, 39). This decision has amounted only to further dissatisfaction, most particularly with his young wife. Now, he has realized that in order to be true to himself as an artist, he must return to the practice of making masterpieces: "And you share no fault in this; I admit it willingly. It's me and me alone who has undergone yet another conversion – [*half to himself*] – an awakening to my own life" (Ibsen, 1899, 40).<sup>1</sup> In this context, to wake up means to live a life that is proper to oneself, or to live a

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<sup>1</sup> "Og du har ingenting forskyldt i det stykke; – det erkender jeg villigt. Det er ene og alene mig, som nu igen har undergået en omvæltning – (*halvt hen for sig.*) – en opvågning til mit egentlige liv"

life more aligned with the apparent truth of the individual self. Towards the close of the second act, before meeting for the last time on the high mountain path, Maja and Rubek converse again briefly. This time, it is Maja's turn to borrow Rubek's expression:

*Maja (scans the plateau as she goes, catches sight of the two [Rubek and Irene] by the stream and calls out).* Good night, professor! Dream of me. I'm going on an adventure.

*Rubek (calls back).* What sort of adventure?

*Maja (coming closer).* I will put *life* before all else.

*Professor Rubek (mockingly).* No, do *you* want that too, little Maja? (Ibsen, 1899, 75)<sup>2</sup>

The stage directions here imply that Maja actually wants to see Rubek one more time. Together with Ulfheim, his servant and his hounds, she "spejder undervejs over vidden" ("scans the plateau") for Rubek and Irene, perhaps simply to communicate her intentions and to assert her confidence and thereby defend herself against Rubek's willingness to be rid of her. Rubek (like the scholars that focus on Maja's intellectual inferiority) mocks Maja's citation of his claim. The mocking emphasis placed on the personal you (*du*) suggests that putting life first can't possibly mean to Maja what it means to Rubek, or that life remains a more idealized category for Rubek. For him, life is the creation of masterpieces; for her (according to Rubek), life is "ørkesløs nydelse" ("idle pleasure") (Ibsen, 1899, 40). On the other hand, Maja's citation of Rubek is a form of mimicry or iteration rather than an immediate and original response. By now it is plain (if it wasn't already) that even her initial exclamation regarding Norway's audible silence is a projection of her own boredom, and it begins to be apparent that a non-subjective or dialectical response to the world doesn't really exist as a possibility in *When We Dead Awaken*. Before departing, Maja tells Rubek that she will bring him a wing shot bird of prey for a model, to which he replies, bitterly, "Yes, wingshooting – unintentionally – that's an old sport of yours, isn't it?" (Ibsen, 1899, 55).<sup>3</sup> This assessment of Maja's sporting habits reflects the animosity between the couple, but it also assigns to her a calculating consciousness. Maja might represent "youth, desire, vitality, and energy" (Moi, 2006, 319) to a certain point, but, like Rubek, she is fully capable of behaving in an artful manner (and is, after all, dressed for the hunt when she scans the plateau).

Apparently indifferent to Rubek's mocking, Maja sings her freedom song for the first time and then uses or repeats Rubek's idea about awakening, declaring "Yes, because I think that I am awake now, finally" (Ibsen, 1899, 54).<sup>4</sup> Maja too can "wake up," defiantly claiming the life that is proper to her. Significantly, her song of freedom

<sup>2</sup> *Fru Maja (spejder undervejs over vidden, får se de to ved bækken og råber hen).* God nat, professor! Drøm om mig. Nu går jeg ud på eventyr! *Professor Rubek (råber tilbage).* Hvad skal det eventyr gå ud på! *Fru Maja (kommer nærmere).* Jeg vil sætte livet i stedet for alt det andet. *Professor Rubek (spottende).* Nej, vil du også det, lille Maja?

<sup>3</sup> "Ja, vingeskyde – af vanvare, – det har længe været noget for dig, det."

<sup>4</sup> "Ja for jeg tror, jeg er vågnet nu – endelig."



has the last word in both the second and third acts, which might be understood as proof that Maja is in fact free from Rubek and his analytical and idealizing impasse (or even that some kind of vitalism is now free from romantic idealism). However, the song itself becomes a repetition, citing itself at least three times; more, if its echoing up the mountain were staged as a literal echo. Like Rubek, then, the play swiftly mocks Maja's song, undermining her assertion of freedom. If she is free from Rubek, she certainly isn't free from demands made upon her by men. After all, the last line of act two, "Jeg er fri!" ("I am free"), is followed by the first line of act three, "Slip meg!" ("Let me go!").

*(Mrs. Maja Rubek, flushed and irritated, comes down over the rockslide on the left. Squire Ulfheim, half angry, half laughing, follows her, holding her tightly by the sleeve.)*

*Maja.* Let me go! Let me go, I say!

*Ulfheim.* Easy, easy, – next you'll be wanting to bite. You are as eager as a wolverine. (Ibsen, 1899, 57)<sup>5</sup>

The hunter hasn't taken Maja down into the forests in search of bear, but up to the peaks with seduction in mind. The term "ophidset" (translated as irritated above) can imply sexual arousal as well as irritation or annoyance, and at times Maja even appears to welcome Ulfheim's attentions, or at least to throw her lot in with him decidedly. Then again, her reactions to him remain both artful and ambivalent: if it is a relief to her that he is not an artist and that the castle that he offers to her contains no works of art, she states plainly enough that she has had her fill of castles: "Tak! Slotte har jeg fåt nok af" ("Thank you! I've had enough of castles" (Ibsen, 1899, 63). Even more importantly, Maja needs Ulfheim if she is to make her way back down the mountain with the life that she so values (and before the people at the hotel wake up, which seems to indicate that she is worried about scandal): "How I will rejoice and sing, if I make it down in one piece" (Ibsen, 1899, 65).<sup>6</sup> Refuting Maja and Ulfheim's status as allegorical representations of "en livsbejaende vitalisme" ("a life-affirming vitalism"), Helland writes, "What they stand for at the end of the piece is precisely not the bloodrich, fertile life, but on the contrary, something that can resemble a kind of life. It is life-likeness and not life-nearness [...] not the immediate sensual life" (Helland, 2000, 456).<sup>7</sup> Helland sees the relationship between Ulfheim and Maja as a repetition, or as another failed attempt at (commercial) relations, a kind of prostitution in which Maja exchanges her body for Ulfheim's goods and services (Helland, 2000, 454-455). Their claims regarding sensual engagement are only claims; they are life-like and not life-near because they

<sup>5</sup> *(Fru Maja Rubek kommer blussende rød og ophidset nedover styrtingen til venstre. Godsejer Ulfheim følger halvt vred, halvt leende efter og holder hende fast i ærmet.)*

*Fru Maja (forsøger at rive sig løs). Slip mig! Slip mig, siger jeg!*

*Godsejer Ulfheim.* Nå, nå, – det mangled bare, at De skulde bide. De er jo så arrig som en jærv.

<sup>6</sup> "Å hvor jeg skal juble og synge, hvis jeg slipper helskindet ned!"

<sup>7</sup> "Det de står for ved stykkets slutt er nettop ikke det blodrige, frodige liv, men tvært imot noe som kan ligne et slags liv. Det er livslighet og ikke livsnærhet [...] ikke det umiddelbart sanselige liv [...]."

experience life in name only. I am not so certain that Maja wants what Ulfheim has to offer; she does, as stated, need his help to descend the mountain alive (and I don't think that we can demand her suicide to preserve her bourgeois tragic honor). In any case, just as Maja is no pure symbol of vital, visceral personhood, Ulfheim is no "faun" (Ibsen, 1899, 58). Ulfheim and Rubek, both famous (or infamous) in Norway, have been acquainted previously, "i selskabslivet" ("in society"), and it is unspecified whether Ulfheim's infamy comes from his behavior at parties or from his hunting skills (Ibsen, 1899, 17). He is a landowner or squire rather than a wild man, and he is interested in making love to a young, but perhaps no longer so naïve, woman.

At their final meeting, the suggestion that Maja and Rubek are in some sense the same – or that their words and actions reveal an inter-penetrating identity between idealization and degradation – is intensified. This time, rather than seeking them out, Maja recoils from the sight of Rubek and Irene, who make their way up the mountain just as she is asking Ulfheim to escort her down:

*Maja.* Is the way down terribly dangerous?

*Ulfheim.* Not as dangerous as the mountain mist. (*She tears herself away, walks over to the crevice and looks down, but rushes back quickly.*)

*Ulfheim (goes to meet her, laughing).* Well, did that make you dizzy?

*Maja (weakly).* Yes, *that* too. But go over there and look down. Those two coming up –

*Ulfheim (goes and leans out over the rock face).* It's only your bird of prey – and his foreign lady. (Ibsen, 1899, 63)<sup>8</sup>

Just before, Maja refers to Rubek as a "tam rovfugl" ("tame bird of prey"); yet she dreads the encounter (Ibsen, 1899, 62). Finally, the reader is unsure of who hunts whom in *When We Dead Awaken*:

*Maja.* Can't we slip by then, without their seeing us?

*Squire Ulfheim.* Impossible. The trail is much too narrow. And there's no other way down. (Ibsen, 1899, 63)<sup>9</sup>

Even as they go their separate ways, Maja down, presumably to live – but not necessarily with Ulfheim, although it is common to assume as much – and Rubek and Irene up to die, there is no way for the couples to avoid one another. There is, instead,

<sup>8</sup> *Fru Maja.* Er vejen frygtelig farlig nedover?

*Godsejer Ulfheim.* Fjeldtågen er farligere.

(*Hun river sig løs, går hen til kløften og ser ned, men farer hurtig tilbage.*)

*Godsejer Ulfheim (går hende imøde og ler).* Nå, svimler det lidt for Dem?

*Fru Maja (mat).* Ja, det også. Men gå derbort og se udover. De to, som kommer –

*Godsejer Ulfheim (går hen og bøjer sig ud over bergvæggen).* Det er jo bare Deres rovfugl – og hans fremmede dame.

<sup>9</sup> "*Fru Maja.* Kan vi ikke slippe forbi dem, – uden at de ser os?"

*Godsejer Ulfheim.* Ugørligt. Stien er altfor trang. Og her er ingen anden vej ned."

only one dangerous pathway, which necessitates a meeting. This act of crossing paths (yet again) – for which Maja “mander sig op” (“mans up”) – undermines or forces a collapse of the thematic separation of Maja and Rubek, as does the echoing of certain elements from the previous meeting (both of which could be emphasized in a staging of the play) (Ibsen, 1899, 64). Rubek too is surprised to see Maja. He notes again that they are doing the same thing: “*Professor Rubek [coldly to Maja]. You’ve also been on the mountain all night, you too, – like us?*” (Ibsen, 1899, 64).<sup>10</sup> This time there is no mocking, only coldness, which indicates remoteness or formality. The repetition of “you also” and “you too” and “like us” also indicates disbelief and further disappointment at their having arrived at the same location and decision. Maja’s presence on the mountain degrades Rubek’s idealist vision of his and Irene’s ascent; his material wife mars the territory in which he is to take his spiritual bride. On the other hand, this repetition suggests that the difference between the vulgar-vital and the idealist-spiritual is less absolute than Rubek would like to imagine. When Maja left Rubek’s side for the first time in act two, and he asked where she was going, she said, “Jeg går mine egne veje herefterdags” (“I go my own way from here on out”) (Ibsen, 1889, 42). Rubek now announces, “*med et blik til fru Maja*” (“*with a glance at Maja*”) that “Den fremmede damen og jeg agter ikke at gå på skilte veje herefter” (“the foreign lady and I don’t intend to part ways from now on”) (Ibsen, 1899, 64). These claims announce independence on the one hand and a form of dependence on the other, but they are also repetitive, reverse citations. Using similar vocabulary – *veie* and *herefter/dags* – Rubek announces his and Irene’s decision through another citation of Maja.

Finally and ironically, it is Ulfheim who manages to describe the situation, although he rejects Rubek’s teasing assertion that he is dealing in wisdom: “Our Lord protect me from wielding the words of a wise man” (Ibsen, 1899, 64).<sup>11</sup> In reference to the dangerous path that Rubek and Irene are mounting, Ulfheim says “No, in the beginning nothing is bad. But then you come to a narrow turn and can’t tell forward from back. And then you’re stuck, professor! Mountain-trapped, as we hunters call it” (Ibsen, 1899, 64).<sup>12</sup> If one can’t tell forward from back, is it so certain that one can tell up from down, valley from heights? Ulfheim’s warning is also a meta-commentary on the deadlock that they all face (and We with them). Up or down, there is no alternative to death, and there is no way of living that isn’t both a living-death and a degradation of ideal life – which might render the category of the ideal itself extinct, if it didn’t so persistently remain: “Life sacrificed to art, or art to life: there is no way out of the *impasse*, no redemption for the spiritually dead” (Durbach, 1982, 139). Even here, in Durbach’s careful insistence on *impasse*, the ideal persists in the implication that the category of the spiritual is viable, or that redemption is possible for the spiritually alive. But does Ibsen’s last play really allow for such viability?

<sup>10</sup> “*Professor Rubek (koldt til fru Maja). Du har altså været på fjeldet hele natten, du også, – ligesom vi?*”

<sup>11</sup> “Vorherre bevare mig for at føre vismands tale.”

<sup>12</sup> “Nej, i førstningen er ingenting slemt. Men så kan en komme til en snevring, hvor en hverken véd frem eller tilbage. Og så står en fast, herr professor! Bergfast, som vi skytter kalder det.”



Before he and Maja head down the mountain, Ulfheim warns Rubek and Irene of the coming storm, telling them that they will die if they stay on the mountain, and that they should take shelter in the hunting cabin until he can send help. But Rubek and Irene continue up the mountain, until “*Suddenly, a thunder-like sound is heard high in the snowfield, which breaks free and rolls down with gathering speed. Professor Rubek and Irene are glimpsed indistinctly, rolling with the masses of snow, and are buried in them*” (Ibsen, 1899, 64).<sup>13</sup> The avalanche itself is, of course, a figure for collapse. For Charles Lyons, the avalanche is an example of the shift from form to formlessness, or from ideological control and concrete identity to loss and disintegration, which is common to all of Ibsen’s plays (he finds the “prototype” in *Brand*, where the shift is from ice church to avalanche: “that changing metaphor which destroys its own sense of form”) (Lyons, 1972, xx). Because the movement of the avalanche brings Rubek and Irene back towards the point of meeting in the middle, or to the place at which Rubek and Maja cross paths for the last time, it is also further proof that we are dealing with a moment of impasse rather than enlightenment, escape, or progress; there is no indication that Rubek and Irene manage to breach the cloudbank before the avalanche brings them down. Additionally, Rubek and his practice have never belonged to the heights, but to the rotten and humid depths. His attempt to ascend results only in a head-over-heels tumble. This moment of deeply ironic and nearly impossible theatre erases the artist and his muse. It might even cover up the mountain pathway on which the play’s life/art, ideal/degraded, vital/degenerate binaries are collapsed, which is perhaps why these binaries remains preserved – and not only in Lukács’s reading. In any case, some kind of cover-up leads Lukács to assert that Ibsen was less than radically critical of the romantic notion that the artist “has necessarily to kill all life in and around himself” (Lukács, 1980, 221-222). Ibsen most certainly dwells in this idea, but he does not seek to protect it from degeneration or irony.

Lukács’s theory of a correct representation of reality is both redemptive and essentialist, demanding wholeness, hierarchies of meaning and submission to history as progress. Both *The Wild Duck* and *When We Dead Awaken* are powerful and thrilling precisely because they refuse to be cheerful (although they are certainly comedic, if blackly so), to part with the past, and to put strong faith in progress. This is not to say that the cheerful and the progressive are always weak or uninteresting, but rather that scholars should allow works of literature that engage in negative critique to do so. Thus, while Lukács regards Ibsen’s works of decay as taking place in the post-romantic era, amidst the ruins of romanticism, I regard such works as being tuned into romanticism’s persistent remainder, which is sometimes veiled but never stamped out by the ideologies of realism. Lukács’s phrase “*Ibsen à rebours*” can also be used – against his own ideology – to indicate a mode of resistance and critique that in some sense moves counter to the current, but is not therefore reactionary.

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<sup>13</sup> “*Pludselig høres en tordenlignende larm oppe fra snebræen. Den glider og hvirvler i rasende fart nedover. Professor Rubek og Irene skimtes utydelig at hvirvles med i snemasserne og begravnes i dem.*”

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## Biographical note

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**Summary**

This article emerges from two big questions: Who is Lukács's Ibsen? and How does he fit into Lukács's understanding of the history of bourgeois literature? Although many critics have insisted on Ibsen's (counter)romanticism, Lukács locates Ibsen – whom he calls a romantic à rebours – more decisively in the “era of decay.” Of course, themes of degeneration are common in Ibsen's plays and covered extensively by the scholarship, but Ibsen himself is infrequently described as decadent (in Nordau, he is “a mystic and an ego-maniac”). Even less often does one assert that Ibsen's realism was subject to some form of late 19<sup>th</sup> century degeneration. In order to better understand what decadence can mean in the case of Ibsen, I consider Lukács's readings of *The Wild Duck* and *When We Dead Awaken*. I then offer my own reading of *When We Dead Awaken* and, via that reading, my own definition of Ibsen's decadence. At stake is a more comparative (and less idealized) understanding of what makes Ibsen's drama modern.

**Keywords/ nøkkelord**

Georg Lukács, Decadence, Neo-romanticism, Realism, Ideology